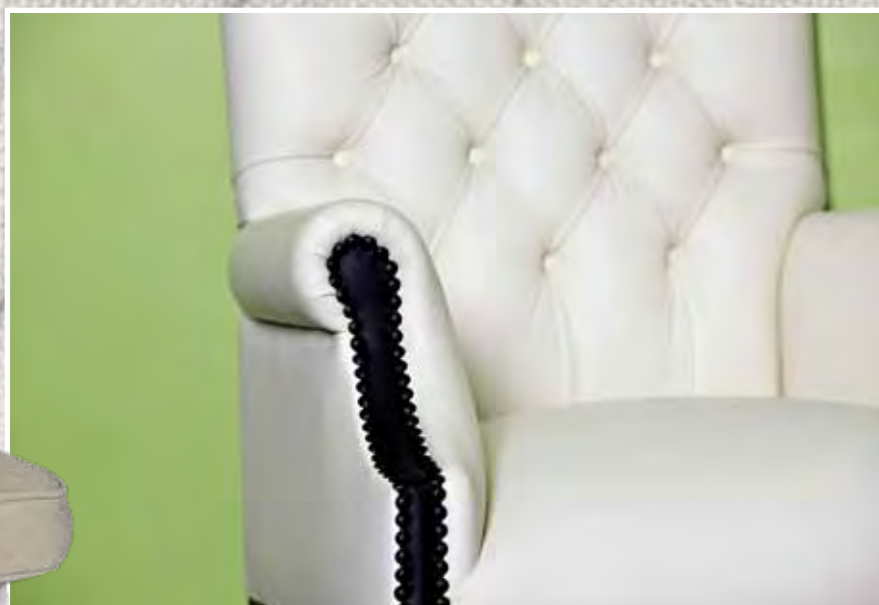


Cover story **Made to order**

Furnish with a flourish

New or renewed, upholstered pieces are the stars of the room, says **Zinta Jurjans Heard**.





IN ANY ROOM upholstered furniture stands out, a fabulous fabric stretched across a stylish frame and then deep buttoned. My upholstery history is all over the place. Fifty-year-old club sofas made by John Moran himself, family heirlooms re-covered many times, are in our living room. Ikea Ektorps – by the truckload – furnish the holiday hideaway. In the past, there was rather pricey Italian Cassina classic.

When my husband and I were out to dinner not so long ago, we came across a rather shabby, discarded armchair. I have no shame when I see a good shape; he was mortified when I told him I had to have it. What if someone saw us?

We struggled home with the heavy and rather dirty find. The upholsterer labelled it a fine Edwardian piece. Now it's my husband's favourite chair.

THE RECOVERY

Jennifer Critchlow teaches upholstery at Holmesglen Institute. She seems the perfect woman in whose hands to leave our future upholsterers. She's strong, multi-skilled and fearless.

This tall blonde rode a Yamaha 550 XT trail bike solo around Africa for nine months, including the notorious Paris-Dakar run. The bike burst a base gasket, she fixed it in four hours without a manual in a mud-walled, sand-floor room far south of Morocco. The bike then started on the second kick. She can plumb her house – and yes, she can diamond-button a sofa.

When I ring to arrange an interview, she warns me that she is into sustainability. That's OK. I can tell her about my recycling and hard rubbish stories and not mention the Ikea bit (in case the Chinese manufacture niggles her).

Critchlow describes herself as a locavore (word of the year in the *Oxford American Dictionary* in 2007), a person whose ethics are to buy food grown within 160 kilometres. She says this principle also applies to furniture.

The throw-out mentality horrifies her. "The \$300 sofa is the bottom end of the market, the sort where the webbing is so cheap you sit down and hit the floor. Don't buy it," she warns, because it's not worth re-upholstering. The fabric would cost \$300, and then there's the cost of manufacturing.

Critchlow explains the key to sustainable furniture. A "normal" sofa made without sustainable standards has about 20 materials that are put together in such a way they are difficult to separate and recycle: three or four levels of foam, glued, stapled and nailed.



"A sustainable sofa would have a steel frame (or hardwood) with springs, injection moulded with high-quality foam with a removable cover," she says.

