

In Production

The Fruit of Her Labor

By Paul Makovsky

Danish designer Henriette Leth bends and weaves strips of compressed wood to create her Big Apple chair.

Denmark has a long-standing reputation for fine craftsmanship and elegant design. The country has produced such standards as Hans Wegner's Classic chair, Finn Juhl's Easy chair, Arne Jacobsen's Ant chair, and Verner Panton's plastic Stacking chair. Now a new group of young Danish designers, including Hans Sandgren Jakobsen and Kasper

Salto, are poised to take over. Examples of their work are included in *Danes on the Move*, an exhibition now touring the United States that features 17 of the most innovative chairs created by this new generation of Danish designers. *Metropolis* asked Henriette Leth, one of the designers featured in the exhibition, to talk about her Big Apple chair.

I'm not very good at names, and I originally called the chair Wood. My boyfriend, who is a composer, named it Big Apple because it looks like a big apple. It has nothing to do with New York.

Each strip of wood is pretty standard, about 118 inches long by 6 inches wide. I'm amazed every time I take the strips out of the machine, because the wood seems very alive. One day I was making a mark where I wanted to drill a hole, and ten minutes later the wood was 2 inches shorter. It also gets a bit wider when it dries. You can't really control it.

I decided a year ago to put the prototype into production on a commissioned basis with the help of cabinetmaker Christian Dennis. He helps put it together and works on the finishes using soap flakes which are good for the wood.

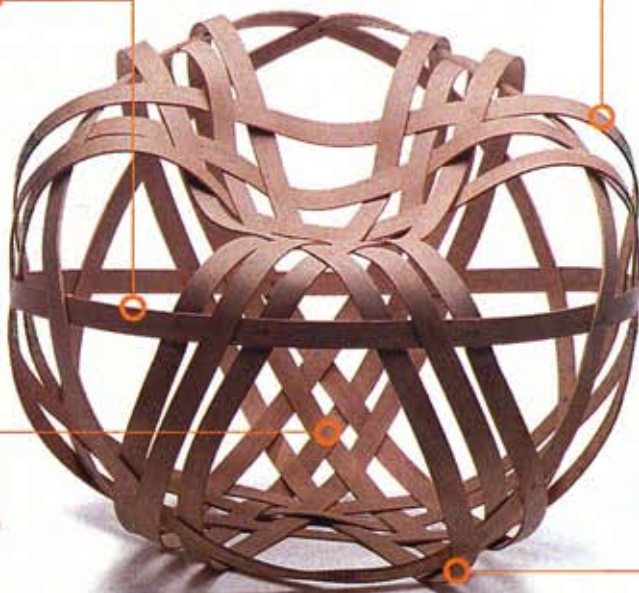
I got really inspired while bending the wood and exploring its qualities. When you take the wood strips out of the machine, the fibers are destroyed and become very flexible. As they dry, you can bend and form them without using tools.

I got the circular shape of the chair by first working with cardboard and then doing drawings. I was thinking of making a whole sofa of this wood, but at one point I went the other way and settled on a chair.

You can use oak or ash to make this chair, but I work only with oak because I like the way it ages and develops a nice patina.

I wanted to work with these thin, precompressed strips and weave them together to create a shape and structure that could bear the weight of a human—and at the same time create a sculptural chair that you would want to sit on.

The shape was always round. I started off working with six rings, and then tried nine, but the ideal is to use 12 strips. If you use six strips, it's not really clear that it's a chair.



Henriette Leth (b. 1967) became a founding member of the Kropsholder design group, a laboratory for experimental furniture design comprised of 14 Nordic female designers, while she was pursuing a furniture and interior design degree at the Danmarks Designskole, in Copenhagen. She graduated in 1998 and recently established her own studio as a freelance designer for IKEA and other clients. In addition to being a design consultant for the Danish company Menu, Leth is designing a storage unit for clothes for IKEA and is looking for a manufacturer for a "very smart" clothes peg.

The idea for the chair came to me in 1997 when I was in a two-week master class at design school, where we undertook an experimental study of precompressed wood sponsored by Compwood, a Danish manufacturer that invented a machine especially to compress wood.

