

Piet Hein Eek

The Value of Sustainability

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[P E T R I L E I J D E K K E R S]

Piet Hein Eek is one of a number of students graduating from Dutch design academies in around 1990 who created examination projects that were an immediate hit. They rejected the aesthetics of modernist design, countering it with playfulness and honesty. The contrary approach to design taken by both Sottsass (1917–2008) and Sipek (b. 1949) made an impact in the 1980s, with unconventional ideas and a vivid visual language that new designers found very stimulating. These were forms in which you could lose yourself. They created a sensation of boundless freedom and a delightful optimism that objects could be redesigned, free from the old, accepted laws.

New Dutch design

The young designers who experienced this shift during their studies believed that objects should first and foremost be imaginative, social and communicative, and that humour and playfulness could be expressed in the design, through the reuse not only of forms (the light bulb and the simple milk bottle) and ideas (Duchamp), but also of materials. They also felt that the environment mattered. Perfect beauty, extravagance and luxury were no longer the norm. Design acquired a new meaning, a new narrative that could be regarded as much warmer, more straight and personal.

In autumn 1995 Piet Hein Eek participated in the Dutch Design Café at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, along with other designers who included Tejo Remy (Milkbottlelamp), Rody Graumans (Chandelier 85 Bulbs), Henk Stallinga (Bubble Lamp) and Joep van Lieshout (Bussing Stations). During MoMA's Piet Mondrian retrospective the design studio OPERA reworked the museum's Garden Café to create a space featuring Dutch-designed tables, chairs and lamps, other fixtures and furnishings, and a display of typography and posters by Dutch graphic designers on the walls. Eek supplied aluminium tables, chairs and stools for the space, with an industrial form and a pop rivet joint as a distinctive design feature. This showcase event marked the beginning of a growing interest in Dutch design in the US. It was the era of Clinton and Dutch prime minister Kok: the economy was flourishing and all was well.

Scrap wood cupboard,
scrap wood, final exam, 1990.



After the fall of the Twin Towers, Dutch Design really came into its own. Its philosophy and approach were appealing, offering comfort and an interesting design experience. Increasing numbers of museums and individuals bought pieces. From Milan to New York, this new Dutch design was appreciated for its simplicity and dry humour. It conquered the world. Credit is due to the Droog creative agency, founded in 1993 as a platform for independent Dutch designers, for bringing this new Dutch design to countries where design was not an everyday concept.

The visual impact of scrap wood

Piet Hein Eek (b. Purmerend, 1967) graduated in 1990 from the Eindhoven Academy for Industrial Design (since 1997 known as the Design Academy), where, after following an inspiring foundation course, he was taught by Ed Annink and Gijs Bakker. At that time the content of the lessons was strongly influenced by the tutor's own artistic preferences, as was the case in all Dutch design academies. The educational system did not offer a broad curriculum and everything was decided on an individual basis. Bakker in particular wanted to hear stories from his students, a narrative that would explain their designs. But for Eek stories were not a priority. His concerns were more pragmatic. He wanted to find out more about craftsmanship, about form and function and

Cabinet curved,
aluminium and glass, 2011.



design systems. His notions of design were shaped by his recollections of his father using scrap wood to repair his garden shed. The art of finding, sawing and shaping old planks was etched into his memory. His imagination was full of sheds, with their plank walls, windows, doors and hinges. While his fellow-students discussed their clever gimmicks and concepts, he attempted to find a balance between thinking and doing, a form of design that would be of value in any era, like the design of a rabbit hutch or a piece by Eames. He started working with wood himself. For his final exam in 1990, he used reclaimed wood to build his now famous scrap-wood cupboard, a tall and narrow cabinet of weathered planks, doors and drawers, in which the layers of old paint and the arrangement of the strips of wood gave the piece a painterly look.

Eek's cupboard was the product of a process in which design, technique and material all interacted. This picturesque scrap wood became a characteristic feature of his work. In the years that followed he used this sturdy material to make tables, chairs, benches, beds and sideboards, both as commissioned one-off pieces and collections for the open market.

Since then, Eek's clients have come from all over the world. His furniture is available not only in its own natural colour with a thick layer of clear varnish, but also with a white or black finish.

The robust wood gives his furniture a monumental impact, as can be seen in the 'enormous scrap-wood armchair', which Eek made in 2000 using the wood from an old shed. With a basic block shape, wide planks and gently curving back and seat, this chair has the aura of a throne. Its dimensions have been selected with the skill of a sculptor, countersunk screws make the joints visible, and the signs of use, the paint and nail-holes all contribute strongly to the appearance of the piece. Thick varnish provides a smooth and practical surface.

