

FURNITURE DESIGN AND DESIGNERS IN ROMANIA AFTER 1990. A CREATIVE PROFESSION BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY (PART I)

Cristina SABĂU

PhD. - Freelance Art & Design historian, Bucharest

E-mail: sabau.cristina@gmail.com

Abstract:

Designing furniture is one of the specific fields where Romanian designers could pursue their profession based on the knowledge and skills accumulated during their academic studies. The recorded examples confirm that it is the creative area that has most substantially attracted designers before and after 1990.

The lack of investment in modern materials and tools kept the creators in a “suspended time”, they could not synchronize their ideas with the moment of their creation. This is why they often resorted to safe paths, with materials and techniques already tested and able to assure them finality and certainty. High production costs, lack of updated technologies and materials, together with few opportunities to exhibit their creations saw the designers to experiments materialized only in prototypes and, at best, small series of manufactured products.

Key words: furniture design; chair; change.

INTRODUCTION

Design is inherent in human existence and represents values that can “bring solace in these times of crisis: durability, customer-friendliness and beauty” (Peeters 2013). A transition becomes visible, from an industrial production economy to an innovative production and knowledge economy. Design is part of this change. Furniture design situated between industrial “accomplishments” and innovative experiment is a good place for an “on-site” investigation.

This paper is centered on the activity of the Romanian furniture designers during the three decades between 1990 and 2020. Furniture is “one of the three important fields of Romanian designers’ activity both before and after the crucial 1990 moment, alongside of vehicle and fashion design” (Sabău 2017). The analytical approach outlines three trends which flow one from the other, often melting into each other.

During the first years after 1990 designers aimed at materializing as many of their previous projects as possible, the kind of projects that had been kept in their “secret drawers”. An eloquent example is the experience of Mihai Maxim, a vehicle designer, whose smart ideas from the end of the 70s found a timid echo at the beginning of the 90s – a coach prototype. There were also more systematic projects that had to be indefinitely postponed, like the exhibition for the third Design Triennial planned for 1988 which took place in 1990. A survey of the few examples and numerous claimed intentions allows the assertion that product design in the early 90s had first of all this “retrieving” approach.

The amplitude that advertising agencies gained in the mid90s induced a strong orientation towards graphic design. This is a domain that shows maximum growing when the number of creators, graduates of design schools, reaches a maximum level, just like the number of advertising agencies. The later subdivision of the huge agencies (photo, branding, DTP etc.) together with the surfacing of small agencies indicate a consolidation of the graphic design market. The 2008 financial crisis marks the end of the first decade of the 20th century and contributes at the realigning of the elements that shape the next period. Now the design market seems to be better outlined. The word “design” seems to have got the sense and the recognition it needed, and the three general fields of design are well-defined: they have their representatives as well as their public. The subdomains that had appeared start to be individualized, defined by functional expressions like lighting design, office design, display design, book design, font design etc.

This period also shows a change in the consumer perception of the industrially manufactured product. After a long duration of taste uniformity and lack of options, the striving for individuality and for creating singular objects was accordingly justified. Industrial production better adapted to manufacturing small series of products became a reasonable answer to the buyers’ attitude change.

OBJECTIVE

The paper’s main objective was to highlight Romanian furniture design along three decades after 1990 and subsequently the hardships and successes of some influential designers.

METHOD

Two investigative-analytical methods were used, considered able to build up the research: a necessary documentary/theoretical study for a reasonable historical context frame, and the processing of a

consistent volume of information accumulated through direct approach: substantial face-to-face dialogues and interviews with the designers, together with analyses of their most representative designs.

THE DESIRED CHANGE IN DESIGN

The idea of *change* can be followed on several levels. This means that, just like in any other design analysis, the change that took place has to be contemplated in its historical, economic and cultural context.

After 1990 it was natural for the fields of design that were practiced in Romania to try to find their path, adapting to the new forms and criteria that were defining capitalist economy with a free market. In Romania the huge enterprises and the industrial platforms started to dissolve through division followed by disappearance. There were situations when those tied up professionally and sentimentally to their work places tried to preserve shop workrooms in otherwise disappearing factories, thus setting the bases of new production centers. Later on, surviving the adaptation to the rigors of market economy they invested in new technologies.

