



# The Art of Design

By KRISTI EVANS

**“Architecture, in its truest sense, may not be academically defined. If it is, it becomes a dead, non-growing entity of style or cliché. I see it as a continuous search for basic human needs in shelter; emotional, psychological ... as well as merely physical. Then it becomes a valid, enduring art.”**

**— John Lautner (1911-1994)**

**F**or **John Lautner '33 AB, LC** thinking outside the box was more than a trendy catchphrase to describe a creative process unshackled by conventional wisdom; it literally was the foundation of his 55-year career. Lautner spurned what he called the “jaded gingerbread box” style of some of his contemporaries. He opted instead for designs that combined inventive functionality with the uncluttered beauty of free-flowing spaces and accentuated light. His creations have been described as living sculptures in harmony with their natural landscapes.

“My dad’s houses are pieces of art in themselves,” said Karol Peterson of Marquette, one of four children by his first marriage. “You don’t decorate a Lautner home. You can’t go in there with drapes, sconces or flowers ... and forget about wallpaper. It’s a challenge to live in one. The design almost dictates to you unless you were the original client.”



Carling residence, Los Angeles, California, 1949.

While Lautner's work was subtly influenced by his mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright, he embarked on a profoundly original path. He became a master in his own right and on his own terms. Opinionated and courageous, Lautner never meshed with the establishment. He resented superficiality and facades. He battled contractors, building departments, and bankers to preserve the integrity of

his ideas and the wishes of his clients. "In the business of building," he once said, "when people become commodities or merchandise, we have facilities to house or shelter, but not architecture."

Real architecture, according to Lautner, was all about the space: the relationship of humans to the space and the relationship of the space to nature. He worked from the inside out. Before putting pencil to paper, Lautner became fully acquainted with his clients' interests, activities, needs, and desires. He also spent tireless hours assessing each site to ensure a seamless integration of the structure with its exterior environment. Because each project uniquely addressed these variables, he did not develop a signature style. His work defied classification, and he preferred it that way.

However, Lautner's diverse portfolio reflects the recurring influence of his Marquette upbringing. He was partial to sensual yet dramatic curves, much like the Lake Superior shoreline. He manipulated materials to mimic the nuances of light as it dances on the water or filters through the forest. He favored walls of glass that offer expansive, unfettered views similar to the one he enjoyed from his family's camp on Middle Island Point. He considered the Upper Peninsula his "heaven on earth."

Lautner grew up a stone's throw from Northern, where his father was a professor. The house



still stands at the corner of Presque Isle and Kaye Avenues. His mother, a painter, designed their chalet-style retreat on Lake Superior. At 12, Lautner helped his father with the construction. The experience made him appreciate fine materials and craftsmanship. It also led to his propensity for “getting his hands dirty” on future projects.

Lautner had a broad liberal arts education at Northern and graduated

Arango residence, Acapulco, 1973. Pictured here, the upper-level living and dining terrace is surrounded by a serpentine moat with an overflowing edge that visually blends into Acapulco Bay, effectively merging the residence with its surrounding environment.

in 1933. But each profession he considered seemed prone to ruts and routines. After reading Frank Lloyd Wright’s autobiography, Lautner joined the first group of Taliesin Fellows in Wisconsin. He was drawn to architecture because “it involves everything in life, so that there is absolutely no end to it.” Lautner’s

lack of formal training was a benefit, Wright told him, because there would be less to unlearn.

The Taliesin Fellows became immersed in all aspects of architecture. “We learned in the best possible way: by actual construction,” Lautner recalled. That meant handling materials and learning how to



Elrod house, Palm Springs, California, 1968. Designed by John Lautner for the interior designer Arthur Elrod.

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use each in its natural way. It meant physical labor—remodeling, plumbing, and stone masonry. Lautner found this more valuable than the typical academic approach, which he said focused too much on plans and sketches. “You could graduate without knowing how to hold a hammer,” he chided with his typical candor. “They grade on neat and to hell with the ideas.”

Lautner believed that the idea mattered most and controlled every aspect of a project. He seemed to

take rebellious pride in the fact that he was a dismal draftsman. His daughter Judy Lautner wrote that “he thought more comfortably in three dimensions.” Los Angeles architect Louis Wiehle agreed: “The concepts all came out of his mind; to be sharpened and juggled on paper, perhaps, but already conceptually full.”

After he apprenticed for six years and supervised four Wright projects, Lautner started his own practice in Los Angeles. Professionally, it was a logical move, but he detested the city and its architecture. The straight-shooting maverick once quipped, “I’d like to go up on Mulholland and make giant concrete balls and roll ‘em down the hills. That would get rid of Hollywood and Vine and all the junk that’s here and then you could really do something.”

