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ILLUSTRATION BY EDGAR HOFMANN

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The Spanish designer puts simplicity first

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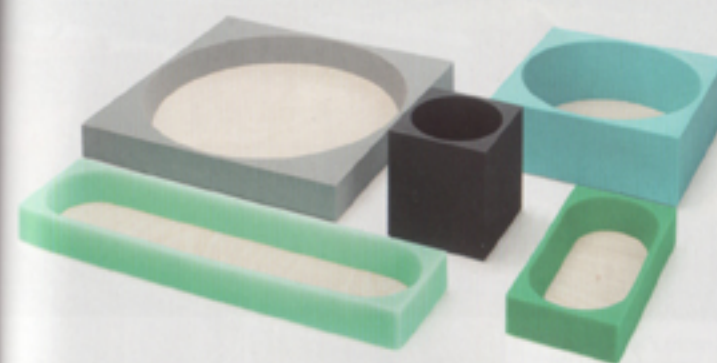
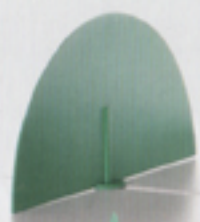
Advancing technology can create a sociable city



**Light** Accessories, such as this task light, slot into the slim gap along the worktop

**Cable tidy** Can be placed anywhere along the desk's hidden horizontal bar

**Divider** A semi-circle of steel makes a bookend; a larger version creates a partition



**Left** Offset for Maxdesign, with myriad configurations for home or office

**Above** Euclid (named after the Greek Mathematician), in ash and natural rubber

**Top** The Spanish-born Alonso, now part of north London's Okay Studio



# Tomás Alonso

Words by ANNA RICHARDSON TAYLOR

The Spanish-born, London-based designer has a way of making things come to life, exemplified by a new desk for home or office. It's down to his twin interests in the way we use objects, and the interplay of different materials

Spanish designer Tomás Alonso needs his space. Part of the Okay Studio collective, he shares a huge building in north London that affords him a sizable workshop area, a space that is integral to his design approach, since it enables him to test and tinker with every stage of the design process. "It is very important to be able to make things with my hands to understand," says Alonso. "A lot of the things I work on are based on quite simple structures and mechanisms, but to arrive there you need to be able to test them. They look simple, but it takes a while to arrive at that simplicity."

Alonso's products are indeed all deceptively simple, formed by a desire to distil design down to the essential. The same aesthetic runs through much of the work Alonso admires most, particularly

by mid-century maestros such as Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Jean Prouvé, Eileen Gray and George Nelson, or the less-well-known Spanish architect José Antonio Coderch. "I guess I don't like superfluous things," says Alonso. "It's about an honesty that something does what it's supposed to do and does it well, and that's what makes it beautiful."

His Offset table for Italian furniture company Maxdesign encapsulates this approach well. Presented at this year's Milan furniture fair, and set to go into production in September, it was borne from a fairly loose brief. It is a flexible system, constructed from ash, steel and aluminium, which responds to the increasingly blurred boundaries between workplace and home. Different components allow the user to adapt the desk to their unique needs, adding accessories such as extra storage space or lighting.

The Offset table evolved from research into people's behaviour and the changes in working and living habits. At the core of the system lies the simplicity of its construction; a gap defines the working area by separating the top into two surfaces while serving as the connecting element for both the structure and accessories. "The final design is of course based on aesthetics, but it is also based on looking at the behaviour of people using the table »



Top For his No 7 chair, Alonso reinterprets a traditional technique, bent plywood

Above Cluthefree, a hanger that can be reassembled to be wall mounted

Above right The folding A Frame table has space-squeezed urbanites in mind

and on structure, and putting all of those elements together, while trying to keep it simple," says Alonso. "That's more or less how I approach most projects."

Flexibility is another characteristic of Offset, although for Alonso this isn't so much about the idea that users can change the table occasionally but rather about making it work to their needs. "That's much more important than trying to sell something that you can take apart or combine in different ways," he says. "It's more about something that adjusts to what you need in your space or your circumstances."

Many of Alonso's projects are based on observation of how people use objects and furniture in everyday life. His A Frame side tables for Karimoku New Standard, for example, rest on a simple trestle-type set of legs that allows them to be easily folded flat, to accommodate contemporary city living. "We need furniture that works with the way we live now and not try to model ourselves around the furniture we have," he says. Experimentation and research also run through Alonso's approach to materials, as was the case in a

recent project for Hong Kong-based manufacturer Praxis, which challenged different designers to create an accessory out of natural rubber. Challenging the often negative connotations of cheapness and environmental harm associated with rubber, Alonso designed a series of geometric desk trays called Euclid, combined the rubber with natural ash. Once the decision was made about this combination

