

Datebook



Matthew Millman / SFMOMA

Judd's deep-seated meaning

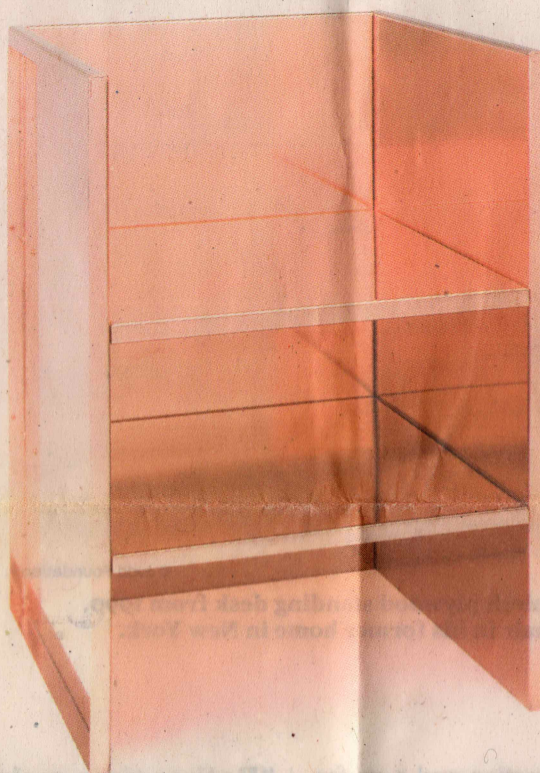
SFMOMA highlights artist's disdain for mass-market constraints

By Charles Desmarais

Anyone who wants to understand furniture design as social theory, rather than as simple accommodation to the slouching postures and conventional minds of most people who sit, should see the exhibition "Donald Judd: Specific Furniture," on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Nov. 4.

There's a good selection of 31 Judd chairs, shelves, daybeds and the like, and an additional 30 or so framed drawings on two long walls that describe concepts for other pieces. All of them look closer to shipping containers for boxed hardware than perches for soft-edged humans.

Eight pieces outside the exhibition proper, newly made, are provided for visitors to sample. You will have guessed, even before trying them out, that they are not nearly as comfortable as a hardwood church pew, or an economy airline seat positioned for



Katherine Du Tiel / SFMOMA

Donald Judd's "Armchair," above, is on display along with other pieces of the sculptor's work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, top.

"Donald Judd: Specific Furniture": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Through Nov. 4. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

takeoff — if the seat were upholstered in sheet metal.

Despite — OK, because of — that obdurate perversion, I have wished for years I could afford an example. The show is required viewing for design devotees and anyone who believes our built environment is worth thinking about deeply.

To get why that's so, you may want also to read Judd's 1993 essay, "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp." It is posted on the SFMOMA website at <http://bit.ly/JuddEssay>.

Judd (1928-1994) was an influential artist of the late 20th century who first came to public notice as a critic. He was best known for what he called his "specific objects" (he felt that he

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Furniture as social, political metaphor

Judd from page E1

had gone beyond sculpture, as had others). These were variations in plywood, metal or concrete on strict geometric themes, industrially manufactured and precisely situated.

As Judd tells it, someone thought a maker of such objects might also make a nice coffee table and asked the artist, at the height of his early career, to design one. "I thought that a work of mine which was essentially a rectangular volume with the upper surface recessed could be altered," he wrote. However, "This debased the work and produced a bad table, which I later threw away."

Judd's essay methodically considers why that might be. The furniture objects on view at SFMOMA, like the sculptural works that made him famous, explain the thinking, rather than the other way around.

"If a chair or a building is not functional," he reasoned, "if it appears to be only art, it is ridiculous. ... The art in art is partly the assertion of someone's interest regardless of other considerations. A work of art exists as itself; a chair exists as a chair itself."

