The Approach

A Promise of Warmth Inside

Louis Cohen
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Fine Arts in the Department of Furniture Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.


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Chapter I

An Introduction
Abstract

Walking up those stairs is always a treat. The tacit knowledge that you are moving towards a hidden gem: a space most don’t know to find. Salt water, wood smoke, and roasted coffee perfume the air. But the best part of all is the intention. This is not a space to go to out of necessity or convenience. This is a space for slow sips and long reprieves.

This thesis explores many themes, but at the heart is the idea of The Approach: how we come to an object is just as important as the actual moment when we meet the object. The Approach pulls the outside world in, building opportunities for solace. Woven into the core of this research is the theme of tension in harmony: contrast that creates a sum greater than its parts. I seek to better understand how to harness balance in opposition. I search for moments on the stairs, when the promise of warmth beckons from just around the corner.
Introduction

At the end of my first year in the furniture graduate program, I attempted to write a mini thesis on what I strive to impart on my furniture. I chose to write about functionalism and timelessness. Unsurprisingly, the essay was deeply flawed. I had chosen to ignore that universal functionalism or timelessness do not exist. Perhaps more damning, I had written a dry and uninteresting essay that attempted to use an analytical voice, and in doing so, had failed to express my own perspective. I still attempt to consider the functionality of any piece I design, but acknowledge that my perspective on function is not ubiquitous. There is a portion of my brain that is deeply enamored with logic and order. That piece of me led me to pursue my undergraduate degree in biology, and craves the rationality inherent in concepts like functionality. I yearn for equations within the field of furniture that result in correct answers. But just like in the natural world, the best part of design is the brilliantly creative and head-spinningly complex solutions that are constantly evolving.

As I began to consider how to approach my thesis, I felt as though I would deflate the richness of my inspirations if I attempted to address my perspective head on. Instead, I began to define what my furniture is not. It is not attempting to be revolutionary: trying to define a new genre of furniture, or implement new materials, or use them in a particularly innovative way. It is not meant to transcend the category of furniture or provide a critique of society, nor is it made in an
attempt to create dialogue with another era of design. It is not designed to accommodate a more nomadic style of life that many younger generations find themselves living today. In fact, in many ways, my work gravitates towards the other end of the spectrum: large and unwieldy, heavy, and near impossible to mend. However, that too is not a deliberate quality of my work, but rather an unintended consequence of the way I design. While I have deep admiration for craft and craftsmanship, I do not seek to build in a manner that adheres to the ethos of craft, nor do I strive to exist solely within the confines of traditional forms. I continue to grapple with these assertions, and have even come to refute some of them. My work may not be attempting to amplify a critique, but there is an ethos to it that is itself a subtle rebuke of modern trends. Nevertheless, the list helped me contextualize what I was thinking about, and began to help me develop a shaky framework for the thesis body that I could build upon. I revisited an inspiration map I had developed and distilled solace as a feeling that I attempt to evoke and explore. I adopted the use of case studies to help flesh out my analytical understanding of existing furniture. The analysis was broken up with vignettes intended to reflect the themes I had developed from my inspiration map. Through the weaving of this tapestry, the concept of approach bubbled to the surface. Approach is the first point of interaction and the subsequent unfolding. There are many elements of approach—beckoning, mystery, anticipation, and tension that are explored throughout this thesis, but it is the approach that cues a moment of reprieve that I am most focused on. If solace is the subject of the work I have developed, then approach is the lens through which I address it.
A Litany for Survival

When we are loved we are afraid
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

Audre Lorde

Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue.

Paul Kalanithi

tension

a balance maintained in an artistic work (such as a poem, painting, or musical composition) between opposing forms or elements; a controlled dramatic or dynamic quality.

In literature the term has been variously used and defined. The poet and critic Allen Tate used it to refer to the elements that are necessary for a work to be considered whole or complete. Tate meant of tension was desired by Tate from two terms used in logic—extension (literal meaning) and intension (metaphorical meaning)—from which he dropped the prefixes, and it refers to a mutually dependent relationship between those different forms of meaning. Though the existence of both kinds of meaning creates a conflict, they are both necessary because it is this conflict or tension that gives poetry its meaning.

