



**ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN**

## See the Masterful Furniture Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Incredible pieces by these starchitects, plus Ettore Sottsass and a crop of exceptional young designers, take center stage in a pair of shows at NYC's Friedman Benda Gallery

**TEXT BY FRED BERNSTEIN**



A pair of Barcelona chairs and a matching table, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, sit in the entrance lobby of Chicago's S.R. Crown Hall (1956), also designed by van der Rohe. Photo: Frank Scherschel / Getty Images

Architects design furniture for lots of reasons—some practical, some artistic, some financial. A pair of shows at the Friedman Benda Gallery in Chelsea puts those motives in the spotlight. Mark McDonald, who has been buying and selling important 20th-century design for more than 40 years, has filled the gallery's glass-fronted main space with a greatest hits collection by Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and other masters. In the

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basement "project space," independent curator Juan Garcia Mosqueda is showcasing new furniture by nine emerging architecture practices.



An installation view of "Inside the Walls: Architects Design" at Friedman Benda in New York.

Photo: Dan Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda

The furniture in the upstairs show, called "Inside the Walls: Architects Design", was in most cases created by architects for specific projects—houses, restaurants, and hotels—with functionality a key concern. By contrast, the pieces by the young architects were made, generally, the way art is made, as one-offs or in small editions, with collectors in mind. Not surprisingly, the pieces in the downstairs show, slyly called "No-Thing", tend to be conceptual. Says Mosqueda, "The architects in my show welcome and champion uncertainty, a de facto reaction against the 20th-century masters upstairs."

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Ettore Sottsass [Italian, 1917-2007]; *Cabinet no. 8*, 1994.

Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Ettore Sottsass

The key figure in the transition from furniture as furniture to furniture as an exploration of ideas may be Ettore Sottsass, the Italian designer represented in the upstairs show by *Cabinet No. 8 (1994)*, which curator Mark McDonald rightly says "is a lot more innovative than its name." Indeed, its "shelves" slope just enough to be unusable as shelves. According to Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Christian Larsen, who mounted the Met's Sottsass show last summer, "Sottsass might very well be the hinge from the idea of coordination between building and interior, toward the autonomous, stand-alone quality of today's conceptually driven furniture."



Andy and Dave; *Where is this? (Bench)*, 2018.

Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Andy and Dave

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Among those conceptually driven pieces, some are also highly functional. That group includes a circular settee by the Brooklyn firm SO-IL, made of chain links slung across a stainless-steel frame; it is surprisingly comfortable. (SO-IL has been exploring uses of chain at least since it designed a gallery in Seoul covered in that material.) And a dining table by the architects Hilary Sample and Michael Meredith, of the firm MOS, looks eminently usable despite its conceptual roots: Meredith and Sample conceived it as a blow-up of the kind of roughly detailed tables that appear, thumbnail-sized, in architectural models. ("We hope it's conceptual and practical," Meredith wrote in an email. "Whenever we make furniture the first thing we think about is, Would we live with it?") Other pieces are closer to the "art" end of the spectrum. Among them are a bench by the Brooklyn creators Andy and Dave, with pleather cushions in shapes derived from the elements of a Louise Nevelson sculpture; it has the title *Where is this?* Daybeds by the Belgium-based *architecten de vylder vinck taillieu* resemble stacks of building materials, seemingly waiting to be assembled.



A quartet of outdoor lanterns designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Francis W. Little House in Wayzata, Minnesota.

Photo: Dan Kukla / Courtesy of Friedman Benda

But if the pieces in Mosqueda's show were designed to be sold, the ones in the upstairs gallery were, in most cases, never meant to come to market. Among the oldest items in McDonald's show is a quartet of outdoor lanterns designed by Wright for the Francis W. Little House in Wayzata, Minnesota. Completed around 1922, that house was demolished in 1972. (Its living room is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) The show also includes a sconce from the Darwin Martin house in Buffalo (1905), which is in the midst of a decades-long renovation. According to Mary Roberts, executive director of the Martin House Restoration Corporation, the sconce was probably lost during the 17 years (1937 to 1954) the house was abandoned. She writes in an email: "Unfortunately we have already paid to replicate the fixture in question, but having the original is always preferred. We make no claim to ownership, but it's something we would like back, if at all possible."

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