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**BLUES BROTHERS
(AND SISTERS)**
HAVE WE GOT
HUES FOR YOU

RUGGED GOOD LOOKS

On-trend designers are eschewing the sleek and the glossy for a rough-and-ready aesthetic with authentic beauty, says Nicole Swengley.

A quiet rebellion is breaking out in our homes as a raw, untamed aesthetic increasingly replaces the sleek, glossy look of recent years. Take as your benchmark rugged cabinets resembling warehouse crates, chairs and sofas apparently constructed from the contents of builders' skips, basins and baths with tactile, roughed-up exterior surfaces and kitchen worktops comprising big slabs of bare, grainy wood. And, if you're in any doubt that this is the look of the moment, check out Die Kunstbar in Cologne where Studio Arne Quinze has created a bar and tables that echo factory packing cases; or Fortnum & Mason's 1707 bar in London where David Collins Studio has installed wooden wall panelling designed to look like old wine crates.

"It's a sign of the times," says London gallery owner Rabih Hage. "People are looking for authenticity and honesty. They want to see the beauty of raw materials without expensive layers of surface applications."

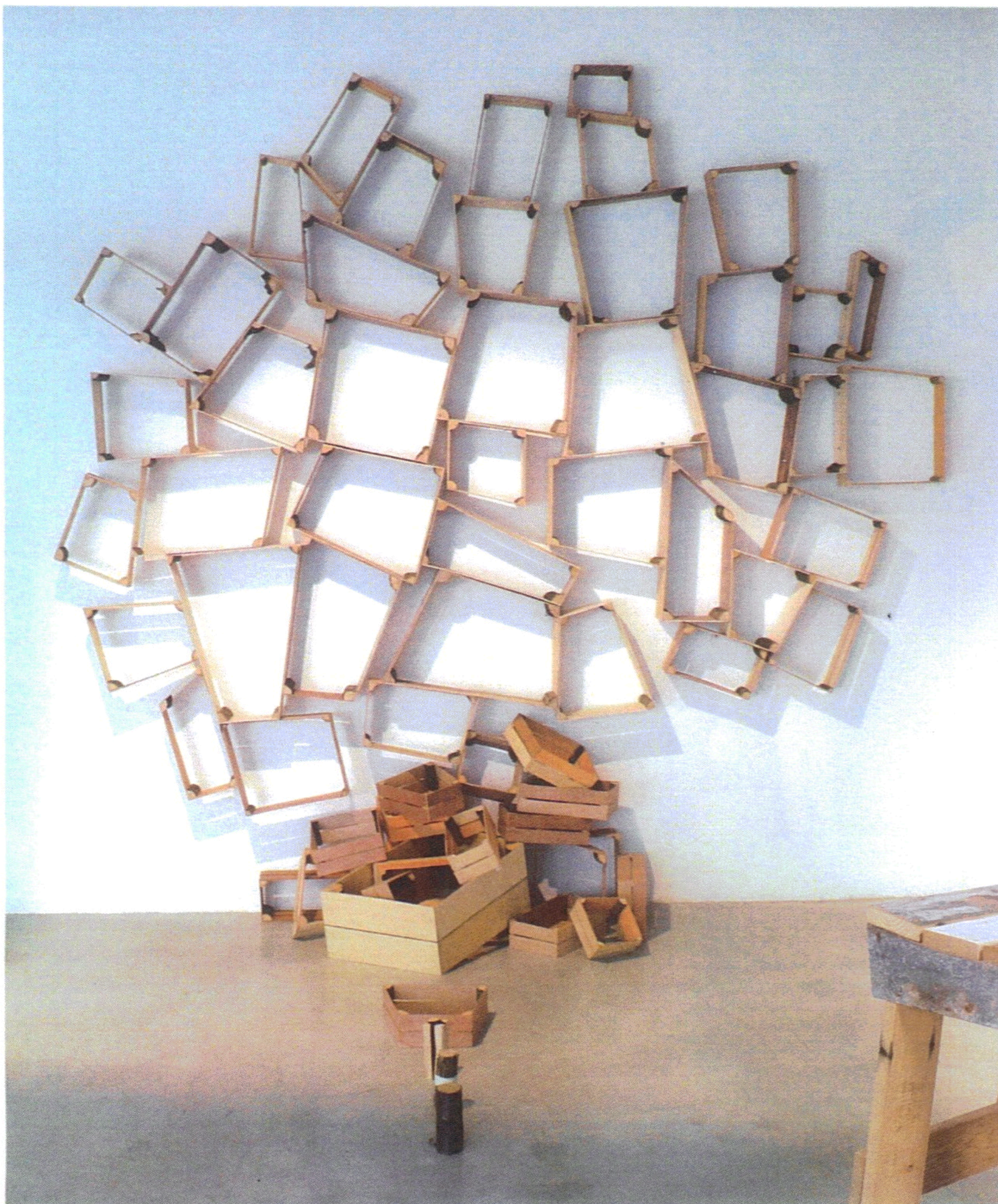
A revival of interest in craft techniques could well account for a greater appreciation of raw materials but sociological changes also lie behind the trend. "In the past year the perception of what really matters has changed dramatically from the overtly expensive to an enjoyment of functionality and authenticity," says Miriam van Dijk, co-owner of Priveekollektie, a design gallery in Heusden in the Netherlands. "See how the demand for historic pieces by Jean Prouvé and George Nakashima has grown. Now people are looking for those qualities in contemporary design too."

