Tom Deacon Interview

"Modelling clay is the only process I trust."
Tom Deacon has been missing for a decade, as in gone, no more work, no website or Instagram, just gone. After a string of iconic and mega successful product launches, he dropped out of the design world to get lost in the backwoods, creating land art, making gardens, and experimenting in his woodshop. Deacon has recently shifted back to the city, sold his gorgeous condo, made another hit chair, and is wondering where design has been while he’s been away. We had the wonderful opportunity to check in this week, to talk about design life, and learn what motivates and moves one of Canada’s top design talents.

Let’s jump in. Tell me more about you, what drives your practice, are you on a mission? “Mission” sounds a bit evangelical to me. I prefer to take a quieter approach to my interaction with the world. The design I admire most tends to be the sort that doesn’t proclaim its presence too loudly, and it’s a quality that I hope is reflected in my own work. It’s at the heart of the great appeal I find in vernacular and anonymous design such as the work of the Shakers.

Keilhauer Trua Chair, 2016

Why is design your thing? I started with a degree in architecture but not with a long held conviction about that being the profession for me. In fact I quit a couple of years into my degree to pursue an interest in music but returned a couple of years later with a more realistic understanding of the challenges of that life. By the time I graduated I already had some misgivings about pursuing a conventional path in architecture, and those were only confirmed by a six week stint in a Toronto office, the sum total of my working experience in the field.

I had always been more interested in the small scale end of architectural design, more about materials and how they come together than planning the big picture. I had the sense that the scale of furniture with fewer people involved in the process might afford a little more control over the process and make for a clearer, more direct expression of ideas and intent than with buildings.

I was also drawn to the idea of designing for production as opposed to the inevitable “one-off” nature of architecture. It gives you the luxury, clients’ deadlines notwithstanding, of spending more time getting things just right because if you do then the results can end up being a part of peoples’ lives all over the world. And
with furniture I can always imagine being the client/end user myself, since it has the possibility of being part of my life too – not that I’m surrounded by my work at home. Not only is it nice to have a little work/life separation but I tend to surround myself with things that inspire me, old and new, rather than reminders of my past, especially since there’s often some little detail you wish you had had one more run at before things get “locked down” for tooling, and if you’re prone to self-flagellation it’s best not to have constant reminders of that.

**Desi gn is credited with improving lives, and design is also accused of creating some of the bigger problems we face (like the environment and consumerism). Do you think design is political?** I would like to think that my work might improve people’s lives but I don’t aspire to do that other than in relatively subtle ways, in giving people pleasure from interacting with pleasing, well thought out, comfortable and functional objects, but that may not enter the realm of “politics” as most people would define it. I’m not trying to shake things up and issue challenges to the status quo. I enjoy working within the parameters of efficient production and producing things that will find a fairly broad audience, and this would seem somewhat antithetical to the idea of being on the political vanguard.

Perhaps an element of politics can be found in my process more easily than in the products. For instance, when I found that a line of teak outdoor furniture I had designed was being made out of pirated timber from Burma, pulling the plug on the project was a no-brainer. I do get satisfaction from working with companies like Keilhauer who are exemplary in their approach to sustainability and the well-being of all the people involved in the process, start to finish.

Now if you really want to dive into the deeper political – and environmental – aspects of what we do, there is the question, troubling for product designers in particular, of whether in general we really ought to be producing all this stuff we’re designing in the first place. That raises fundamental issues beyond the realm of the design profession, but one way to tackle it is to make things that last longer, that delay the point at which disposal or recycling becomes an issue, and to make things that remain a useful and pleasing part of people’s lives for as long as possible. “Useful” in the sense of durability, “pleasing” in the sense of aging gracefully and not being tied too closely to trends and fashion.

Keilhauer Loon Chair, 2014

**Technology is really pushing design open to non-pros. Our tools/processes are now widely available…how do you stay out front of this and how have you seen technology push your practice?** Technology is providing wonderful new tools all the time but to talk of it “pushing” a practice
points towards a potential danger in the role it can play. There is a risk of sounding like a luddite, but while it has come to play an indispensable part in engineering and production the role of some technological advancements in the design process is a two edged sword.

