



PLEASE BE SEATED 05/27/08

Words :: Josh MacKinnon // Images :: Courtesy of Nienkämper, Moureaux Hauspy

What started out as a modest furniture shop on King St. in Toronto selling imported European furnishings across North America, after forty years, Nienkämper is now one of most widely recognized and successful corporate and residential furniture manufacturers on the continent. Having been in the business for longer than he likes to admit, Klaus Nienkämper Sr., the founder, owner and president of Nienkämper, tells elemente he has learned a great deal about design, the marketplace and the challenges of running his own business. His recipe for success has been seemingly quite simple: stay focused, listen to your customers, innovate, and last but not least, always have a say in what you produce. Although Klaus may not realize it, he's a 'hands-on' kind of guy. Very involved in the day-to-day workings of Nienkämper's Toronto manufacturing facility as well as client relations, Klaus admits, "One of the challenges is that you have to be good at everything.

You certainly have to be very service orientated and have clientele that supports you. You also must innovate to keep their interest.” The man gets a say in pretty much everything that is produced at the Nienkämper factory. He admits, “I often have strong arguments with designers who are persistent in doing something that doesn’t work. And those things, unless they get changed, they die.” There can be a fine line between being controlling and being a good manager. Klaus likes to manage intelligently, that is, teach others based on his past experiences. “If you have ten clients tell you the same negative thing, it’s simple, you go home and change it!” he believes.

With his recent project working with Daniel Libeskind for a chair designed specifically for the Royal Ontario Museum’s new Spirit House space, Klaus discloses that Libeskind was very firm on a particular aspect of the design, despite Klaus suggesting otherwise. “Libeskind said, there will be no cushion! And that was that,” Klaus says. Keeping in mind that the chair is constructed out of stainless steel, Klaus continues, “Nina Libeskind recently called and asked me to send down cushions for the two Spirit House chairs in their New York office.”

It appears that for Klaus, saying “I told you so!” wasn’t necessary.

“Smart designers make use of what we have learned over the years,” Klaus believes. He continues, “Things work out very well that way. Karim Rashid is a good example of this approach. He basically starts with a rough outline and then refines it after we talk about it. It’s a collaborative approach. Some designers don’t work that way though.” Karim’s work for Nienkämper includes his Wavelength, Kurv and Blob collections, as well as his most recent Kloud collection. Although Klaus is very much a fan of the work Karim has done for Nienkämper, he doesn’t believe that all of Karim’s work is successful. “He produces so much of it! We keep telling him that maybe he should do a bit of editing!” Klaus laughs.

From day one, Klaus has believed in producing what he defines as ‘timeless classics.’ For him, this means designing and manufacturing furnishings that not only stand the test of time aesthetically, but in their durability too. If it comes into question whether Nienkämper should manufacture a particular design, the answer is always easy for Klaus; if it’s not a timeless classic, it doesn’t get put into production. He explains, “What scares me is producing something that is passé in a year or two. That’s the argument I have with Klaus Jr. sometimes. We charge a fair amount of money for our furnishings, we need to make sure they’re still around five years from now! Klaus Jr. has a lot of the European imports, some of it bordering on kitsch. You have to be careful with those [designs].” While Klaus Sr. oversees the Nienkämper company and its Toronto factory, his son is in charge of running their King St. boutique furniture shop, KLAUS by Nienkämper. Although the shop is Klaus Jr.’s to run as he sees fit, it’s not surprising to hear Klaus Sr. admit that he calls and stops by the store every so often to provide his advice on various matters.

For the Full Article, Pick up Issue 8 +
http://www.elementmag.com/index.php/news/255/63/d,item_detail