"Designers who celebrate the natural qualities inherent in a material, or leave the working process unadorned, are offering alternatives to slick, impersonal designs," says London gallerist Libby Sellers. "This could be read as a response to the economic situation – a desire to avoid any obvious superfluous detailing or unnecessary artifice – but it's also about getting back to basics through hand-crafted design solutions."

This demand for an intelligent use of raw materials has given gravitas to the *objet trouvé* movement. Eyebrows were raised a few years ago when designer Karen Ryan began making sculptures out of chairs found in skips. Now her unconventional Custom Made and Boarded Up designs (from £3,500 and £5,000 respectively, from Rabih Hage Gallery) are highly sought-after. It's a similar story with the lacquered, scrap-wood furniture constructed in an appealing patchwork style by Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek (from €269) and the starkly beautiful Catastrophe vases by Czech designer Maxim



Boffi's Duemilaotto Kitchen (from £30,000), designed by Piero Lissoni, features a huge wooden surface of reclaimed alpine acacia.



Left: Peter Marigold's Split Box series, 2006, from £6,640 at Libby Sellers Gallery. Below: Piet Hein Eek's Plankchair, €269. Bottom: Tom Price's Meltdown Chair: PP Blue Rope, price on request.



Velcovsky, which, he says, combine "porcelain, dirt and found objects" (from £1,200 for an edition of six, from Mint).

Hage, too, is designing in the raw, leaving bubbles "to add interest" in the tactile plaster of his Semi-Semainier cabinet (£6,800) and roughing up his Miles chest (£3,800) by adding legs made of reinforced steel bars to its plaster form. "Using a cheap material as if it were a noble material has great appeal for me – there's a lot of creativity and intelligence in this process," he says.

Tom Price's unorthodox Meltdown chairs are an extreme example of the trend (pictured right and overleaf, from £2,000). Fusing a giant coil of polypropylene rope, tubing, plumbing pipes or other thermoplastic materials with a seat-shaped form brings these humble materials together to create surprisingly comfortable, eye-catching chairs.

Anyone in search of no-frills furniture made from discarded materials might also be tempted by Piet Hein Eek's designs. Take his wall-mounted mirror with opening wooden doors (€300). It's made of rough scrap wood with untrimmed edges, yet its beach-house aesthetic is redolent of an attractive, carefree lifestyle. Who wouldn't want that in an inner-city apartment?

Similarly, his plywood Crisis desk (from €1,937) offers a work-is-fun ambience that laptop-glued executives might find very appealing. Meanwhile his Plankchair (€269 in Indonesian teak scrap, pictured overleaf, €306 in Dutch scrap wood) enshrines values of simplicity and affordability in a way that thoroughly democratises design.