That danger, particularly in product design and architecture, is a certain distancing from the physical world and nowhere more acutely than with furniture design where our relationship to the end product is so fundamentally physical and tactile. When designing a chair I start using full scale, physical mock-ups as early in the process as possible. No matter how sketchy it may be or whether it is sittable or not, something that occupies real space, is life size, that is built with your hands, will tell you things that the most sophisticated rendering of a computer model never can. And when refining elements with more complex form, making full scale models using automotive modelling clay is the only process I trust. It not only means I can be completely confident about the physical reality of the form of the finished product, but the physical process itself can play a significant role in refining that form.

Eventually a scan is made of that mockup which is then turned into a 3D computer model used for engineering, rapid prototyping and mould design/making. So even though the final result is a mass produced moulded plastic element, the starting point is a hand crafted object, and there is a direct connection between the feeling I have as I pull a scraper over the surface of the clay while refining the shape and the feeling a user has sliding a hand over the surface of the finished product.

In a panel discussion on this topic Jonathan Ive bemoaned the tendency of design and architecture schools to close down their model shops. If you’re designing something that will be made of a particular material, he said, go get some of it and get to know the physical stuff rather that jumping to form development on a screen.

Finessing a symbiotic relationship between the physical qualities of the materials something is made of, its structure, its form and how it is used or occupied has always been and still is, I believe, what forms not just the foundation of the best design but provides the potential for poetry in physical objects and spaces. Finding that sweet spot in the interaction of those four elements is grounded in a feel for the tactile, sensual, physical reality of the thing. The ability through computer modelling to quickly produce seductive images of any form that can be dreamed of presents the danger of form and image driving everything. And though 3D printing is a wonderful tool for verifying form, it is still at a distance from the physicality of real materials, and the structural and tactile qualities inherent in them.

This issue becomes all the more acute with a generation that has been looking at screens their whole life. I did a double take when, after a talk at OCAD tracing the design process of the Tom chair, a student asked how I could build a physical mock up before making a computer model, which seemed to me to have things rather backwards.
What would you describe as the most significant development in contemporary furniture-making within the last 5-10 years? Furniture design doesn’t involve the sort of physical challenges that require the latest developments in materials. When carbon fiber first appeared a few chairs were made with it but does a chair really need to weigh almost nothing, especially given the costs involved?

The big shift in the furniture industry in the last decade has been more in the rise in importance of the issue of sustainability. This doesn’t just inform what materials go into products but things like life-cycle analysis which involve both up front and ongoing commitment on the part of the client and even large scale infrastructure questions like the capacity and motivation of society in general to collect and recycle materials. The frustration can be that these are things in which the designer often plays a relatively small part.

Your work is so timeless and efficient – how important is memory and place in your work? The design of chairs has continued to be challenging and rich ground for me to explore because we relate to them on so many levels. Most obviously in a straightforward ergonomic sense, but also, still on a physical level, as a source of pleasure as our hand or eye follows a pleasing form. But we also interact with them in less tangible, less physical ways. As well as being counter-forms to the body which they accommodate they can be strongly zoomorphic and be seen as little beings in their own right. It’s not coincidental that we use the terms back, arms, legs, feet to describe the parts of a chair and when done well they have that sense of inevitability and easy grace found in almost any living creature.

Memory can also play a role in how we apprehend a chair, in how it speaks to us. I think that when we first encounter a chair we see it, if only subconsciously, in relation to all chairs we’ve seen before. Despite developments in materials and to some degree function, the history of chairs exhibits a high degree of continuity of form across cultures and through millennia. So I think it’s useful for a designer to be familiar with that history and how something new might relate to it. I’m not advocating a post-modern or historicist quoting of elements and at times thinking in these terms may not be appropriate at all, but a certain resonance with familiar form, even if not consciously perceived by those who encounter it, can often enrich our experience of a chair.

As for place, I’m not so sure. At times there has been much discussion about whether there is something distinctive and identifiable about Canadian design. I think that in the past, and in other places, that sort of thing has usually been the product of a certain degree of cultural homogeneity, or a particular tradition of ways of making or use of materials or isolation. None of those are conditions that seem to apply to Canada now. We obviously have wood coming out our ears but when I did a series of wood chairs for Keihauer some time ago we ended up, ironically, going to Italy for production where there was much more sophisticated automation in that area. So if we rule out things like chairs that look like snowshoes, or the use of birchbark, I’m not sure why we would expect there to be such a thing in such a diverse and globally connected country.