-Make the music you want to listen to
-Andre Benjamin

When breath becomes air

Paul Kalanithi

Improvisation

Paul Kalanithi

Scarcity

The room was dimly lit. The air felt still and there was a noticeable lack of sound. I felt warm and uncomfortable. There wasn’t anything else to do but occupying my attention. Maybe it was Turing’s universe. The clock was slightly tilted. Things were scattered about, and the floor was not kept. I sat down, and after a few minutes I was still there. There didn’t seem to be any sense or reason to the questions I asked myself. Should I repeat it with the door. Light enough in the room seemed to move off the same place, then. Be more of a intellectual exercise, but it still wasn’t very

Albert Einstein

Half-Remembered Dreams
The idea of how easy it is when you know how and when (looking through the window).

The scene is so much better when the sun is shining. It makes everything look better.

There's also potential for the bath to be a space that invites relaxation.

Loaded Potential

Nature (Utah Rainbow)

Joy Harman

Systems

Function

Resourcefulness

Woven

Tradition

Creating the Familiar

Composed

Baking (Breads, British, laminated pastry)

Contentment

Hidden Gems (Sonnyville, Coffee, Pike Place Market)

Joinery (Petal Design by Smokeshow)

Audre Lord

- Make the music you want to listen to

Andre Benjamin

- Don't underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear and not bothering

Paul Kalanithi

- Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue.

Winnie the Pooh

- When we are loved, we are afraid love will vanish.
- When we are alone, we are afraid love will never return.
- And when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed.
- But when we are silent, we are still afraid.

A Litany for Survival

Contentment

Furniture should feel warm and inviting.

Paul Kalanithi

- I believe this has, bit by bit, to do with materials, proportions, and shape. I will continue to use wood to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work. I want to bring a natural element to my work.

Joinery (Petal Design by Smokeshow)
The inspiration map and complimentary symbols were the culmination of an evolving project intended to help each thesis-year furniture student pull out patterns in their work. We began by identifying seven influences each that were primarily visual, textual, and ephemeral in nature. Those influences were grouped to develop themes, and symbols were created to capture those themes. Finally, our influences were visually mapped in whatever way we felt best represented the nature of our work.

The project helped me to identify the harmonious tension that exists in my pieces. Through conversations with peers, the image of a warm hearth on a cold night was developed as a metaphor for the feelings my work evokes. I revisit this metaphor often, and use it to help orient myself.
Disquiet of Mystery
Moving on faith, feelings without a word, 
half remembered dreams, dense fog

Spiraling Path
Hidden patterns, unknowable logic, ripples 
on a pond, the peace of order

Buttery Crust
Bear hugs, reading nooks, the smell of the 
familiar, home, heart, hearth

Latent Electricity
Racing thoughts, blank canvas, humming 
with potential, impending downpour
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside
Petrification

Imagine the tree that once stood in the place where the pebble sits today. The process of petrification begins underground. When a tree is engulfed in ash, submerged in silt, and buried in the Earth, it has descended into an environment ripe for permineralization. Over the course of millennia, the organic matter decomposes, but in its final act of growth, the tree’s cell walls create a perfect template for mineral-bathed water to flow. The tree recasts itself even as it is consumed. Pressure, winds, and water buffet the tree, until only the polished skeleton of stone remains.

Should you pick up the petrified pine, it will exude a warmth seldom found in stone. Perhaps trapped between worlds, it is at once hard and soft; inviting but honed. There is an inherent honesty to it that exists in all natural things, but that does not preclude the mystery that is woven into the fibers of the form. The fractures and imperfections that have accumulated over the course of its life have become integral, no longer defects, but chapters and stories that have been worn smooth by time. Out of the corner of your eye, you may catch a wink of internal light from the depths of the form, or it may be a reflection of the light that envelops the room like a thick blanket.

Not intended solely as an object to be ogled at, in hand the stone begins to nourish. The hard exterior gives way to a molten core in a manner that is referential to the magma that entombed the tree for a time. This rich liquor runs through those that gather in the space of the stone, exuding a pleasant warmth. Allow yourself a drink, and you can begin to feel the latent energy that vibrates through the stone like a classic boombox beat, hammering out the song of its storied past. The music of the form keeps time with the conversation in the room, while allowing those present to lose track of time entirely.
Chapter II

The Invitation
More than any other image of furniture, this photo has captivated my attention, and has continued to be a touchstone for my own design language. The eye lands on the crest of the drawer pull, and slips its way down to the cavity below. The form of the drawer front is so intuitive, and yet it requires one glance after another to try to figure out its topography. The fact that such a soft shape can create such a strong crease makes you question how the lip of the pull protrudes. The shadow beneath the lip seems to insinuate that a recess has been carved from the blank of material. My rational brain imagines a flat piece of stock that has been built up to create the lip, and carved away to create the recess. And with that assumption, my eye once again flows around the perimeter of the drawer, hunting for the flat spot or hidden seam that reveals how the form was sculpted.

