

## “Soft Products” profile of Molo Soft Forsythe + MacAllen Design

Museum of Modern Art in New York acquires “Soft Products” by Canadian Design firm Molo for their permanent collection!

Molo Soft Forsythe + MacAllen Design, [www.forsythe-macallen.com](http://www.forsythe-macallen.com)

Stephanie Forsythe and Todd MacAllen met at Dalhousie University in the mid 1990s having both garnered a mixed education: in Architecture, Environmental Design, Fine Art, a variety of Craft practices and Science. This would lead them into getting their Master Degrees in Architecture in 2000. They began working together in 1996, operating a multi-disciplinary design studio, and are currently based in Vancouver, Canada. Their early projects, before and after earning their Masters in 2000, were a series of houses in Canada and the United States that they both designed and built. These projects have since won international awards and have been published in several design and architecture books and magazines around the world. Becoming dissatisfied with the limited function of accordion pleats, while experimenting with the concept of flexible, telescoping materials Stephanie and Todd recalled the flimsy, tacky, “sculpted”, honeycombed tissue paper decorations seen on numerous special occasions. They went to the dollar store and purchased a bunch of wedding bells (white being a preferred colour) to play with and “eureka!” This a slightly simplified version of the story Forsythe put forward during a telephone interview I had with her, or rather a “conversation” since she expressed a desire for a less formal exchange. It is this less formal approach that has allowed this design company to find and explore the structural strength inherent in the honeycombed construction of a dollar store item that has become the base element for an entire range of interior design products. “Soft Products” includes lighting, seating, and vertical panels (soft walls/ blocks) of various heights and potential uses; room divider, bar, coffee table just to mention a few. Made from brown craft paper or a non-woven polyethylene fibre textile in white or stained with a bamboo charcoal ink that creates a rich lively black that allows the texture of the fibre to show, the colour palette is limited. Yet due to its open honeycomb structure and the thinness of the layers a light source in proximity does effect colour change and was very much considered within the original concept.

“Made from simple lightweight sheets of humble materials such as paper and non-woven textiles, the honeycomb geometry lends these structures high strength and flexible resilience, with an economy of material resource”<sup>1</sup> The use of amalgamated fibre, non woven, composite, or layered and glued materials to produce objects for decorative use has a long history and is far from humble. Look at the tradition of Chinese and the latter day version of French Papier Mache furniture (composite). These had a structural integrity enabling a wide range of uses from storage to four-poster beds. The finishing on paper mache ranges from carved lacquer, decorative painting, gilding, and collage completely disguising its base material. These production processes were toxic to the extreme and the death of craftspeople involved in their manufacture was not unknown but rather acceptable. (The rich do require their beautiful decors). The Japanese use of Shoji (washi/ paper) screen room- dividers as a non-structural visual barricade has been a standard in Western Interior Design since the 1850s. Moving through the twentieth Century the lighting design of Isamu Noguchi’s mulberry lamps (non-woven) or Frank Gehry’s cardboard furniture (layered and glued) are part of this centuries old continuum. From Bauhaus to Modernists to Contemporary Architects such as Gehry to Molo, we see an elimination of the “finish” to allow the structural materials to stand on their own, to show their inherent beauty and function. In the case of Molo Designs the form allows the function to become adaptable. “Soft is a product line conceived of the desire to dynamically shape and redefine open space into more intimate and ephemeral surroundings, in a flexible and temporal way. Utilizing flexible honeycomb structures that can expand, contract, and flex to form a sculptural space or seating topography, Soft is an evolutionary, materials research driven exploration of possibilities. The elements of the Soft collection have been designed to be used and re-used in a flexible and dynamic way, replacing the need for more costly and inflexible alternatives for partitioning and arranging space.”<sup>2</sup> All of the Soft products and the exploration of possibilities lend themselves to an almost childlike play. You can in a sense build a fort and it is this fort building aspect that has the firm thinking about adaptable housing. A competition sponsored by Common Ground Community and Architecture League of New York in 2003 allowed Molo Design to think in terms of using their “Soft” products to facilitate expandable single occupancy rooms. For the First Step Open International Housing Competition the Softhouse was designed for installation in a former lodging house on the Bowery in New York City. The adaptability gives the opportunity to create larger common space when and if it is necessary. However the reality of housing the homeless is beyond the scope of an individual designer or design firm and durability of the materials used in such projects is as important as its flexibility. An unpopulated installation that survives a design competition is not much of an endurance test for this material. This year they will be creating the Press and Meeting Point for the Zona Tortona, Design Fair in Milan, Italy. This location will experience high traffic, as it is a multi-functional space created to offer different services. Press Area: where journalists can pick material and information on all the events taking place and Meeting Point: a space where each morning a series of workshops, events, debates and press conferences will be held. The afternoons offer a chance to keep abreast of the latest design trends with the cycle of seminars. Needless to say this will test the Soft products durability in a way a booth or display at trade show would not. This information will address issues arising in the Softhouse project. Softhouse is a not-for-profit project under development.

Molo Design was formed in 2004 by Stephanie Forsythe and Todd MacAllen to get their Soft products into the market place. While appearing as one of the ten Innovators at the IDS 08 they also participated in the Radiant Dark exhibition. I look forward to following this company Winner: First Step Open International Housing Competition sponsored by Common Ground Community and The Architecture League of New York, 2003 "3." Recent and Upcoming opportunities to view their work: Interior Design Show (as a Featured Exhibit) February 21 &ndash; 24, 2008 Direct Energy Centre, Exhibition Place, Toronto <http://interiordesignshow.com> Zona Tortona, Milan, Italy April 16th - 21st, 2008 <http://www.zonatortona.com/> ICFE 2008 &ndash; International Contemporary Furniture Fair 9Molo is Booth 9660 New York, New York United States May 17th&ndash; 20th, 2008 <http://www.icff.com> On-line video demonstration of the designers demonstrating Softwalls <http://www.revver.com/video/302022/molo-design/> Soft Products Soft walls: <http://www.molodesign.com/en/products/soft/overview.html> Museum of Modern Art

1. This is a statement from their website2. from website3. from website