

Matteo Thun

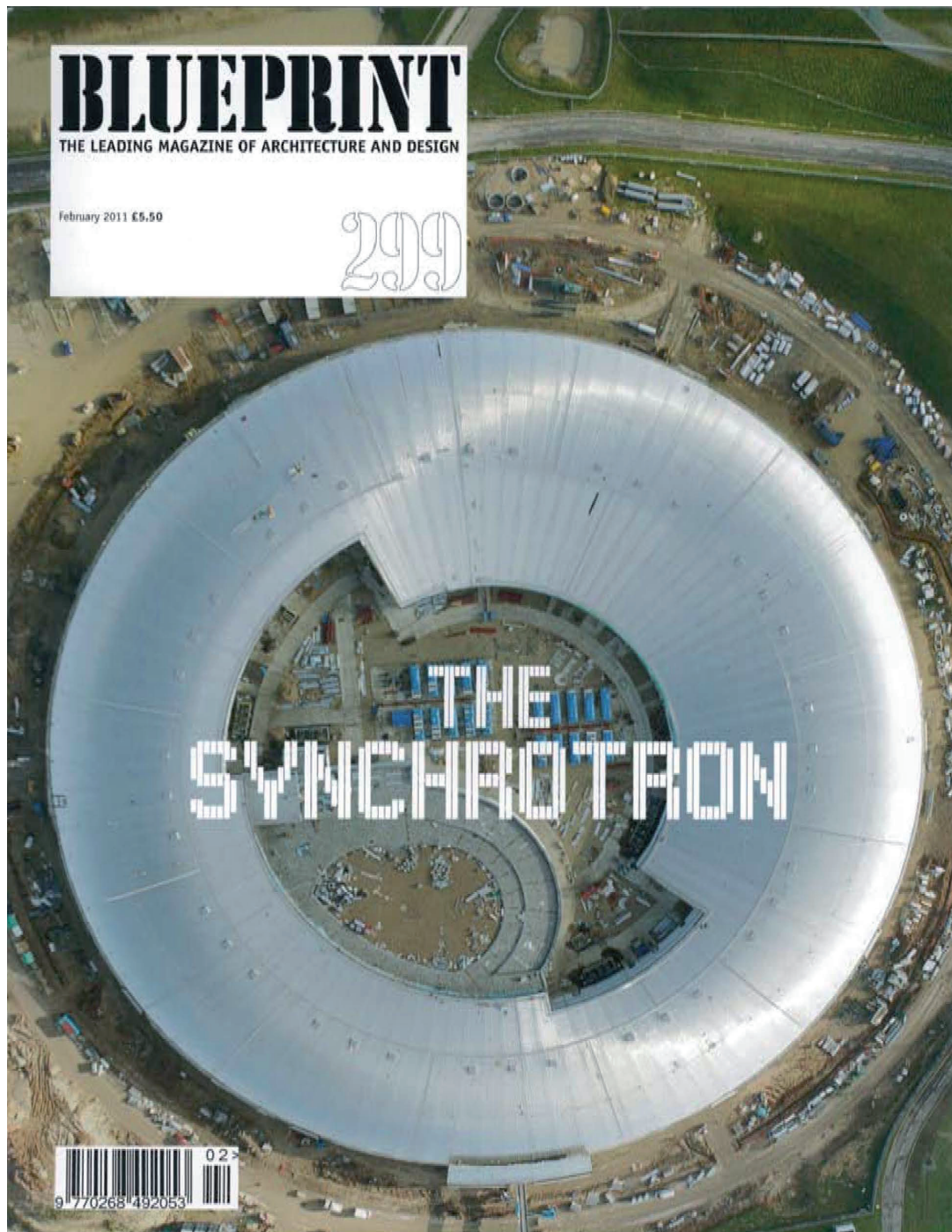
Publication

Publication
Blueprint (UK)

