



DESIGNER

By Akemi Tanaka Blanchard

Cats!

As a furniture designer, I have sought to find eco-friendly and innovative solutions for entertaining in small spaces.



My love of my cats, moving into my new home and not being satisfied with what I found on the market has led me down my latest path – a wall-mounted cat bed.

Experiences throughout my life have influenced who I am as a designer. I learned compassion for all living things early in my life through my parents who would rescue any animal that crossed their paths. I learned to prepare way too much food during the holidays so that everyone would be well fed and happy. Later in life, I realised that these ideas still resonate through my work. Whether it is people or animals, I like to design products that make all feel welcomed and comfortable.

IN THE BEGINNING

As a child growing up in a small suburban town, my first memories always seemed to revolve around animals. We had birds, cats, a dog, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs and the occasional rescued squirrel, robin and pigeon, many of which I begged my parents to get or keep. My favourite was the cat I picked out when I was eleven years old. I named her Sachi. She was the runt of the litter and had her fair share of health problems. She was also a very cranky cat who did not like anyone except for me. And that was only sometimes. Nonetheless, I loved her unconditionally and secretly relished the fact that she did not like anyone else. She never even warmed up to anyone after I went to college for four years. After

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college, she came with me to my first apartment and finally lived with me full time. She seemed to enjoy the fact that she was no longer being bothered by any other animals.

Sachi enjoyed the peace of an animal-free apartment for three years. Then Chilly gently pushed herself into our lives. I had not planned on having another cat. In fact, my boyfriend (now husband) was dead-set against it but I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was just skin and bones with a lot of fur missing. Definitely not a looker! It was the start of winter and I knew she would not last, as I would see her shivering on cold days. I also knew she was still caring for what was left of her litter of feral kittens. But she was a street-smart city cat and played her cards right. At some point, Chilly had been someone's pet because after gaining her trust she was very friendly and loving, with a vibrant personality.

After weeks of feeding her on the sidewalk outside my apartment building, I looked out onto the inner courtyard my ground-floor apartment faced. Coming out of a broken basement window, I saw Chilly squeezing herself out and into the courtyard. Then she saw me. From then on, she would climb up to my window and

meow at me. I started letting her in to warm up and eat. My boyfriend was not pleased at all by this turn of events – but not for long. Chilly wasn't silly. One evening when he caught me with Chilly in the apartment, she took one look at him and started weaving herself between his feet, purring the entire time. I couldn't believe my eyes, but that was exactly what she needed to do in order to secure a place within our family, and she did it with flying colours.

CAT FURNITURE

While I was getting my Industrial Design Master's degree, my thesis adviser told the class, "Take this opportunity to either get in the door to an industry/career you are interested in pursuing post graduation, or use this project to do something you are passionate about". I decided on the latter option. With my lifelong love of animals, years of volunteering at animal shelters and the recent passing of Sachi at eighteen years old, I focused on trying to improve the lives and environment of shelter animals through design.

The idea was simple. It was an investigation into the needs of existing animal shelters, and how creative ideas and seemingly simple solutions can have a big impact on the quality of life for both

the animals and people involved. The challenges lay within the philosophy that these solutions should be low or free, easy to implement, and be undertaken by others so as to not distract employees from their main concern, that of animal care.

Through community-based support and effort, I was able to make small changes within a local animal care and control facility that positively impacted animals, employees and people looking to adopt. For example, I organised sewing parties with donated fabric in all different colourful prints to make dog and cat beds. Taking a few hours with a group of volunteers, we were able to make over thirty-five beds and it cost next to nothing. In addition, some people even learned a new skill – how to use a sewing machine. It didn't matter if the beds were imperfect, the animals would be non-judgemental. It turned out to be a great experience for all involved. These simple beds made the animals much more comfortable and calm in their cages which, as a result, reduced the noise in each of the shelter's rooms. It also made their temporary home look more attractive and the animals happier to potential adopters. The fun part was letting the staff determine the best print for the animal's colouring. Little did I realise that the thesis would not only be a passion but a career path.

