



# RON'S W

Designer Ron Arad has a retrospective running at the Pompidou in Paris before it moves to MoMA, New York; he's the darling of Italian manufacturers; he has buildings on the go from Israel to Belgium and he champions 'design art' from his studio in Chalk Farm. And he still has the energy for a fight with **Helen Kirwan-Taylor**

**I** got told off before the interview with Ron Arad had even started. 'What do you mean you haven't seen my show at the Centre Pompidou?' he snapped. I could have bluffed my way through except Arad has a sniffer dog in the form of the world's worst website. There is absolutely nothing on it: not even a birthday. 'If the website said everything, you wouldn't need to meet me or ever come to my studio,' he said.

Or bother with Parisian museums for that matter.

Paris it is, because... how can I put it? Arad's school of charm is not what we Anglo-Saxons are used to. The 57-year-old Israeli-born architect and designer, who has dominated the international design scene since he banged together the Rover chair in his Covent Garden studio in 1981, is a bit gruff. 'Why do you keep jumping to the end of the story before I have even finished!' he blurted out. I noticed the photographer's face tensing up. I think he expected Arad to stalk out, but having first met the designer over 12 years ago, I know there is a cuddly side underneath (his students at the RCA love him, though he did cause a rather big fuss when he merged the departments of furniture design and industrial design). I did temporarily forget this as he contradicted, interrupted and more than occasionally told me off for not being an expert on all things Arad.

But why should he try to ingratiate himself? He does, after all, have a one-man retrospective of 600 works currently on at the Centre Pompidou, called *No Discipline*, until March, after which it opens at MoMA (in a different version) in New York on 28 July. He's finishing off the Design Museum Holon near Tel Aviv, due for completion in April 2009, which, with its circular ribbon-like front, is pure, fanciful Arad. He has a solo show opening in April at the Timothy Taylor Gallery on Carlos Place, and, of course, a medley of super-design hits under his belt, including the Bookworm bookshelf for Kartell and the Tom Vac chair for Vitra. Maybe Zaha Hadid and Marc

Newson found the 'design art' field (more about this later with many gesticulations from Ron) lucrative because they had so few hits on the real market. But Arad, whose D sofa in mirror-polished stainless steel fetched \$409,000 at Phillips de Pury in December 2007, doesn't need to depend on the patronage of rich collectors because he can deliver mass-market design; in my opinion, the much harder challenge. Art is whatever the artist says it is: industrial design has to light a room, not collapse if you sit on it, and do tricks like stack or live outside all year.

In fact, he has so many items on the market that I kept getting them all mixed up. It doesn't help that he somewhat mischievously plays the Italian manufacturers off against each other. Many of his projects, including the Clover chair for Driade, started life elsewhere. 'The chief at Magis (for whom the chair was originally intended)

said it wasn't as nice as the chair I designed for Moroso,' Arad said. 'So I took it to Driade, who loved it!' Again, I'm not sure a bashful Anglo-Saxon could muster thechutzpah to do this but, equally, I don't think the Albertos and Giannis of the design world would dare challenge Arad either. Arad is in your face: he hates theory, won't indulge in intellectual banter and is positively terrifying when you mention the words 'selling out to the art world'.

I arrived at his offices in Chalk Farm on the coldest day of winter. The heating was off (broken) and the architects and designers in his office were huddled over computers with coats and scarves on. To get to the studio, a former sweatshop and piano workshop, which he moved into in 1989, you have to climb up a rickety staircase and walk through what feels like the inside of a cement-mixing machine. It's all coated in wood and lined with some of Ron's most famous studio pieces (things

