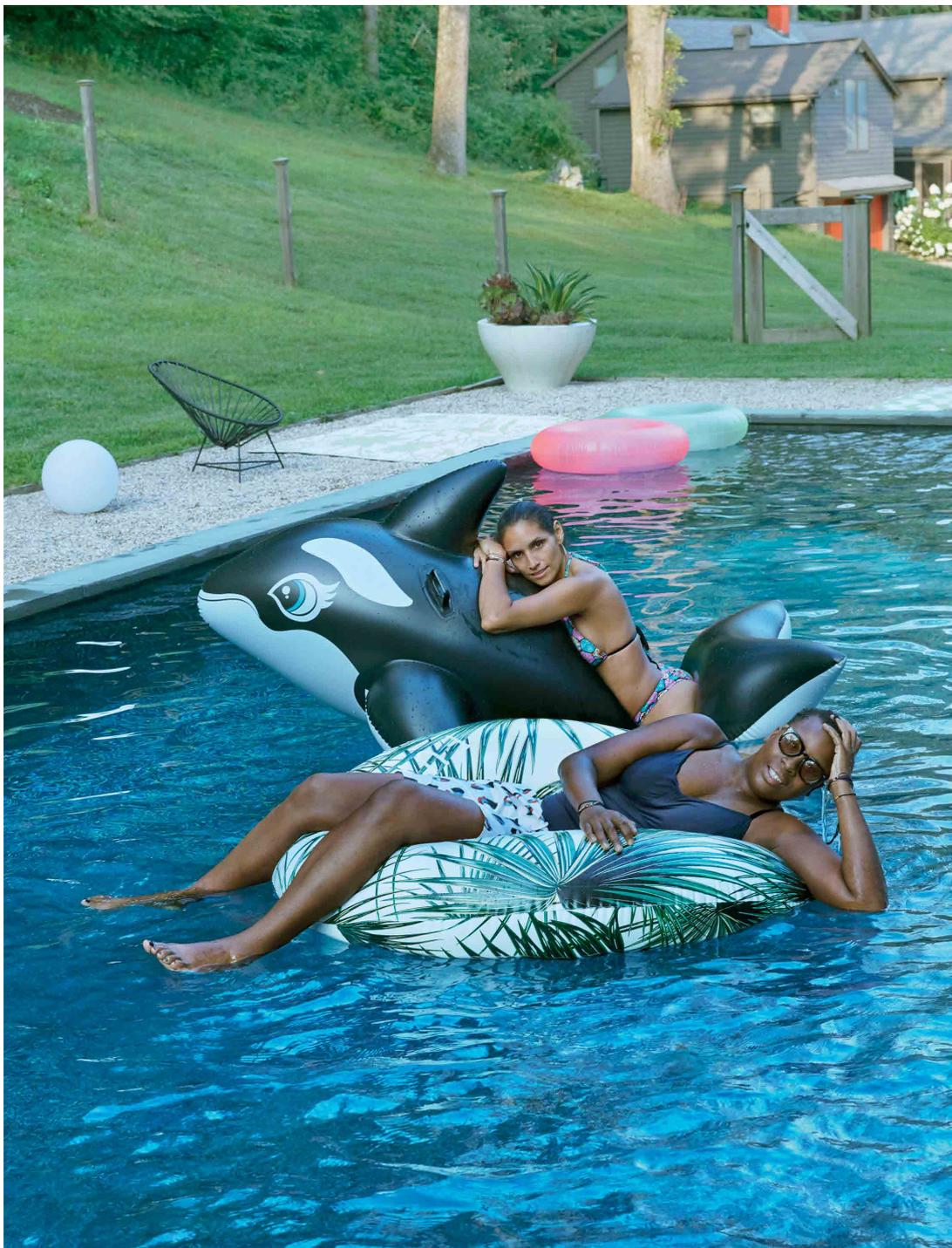


# UPSTATE DIARY



## HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Mickalene Thomas / Sean Kelly / Judy Pfaff / Mary McCartney / Donald Judd's *Casa Perez*  
 Terhi Tolvanen / Brice Marden / Letha Wilson / Georgie Hopton / Kirsten Owen

THIS MAN

Words Chris Hartman

IS A

FURNITURE

Photography Christian Anwander

ACTIVIST





## Ken Landauer has a radical notion

— he wants to produce sustainable, comfortable, beautiful, and affordable furniture for a public whose experience with and taste in home furnishings has been shaped mainly by large corporations and cheap foreign labor. Inspired by the anti-corporatism of the Occupy movement, the former art professor has adapted that philosophy to FN Furniture, his line of approximately twenty pieces, including chairs, tables, chaise lounges, and other items. Taken together, they comprise the “99% Project.” It’s furniture as activism.

Landauer, a native of Jamaica, Queens, who now lives in Stone Ridge, New York, spent thirty years teaching art mainly at Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of the Arts, and at the School of Visual Arts’ Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Program, as well as at nearby Bard College. But contemporaneously, he had pursued woodworking and home contracting, and constructed the first cross-laminated timber (CLT) home in the Northeastern U.S. From the proceeds of that house, Landauer decided to pursue his dream of making high-quality furniture. To accomplish this, he successfully paired aesthetics and utility “in a way that amplifies instead of diminishing [each piece], which is the challenge of making art.”

The rubric Landauer follows emphasizes the most efficient, economical, sturdy, and comfortable furniture he can make; in short, what’s the *most* he can make from the *least*. And this focused approach has gained him a number of institutional clients, such as The Museum of Art and Design in Manhattan, among several others. The pieces they purchase, such as chairs and benches, are not for exhibition, but rather for their visitors’

comfort. This has inspired Landauer to plumb for more commercial clients. From his adjusted spacing perspective, “The commercial route may be a way to go, because the problem with making less expensive furniture is that I have to sell a lot more of it to pay my bills.”