Some might argue that a table or cabinet made from planks of wood is too simplistic to be considered a "designed" piece. This isn't necessarily the case, argues Van Dijk. "Wouter Scheublin spent more than 200 hours on his Cabinet of Chests, choosing

each piece of wood for a certain place and making it to the highest quality possible," she says. Nor are buyers deterred by the high prices of such labour-intensive work. Scheublin's American walnut cabinet (£29,500) sold several times over at Design Miami/Basel last June, as did his articulated Walking Table (£18,000). One reason for the acceptance of high prices, according to Hage, is that "people want luxury that's based on their own connoisseurship.

"Raw" can mean "unrefined", yet it can also describe the expression of a pure, undiluted idea.



They're looking for provenance in an object and its materials."

This search for authenticity finds its epiphany in the rawest examples. Take designer Max Lamb's China Granite project. These organic seats and tables are made from half-hewn boulders, personally selected by Lamb, from a quarry in Cheng Nan Zhuang, Hebei Province, some five hours south of Beijing in rural China. The 15 pieces, in gorgeous, jewel-like green or black granite, cost from \$8,000 to \$25,000 at Johnson Trading Gallery in New York. Meanwhile, designers Russell and John

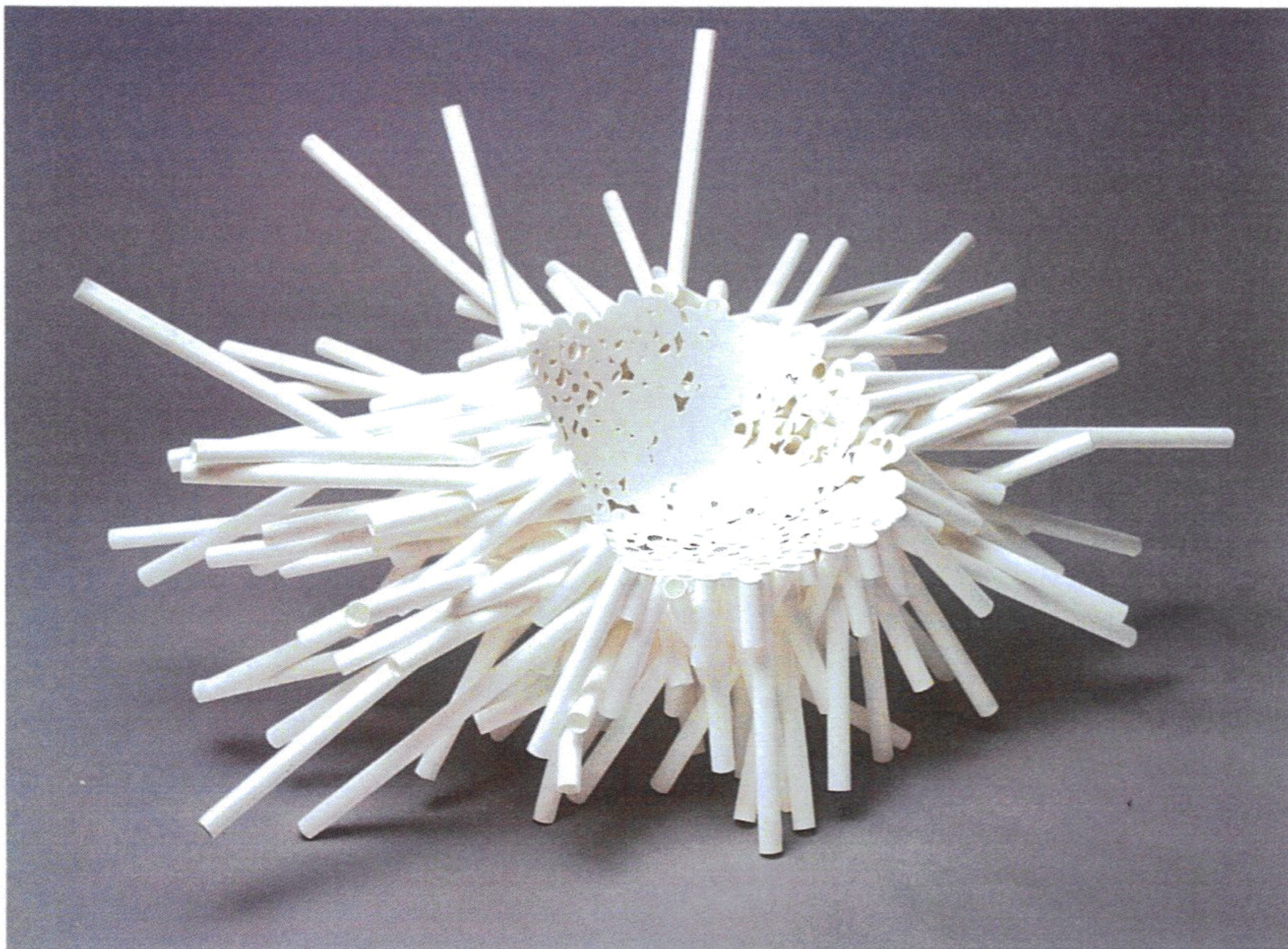
Pinch could tell you the exact location in Gloucestershire where the trees producing the coppiced hazel branches used to make their rustic Twig Bench and Cube grow (£1,425 and £810, from Few & Far).

