Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien bring myriad influences to bear in their work, combining sculptural forms, colour, tactility and warmth with geometry, precision and technology to produce ‘design that communicates’

Photographs: Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien and Fionn McCarthy

Their raison d’être crystallised when they realised “our different perspectives and points of view could create a really interesting mix in our work”, says Levien. His interest in design was fostered by his parents, who ran a business curing sheepskin rugs and selling mail-order toy kits using the offcuts, as well as insights from his uncle Robin Levien, the award-winning ceramics-trained product designer whose clients include Ideal Standard and Villeroy & Boch.

With Doshi’s particular eye for colour and texture and Levien’s love for making and materials, “the refinement with which we bring those elements together, juxtaposing geometry and fact with intuition and feeling, at a very high level defines our work”, Levien says. There is also Doshi’s constant pursuit of beauty. “I know beauty is a bad word in design, but for me it refers to the energy of an object and the quality that comes from something that has been made beautifully or shows human endeavour,” she says. With their design ethos led by “how beautifully we can make something so that in some ways it transcends function”, Doshi adds, “I believe we have a deep relationship to our material environment that is not about need. It’s something more visceral.”

It is this philosophical, detailed but also joyful approach to design – weaving its way through projects as diverse as chairs, tables and shoes to cosmetics, eyewear and cookware that has drawn major brands such as B&B Italia, Moroso, Kettal, Kvadrat and Hay into the pair’s orbit. Their first commission in the early noughties came from Tom Dixon, then creative director of Habitat, to design a set of cutlery and glassware, for the British retailer. “There was so much we wanted to give to that material in terms of design and form to make it palatable in the mouth and good to use,” Levien cites as an example of how they reimagined the everyday knife and fork. “It had to be sensual, it had to be soft, it had to feel nice to touch.”

Designing a chair is no different, looking not only at the actual physical form of it as a seat but also how “it frames you in a space”, explains Levien, who first trained as a fine cabinet maker before gaining a BA in design, then a master’s degree in furniture design at the Royal College of Art. There he met Mumbai-born Doshi, a graduate of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. In 2000 they quit their jobs – Levien with the renowned British designer Ross Lovegrove and Doshi with David Chipperfield Architects – tied the knot and founded Doshi Levien out of the living room of their apartment in Golders Green.
Doshi. “What do you feel when you sit in a chair? Does it make you feel good about yourself? Do you feel big or feel small?” The spatial aspect is of course very important and although furniture is not sculpture, it has those qualities, so to me furniture is like mini architecture,” she continues. Levene agrees. “Within an object, you’re capturing the spirit that was injected into it during the design process and making process, and then never lose. I feel design communicates in an intuitive sense.”

The duo’s initial creative process is surprisingly analog. While visiting their studios, Doshi pulls out piles of exercise books, impeccably preserved in clear plastic sleeves, filled with immaculate, intricate drawings brought to life with a rainbow array of hand-embroidered colour. “The reason I draw is because in my head it’s quicker than making the object, because projects take so long,” she laughs, “I just want to have it as it is in my book — sometimes design isn’t fast enough.”

By contrast, Levien “sketches through making”, he says. “I find it much easier to pick up a material and have an idea by making something, whether it’s a paper model or a wire frame. Surprising things happen much easier to pick up a material and have an idea by making something, because you can make all kinds of things to see what it feels like.”

Doshi, on the other hand, believes that the human body is integral to her creative process. “By considering the form and style of a sofa, the curves an arm of the ‘Impossible Wood’ stacking chair, one can extract the look and silhouette of steam bent timber, and the distinct oriental feel of Doshi Levien’s ‘Paper Planes’ seat and armchair was inspired by the idea of folding and modelling graph paper.”

Levene has had a long history of collecting objects that he feels share his design aesthetic. “I have a real fondness for minimalist French furniture and chairs, and the sinuous forms of organic modernism such as Michael Anastassiades, Pepe Garcia and Jaime Hayón.”

The “Barrell” chair, originally designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1937 for Herman Miller and Marco Zanuso’s sixties Oluce 275 table lamp. “We always start with, ‘Am I going to love it?’ because if we don’t like it, we won’t use it,” Doshi says. “We’re drawn to pieces where we can see the quality of work, because we know how difficult it is to make them in such a sustainable, considered way,” he says. Equally, where he expected a very youthful market to understand the pieces they were bringing to Australia, it turned out “some of our clients are in their eighties and it’s great to see how excited they are by collecting pieces that bring them joy.”

Levene has a love for classic pieces by Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Franco Albini — my father and I were fascinated with the craftsmanship — but I thought maybe there wasn’t a market for it in Perth,” says Fazzari. “So I thought I’d open a showroom and see if there was a market there.”

Fazzari opened a second showroom in the heart of the city’s CBD early last year, and a Melbourne outpost on Chapel Street is due to open this month. A fourth is slated for Sydney by the end of the year.

There is huge personality in Mobilia’s collections, from pleated linen and velvet sofas to ‘designed to last, they’re not things you’d throw away’, says Doshi. “We’re always trying to find opportunities that allow us to tap into a local culture and create something of physical interpretation of that,” says Levien. “It’s just playing really, and having fun,” Doshi adds.

This idea of “bringing many worlds together”, says Doshi, is an integral signature of their work. “Many”, an airy curtain fabric textile for Kvadrat, echoes “the transparency and lightness of the saris we wore in the summer in India”, she explains. For their self-produced “Earth To Sky” lighting collection, executed in an array of natural forms to feel like “precious creatures suspended in air”, they drew on materials such as polished aluminium and brass and the techniques of seamless automotive engineering. In Barcelona based outdoor furniture company Kettal, alongside “Calis” open-weave armchair, stackable dining chairs and sofas, they play a pivotal role behind the scenes overseeing the colour and material palettes used across all of the brand’s collections.

Sartorial influences flow through last year’s successful “quilts” round and stitched modular sofas, Doshi Levien’s most recent design for Hay. “We wanted to create a sofa that felt soft, through the quilting, yet tailored and precise at the same time,” says Doshi. “I think it feels like a beautiful coat that feels nice and comfortable to wear but looks smart too.”

It was in fact the kind of sofa they would want — and in fact have — in their own home, a gloriously light-filled waterside apartment in London’s Chelsea, “As a child,” she continues, “I would sit with a sketchbook and draw. That’s how I differ from Nipa, because when I engage with materials that I would never think about if I was just looking at them, whether it’s a paper model or a wire frame. Surprising things happen much easier to pick up a material and have an idea by making something, because you can make all kinds of things to see what it feels like.”

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