

A SENSE OF THEATRICALITY

POST-MODERN FURNITURE

Brian Gladwell



Console Table with Drawers; 1988
Cardboard, lacquer, wood
86 x 89 x 43 cm (34 x 35 x 17 in.)
Collection: Saskatchewan Arts Board
Photo: Don Hall

It was a practical impulse that led me to start making furniture out of corrugated cardboard. In the mid eighties, I was making fine furniture in solid woods. The time-intensive nature of the work made it too costly for my friends to buy, so I was looking for a way I might do something they could afford, while still operating at a high aesthetic and technical level. I had been using cardboard for maquettes, found it versatile and fairly quick to work with, and so decided to make a series of tables and see what came of it.

I wasn't the first to use cardboard for furniture. Mail-order catalogues offered wardrobes and chests of drawers, which were essentially specialized boxes, often with a faux wood grain printed on them. In the sixties, architect Frank Gehry designed a series of cardboard chairs and tables, called "Easy Edges". Exceptionally strong and attractive and left in a raw, unfinished state, over the years the exposed corrugations developed a rich, fibrous patina.

To make my first tables, I used woodworking tools and processes to cut and join pieces (rather than the box maker's method of cutting and folding) and created a grid structure sandwiched between layers of flat cardboard for the table tops. I rolled up long triangles of cardboard to make tapered legs, and I finished the tables with automotive lacquer, the colours chosen for the impact they might have on the forms. Carefully engineered for strength, the visual interest came from the fluting on the exposed edges, and the spiralling tapered profile of the legs. Not only were these tables well received, I found the material, and the concept of cardboard furniture, compelling enough to want to carry it further. Indeed, I soon forgot the idea of making furniture more cheaply as I discovered both the formal and the metaphorical possibilities of the material.

Cardboard has a slightly pebbly texture to its surface, which made rich finishing effects possible with the intensely coloured automotive lacquers. *Cabinet 1987* used these surface effects, as well as a traditional veneering strategy, in which the body and base surfaces incorporated different cardboard "veneers". These were applied to the surfaces in a manner similar to the surface treatment of a finely veneered 19th century cabinet.

I also found that cardboard allows me to generate and control a great variety of patterns on the exposed edges. I exploited this quality by gluing layers of cardboard together, then cutting elements which were further combined to create the structure of the piece, as in the *Console Table with Drawers* and a *Table with Cabriole Legs*. This created a stylized wood grain on the cut surfaces which reinforced the affinity between cardboard and wood—the internal fluting of the cardboard corresponding to the cell structure of wood.

As well as generating visual interest through patterning, the edges made clear (on closer examination) the nature of the material used. While working in wood one primarily

considers line and surface; the open edges of the cardboard allowed me to work more explicitly with volume. What I mean by this is that cardboard is mostly void—indeed the void is essential to the strength of the material. A large volume of cardboard thus has a strong visual presence, but not the same sense of weight, either physical or visual, that wood has. The pieces carried a sense of theatricality about them beyond what is customary in furniture, permitting them to function as a metaphor, or representations of archetypes of furniture. *Tall Cabinet* was developed in reference to several historical sources. The diamond point panels of 18th century Quebec furniture, the dramatic wardrobes made by prairie settlers from Eastern Europe, and the colour scheme of an early 20th century Doukhobor entrance door were all direct sources for the cabinet. An exercise in pattern and colour, the cabinet functions in a practical way, and at the same time occupies a more enigmatic space.

A paradox lay at the heart of my project, and as I developed the work it was both the characteristics of the material itself, and that paradox, which appealed to me. The work subverted expectations of furniture in several ways. Fine work done in humble material challenged the hierarchy of materials. In both craft and manufactured furniture the material was often the principal sales pitch. For example, a furniture store might have "Brass and Oak" in its name. Everything was solid oak, which equated to quality and value. More often than not this furniture was a dumbed down version of Victorian and Edwardian furniture, and was badly proportioned, with all detailing rendered vague and formless. Or else it was a generic contemporary theme, lacking crispness or excitement, or any other evidence of sophisticated design. Yet many people with otherwise discriminating taste, and perhaps little practical alternative, would fill their houses with this stuff. My work, carefully