Language
English

Issue
January 2011

Product / Project
LA CUCINA



Matteo Thun
& Partners

Via Appiani 9
20121 Milano

Tel. +39 02 655 69 11
Facsimile +39 02 657 06 46

www.matteothun.com
mail@matteothun.com

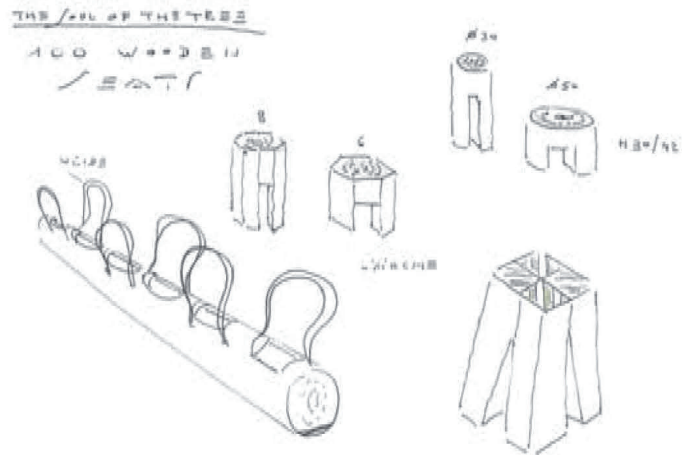
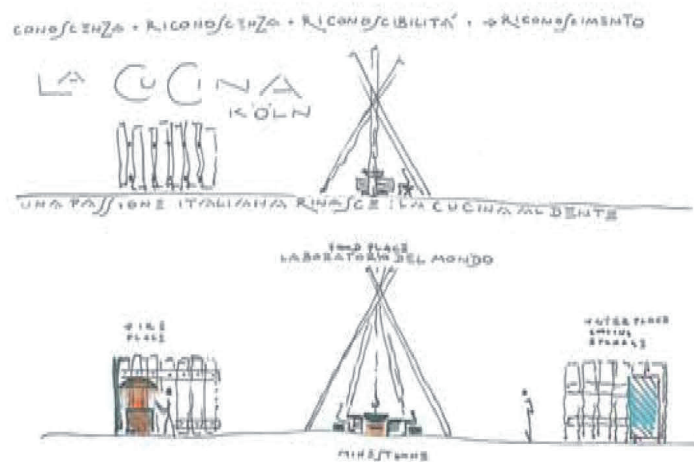
IN AN AGE OF DIGITALISATION, TIMBER STILL MANAGES TO MEDIATE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY. NATRE WANNATHEPSAKUL MEETS THE ARCHITECT MATTEO THUN TO DISCUSS HIS WOODEN COLLABORATION WITH RIVA 1920

MATTEO THUN RIVA 1920

The digitalisation of design has resulted in an increasingly exciting and original formal design language that can be applied at an ever larger scale. For a time, the resulting visual renderings had seemed removed from the structural reality of more traditional materials such as timber and masonry. But improvements in the technology of engineered timber have made possible curvaceous gridshell structures, and continue to expand the material's scope in the breadth of span and in height. Where architecture goes, design will often follow, and a revival of interest in timber can also be seen in the smaller scale of furniture production. A highlight of the 2010 London Design Festival was British bespoke furniture manufacturer Benchmark's temporary workshop set up on the first floor of the Tramshed in Rivington Street. It demonstrated a growing fascination with craft and its combination with large-scale production.

On the level of design education, timber is an ideal material for students to work with. At the Architectural Association, Martin Self is directing a postgraduate programme called Design and Make at Hooke Park, the school's campus in rural Dorset. Each year the students design and build an additional facility building for the campus, complementing the existing timber structures by Frei Otto and Edward Cullinan. Though working with wood is not the programme's main agenda, Self professes that wood 'lends itself to being worked by hand and is a good material to engage with.' Even experimental practices not renowned for working with traditional materials are expressing an interest in timber. Alvin Huang, a director at Amanda Levete Architects, concurs with Self's sentiment. There is a 'feedback process between the hand and the material,' he says, and suggests that timber lends itself particularly well to architecture's current preoccupation with establishing a confluence between traditional craft skills and new digital technologies.

One architect who is particularly excited



Top right: Matteo Thun's hand-drawn sketches for La Cucina installation

Bottom right: Thun's bench and stool designs emphasise the wood's natural aesthetic qualities



Top left and right: colourful and plush fabrics, from Italian brand Nani, are set against the unpolished surfaces of the timber panels

about timber is the Italian, Matteo Thun. Currently in the process of designing a 12-storey building for student accommodation in timber, he is confident that wood and glass will be the defining materials of the 21st century. He states explicitly: 'wood is alive, concrete is dead'. For Thun, wood achieves both a technical and aesthetic durability. 'All human beings are not against falling in love with the patina, which tells the history of the wooden surface,' he says.

Thun's fascination with the material will be demonstrated at this year's IMM Cologne in January. La Cucina, or Living Kitchen, is a kitchen installation designed in collaboration with manufacturer of wooden furniture Riva 1920. For La Cucina, Thun has designed various elements: a Kauri and marble worktop for the food-preparation area; stools, benches, a table and open shelves are all made from solid wood. The centrepiece of the kitchen, the 'food' place, is highly exuberant: a tepee structure assembled out of interlocking chestnut poles. The fabrication of most of these pieces began in late November, though some - for example the 2009 Woody stools - were already in production. Fabricated from a single trunk section of cedar trees, the stools are pared down to a 35cm diameter cylinder and then a cross is cut into it to create the four legs. Another is the Light table, also 2009, in which the tabletop tapers out towards the edges, just the legs become thinner as they reach the ground, creating the appearance of a slim profile even though the piece is very sturdy. Light is in production with a range of wood types but will be shown in Cologne in American red oak - it is the first time that Riva has used this material in its furniture.

