

Globe Life

Pilot project

Design exchange

Twelve style makers accepted Toronto retailer Casalife's challenge to conceive a piece of furniture, from sketch to prototype

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Does design fluency translate? Can someone who makes clothes or cooks meals or opens nightclubs create a credible piece of furniture?

That was one of the questions a Toronto furniture retailer set out to answer with Mi Casa Su Casa, a pilot project unveiled at a swanky event at its Liberty Village showroom last Thursday.

Fashion designers Evan Biddell and Shawn Hewson, chef Roger Mooking of Nyood restaurant, *eTalk* host Tanya Kim and club king Charles Khabouth were five of the boldfaced dozen enlisted to conceive an idea for Casalife to turn into a prototype.

Perhaps the bigger question is what design can do to address the specific needs of individuals. Only a full-time chef such as Mooking, for instance, could dream up a kitchen unit that functions as a prep station, pot storage and dining table.

“These people provided me with so much juice,” said Rob Whitfield, who oversees the company with his cousin Jason.

For Pete Lytwyniuk of graphic design shop Studiolit, the event revealed a sum of many design parts. “It was cool to see that the designers stayed with their medium, where they add value and specialized knowledge,” he said. Where his coffee table featured interchangeable graphic images under a pane of glass, Lytwyniuk pointed out that interior designer Karen Sealy's hamper stool “wouldn't enter my mind.”

Kim's compact magazine holder, on the other hand, is tailor-made for gossip girls. And jean junkies would appreciate designer Christopher Bates's stainless occasional tables inlaid with distressed denim. Raw Design's bed desk, meanwhile, is sure to appeal to a design type.

There was no pressure to be revolutionary, according to Hewson, who framed a series of mirrors with fabric used in his fashion label Bustle's 2010 collection, adding practical hooks and wallet-sized ledges. “Rob stressed the importance of not trying to solve the world's problems with a sofa that turns into a bed.”

More important were considerations of context and accessibility. “Everyone looks in the mirror, which relates back to fashion and aesthetics and appearance,” Hewson said. “Designing furniture is a lot like designing clothes; you have to temper an idea with what's reasonably marketable and bounce it off the reality board a bit.”

Biddell also saw parallels between building a fashion collection and a sleek eco-aware chair made from plyboo (bamboo plywood) and environmentally friendly leather. “There's definitely style involved; you have to appeal to a modern person's taste. You have to fill a need for something. And then there's the fabrication; you take the raw materials and build something from them.”

Of course, the guest designers were not expected to actually make the furniture. Most of the sketches were reinterpreted by Canobo, Casalife's in-house production arm. Materials were sourced and assembled by 10 local suppliers. Even Ryerson University's School of Interior Design came onboard to bring the sketches to life.

The experience was eye-opening for Mooking. “I learned that regardless of the industry, the creative process never really changes. It always starts with a spark of idea, whether out of necessity or free form will, and you always have to hone it and fine-tune it again and again.”

Whitfield said Casalife is currently determining which pieces will be put into small production runs (Biddell's chair would cost upward of \$2,500, while Kim's side table would be significantly less).

Mooking, a former member of Canadian group Base is Bass, who hosts a show on the Food Network called *Everyday Exotic*, seemed excited by the prospect of bringing his design home. His only concern: “I'm kind of afraid to one put one more slash on my name.”

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