



096 EDUCATION & RESEARCH

d.lab for Objects From a Tablescape

TEXT BY JOANNE GOH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY YONG JIEYU

Design meets commerce meets education in d.lab, a new studio headed by local design wunderkind Patrick Chia. Joanne Goh finds out more about the genesis and process of Objects Around The Tablescape, the design studio's collection of Corian® products that showed at an exhibition in Paris earlier this year.

Early Beginnings.

In May 2007, Patrick Chia, the Creative Director of the Design Incubation Centre (DIC) at the School of Design and Environment at the National University of Singapore (NUS), organised a workshop for 40 students to explore the properties of Corian® through the manipulation of the material. The aim of the workshop was to come up with a collection of new forms of tabletop objects through the process of material manipulation and prototyping, with students exploring this theme in a very hands-on, interactive and experimental environment.

Conducted with the aim of contributing to an exhibition collection that was to have a more individual and hence commercial feel, the workshop was the springboard for projects such as the Stairway Paper Tray, the Long Fruit Bowl and Letter Light. During the workshop, participants played with the crafting of various forms to create objects that have relevance to everyday life. The material proved to be restrictive when it came to certain design ideas, and the students' skills in controlling the crafting of the material while incorporating their design intentions were put to the test.

At the end of the design and prototyping stages, selected designs were further developed and showcased at the Maison & Objet exhibition held in Paris in January this year, under a collection titled Objects Around The Tablescape under the brand d.lab.

caption: From top
1. Plates for Layered Plates
2. The wooden parts were then used like a jig to form the Corian sections of the Layered plates design
3. The edges were then trimmed altogether
4. The finished Layered Plates

caption: From top
Stairway Paper Tray, A Long Fruit Bowl, Letter Light

098

Designing.

Defining moments such as those of the invention of the light bulb or the telephone are certainly few and far between. When the function of an object has already been worked out, a possibly harder task ensues. The question becomes how objects can be made to embody individual characteristics that speak to their target audience. Then, how to create something that looks designed without looking over-designed? The arresting simplicity and elegance of the pieces in the collection are testament to the thought given to the projects as well as the effort invested in seeing the design process through to the end.

Faced with the abundance of designed objects, a greater importance has to be placed on creating unique pieces with credible design merit. One such approach is reflected in the current emphasis placed on the (positive) ambiguity and often neglected relationships among different fields both in and out of design. The encouragement of this practice is evident in the design brief, where participants were given a relatively free rein to interpret and explore the theme of 'Objects as Architecture. Architecture as Objects.' As Chia explained, the term 'object' implies a non-absolute freedom encompassed by neither 'product' nor 'sculpture'.

Presented with this constantly shifting, transitional space between 'architecture' and 'objects' the participants approached the project in a wide range of ways. For example, 28-year-old Yong Jieyu, who recently graduated with an IM Masters at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, took the opportunity to explore how objects can exert the same strength in spatial articulation as architecture. Taking a more personal approach to the theme, his design process indicated an ability to interpret and adhere to the theme while remaining receptive to as wide a range of ideas as possible.

Working consciously to isolate preconceived ideas and influences as much as possible, Yong looked at works by architects and artists that were relevant to his study of space, scale and design. Working within a limited time frame, he swiftly formulated a few product ideas with paper and plastic models, before going on to the 3D modelling phase to prepare for the final prototyping. Through the Stairway Paper Tray project, Yong sought to accentuate spatial qualities around an object, while using the design of the object to create new awareness of the space around it. This was achieved through aligning stacks of paper in a "cascading stairway" format, which then formed a "mini landscape" on the tabletop.

While the participants faced little difficulty in conceptualising their designs, Chia admitted that some were lacking in the knowledge of Corian's innate qualities as a crafting material. Consequently, some of the complicated designs did not work as well as the simpler ones, which were better able to show off the physical qualities of Corian.

099

Making.

As all practicing designers should be aware, coming up with a good design does not signal the end of the work process, but is where the designer's ability to harmonise technical knowledge and conceptual ideas is put to the test. Timothy Wong, currently with the DIC and one of the lead designers for the project, says that while the crafting of products involves the knowledge of production methods and how they can be manipulated to achieve the desired results, it is not necessary for the initial design to be followed through like a blueprint. This back-and-forth process allows for the redefining of preliminary design ideas even during the production stage.

Describing some of the finer points of production, Wong stressed the importance of accuracy, especially since certain pieces had rather intricate details. While almost half of the collection was produced on the Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine, some pieces like the Long Fruit Bowl involved a more hands-on crafting method. The process for the latter involved the steaming of the materials, which were later put into the oven to prepare for shaping. Once heated, the Corian was placed in between wooden jigs before being clamped together.

Depending on the nature of each piece, a finished product can take anything from two hours to two days to be realised. The most difficult aspect was in translating the concept into a highly finished product repeatedly and consistently. While the pieces made by hand were understandably not of a factory-made consistency, there was a need for a controlled variation allowance.

Despite the high degree of accuracy and amount of effort involved, Wong maintained that it was enjoyable and rewarding to go through the different stages of the process, trying to work out better ways of constructing a piece, and then finally seeing a concept being realised. While many stages of the design process appeared extremely laborious and frustrating at times, a combination of determination and passion was vital. As he said: "You have to love every part of it to keep doing it."

caption: From top
1. The pre-cut Corian is heated up in an oven
2. The material becomes flexible and easy to bend
3. The jig held and mould important segments of the Long Fruit Bowl while allowance were give for certain areas like the sides to flare and formed naturally
4. The jigs and Corian were then clamped together in place for steaming
5, 6. A Long Fruit Bowl

caption: Round Bowl with Tray Base



100

Exhibiting and Beyond.

While a piece may seem as complete at this point, this is not the case if the piece is part of a collection to be presented at an international exhibition. The design director has to make sure that the collection is ready for submission before the entry deadline, and be in charge of the logistics once the collection is accepted. Despite facing a few hiccups during submission, d.lab's collection was ultimately accepted and well received at the exhibition. Giving due credit to the venue, Chia described the exhibition hall as a large and airy space with lots of natural light, which allowed for the beauty of the material to be optimally showcased.

As evidence of their success, d.lab has been approached by various companies such as Design Within Reach to produce their collection on a larger scale. Chia has not committed to any of these, as he feels that there is a lack of design-forward companies in Singapore. He also has plans to develop the d.lab brand. Although they have a model maker onboard to oversee the in-house production of pieces whose orders have been placed by individual buyers, the design team is still involved at certain points of the production, staying true to d.lab's emphasis on creating products with both a humane as well as technical quality. ■

top left A View
middle left A Family of Long Legged Lights
middle right A Family of Short Legged Lights
bottom left Corner Piece
bottom right Rectangular Tray with Tusk Base