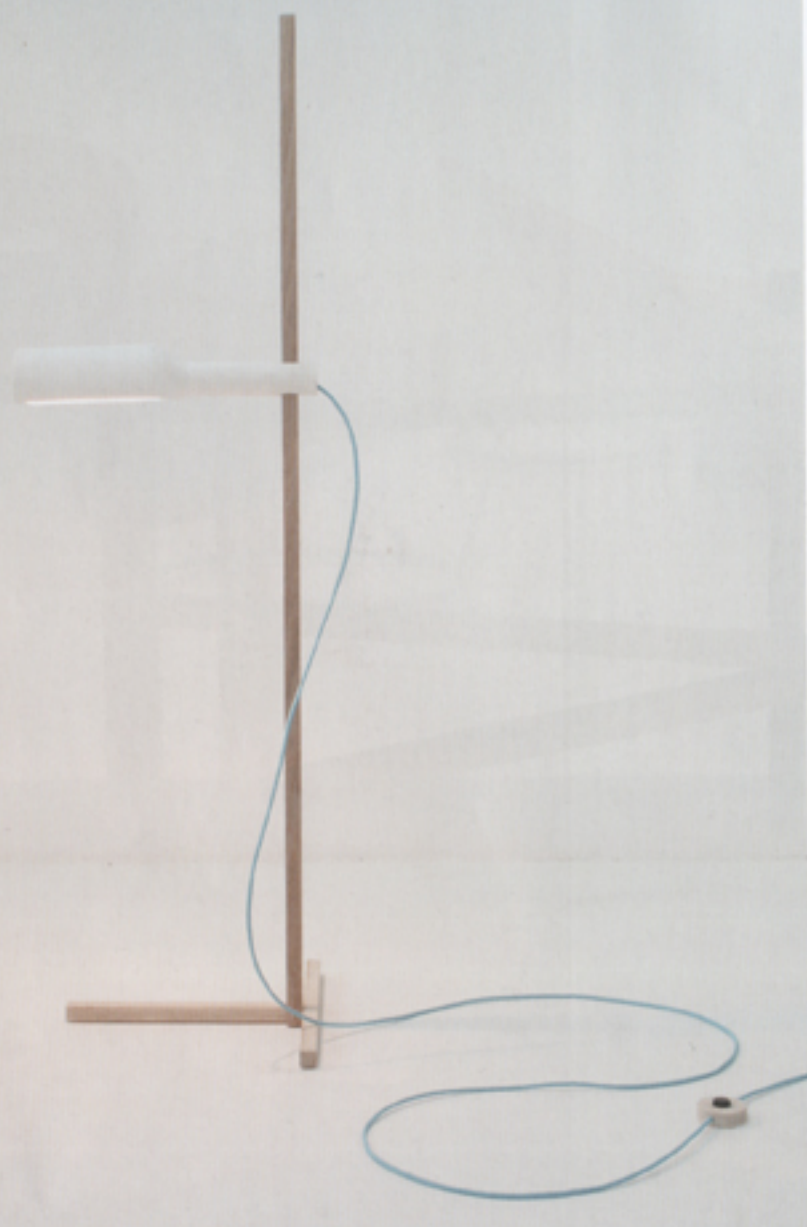
of materials, their inherent properties informed the eventual design, with the flexibility of the rubber sides neatly holding the wood bottom in place.

Challenging the perceived properties of materials similarly informed the table

and benches he designed for One Part Chef, Four Parts Designer, a 2010 project for the V&A that combined food and design. His work played on the theme of contrast and balance between the materials – steel tube and solid wood – and the structural research into how the two could be combined.

The positive responses that the V&A project received led to many requests for projects with a »

**'We need furniture that works with the way we live now'**



Left The Bottle light's adjustable shade holds itself in place with its own weight

Below LED tube lights form the starting point for the form of the Mr Lights series

Bottom Side Table for an Apple: like the Bottle light, the top is self-supporting



similar design direction, but he sees those as a mixed blessing, as he prefers not to be pigeon-holed. "I don't want to be conceived as the designer who works with metal tubes and wood," he explains. "It's about the overall approach. Each project you do should be a completely different experience."

Alonso's background is certainly varied. The 38-year-old designer spent a decade studying and working in the USA, Australia and Italy, before graduating from the Royal College of Art's Design Products masters degree in 2006. His work ranges from retail interiors for shoe brand Camper – most recently in Thessaloniki – to gallery commissions that allow him a more playful and experimental approach.

During his time in the United States, Alonso worked as the design director for OZ Racing, which makes alloy wheels – an experience that still informs his work today. "That experience taught me a lot,"

'They look simple,  
but it takes a while  
to arrive at that'

he says. "There were many technical sides to the job, and my brain is still a little bit technical sometimes. I'm always driven to see how something works and in that job there was a lot of that."

He is also driven by variety and constant challenge – by discovering the new possibilities every project entails. He would like to bring more of his design thinking to the office world, for example, now that he has started investigating it – maybe even tackling what he calls a "hardcore office system". He is already exploring some shelving and possibly a chair with Maxdesign using the Offset principles.

But whatever comes next, however simple on the face of it, it needs to challenge the expected shape, way or behaviour of things – of space, furniture, objects and people. As Alonso says, he is constantly striving "to try and find something new but still keep it simple and functional". ■