made by him for anyone who wants to buy them), including the Box In Four Movements mirrored chair, an MT Rocker (a rocking chair) in stainless steel, and a carbon Oh Voud (another rocking chair) – most have also been reproduced in an industrial version. Design these days is all glossy and virtual: this office looks like a scrapyard with a few desks thrown in. It's a sign, to me at least, that Arad is gritty and hands-on rather than the sort of designer who draws blobs on screen that someone else (a poor Italian engineer) has to figure out. There were prototypes all over the office, including one for his PizzaKobra light for iGuzzini, which arrives in a pizza box and cleverly rises up like a snake. His conference table is surrounded by the Tom Vac and Ripple chairs. The fact that they were made for two competing manufacturers (Vitra and Moroso), but are as related as I am to my children, would, you might think, cause alarm, but Arad handled it. 'The Ripple chair is a sequel to the Tom Vac. I was interested in knowing

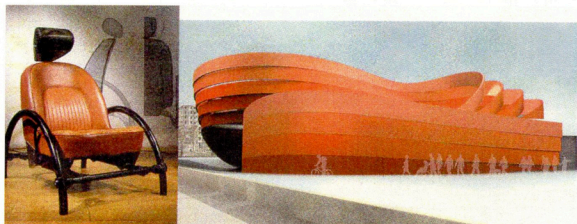


Above: Tom Vac. Below: the poster for Arad's show in Paris features his Bookworm bookshelf

The Chair man: Ron Arad at his Chalk Farm studio, January 2009

# ORL





The world according to Arad, from far left: the Rover chair; the Design Museum, Holon

what would happen if the backs criss-crossed. I sent the drawing to Rolf Fehlbaum [of Vitra] and said: 'Do you have any issues with this?' He answered that he expects products by the same designer to have things in common.' An ordinary mortal designer might have never have had his calls returned, but Arad is Arad.

His personal biography goes something like this. Born to a photographer father and an artist mother, Arad left war-torn Israel in 1973 to study at the Architectural Association. He graduated in 1979, with Nigel Coates and Zaha Hadid, and decided that 'working in someone's office wasn't for me, especially after lunch'.

He opened a studio/shop with Caroline Thorman, his business partner, called One Off in Covent Garden in 1981. His first piece of furniture was the Rover chair made from the seat of a car. One day a Frenchman knocked on his studio door and said, 'I want to buy these chairs!' He bought six for £99 each. When he left his details, Caroline noticed the name. It was Jean Paul Gaultier,' says Arad.

After that, work came quite quickly, including his first commission from Rolf Fehlbaum. 'That man loves chairs,' says Arad. 'He saw a picture of the Rover chair in blueprint and said he was commissioning a series of chairs from the likes of [Shiro] Kuramata, Frank Gehry and me. My brief was to do something with no commercial limitations.' To get the now famous stainless-steel Well Tempered chair (a pair on overstuffed armchairs) produced meant hiring 'art school refugees' and mastering the art of welding. In between making chairs, lights, tables, cutlery and even a hat (for Alessi, which he wears to bed I imagine) and coming soon a handbag for Notify Jeans (it contains a transparent centre that lights up so you can find your keys), he managed to knock together some architectural gems, including the auditorium at the Tel Aviv Opera House and, more recently, the Big Blue, a flying saucer-like structure and skylight cap to the Canary Wharf Shopping Centre. But apart from two Belgo restaurants (Belgo Noord and Belgo Centraal), Arad has never built much here. Meanwhile he is planning a mammoth shopping centre in Liège called Mediaticité. His wife, Alma, a social psychologist, and his two daughters (Lail, 25, a musician, and Dara, 16) accompany him to events. 'They complain my furniture is not comfortable enough,' he says.

Arad is used to teaching creative people. He discards ideas. 'They are the cheapest thing. What matters,' he says, 'is what you do with them.' He thought his Bookworm bookshelf would be a flop. 'It's not the

most practical thing. It takes two weekends to install. You have to drill it on to the wall.' So why is Kartell now extruding over 1,000km a year of the snake? 'It gives people the illusion that they are participating in its use. It offers things other shelves don't,' he says.