The low-relief carving of the front calls to mind the biomorphic surrealism present in Isamu Noguchi’s work. George Nelson described the work Noguchi was making in the 1940s as “amorphous and flowing like living tissue.” Noguchi, who was a strong believer that sculpture and design were interchangeable words, strove to animate space and objects through plastic form. The plasticity present in Peder evokes a softness that is uninterrupted by material. The form is not only soft on the hand, it is soft on the eye. The geometry flattens out just long enough for you to take in the rich details of the joinery, before you are carried around the corner of the leg or whisked down to the ground with a sweeping curve. Snederskind’s work, like Noguchi’s, finds a way to accentuate function, rather than limit it, through form.

For all the fluid grace found in the curvature of the form, it is the fact that the protrusions are founded in a facet of functionality that makes Peder such a compelling object to me. Naoto Fukasawa writes about a moment of clarity he experienced when he stopped attempting to impart his own signature on each piece he designed, and instead began to objectively identify with how people were interacting with his work. He goes on to explain that the best designs are those that feel so intuitive as to be handled “without thought,” and how this idea led him to study how objects of design can dissolve into the background when not in use. He writes, In such dematerialized design thinking, a groove [in a tile floor] can be an umbrella stand, and that umbrella stand might literally dissolve in the course of people’s actions. The functional provisions for those actions might not be immediately apparent, but quickly come to the fore when people perform those actions without thinking.

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Peder Desk,
Snedikersind (Kristian Olsen Frandsen)
2016
As a piece grounded in functional use, I do not see Peder as an object disappearing into its surroundings, but I do understand the drawer front in that context. The way that the form so seamlessly rises and falls obfuscates its utility until it is needed. The exposed joinery, by contrast, is a moment in Peder where Snedkersind tips his hand and calls the viewer’s attention. Rather than feeling like a grandiose expression of craft skill, it feels like a subtle cue that provides a hint at construction techniques, while further bathing the piece in a sense of mystery.

Depending on your level of woodworking know-how, the details of the exposed joinery can seem like an interesting visual, or a testament to the quality of design and craft present, but they are undeniably a moment of graphic mystery in such a visually quiet object. The joinery feels deliberate and integral, but it opens up questions of where it is coming from or going to, and why it came to be the way it is. The mystery present in the geometry is only enhanced by the mystery of the photo. The composition of elements feels so proportional, yet the photo provides little in the way of information about scale or context. Peder could be a nightstand, or console table; it could have one continuous long drawer or several, and could be tall or short, wide or narrow. The image provides the perfect amount of information to absorb the form. The drawer provides a focus point, and is itself a focus on function. That focus is softened through the blending of forms, until it feels easy for the eye to glide along. The surfaces and edges are moments of reprieve, which give way to the graphic moments on the periphery. The eye gets to flow from central moments out to the details, but it always finds its way back to the heart of the image.

In actuality, Peder is a desk with two drawers and a hidden compartment. Though the quality of craft is carried throughout the piece, there is something lost for me in seeing the whole of the desk. The proportions do not seem quite so intuitive, and the eye must work a little harder to move across the object. Perhaps it is better to maintain a bit of the mystery.
There are days when the world around you is blanketed in the ethereal cotton of fog. Headlights remain on all day, poking through the curtain like two luminous eyes heralding the arrival of something else warm and moving. The fog does not just swaddle; it burrows into the core of your being, attempting to leach your heat and swallow you whole. It carries with it the smell of wet. Not the cleansing scent of rain, but a sodden stench of permeation. A wet that makes all of nature shiver. There is no fighting it. The haze cannot be swatted away, or made insubstantial simply by turning on a light. Instead, it takes that brightness and distorts it, diffusing and recasting until the light has become disoriented. Fog is unmovable and unyielding, encouraging you to feel small and alone.

