

**I**n the line-up of designers for Bernhardt Design's latest collection, Global Edition - a project in which the company commissioned its pick of the most talented designers working today to create individual pieces - only two of the eight hail from the US. But then, according to Jerry Helling, creative director of Bernhardt Design, this isn't surprising. He explains: 'The American market is very different from the European one. In the US the market is so large that everything is geared to mass appeal. For most companies the drive for quarterly results is their priority and they don't have the luxury to take risks.' As a result, he says, the majority of Americans tend to have conservative tastes in design. Most European furniture companies - Vitra, Cappellini et al - struggle to gain a foothold. The US just isn't producing the same calibre of innovative designers as Europe.

This is exactly what Jerry Helling intends to change. Through Bernhardt Design, which was founded in 1980 as an arm of the 118-year-old Bernhardt Furniture Company and dedicated to innovative and distinctive high-end design, Helling is determined to succeed where others have failed. And with his passionate heart and balanced business mind, he may just pull it off. 'My quest is to give people what they want to buy, but at the same time to chip away at their fear of experimental design,' he explains. 'The early 19903 stock crash pulled America back to a place where no one would have thought the Eameses ever existed. Then, with the dotcom boom and the growth of Silicon Valley, things opened up a bit more. Today seems like the perfect time to start chipping away,' he says.

Not surprisingly, Global Edition was an idea that took shape in Paris, 'in a taxi late at night with Brooke Stoddard'. Stoddard, former style editor of *US House & Garden*, is a consultant on the project, which aims to create a collection that transcends fashion and is aimed at all markets, both residential and commercial. Each of the 12 pieces is simple, pure and timeless. To develop such a collection, Helling knew that he had to enlist an accomplished roster of international talent. 'Stoddard and I locked ourselves into a war room, put up the top designers on pinboards and started going through them to decide who we wanted.' Helling beams as he reads out the final list: Shin Azumi, Jeffrey Bennett, Christian Biecher, Yves Behar, CuldeSac, Arik Levy, Pearson Lloyd »



# O16

## American beauty

Jerry Helling at Bernhardt Design isn't taking the US creative crisis lying down. With a new, mainly European-designed collection of furniture, he hopes to reinvigorate the market

PHOTOGRAPHER: DEAN KAUFMAN. WRITER: ALEX BAGNER



**SEATING IS BELIEVING**  
At Bernhardt Design's North Carolina factory, creative director Jerry Helling on Arik Levy's 'Millix' sofa, with 'Aro' barstools by Lievore Altherr Molina and (right) Jeffrey Bennett's 'Remy' chair, all for the Global Edition collection

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and Lievore Altherr Molina. 'We were looking for people who knew what we wanted, who understood us,' Helling says. 'And we got it.'

When the designers signed up, they were told what item of furniture to design, but were specifically not told who the other designers were. 'If they were going to design something truly neutral that could go anywhere and blend with all these different style approaches, they could not be influenced by the idea of a "collection",' says Helling. He therefore had to earn their complete trust. All the prototypes were made at the North Carolina HQ, and while some were produced smoothly, others took up to 14 attempts to get right. 'The chair by CuldeSac is so complicated. It doesn't look it, but every line is tied to another, which makes it difficult to draw, let alone produce. To get something to look unconditionally simple is always very complicated,' he says.

Similarly simple in a complex way is the 'Aro' barstool by the Barcelona-based collective Lievore Altherr Molina. Essentially three loops held together with two legs, the piece may look perfectly weightless but it is incredibly stable as a seat. Its fixed base and revolving seat make it suitable for residential as well as demanding commercial spaces. 'The barstool was the one piece I thought would be hard. I thought the perfect barstool had already»



**SAWN IN THE USA**

**Top, patterns for chair frames at the Bernhardt Design factory**  
**Above, 'Celon' chair by Lievore Altherr Molina, from Global Edition collection**



been designed, but I was wrong. This piece is perfect,' smiles Helling confidently.

With the backing of Ann Bernhardt, CEO of Bernhardt Design and the wife of the CEO of Bernhardt, Helling is determined to push the boundaries. He concedes that when he first started at Bernhardt, fresh out of university, he was absolutely unqualified for the job. Plucked out of sales into a more creative role by Ann herself and nurtured to climb the ranks to his current, rather grandiose title of executive vice president creative director, Helling admits it could only have happened in a family-run firm. It was in the early 1990s that he started to become enthralled by European design and what it was accomplishing. 'Could we translate that?' he asks. 'Are we able to raise the bar in the state of design in the US?'

To answer his own question, Global Edition is being launched at New York's ICFF (19-22 May), rather than earlier at Milan's Salone del Mobile. Whether it's a roaring success or not, Helling isn't giving up on his quest. A project with European design darling Jaime Hayon is in the pipeline, and Bernhardt Studio - a platform to help young US designers - is in its second year. Either way, you know that Helling won't give up until US design stops following the path of least resistance. \*

[www.bernhardtdesign.com](http://www.bernhardtdesign.com)



**UNITED SHAPES**  
Above, prototypes at the factory include pieces by Arik Levy, Yves Behar and Jeffrey Bennett, all for Helling's Global Edition collection  
Left, 'Onda' chair by Christian Biecher, also part of the collection