The red oak used for the Cucina installation is salvaged from another collaboration between Riva and Matteo Thun: the Wooden Beacons installation, constructed in-situ by Riva and exhibited during the Milan Furniture Fair in April 2010. The hardness and roughness of the unfinished wooden planks, placed upright in

Left: the Wooden Beacon installation designed by Matteo Thun, in collaboration with Riva, used red oak planks supplied by the American Hardwood Export Council



various formations, enclosed and contrasted with the delicate jewellery and fabrics that constitute the raw materials from Marni, a high-end Italian fashion house. Thun claims that 'the beacons were not supposed to be a nice object. It was a statement. So it's not about the beauty of the surface, it's about the beauty of the thought.'

Re-use has been a recurring theme in Riva's collaboration with artists and designers. During the same Milan Furniture Fair, the exhibition Tra le Briccole di Venezia was shown at the Triennale Museum, organised by Riva to coincide with the celebration of its 90th anniversary. Venetian mooring posts are driven into the lagoon's water and stay there for between five and ten years before they are replaced. In the past they have been re-used for flooring; the Briccole project is the first time that they have been transformed into furniture and sculptural pieces. Riva commissioned 29 prominent designers, including

Renzo Piano, David Chipperfield and Antonio Citterio. The outcomes range from Brancusi-inspired, hourglass-shaped stools and small tables by Mario Botta to abstract totem poles by Marc Sadler. Matteo Thun designed a hardwood table, which consists of two long sections of the lagoon wood acting as the tabletop. Underneath it are eight rounded stanting legs evoking the mooring posts in the lagoon. Thun's Briccole table is the sprightly Venetian variation to his Cerelina table – also for Riva – which is much more weighty and sombre. A Cerelina table stands in the designer's own meeting room ('You can have a party on this,' Thun says).

Riva has been collaborating with famous designers since 1995, when the Riva brothers, Maurizio and Davide – the third generation heading the firm founded by their grandfather – decided to expand the company's operations as well as developing a higher profile in the high-end furniture market. The brothers are both

Above: Helidon Khlefa Jutes his sculptural works in stainless steel with briccola – the natural artwork of Venice's lagoon – to create a raw and dynamic table

Below: stools and small tables designed by Mario Botta. The decay wrought by the micro organisms in the lagoon water is accentuated, invoking reflection on the passage of time





carpenters as well as designers, working in Riva's two workshops alongside 76 employees, one of whom is their nephew. The family legacy looks set to continue.

As the name implies, Riva was founded in 1920, a family-run furniture maker based in Cantù, where the company is still based today. The city has always been an important area for furniture production in Italy. It is littered with piles of raw wood and workshops, and now has its own museum of wood. The Museo del Legno – Riva's private museum – opened at the end of 2010. The museum's façade is clad in timber and designed by a local architect.

The ground floor operates as Riva's showroom, while the museum's collection is displayed on the first floor. Riva has an impressive collection of furniture-making tools and machinery drawn from both the company's personal collection and others, dating from as far back as the 1700s. It is quite the modern

shrine to a century's obsession with wood: an eclectic compendium of objects and artefacts ranging from intricate scaled models of Riva's furniture to a shelf lined with small glass jars containing various wood shavings. With this theme, the collection is unique in Italy for its quantity and quality.

Riva's growing penchant for unusual and exclusive raw materials was first manifest in the Kauri range of products. These are made from ancient Kauri trees that have been buried since the last Ice Age in New Zealand peat bogs. They have huge trunks – some as wide as seven metres in diameter – on average, each tree excavated weighs 220 tonnes. Riva is currently the only furniture manufacturer working with Kauri wood and the supply is limited.

Unlike mass-manufactured products, it is not the pristine rendition of a design that attracts, but each piece's uniqueness and natural flaws. There are again tables by designers such as Botta

and Thun. Even Norman Foster has used the wood to panel the interior surfaces of one of his hotel projects in London.

Riva combines contemporary technology with their tradition of high quality craftsmanship. The forms of Terry Dwan's voluptuous chairs are carved from solid blocks by CNC machines before being smoothed by hand-held machines; for very small areas, they are sanded down by hand. The Riva family founded their company on sustainability, long before it became a necessity and its attention to detail is second to none. It uses dovetail joints for most of its cabinetry and has its very own organic finishing oil – a special mixture produced exclusively for the company.

Riva's ethos is durability and showing wood in its natural state. As Matteo Thun enthuses: 'Maybe in ten years, this table from Riva will be even more beautiful. It's like the face of a very old farmer in the mountain, his wrinkles are telling the story of a very fantastic life.'

Above left: the deterioration of the surface of the wood does not affect its structural integrity

Above right: table mats designed by Philippe Starck; the smallest items in the series

Below: Claudio Bellini's composition is a visual representation of the wood's history, as well as a piece of furniture