SPACE-SAVING IDEAS

During school, I became very interested in designing eco-friendly furniture for small spaces. Being on student budgets, my classmates and I had small apartments, yet we liked to entertain within our home. How could furniture help to facilitate socialisation within a small footprint? Studying recreational vehicles and boats, multi-functional furniture seemed like a great solution. I began trying to design an object that could be useful when one was alone in the apartment and then could transform into additional seating when guests were present. Over the next year, development began on finding elegant solutions to this problem. In the end, Futaba and Tagei were born. Both were made of eco-friendly bamboo plywood.

Futaba, a Japanese word meaning 'double leaves sprout from one seed', is a coffee table that flips open to reveal a love seat. With contoured cushions and a backrest, Futaba becomes a comfortable seat but loses the coffee table function. Tagei, translating to versatility, addresses that issue. Tagei is a coffee table in which the two halves slide open to reveal an upholstered bench. The two halves of the coffee table become side tables flanking the bench. The bench is a little less comfortable than the love seat but the table function remains through the transformation.

However, back to cats! A few years ago, my husband and I bought our first



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apartment. After moving six times in the last ten years, it was exhilarating to be able to call the place our own. We were able to finally invest time and effort into designing the space, knowing it was going to be for the long-term. Having freshly graduated from my master's program, I was eager to decorate our modern but small apartment in my vision with carefully selected furnishings and décor. Needless to say, to this day it is still a work in progress.

CAT COMFORT

Living in an urban environment the goal was to make the place inviting yet calming and fun for our three lively indoor cats, two of which were adopted as young rescues the year before. With boundless energy, a fascination for anything moving outside the window, a love of napping and being able to survey their kingdom below them, I wanted to give them a piece of furniture that would facilitate all these activities. But I also did not want to sacrifice precious floor space in a small apartment nor style. I wanted the object to blend in with the rest of the furnishings, which had simple, clean lines.

There was a lot of cat furniture on the market but I found that nothing really satisfied all the needs of my cats and me. The lack of products focusing equally on the buyers' (in this case, me) and users' needs (the cat) was frustrating. Not willing to settle for a product that did not meet all my requirements, I came to the conclusion that I needed to figure out my own solution. If nothing else, it was going to be good practise for my newly acquired skills and a fun personal home project.

I tackled this perceived design problem as I would any other, by looking at the needs of the users. These included the knowledge that cats:

- love to jump, climb and perch up high
- like structures that feel secure
- find places to nap that are enveloping and soft
- really want to be a part of the action and excitement happening

in a room but, at the same time, do not really want to be acknowledged.

For my requirements, I wanted something that really did not look like cat furniture. I wanted something that one might overlook in the room because it blends in seamlessly with the rest of the furnishings. While I am crazy about my cats, I don't want my home to immediately scream that fact to every guest that walks into it.

Only after pages and pages of sketching and creating cardboard models did I come up with something that resembles the final result. Many times things that look like the least complicated and most straightforward and effortless are actually the hardest to design. And this was no different. For instance, it took eight different bracket designs to finally come up with one that was a simple right angle. Now it looks like that was the most obvious choice from the start – but that was not always the case.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the design passed the test of the most important critics, the cats. No matter how well I thought I designed it, the project was all for naught if the cats never used it. Success was achieved as they have spent countless hours napping, playing and looking out the window and observing the world around them. The curve of the bent wood allows them to feel secure while napping and rolling around, while the bracket design allows Curve to mount anywhere on a wall.

After family and friends starting asking for their own ones, I realised other people shared my opinions and aesthetics, and saw the need for the product in the market. Curve, as it became known, was added to the furniture collection. What started out as a side project to home decorating became a career. In the end, it was wonderful to be able to meld all my passions: problem solving, furniture design and cats together into one product.

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