"Germany has end-of-life legislation. The company that made the product has to take it back and do something with it. Laws are in place, so it's in the company's interests to factor in the recycle."

She's big on loose covers. They are the answer for a green future, she says, not to mention hygiene. "Removable and washable, they should be mandatory and that way you can have white. Even leather covers can be removable these days," she says.

"The big tip when ordering furniture with loose covers is to ask for templates so new covers can be ordered at the drop of a hat. Unfortunately many upholsterers don't have the skills to make loose covers these days. I want to start a course in loose cover making."

Then this self-confessed locavore drops a bombshell: "Ikea does loose covers well," she says. Before I could stop myself, I confessed about my nine-year-old Ikea Ektorps and how they have been updated with five cover changes (only because I get sucked in when a new fabric is released).

By the way, an Ikea spokeswoman tells me the retail chain has a sustainability policy for timber and three models, the Ektorp, Karlstad and Klippan, have loose covers. Ikea sells more than 25,000 sofas in Australia each year.

Back with Critchlow, it's sad there are only 14 upholstery apprentices in our state. "No major manufacturer is sending apprentices; the kids don't want to do upholstery. There is a real shortage," she says.

Above: interior designer Antra Lanskis (with Eissy) believes in tweaking the size of the sofa to suit the requirements of her clients.

Above left: Jennifer Critchlow, upholstery teacher at Holmesglen, is passionate about linking the environment to her trade.

Opposite page: each work of upholstery involves techniques that are appropriate to the furniture – a stunning white statement piece with black-studded contrast, restored by Jennifer Critchlow; and by The Seater, a leafy and elegant remake of a sofa, and a Louis chair, the epitome of French nobility.

PICTURES: SUSAN GORDON-BROWN

Cover story **Made to order**



A brilliant example of why quality furniture is worth restoring.

Right: Lincoln Dempsey at work with, below, co-founder Robert Horn of The Seater.

PICTURES: SUSAN GORDON-BROWN

From page 19

IN WITH THE NEW

The Seater is a boutique upholstery workshop in Bayswater. It's light and bright and looks like a good place to work. The two principals also worry about the lack of young people wanting to be apprentices. "When was the last time you saw an upholsterer as a

character in a soapie," says production manager Lincoln Dempsey. "Upholstery is just not sexy."

Maybe not, but the end result definitely is sexy. The Seater has produced chairs for the Chanel stores, upholstered walls for Bulgari in four states, made furniture for the National Gallery of Victoria and upholstered 900 bedheads for Crown Towers. It has



completed orders for NAB and the ANZ.

Robert Horn started The Seater 16 years ago in a single garage in Preston after he became bored with working on mass production aimed at department stores. Dempsey, a former Tasmanian, has a similar history of sound training and broad experience. The men also take on custom-made domestic pieces and re-upholstery, some from torn and tattered excuses for furniture that are hauled through the door.

At what point is a piece too far gone to be resuscitated? Maybe never. A pair of leather chairs in their showroom tells the before and after story. One chair is a mess of innards, the other looks like new. "This chair was very labour intensive, it was a week's work," Horn says. The price tag was \$2000. "We never charge through the roof," he laughs.

"Why throw away furniture with sound hardwood frames, even though it may be 80, 90 or 100 years old. It was built properly," Dempsey says. "The upholstery techniques we use will replicate the original construction."

These days, with styling being so universal, you can get a similar-looking piece at any price point. "The trouble with a cheap [imitation is that] it will only

Continued page 22

MILAN'S TRIBUTE TO THE PAST

"Milan, where else?" That was the confident tag line to promote the recent Milan Furniture Fair (Salone Internazionale del Mobile). This year the biennial International Kitchen Furniture Exhibition (EuroCucina) and the International Bathroom Exhibition, as well as the International Furnishing Accessories Exhibition, were part of the action, making it the world's largest home design expo.

But the pizzazz was turned down, although the ideas and quality products were there. The organizers say the financial crisis in Europe affected the mood of the show, with demand shrunk and altered.

Nostalgia was rife. "Hope for the future that belongs in the past," was how the mood was expressed. Inspiration was drawn from eras from art deco to the 1960s.

Revisiting established designs and tweaking them to suit the current market was a trend. Pieces were smaller, easier to transport and more suitable for an ageing customer base. This was not the year of provocative design.