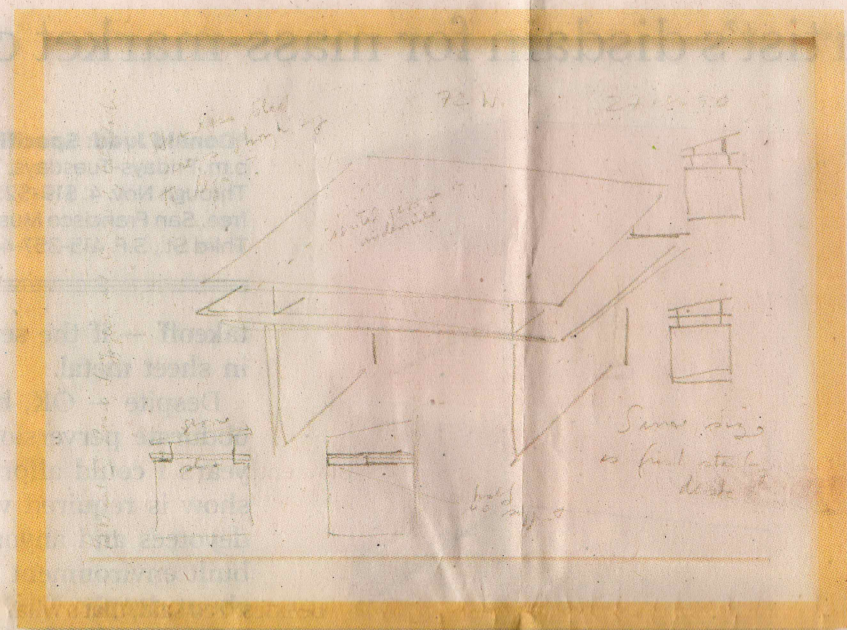
This idea, that "art cannot be imposed upon" utilitarian objects, is what lies behind the rigor of Judd's approach to furniture. It became something of a dead end for him. Judd collected classics of modern design by Alvar Aalto, Gerrit Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe and others, some examples of which are on view, so he surely saw that it was possible to be innovative without being inflexible.

Aalto's "Chair 21" (1932-33) was made of birch plywood, molded to human form and mounted on a springy cantilever base. Rietveld went both ways, yet the inclined seat and back of his "Crate Chair" (1934) are an invitation to lounge. And the "MR 20" (1927) by Mies was designed in tubular steel and wicker to bounce a bit, and give where most bodies need



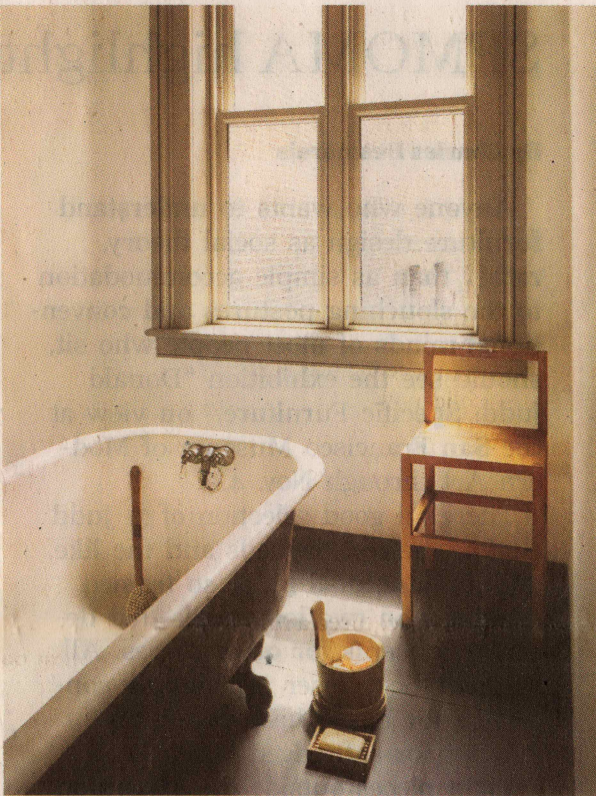
Franziska & Bruno Mancina / © FBM Studio 1990

Donald Judd (1928-94), shown with some of his pieces in 1990, sought to challenge societal notions with his furniture.



© Judd Foundation

Above: A Judd drawing of a birch plywood standing desk from 1990. Right: A room with a Judd chair in his former home in New York.



Matthew Millman / © Judd Foundation

cushioning.

Judd was more demanding. He wrote, "Rather than making a chair to sleep in ... it is better to make a bed. A straight chair is best for eating or writing."

As for other options? "The third position is standing," he declared.

But if he was boxed in by an obsession with

proportion and a preference for the rectilinear, he railed against a different tyranny: the constraints of the mass market. "The purpose of big business is to maintain its oligarchy," he pointed out, and the pursuit of that motive stifles creativity. He was, accordingly, an early proponent of localism.