Aluminium and glass

Eek's metalwork is also uniquely robust and simple. In 1993 he discovered the possibilities of the CNC (computer numerical control) machine, a computer-

controlled lathe that allows shapes to be copied in metal with seamless precision. Eek worked with the factory that owned the machine to produce a light-grey, almost graphic aluminium chair, an industrial gem composed of flat, folded sections held together with pop rivets. He used the same approach for the matching table that he went on to design, and exhibited both table and chair in New York. These pieces were revolutionary because, although their appearance suggests otherwise, they are in fact extremely lightweight and stackable. The cold-construction method of assembly, using bent edges and rivets, is an allusion to the beauty of the functional construction of factories, bridges and machinery in the late nineteenth century.

Two years later Eek made a metal storage unit based on the rectangular glass doors of a lab cupboard that he found on a Philips dump. This became one of his most successful designs. Just as the rhythmic arrangement of the planks of his wooden cupboard are reminiscent of structures in Cubist painting, the modular cadence of the Philips cabinet reflects the identical series in the work of the American minimalist artists Andre, Judd and LeWitt in the 1960s, who based their sculptures on the rhythms of the grid and the automation of the production process.

Just as elementary in form, but of a dazzling elegance, is Eek's 'aluminium curved cabinet', a long undulating glass form that he designed in 2011 and exhibited at the Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan. The piece is based

Ticket office of the Museum Kröller Möller,
Otterlo, 2000.





Restaurant (2010) with various furniture, tubes buffet, lamp of Léon Stynen and the 'Old lamp shade lamp 'Ball'(2008).

on a curved aluminium unit that Eek had recently made for a shop. Restricted by the rounded shape of the setting within which the unit had to function, he devised a construction that allowed straight glass sections to be placed within a curved aluminium frame. The result was this glittering piece of furniture, which appears completely transparent, with its reflections of aluminium and glass. It is an arrangement of metal sections with glass sheets mounted within a series of crystal-clear segments which can be extended endlessly in any direction. The interplay of old and new is a key feature of this piece: the glass and sculpted lines give this unit a character that owes much to functionalist architecture, but its aluminium construction and resultant elegant form lend the design an entirely contemporary look.

Discovery, design and production

Piet Hein Eek's furniture appeals to the imagination. His pieces appear on television shows, at trade fairs, in reading areas at exhibitions and by 1995 they had already found their way to MoMA in New York. He researched his ideas in what he refers to as his 'free work', in which he has experimented with different materials, imitating wooden furniture in steel, attaching veneer to steel objects and making a cupboard out of sticks and a treehouse from scrap steel. He nearly always bases his work on something that he has happened to find – old wood, a piece of metal, a heap of glazed windows or an unusual object. He recently took a stack of heavy beams, which he'd come across years ago and kept in storage because he liked the way they looked, and piled them up to create a unique group of benches and chairs. His company showroom is full of seats and tables made from leftovers of the production process, as though in a protest against wastefulness.



Old lamp shade
lamp 'Ball', 2008.

In 1996, prompted by his love of old doors and his father's sheds, he designed his own first garden houses, buildings whose appearance is determined by their intended function. One outstanding example of this work is the ticket-sales kiosk in the woods at the rear entrance of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, which he made from left-over materials in 2002.

Not only are his designs based on found forms and materials, his approach to construction solutions also relies on serendipity. Every technical discovery that leads to a remarkable result is painstakingly recorded for the long-term benefit of the company's design processes and profits.

Eek finds room for reflection and taps into new ideas within the free association allowed by his experimental work, where no external demands influence the process. He believes that research, design and manufacture form a single whole, just as the pop rivet in his metal products represents both the form and the construction. For Eek, design is all about finding the right balance in the calculating and creative process. Because a design has no value if it is not economically feasible.

Company finances

Since 2010 Eek en Ruijgrok BV, the official name of the company that Eek set up in Geldrop in 1996 with his fellow-student Nob Ruijgrok, has been based in one of the palaces of industrial construction on Strijp R, a former Philips factory site in Eindhoven. The factory, renovated by Eek himself, covers an area of 10,000 square metres and consists of five large halls, divided between two blocks that are connected by a transport corridor. The building, originally a ceramics workshop for the lighting industry, has high ceilings and a

lightweight construction of concrete and brick, metal and glass. Sunlight streams in through the glass roof. These transparent spaces present all of the different facets of the company: design studio, production floor, shop, showroom, administration department and exhibition space, where Eek also displays work by fellow artists and designers.