Neutrals were everywhere, especially in the grey palette often balanced by bright flashes of colour, maybe a signal for optimism for the European economy. If it wasn't neutral it was clean, snowy white, as always, a designers' favourite.

John Turvey, from Mokum – a leading fabric house – has trend-spotted bright moves in upholstery fabric orders. "People are definitely after more pattern and colour," he says.

The timidity of only having tiny squares of vibrancy, look-at-me



PICTURE: SAVERIO LOMBARDI VALLAURI

PICTURE: ANNALISA CIMMINO

PICTURE: SAVERIO LOMBARDI VALLAURI

cushions on a neutral sofa is passé: "Colour confidence has increased and colour is being used in a more permanent way, upholstering the whole sofa or chair."

Chartreuse and turquoise are popular at present. But when Mokum's new international collection, Vacation, hits the showrooms that might change. The offering is expected to be rich, with bold zigzag-type patterns and brilliant colours.

CONTACT

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Clockwise from chair: the Bee chair, in bamboo, steel and wool, designed by Fritsch-Durisotti, made by TurriniBY; bold black, white and grey in offbeat shapes suggest a modern approach to tribal style; a traditional quilt treatment adds a handmade feeling; Miss Sarajevo, by Moroso, a mix of craft and sharp design, at Hub (hubfurniture.com.au); Alessi's teardrop basin and asymmetrical bath tub.

Cover story **Made to order**

From page 21

last five years before it needs some work – the junk webbing will sag; the frame will break because of the cheap materials used; it will have inferior foams.”

He recommends testing the comfort when buying sofas and armchairs. “People only sit for five minutes in a showroom, they should sit on the sofa for 20 minutes. Nobody sits on a sofa at home for only five minutes. You will soon see if the cushions flatten out.”

So what can we expect in furniture trends? The men observe that interior design concepts popular in restaurants – such as banquet seating and upholstered walls – are now becoming popular in homes as well. There’s also a boom in upholstered bedheads and outdoor seating.

SEEKING INSPIRATION

Furniture Inspirations is a 23-year-old manufacturing success story. The Clayton showroom is a showcase of its many styles, with the contemporary classic Fondo one of the most popular (view it on the website). But these pieces are not for sale, it’s an exhibition from which specifiers and retailers place orders.

Designers bring clients in to show what they have in mind and retailers send customers because they can’t hold every product. People off the street are welcome to browse and are referred to the retailers listed on their website.

David Balleggi, one of the founders, explains that it has a vast collection of products and bends over backwards to change designs to suit customers. “We understand what our clients want, we always accommodate requests. Actually we say ‘yes’ too often,” he says. Next time you are in the Hilton, you may be sitting on one of the company’s chairs.

The company also has a green



Above: the Ektorp from Ikea, has removable and washable covers – the answer to cleanliness and instant fashion updates. Left: a clue to the coming vibrancy of upholstery. Mokum’s new fabric collection, Vacation.

philosophy, as do many local manufacturers – Map, Jardan, Jimmy Possum and Zuster to name a handful.

“We saw the trend coming and so made sure we were ahead,” Balleggi says. He adds that the company follows best practice; hardwood that is screwed and dowelled and many comfort levels available. “All our materials, the foams and timbers are Australian. We support our industry.”

A PERFECT MATCH

Interior designer Antra Lanskis, of Taupeology, has all the furniture for her projects custom made so it fits the space in perfect proportions.

“It’s all about micro tweaking,” she says. “Furniture has to suit the people who live with it, a couple of centimetres here and there can make all the difference.”

Lanskis doesn’t describe the sofas as two- or three-seaters but by dimensions. “If I say three-seater, it sets up an expectation,” she says.

The sofa in her own living room is three metres long – her large space needed the mega piece. “It would probably be described as a six-seater, although there would never be six people sitting on it, that would look like a waiting room,” she laughs.

The values of the company that makes the furniture are as important to her as the aesthetic, which is why Furniture Inspirations is the perfect ethic for her. “It’s important to know where the product comes from; designers get what they need and so does the environment.”

She is currently designing dining chairs with loose covers. “My client is after a pale fabric, slip covers make it possible,” she says.

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