Across the Atlantic

Jonathon Kemnitzer, founder and owner of KEM Studio, speaks to Alistair Welch about his passion for design, detail, and skateboarding

Amongst his idols Jonathon Kemnitzer counts the Eames, the pre-eminent furniture designers of the mid-20th century, and Tony Hawk, the world-renowned professional skateboarder. True American heroes all, although it is tough to imagine Charles and Ray grading the halfpipe.

A recent KEM Studio project, Skate Bench No.1, manages to combine these most diverse influences, simultaneously paying homage to the clean lines of the Eames and the kickflip of the Birdman. The bench incorporates a custom skateboard deck atop a continuously bent stainless steel or powder coated frame. The project was successfully funded on Kickstarter, a website supporting ‘crowd funding’ for creative projects. His enthusiasm was matched by the online community as this bench not only reached (and exceeded) its funding target, but also attracted the attention of design and skateboarding bloggers.

“This is one of the things that is interesting about design now and the future of design,” he continues. “Design is starting to come back to a situation where it can be done locally and it can be done individually. Once Kickstarter started happening we saw an opportunity to bring down cost and try to do more local manufacture. Skate Bench No.1 started off as a 15 minute project talking about the Eames and CNC – it ended up being a lot more involved. We went to Kickstarter, got funded, and two weeks after our Kickstarter campaign we’re meeting Tony Hawk – it’s actually been a pretty surreal ride.”

Kemnitzer is certain that direct funding mechanisms like Kickstarter are changing the face of professional design. “I think the beauty of it is that, in the past, design firms or individuals came up with ideas and then used those as a way to market their company – they existed on their websites or in their literature as examples of what they could do and how they thought,” he says. “The difference is now we can make those projects a reality – that’s really powerful as it allows design firms to take advantage of what they do for their clients day in day out.”

This, alongside rapid prototyping and global manufacturing, means, in Kemnitzer’s eyes, it

Having in-house industrial designers and architects means the consultancy is very collaborative

consultancy
is a uniquely exciting moment to be working in industrial design. “I’m really interested to see how those three things continue to converge together,” he enthuses.

“I don’t think it will be too long before people will be able to manufacture stuff at home or we will all have 3D printers. Even today, we have a small Makerbot at our office; it’s fantastic; it liberates the design process in a lot of ways. Instead of getting your file and sending it off (and, yes, you could have a part in a day which was still great), you can have a part in 15 minutes. I’m excited about where it can go in the future, the possibilities of that are endless. You start thinking about getting these into the hands of schools or corporations, becomes a really interesting social experiment.”

Despite this interest in emerging technologies and the frontiers of product design, Kemnitzer still cites the work of Charles and Ray Eames as his greatest inspiration. “When we are designing something we try to make it as simple as possible. I think the Eames did a really good job of that and as a result their designs became classic,” he explains. “Especially in their early work they were investigating and experimenting with new materials and processes. Skate Bench No.1 is our attempt at one of those investigations.”

Overall, it is the process of collaboration – between industrial design and architecture, and between studio and client – that gives Kemnitzer the greatest pleasure. He concludes: “Having that interaction and coming up with something new is pretty fascinating.”

Direct funding mechanisms like Kickstarter are changing the face of professional design