The material Landauer employs is CDX laminated plywood: “I was trying to make something with the most basic material possible ... and plywood is that. It’s ubiquitous ... and very strong, stable, and inexpensive.” He wants to acquire it locally, but over time, as the quality of American plywood has declined from five to four-ply, he’s been forced into overseas sources because, he lamented, “I was putting too much time into this to buy crappy plywood.” He has also made use of a CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) router. The router operates with design CAD software to cut intricate shapes from a single slab of plywood, and enables him to create precision joints to within 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of an inch. This allows him to build an independent production line that’s fairly expansive — upwards of 200 individual pieces in the past year and a half. The efficiency of this process, in turn, reduces the expense as well as the waste generated. For Landauer, “zero waste” is not just an aspiration but a frequent achievement.

Keeping the manufacturing process local and his products accessible to a broader community are essential to Landauer. He also conducts his own “product testing” by living with his furniture before offering it to the public. In the case of his chaise lounge, he’ll attach either a ½ inch layer of felt or sheepskin to the hardwood surface to make it more comfortable. And, as a 19-year, daily practitioner of yoga, Landauer appreci-



Left: Ken with F1 Banquet Table and F1 Chaise. Opposite: F2 Rocker, F5 Chair, F5 Barstool and F2 Lounge Chair.

psychologists and relationship experts have said that a trip to Ikea will often lead to an argument. And assembling Ikea furniture “generally ensures a blow up.” Landauer is passionate when he says “Ikea has made itself into a four-letter word.” He asserted that it started off

with a noble premise, to make affordable, quality things, but has since become a corporation. Landauer has followed Ikea closely in the intervening years. “I went back to look at their assembly methods ... and they just haven’t figured out how to make [their furniture] go together more easily. And what they do is send it out to people, and it’s so discouraging, they wind up hating it. In a way, you could say Ikea *really* respects its customers because they’re sending them a cabinet that only a professional can put together easily.”

In a “Walmart economy” that offers consumers cheap goods of all kinds, Landauer insists, “I don’t want it to be consumed. I want it to be *owned*, so that people respect and take care of it. For example, my business model would be Electrolux and not Hoover. Electrolux made and makes beautiful vacuums. And Hoover treated their business by going for the biggest buck, and they just make garbage.” And Apple has earned particular criticism from Landauer for the environmental degradation they’ve created. “In my book Steve Jobs is one of our biggest criminals, not one of our biggest heroes, because he’s responsible for more e-waste than anyone else on the planet. Design-wise, I totally admire him, and a lot of his business decisions were incredible, but his overall effect on the planet has been incredibly destructive.”

To go along with a number of significant achievements, Landauer has also faced several challenges in his business — financial and otherwise. “I don’t have money in the bank or a bunch of family money behind me, so it’s been an extremely stressful two years ... Just two weeks ago, I bounced checks from three different accounts — don’t tell my wife, but she can find out when this is published — that was like on a Thursday or Friday, and then on Monday I got an email from *Architectural Digest* telling me they’re giving me a ‘Cleverest Design’ award for 2018.” Landauer has also experienced irregular sleeping patterns that have solved seemingly impenetrable blocks that wasted entire days — such as the time he woke at three in the morning with a “eureka!” moment for solving a hinge issue on a folding table for the Museum of Arts and Design: “Here I am, banging my head against the wall all day, and then something comes together in that creative time.”

As an evangelist for the importance of locally produced, yet economical furniture, Landauer muses on the dysfunction of our economy: “I really don’t think we realize how fucked up the economy is until we have to buy something local; you know, we have to get our house fixed, we have to hire a plumber and electrician, or do some work, and everyone thinks it’s so expensive. But what’s really happened is that our economy is fucked up, and we only think our economy *isn’t* fucked up is because we can buy a bunch of crap from China that’s so cheap we can have plenty of it.” ■

Learn more at [fnfurniture.com](http://fnfurniture.com) Christian Anwander, [christiananwander.com](http://christiananwander.com). Chris Hartman is a regular contributor to UD.

ates the importance of encouraging good posture through his furniture. For instance, one of his patrons is the noted British artist Gary Hume, who had a lumbar ailment that Landauer’s straight-backed chairs helped alleviate. Hume, who’s known Landauer for years, applauds his mission: “The apparent simplicity of [his] design, led by his desire to reduce waste to the absolute minimum, using the materials’ inherent qualities to produce elegant, minimal furniture, is exciting ... Good design is permanent; fashions may change, but this level of thoughtful design will always be apparent. [Landauer’s] ethical approach is obviously a prerequisite in a world of decreasing resources and abundant waste.”

Furniture that endures not only aesthetically, but structurally, is important to Landauer. One of the advantages of plywood over regular wood, he asserts, “is that it’s cross-laminated, so the grains are going both vertically and horizontally — they stabilize each other — and it’s not going to shrink and swell.” He also believes, using the example of the bar stool, that its beauty and strength come together using the plywood. Where one would typically place a “mortise” or “lap joint” to make a stool stable, the visually pleasing contours of the plywood provide the added benefit of strength without fasteners or joints. Landauer’s guiding principle is that everything has to really be perfect — particularly if he’s sending pieces out to customers to assemble. “I don’t want people having to spend half a day putting my furniture together. I want it to go together easily and ... to be part of the pleasure of the piece.”

If assembling furniture is made too difficult, disillusion and anger can often result. According to the *Wall Street Journal*,