



Hans Wegner

A modern master of furniture design

by Irving Sloane

After World War II, a revolution in the design of furniture radically altered the style of home furnishings. A new wave of light, functional furniture using an exposed framework of naturally finished woods found a ready market. These modern designs possessed a freshness and homogeneity that encouraged free choice. The old reliance on matched living, dining and bedroom suites gave way as people began selecting pieces of furniture on the basis of individual merit and functional suitability.

Denmark was the center of this revolution, led by a handful of designers—Finn Juhl, Borge Mogensen, Hans Wegner, Arne Jacobsen. Its impact was international, and Denmark, an agricultural economy before the war, experienced a tremendous surge in furniture exports: 3 million kroner in 1950; 146 million kroner in 1960; 725 million kroner in 1973. By



This adaptation of a traditional Windsor chair was designed by Wegner in 1947. Known as the Peacock chair, it is the first of Wegner's designs to attain popularity in the U.S. The subtly graduated, flattened portion in each of the back spindles provides comfortable back support, and emphasizes the dramatic size and sweep of the back. Flying supports, doweled into the bulbous ends of the stretcher, pierce the seat and hold the arms. Each support actually consists of two parts that divide at the top face of the seat, with the bottom section doweled into the upper.



1978, Danish furniture exports had reached an astonishing 1,566 million kroner.

From the standpoint of the range and quality of his extraordinary productivity, the outstanding figure of this group was, and remains, Hans Wegner. His brilliant designs are admired and sold in many countries. Many institutions have bestowed honors and awards on him, and his chairs—he is pre-eminently a chair designer—are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the National Museum in Stockholm, the National Gallery in Melbourne, and others. Leading architects and designers have used Wegner's furniture at Harvard University, the United Nations, the World Bank, UNESCO (Paris), the Salk Institute, the Seagram Building, the Chase Manhattan Bank, and

IBM headquarters (New York and Europe). The recent death of Charles Eames leaves Wegner the single most important furniture designer in the world today.

Wegner is a quiet, mild-mannered man of 65. His provincial background has given him a native reserve that melts easily into the warm geniality one often encounters among the older generation of Danes. He speaks in subdued tones, obviously sincere. He lives in an attractive modern house he designed, on a leafy terrace a few miles outside Copenhagen. The interior is all Wegner: airy spaciousness and comfort, his furniture set off by beautiful color and texture.

At lunch, I express interest in the artifacts about the room. They are things collected over the years, and he eagerly brings some to the table for closer inspection: primitive ax heads, an Eskimo carving, Japanese lacquerware. I ask him if he enjoyed his years teaching at *Kunsthåndværkerskolen*, the School of Arts, Crafts and Design, in Copenhagen.

"It was a difficult time. I taught only from 9 to 12, worked in a design studio all afternoon, and was busy with my own design work evenings."

He says this with vague regret; teaching perhaps was not his style. I ask if design can really be taught.

"Up to a point, but unless you have some talent you can't expect to get very far. Many young people today take training in furniture design and cabinetmaking but almost all of them want to be designers. Very few seem interested in spending the time and effort necessary to become skilled cabinetmakers. Because of this, and the increasing sophistication of modern woodworking machines, I see the time coming when these skills will rest mainly in the hands of do-it-yourselfers. The professionals, in the best sense of the word—men with pride in their skill—will quietly disappear, and it's a great pity. Is there anything more fundamentally human or rewarding than mastering a trade and making a living at it?"

This talk leads to soft reminiscence about his early career. Wegner was born in 1914 in the south Jutland town of Tonder, a small provincial trading center on the Danish side of the German border. In 1914, Tonder was still part of the Danish territory Germany had seized in the war of 1864. In 1920, a plebiscite authorized by the Treaty of Versailles restored Tonder to Danish sovereignty.

Wegner's father was a shoemaker, a skilled craftsman, so young Hans was indoctrinated early in traditional craft. At age 14, he was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker. After four years he became a journeyman and worked locally for another three years. At 21 he enrolled at the Technological Institute in Copenhagen for a course in furniture making. Then from late 1936 through 1938 Wegner trained as a furniture designer at the *Kunsthåndværkerskolen*, where he later taught.

"My intention was to open a cabinetmaking shop, and I felt that training in design would be a valuable asset. It was a good decision, and I learned many useful things such as technical drawing and design basics. In 1938 I was offered a job as design assistant in the Aarhus design office of Arne Jacobsen and Erik Moller. I asked a professor at the school whether I should complete my school program, or take the job in Aarhus. He advised me to take the job, and I did."