Perhaps the simple fact that the scale of marketing and production in the world of Canadian furniture is not generally global in reach might have a more subtle effect on our output. Given the lack of capacity and inclination for “star making” in Canadian media we don’t end up with products that are desirable simply because of the signature on them. For someone who admires much anonymous and vernacular design this is not really a problem, and in fact might encourage a degree of reserve that can make things more likely to have a long life rather than things that more exuberantly express the vision or “brand” of a creator or current trends. I’m more delighted when I find that a friend has bought one of my products without knowing that it’s mine.
Deep dive us into one of your big hits, like the **Danforth Office seating**. How did this get started/pitched/developed? How long does it take to develop a product? The brief for the Danforth was for executive seating which, while incorporating the latest ergonomic features, would be at home in quite traditional settings and so was not the most exciting design challenge. But it is a great example of a fun and unexpected perk of designing for production…your things turn up in all sorts of unexpected places. It’s the chair that’s used in the Situation Room at the White House and though I first saw photos with Bush and Cheney in them i’ve enjoyed the more plentiful ones with Obama, et al.

A more interesting story would be the Tom chair which followed the Danforth and which represented, on the other hand, significant challenges for both me and the client, and perhaps even better than the White House, it turned up in Dr. Evil’s lair in Goldmember. Keilhauer had had great success with Chris Sorensen’s **Respons chair** but were wanting to take the next step, to create a chair that would include a more complete set of features for a task chair, like adjustable back height and adjustable arms, as well as having a slimmer feel than the fairly voluptuous Respons.

It’s a good example of project creep, as it increased hugely in scope as the development progressed. I’m not sure they were envisioning an undertaking of it’s ultimate scale when we started but at each step, as more ideas and possibilities came up, Keilhauer had the confidence and courage to ante up for a project that took about two years and involved over two million dollars in tooling.
There was an initial desire to include some sort of mesh back but this was pre-Aeron Chair and at the time that was a rather exotic feature without much precedent. While developing the forms for the upholstered version in rigid foam we discovered that with careful shaping a rigid back could be surprisingly comfortable. So rather than a mesh back we decided to offer one in moulded plastic, with the option of a slim upholstered pad. In the end this became, with its grid of perforations, the signature version of the chair with a distinctive visual presence. Using large scale moulded plastic components was a new experience for me, and for Keilhauer it involved both capital investment and technical expertise on a whole new level. When we began the project Keilhauer had a one man R&D department, by the time Tom was launched it had grown to include several people and had made the move into CAD capabilities. The chair ended up more like a system, with three arm options, three back heights, four degrees of upholstery, and two seat depths.

Fortunately Keilhauer’s confidence was well rewarded. In the year following the launch of Tom total sales of the company doubled.

By the way, I played no part in the naming of the chair. In fact when Mike Keilhauer told me about it I thought he was pulling my leg.

You are barely online and you are not a high volume creator, or selling your own brand as part of your client work. Is this pace and attitude part of your design thinking? Tell us about your approach to making. There are at least two reasons for my relatively low profile online. The first is that around 2000, the time when the net started to become a big part of our lives, I began what I thought would be a year or two “sabbatical” spent mostly at a place I have north of Toronto. I became quite caught up in various kinds of interventions in the landscape, eventually getting involved in exploring a kind of hybrid of garden/land art/sculpture. I guess I was pretty engrossed because the years kept ticking by and eventually I realized that this was more likely an early retirement than a sabbatical. But after ten years of a fairly reclusive life, and for reasons I might need a therapist to fully understand, I decided to resume a more engaged relationship with the world and so shifted my center of gravity back to the city and started designing again for Keilhauer. Since then a large portion of my time has been taken up with two personal architectural projects so there have only been a couple of product introductions so far in this chapter which means that the majority of my work predates the internet.

The other reason for my low internet profile is the result of having the good fortune of an amazing longstanding relationship with Keilhauer. I’ve done products for a handful of other companies over the years but while I remain a freelance designer and my relationship with Keilhauer is not exclusive, it has given me the opportunity to do a large number of projects and they’ve done pretty well with many of them so it has meant that, while the conventional wisdom would be to have your eggs in more than one basket, I’ve had the luxury of doing just fine with, essentially, one client. The result is that there’s been no real incentive, beyond indulging my vanity, to have my own website since I’m not trying to sell my services to anyone new, and Keilhauer does an amazing job of selling my products without much involvement on my part.
As for my approach to making, it is indeed very much about making. I’ve always derived great satisfaction from that, be it model airplanes and forts when I was a kid, an Appalachian dulcimer in the wood shop at the School of Architecture, to producing extremely large objects of indeterminate function on my lathe.

