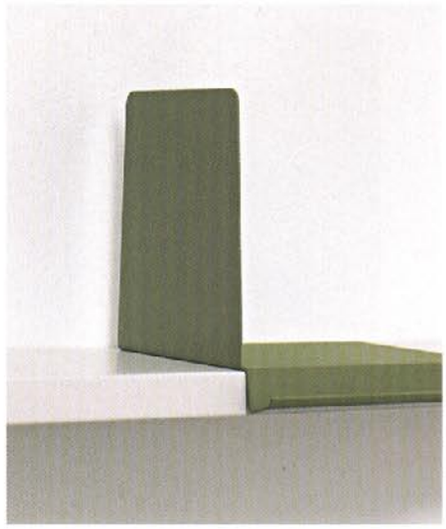
TAKING THE CHAIR
This picture, from front, Degenhardt's redesign of the 1953 'Hirche' chair, which he adapted for use outdoors with waterproof fabric; the 'Unit' side table with its lacquered and veneered surfaces; and the new 'Cup' sofa

Below, a simple folded steel bookend

BOTTOM LINES

German designer Eric Degenhardt sees his furniture as sculpture – it needs to look good from behind



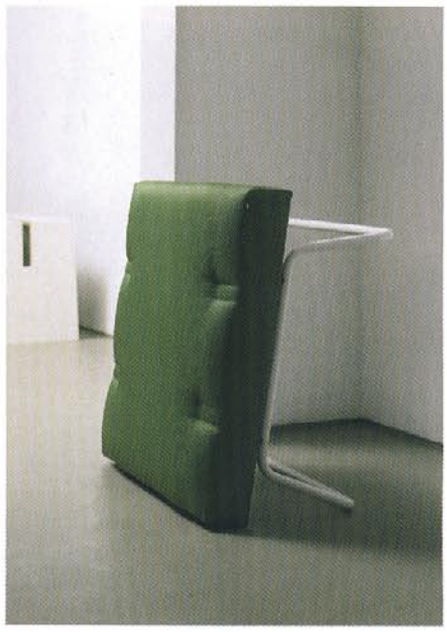
The work of Köln-based Eric Degenhardt follows a fine tradition in sensible German *Sachlichkeit* (practicality) that we have always admired: keeping the functional firmly in the foreground, but, in his case, with a delicious contemporary twist. We have been keeping an eye on the designer for some time. At the Salone del Mobile in Milan earlier this year, he really hit his stride, designing the entire show stand for the independent German manufacturer Richard Lampert, as well as presenting his new 'Cup' armchair and sofa, plus an inspired update of the 'Hirche' lounge chair, originally designed in 1953 by Bauhaus member Herbert Hirche. With such brilliance flying out of his studio, we decided it was time we paid Degenhardt a visit.

Like many furniture and industrial designers, Degenhardt initially studied architecture before switching over to design. After graduating from Rhenish-Westphalian Technical University in »

ERIC THE STRIKING
This picture, Degenhardt sitting on his new 'Cup' chair, designed to impress from all angles

Right, the footrest to go with his redesigned 'Hirche' chair

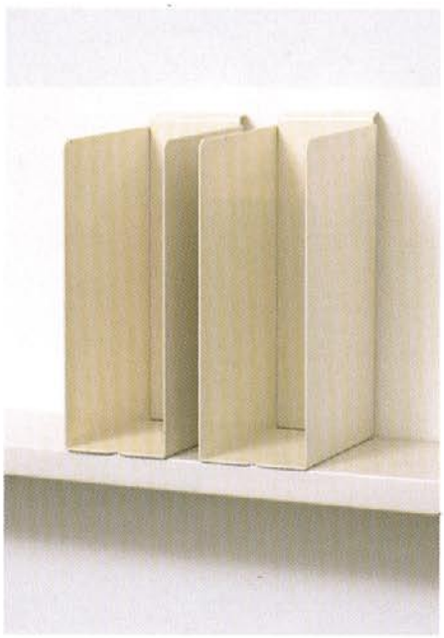
Below, bookends from a collection designed for Richard Lampert



Aachen, he worked for two years in various small architectural practices before setting up his own design studio in 2000. For Degenhardt, the transition from one discipline to the other was completely logical: 'Architecture and space are just a kind of skin – the final definition of space comes with the furniture and the people who use it.' He sees his work as being at the interface between a building and its contents, creating a 'kind of dialogue between skin and interior'.

Degenhardt's collaboration with Stuttgart-based Lampert goes back some time. They met during Lampert's debut exhibition in the Köln Passagen in 1994, but it wasn't until 2001 that Degenhardt started designing fair stands for him; in 2003, his first piece of furniture with the company, a practical, functional side table called 'Unit', went on the market. Compared to his work with other firms, says Degenhardt, 'the collaboration with Lampert is unusual. We talk a lot in advance and then Richard just lets me work. He gives me lots of freedom.'

Lampert, too, emphasises the importance of collaboration in their relationship: 'The chemistry has to work. Put more than simply, "I give you money, you give me product".' And the chemistry between them is clearly working; Degenhardt's 'Cup' chair and sofa for Lampert have a wonderful lightness about them. Formal yet sculptural, they look just as lovely from behind as from the front. 'For me, it is very important that my pieces can be positioned in the centre of the room. That means that they cannot have a "backside",' explains Degenhardt.



Degenhardt's redesign of the 'Hirche' chair was trickier. 'I was not sure about changing the details of somebody else's design,' he says. He solved the problem rather cleverly – by changing the context of the object without compromising the beauty of the original. Herbert Hirche (who studied under Mies van der Rohe) originally designed the chair for his own sitting room. 'He offered it to Knoll,' says Lampert, 'but they didn't want it, so it never went into production.' Degenhardt turned the rather low-slung armchair from a sitting-room object into a garden object – using a waterproof fabric, for instance, and lacquered steel tubing to make it suitable for use outdoors. He made tiny interventions in the design, which suddenly made the chair contemporary instead of vintage.

Along with his work for Lampert, Degenhardt has also designed spaces, furniture and packaging for a number of international clients, including Paola Lenti and Boffi. This year alone, he and his team are preparing two big shows for the automotive industry in Wolfsburg, as well as products with furniture companies COR and Wilkhahn. He has more pieces in the pipeline for Lampert and hopes, in the future, to branch out into other areas, particularly on a smaller scale: 'I really would like to design a pen and some electrical devices,' Degenhardt confesses; how very German, how very *sachlich*. We look forward to it. ✱

Studio Eric Degenhardt Industrial Design, Krieler Strasse 56, Köln, tel: 49.221 84 67 810, www.eric-degenhardt.com