Furniture is the true sensor of these changes, being one of the best practiced design areas, with a consistent history dating from before 1990, with good examples from the second part of the 70s. Once the new, post-1990 context appeared, designers were expecting to be taken into account by manufacturers, or to find a place to materialize their creations. Mihai Maxim is one of those who hoped to offer his experience to some employers. He wished to be given the opportunity to design modular furniture, based on some principles of Scandinavian design, but the potential employers he had met were not interested, so the idea was doomed. Mihai Maxim had already significant experience, being for example the first Romanian designer to have created bathroom furniture made of plastic and fiberglass in 1975 (Sabău 1988).

Positive collaborations between designers and manufacturers happened only after 2010. Therefore the contribution of designers that was brought to the furniture creation domain remains relatively limited, many of their materialized ideas appear as solitary experiments.

FURNITURE DESIGN BETWEEN EXPERIMENT AND SMALL SERIES

One of those who strongly believed that the 1990 changes would have a favorable effect upon on design too is Emil Răgușilă. In 1993 he founded his own studio to which a workshop was attached, but regretfully in 1999 he had to close the workshop because of problems like limited production, the creative - entrepreneurial formula adopted, difficulties in exhibiting his products. Tables, storage units, shelves were some of his manufactured furniture pieces. Carefully made of diversely veneered plywood, they were light compared to their generous volumes. They were "manufactured by combining new ideas and techniques with the old cabinet-makers' joints, hardware and fitting systems" (Sabău 1999). Through his attitude toward the profession and his daring spirit, Emil Răgușilă remains a relevant example of Romanian furniture creation in the 90s (Fig.1).



Fig. 1.
a - Bookshelf, Emil Răgușilă, 1998; b - Coffee Table, Emil Răgușilă, 1996.

The absence of partnerships and the financial difficulty of being actively represented at furniture fairs, implying thus also the sale of the products, are just a part of the list of hindrances met by designers. Those years had also revealed another troublesome aspect of the design process, namely finding good workshops with a well-qualified, specialized working force.

Nevertheless, despite these accumulated obstacles, designers did not abandon their courage, they still believed in the future of design in Romania, they believed that their profession would assure their survival. Gradually towards 2010 more young design graduates, part of them specialized in product design, wished to create furniture and worked out to create a “pressure weight” steering them towards asserting themselves locally and internationally. Some of them worked as individuals, others in partnership with a manufacturer. Among those who had opted for individual work are Corvin Cristian, 201 Design Studio, Agnes Lukács, Alexe Popescu, Radu Teacă, Constantin Alupoaei. One of those who succeeded to initiate a partnership with a manufacturer is Dragoş Motică.

Inventive and dynamic, Corvin Cristian, always searching for new creative ideas, started to develop interior design for several restaurants from the old city center of Bucharest, an activity which brought him a special position among designers. His interiors turned to good account a vast collection of retrieved objects, which he had built up carefully during a decade: industrial chairs and lamps, visible in his *Machine Shop* Bar, 2011 (Fig. 2a), old sewing machines which he used in his *Papiota* Bar, 2011, old entrance doors which decorate the walls of the *Bon* Restaurant, 2012, old kitchen implements for the *Sardin* Restaurant, 2016 (Fig. 2b).

In 2016 Corvin Cristian started to renounce this successful creation path and instead concentrated on designing ensembles of objects for office spaces. Office cabins are one of his more recent themes for which he uses solid wood or hardwood plywood. For his restaurants' chairs he uses either oak wood - *Takim* Set (Fig. 3a) and ash wood - *Yo Set* (Fig. 3b) and *Agape Family* (Fig. 4a), or birch plywood - *DCP Chairs* (Fig. 4b).

