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RARA: Rover chairs

An adventure in adhocism

Rodney Gordon Adank, 2015



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An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Design at Massey University,
Wellington, New Zealand.

Abstract

This practice based research explores the nature of opportunity availed by an adhocist strategy employed in seating design. It is inspired and sustained through a focus and reflection on Ron Arad's *Rover Chair, 1981*. Characteristics of adhocism such as opportunity, heterogeneity and value are unpacked through case studies. Seating concepts developed through research practice are examined. RARA (Ron Arad: Rod Adank) incorporates the appropriation of design and cultural references as a part of a hybridization strategy. It considers the role of immersive experience, physicality and affective design in the development of a body of work tethered to a design precedent. It postulates that by pursuing the pleasure of design through a practice of playfulness, humour, irony and compulsiveness, diverse and creative solutions to seating may be found.

Keywords:

adhocism, chair design, creativity, furniture, hybrid, prototyping, sensory experience



Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to the following people who have assisted and supported me throughout my study. Thank you to Professor Vicki Karaminas, Professor Julieanna Preston for their academic support. Additionally, Sven, Sally, Wendy, Natalie, Dave C and Lee. I am grateful to Bayden Filleul, Sandy Pawson, Lucy Cant, Thomas Rutledge, Uli Thie, Evan Thomas, Thomas Le Bas and Harmony Repia for their technical support. Thanks to *Kerry's Upholstery*, Levin, *The Craftsman Upholsterer*, Newtown, *Acme Engineering*, Petone, *Metal Immersions Ltd.*, Tawa, *Form Furniture*, Thorndon, and *Rodney Jaguar & Rover*, Warkworth.



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Preface

Let me tell you a few things about my journey into adhocism and my introduction to the *Rover Chair, 1981* by Ron Arad...

To make things you need 'stuff'. We had a drawer full of stuff in the kitchen when I was a child. It was universally useful for all sorts of ad hoc making and creating. We called it the junk drawer because it was filled with left over bits and pieces that could be useful for some other later application. You could always find something useful inside: string, tape, buttons, needles, skewers, wool, crayons, wire, glue, all to be pressed into action to serve a creative compulsion.

An early memory is of making a simple stool. It consisted of timber sides salvaged from the ends of a fruit box. Importantly, this gave me two equal length legs—it was tricky to get sawn legs the same length, or to cut them straight—and a length of timber nailed on top to make a simple three-piece stool. I coloured it with green wax crayon and signed my name on it in orange. I must have been about seven years old, subconsciously engaging with usability and complementary contrast. I remember this stool because later I used it to barter with my younger brother. Making had generated something of value that I could translate into some other form of benefit.

By 1980 I was operating as a sole trader making leather bags and belts, cane furniture and deck chairs from a small garage at the front of the house. An extension lead from the house provided lighting and power. This, along with some basic tools and a borrowed tank of compressed air driving an industrial staple gun, provided the means of production. I supplemented the modest income with part time work at Bon Brushes, a local brush making company. One of their many products was 1 ½ inch diameter broom handles, made in large numbers. A percentage were rejected due to material flaws. These rejected handles were of considerable interest to this budding entrepreneur. They represented a material that had been vested with added value through processing to a uniform size. They were available at no cost. Imported cane for furniture was expensive: could I do a material substitution with the timber handles with a cane lashing? The problem with timber handles is they don't readily bend and so the form-giving qualities of cane were lost. This required a rethink of the product concept. The resulting plant stand showed promise but never generated enough interest or demand to make in any quantity.

In 1982 I bought a business that laminated glass with decorative and protective films for automotive, domestic, and commercial use. The purchase included

some imported high technology mirrored films that were now outside their factory warranty. These films contained considerable embedded value, but it was a challenge to recover any value from this stock. I decided to use it for promotional wrap around sunglasses. An architect friend developed the design, a stamp dye was made, and the components —consisting of solar film, double sided tape, cardboard backer and an elastic headband— were assembled. Thousands of these ‘Solar Shades’ were produced and distributed. The step from concept to product was rapid, executed with urgency and purpose and without iteration. It was as little as could be afforded for this disposable product. Some years later I rebuilt a Lotus 7 sports car from Ford and Standard-Triumph parts sourced new, secondhand or salvaged from wrecked cars. Over many years I developed an eye for seeing individual components within larger assemblies of parts. It was empowering to make something exciting from an assembly of innocuous components.