Jacobsen, who later became prominent as a designer and architect, was interested, like Eames, in the possibilities of molded plywood. He is best known for his molded plywood chair with three-legged metal base, and for his futuristic, swiveling Egg chair. It was Wegner's first contact with the

professional world of design. He worked there for five years, and it soon became clear that his real career lay in design.

The last three years in Aarhus were difficult. Germany occupied Denmark in 1940, movement was restricted, and curfews were in effect. Wegner spent his spare time submitting designs and winning awards in design competitions for furniture, lighting fixtures, silverware, even a service station. Most important were the annual competitions sponsored by the Copenhagen Cabinetmakers' Guild. Wegner won awards in each guild competition between 1941 and 1947. The guild members were cabinetmakers, many operating small production shops. Wegner remembers them with affection.

"The old cabinetmakers were rugged individualists. They trusted their instincts and weren't afraid to take a chance on



Wegner's Chinese chair (top), designed in 1943 and here shown at the museum in Tonder, where Wegner was born, is a beautifully understated adaptation of the rectilinear formalism of Chinese furniture. The wishbone chair (above) is a direct descendent of the Chinese chair, but is more centered in the Wegner style—unified arms and back, slightly splayed legs, canted, woven seat. The wishbone splat and bow are laminated, but the gracefully curved legs are bandsawn to shape.

something new even though they sometimes lost their investment. The competitions were their attempt to keep from being pushed out by the big factories. It was a wonderful forum for a young designer, and resulted in my association with Johannes Hansen, a company that still produces my furniture.

“The dominant figure in furniture design in those days was Kaare Klint, the father of modern Danish design. He was a rather distant person of uncompromising standards, difficult to know, but fair in his judgments; if he liked your work, he told you so. His approach to design was that of a strict classicist. He would take a Chippendale chair, for example, and say: ‘Now let’s see what we can do to improve this perfectly good, attractive old chair.’ Design for him was a slowly evolving process, and he saw no sense or purpose in rejecting the old for the sake of creating something entirely new.

“There was much to admire in Klint’s work, and in his integrity, but it wasn’t good enough for the next generation. We felt the pressing social needs of the time more than he did, and we were anxious for a fresh start.”

In 1943 Wegner opened his own design studio in Aarhus. The war ended in 1945, and suddenly everything seemed possible. “It was a marvelous, exhilarating time. We were free to

do as we wanted, and eager to get going. In 1946 my wife and I moved to Copenhagen, and I began the busy round of teaching mornings, working afternoons in the design studio of Palle Suenson, and evenings were spent on my own design work. I had already designed a Chinese-style chair in 1943, and I had one chair in production, a Shaker-inspired rocking chair I designed for the Danish Cooperative Movement, a chain of stores.

“The Windsor chair was a popular theme, and I designed several of them. In 1947, with the help of Niels Thomsen, the shop foreman at Johannes Hansen, I built the first prototype of my Windsor chair, known in Denmark as the Peacock chair. Johannes Hansen, the owner, didn’t mind our using his shop after hours, and this close collaboration with Thomsen, a fine craftsman, has continued to the present time. Hansen was indulgent, but he didn’t feel the chair was for him.”

Wegner also speaks warmly of his friendship with Borge Mogensen, a Jutlander like himself, and Finn Juhl, a cosmopolitan from Copenhagen. “We worked in a spirit of fun. None of us dreamed that we might one day make a living from the furniture we designed. I remember that it was during this time, 1948, I participated in a Museum of Modern Art competition with a large project on inexpensive furniture.”