"Why should Texas import cars and trucks from Michigan? The oligarchy of monopolies of distribution prevents innovation, invents only restrictions, and raises

"Rather than making a chair to sleep in ... it is better to make a bed. A straight chair is best for eating or writing. The third position is standing."

Donald Judd, 1993

blank walls. The flat and boring society is a maze of blank walls just above eye level. This prevents new and real inventions, so obviously there is no chance for only a new chair or a little book."

Individualistic to the core, he resisted sugges-

tions by those who found his design products physically restrictive. The justification was, to him, self-evident: "The furniture is comfortable to me."

If, however, all we could say about Judd's furniture was that it is idiosyncratic, we might find it distinctive but not profound. The value of this line of his thinking is, in the end, its significance as social and political analysis.

He bemoaned the ubiquity of "traditional" furniture, Victorian furniture in virtually all stores. "This is what most people have to choose from, whether in Yellowknife or New York. As in politics, this furniture is not traditional and conservative but is an imitation of past furniture. The appearance of the past represents status by invoking a higher class in the past than the purchaser is in the present."

Yet he hated equally the blandness of copycat modern design. He wrote, "The imitation old furniture symbolizes up and the imitation modern symbolizes forward."

Nor did he spare the institutions that promoted such mediocrity. "Usually the first is in

the home and the second is in the office, sometimes one or the other in both," he said. "The bizarre and complicated 'modern' office of the rich executive, who has photographs on his desk of his wife and children in their traditional setting, is a summation of the surrounding corporate headquarters. Since he or his wife is on the board of the museum, it must look progressive, like the headquarters, but with a touch of tradition ... for upward mobility to the past, for something better than business, such as learning."

Judd's essay makes it clear that furniture is metaphor, and only secondarily for sitting. For that, a rock suited our ancestors for thousands of years. Our hypothetical museum trustee "may be on the town council, or he builds shopping centers, or he builds apartment houses, giving the people what they want, to go with the furniture in which they had no choice. Upward and forward, and lower every year, not only in architecture and art, but economically and politically."

"Anyway," he asks dolefully, "what kind of a society is it when you can't even buy a chair?"

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

FEARFACTOR MASK
LISTENHERE EDNA
ATTENDANCE TIMEN
THU CSI VARIES
SEDGE CREDENZA
OREL MPAA ESSSES
DONATIONBOX
ARTDECO BREWPUB
MADEINCHINA
USMAP LITE INDC
PHILLIES SPARK
MADMEN POP FIB
OKGO ASTEPABOVE
STEN WOODEDAREA
TIED ENTICEMENT

Sudoku Puzzle

6	7	3	8	2	5	4	1	9
2	9	1	3	6	4	8	5	7
4	5	8	7	9	1	2	3	6
8	1	4	9	3	6	7	2	5
5	2	7	4	1	8	6	9	3
9	3	6	5	7	2	1	4	8
1	4	5	6	8	3	9	7	2
7	6	2	1	5	9	3	8	4
3	8	9	2	4	7	5	6	1

New York Times Crossword

WOOLZY SEALABS MAJOR
INNIE CANCELLED ALAMO
ELENA ADVANTAGE ROGET
LONGRALLY HARDCOURT
DAILY ACE LBO FATE
SNL RUM IMAMS YSL RAD
BASE CAREW WJIC
FALLAFEL ADORE IDEATES
ELECTRA REUSE NOWEAT
LEAK THEUSOPEN ECTO
LUSH BEE SEN XES SHUN
ATTA URLS TERP ESPY
NOR PHI DOM ART
TODAY LON UMP MIMIC
SHUSH FEET NOLA MANIA
ARTHUR ASHE GRANDSTAND
MIRO ENSOR ARROW CREE
AVATAR RETRO ASHARP
REG QUEENSNEWYORK BAT
ROE UNDO TUE ALFA IMA
AND ASSN STS ZEST CAT

Challenger

9	9	9	2	11
1	2	1	1	5
6	7	9	8	30
1	1	2	1	5
17	19	21	12	21

Chess

1. Qxf5! does it. If ... Bxc4, 2. Qc8ch followed by Qxc4 [Baklan-Shabalov '09].

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