But fog can also soothe. It can mute the cacophony of noise that swirls about you. It can hide garish colors and gristy sights, and make a blank canvas of the world. More enticingly still, it can create a new world for you entirely. Your city can begin to float, untethered by the laws of gravity. Skyscrapers can become stepping stones, levitating a thousand feet in the air. And pathways can become portals to a different reality, cocooning you in a dense weave of evergreens, crisp air, and the unknown. There is possibility ever-present in mystery. True, there could be something monstrous around the next corner, but there is also the chance of something new and marvelous.
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside
Chapter III

Walking Down the Path
There are certain pieces of furniture that feel like intermediary steps necessary for a designer to discover their full potential. Something about them is not quite right or fully realized, but there are moments of magic that bubble to the surface. The occasional arm chair designed and made by Sam Maloof in 1954 is such an object. The flat, angular, lower frame of the chair feels both boxy and disjointed from the heavily sculpted and turned upper frame. The way the front leg falls on the outside of the lower frame feels less like a deliberate design decision than a convenient means of connecting the two elements, and the way the arm dead-ends into the back leg feels like a missed opportunity to maintain fluidity. Furthermore, the headrest is badly out of proportion. For all the chair’s flaws, the richness in detail it possesses, and warmth it exudes, makes it a fascinating and beautiful object to study.

The front leg flows seamlessly into the armrest in a moment of sculptural purity. The slippery curve of the interior surface of the arm invites the hand to dance along its surface. The outside edge of the arm, by contrast, holds a crisp edge, accentuating the serpentine form and creating a moment of sharp contrast. The barely perceptible transition that begins at the bottom of the headrest and carries into the back legs is a subtle piece of joinery that maintains the graceful flow of the form. Despite the boxy feel of the lower frame, the back leg is a single piece of wood that blends from rectangular stock to round in both directions, as though it was worn smooth by time except where it connects to the rest of the chair.

Maloof’s popularity would continue to grow exponentially in the years following the debut of this chair, and with that growth his form language continued to evolve, but he never lost the essence of what made his furniture so special. Years after he had become a household name in California, he insisted that he remain a one-man operation to maintain quality. Maloof was a perfectionist. In the early days of his studio, he would draw ground plans of the client’s home, make paper mock-ups of the space, scaled models of his work, and finally full-scale prototypes in redwood or pine. Each project he took on he treated as a fully custom job, despite having a collection of work that people were clamoring for. While his attention to craft is laudable, Maloof is set apart because he knew how to marry skilled craft with thoughtful design, something he believed was missing from much of the furniture being designed in his era:

One of Maloof’s principal objectives was “warmth.” In his view, the weakness of much
contemporary American manufactured furniture was its “coldness” - the direct result of the separation of designer and craftsman in industry. Scandinavia offered a better manufacturing model. There, he pointed out, furniture designers and production cabinetmakers worked in tandem, not isolation, each appreciating and acknowledging the other’s contributions. But his own role as an independent designer-craftsman represented the ideal: in an autonomous individual, the two identities were successfully combined, and quality was controlled from start to finish.4

The warmth referred to goes far beyond high-quality craftsmanship; it can be found in the tone of the materials he chose, the honesty of those materials, the visual weight of his pieces, and the lines he exaggerated or pushed to the periphery. Maloof declared, “he wanted the light, fluid lines of his hardwood furniture also to convey ‘strength.’”4 The ability to balance visual weight with flowing form, and still manage to produce a chair that was comfortable to sit in and made of natural materials is what set Maloof apart, and what imbued his work with the internal warmth I attempt to impart in my own work.
Portal Lamp

Begin at a midpoint on the frame, and trace the steel form from one curve to another with your eyes. The full oval is reflected from one half to the other, yet it is easy to imagine the lower half of the light swinging up to nest inside the upper half. The structure is at once flowing and jarring, static and moving. Smooth curves give way to right angles at the moments of transition, and textured surfaces are forced smooth at the perimeter. There is something arcane about the light, making you question whether to move towards it or keep a distance.

