the business of making art

is taking your hot product idea to market worth the headaches?

by nigel f. maynard

Bruce Tomb had no clear plans in 1984 when he hand-cast a basin for a gallery exhibition in Santa Clara, Calif. As an art piece, Sacred Basin was successful, but "it wasn't done with the intent to become a product," the San Francisco-based designer says. Perhaps, but it became just that soon thereafter, when Tomb was serving as project designer on the now-closed Clodagh Ross Williams store in New York City.

"I had a couple of castings that I had done in my attempt to make the first sink," Tomb explains. "They were rather crude, and by most people's standards they would be considered unacceptable." But once installed in the store, the basin was a hit, generating numerous requests from customers. Eventually, as orders trickled in, he decided "it made sense to mass produce it."

The move isn't unusual; many well-known industrial design pieces began as singular objets d'art fashioned by architects before blossoming into modern design icons produced by major purveyors. Less common is the architect who assumes control of his product from the design phase all the way through manufacturing. For those who manage to pull it off, the rewards can be creatively fulfilling and financially lucrative, but the process is more arduous than it appears.

infinite possibilities

Tomb's story had a happy ending. In addition to running his eponymous practice, he operates Infinite Fitting, a company that manufactures the sand-cast basins out of white or silicon bronze, brass, and aluminum. Tomb refined the earlier sink, making it more applicable for conventional installation (while keeping the spirit of the original). Although the company works with small local foundries, Infinite does the finishing and machining in its own shop.

Whitney Sander also got into the product biz by accident, when he moved to Los Angeles in 1999 and began designing his own house. "Because I had moved from another city, I didn't have much of a client base here," explains Sander, principal of Sander Architects. "I had all the time in the world, so I designed everything." This included a resin sink that captured the imagination of visitors. As more people asked for one of their own, Sander began producing them in quantity.

"At the time I was doing trade shows for my prefab Hybrid House, exhibiting at events such as CA Boom and Dwell on Design, so we put a sink in the corner [of our booths] and put a bunch of fliers next to it," Sander recalls. "And folks started calling." Sander partnered with a local fabricator for production, but his firm handled fulfillment and shipping. "We were turning out 10 sinks a month at one point," he says, "and at $2,000 a pop, that was nice."

While some architects and designers stumble into a manufacturing opportunity, others, such as Brooklyn, N.Y.-based 4-pli, make it part of their business model. "Furniture, in a way, has been integral to the firm since our first project," says partner Jeffrey Taras. "It was an office space, for which we did the design and made all of..."

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the furniture—24 desks and a conference table." Eventually 4-pli started a sister company, Associated Fabrication, which makes the firm's pieces.

**Industrial strengths**

Compared to a small architecture firm producing sinks and furniture, the operations of established industrial design firms are far more sophisticated. London-based Jake Dyson Ltd. is comprised of a team of product designers and design engineers whose sole task is "coming up with new product ideas that are visually stunning and go where no one has gone before in providing innovative, functional benefits," says principal Jake Dyson, son of the well-known vacuum designer.

Dyson says his approach is to conceive a product and follow it through to the point of manufacture, which is "unusual in a world where product design typically is separate from the development and manufacturing side." Having a "hands-on" approach to the process is essential, he adds.

But not all architects and designers have the time, money, or wherewithal to do this. Fortunately, companies such as Reveal Designs have emerged to fill the void. Founded in 2004 with the goal of licensing products designed by architects, Reveal discovered almost immediately that establishing manufacturing partners is hard. "It was very difficult getting things to move in a timely fashion," says Scott Roskind, principal of the White Plains, N.Y.-based company. "So we started creating things on our own."

Reveal works with such firms as Bohlin Cywinski Jackson and Cutler Anderson Architects to bring their architectural hardware and furniture to market. The beauty of working with Reveal, Roskind says, is that the architects aren't encumbered by the business issues associated with doing so. The process is surprisingly simple. "I've literally had Jim [Cutler, FAIA] step off an airplane and say, 'Hey, I drew something and I'm going to fax it to you,'" Roskind says. "We look at it with our manufacturer partner in the United States, get the sizing [and other details] right, and then we do a prototype." Once approved, the product is manufactured and shipped to the company's network of more than 50 high-end distributors. Each deal is different, but generally architects own the copyrights and patents on their work, and Reveal pays royalties on product sales.

**Double down?**

For those looking to go it alone, be forewarned: bringing a product to market is no easy task. Having the artistic acumen to design what people want is important, but a solid business plan, marketing talent, and lots of money are essential. "There's a lot of behind-the-scenes business that people don't see," Tomb warns. "Manufacturing is a really difficult endeavor. It's very capital-intensive." Taras agrees, adding, "If you don't have the ability to go out to furniture shows and market yourself and also have capital to do all that while you're waiting to get orders, it's going to be hard."

Even the seemingly simple things can be tricky. Sander cites packaging as a prime example. Finding properly sized boxes and fittings so his sinks wouldn't arrive damaged or dysfunctional took a good deal of time to resolve.

Conquering such issues doesn't necessarily guarantee success either. In Sander's case, the sinks simply grew too expensive to produce. The manufacturer who was making them "kept upping his price as he saw they were selling," Sander recalls. "The margins kept getting thinner and thinner, and we just couldn't make [enough] money to justify continuing," so he shuttered the sink business in 2007. "I was born to be an architect, not a product manager," he says. "Making sinks became a drag."

Tomb concedes that operating your own manufacturing arm is difficult and time-consuming, but with those obstacles come certain rewards. "It definitely has created challenges for the firm, and it's taken a considerable investment," he says. But "it also has paid back and [supplemented] our income."

And the long-term value of a limited-production, architect-designed objet in a client's house? Priceless. ra

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4-pli offers furniture pieces, such as the Nesting Desk (above), that are customizable by size. Reveal Designs' hardware—including (from top) the stainless steel BCL Lever 1 by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson and the Bainbridge Lever by Cutler Anderson Architects—comes in a variety of standard and custom metals and wood species.

For a Web-exclusive slide show of architect-designed products, visit www.residentialarchitect.com.