Eye spy

She may create functional light installations and furniture from her small Bondi flat, but Jo Philippsohn has a really big future in industrial design.

Words: Julia Nekich

THE CLASSIC PRINCIPLE of 'form follows function' isn't the only consideration in creating great designs. Whether it is a building, interior or piece of furniture, the trend today is towards designs that also reflect the user's personality and lifestyle.

Take the creations of emerging product designer Jo Philippsohn. Even before graduating from the University of NSW with a degree in industrial design, Jo's quirky lifestyle-based pieces caught the attention of the media, design industry and design-savvy individuals.

Jo is the brains behind Dwell by Jo, a furniture, lighting and graphic design business, and she admits the ideas that spark her designs originate from the user's lifestyle. Her very first design showcased to the world was Glow-in-the-box, a series of connected light boxes that can be rearranged to create different forms and varying intensities of light to suit the user's space and the way they live. It was exhibited in 2001, in the third year of Jo's studies, at top furniture trade fair – Salon Satellite (or Furniture Fair) in Milan. Jo was one of 12 in her year chosen by her university to exhibit her work there.

"Milan gave me a better perspective of the design world," she recalls. "There were ideas and technologies presented that I hadn't previously been exposed to, and it opened my mind to new possibilities and new ways of thinking. There, the design world was tangible and real, no longer restricted to design books, magazines and high-end shops, which I was used to in Australia."

Jo established Dwell by Jo in 2002, and works from home. She describes the design process as both creative and technical. "It begins with sketches, and then a lot of computer work to get the geometry right. Then I create models of the design to understand which parts need to be refined. After that, it is a matter of finding the right manufacturers – who has what capabilities. After responses from friends and family, I take it to the market and get feedback before I do the final tweaking."

Jo's first piece marketed to the public was Flip Flop – modular, multifunctional seating in the form of connected ottomans. Like Glow-in-the-box, it allows the individual to create different configurations to suit their lifestyle and living space. "I had a prototype made and exhibited it at Furnitex in Melbourne in 2002," says Jo. "There, I got feedback, then redeveloped it and took it to DesignEx in Melbourne in 2003. Around 20 interior designers placed orders for it – for living areas, children's play areas and dens," she says.

Other designs have since followed, but arguably Jo's most lauded piece is Slat, a curvaceous outdoor timber seat with decorative cut-outs released in February this year. "I can see now that Flip Flop was almost a different generation," she says. "Back then, maximising small spaces was increasing. When I started looking at designing an outdoor piece, however, it was a totally different element. As a designer, I have my own philosophy, but I'm also playing with a market that can change quite quickly."

Slat taps into the current trend towards the merging of indoor and outdoor living spaces. "The idea was lifestyle based," says Jo. "In Australia, we have such a fabulous outdoor lifestyle. Having a beautiful product outside helps connect the outdoors with the indoors."

Slat was a finalist in this year's *Home Beautiful* Product of the Year Awards and will also be exhibited in Melbourne's Garden Designfest 2006 this month. "One of my first clients for Slat was a Queensland woman who bought a few pieces and had an area of her garden especially landscaped for them. When my next piece, Stripped Bare, was released, she immediately placed an order for one. A few days later she told me she visited my website for the first time and realised that I am also the designer behind Flip Flop. Her daughter had bought a Flip Flop when I was just starting out in the design world. The family has impeccable design taste!" she says, with a laugh.

Jo's latest design, Stripped Bare, is a combined coat rack and oversized floor lamp in laminated plywood. It was exhibited at Melbourne's Furnitex in July, and got great reviews in the commercial market. The design now adorns a number of retail shops and corporate offices. It is also a finalist in the IDEA Awards, run by *Inside* magazine.

"Again, Stripped Bare is lifestyle inspired," she says. "Australian winters are short and not very harsh. The idea was to have a coat stand that can also function as another object. Stripped Bare has the aesthetic of a lamp, and you're not looking at a coat stand for the rest of the year."

Interestingly, Stripped Bare is Jo's first lighting piece since graduation. "It's funny – I did lighting at uni, but furniture when I started out. So now I'm going back into lighting."

That said, Jo says that the design world can continue to look out for more of her quirky and functional furniture pieces. "I'd love to have a distributor, but at the same time, I want to remain close to my products – custom designing each one for my clients.

"In design, you're learning everything you need to know along the way – the ergonomics of a seat, the photometrics of lighting, new materials. Every aspect opens up a whole new world."

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