Eek en Ruijgrok BV is a completely independent operation with an annual turnover of 4 to 5 million euros. It is a successful creative industry employing fifty people. The organisation has a holistic structure that allows an easy overview of the entire design process of Eek's products, from the initial pencil sketches to the computer development and the manufacture of the result.

Eek views the creation of his own company in Geldrop as the most successful moment in his design career so far. It enabled him to combine everything under one roof, which proved hugely successful in terms of quality and sales, because it gave Eek control over both the price and production standards. And this has led him to believe that designers are exceptionally well qualified to take the lead in a new approach to business. Their work gives them the ability to take a broad economic view. Right from the initial sketches, they are able to visualise the final product and the stages required to get there. Eek feels that the business world could benefit from applying the creative concepts and qualitative aspects of design. And indeed, increasing numbers of artists and designers are now working successfully in think-tanks for innovative projects and in this way they could also contribute a great deal to the renewal of the economy.

For Eek, sustainability is a non-negotiable aspect of his business. The quality of his work depends on it. He is currently considering purchasing an area of woodland in the Dordogne, where he has already bought and renovated a dilapidated watermill, so that he knows where his wood comes from and that it was sourced responsibly.



Tubes buffet, old pipes, 2010

The restaurant

The premises also house the company restaurant, where Eek's own designs mingle with antique furniture. The look of this space, with its high ceiling, is determined by lots of natural light, a colourful bar unit and an unusual group of hanging lights made from old lampshades. The bar unit was made by Eek and consists of a horizontal stack of gas, water, air conditioning and heating pipes in their original colours, which had been reclaimed from the Philips factory. A monumental light in a simple, vertical form hangs dramatically in the middle of the restaurant. It is a design by the Flemish architect Léon Stynen (1899–1990). This hanging lamp, with its long lines of glass and metal, is a monument in light, surrounded by smaller, more playful lighting designs. Eek's decision to install this colossal piece, with its architectural allusions to the middle of last century, at the centre of his restaurant, may be a reference to the balance that he is seeking, a notion that is constantly apparent in his work: the balance between architecture and furniture, between then and now, in search of the eternal form. His lampshade-lights hang daintily around this piece, circling in a dance of elegant glass shades found by Eek in second-hand shops.

As we have already seen, Piet Hein Eek's independence and his open cultural attitude, his conceptual vision and his craft, and his ability to make rapid associations with what he sees are all important factors in the development of the



Tubes chair, old pipes, 2011.

designer's work. The objet trouvé always plays a vital role. Found elements inspire Eek in his creation of associations, connections and new designs that, all being well, will result in the production of objects. This is how all his designs came about, from the scrap-wood cupboard in 1990 to the Philips cabinet in 1994 and last year's 'aluminium curved cabinet', which was developed on the basis of the same design, via the 2003 oak display cabinet. He used the pipes he found in the old factory not only to make the restaurant bar unit, but also a number of tube chairs and benches, thus linking him, in his own unique way, to Marcel Breuer (1902–1981), who made his first bent tubular steel chair in 1925.

Above the factory shop and design floor is an immense exhibition area for art and design. In this loft-like space, Eek shows the work of artists and designers with whom he feels an affinity. The Van Abbe Museum has used the display case in the middle of this space, which was designed by Eek, to present pieces by El Lissitzky, René Daniels, Henk Visch and JCJ Vanderheyden. These are small, important works in which the conceptual and visual values of the artistic concept unite in a way that everyone can see.

Eek's designs reveal his warm relationship with elements of modern visual art. His connection with Judd and Andre has already been mentioned, but the bright spirit of Mondrian is also prominent in his work, and is expressed in the dimensions and scale of his designs. The metal table he designed in 2004 as a development of his scrap-wood tables reveals his affinity with the artist. Its staggered pattern reflects not only the structure of the scrap-wood table surface but also the interlocking patterns painted by Mondrian in 1918 and 1919, when he was tentatively feeling his way towards his own universe. In his paintings Mondrian sought to find absolute harmony of body and spirit. In the rich sustainability of his designs and in his company's approach to business, Piet Hein Eek is doing the same. ■

Translated by Laura Watkinson