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# Designing a New Role

By JULIE LASKY

PRODUCT design can be a thankless job. Many designers don't get to claim authorship of their work, and much of what they make, from sleds to spatulas, is assumed to be conceived on the factory floor without a jot of human intervention.

So it may encourage designers to know that [Brad Pitt](#) not only respects what they do but takes pains to be one of them.

Four Academy Award nominations? Bah! Twice named People magazine's Sexiest Man Alive? Phooey! Mr. Pitt has spent a good deal of his off-screen time establishing his credibility in architecture and the applied arts. He designed the wedding bands for his marriage to Jennifer Aniston (and sued the jeweler for copying and distributing them). He was spotted at the 2008 Design Miami show buying artfully lumpy bronze chairs by the British designer Max Lamb. He apprenticed with the architect Frank Gehry. And, most impressively, his Make It Right foundation brought serious money and talent to the project of rebuilding New Orleans after [Hurricane Katrina](#).

If all the world's a stage, Mr. Pitt appears to have a special feeling for its sets and props. Now he has escalated his involvement by designing furniture.

Collaborating with the luxury furniture maker Frank Pollaro in Union, N.J., Mr. Pitt has sketched and overseen the production of about a dozen limited-edition pieces. The group, Mr. Pollaro said, includes a bed, club chairs, dining tables, side tables, a bar stool and bathtub, and will be presented along with items created exclusively by [Pollaro Custom Furniture](#) at a gallery show in New York next week.

Mr. Pollaro met Mr. Pitt in 2008, when he was asked to build an Art Deco-style desk based on an Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann design as a birthday gift for Angelina Jolie. While installing the desk at the Pitt-Jolie residence in France, he saw a sketchbook filled with drawings the actor had made of furniture over a decade. Mr. Pollaro offered to produce some of the items.

"This is not a licensing situation," Mr. Pollaro said about the partnership. "This is not Pollaro pays Pitt for his name. This is Brad Pitt controlling every single line. I gave him assistance with engineering and materials selection, but the reality is, the man is a great designer." (Mr. Pitt was not available for comment.)

How great was a question we submitted to four experts: Murray Moss, founder of the design consultancy and gallery Moss Bureau and a former actor; Sheila Bridges, the New York-based interior designer who kitted out Bill Clinton's Harlem office; Kurt Andersen, the novelist, public radio host and former architecture and design critic of Time magazine; and Giulio Cappellini, artistic director of the Italian furniture company Cappellini, and a noted booster of emerging design talent.

The group reviewed the designs and returned their comments by e-mail. On the whole, they avoided the lure of snark and made thoughtful and surprisingly supportive observations. This was all the more impressive considering that Mr. Pollaro released only a few computerized renderings of the collection, all of which left something to the imagination: It was not clear, for instance, that the bathtub was produced in a high-quality white Italian marble, or what the price would be. "At this point, we haven't even set the prices," Mr. Pollaro said.

### **FIRST WORD THAT COMES TO MIND?**

**Murray Moss:** "Stifled." Designing, like acting, requires that one take an action. One enters on stage with a clear purpose. Brad Pitt is a great actor; he knows that he needs to speak through his work in his own voice, and he can do that fiercely better than anyone. These pieces are too nice; I do not hear Mr. Pitt's voice unleashed with full authority.

**Sheila Bridges:** "Modern." The furniture looks as though it is very well made and seems consistent with the exceptional quality and workmanship Frank Pollaro has built his reputation on.

**Kurt Andersen:** "Swanky." Which is the word I've used for many years to describe expensive, curvy, shiny modern things meant to look stylish.

**Giulio Cappellini:** "Timeless." It's hard to give a timing for these products that may have been designed several decades ago or today. The articles, however, are elegant.

### **DO YOU FIND ANY ASPECT OF THIS COLLECTION SURPRISING?**

**Ms. Bridges:** I'm always a bit wary when supermodels and bona fide Hollywood celebrities become furniture designers. I'm not sure what I expected, but I must admit I was pleasantly surprised. Because of Frank Pollaro's expertise with rare woods, I guess I expected to see a collection that felt heavier. It is refreshing to see him veer from the materials he's most accustomed to working with.

