

Special, but not too special

Small-batch furniture, a growing niche in the design industry, is helping emerging designers find new customers and expand their product lines. As **Matthew Hague** finds, it's a sweet spot between IKEA and exclusive

The Caribou coffee table could easily be mistaken for a piece of custom furniture. Its Scandinavian-minimal design – a robust, disc-shaped top hovering over a thin cow-hide shelf slung between elegantly tapering legs – was hand-crafted in Toronto by Chris Charuk and Simon Ford, co-founders of recently launched studio Charuk & Ford. The materials are top-quality – finely grained white oak, solid brass, buttery European leather – as is the construction. It's built with wedged-through tenon joints that the designers believe will last at least 100 years.

Curiously, though, the Caribou coffee table could also be mistaken for something more mass-market. Unless it is picked up fully assembled at Charuk & Ford's downtown workshop, which boasts high-ceilings, humming saws and wood neatly stacked, it arrives flat-packed with DIY instructions and an Allen key to put it together. And while the price at \$1,300 – is high compared to, say, a certain international Swedish retailer, it's still many multiples lower than the bespoke equivalent.

The table is neither one-off nor mass-made: It's actually small-batch, an increasingly popular means of both producing and purchasing furniture. "The idea with small-batch is that we are able to offer a product that is at the same quality of the custom furniture we would otherwise be making," says Ford, who also takes private commissions. "But we're able to reduce the price because we're making it in multiples," often runs of 10 to 20 pieces.

Like an aspirational alternative to IKEA, then, small-batch appeals to people who want locally made, sustainable, high-end stuff, but don't make CEO-level salaries, and don't care if the neighbour down the street has the same seat, bench or light fixture.

Charuk and Ford share a work space with Peter Coolican, a mentor and a progenitor of Canada's small-batch furniture movement. He started his small-batch line Coolican & Company in 2015, in part to "serve a market that is really there because they appreciate design," he says, as opposed to just status-seeking zillionaires.

"My goal is to make furniture that someone only has to buy once," he adds. "The pieces are still more expensive than the mass-production equivalent. But hopefully they wear well, and become these comfortable things in your space that you care for and value, and pass on to the next generation."

Coolican's work – chic, contemporary takes on traditional Shaker craftsmanship – is exemplary and highly coveted. This year, for example, influential style store Design Within Reach picked up his arch-shaped Euclid mirror, where it sells next to items by bold-faced names such as Le Corbusier and Charles and Ray Eames. "There are a lot of people I've looked up to and aspired to in that store," says Coolican, who is a rare Canadian among the international lineup.

Among Coolican's loyal customers is Toronto's Arriz Hassam, one-half of a Canadian design power couple. A trained architect, his studio, Arriz + Co., helped design the world-renowned Ismaili Centre at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. He's married to Suzanne Dimma, a top interior designer and former edi-

tor-in-chief of House and Home magazine.

In building and renovating private homes, Hassam has sourced many of Coolican's wares, including stools, chairs, benches and lamps. Soon, he and Dimma plan on purchasing a set of something for their own home. For Hassam, the appeal is both poetic and practical.

"The concept of small-batch furniture is much like the first edition of a collectible book or recording," he says. "The pieces are usually made carefully, by the craftsman, very closely to their original concept." But in addition to good quality, "there is usually a quick turnaround time and low shipping costs," Hassam says. "Small-batch is a direct process. Having less people in the chain has economical advantages."

The system isn't perfect, however. For an independent designer, there can be a lot of risk involved. It takes a lot of tools, supplies and time to make 10 to 20 items on spec, not knowing whether any will sell.

"But that's the type of risk you have to take in business, in order to grow," says Nicholas Holmes, a furniture maker in Hamilton, Ont. Last year, he produced 12 of his signature small-batch piece, the Shoreman's Bench, a white-ash seat with an intricately woven top. So far, he's sold six of them. "I'm pretty new to the contemporary-furniture scene," he says. "So that has worked out pretty well for me."