Dutch designer Maarten Baas uses a material's inherent roughness to give a new spin to the primary characteristics of domestic furniture – for instance, he uses sand-blasted walnut veneer in his limited-edition Sculpt furniture (cupboard pictured left; also chair, table, chest, all price on request); and hand-worked synthetic clay over a metal skeleton for his Clay series (including a bench, armchair, dining chair and bookshelves; from €1,200). And French artist Vincent Dubourg goes even further in challenging conventional notions about furniture design by using rough materials. His limited-edition steel Buffet à Nouvelle-Zélande

(£18,800, from Carpenters Workshop Gallery) employs traditional metal-casting techniques to create a half-bench, half-sculpture; use it if you dare.

The word "raw" is generally taken to mean "unrefined" or "unfinished", yet it can also describe the origins or expression of a pure, undiluted idea. Designer Peter Marigold combines both aspects in his Palindrome series, created for Design Miami/Art Basel's Designers of the Future Award show last year (prices on request, from Moss). Each cupboard, table or seat is made from an amalgam of two halves – a rough plaster mould and its mirror-image in wood, cast from the original mould, on the other. The symmetrical halves, with their tactile, unfinished surfaces, reflect and echo each other very seductively. "Mirrored reflections create an instinctive response," says Marigold. "Pure, perfect geometry stirs an emotional reaction that's totally primal."

The way in which Marigold conveys a "raw" idea through the use of unprocessed materials has evolved naturally from previous pieces, such as his geometric Split Box series (pictured right, from £6,640, at Libby Sellers Gallery, or Sum shelves production version, £215 from SCP) and his organic Octave shelving, Thin Slice cabinet and Yield screen (limited editions, from £5,175, £6,612 and £10,350 respectively, at Libby Sellers Gallery) in which he



Left: Tom Price's Meltdown Chair: PP Tube #1, price on request. Below: Martino Gamper's Total Trattoria Off-Cut Table in 13 pieces made from teak laboratory tops, oak from Scottish church benches and poplar from the London Patent Office. Available through Nilufar, Milan. Bottom: Maarten Baas' Sculpt cupboard, price on request.

explores the universal structures that comprise nature's building blocks. "Using cheap, available material allows me the liberty to think and work without concern for anything but the idea," he says.

The raw materials used by designer Martino Gamper similarly express original ideas. His Total Trattoria Off-Cut Table, comprising 13 individual units butted against each other to create a horseshoe shape (price on request, from Nilufar), uses teak from English school laboratory tops, oak from Scottish church benches and poplar from the London Patent office. "It reflects the fact that dining is only ever complete when different people around the table share the same experience," he says. His Totem cabinet, made from chipboard and re-used furniture elements (€21,150, from Nilufar), challenges the belief that collectables should be housed in expensive display cases; and he inverts the notion of stacking books in boxes on the floor by grouping plywood boxes vertically on the wall in his Together bookcase (limited edition of 12, from €29,375, from Nilufar).

