

Wendy Neale: Maker

By Tara Robertson

When I walked into Wendy Neale's flat I felt like a crow: excited by all the shiny things. I kept pointing to pieces of furniture and other objects asking "did you make this too?" she kept nodding and smiling. Wendy is one of few women who are professional furniture makers in New Zealand. She is a maker: an artist and crafter with woodworking, metalworking, upholstery, sewing, embroidering, crocheting, knitting, and printing in her arsenal.



She is a paradox; a designer who thinks there's too much stuff in the world, and a professional furniture maker who has decided that she will no longer sell her pieces. She has a wicked sense of humour, punctuating our conversation with her trademark "I knooooow". She is a curious explorer who likes to incorporate secret drawers or hidden features in her work. Here's our conversation.

How long have you been making furniture? I've been making furniture professionally for about 13 or 14 years. I started formally training in woodwork and jewellery making in 1996, however, I've been making furniture for a lot longer. About 15 years ago, my mum asked me to clean out a storage space with stuff from when I was a kid. I found my dolls, and all the balsa wood furniture that I had made for them.

How long have you been doing craft? I was surrounded by people who were making things all the time, so I would say that I've always been a maker. My dad had a shed, and as kids we were all encouraged to make things. We all had our own tools. All the women in my family sew, crochet, and knit. Every one of them would say they didn't have a creative bone in their body, but they all created all the time. I didn't have to buy clothes when I was a kid; they were all made.

When my niece was 5 years old she came to Waiheke. At that time I was building our house. I got her a little hammer and she helped nail in some of the nails. Ever since she has said, "when I grow up I want to be a maker like Wendy."

"I decorated the underside of the school table with wallpaper, added a peephole, and a little cupboard where you can put your raisins and sniffers."



What are some characteristics of your designs?

I'm interested in surface, texture, colour, and junctions, or how one component of furniture meets another. Whether it's the colour within timber, or a piece of fabric, red and green seem to be really important to me. An example of a junction is how the chair legs go into the base of a chair. I put a lot of work into that area, so why would I hide it? Instead I choose to highlight this area, and will probably use buttons on the upholstery to echo the design and craft of the base.

I'm particularly interested in surprises and the mystery of pieces of furniture. I love the discovery, adventure and exploration, for example, when you open drawers, or discover secret drawers, or view a design detail on the underside of a piece. For example, a plain school table reminded me of the earthquake

drills that we did in school. Every year we practised getting under our desks. So I decorated the underside of the school table with wallpaper, added a peephole, and a little cupboard where you can put your raisins and sniffers. While you're under there you have supplies and a viewing portal into the world.

How do craft, design and art relate to each other? We often elevate the notion of design. Everything is designed. People talk about an architecturally designed house. Versus what? A house designed by an architect?

I see it as a class or gender hierarchy. Craft is made by women or working class people. Design is made by creative, white collar men.

Fine art and craft are related because they both create one-offs. Every object is individual and

separate. Often design is about creating something that can be reproduced. Spatial design or architecture often sits aside; often an interior or a building is a one-off.

I call this in some ways design, because I'm creating prototypes; it would be nice if I could start replicating these and keep the story. For my Masters project I've got two drawers, a table and three chairs. I see the process of replication as design, though each object is crafted and has some sort of fine arts conceptual background to it.

Tell me more about your Masters project! I'm doing the Master of Design in the Spatial Design Department at Massey University. This is where my ideas of furniture seemed to fit the best. I will be finishing in February 2010.

I'm taking pieces of obsolete furniture and making minimal interventions. Obsolete furniture is stuff that people don't need anymore and is often just thrown away. Often there's nothing wrong with these pieces, they aren't broken, it's just someone's change of headspace or style. I see these things lying around, grab them, breathe some new life into them, and put them back into the world.

This design process is different from the standard design process. You normally start with sketches, do some quick model making, and perhaps make a full scale mock-up of a component, or the whole thing. But because I had the objects in front of me, it seemed too disconnected to go back and draw the object. I needed to work directly with the object, and treat the object as not only a sketch, or a prototype or maquette, but as the object itself. It's a very direct way of working.

I enjoy working with my hands as I find that what you experience physically allows you to develop things quite intuitively. It's been a nice change to move from a formal process to a more intuitive and haptic process. It's been an incredible way to learn, by making—not just thinking or reading. It's an integrated process that is both academically rigorous and hands on and sensual.

As an object maker, I really enjoy making and creating things, as well as working things with my hands. Though I've come to a point where I think there's enough stuff in the world. That there is a constant proliferation of stuff and objects. We're always being sold stuff. This is one of the reasons why I've chosen to work with obsolete furniture.