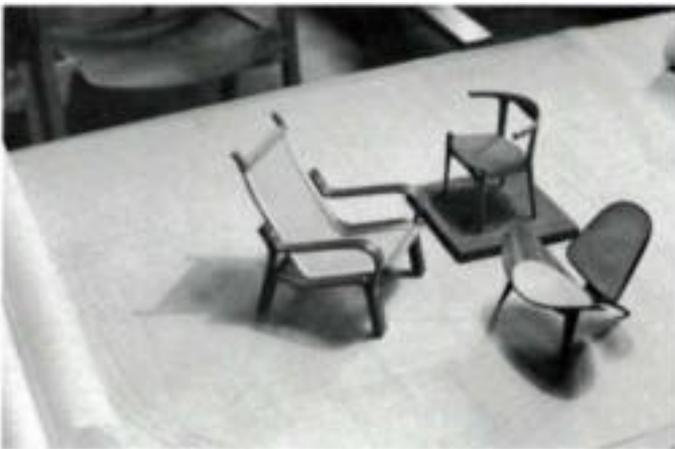
After lunch, he leads me downstairs to his workshop and studio, a large L-shaped room with desks, a drawing table and an old workbench. His daughter Marianne, an architect, is working at a table. She is his design assistant. Scale models of new chair designs stand around the room, and a large model of an outdoor lighting fixture rises between two desks. A high shelf along one wall is crowded with careful miniatures Wegner makes before going to a full-size prototype. They are done to ¼-scale, marvelously precise even to the woven seats and backs. He lifts a full-size model of a chair onto a desk. It is constructed entirely of buff-colored cardboard cut with considerable ingenuity to convey a sense of mass and form.

“I start with very rough thumbnail sketches, then an improved drawing and a miniature model. For upholstered chairs, I make models in plasticine; it doesn’t harden and I can always make changes. The model brings the design to life for me. Sketches and drawings don’t reveal the shortcomings in a design the way a model does. It’s the most exciting part of design work for me, seeing the designs take shape and become a reality.”

The studio—among his models, the rolls of work drawings, his drawing instruments—is Wegner’s element. He is relaxed, expansive, his speech more animated. His wood-working tools are stored neatly in a closet near his bench, some double-iron wooden planes, chisels and other tools. He shows me a wood carving made in his boyhood, a nicely carved figure of a nude with arms outstretched.

We speak about design and public taste. I suggest that modern art has been responsible for the self-conscious approach to aesthetic judgments that asks, “Should I like this?” instead of “Do I like this?” He agrees and speaks with feeling about the unfortunate tendency of young craftsmen and designers to invest their work with a mystique it does not possess. He gives no hint himself of being prone to elegant introspection, and innately distrusts that process of emotional or psychological involvement whereby a craft object emerges as a deeply felt, personal “statement.”

“A designer must maintain an objective view of his work. I’ve seen students—young designers—with a new design,



Wegner always makes models of his designs, first miniature, as at top, then full-size. The one above is of cardboard, ingeniously cut and constructed to suggest mass and form.

and they think: 'This is something really precious, and I must be careful what I do with it, and to whom I show it.' When you have this kind of emotional involvement, you lose the objectivity every good designer must have. You just can't afford this kind of sentimentality."

Wegner has a shockproof detector for what he finds superficial or enfeebling in his designs. He tells about the work that led to his famous Classic chair. "I was working on the full-scale model, and was unhappy about the arm. Its form didn't seem right to me. I took a walk, thought it over, and sawed off the offending portion. I glued on a new piece and gave it the shape it has today. If I had not done it, the chair would never have achieved the success it has. It was an important lesson, and also taught me the value of making my own models. If another cabinetmaker had made it, I would have hesitated to ruthlessly saw off half an arm."

After a model reaches final form, he makes a 1:1 working drawing. It is drawn with meticulous precision, leaving nothing to the whim or judgment of the cabinetmaker.

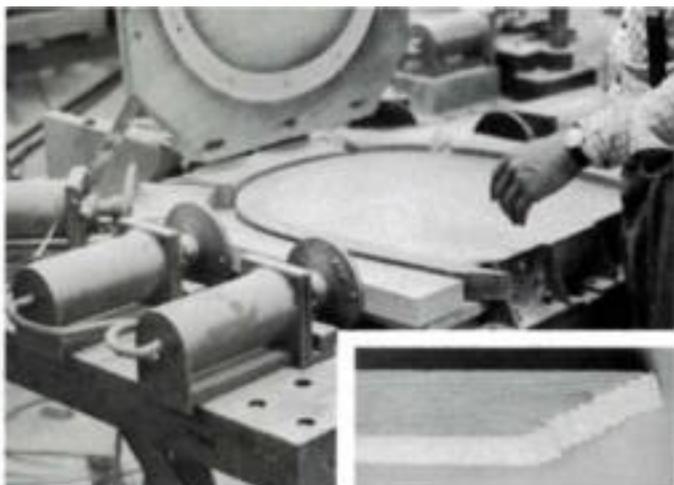
The studio visit complete, we drive to the workshop of PP Furniture Company. Ejnar Pedersen, a stocky, bearded man in his fifties, is the working owner of PP, a medium-sized

shop employing about 12 people. Pedersen declares he has never seen a craftsman with Wegner's gift for working wood. Wegner leads me around the workshops and points out items of interest. It is after 3:30 P.M. and the workers have left.