With solo designers experiencing a spike in requests for raw-looking pieces (Gamper has received orders for bespoke bookcases, CD shelves and wall cabinets), it's no surprise that design-savvy manufacturers and retailers are responding to the trend. Last year the French furniture-maker Roche-Bobois launched its Architecte collection of simple, robust cherrywood pieces that appear to have been rescued from drapers' shops, schoolrooms and architects' offices. The initial range proved so popular that more items, including cabinets resembling plan chests, a dining table and a bookcase, have been added (from £1,500). Minottiitalia, meanwhile, sells two larch-veneered sideboards on castors designed by Claudio Bitetti that look as if they belong in factory packing departments (four-door Fragile from €2,932; two-



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door Alto from €3,392). At Selfridges there's the rustic, wooden Riva range (coffee table from £599, chair, £2,895, dining table, £13,495), while The Conran Shop has a rough oak coffee table on rubber castors (£895).

Nor is it only furniture that's getting rough treatment. Black granite basins

(from £1,230) with rugged exteriors (the rims and interiors are smooth-polished) are selling briskly at Bathrooms International, as is a free-standing Blue-Grey Granite bathtub carved from a single boulder (pictured on previous page, from £15,450). "Bathing or washing in a chunk of natural stone is a pure, very alluring experience," says Cheryl Gurner, the company's creative director.

A raw look is materialising in kitchens, too, with designs such as Boffi's Duemilaotto kitchen (pictured on opening page, from £30,000) combining natural stone surfaces with a slab-like workbench made from reclaimed, solid alpine acacia. Leaving the bare wood unstained and unpainted allows the grain's natural irregularity to shine through in a thoroughly appealing way.

A raw deal is generally one to avoid – though perhaps not right now. ♦

A BIT OF ROUGH

Bathrooms International, 4 Pont Street, London SW1 (020-7838 7788; www.bathroomsint.com). **Boffi**, 254 Brompton Road, London SW3 (020-7590 8910; www.boffi-chelsea.com). **Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 3 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-3051 5939; www.cwgdesign.com). **The Conran Shop**, 81 Fulham Road, London SW3 (020-7589 7401; www.conranshop.co.uk) and branch. **Few & Far**, 242 Brompton Road, London SW3 (020-7225 7070; www.fewandfar.net). **Karen Ryan**, www.bykarenryan.co.uk and see Rabih Hage. **Johnson Trading Gallery**, 490 Greenwich Street, New York 10013 (+1212-925 1110; www.johnsontradinggallery.com). **Libby Sellers Gallery**, 07774-113 813; www.libbysellers.com. **Maarten Baas**, +316-2450 2082; www.maartenbaas.com and see Mint and Moss. **Martino Gamper**, www.gampermartino.com and see Nilufar. **Max Lamb**, 07950-913 563; www.maxlamb.org and see Johnson Trading Gallery. **Maxim Velcovsky**, +4222-2313 1512; www.qubus.cz and see Mint. **Minottiitalia**, +39031-7692 5215; www.minottiitalia.it. **Mint**, 2 North Terrace, London SW2 (020-7225 2228; www.mintshop.co.uk). **Moss**, 150 Greene Street, New York 10012 (+1212-204 7100; www.mossonline.com). **Nilufar**, 32 Via della Spiga, Milan (+3902-780 193; www.nilufar.com). **Peter Marigold**, by appointment, 020-8880 0690; www.petermarigold.com and see Libby Sellers Gallery, Moss and SCP. **Pinch**, 6 Horsford Road, London SW2 (020-7501 9262; www.pinchdesign.com) and stockists. **Piet Hein Eek**, +40-285 6610; www.pietheineek.nl and see Rabih Hage. **Priveekollektie**, Pelsestraat 15, Heusden, 5256 AT, Netherlands (+31416-663 234; www.priveekollektie.com). **Rabih Hage**, 69-71 Sloane Avenue, London SW3 (020-7823 8288; www.rabihhage.com). **Roche-Bobois**, 020-8874 9818; www.roche-bobois.com. **SCP**, 135-139 Curtain Road, London EC2 (020-7749 7398; www.scp.co.uk). **Selfridges**, 400 Oxford Street, London W1 (0800-123 400; www.selfridges.co.uk) and branches. **Tom Price**, 07815-720 922; www.tom-price.com. **Vincent Dubourg**, www.vincent-dubourg.com and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **Wouter Scheublin**, +316-4509 8416; www.wouterscheublin.com and see Priveekollektie.