Tell me about some of the pieces you've made from obsolete furniture.

DRAWER-SHRINE

This was made from a drawer that was burnt in a house fire in Waiheke. Once every year or two, everyone puts out the stuff that they don't want anymore, and you can take things that you want from other people's rubbish piles. This drawer was all that was left from a 1930s art deco style dressing table, one of those with the two top tiny drawers and a mirror.

I remember my great aunty sitting at a similar dressing table. She would spend time with herself brushing her hair and doing her makeup. I also remember my mum putting on her fake eyelashes, teasing up her hair, putting on her 1970s outfits. It was a place where women spent some time with themselves, looking after themselves. Instead of keeping it as a drawer, where it would be contained. I decided to gold leaf the inside to tie it to the specialness and raise it up on the wall on long legs. It's almost like a shrine.

The dressing table invokes a sense of nostalgia. Nostalgia is often seen as something in a negative light, something that hasn't moved with the times, or a syrupy sweet emotion. Nostalgia can be wistful, a connection with memories, a connection with the past, which informs our future. Nostalgia is a really positive and affirming connecting emotion.

The legs are old Matai timber floorboards that were given to me from a friend who moved to Ireland. I get a lot of materials from people at work and from friends. People often say "I've got these headboards, you might be interested in them", and they are often right.

LECTERN PODIUM

I decided not to include this piece in the Masters but I still like it. It is made of four years of students' workshop leftovers, so any number of students who have graduated in the last several years could see their timber. I took scrap from the student lab and made a series of tiny boxes. It has a copper sheet that has aged nicely, with a computer and speakers. You can move it around.

BLACK VINYL CASTOR CHAIRS

I'm reworking three black vinyl swivel chairs. When I found the chairs they were ripped. Instead



of mending the rips, or reupholstering them, I decided to incorporate the rips into the design. One has corset style lacing with bright coloured fabric peeking out. Another one has a zipper. I haven't decided what the third one will be yet. The fabric that peeks out was from a Trelise Cooper bag of workroom scraps. When I lived on Waiheke, I knew a woman who was her cousin and she offered me these fabric scraps.

CURRENT PIECE

The piece I'm finishing off right now is made from an obsolete chair, wooden legs, and one of my old coats. I started experimenting by using clothes pegs to see where the fabric worked best, and have moved to something more permanent, using the red buttons from the original upholstery as an accent on the fabric and as a way to pick up the design in the base. Whatever I'm working on at the moment is my favourite piece.

Can you explain why you don't sell your pieces?
I can't be selling pieces made from obsolete furniture. When I find the original piece and play with it, I get enjoyment out of that. I have a job, so I don't have to make money from selling this furniture. Perhaps someone's going to get enjoyment out of the piece, and maybe they decide



to give me something as a gift. I'm working outside of that dominant consumer system that's concerned with profit and loss. Normally as a designer, because you design something, it then has value. I find these objects for free, and then I put some value into it. The next step would normally be to put it in a gallery or a designer shop and command an exorbitant price for it. This does not interest me.

I'm so interested in the stories of the objects. First I find the piece of obsolete furniture. Then I decide what the story of the piece was and I develop it by making little interventions and changing it in small ways. The next part of the story is the new caretaker, or owner, and how they came to have the piece, and the story of our interaction and their connection to the piece.

Many people have called the cycling of an object, "upcycling". I don't use that word. I'd rather keep it in Karl Marx's interstices. Nicolas Bourriaud talks about how our social spaces have become mechanised. For example, instead of going into the bank, we use an ATM to get money. We lose the opportunity to have little interactions and squabbles with other people. These enrich our social interactions and help us develop our sense of where we are in the world. I wanted to retain that in the

process of negotiation, swapping and gifting. It's another way of stepping out of the dominant paradigm of "this needs to be paid for with money".

Can you share your thoughts on sustainability?
The way sustainability is projected is more of a marketing concern than a reality. Often I see things that are advertised as "sustainable". Maybe the plywood is grown sustainably, but the way that the material is used is wasteful. In Europe the company who produces the object is responsible for the rubbish. But here we have that attitude that if we put some recycling out we've done our bit. The word "sustainable" is used a lot, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything. William McDonough's book, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, talks about sustainability in a far different way than people think about it now. Electric cars are not more environmentally friendly, it still takes 80 barrels of petrol to make the car, even though they don't use much petrol. We need to consider that a lot more thoroughly.

Tara Robertson is a crafty, queer, geeky librarian who likes to ride her bike. She recently moved to Wellington from Vancouver, Canada. Tara is passionate about open source software, social justice, and finding the perfect shade of red lipstick. She has a big mouth, a big butt, and a big heart.