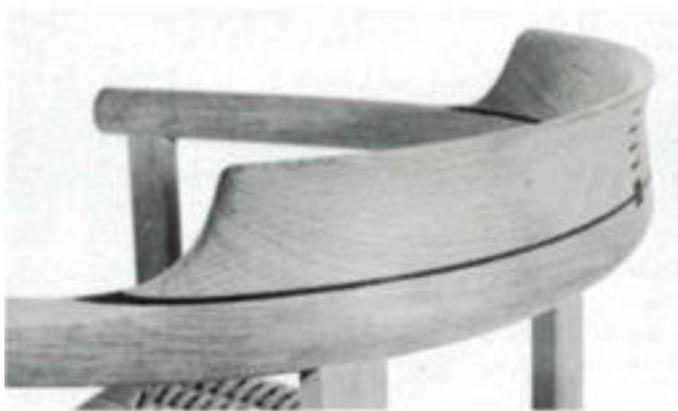
"I sometimes come here in the evenings to work on my models, and often run into other workers. Pedersen lets them come back in the evening to make furniture for themselves. It's a kind of family atmosphere."

PP manufactures a number of Wegner chairs, principally a chair that resembles a captain's chair. They also make some of Wegner's tables, tea carts and a sewing table. These pieces are distinguished by Shaker-like simplicity, purity of line and exemplary craftsmanship. Everything is made to the highest standards, and Wegner keeps a close watch. He picks up the bowed back member of the captain's chair. "If you look closely, you will see that this piece is a lamination of 15 pieces of ash; it is not bent with steam."

I examine the edges carefully, and am surprised to find that it is indeed a lamination. Yet the surface figure shows unbroken continuity—it looks like solid wood. He explains: "These 1½-mm (about ⅙ in.) ash veneer strips are not sawn—they're sliced with a big knife that cuts with a shear-



Bowed back of captain's chair consists of 15 pieces of ash, sliced, not sawn, from a single board and then glued back together on an electric form in their original order. In contrast to this technique, which conceals the laminations, Wegner uses wenge strips and splines to accentuate the joints between the other parts of the back.



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At the PP Furniture Company, one of the eight firms in Denmark that produce Wegner's designs, each bin, above, holds patterns and jigs for one chair. Left, stacks of Shaker-style chairs about to be corded.



With Wegner near a stack of Peacock chairs is Niels Thomsen, foreman at the Johannes Hansen factory. Thirty years ago, Thomsen helped build the prototype for this chair.



Thomsen demonstrates a welded steel jig that clamps the bowed member of a Peacock chair in place for drilling the 16 spindle holes. Welded sections of tubing canted at the correct angles steer the drill.

ing action. They're kept in series and glued in an electric form, where they dry in two minutes. We can't use steam-bent wood because the process is not exact enough. When you are making a series of one or two hundred chairs, it's absolutely essential that each bent member be exactly like the next one."

Was there any particular wood he favored? "I like all wood and use oak, ash, cherry, maple, walnut, teak, and occasionally, mahogany. I also like Brazilian rosewood but we can't get it anymore. The walnut comes from America; I prefer French walnut but it's very hard to get. Beech is something of a problem in Denmark. It's so common that Danes burn it for firewood, and furniture made of beech would sell poorly here. Teak is out of style. It was used so much in the '50s and '60s that Scandinavians tired of it. We still use it for exported furniture. I personally like teak because it's beautiful and can easily be kept with oil.

"We use as much domestic timber as possible. Danish oak is stronger than oak from the southern regions of Europe because of our colder climate and shorter growing season. For inlay we use wenge."

The captain-style chair uses wenge as an interface veneer, and as short splines to reinforce a butt center joint. Wegner

normally avoids surface decoration, but in this case he has made decorative use of a functional necessity. "It also helps in another way," he adds. "If there is some unavoidable defect like a small knot or grain irregularity, the dark center design draws your attention so that you don't notice the defect."