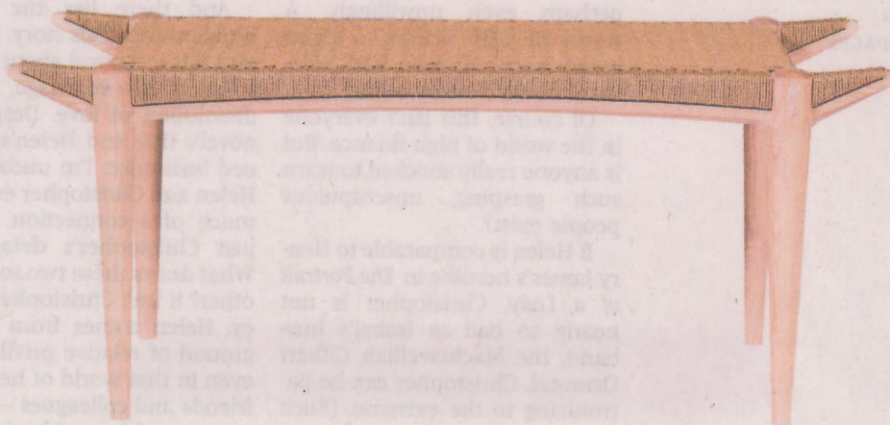
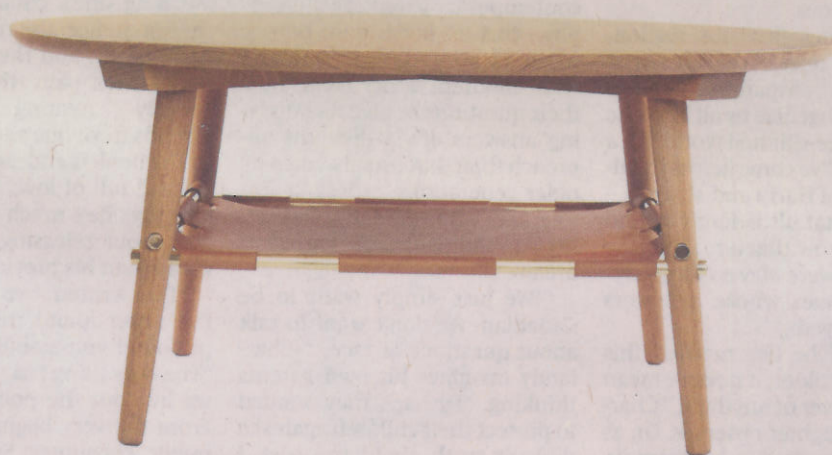
And aside from the upfront business risks, it can be challenging for a designer to find the right balance between ideal quality and appealing, consumer-friendly price point.

For Charuk & Ford's Chris Charuk, it's an important issue. "We believe in the philosophy of build it for as cheap as you can, for as many people as you can, while maintaining quality," he says. "But it's kind of an impossibility. IKEA has figured out how to satisfy everyone by being affordable, but they can't get their quality to match. For us, it's about trying to produce something that is sustainable, that's durable, that's long-lived, that looks good, and we try to get it down in price as low as we can. But there is a trade-off at some point. The quality comes at a financial trade-off."

It's especially pressing for Charuk as his ultimate goal is to "sell stuff that middle-class people can afford," he says. "That's my dream."

It's not just altruistic, it's personal: "There's no way that I can afford \$1,100 for a chair," he says, a sentiment that Peter Coolican understands as well. "There is always that joke about furniture makers – that we can never afford our own work," he says. "Which is totally legitimate." (After three years in business, Coolican only owns a couple of his own objects – flawed prototypes.)

This is why Charuk is looking for ways to bring prices down further. "If we can figure out ways to speed up production," he says, "to get the costs down, then that's the goal." One such efficiency was the simple decision to flat-pack the Caribou table, for example, as opposed to send it out assembled. "It cuts our shipping costs in half," says Charuk, "which is huge, because it translates to a \$50 savings for the customer. And it means we cut down on all the volume of the packaging, so it's ultimately much more sustainable, too."



Charuk & Ford's pieces, such as their caribou table, top, and Atlantic chair, along with and the shoreman's bench by Hamilton Homes, appeal to people who want high-end products but don't have CEO-level salaries.