Fantasy aside, Lautner set about designing 188 structures, 113 of which were built in the United States and Mexico. He had some commercial credits—motels, university buildings, offices, and the notorious Googies coffee shops—and would have liked more. But Lautner’s reputation is defined primarily by his residential work.

The Arango home in Acapulco is a favorite of Karol Peterson’s. Her father used structural concrete, which became his material of choice, to create a large open terrace with a moat that spilled over to a sweeping view of Acapulco Bay and

the azure sky. It was proof that Lautner's vision did not equate shelter with complete enclosure.

The most famous of his Southern California homes is Chemosphere. It resembles a flying saucer docked on a concrete column with steel spokes radiating support. It is perched above a steep, Los Angeles hillside and is only accessible via cable car. With his trademark flair, Lautner came up with a radical yet sound solution for a seemingly impossible site.

Chemosphere was featured in the movie *Body Double*. Other Lautner homes have gained pop-culture exposure through such films as *Diamonds are Forever* and *Lethal Weapon II*, not to mention magazine articles and television ads. Chances are, you have seen a Lautner work without even realizing it.

Therein lies a major drawback: his talents were too often unheralded. Because his most acclaimed projects are private dwellings, accessibility is strictly limited. Brief film clips and still photos do not adequately convey Lautner's ability to create "timeless, free, joyous spaces for all activities ... as sensible as nature in deriving from a main idea and flowering into a beautiful entity."

Many contend that Lautner did not receive the critical acclaim he warranted during his lifetime. Despite his occasional jabs at the press and his peers, Lautner sought their recognition and was genuinely touched when he got it: "He'd buy

multiple copies of magazines and newspapers and make sure we all saw them," said Peterson. "It made him proud. And when they made

Lautner legacy: it is—like his structures—solid, timeless, and enduring; a visible testament to his indomitable spirit and creativity. ■



Elrod house, interior view. Featured in the James Bond film *Diamonds are Forever*, starring Sean Connery.

him a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects, he thought it was a very important honor."

Her father continued to design until his death in 1994 at the age of 83. Frank Escher, editor of a book on Lautner's career, wrote that he was one of the most important contemporary American architects: "He left one of the most exceptional bodies of work in the architecture of this century, and it is this work that will secure him the recognition he deserves."

That is the beauty of the

*SOURCES:* John Lautner, Architect by Frank Escher; John Lautner by Barbara-Ann Campbell-Lange; Journal of the Taliesin Fellows; The Spirit in Architecture: John Lautner, a documentary by Bette Jane Cohen; and The John Lautner Foundation.

*Photographs courtesy of The John Lautner Foundation.*

# The Art of Motion

By KAREN WALLINGFORD

**Y**ou won't see one of Stephan Larson's computer animations on the Cartoon Network. They have no characters and no story—no narrative component whatsoever. You're more likely to see one of his moving images projected forty feet tall against the wall of a dance club—the shapes and colors moving and bending to the rhythm of the music. Although Larson said this is not a typical application of one of his animations, it is more in line with how he intended for his work to be enjoyed.



“My animations require a different kind of attention from the audience,” he said. “They’re more of an experience as opposed to outright telling a story, so they’re harder to get into if you’re just casually watching them.”

One of the art and design department's newest faculty members, Larson's love for art and computers began at an early age with a paint program and an Atari computer. While he said it wasn't very sophisticated—drawing with a joystick and only eight colors to choose from—it laid the foundation for a lifelong interest and a career that would take technology another 10 years to adequately develop.