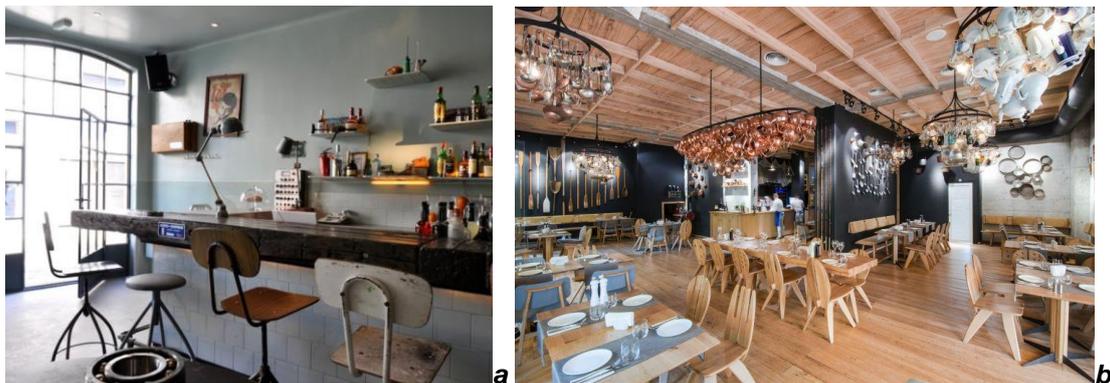


Fig. 2.

a - Machine Shop, Corvin Cristian, 2011; b – Sardin Restaurant, Corvin Cristian, 2016.

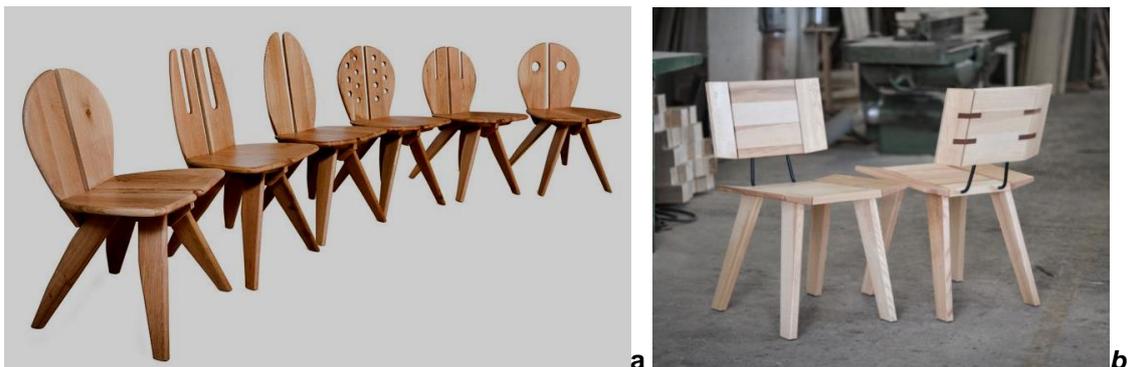


Fig. 3.

a – Takim Chairs, Corvin Cristian, 2016; b – Yo Set, Corvin Cristian, 2016.



Fig. 4.

a – Agape Chairs, Corvin Cristian, 2016; b – DCP Chairs, Corvin Cristian, 2015.

Mira Ene and Codrin Stănciulescu (201 Design Studio), are a young team who, at the beginning, was keen on using natural materials, hardwood plywood offering an adequate quality to their experiments. Their *Twig* Collection, 2012 (Fig. 5a) consisting of three types of objects – stool, barstool, table – shows simple and efficient design. The particularity of this project is visible in the concept of the legs, showing an ergonomic curvature able to enhance the objects' stability and offering a friendly support to the occupant's feet. Made of birch plywood, the chair *2Seat*, 2011 is another ingenious concept, offering two seating positions by its simple overturning (Fig. 5b).



Fig. 5.

a – *Twig*, 201 Design Studio, 2012; b – *2Seat*, 201 Design Studio, 2011.

Alexe Popescu is a designer with spectacular furniture projects where unassuming materials were used. Furniture is a limited field in the designer's portfolio, he is known mostly for book design. For his *Cookie Table*, 2009 (Fig. 6a) and *Grafica Chair*, 2010 - designed together with Radu Manelici (Fig. 6b) he uses birch plywood and simple volumes (for example the table fits in a cube). At the same time he reduces the object's weight as it can be seen at the table countertop, whose bottom panel is cut up in the central area.

