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## When novices create

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Presented by



Peter J. Thompson/National Post

Most condo and apartment dwellers are quite familiar with the benefits of space-efficient, multifunctional furnishings - items such as sofa beds, stackable chairs and storage ottomans have become indispensable for those who live in tight quarters.

But home store Casalife, which specializes in furnishings for the condo crowd, has taken the concept of small-space furniture design and added a bit of personality - or shall we say "personalities" - to the mix.

About four months ago, Casalife owner Rob Whitfield asked a few creative minds from a variety of disciplines if they would be interested in designing a piece of furniture and combining their passions with Casalife's capabilities and know-how. His reason: He wanted to bring a fresh eye to design while raising awareness about the design process.

"I've been working with wood and metal pretty much all my life, so when I have an idea, I can figure out pretty quickly that 'There's no hardware to do that' or 'I know that wood's not strong enough for that,' " says Mr. Whitfield. "Most of these people have never designed a piece of furniture before, so they're not confined by [these parameters]. These are super creative people and I found them incredibly motivating and inspiring."

He initially thought he'd interest about four people, but was stunned when the project quickly expanded. Everyone he asked said yes. "I guess there's a lot more 'closet [furniture] designers' than I thought," he says.

The resulting 14 prototypes were unveiled a couple of weeks ago at Casalife's Mi Casa Su Casa design expo, which featured installations exposing the process from napkin sketch to final product. With the likes of fashion designers, nightclub moguls and chefs behind their designs, many items were inspired not only by style and function, but also by the careers of the participants themselves.

Fashion house Bustle Clothing, for example, combined function and fashion to create fabric-framed mirrors bearing shelves, hooks and knobs; graphic designer Peter Lytwyniuk of Studiolit designed a coffee table inspired by advertising billboards with a changing image underneath the glass top; and INK Entertainment owner Charles Khabouth's modern dining table, made of aluminum, steel and glass, was inspired by a stiletto and a disco ball, combing the worlds of fashion and nightclubs.

Creating quite a buzz was high-profile chef Roger Mooking's kitchen island. Made of sustainable bamboo, the portable piece features pull-out pot storage, hooks for tea towels, a rack for spices and flatware, and fold-up sleeves that cleverly turn the island into a dining surface. "I've lived in so many small apartments that couldn't really fit a dining room, couldn't really fit a kitchen island or any good working surfaces," Mr. Mooking says. "So I wanted to create something that could satisfy those needs."

Loft dwellers-cum-Hollywood-gossip hounds can appreciate eTalk host Tanya Kim's funky "on the side" table, which features an aluminum door that opens to expose a hidden magazine rack. "I just thought all of us, when we're standing in line with our groceries waiting to pay, we all can't help but glance over at all of the tabloid glossies," she says. "Some of us are brave enough to actually pick them up and buy them. But I think this side table is a great way to keep yourself a closeted gossip hound."

Basing his decisions on customer feedback, Mr. Whitfield intends to put many of the prototypes into production. In the meantime, they are still on display at Casalife's Liberty Village showroom. "And I'm really looking forward to maybe doing another event," says Mr. Whitfield. "It could become an annual affair here. It was really stimulating and I think a lot of people really appreciated the concepts."

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