The portal light began with the idea of transformation. Initially, the concept revolved around physical transformation: a light that could pivot and move to create a partition or reading light depending on its orientation. A deeper exploration of transformation led me to explore the concept of liminality. As a word I had always associated with discomfort, I was surprised to discover that possibility was core to the definition of the word. I attempted to imbue this light with my new understanding of liminal space, creating an object of uncertainty and opportunity. A portal to step through.
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside
Walking Down the Path
Spiraling Path

Grab hold of a piece of seaweed near the shore and it will shred in your hands, yet it survives the most violent of storms in the midst of the ocean. The macro algae dances through the water spinning about to the rhythm of the waves. Were you to capture a moment of this dance, you would notice that the seaweeds corkscrew about in the pattern of a whirlpool. The spiral is an archetypal shape of movement in nature.

Galaxies full of one hundred trillion stars twist around their dark matter in a massive coil. The molecules responsible for the development and function of all organisms are ever chasing one another around a double helix. Colonies of fish swirl about in a tornado of fins, and hurricanes unleash their ferocity through the eye of the storm.

The spiral is, in many ways, the antithesis of the straight line. It does not always feel like the most efficient solution, and at times, a curve can feel like it is taking you further away from a goal. There are layers to a spiral, it does not immediately lay its secrets bare. Nevertheless, there is an origin and a destination. There is purpose to the path. Allowing yourself to travel around those curves lets you revisit old ideas; allows you to see the narrative of your work shape itself. Even if you cannot see where you are going, the spiral is a shape of reason and it will move you towards the right place.
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside
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Chapter IV

Entering a New, Familiar Space
My parents have a chest in their bedroom that glows with the burnished patina of 200 years of daily use. When my sister was two, she accidentally bumped the chest while it was opened, and the lid slammed and locked with the key inside. For my entire life, the chest has remained locked, lending an air of mystery to it. In my mind, the chest bulges comically, attempting to escape its confines and spill its secrets. The left edge of the lid stands out as several shades darker than the rest of the chest. Once considered a rather crude repair done by my grandfather in his two-car garage, the edge has been worn into a seamless moment in the story of the chest. Every surface possesses innumerable checks and flaws. The key plate hangs from one nail, wood putty fills the gaps in the dovetails, and scratches from cats, toddlers, and moves across the Atlantic run in all directions. The dovetails and profiles of the base stand out as the most embellished moments of the chest, yet both can be understood as practical decisions employed in the name of expediency and longevity. Were this chest to be offered in new condition today, it would hold no appeal to me. The surfaces are too planar and unadorned. The curvature of the lid edge feels crude and uneven, and the profile of the base feels like a weak attempt to mimic architectural motifs. Knotty pine, known for being easy to work and growing large and straight, does not generally possess the richness or character of the species I love best. The draw of the chest is in the surfaces worn down and recast, in the imperfections, in the history that it wears proudly for all to see. There is a warmth imbued in this chest that no amount of sanding or staining can impart.

Like the chest, the things I make are meant to be used. How can a piece of furniture be functional if you are afraid of interacting with it? However, there is a contradiction that lives inside of me: as a designer and maker, I strive for perfection with my work. I want the blending of curves to be perfect, and a CNC’s ability to reproduce the same piece time and again has made it a near-integral tool in my fabrication process. I seek to create something that is visually precious, even as I attempt to make furniture that feels inviting to interact with. Once I have finished making a piece, it is not the perfect feathering of an edge that I find most compelling, but the inevitable flaws I have imparted in making the object. Glenn Adamson talks about the art of repair and the Japanese practice of kintsugi in his book Fewer, Better Things saying, “Because Japanese pottery is so revered for its historical associations, marking a crack in this way can even enhance the appeal and cultural stature of a particular tea bowl or jar.” I understand dents and chips in finish in much the
same context. Were those marks to be left by the maker on purpose, they would be ugly blemishes and devalue the object, but left over time, they tell part of the story of a person’s life, and create a more compelling narrative than any new piece of furniture can. Where does that leave me as a designer attempting to make new work? I see my goal as making furniture that is interesting enough to capture the eye, inviting enough to encourage daily use, and resilient enough to stand up to 200 years of abuse and look better for it.
The precipice of sleep is a fragile place to be. Forgotten tasks and unfulfilled ambitions threaten to lurch you awake as your body fights your mind for sweet reprieve. The edge of the dream world beckons with promises of unshackled creativity and nonsensical adventure. But the world of sleep is not always kind or carefree.

