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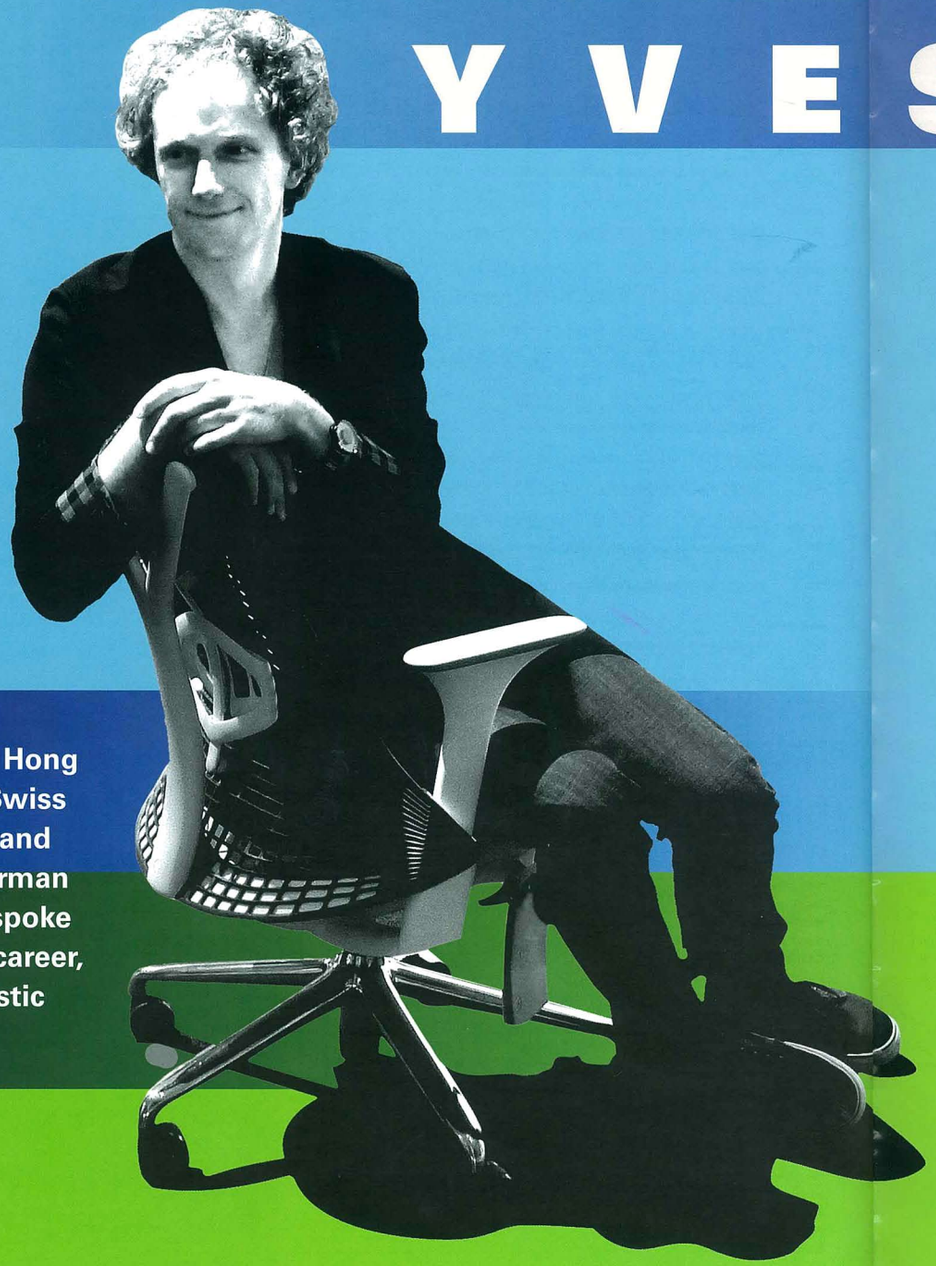
YVES BEHAR



On a recent visit to Hong Kong, Yves Behar, Swiss industrial designer and the man behind Herman Miller's Sayl chair, spoke to *hinge* about his career, influences, and artistic philosophy.

