



MAY HOW THEY'VE GROWN

The primary direction of contemporary furniture has tended towards the ground. But now we've had enough of the low life, says Jenny Dalton.

Let's face it, a low 12in-from-the-floor chair can only be used by 20-year-olds. Or 50-year-olds after a few martinis," declares Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, interior designer of the new Mondrian Scottsdale hotel in the Arizona desert (pictured on final page), a partner to the hip Los Angeles Mondrian. The hotel features a Garden of Eden theme, including a ceiling-high plaster "tree" in the lobby, head-height lamps, high-backed chairs and copies of Arne Jacobsen's egg chair in wicker in the Skybar. "Low is extremely impractical," says the designer – a favourite of the pop singer Lenny Kravitz – of his elevated aesthetic. "Try getting out of a low chair if you're pregnant, if you're wearing a short skirt, if you're trying to look elegant. High is much more appealing to all ages."

Noriega-Ortiz isn't aware of trend-setting with his emphasis on the vertical. "I didn't do it because it's fashionable. I didn't use high-backed chairs because it's a trend. It fitted with the concept of the hotel – it's supposed to look like the outdoors – and the high lamps and chairs in the lobby respond

to the scale of the space." Nonetheless, the designer's work is inevitably influential (he did all-white and Perspex chairs way before it was cool) and it's inarguable the high life is returning to our interiors. This year's new collections feature a high-backed swivel lounge chair, the Lotus, by Jasper Morrison for Cappellini, from about £1,538 – a little like a 1980s office "power chair" but designed for domestic consumption as much as the boardroom. There's Matthew Hilton's Wing armchair for SCP, an austere, 110cm-high contemporary version of a high-backed gent's armchair (from £1,452). Plus there's Max Inc's 280cm-high Anglepoise-style lamp which takes the design classic to new heights (pictured overleaf, from £1,650).

For in Europe (though not in the US), low has been the primary direction of contemporary furniture and living rooms for several years, confirms Samuele Mazza, designer of ultra-sexy Italian furniture label Visionnaire. "Recent design has tended towards the ground – a Japanese idea of design that's a little bit Zen, a little bit tatami." Add to that Mazza's description of

Main picture: Visionnaire's high bench, about £3,000, and Daydream table, about £4,165. Left: Fredrickson Stallard's Bergère chair, price on request.





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late-1990s design as all steel and marble, and he concludes we’ve had a pretty “punitive” attitude to furniture for too long.

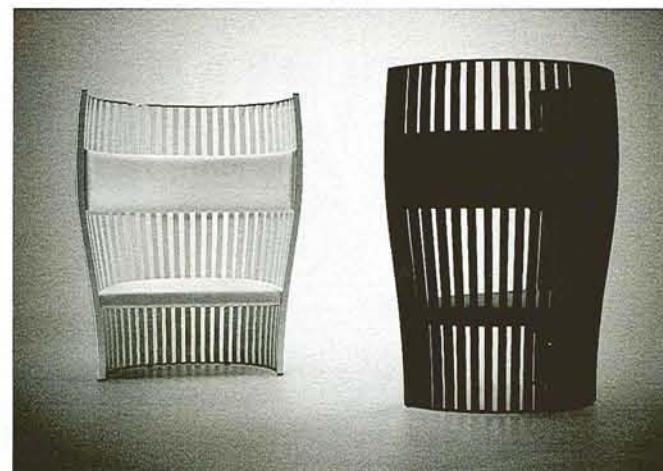
Mazza’s own reaction to that is a new exaggerated take on scale and glamour. With the Visionnaire collection for IPE Cavalli – favoured by new markets such as Russia for its super-glam tendencies coupled with Italian craft quality – dimensions are generous and sensual, surfaces comfy and upholstered. And Mazza isn’t alone in believing low living needed a rethink.

There is only so low you can go, says Christophe Pillet, one of France’s leading ultra-contemporary interior designers from his base in Paris. “As a designer, after 20 sofa designs that are very low, very flat, very horizontal, you feel a necessity to be a little higher, a little more closed in by something, to create something a little more intimate. As a consumer, too, after having so much of something, you want something different. You want a new experience – it’s a very normal human condition.”