**Mr. Andersen:** The shiny metal surprised me specifically; the mod Trumpian swankiness, in general. Heretofore, Mr. Pitt's design sensibility — as embodied by Frank Gehry and other

designers of the Make It Right houses in New Orleans — has seemed very different than that. Also, I was surprised to discover that the bathtub was a bathtub; I thought it was an ashtray.

**Mr. Cappellini:** The work looks very strongly influenced by the Bauhaus and Art Deco, which may seem contradictory. In one case, the style is sinuous and rounded; in the other, the forms are rigid and square. This, however, is part of freedom of the designer, which does not surprise me in a negative way.

**Mr. Moss:** These pieces address “line”: they are formal studies of movement and growth; they are projectiles generated by nature and/or mathematics. They surprise me, coming from a person whose work I know to be so famously “reactive” and seemingly less conscious about formal aesthetics.

### **WOULD YOU RECOMMEND ANY OF THIS WORK TO A CLIENT?**

**Ms. Bridges:** My favorite piece, by far, is the dining table. This piece in particular seems a bit reminiscent of the Eameses’ iconic laminate tables with wire-rod bases. Pitt’s bases are less rectilinear, more fluid and luxurious, so there seems to be a nod to both Art Nouveau and Art Deco in his collection. It would be great if the dining table base came in a variety of finishes to choose from (which I assume it does). I don’t specify a lot of glass and metal tables (most of my clients prefer wood), but I would specify this dining table (depending on the price) and pair it with antique wood side chairs or ones that are more classic, like a set of upholstered Brno chairs by Mies van der Rohe.

### **WOULD YOU WANT ANY OF THESE PIECES IN YOUR HOME?**

**Mr. Andersen:** *Possibly* the oval table — in the guest room of a second home, if I owned a second home.

### **IF BRAD PITT ASKED YOU TO CONSULT ON HIS NEXT COLLECTION, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER?**

**Mr. Moss:** I would say, “Mr. Pitt, you are a great actor. Stay that person, with all of his confidence and drive and risk-taking, when designing. These first pieces are audition monologues; you already have the part. If you’re going to draw a line in space, do it as Brad Pitt.”

### **SHOULD THE DESIGN INDUSTRIES BE ENCOURAGED BY MR. PITT’S INTEREST? MORE TO THE POINT, SHOULD HE BE ENCOURAGED?**

**Mr. Cappellini:** Surely, it is very positive that Mr. Pitt supports and promotes design. I recently saw one of his houses published in a magazine and I found it very nice, with the

presence of some iconic products that have made the history of design. I think his passion for design should absolutely be encouraged, not so much because of his famous name but because of his attitude.

**Mr. Andersen:** I think his design enthusiasms are wonderful, and I'm a big believer in the amateur spirit. Enthusiasm, however, is necessary but not sufficient for making great design. I think he should be emphatically encouraged to continue his activities as a design activist, collector, impresario and client.

**Mr. Moss:** Konstantin Stanislavsky, the great innovator in the teaching of acting, understood and conceded that "every person who is really an artist desires to create inside of himself another, deeper, more interesting life than the one that actually surrounds him." How can we not encourage this?

**Ms. Bridges:** I'm not convinced after seeing three table designs (and a bathtub that reminds me of an ashtray) that Brad Pitt should quit his day job to be in the furniture or product design game. Unless that means I can be an actor for a day and get paid \$7 million to star in a Chanel No. 5 perfume ad.

Responding to the comments, Mr. Pollaro reiterated his admiration for Mr. Pitt. "Having worked side by side with Brad for hundreds of hours on the Pitt-Pollaro collection," he wrote in an e-mail, "I am impressed by his commitment to express his own artistic vision." He also clarified that "the metal pieces will be available in gold, silver, nickel, titanium and patinated bronze, all in both polished and satin finishes." The one-off pieces can be seen Nov. 13 to 15 at a show in Chelsea. Information: (908) 206-1888 or [pollaro.com](http://pollaro.com).