***hinge* – Would you mind telling us a bit about your background and how you first got into industrial design?**

Yves Behar – Well I got into design when I was 15 years old or so, in Switzerland, where I grew up. I started to build objects around the things I loved to do. And so my first attempt at design was to build a combination windsurfing and skiing device; the two combined together to create this very dangerous contraption, so I could windsurf on frozen lakes. So I started essentially building things that were different or a combination of the things I liked to do. I did half my studies in Europe and the other half in the US, at the Arts Centre in Los Angeles. Then I moved to Silicon Valley in the early nineties and it was a fascinating place because I could see how design could have a great role. And technology and those new tools that we use in our offices and in our homes. It's a fascinating place where change always occurs; and where designers are able to be much more of a partner to the companies they work with, rather than just someone you call in to solve problems for a couple of weeks.

You seem to have designed an array of products, from office furniture to very expensive mobile phones. What products have interested you most?

The two branches of projects I've been pursuing for many years now, are innovations around sustainability, and products that deliver, I would say, the totality of an experience, but in a very attainable type of way. So the Sayl chair, for example, is affordable, it's green and has a 12-year warranty, and delivers all the ergonomics you could ever dream of, and more in a way, but at less than half the price of an Aeron chair. So this notion that design can deliver a superior experience, and using sustainability in a way to take things off the table, in a product, or an experience, and inject a level of innovation and technology in that, is something I've been very interested in, whether it's in the work with Jawbone or Herman Miller or Puma, that's very much at the core of what I do. But on the other side of that equation, the products I've done, I've been using the same tools, but in the nonprofit world, like the hundred dollar laptop, the New York City condom, the eye glasses for the children in Mexico … these are a series of products that bring efficiency, customer love, efficacy, all the things design is expected to bring to a for-profit business, but nonprofits need all these things. They need design. Though design rarely finds itself in the nonprofit world. So since the hundred-dollar laptop there's been a change and now designers find themselves supporting and helping build nonprofit organisations. That's the social and educational work that I've been pursuing.

Design providing solutions in an area that has, perhaps, been neglected.

I call it Design for Good. Where design provides solutions to age-old problems … like how do you get kids to learn? How do you get kids to get proficient in technology? How do you get kids to be the teachers that they are by bringing the laptops back to their families, back to their homes, their siblings and their parents? Those are fundament issues and problems that design can attack from a different angle.

From that list, is there a project that has given you the most satisfaction, either in the process or the result?

The hundred-dollar laptop and the eyeglasses for Mexico certainly … three million laptops in the hands of kids right now. That's a lot of children with a different perspective, with a different learning experience. In some countries, like Uruguay, every child between the age of six and 18 has one. Every single child in Uruguay has one! In Peru, we have 860,000 laptops in the hands of kids. When it's used in the right way as a government policy, it's incredible the level of changes that it does [bring about].

We can see tangible results from design innovation?

Very tangible. And it's not stopping. It's continuing. Now that the results [of this initiative] have been recorded and studied, other governments are looking at it [the hundred-dollar laptop programme]. We are also working on a tablet. Nicholas Negroponte and I have been working on a tablet version of the computer for the last six years.

How do you approach each product and how does the design process differ accordingly? Is there one guiding principle?