This “new experience” for Pillet has resulted in a chair that he describes as half architecture, half furniture. The SouthBeach (pictured above right, from £3,119), manufactured by Tacchini, is a wooden lattice chair so high-backed (139cm), it’s practically a curved screen. And this is precisely what Pillet was going for when he designed an almost-ceiling height version of the chair for a Paris hotel, the Sezz, a couple of years ago. The idea was to create

semi-private, demarcated intimate spaces for those drinking in the hotel’s fashionable bar: “to see through and to be seen through”.

And Pillet’s aesthetic inspiration for the chairs that were big enough to house three to four people? (The domestic version houses just two.) Surprisingly, the modernist architect-designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Or maybe it’s not so surprising. Just across the Med in Italy, Samuele Mazza has also taken inspiration from the grandiose and gothic. His colossal, statuesque leather-quilted Siegfried sofa bench for Visionnaire (pictured on previous page, about £3,000) is high enough not just to be a screen, but a dividing wall. And, in fact, Mazza’s inspirations for the



chair are all architectural: the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, the Duomo in Milan and Notre Dame in Paris. The overall feeling, says Mazza, is one he calls the “Manhattan Effect”, of “grand buildings in limited spaces”. But why his plundering of the gothic for 2007? “At a time when Europe is looking to unify, I began thinking about what style would best represent the whole of Europe. And without a doubt, it had to be the gothic style: it spans the Continent, including Sicily where I was born.” What’s more, he adds, “The new markets, such as India, China, the Arab nations, Russia and the Balkans are all seeking to buy what they in their collective imagination believe is seen as European or Italian. It would be useless to try and sell chinoiserie to China; it wouldn’t make sense.”

But back to Mazza’s skyscraper analogy. It’s a fitting one for most European housing, where space, or lack thereof, remains an important factor. But while John Stefanidis, the interior designer, states that “the architecture must always come first. Tall isn’t going to work in a cottage in Chelsea, is it?”, Mazza’s

intention has been to create a style of seating that would work in the awkward, often limited spaces of a “bathroom, an entrance hall, or a bedroom. It was conceived as a grand piece for small spaces – spaces where you couldn’t fit a whole sofa, but which still require some kind of seating. So to attain a sense of grandeur without occupying too much space, we took our dimensions up instead of out. In this sense it’s more about symbolism than strict comfort.”

Martin Waller, owner of Andrew Martin, confirms the new high design is actually intended to tackle small spaces with increased drama and aplomb as much as the big: “In small rooms, you need big things. If you have lots of little things, it only makes it look smaller. The challenge is to get this sense of scale and grandeur in a small space. You see it best in headboards that now go all the way up to the ceiling, in table lamps – such as our curved steel Mercury lamp (£295), which started off at 45cm high and is now also available at 85cm – and in paintings and mirrors (pictured overleaf) that are floor to ceiling. All these things take up no more room on the footprint of your floor. All they’re using is what would otherwise be dead space. It’s about using space more efficiently. But it’s also about balancing out things like a monstrously big bed with a bigger bedside table and big lamp instead of a tiny, silly one. It’s so much more dramatic.”

In fact, the scale of most of the new vertical design isn’t necessarily functional – with

the exception of high-backed chairs such as Morrison’s Lotus (pictured below left, from £1,538). He says: “I wanted to do a reclining lounge chair that would be comfy enough to read in. I’ve designed other low chairs in the past and been disappointed in their comfort, so the higher back in this case provides the support for a headrest. It’s a look with a reason.”

Noriega-Ortiz also always insists on high-backed chairs at the dinner table, as they’re the only seats comfortable enough to keep people there for hours.

Elsewhere, Max Inc’s supersize, Anglepoise-style lamp (pictured top, £1,650 from TwentyTwentyOne) does function brilliantly as an overhead reading light à la Castiglione’s famous curved Arco, plus it’s slim enough not to take up too much floor space, but it’s the contrast with surrounding low-level furniture that highlights its almost ridiculous dimensions – the whole point of the design. Similarly, Rosaria Rattin’s compelling tall “vessel objects” for her Milan-based design company Kose aren’t necessarily meant to function as vases. But there’s something emotive about the over-tall clay ceramics that mimic the soulfulness of a Giorgio Morandi still-life. Like Mazza and Pillet before her, Rattin takes inspiration from “landscapes, cities, atmospheres”, be they New York’s skyline or, in the case of her new Fabbriche collection, “an old abandoned factory”.

