

design | Jacqui Taffel

Suite music

It takes three months to make but will outlive the grandchildren.

In 2001, Robert Chapman took a trip to Barcelona, where he finally saw the extraordinary work of Antonio Gaudi *in situ*. Chapman was blown away: "Not only by the creativity of it but also by a person who refused to be confined to a particular style or making something to a price."

Long before this trip, a concept had been brewing in his mind. He wanted to make a dining room suite that had more in common with sculpture than the usual pieces of timber joined together. "I had these sketches and ideas but it had never gelled until I was in Barcelona."

Returning home, it took two years to develop this concept - the result is an elegant, extendable oval table with eight matching, curvaceous chairs, which he named after the Spanish city that inspired him.

Chapman's Barcelona Collection scooped the pool recently at the National Furniture of the Year Awards, taking out the excellence in dining room furniture award as well as the show's main prize, the best of the best award. What made this recognition particularly satisfying was that Chapman has only been making furniture professionally for five years.

Homage to Gaudi: a detail of Chapman's blackwood and French oak extension table, below, and chair, right, from the Barcelona Collection.



saying, 'Well, I've got to move out to do this and pack up my life and move away from friends and family. Because if I stay in Sydney I will be forced by economics to make things I just don't want to make.'

Chapman and his two employees work on only one project at a time; it takes them three months to make one dining room suite. "So, instead of having a production line where 1000 left-hand legs and right-hand legs and bases are made up, you're getting one person creating every single piece of that chair."

This includes cutting the wood so the grain complements the chair's shape, and polishing the final product with oil and shellac to bring out the natural patina. Chapman's ambition is to produce the antiques of the future. Where the average life of a piece of mass-produced furniture might be 15 years, he claims his work is made to last 150 years. "I say to people, 'You're going to be burdening your grandkids

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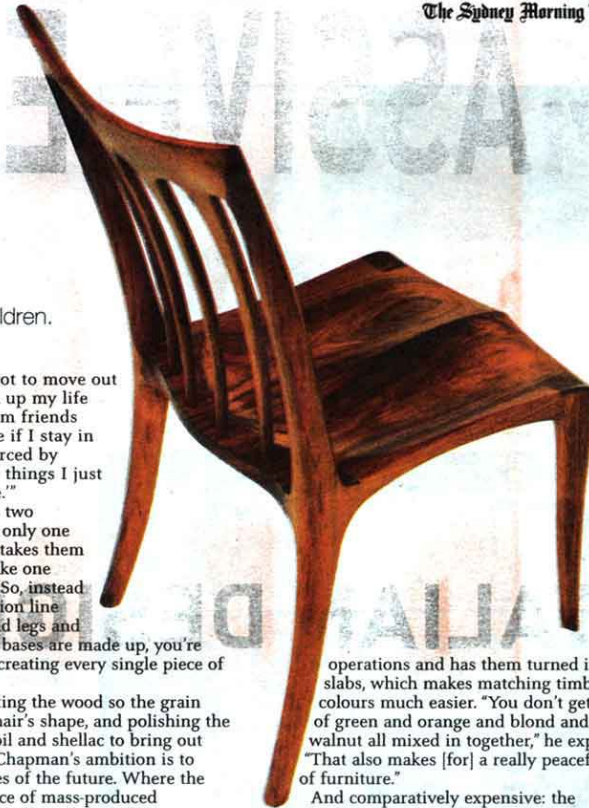
Since leaving school, he has managed a takeaway pizza store, finished a building degree and established a marketing company that, within five years, had offices in Sydney and Melbourne and employed 30 people.

Then he turned 29. He didn't want to get to 50 without chasing his dream, which was to make quality furniture. Chapman moved with his wife to Wollongong, where he could afford to buy a workshop and stay true to his vision. "It certainly is a bit scary standing on the edge of a cliff and

with this furniture, because that's how long it's going to be around'."

Inevitably, the furniture maker becomes attached to his work. When he receives an "exceptionally beautiful lot of timber" he wants to make sure it goes to the right customer. "Because we put so much energy and dedication into making this furniture, I don't want it to go to a home where it's going to be ill-treated."

Indeed, Chapman "talks" to the wood as he works. Tasmanian blackwood is a favourite; he buys whole logs salvaged from wood-chipping



operations and has them turned into slabs, which makes matching timber colours much easier. "You don't get a bit of green and orange and blond and walnut all mixed in together," he explains. "That also makes [for] a really peaceful bit of furniture."

And comparatively expensive: the Barcelona Collection (extension table plus eight chairs) costs \$29,000. "One of the hardest things about selling furniture is you can't really sell it from pictures, because you can't see the joinery or the finish. You can't touch it or sit in it or smell it or turn it over." Chapman displays his work at furniture exhibitions and finds that his former careers come in handy. "I was lucky to have the marketing and people skills from previous business experience."

The sacrifices he has made - moving from Sydney, having less disposable income - have been well worth it. "The satisfaction of making the furniture and delivering it to someone and getting the cheque for that work is tenfold the satisfaction I would receive from signing up another advertising deal and making money that way."

Robert Chapman Contemporary Furniture Designer and Maker, 4271 1599, www.contemporaryfurniture.com.au; his next Sydney show is at Designex, April 22-24, Sydney Exhibition and Convention Centre, Darling Harbour.