

ISSUE  
46

# Gray

*in bloom*

architecture  
interiors  
design  
culture

CULTURAL  
EXCHANGE:

**ARCHITECT  
FRANCIS KÉRÉ  
BRINGS  
WEST AFRICA  
TO MONTANA**

**PLUS:**

*Vikky Alexander*

*Memo Furniture*

*Natalia Ilyin*

*Ana Kraš*

*Todd Saunders*

*Cauleen Smith*

*Julian Watts*

*Le Whit*

*Carrie Yamaoka*

# RAISING THE BAR

Memo Furniture honors the designer, and the design process, in every piece it makes.

By TIFFANY JOW

Photographs by BIGTOP STUDIO

**HAVE YOU EVER HEARD A DESIGNER LAMENT THAT HIS DESIGN WAS DILUTED**, or totally changed, in the course of working with a client? [*Reader nods empathetically.*] A new furniture company called Memo aims to be an antidote to such situations. Sixteen years in the making, the company formally launches in June with the goal of developing and manufacturing furniture by working closely with a range of designers and conscientiously carrying their concepts through to the very end. And it's not a gimmick: Memo is helmed by Seattle-based Dave Simon, 49, and Gary Cruce, 52, whose combined experience includes coursework at the California College of the Arts, the University of Washington, and London's Royal College of Art, plus nearly two decades in executive positions at design heavyweight Herman Miller. They're furniture designers running a furniture design company, setting themselves apart with their intention to approach their products from a qualitative point of view.

Memo's first offering, the Penna lounge chair, was designed by Studio Gorm, the Eugene, Oregon-based firm formed by Wonhee and John Arndt. "We've never worked with someone who had a better understanding of our design than us,"

Wonhee says, but notes that Memo did. "They aren't a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps start-up—these guys really know," John adds. "It's amazing to see that level of integrity and awareness embraced from the get-go. Memo has the potential to set new standards for other [furniture manufacturers] out there."

Memo's story began in the early aughts, when Simon was consulting for Brandrud, a furniture company that conceptualized and manufactured products for healthcare, education, and corporate clients, maintaining an unusually high level of design execution. At the time, Brandrud was owned by Lee Falck and Bobby Holt, who knew a lot about running a business but little about design. Simon joined Brandrud in 2003 and, charged with creating an internal design studio, called Cruce, a friend who was then a designer in architecture firm NBBJ's retail store, to help him. The foursome grew Brandrud into a respected leader in its field, epitomized by Herman Miller's acquisition of it in 2008. Simon and Cruce took on roles there, while Falck and Holt pursued other opportunities. "Even as we went our separate ways, there was a spark that never went out between us," Simon says. "We always said that one day, we should build

on what we'd created and do it again but better, with years of experience behind us."

Last January, the stars aligned and the quartet began developing a new premium design brand. They called it Memo, droll shorthand for their vision of achieving something "memorable." To raise capital, the four (under a different, now-dissolved moniker) leveraged the relationships they'd built through Brandrud to create furniture for the healthcare sector; the proceeds funded the brand they wanted to become.

As they surveyed the furniture industry, Simon and Cruce observed a lack of authenticity. "The American market is operating in a world of sameness, where everything is measured," Simon says. "Many of the larger companies are fixated on performance." Rather than developing products that make people work better, he continues, Memo is interested in creating furniture that is visceral, connects with users, and—through a kind of pared-down beauty that makes an object's construction apparent—allows for a human experience of balance and calm.

Memo's Penna (Latin for "feather") lounge lives up to the hype. Made of North American ash, molded plywood, and cold-formed polypropylene and upholstered in Maharam »



Dave Simon and Gary Cruce,  
cofounders of Memo Furniture.

Memo Furniture's Penna lounge chair.

SEAL OF APPROVAL



and Kvadrat textiles, it's a light-weight, refined, yet friendly piece that invites its sitter to stay a while in its deep, tilted seat. Cruce first encountered Penna as a prototype at Studio Gorm last fall, after it was initially presented at Milan's Salone Satellite in 2014, and was drawn to its origins in material exploration. "The original idea came from folding a piece of paper," John says of Studio Gorm's vision for the seat. "We wondered how we could take a flat sheet of material and bend it into a complex organic form that makes a really comfortable chair."

Memo worked with Studio Gorm to optimize Penna for manufacturing and made some structural changes—including adding more padding, thickening the sheet material to better accommodate the upholstery process, and improving the joints and construction methods. The connection between the front leg and the frame, a detail Memo developed to strengthen the construction, is more elegant than the initial concept, John says. "There are countless

little [ways] Memo improved on the original design, and their tireless approach to making things better and consistently reproducible at a high level of quality is impressive." He suggests flipping the chair over to see the part that most wows Studio Gorm: "The bottom is the prettiest part," he says, noting that Memo suggested the base's original four screws be reduced to two. "Even though very few people will look at the underside, they still care about making it look as good as possible."

The chair was manufactured in the Seattle area, where all of Memo's furniture will be produced, and Studio Gorm met frequently with Memo throughout the process. "We spent the dime to get them here and have face-to-face interaction," Cruce says. "We're trying to support the designers who are authoring the project, and it's a big undertaking to champion their point of view." This people-first sentiment is echoed in the way Memo presents its work to the public: while pieces can be purchased through its website, they

can also be experienced first-hand at Fulcrum Cafe, the brick-and-mortar arm of Memo's sister company Fulcrum Coffee, owned by entrepreneurs Falck and Holt and located a stone's throw away from Amazon's Spheres in Seattle. Memo plans to put all its furniture in the space, which will host quarterly events for the A&D community in the near future. Studio Gorm is developing additional products that will debut from Memo in 2020, and pieces by Finnish designer Harri Koskinen, Brooklyn design consultancy Standard Issue, and Jun Yasumoto—who works with Jasper Morrison and also runs his own practice—are slated to be released starting this fall.

Not surprisingly, Simon says that he, Cruce, and their staff dream about work stuff all the time. It's this kind of dedicated thinking—both resourceful and detail-obsessed—that all but ensure Memo will triumph. "All our prior work has been with existing businesses," Cruce says. "Now it's a tabula rasa. We can do whatever we want!" ✱