Production of Wegner's chairs and furniture is spread over at least eight factories. He has designed many chairs for institutional use (schools, libraries, and restaurants); these are often spray-lacquered in customer-selected colors. He has also designed wall units that come with various shelf, cabinet and drawer-case arrangements for consumer adaptation. Pedersen's entire production, except for an occasional outside job, is given over to Wegner's designs. But Wegner has refused a remunerative offer from a large American manufacturer interested in producing his furniture.

"I prefer to work with the people I've been working with for many years. I feel a certain loyalty to them, and I'm also afraid the quality would suffer if my furniture got into a real 'mass-produced' situation. Pedersen here has twelve employees; if he had twenty-five it would be too much. The quality would deteriorate."

Quality is a constant concern. Two-piece butted chair backs are bookmatched, and arms and legs are cut from the same

board or fitch. Nowhere do I see a part mismatched in color or figure. Seat weaving is farmed out locally, as piecework.

We drive back to Wegner's house talking about the future of skilled work in a country with serious unemployment. Education is free, and the broad movement toward a university degree has created an oversupply of academics and professionals. College education tends to be protracted by the scarcity of jobs; undergraduates of 30 or older are not unusual. Private-sector employment is shrinking while public-sector employment grows rapidly (up 53.7% between 1970 and 1977). The government is under pressure to reverse this trend, and among the remedies is a pre-pension scheme to encourage early retirement at 60. Wegner feels this diminishes an already dwindling supply of skilled craftsmen who serve as valuable models for newcomers.

"Machines can do a lot, but my furniture still requires a great deal of skilled handwork. With the slow disappearance of these skills, I'm not sure it will be possible to make my kind of furniture in 15 or 20 years."

Many young American woodworkers think in terms of operating shops where they will be both designer and maker. But Wegner thinks, "It would be difficult to do a good job of both. It would be hard to make a decent living."

Wegner's mode of operation is to design a chair, for example, and take it up to the full-scale-model stage. He then shows it to the principals of shops that might be interested in producing it. (Despite his awesome record, many of his designs have not been produced.) If they go ahead, he makes a production drawing and with the shop people works out the production bugs. For this he gets a small percentage of the manufacturer's invoiced price. He also designs special-order furniture to match his chairs, and lighting fixtures.

We meet the following morning at the Johannes Hansen factory in Gladsaxe, just west of Copenhagen. Hansen's is larger than Pedersen's, with perhaps 20 employees. Their entire production is Wegner's designs, a working association now in its 40th year. The Classic, Peacock, valet, cow-horn

and folding chair are among the chairs made here.

We are greeted by Niels Thomsen, Wegner's longtime friend and collaborator. He is in his late 60s and, like Wegner, apprenticed at age 14. We move through the workrooms, with Wegner and the workers exchanging friendly waves. I ask Thomsen if he gets apprenticeship applicants. "No, and anyway we really wouldn't be interested in inexperienced help. If we hear about a shop closing down we might hire the most experienced men; that's mainly how we get help. But there's not much turnover here. Most of these men have been here for 15, 20, 25 years or more."

Wegner leads me to a small room where a German six-station copying machine is shaping Peacock chair arms out of bandsawn teak billets. The machine works from precise steel masters, copying the parts with unvarying fidelity and leaving only minor hand-finishing. The Peacock chair is also made with ash arms, but Wegner prefers teak because it has less tendency to soil. For the finish, he prefers oil or wax.

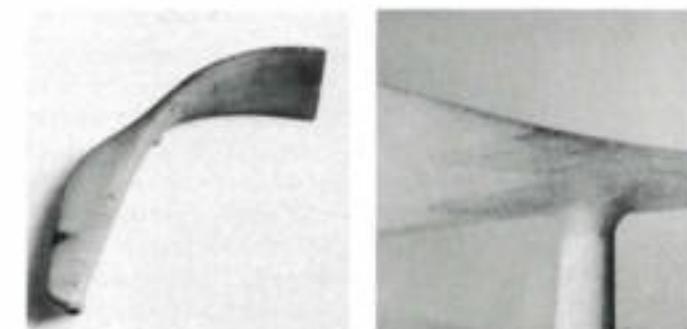
He picks up a worker's wooden smoothing plane and runs his fingers over the sole. A recollection brings a smile: "When I was working as a cabinetmaker we had a little trick—when ever we went on vacation we would put a few drops of oil on the bottom of the planes and set them on a piece of glass. This helped to keep the bottom level."