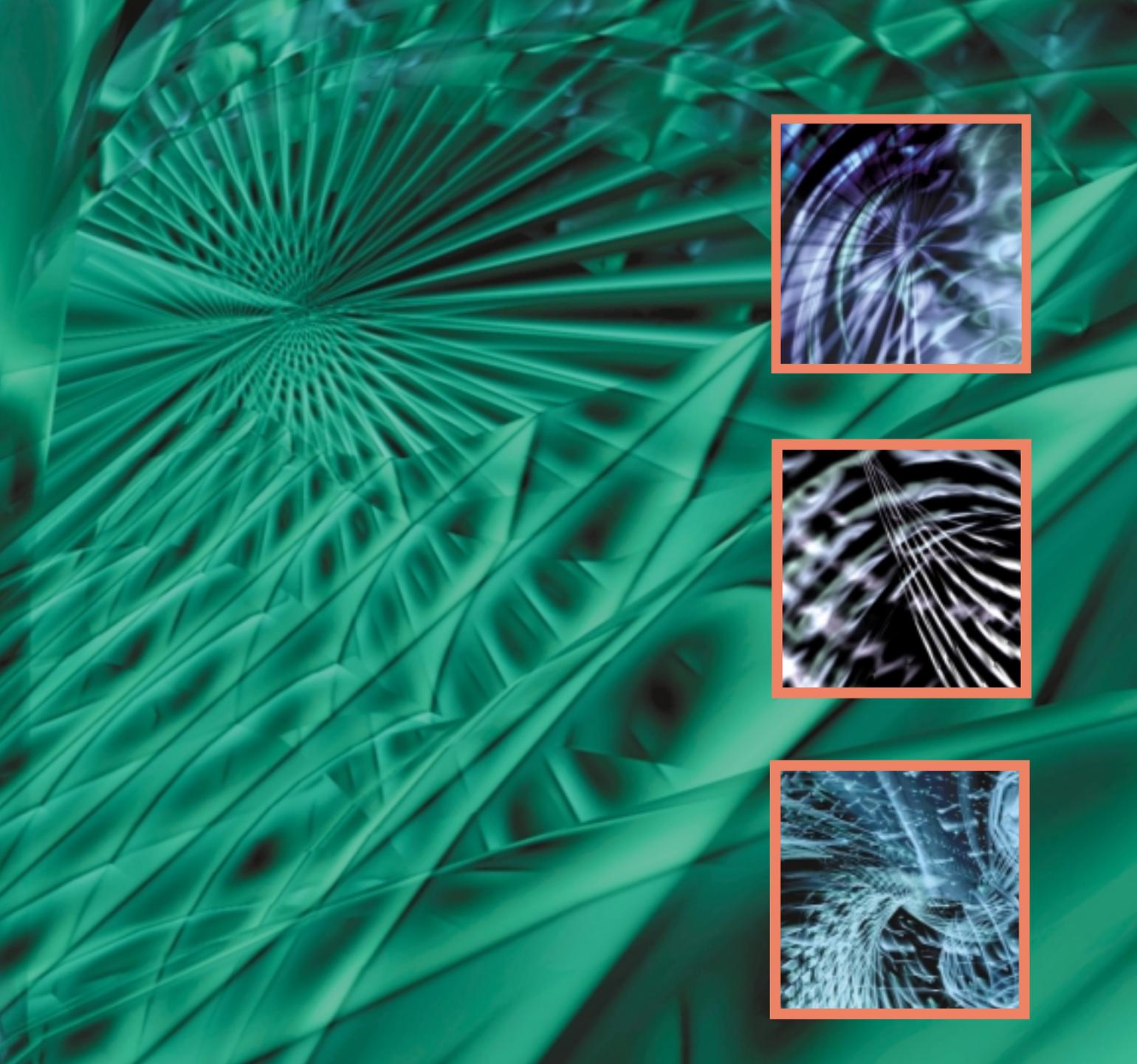
Larson said his decision to go into computer animation was a conveniently timed synthesis of technology and his interest in art. He began his undergraduate career as an advertising design major at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, but when the university got a computer lab and some drawing and animation programs, he shifted direction and became a media art major, which allowed him do animation on the computer.

After completing a bachelor of fine arts, he went on to earn a master of fine arts from Syracuse University,

where he was a graduate teaching associate.

While he dabbled in the professional and freelance art world—doing a bit of illustration, photographic enhancement, and even working on a game design that he said didn't make it off the ground, he never found the same satisfaction from commercial work that he did from teaching. So after graduate school, he accepted a job at the University of Mississippi, where he taught for five years before coming to NMU in the fall of 2001.

The move has been good for Larson. He likes that Northern's art and design department keeps on top of



While Larson's work is comprised primarily of animations, he also does still images. Shown here are *Venare*, 1996, a still from a 4 min. 20 sec. animation. Inset (top to bottom): *Majestic*, 1999, a translucent print; *(r)emerge*, 1997, a still from a 4 minute animation; and a second still from *Venare*.

the technology curve, which he said is critical to teaching electronic imaging. Plus, having the technology readily available in classrooms allows Larson to focus less on teaching the mechanics of the various software programs and more on applying techniques and evaluating images.