Woven threads of light flicker with an internal flame, capturing self-doubt and engulfing it. The weave becomes porous around its perimeter, allowing space for fresh thoughts to seep in. Roots slide out of the ground and meld together to form a cradle. Worn smooth by time, it is impossible to tell where one ends and another begins. They beckon with a polished glow, promising a warm and safe place to rest.

**Hawser Bed**

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**Buttery Crust**

Dark nights call for thick sweaters and fresh cookies. Burnished floors reflect the melted butter glow of warm light. The slow simmer of a long cook quietly offering a background melody to the vocal fry of Ira Glass. Condensation sits upon the windows, buffeting the breath of winter and covering the abyss of the night sky. Spices on the counter speak of histories both near and far; a roadmap of the meal to come, and a map of flavors migrating through time. Different smells waft from each corner of the kitchen. Rather than clashing, these scents weave together into the aroma of the familiar. Sauce-splattered books lay open to recipes so covered in looping cursive script as to be made illegible. Nevertheless, the notes are easy to decipher: they speak of past nights together with good food and better company.

The meal is made with many sets of hands. Nimble fingers make short work of large piles of fruit, but sit in rapture as weathered wrinkles roll out smooth crust. Together, edges are crimped and tops latticed; the elder hands slowly transferring confidence and the practiced touch of the patient pâtissier. The recipe being prepared is neither novel nor nouveau. Instead, it has been passed down through many generations, each set of hands leaving their mark on the dish. A pinch of nutmeg here, an extra spoonful of honey there. Every iteration recreating something simultaneously well known and entirely unique. Even as the recipe has evolved, its purpose has remained steadfast: it is meant to nourish. The first bite, like a warmly-spiced hug, requires savoring. Subsequent forkfuls of tender fruit soothe stresses and inject new life into the conversation, allowing the night to meander along contentedly. The last bites of buttery crust enveloping all in a warm blanket of full relaxation.
The first thing the eye is drawn to is the lip of the table; it catches the light and stands out in contrast to the apron, which is bathed in shadow. From afar, that lip encourages a viewer’s eye to slip below the surface and follow the form of the base, while those near the table run an open palm over the edge of the top and down the gentle slope of the belly. Every curve in the form invites the hand. The leg feels just stout enough to wrap fingers around. Initially intended to bleed into the underside of the top individually, instead the legs create a perimeter that prevents the viewer from seeing through to the other side of the table. The middle remains shrouded in a bit of mystery. Does the table’s mass continue to grow to the very center? It is only by climbing beneath that a viewer can fully understand the shape. As the form splays out near the bottom, the half-lapped cross of the stretchers holds the base stable as it once again draws the eye to the heart of the piece. The size of Sinew does not feel so significant that it is uncomfortable for an individual, but it can always accommodate at least one more. The sinew table began with the idea of pulling people together, and remained at the heart of the design.

Sinew Table

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Chapter V

Leaving Allows You to Return
The Value of Absence

What if we considered negative space as a material? Empty space is a critical component to nearly all designs, yet it is rarely thought of as an element to be inserted into an object. For example, we might talk about reducing the thickness of a shelf, or elongating a post, but rarely do we suggest adding more emptiness to something. Just the phrase adding emptiness feels slightly paradoxical. There is, however, much to be gained from working negative space into the artist palette. In the context of furniture, adding more emptiness will usually result in a lighter structure both physically and visually. The emptiness also gives the eye cues as to where it should travel, and opportunities for it to rest between rich details. Negative space can be used to test boundaries, and can demand more thoughtful and inventive solutions without costing a penny in materials. In the case of the Tana Shelf, designed by George Harper for Tide Design, it is the additive emptiness that takes the piece from simplistic, utilitarian shelving to an airy and unique object.

There are sight lines through the Tana Shelf from any angle of approach. The panes of negative space feel like windows letting in light. Curves in the perimeters of the shelf back and supports help the piece break out of its rectilinear confines, and rounded posts further soften the form. The shelves sit perched on their supports; captured on both edges and a face, they sit securely, but are held lightly. The details of the Tana are subtle enough that they do not detract from the objects resting on the shelves, but do provide a means of framing a particular object by leaving it largely surrounded by empty space.