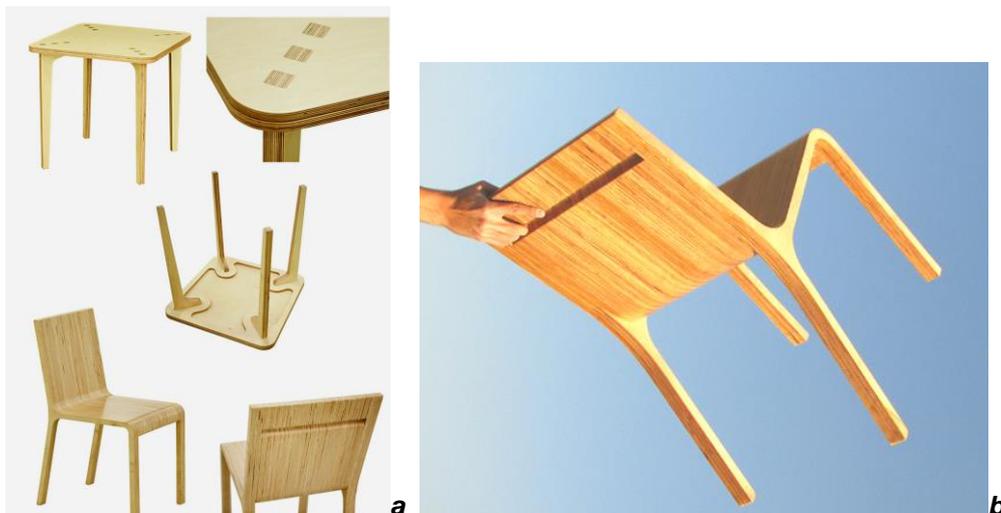


Fig. 6.

**a - Cookie Table, Alexe Popescu, 2009 and Grafica Chair, Alexe Popescu & Radu Manelici, 2010
b - Grafica Chair.**

A peculiar presence in the local landscape of furniture design is the Studio *Materia*, specialized in high quality furniture. These high-end pieces of furniture belong to the *de luxe* category of objects. The studio is known to use recovered old wood from discarded furniture or waste wood abandoned in deserted courtyards and barns. As a general principle, *Materia* creates a simple design, with basic, clear volumes, resorting to attractive woods (chestnut, walnut, oak). The simplicity of form highlights the beauty of the wood color and texture (Fig. 7). Another particularity of Studio *Materia*, established in 2014, is the firm's social engagement through hiring persons with a disadvantaged background or with no qualification who wish and need to work and learn a trade.



Fig. 7.

a - Alkar Table, Studio Materia, 2016; b - Faug Stools, Studio Materia, 2016.

The singular example of a partnership between a designer, Dragoş Motică, and a manufacturer is the creative studio *Ubikubi*, established in 2014. The collection called *Marco* (2012) includes a stool, a barstool, a table and a bench, has seats made of cork wood and epoxy paint-covered metal fittings, an animating color accent (Fig. 8). Other collections followed, where oak and ash wood were used. The collection *Atelier*, 2015, consisting of tables and stackable chairs, is informed by the easel structure (Fig. 9a). The chairs optionally can get a leather cushion and a blanket attached to the chair back with two leather straps. The *Bend Set*, 2016, includes tables with three different heights, with circular countertops and metallic tubular legs (Fig. 9b).



Fig. 8.
Dragoș Motică
Marco barstool, stool, bench, 2012.



Fig. 9.
a – Atelier Chair, Dragoș Motică, 2015; b – Bend Collection, Dragoș Motică, 2016.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

What has happened in Romanian design during the last three decades and was described in this paper rises a question which may stand as a conclusion: design and designers – where are they heading to? Without seeking a final answer here, a direction which emerged from the latest design events is a delicate fusion between design and crafts concentrated in an object, a symbol image which the Romanian Design Week – RDW 2017 edition adopted as the event identity: the three legged stool (the tripod, a basic structure often found in folk furniture) got submitted to an updating re-creation process, thus becoming a barstool (with footrests) whose disassembled components require a minimum volume.

Peter Dormer, the classic author and editor of one of the most influential book about the vast and controversial theoretical significance of crafts (Dormer 1997) reveals “how fluid the definition of design is” in his „rhetorical cultural comment about the shortcomings of design and technology” when it becomes necessary „to borrow an argument from the crafts”, as Alan Peters reflects (Peters 1997).