My first experience of the *Rover Chair, 1981* came in 1988 after my first year studying industrial design. My girlfriend introduced me to a friend. He had a wide-boy style going on, with wrinkle picker shoes, sideburns and an edgy look. He sat in an old leather car seat mounted in a steel pipe frame, looking at me cock-eyed through a green beer bottle trying to work out an angle.

“This is a Rover chair designed by Ron Arad,” he said. “Do you recognise it?”

“No,” I replied. This ad hoc assemblage of a chair had some form of power.

I smile now to think that while Ron Arad was cutting a swathe with adhocism and high-tech style in the punk hyper city of London with his creative salvage, I was on the margins of viability, trying to reappropriate the surplus value availed by the 11/8 inch broom handles in a material substitution for a product no one really wanted.

In a compulsory third year industrial design project, our tutors loosened the previously tightly constrained chair design project. We were unleashed. I unknowingly embraced a postmodernist style that lifted me up creatively. I must have spray painted that chair half a dozen times just trying different colour combinations and then with photography tutor Helen Mitchell experimented with film processing to invert colours, turning it into a lustrous golden plastic finish. I had designed my first chair and it provided a lasting sense of satisfaction and achievement.

My second chair was the *Madonna Chair, 1994*. A chair that you really couldn’t sit on for any extended period as it was ergonomically challenging. For this chair that literally was the point, it was designed as a niche café chair. My research around the emerging café culture of Wellington identified that cafés needed to turn over tables to make a buck. Having customers too comfortable was not an objective. That provided the impetus for this Jean Paul Gaultier bustier inspired chair. There was no way you would be able to relax on the seat, but you would sure turn up to the café to see it or try it out. The *Madonna Chair* featured on the TV news during our final year exhibition. This chair showed me that designing things that worked as they were expected isn’t always an objective. Making things that engage with something else can offer a richer quality of experience, generating surprise, pleasure, and enjoyment.

After several years teaching product development, I became an industrial design lecturer. In 2006 I developed and coordinated a third year industrial design paper with a recycling/upcycling focus. Small teams of students were given a Neolt folding drafting table. These tables, previously highly valued by students, were becoming redundant due to advances in computer software and hardware. The collective time and effort put into this project was well in excess of what most upcycling type projects would ever receive. A remarkable diversity of ideas and designs came from this redundant Neolt table. The playful fun and engagement from students made this paper a joy to be involved in. There were dramatic variations in the perception of where the value was to be exploited. I gained several realizations about adhocism from this project. I saw that adhocism as a design strategy often picks the low hanging fruit. The marginal condition of the practice does not warrant or justify standing in the ground for too long. A constraint on supply or access to the source material limits the ability to extend into other solutions, and does not justify investment in further design time. But I saw that there are other solutions waiting to be found if you can stand in the ground for longer.

Building on the enthusiasm and positive engagement I had experienced working in the undergraduate programme, I developed a design competition for researchers. The competition, *Surplus & Creativity: Design and the Readymade*, built on the concepts of adhocism, readymade, recycling, repurposing, up-cycling, and extracting surplus value through design. The competition exhibition was installed at the Department of Conservation, Te Papa Atawhai, Wellington and opened to the public in November 2009. My experience of the project was that it generated a good deal of excitement, interest and enthusiasm among participants, visitors and staff.

A notable thing that I observed across these experiences was the pleasure of designing and making. I found that making and having interesting stuff around stimulates creativity. It builds community in and around the local environment. Making builds knowledge about the artifact being built and extends the ability to interact with a materially rich environment. The opportunities and ideas provided by just one or two found objects can be many and varied. Dealing with a material reality that has history and form brings its own constraints and challenges, and also has much to offer. This study, with the *Rover Chair, 1981* as its anchor point, follows from these experiences, learnings and understandings.