Stacks of Peacock chairs in the main workroom await seat-weaving and arm installation. The bowed back member is an ash lamination cured in a dielectric heating press. Before assembly of the 8-mm ($\frac{5}{16}$ -in.) thick strips, each tapered center section is thinned on a jiggged router setup so that the finished lamination is 6 mm thinner in the central, top portion of the bow. Wegner has done this for aesthetic reasons. A uniformly thick bow would unbalance the chair's appearance. The finished lamination is quarter-rounded on a shaper.

The Peacock chair is popular in the United States, and Wegner speaks again of the chair's early days. "The first prototype I put together with Thomsen's help in 1947 went with an exhibition to Holland and disappeared. We didn't



The valet chair demonstrates Wegner's inventive handling of a functional idea, in sculptural terms. The back member and legs are Oregon pine, with joinery and bold figure oriented to accentuate the banger and backrest. A seat of teak lifts up to hold a folded pair of pants on its shaped edge, revealing a triangular tray for keys, watch and change. The late King Frederik IX of Denmark was the first purchaser of the valet chair, and was fond of presenting it as a gift. Right, a Wegner folding chair, a design often copied cheaply and common in import shops.



The Classic chair (also shown on the cover) is the epitome of Wegner's style. In some models the tapered finger joints between back and arms (cut on a shaper) are left exposed; in others they are wrapped with cane. The arm, left, is the original model that Wegner sawed a displeasing piece off, replaced and reshaped. The difference in grain between the two pieces indicates the graft. Below, a worker at Hansen's prepares to finish-sand a Classic Chair.



Irving Sloane's most recent book is Making Musical Instruments (E.P. Dutton, 1978). This article owes much to his Danish wife, Lene Host Sloane, a professional interpreter.

think too much about it, but two years later we decided the chair really had something, and we built a second one. It was exhibited here again, and Viggo Sten Moller, director of the Danish Arts and Crafts Association, sent photographs of my chairs to the American magazine *Interiors*. It was the first publicity about my chairs in America, and orders were not long in coming."

Thomsen rummages in a storage room and comes up with the original Classic chair arm of the fateful sawing episode. The pine back and arm are joined with a square dovetail. Wegner felt the joint was an eyesore and wrapped the back with cane to conceal it. The chairs were made this way until he hit on a sawtooth-style splice, aesthetically pleasing and providing a large glue surface. The joint, cut on a shaper, is attractive, though many still prefer the cane-wrapped back.

The Classic chair, designed 30 years ago, is pure Wegner at his best. It has the irreducible simplicity he is constantly striving for, and represents his most innovative contribution to chair design. A rungless chair, it is made possible by the strength of the unified arms and back, and the deep seat rails. The bow includes projections that make the dowel joints to the legs a sculptural continuity—a hallmark of Danish furniture, Wegner's in particular. The legs are turned thicker above their midpoint, where they connect to the seat. They form solid, straight lines, the front angled slightly back and in, the rear, forward and in. A comfortable chair, it has the sort of design universality that makes it at home with a desk or dining table, or as an occasional chair. The chair received international exposure during the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, when each candidate sat in one.

I comment about the great design wave of the '50s and the long, relatively static situation since. "You have to remember that the war years left a vacuum; moreover, the Danish designers who were ready to fill this vacuum were fed up with the endless, tired imitations of period furniture. Looking back, I can see now that the furniture we produced was the natural result of a long process involving social and cultural factors—more evolution than revolution. And before us there was the Bauhaus with Stam, Mies van der Rohe, Breuer—they designed some of the finest metal chairs ever made.

"There is much confusion today about what is modern, what is functional, and my hope always is that people will not be drawn to novelty, but will learn to value what is simple and pure in good design. And things should do the job they are designed for. I don't think that's asking too much."

We speak about the changing context in which designers work, and his regrets over what has happened to the healthy competitiveness he feels was important to his early development as a designer. Marketing priorities have steadily shifted from what is good to what will sell. In America there is a vast, sophisticated apparatus for sifting the vagaries of consumers to divine what color, form or fashion will sell. Designers must more and more respond to fad. And as the stakes get higher, the chance for great design waves—such as the one in which Wegner figured so importantly—will diminish.

I left, turning over in my mind a conversation of some years before. In 1972 I toured the *Kunsthåndværkerskolen* in the company of the school director, Ole Gjerlov-Knudsen. We were discussing craft education when the subject of furniture design and Wegner came up. He said: "The Danish government believes that if we train 5,000 designers, and produce one Hans Wegner, the money is very well spent." □