For Fredrikson Stallard, one of the most talked-about British design duos of the

From top: Max lamp, £1,650; the Pillet-designed SouthBeach chair, from £3,119; Jasper Morrison’s Lotus chair, from £1,538.



moment, part of the reason they've done tall in their first limited edition collection of furniture is simply because they can. The fact their collection for David Gill Galleries is presented as a very small edition (just 12 of their 140cm high-backed, historically influenced stainless steel and rubber Bergère armchairs will be made, pictured on opening page) means that standard factory production rules have been broken. The chairs are hand-beaten and hand-polished by the Coventry-based factory that creates the bodywork of Aston Martin prototypes. Of their newfound stylistic freedom, Fredrikson says, "For this collection, bigger is better. We were allowed to go a little crazy with sizes and materials. But it's not for

Above: Noriega-Ortiz's design for the Mondrian Scottsdale.

Above right: Andrew Martin's Orion mirrors, £495 each.

the sake of going crazy. We just didn't have to consider things such as getting them through doors, because we imagine whoever buys them will have houses – and doorways – as generous as their wallets."

Indeed, John Stefanidis points out that part of the reason there's a current proliferation of tall, monumental installations in homes around the globe, is that these homes tend to be extremely large. "If there's the space, you absolutely indulge in tall design." And there is increasingly the space, not least in a house he's currently kitting out in Istanbul, "where there's so much high space it's going to be filled with monumental sculptures the scale of Jeff Koons's



9ft Egg sculpture. You can buy much bigger apartments, much bigger homes now, and that's what people are after. It simply comes from greater affluence."

Noriega-Ortiz confirms this: in Miami – currently a hotbed of property development, including a rash of bigger-than-average condos – he's created a public space in a new residential block development called Villa Magna. Intended as a beach club on the 14th floor, he's made the 25ft-high ceiling mirrored to double its perceived height, "so people feel totally disorientated, like you've really arrived somewhere incredible, and otherworldly. "I think you can go really grand-scale now," he adds, "because spaces are so big. Houses being built here are insane – the size of

European castles for him, her and two kids. You need to fill them up with something."

Small or big, it doesn't really matter – tall caters for both. Concludes Martin Waller: "It's simply a case of providing more drama per square foot." ♦

HIGH SOCIETY

Andrew Martin, 200 Walton Street, London SW3 (020-7225 5100; www.andrewmartin.co.uk) and see D&D Annex. **B&B Italia**, 250 Brompton Road, London SW3 (020-7591 8111). **Benjamin**

Noriega-Ortiz, 6th Floor, 75 Spring Street, New York (001212-343 9709; www.bnodesign.com). **Cappellini**, 020-7837 1900; www.cappellini.it and see TwentyTwentyOne.

Christophe Pillet, www.christophepillet.com.

Clifton Interiors, 168 Regents Park Road, London NW1 (020-7586 5533). **D&D Annex**, 222 East 59th Street, New York (001212-688 4498). **David Gill Galleries**, 3 Loughborough

Street, London SE11 (020-7793 1100). **Fredrikson Stallard**, 020-7254 9933; www.fredriksonstallard.com and see David Gill Galleries. **Kose Milano**, www.kosemilano.com and see B&B Italia and Clifton Interiors. **Max Inc**, see Twenty

TwentyOne. **Mondrian Scottsdale**, 7353 East Indian School Road, Scottsdale, Arizona (001480-308 1100). **SCP**, 135-139 Curtain Road, London EC2 (020-7739 1869; www.scp.co.uk) and stockists.

Sezz, 6 Avenue Fremiet, Paris (003356-752 626; www.hotelsez.com). **Tacchini**, www.tacchini.it and see Viaduct. **TwentyTwentyOne**, 274 Upper Street, London N1 (020-7288 1966; www.twentytwentyone.com). **Visionnaire for IPE Cavalli**, 0039051-618 6322; www.IPE.it. **John Stefanidis**, 5 Eccleston Street, London SW1 (020-7808 4700; www.johnstefanidis.com). **Viaduct**, 1-10 Summers Street, London EC1 (020-7278 8456).