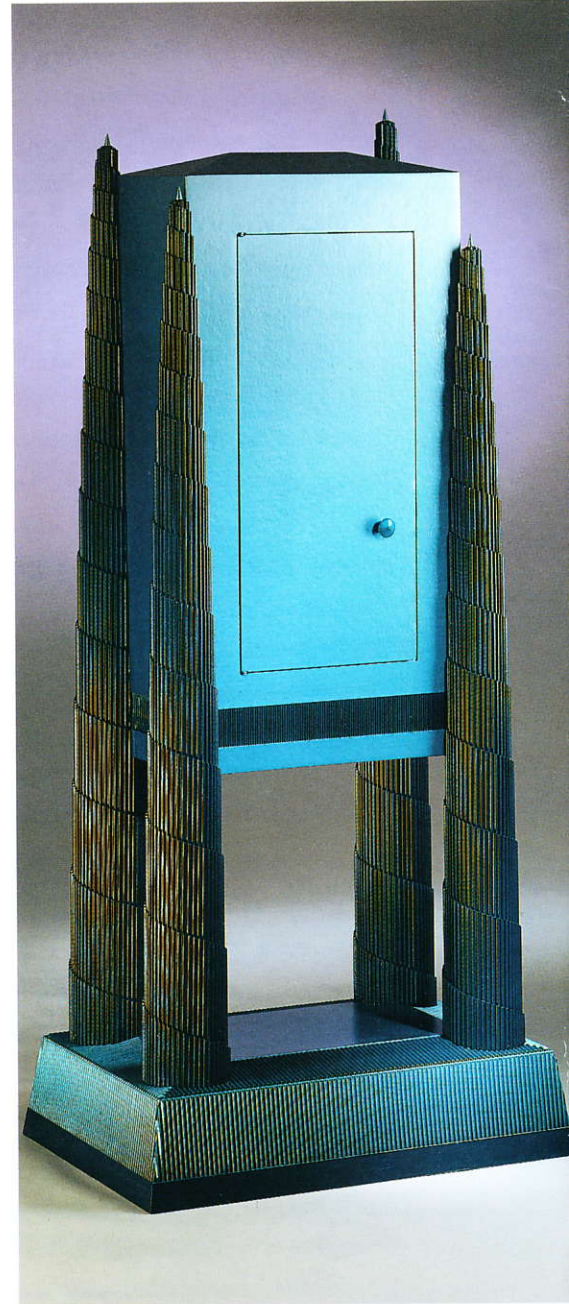
designed and constructed, stood in sharp contrast—even though it was just cardboard.

Working with cardboard forced me to consider deeply the value of expending considerable skill and time on a relatively transitory object. One of the virtues of fine craft and quality manufactured furniture is seen to be its role as a family heirloom, something handed down through the generations as a statement of enduring values in a time of social and economic change. My work proposed that much of this sort of furniture, though solidly constructed, is poorly conceived and aesthetically weak, driven by expedience rather than a commitment to the positive values it ostensibly conveys. Could a body of work which is blatantly impermanent actually serve as a better vehicle for these lasting values?

Good design must be supported by good making. Even though it was only cardboard, the design work depended on careful craftsmanship for its effect and was supported by all the precision, control and care that I exercised in my fine wood furniture. These pieces could be examined closely without their aesthetic effect collapsing or being undermined by sloppy details, with the result that the visual experience was addressed without compromise.

While the works in cardboard share some characteristics with sculpture, their power as objects lies in their relationship to the conventions and functional role of furniture. They had to be furniture, not sculpture on the subject of furniture, and therefore had to be useful in a domestic setting. Thus the tables can handle considerable weight (I have an aquarium on one), and the cabinets have sturdy doors with adjustable shelves inside. They are subject, though, to denting (for comparison, so too is pine furniture).

The apparent ambiguity of these objects in relation to function, inherent in the nature of the material, raised an issue that interested me—that of objects which are readily considered furniture, but are not particularly functional.



Cabinet: 1987
Cardboard, lacquer
167 x 75 x 55 cm (66 x 30 x 22 in.)
Collection: MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina
Photo: A.K. Photos



Tall Cabinet, 1990
 Cardboard fiberboard, lacquer
 203 x 57 x 35 cm (80 x 22 1/2 x 14 in.)
 Collection: Regina Public Library
 Photo: A.K. Photos

As for example, a delicate European antique side table or small cabinet, standing in the home well out the way of any traffic, with perhaps an object of art on it. Although it may once have been actively used as furniture, it now appears as an object of sculptural form whose primary function is aesthetic.

The issue of function is a complex one in craft, and my cardboard pieces were also a statement about the fact that the practice of fine craft no longer had a lock on function — that in fact well considered industrial design had overtaken craft in this area. The skills of craftsmanship itself are important, but cannot stand alone in the making of good furniture. There are many pieces of furniture which are solidly and skillfully constructed, but aesthetically boring or awkward. Conversely, there are others which are fresh and exciting, satisfying and useful, although shaky in their execution. The traditional essence of craft—skillful making, honest materials and functional design—no longer seemed sufficient. The reason craft still mattered to me had to do with its metaphorical possibilities.

With the boundaries between craft, fine art and design increasingly blurred, I found myself as a furniture maker working in these areas of overlap, inverting many of the conventions of furniture, but retaining its essence. This has had the effect of opening a new interpretive space, one in which to consider distinctions between the nature of good furniture and conventional wisdom on the subject. I view good furniture as a vehicle for meaning — by conveying social and cultural values it tells a story. My purpose as a furniture maker is to make materially and formally engaged objects which depart from mundane and familiar tasks as they point toward more sublime possibilities.

Brian Gladwell is a furniture maker living in Regina. He works primarily in wood, but continues to make the occasional piece in corrugated cardboard, currently combining that material with fine wood veneers.



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