



'Retro' goes beyond the seventies, back to the founders of Modernism. Local designers and manufacturers played a major role in producing 'modern' furniture

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# Retro

the wider view



Reflect for a moment upon how you purchase or display objects or furnishings for your own décor. Most of us, whether as frenetic collectors or minimalists, seek harmony and balance – perhaps our own particular brand of *feng shui*. We seek a balance of form and function, perhaps a hint of opulence yet simplicity of lifestyle.

A magnificent Murano glass vase will flaunt its riot of colour on a window ledge, yet cringe in despair in a darkened boxed-in shelf. A grand sculpture will be ill at ease co-existing with lesser contenders or will only tolerate, at best, those objets d'art which complement its form. Smaller collectables, yearning for detailed study, will feel cast adrift in a wide-open space, seeking a cluster of others of their ilk.

So, where does the concept of Retro fit in with this? Is it just a passing phase or a serious force to be reckoned with? Until recently, when most of us thought of Retro, it was images of 70s plywood, stapled furniture and handkerchief-shaped coloured glass vases that sprang to mind, along with orange ceramics, macramé, rice-paper light shades and purple walls.

Retro is much bigger than the 70s. It is a constant re-visit to the chic modernism of the 30s, the Spartan 50s, the lairy 70s and the minimalism of the 1990s, translated into apartment living and the sleek interiors of contemporary times. 'Danish mid-50s' has become a convenient label but this should not envelop all of the great designer masterpieces, which can be functional, elegant and collectable.

Finnish architect and designer Alvar Aalto (1898–1976) strongly influenced modern furniture design. Perhaps his most important contribution was in the chair leg forming process. Before his innovation, chair legs had been simply glued or dowelled into the underside of the seat base. Aalto revolutionised this with the L-shaped vertical/horizontal leg, which could be screwed into position. Joinery could now become a liberating art

form rather than a rigid – or at worst, shape marring – afterthought.

The 20th century is ablaze with the names of great designers and architects who influenced the development of Modernism. Marcel Breuer's signature 1925 'Wassily chair' in tubular steel and canvas revolutionised design. Mies van der Rohe's 1929 'Barcelona chair' with its luxuriant padded leather and flat, chrome plated X-shaped steel bars, providing back and leg support, has developed a cult following.



Most of the great designers were architects, often commissioned to design both the buildings and furnishings. Le Corbusier designed the 'chaise longue' produced by Cassina of Milan and the 'Basculant chair' for Thonet in 1928. Arne Jacobsen created the famed 'Butterfly chair' and 'Swan chair', and George Nelson his 'Coconut chair' in 1956. Charles and Ray Eames devised chairs made of moulded plywood for the Herman Miller Company.

The first single-piece plastic stacking chair was designed by the renowned Danish designer Vernon Panton, also acclaimed for his lamps. The Panto with its clear glass suspended globe shape which encloses a series of hanging reflectors of blue and red, is stunning visually but also aims to break the glare and disperse the reflected light. Panton's ball pendant, perhaps most stunning in vermilion red, and silvery 'Spiral lamp' evoke the easy-going spirit of the 60s. A more stylised hanging lamp of ethereal lighting quality is the 'Enigma' by Shoichi Uchiyama.



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One of the greats of Danish furniture was Hans Wegner (1915–2007). He had the ability to translate classic concepts into modern forms. Wegner was meticulous, crafting miniature models and then prototypes to test comfort as well as aesthetics. He once commented, 'A chair is not a chair without someone sitting in it.' Wegner was deeply philosophical about his work, also musing, 'A chair should have no rear, but be beautiful from all sides.'

When we think of the great international schools of Modernism, names such as Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi (Royal Danish Academy of Arts), the Bauhaus in Germany and the Castiglioni Design School of Milan leap out, with MoMA in New York perhaps being the pre-eminent showcase of modernism.



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## FURNITURE DESIGN IN ADELAIDE

Adelaide was once the thriving heart of an Australian furniture design industry. As Jeffrey Marchant, a leading designer for Knight's furniture in the early 80s, reflects, 'Knights was reputed to be the largest furniture manufacturing company in the Southern Hemisphere and supplied custom-ordered furniture to clients such as Walton's Department Store in Melbourne and Harvey

Norman.' Manufacturers such as Macrob (MacPherson & Robertson) and Gilcraft have gone while others such as Hamra have hung on, now concentrating on commercial and hospitality fit-out projects rather than sending products to stores all over Australia.

In the 1960s, men like Tino Bonato were drawn here because of South Australia's global reputation as the centre of furniture manufacturing. Since the 1980s, tariff reductions, globalisation and cheap imports made it increasingly difficult for Australian industry to compete.

Local designers such as Julie Pieda (Salon South), Michael Geisseler, 'spencerbilado' (Lilypad 3 design), Craig English and Tony Thomas, together with Simon Zappia, who was nominated to design furniture for Adelaide International Airport, are gaining recognition, finding ways to service the top-end of the market and undertake project work. The Jam Factory is an artistic catalyst in South Australia, with local designer-maker Tom Mirrans providing much of the stewardship. Gray Hawk has paved the way with his fit-out of the new Commonwealth Law Courts in Adelaide.

Adelaide has various outlets for quality designer furniture. Khai Liew operates from Magill Road where other retro shops are located. Nordic Design, PJS Interiors, and Randall Smith Interiors specialise in modernism.

One store with a wide range of furniture akin to many of the classic retro items is Goran Tridic's Studio Barcelona, just off Rundle Street, which is well equipped for top end décor in luxury apartments or offices. Goran is a wealth of knowledge in the field of modernist furnishing. Carol Trubee's Church Studio has twelve rooms of signature modernist furniture interspersed with Bromley and Roper paintings and classic furniture to complement the retro items. Carol's business partner is furniture designer Tom Twopenny.

With all this talent and enthusiasm, one can only hope that Adelaide will see a return to the halcyon days of pre-80s furniture design and manufacturing for niche markets.