Though negative space has the power to guide, challenge, and improve, it lacks warmth. Negative space is the all-consuming fog. It is the blind turn on the path that takes you away from where you think you want to go. It is the starless night that stares back at you from the window. And it is what is left when the house has been ripped down to the studs. That emptiness speaks of mystery and potential. To be surrounded by a lack of it is to be in a kind of limbo – somewhere between here and there. For most of us, myself in particular, that space is charged with excitement, but it is also a space of discomfort. Emptiness lacks the familiar, and the familiar is at the heart of solace.

By introducing negative space into furniture, we make the moments of positive space richer and warmer. The emptiness reminds us of all the unknown things that surround us. By contrast, the honest solidity of a wooden post is a reassuring reminder of the familiar.
Our way of perceiving the world in relation goes beyond the physical. As I have grappled with what makes a piece of furniture comfortable, or how a piece of furniture can contribute to a comfortable environment, I have come to the conclusion that part of creating a space of solace is by experiencing moments of discomfort; that those moments of discomfort not only give us necessary context for appreciating the comforts we do experience, but they actually enhance those moments.

I understand absence from an environment or object to be a tool that can be used to gain a fuller appreciation of that place or thing. An example of this I attempt to consider while designing is the idea of the warm hearth on a dark and rainy night. For many of us, the hearth is the heart of the home, an object we associate with warmth, nourishment, and coziness. By contrast, being outside on a dark and wet night is an experience nobody relishes. Rather than those experiences being subtractive, the discomfort of the outside enhances the feeling of being in that warmth. The fire feels a little more comforting, the smells of the kitchen waft a little more invitingly, and the space glows a little brighter. The sum of the experience is greater than its parts. As I think about how to impart my understanding of the benefits of absence into my work, I continually come back to the approach: how somebody feels as they lay eyes on my furniture. I attempt to make work that beckons to those who see it, and invites them to interact, whether it is their first time encountering a piece or the thousandth. The comfort I attempt to imbue in my work is less focused on the plush, saturated comfort of a La-Z-Boy, than the lasting comfort of an invitation. Like somebody picking you up from the airport, or a dog waiting for you to return from work, there is something wonderful about leaving so that you can feel the welcome of being home.
Leaving Allows You to Return
The house with the sagging roof and shattered front window vibrates with possibility. Each squeaky floorboard a cry for salvation. Each fissure in the plaster a mark of permission to begin anew. History has bled into the frame of an old home. When old is well preserved it becomes precious and delicate, but when old has been neglected, it provides a Choose Your Own Adventure smorgasbord of possibilities. Dilapidation unveils solutions that stand up to time and abuse. Gems of bygone eras gleam out as a reminder of the value that exists behind the crumbling facade. But refit a beam, reframe a window, recast the home until it fits your vision seamlessly.

If a beautiful home undergoes renovation, a gash has appeared in an unmarred surface. The cut requires precise and rapid stitches, leaving as subtle a scar as possible. The house with 10,000 cuts does not require the same delicacy. It urges you to test limits and push boundaries. The bathtub in what will become the kitchen may strike you as incongruent, but allow yourself to imagine a version of your dream home that celebrates the tub. Embrace the knowledge that with the first blow of the sledge, chaos will erupt. Opportunities to make improvements upon your plans will present themselves, as will complications that require clever solutions. Complications and chaos create fertile ground for breakthrough. The moment where the tub is no longer an impediment, but a critical fixture of the home. Allow yourself to sit in the magic of that moment and enjoy its frenetic pulse.
The Approach: A Promise of Warmth Inside
Leaving Allows You to Return
A Dinner with Friends

The evening heralds a golden light. Pots bubble away on the stove as the doorbell rings. Guests arrive in twos and threes, exchanging bottles of wine for warm embraces. The room comes alive with familiar conversations, as friends sink into chairs and lose track of time. This is the best kind of hidden gem - the type that only exists with an invitation.

The evening stretches on well past the end of the meal. Guests linger around the table, the discussion too enthralling to think of leaving. Finally, the wine has been drunk and the rest of the world seeps back in. Friends head their separate ways, content in the knowledge that leaving allows the opportunity for another magical approach together.
Endnotes


Works Referenced


Works Shown

Sinnet Nightstands 30-35
Breast Bone Cabinet 38-45
Portal Lamp 56-61
Palm Mirror 66-71
Hawser Bed 80-85
Sinew Table 90-95
Burble Sconces 102-105