As you know, I'm not stylistically guided. I don't have a singular signature as a designer. But what guides us in each project is the core idea. We tend to develop one idea for a project that we feel hasn't been explored, hasn't been resolved, hasn't been successful. And we focus on that to a point of obsession, on solving it in a philosophical way. So we essentially pursue a singular idea with a work project; and it is that idea that dictates most of the decisions, or all the decisions, that we take throughout. And I can walk you through the ideas for a few projects, but that's basically the process. We go through a lot of sketching and drawing, we use 3-D [imaging]… The reason why we produce so much material throughout the process isn't because we are looking at 20 different things, and 20 different ideas, and saying 'well we could go this way on this project, or we could go that way', it's because we obsessively focus on one single idea. On the Puma shoe box, the thing we were completely focused on was the environmental side of it: reducing the materials, finding a solution that was going to satisfy an extremely complex manufacturing and distribution system, all the way to the customer experience. So we could have built lots and lots of fancy shoeboxes but that's not what did. We relentlessly pursued a singular approach, which is [seen] in the final product.

Is there another industrial designer, either from the past or the present, whom you particularly admire?

Yes, there are many architects, designers, fashion designers that I admire. In industrial design: when I was quite young, aged 17 or 18, I asked my parents to buy me an Achille Castiglioni lamp. I always felt a connection with his work because of the diversity of the work itself and because of the story element in each project. What I like about Castiglioni's work is it tends to be very much about a certain idea at a certain time; rather than a stylistically based design. So I do like his work a lot. But I'm also inspired by other people like Joe Colombo, who's very experimental … there are many.

Which Castiglioni lamp did you get? The Arco, or the one with the tripod…?

No, the one that uses a Fiat headlamp. It looks like a fishing pole, with a lightbulb on top.

And no lampshade…

Right. I'm not a big fan of lampshades either.

Where do you usually work? You're based in San Francisco?

We are based in San Francisco. I have a team of 40 designers there, and we have a small team in New York. But we work all around the world. We work as much in Germany, Italy and France, as we do in the US. But all the designing, all the work, gets done in San Francisco. But I travel to meet with people, to brainstorm with them; and that's the part that's important. The time you spend with your [business] partners. And again, it's really about partnerships, rather than providing somebody with a temporary fix for their problem.

How long does the process take, on average, for each project?
Projects take between a year and six years. It all depends. The Sayl chair took three years, which in the chair world is very fast. It's the fastest Herman Miller development to date.

You are a founder of the Cradle to Cradle institute, which is part of your sustainability ethos, and something that is clearly very important to you. Could you tell us a bit that and why you founded it?
Sure. The exercise of being a designer is to not just look at the future and say 'I will participate in it,' but to actually make it happen. In my opinion, good design stimulates and accelerates the adoption of new ideas. That's what design does. If sustainability is a concept that seems foreign to some people, not attainable, not easily adaptable in their lives, then sustainability, to live sustainably, is going to take a lot longer to be adopted into everybody's existence. If design can prove that it isn't hard or expensive or complex, and actually delivers a better experience, then what design has done is accelerate the adoption of the notion of living sustainably.

Design sometimes gives us a way of making sustainability profitable.
Absolutely. On all these levels. So based on that notion I've gotten involved with things that I think are the next stage of design. Sustainability, the Cradle to Cradle institute … there is no doubt in my mind that in the next 15 to 20 years every manufacturing process, every distribution system, every fulfilment, every piece of logistics, is going to have to be reinvented, if we can, to get to the kind of economy, the kind of world, we want to live in – that is profitable, that is about growth, but is also a healthy world to live in. And so I feel that the next 15 to 20 years are going to be the golden age of design. This is where we'll be able to not just design the shape and form of something, but do what I call "360-degree design", which is looking at the logistics, the fulfilment, the manufacturing, and really be creative around that, really reinvent it. The Puma shoebox is an example of that. And the reason why I believe it's possible is because we've tried to do it a few times, and sometimes we've succeeded. In the case of the shoebox, eight million shoes get shipped in the new Puma shoebox, about half right now and the rest next year. But that's a sea change for a company that used to ship their products in a box that used 60% more materials and used 60% more energy to produce [than the new box]. That's why it's critical to be in there because it's a critical part of the way our world is going to change. But it is also going to be the most fun and exciting design work one can do, because it will be full of innovation and solutions. And designers have a role to play.

As they say, necessity is the mother of invention, and we have to change our ways.
Yes. It's where the future is. And designers should be where the future is.