“What makes something successful isn't actually the technique,” said Larson. “Of course you have to know the techniques, but they are just tools to make an idea manifest. The tool is not the idea, the computer is not the idea, the filter that you're using in Photoshop is not the idea; it's what you do with it that's going

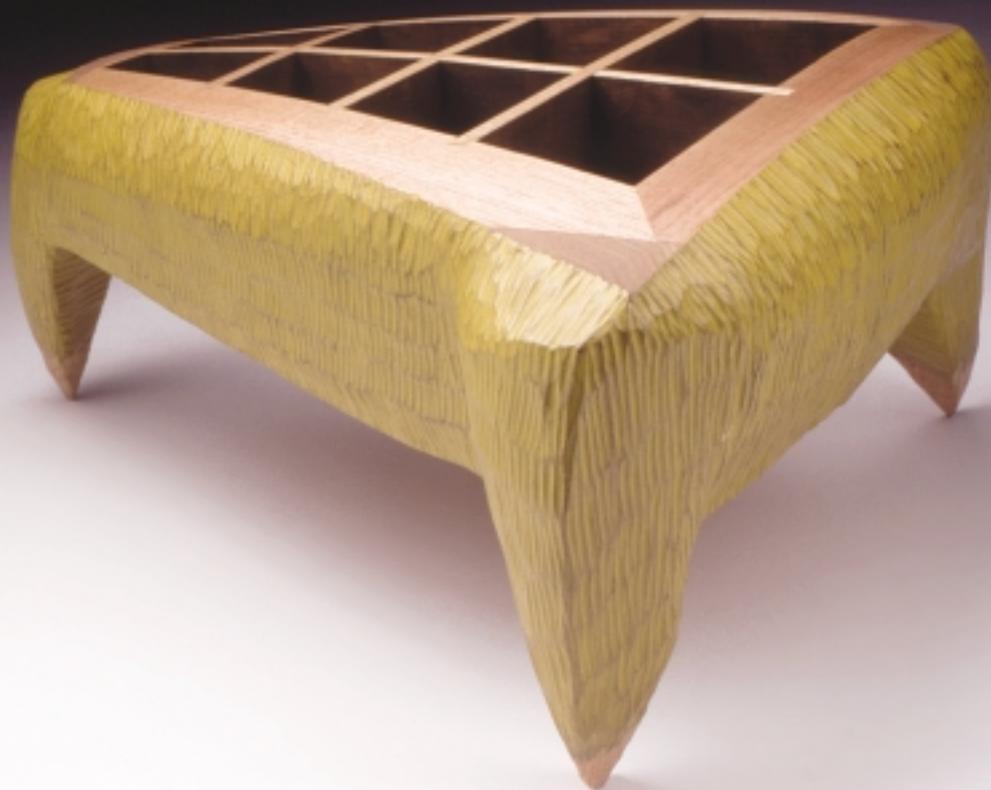
to make something interesting.”

He also likes working in a university setting because it allows him to work on his own projects and focus on his own ideas and vision, which he prefers to client-driven work.

“I do this because I'm compelled to do it,” Larson said. “For me, it's more purely creative.” ■

# Form and Function

By KAREN WALLINGFORD



**M**any artists spend their time drawing lines. **John DeHoog '96 BFA** spends his time blurring them—challenging our perspectives about the lines between form and function, function and non-function, new and old—furniture and sculpture. While he didn't know what form it would take, DeHoog always knew he had a creative side that needed to be fed. He knew as soon as he started majoring in biology and focusing solely on science at Lake Superior State University that he couldn't continue in that direction. After a year at LSSU, he transferred to Western Michigan University to study industrial design. But after two years there, he realized that he still wasn't headed in the right direction; Western's program was geared too much toward design



Above: John DeHoog in his woodshop. Opposite page: *3-Legged Box-Back*, 1999, wood, paint. Inset above: *Nubbed Table with Glasses*, 2000, mahogany, steel, paint, handblown glass.

on a computer. So he took some time off, leaving school and traveling with some friends to Alaska.

And then during a trip to the Anchorage Public Library in the summer of 1992—an epiphany. He discovered his creative niche.

“I found a back issue of a magazine called *American Craft*,” DeHoog said. “On the cover was a piece of furniture made by a woman named Wendy Maruyama. I was

amazed that there was this genre of furniture design that was handmade. From that point on, I knew this is what I wanted to learn everything I could about, so I started researching where I could go to school that had programs in furniture design.”

His research led him to Northern Michigan University. In addition to being affordable, he liked that Northern’s furniture design program focused more on

traditional hand craftsmanship and joinery. He also got the feeling that he’d have the freedom to really explore his creativity and choose his own direction.

He was right. While at Northern, DeHoog embarked on a distinctively original creative path. His senior project, an interactive table titled, *Functional Balance*, won the top honor in *Niche* magazine’s student award competition. It remains



*Trifolium*, wood, 2002.

his favorite piece of work to this day. Professor Bill Leete, director of the woodworking design studio at NMU, found DeHoog's work to be an interesting combination of function and interactivity. He said of DeHoog at the time, "His ideas are modular, which is common in industry, but it's curious they are also thought pieces that contain moveable elements. It's a very different visual system."