Back in the frozen confines of his office, Arad pulls up a picture from the Bologna Art Fair of a giant ping-pong table in mirrored stainless steel. The limited-edition version sold for €375,000. One featured in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition last June (it was shown on the cover with Tracey Emin and Humphrey Ocean playing ping-pong) and, though beautiful, appeared to me to be the height of pre-crash folly.

'That's really decadent,' I said to Arad. It took some guts to say this knowing that Arad wasn't going to take a punch without returning 30.

'What is the most expensive piece of artwork you own?' he asked. I mentioned a Hitchens. 'Don't you think it's a bit decadent to spend that much money on some paint smeared on paper? If you need to play ping-pong with your kids, this is not what you buy.'

For some time now, the art world has been feasting on the insatiable appetite of the suddenly rich. Dealers who couldn't get their hands on a Hirst thought: 'Ah! Let's sell design!' So they approached Marc Newson, Zaha Hadid and Ron Arad and asked for limited editions to sell for six figures. The term 'design art' popped up as an all-encompassing explanation for chairs that now came with a price tag of €185,000. To put it in context, most designers make their living working in the world of hi-tech manufacturing where the idea is to lower the costs. Now they were told: ask for as much as you want and whatever you do, don't make it look like furniture.

Arad was among the first designers to exhibit at Frieze. Two years ago, when three shiny Arad sculptures showed at Berlin's Jablonka Galerie, priced at €450,000 to €850,000, many in the industry saw red. They felt even angrier this year when six of his pieces, including the polyester and fibreglass Gomli inspired by his friend Antony Gormley (the only one that sold, with

## 'I have chairs in the show that are being reunited like long-lost siblings'



Arad clan: Alma, Ron, Dara and Lail in November in Paris

a price tag of €190,000), appeared at the Timothy Taylor Gallery.

'Arad really doesn't need to worry about money,' says Simon Stock of Sotheby's, who has worked with him and describes him as your 'typical artist-craftsman who's in it for the sport. He's very creative, very enthusiastic.' And rather difficult to work with I imagine, though Stock didn't say that. Deyan Sudjic, a friend and head of the Design Museum London, says Arad was once called the Bruce Willis of design. 'He is smart, and has a way with ideas, and is always moving on,' he says. One of his ideas was the Upperworld Hotel at Battersea Power Station, where the suites were going to be reached by shuttles through Tube-like corridors.

To be fair, Arad made pieces such as New Orleans (a large sculpted armchair), the Big Easy (another armchair) and Oh Void chairs long before someone who calls himself an art dealer stumbled upon them, but it's the 'art' mantle he wears that irritates his peers because it means riches.

What's currently consuming Arad is his own retrospective. 'It's so exciting! I have chairs in the show that have been reunited for the first time, like long-lost siblings!'

He says most designers are not interested in retrospectives but only want to show 'new work'. Retrospectives suggest the best is behind you. And

clearly Arad has enough confidence in his gifts to take that risk. To make the MoMA show more exciting he has convinced a Swiss collector to fund the 36m structure made of mirror-polished stainless steel that contains his work. When the show moves on to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the installation will go back to the collector. Meanwhile, the international galleries spontaneously mounting shows dedicated to Arad will profit from the publicity.

He has become very famous since I first met him but he acts the same. The coat he wore on the day we met was joined together by large bulldog clips. He drives an 'escargot' that looks, in Caroline's words, 'like a frog' and he never takes that hat off. 'You can now buy it on eBay,' he says.

He appears to be an egotist but you can only judge a person by the way he behaves. He answers his own phone and brings Caroline into the conversation constantly, though he is clearly the star. After the interview, I chatted with his staff.

They seemed as nervous in the presence of their boss as my children are in mine. Sure, I got barked at a few times but Arad is more teddy bear than polar bear. When I mentioned that my son has caught the design bug, he instantly suggested I bring him in. 'He has to see the real thing,' he says. Designer, architect or artist? Who cares. ■