I’ve always talked about nature as being a central inspiration. I’ve spent a lot of my life outdoors, on water and in the woods, which may be why I’m sympathetic to Karl Blossfeldt’s idea that any formal problem faced by a designer or engineer has already been solved by nature, you just have to look for it.

Tools, mostly old hand tools, have always been a favourite source of inspiration. They are not unlike objects in nature in that the form is principally the product of necessity, a direct reflection of how they are used, the hand that holds them and the qualities of the materials of which they are made. The result is often a beauty and sense of ease and grace of form which comes more, I think, from an unselfconscious response to needs than from a deliberate effort to make an exquisite object, or a desire of the maker to express themselves.

Your designs have been described as very technical – more about the idea of being flawless and perfect than the product of a craft process, with more evidence of the hand of the maker. Do you agree? How does your diverse background inform your product design? I think there is a fundamental difference between hand crafted objects and the products of industrial production. As I described earlier there is a crucial role in my design process for the sort of hand work that defines craft work. Our relationship with chairs being so directly physical and tactile, it seems essential that the design of these things involve contact with more than keypads and a mouse.

And I hope that in subtle perhaps unconsciously perceived ways there is evidence of that in the result but to try to manifest more direct, literal evidence of “the hand of the maker” in a finished product is problematic. The necessities of volume, cost and consistency with these sorts of products means having to minimize the amount and evidence of manual handling along the way. And, needless to say, to try to then simulate a more craft-like appearance in objects produced in this way, much like plastic moulded with a woodgrain texture, would involve a kind of artifice risking the whiff of kitch.

What is your favorite thing that you didn’t design… why do you like it and what design lessons are demonstrated in it? The Round Chair, an ikon of modern Danish design, is such an obvious choice but for good reason. Its perfection is the sort of thing that might inspire questions of whether the world needs another wood chair but, fortunately for people who love designing chairs, there are at least two answers.

First, making the round chair involves a tremendous amount of hand work and, I’m guessing, the manufacturer has decided that to try to change that would endanger the quality and integrity of the end product. It’s therefore an extremely expensive chair and accessible to a sliver of the buying public. So trying to make things within reach of a broader public is a worthwhile aim.

Second, the question of whether the world NEEDS another chair is perhaps beside the point. As designer friend Helen Kerr said when asked by a student whether the world needs another spoon, does the world NEED another song? If need in too narrow a sense must be the starting point to justify a design then the world would be a rather bleak place. It’s rather a question of whether the world might be a more humane, enjoyable, inspiring place through our contributions and that, given a little optimism, leaves plenty of room for our pursuits.
In the waves of conformity/sameness and the push for work to be commercial and marketable. Do you think that design can create new ways of living? I think I have to confine my response to this question to the area of product design rather than include things like the massively expanding scope of “design thinking” as applied to almost every area. As such, creating “new ways of living” seems beyond a realistic aim for the sort of work I do. There are very few companies prepared to invest in the development of a product that doesn’t have a pretty good chance of being “commercial and marketable”, and even when one does decide to aim for a real leap, like with Herman Miller and the Aeron chair, which was truly ground breaking, it’s hard to see how it has created a new way of living.

One could always work more speculatively, and then try to find a vehicle to bring something more revolutionary to the world, or let it stand as a statement rather than a product. I know that some people assume that I’d rather be doing art furniture, or something more idiosyncratic or somehow personally expressive but I genuinely enjoy the discipline of working within the parameters of what is produceable and what brings pleasure to a broad range of people. This is not exactly an effective or appropriate vehicle for revolutionary fervour! And so perhaps my aspirations are less about creating new ways of living than about trying to bring some delight and comfort into lives as people are already living them.

Tell us about working in the creative industry in Toronto and Canada, are there advantages or disadvantages to being a designer here? Well the advantage of doing what I do in Toronto has been quite specific, that is, it resulted in my connecting with Keilhauer. That has been a wonderful and fruitful relationship with a great company and has rendered me blissfully immune to most of the challenges there may be in working as a designer here.

Some of Deacon’s Favourite Things:
Tom Deacon portrait by Guntar Kravis.