DeHoog's material of choice is wood—preferring it to metal because it's easier to work with and because it's more forgiving. But surprisingly, he had very little woodworking experience prior to coming

to NMU. He said that while his family always had a small woodshop, it was mainly his older brother who worked in it. DeHoog quickly made up for any lack of woodworking experience through his course work at NMU and by getting a job at Taylor Made Furniture, a small cabinet shop in Marquette.

After completing his undergraduate degree,

he stayed in Marquette for a year, "cobbling an income together" by working at the U.P. Children's Museum and continuing to work at Taylor Made Furniture. But he knew that if he wanted to continue to pursue his creative interests, he would need to further his education, so he started applying to graduate programs. He was accepted at the Rhode Island School of Design, and upon completing a master of fine arts there in 2000, he landed a teaching position at Eastern Michigan University.

DeHoog's furniture design is a combination of clean lines, smooth curves, and unexpected angles. And while each piece is interesting to look at as an art object, he seems to have something much more significant in mind when designing them. His furniture design makes you question your ideas about the essence of what furniture is or what it should be, and begin asking yourself what it could be.

While DeHoog said that he has been influenced by both his undergraduate and graduate art teachers, much of the foundation for his creative direction can be traced back to lessons he learned from Bill Leete, whose philosophy about art and object making gave him the freedom to experiment across genre lines.

"One thing that was really important to me is that Professor Leete never set out any sort of hierarchy—like sculpture has a higher status than furniture," said DeHoog. "Something you often come up against is that furniture, because it's functional, is somehow inferior to sculpture. But Bill had no hierarchy like that, and he was very clear in explaining that to us."

The most direct manifestation of that philosophy is that almost all of his work straddles the line between furniture and sculpture. What that translates into is furniture pieces that have their function limited or specified to a very particular use.

For example, DeHoog's *Nubbed Table with Glasses*, which he completed as a graduate student, features a table with a bumped surface. Included with the table are a set of glasses that have a corresponding cavity on the bottom so they can sit on the bumps.



*Functional Balance*, an interactive table, two views, 1996.

“The question that most often comes up is ‘well, it looks like furniture, but can you use it?’ I’m playing with notions of function and non-function. You can set things on this table, but whether or not you’re successful depends on how you do it,” DeHoog said.

His current work moves away from the idea of interactivity and function and is more interested in the idea of mutation—furniture that is recognizable, but that, for one reason or another, has had its function entirely negated. *Trifoil*, which DeHoog recently completed, consists of three table halves that are joined in the center.

“None of the surfaces actually sit flat,” he said. “It’s completely non-functional, but you can still recognize it as legs and a tabletop and traditional joinery. It looks more like a mutant. Instead of growing flat and straight, it developed all these strange angles.”

A sister piece to *Trifoil* is titled *Struggling Table*. It consists of two table halves that are joined at the center so that the tabletop sits at an angle like an inverted V. The legs on the table are curved, making it appear as if the two halves are pulling away from each other.

“This one has more of an animated quality, where if you turned around, it might actually start to walk away or change positions,” DeHoog said. “Again, the function is gone, but the table is still there.”

His upcoming work is yet another departure. Over the summer, DeHoog will be working on a grant project that involves lightweight chair design by combining wood with kevlar, fiberglass, and carbon fiber. Although these pieces will be decidedly functional, he still wants the finished pieces to challenge traditional perceptions—this time perceptions surrounding the well-known materials he will be using to fabricate the chairs.



“I’m playing around with the new and the old and thinking this might develop into a whole new vocabulary of design—a new way of thinking about chair design,” he said. “How do you successfully combine these materials to make a visually interesting chair and a chair that’s very lightweight and comfortable? There is some chair design that includes carbon fiber, and of course fiber glass has been around for 30 or 40 years, but using things like the carbon and kevlar and combining them with wood—I don’t think that’s been done.”

Like many artists, DeHoog was hardpressed to pinpoint precisely where his ideas come from, but he did say that the furniture/sculpture zone he works in seems to be fertile ground for experimentation. He also said that he sketches every day and that he draws on another lesson he learned from Leete.

“He taught us that although furniture design is a creative process, it can also be a very rational process. He said that there is a specific design process that you can use in your work—a series of steps to help you all the way from generating ideas to developing a plan on how to produce something, building it, and finally evaluating the product after you’ve made it. That idea was interesting and very helpful. It’s something I teach to my students today.” ■