



Creative Insight

# HOW I GOT HERE: DESIGNER SAM HECHT

*Sam Hecht has had a 20-year partnership with Muji, helping shape the company's minimalist yet practical image. Here he looks back over 30 years as a designer, discussing his "obsessive curiosity" and why design sometimes needs to be driven by need rather than desire*

By Emma Tucker 27/07/2020

As one half of design studio Industrial Facility, Sam Hecht has designed everything from chairs and lamps to storage boxes and coffee makers. Originally studying industrial design at Central Saint Martins, followed by a masters at the Royal College of Art, Hecht spent several years living and working in San Francisco and Tokyo, before moving back to London and setting up his studio with partner Kim Collin.

Together the duo have created work for some of the biggest names in design, not least of all Muji, which has been working with Industrial Facility for the last two decades. And while Hecht's work might be characterised by a distinctive kind of minimalism, the designer is quick to emphasise how much consideration goes into the tiniest details of every single piece. Here he tells CR how he turned a natural curiosity for making into a keen interest in industrial design and mass production, and why his studio takes a finely honed approach to its work for Muji.

**Early creative endeavours** I wasn't very good at school but I was very good at making things – and when I say making things, I mean taking things apart more than anything. I was very curious as a kid but not very studious, and that doesn't bode well for a school system. I wasn't sure what I was going to do necessarily but then I came across design. I was very into the idea of drawing something, making it, and using it. It wasn't really artistic, it was more this idea of practicality. From there I was able to go and do an art foundation, which definitely opened up my eyes and my mind tremendously.



*Top image: Portrait by NPF. Above: coffee maker for Muji*

**Industrial design in the 90s** It was a very male profession, and I think that was partly because it was tied to the workshop and this idea that using a lathe or milling machine was just what men did. I can't really describe it. It was almost slightly ex-army in a way. I had a lot of fun, but I wouldn't say it was a brilliant education. It was a very, very traditional way of thinking about what design is.

**The challenges of being different** I worked with David Chipperfield for a short while and really enjoyed being around architects and understanding their challenges and responsibilities. I applied for a job with a big American company called Ideo, and went for an interview with Bill Moggridge and showed him my portfolio. I think he thought I was someone else, and he was very honest and said, "Look, I just don't think you're going to be able to get a job with the work you've done." It wasn't industrial design, it wasn't product design, it was other things. I guess I was still experimenting with ideas and the work was different. But of course it's very difficult when you're trying to get a job and you're different. It's hard to see how you can contribute effectively to an industry that has mechanisms and methods. But I knew I needed to get experience, otherwise it wasn't going to work, because the things I was interested in were production and dealing with manufacturing. You need experience from being exposed to these kinds of projects and the best way [to do that] is to get a job. I was interested in mass production and trying to have an impact in that world.

**Moving to America** Bill Moggridge said he had this project he was trying to start up at Harvard University, which was an examination of what work is and how you relate to design, so office furniture and these sorts of things. He asked if I'd like to go out for six months and be at Harvard working alongside a professor, and I said yes, I'd love to. I went out and it opened my eyes tremendously, because in America at that time, the contrast was far bigger. In the UK, there wasn't really email, everyone was still faxing. There were Macs, but you used them for very basic graphics. When I went to America, they had all those things, and it was a realisation of a huge contrast. It was exciting. From there I met a gentleman who was building an office for Ideo in San Francisco so he invited me along, and I worked there for three years.

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**Architecture vs industrial design** After three years in Tokyo I moved back to London where I met my partner Kim Collin. We started to work together and she was an architect at the time and didn't know anything about product or furniture design – only as someone who admires it. Similarly I was super interested in architecture but from a different concept; the responsibility of building something and the many aspects you need to involve because that building's going to be there for a very, very long time. Whereas industrial design was always so temporal. Fleeting. We were interested in different things and we do different things and that's why it works so well. We started our studio together in Golden Lane because we didn't want to do the same things [as everybody else], we wanted to do things differently.

**Building a studio from a manifesto** We weren't looking to be commercially successful necessarily, we just wanted to write manifestos and see how we could approach companies as being slightly different. One of them that was very receptive was Muji, and they were our first company that we started to work with. We started to develop all sorts of different products, and then it grew to work with other companies. We decided that the best way for the studio to operate was to see if we could stay small and work with a small group of designers in the office who we respected and got along with. We wanted to continually improve the quality of the output, so stay small but get better. That has allowed us to work with very interesting companies, rather than darting around trying to do any work that came our way. We've tried to stick with a small group of companies and work with them very closely.

**What makes Muji work** I think the reason people enjoy Muji is, firstly, because the things that you can buy and the way you can use them is very open. Particularly the storage items. It's generally driven by need, rather than desire. That's why people go into Muji. It might be that their bathroom isn't organised properly, or they need better hangers, or their slippers are worn out. Or they need a good pair of swimming shorts. So as a designer we're trying to use design as a living, breathing space in a way. If you're trying to organise your bathroom you might have a rough idea of what you think you need, it might be a box but you're not quite sure of the size or what you want, but then you see it in Muji and things are open enough to allow you to be able to use them. That design may never have been intended to be in the bathroom, it might have been a box to put on your desk, but that's the beautiful thing about Muji.



**Designing for Muji** We try to remove the boundary and borders, and make everything as open as possible – open to interpretation, open to use. The other aspect is that everything is made with this idea of the perfect equilibrium of cost, materials and subject matter. It results in many of the things at Muji [being] what we describe as just being 'good enough'. So they're not great, which means they're not exclusive. They're things which are just good enough for what it's supposed to be, and that allows the correct price and expectation and that's why they tend to stick around. People enjoy them, they don't shout, they serve the need well, and they don't break the atmosphere that you have at home. If anything, they contribute to it.

It means that whenever we design for Muji, we have to be very careful about the responsibility of expression. By that I mean if there's too much design, or it's too expressive, it won't work for Muji. The trickiest part for people to appreciate is that if you try too hard it's not Muji. It's going to be too expressive. And we don't want people to buy Muji because it's designed, we want people to buy Muji because it's good design.



*Wireframe sofa for Herman Miller. Photos by Angela Moore*

**It doesn't always have to be so artistic** We put so much thought and time into things that the customer would never know, or see, or stop and admire. But that's exactly why we do it, because we want them to enjoy as much as possible without any barrier between

them and the work. To do that requires an enormous amount of conversation and pulling apart and analysing the actual work. Which is maybe why you feel that everything is very precise, but at the same time has a naturalness about it. That's what we feel the design profession is. It can be slightly intellectual, but that's not a problem. It doesn't always have to be so artistic. It can be expressive, but there's room for analysis and careful thought.

**Dream design projects** One area we still have not tackled, and would love to, is transportation. I'm not talking about planes and those sort of things, I'm talking about much smaller things like bicycles. Our naïvety, coupled with an obsessive curiosity and a desire to make it the best, could result in a different perspective, a different outlook, and a different result in the end. I think we'd like to try and tackle that process with transportation.

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