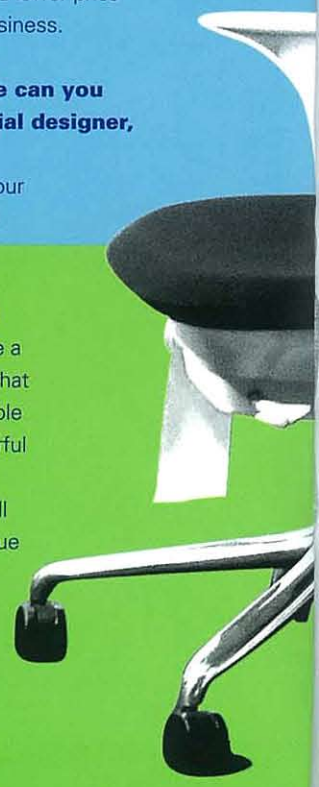
I think many are. There's now a realisation that we really have to take this seriously.
I agree. I agree.

Moving on to the Sayl chair. There are already a great number of task chairs on the market, and many of them very good. Why should anyone choose the Sayl?
Yes. The question is: there are many chairs out there, why to we need another? Well, to that question you could ask, why do we need another book? There is a new story, a new technology, a number of different steps that the Sayl chair takes, in the space of ergonomics, in the area of sustainability, and in the area of attainability, that I think are important steps to take. In the area of ergonomics, getting rid of a structural frame, which, if you move around, your body hits. In this case we've made a chair that uses a lot fewer materials because it doesn't have a frame. When there's no frame, that means more comfort, as these areas are soft. That [in turn] means fewer materials. And fewer materials means less cost.

And less waste, less production...
Exactly. So using a singular material, instead of two, or three, or four, for the back of a chair, for what's called in the furniture world the 'A Surface', the surface you feel, you touch, is an innovation. It's a huge endeavour to rethink the way essentially you build a task chair; something that needs to last for 12 years [the length of its warranty] and that will be tested in a laboratory and will have to pass regulations all around the world. These are tremendous challenges; doing something new is [always] full of obstacles. The back of the Sayl chair is the most complicated part Herman Miller has ever made. Just like the Aeron chair was a breakthrough, we learned a lot from that breakthrough about fit and posture and movement and ergonomics in general, so is this. And every 15 years or so there are some new opportunities, new materials, new thinking… That's why it's important to make a chair now. It's not going to take a single step to get to the best chair ever, when we'll never have to design another, and I don't even know if that [scenario] will ever exist. But it gets better: the Sayl chair is about 30% lighter than its competition; and it's very affordable – less than half the price of an Aeron.

What materials are used in its construction and what sustainability credentials does it have, considering the construction process and after it's served its use, its decomposition … reuse, recycling, etc?
The chair is at least 95% recyclable. It uses about 23% of recycled materials in its production. It's shipped in a half box – a box half the size of one that is typically used for chairs.

Well that reduces its carbon footprint, because transportation is a big part of...
Right. And Herman Miller is building three factories around the world to produce it: one in the US, one in Asia, and one in Europe. Which again contributes to the lower carbon footprint, and the lower price point. So being able to prove that Herman Miller, the number one high-end chair maker in the world, from all the classics to the more recent ergonomic chairs, can do something with the same level of quality, the same level of ergonomics, innovation and design, at a lower price point, was a strategic effort, for the business.

Wrapping things up, what advice can you give to ambitious young industrial designer, or any designer?
Be ambitious, to use that word from your question. Be ambitious of the fact that you can find your own way, use your own passion and background to build the next generation of businesses and partnerships with clients that will make a difference. Be ambitious in the sense that designers certainly have a significant role in building the biggest and most powerful company in the world, which is Apple. And there are others like Apple that will be built. And that designers will continue to have that big, or bigger, of a role. And that there are always more skills to be acquired; but don't undersell the level of what your contribution could be.

Indeed. Many thanks.