

## Homes: design's free spirit – Ron Arad interview

The free-spirited 63-year-old's maverick career has been marked by bold and uncompromising design

Becky Sunshine

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Ron Arad: 'I'm interested in running a studio, not a business.' Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

It's not easy giving [Ron Arad](#) a label, which is arguably something that appeals to the free-spirited 63-year-old. Israeli-born, but London-based for decades, Arad trained as an architect, yet refers to himself as "a refugee of architecture", alluding to the fact that the initial bold, experimental and uncompromising focus of his career was on product design – some loved, some less so – rather than building.

Arad had a stint as a somewhat controversial professor of design products at the Royal College of Art from 1998 to 2009, where he set about trying to undermine the rules by encouraging students – [Paul Cockledge](#), [Julia Lohmann](#) and [Peter Marigold](#) among them – to think freely. He has also had numerous solo exhibitions in recent years, including retrospectives at the [Pompidou Centre in Paris](#), [the Museum of Modern Art in New York](#) and [the Barbican in London](#).

[Arad's studio](#) in Chalk Farm, north London, is an unpretentious space in a former piano factory, which leads into a small gallery area upstairs. Currently on display is Arad's Last Train [scratched glass installation from last year's Venice Biennale](#). There are prototypes and models, from his first hit – the [1981 Rover chair](#) – and miniature versions of his [design museum in Holon](#), Israel, a highlight of his architectural work to date.

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"I'd say this place represents me," he says. "It's chaos, not a clean, organised place. You can see people are happy to work here. Or at least they pretend to be for my sake," he adds with a smile.

Arad is not good at sitting still – there's simply too much to do. With his team of 22, the studio is working on an array of international architectural, design product and installation projects. "I never wanted more than 20 people here," he says. "I'm interested in what I'm doing, which is running a studio, not a business. When you have a lot of people, it forces you to take work you don't want to do to pay the wages. That's not what this is about."

Current projects include the renovation of the Watergate Hotel in Washington, a concept for the unveiling of Fiat's new Cinquecento at the Paris Motor Show in October and a large moving sculpture for a public space in Canada.

During [Clerkenwell Design Week](#), which starts on Tuesday, Swiss furniture brand Vitra, with whom Arad has a long relationship, is celebrating the 15th anniversary of his moulded plastic [Tom Vac chair](#). Twenty-two designers and architects – including [El Ultimo Grito](#), [Morag Myerscough](#), [Make Architects](#) and [TP Bennett](#) – have been asked [to reimagine the chair](#). Arad will select his favourite from the participants. "I'm as excited as anyone to see what they've done," he says of the project. "I remember once doing something similar for the [Verner Panton](#) chair in cast concrete. It was unexpected."

The Tom Vac, which has been a huge commercial hit since its launch in 1999, began life as an aluminium experiment a few years earlier. The original prototypes are lined up on a raised undulating wooden platform at Arad's studio. "I learned about this amazing technique where you can vacuum-form aluminium, but I hadn't found any excuse to use the expensive mould-making technology," he says. An installation for [design magazine Domus](#) in 1997 was the moment that enabled Arad to create a totem of stacked chairs made using the technique.

The following year, Arad and Vitra went industrial by producing a plastic version. A few simplifications later – "If you want to use a horrible architectural term," he says now, "it was 'value engineered' to bring the price down and make it more comfortable, more flexible" – and it was presented at the Milan furniture fair.

Did Arad anticipate such a hit? "To be honest, I don't really think commercially. This is how we work – we want to do the best we can; it's not about world domination. My first company was called One Off, because I didn't understand why you'd want to make more than one of something, or about the joy or value of mass-production. Now, when I walk home from the studio, there are probably 10 windows I look through and can see my [Bookworm](#) [a now legendary serpentine spiral bookshelf that he designed for Italian company Kartell]. I was more interested in the design itself, rather than what it might become."

He speaks at length about ersatz versions of the Tom Vac and his Ripple chair for Moroso seen everywhere. "I don't love it, but real success is measured by how many copies you get. If you're copied, you know you exist. I think there are probably more fakes than real ones." Does it bother him? "Somehow I'm more bothered by people nearer to me doing less obvious copies than people trying to make precise copies in China," Arad says. "You go to the Milan furniture fair every April and you can see stupid versions of the Tom Vac – that's more irritating than an almost good one from China."

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The **Tailor My Tom Vac** exhibition is at Vitra, London EC1, for the duration of **Clerkenwell Design Week** from 20-22 May; open 9.30am–5pm, admission free.

The Last Train installation is on show at the Ron Arad Studio, London NW1 from 27 June-25 July; open Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm, no booking necessary.

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