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DESIGN IS WHAT DESIGN DOES

Your couch may be the latest in furniture couture, but if sitting on it makes you miserable, it’s time to change your designer. Julia Puppe talks with furniture store scion Eric Villency about the good, the bad and the fugly.

Born into a family of artists, Eric Villency’s life has brimmed with creativity. His grandfather, Maurice Villency, and father Robert began designing furniture in New York in 1932. Some 50 years later, six-year-old Eric chased people around the warehouse with a nail gun, playing with furniture like other children play with toys.

He may have got older – and the toys more expensive – but he hasn’t changed: “When you live in New York, you don’t get a chance to drive much because traffic is dreadful. So to have a bunch of cars in the garage is not exciting.” Peek in his and you’ll find some of his design failures instead – pieces he loved that weren’t selling.

Villency’s house has an ever-changing interior of natural materials and warm woods, peppered with his collection of mid-century furniture. His favorite, an Arne Jacobsen Egg Chair, is an original prototype re-upholstered in a mink. “It’s an over-the-top, unbelievable piece that I can’t really sit on because the material isn’t practical. But it’s just a decadent, gorgeous, beautiful, classic design, which is kind of me.”

At home, Villency’s favorite pieces may be forgiven their creative uselessness. At work the furniture store junior embraces practicality. No matter how ele-
Sophisticated design and contemporary architecture combine to winning effect in Villency's unique flagship store on 57th street in Manhattan.

gant his high-end furniture looks, if it's not comfortable and durable, it won't sell in any of his stores. "It's the perfect balance of form and function. That's what represents the best of design."

Sophisticated design and contemporary architecture combines to winning effect in Villency's unique flagship store on 57th street in Manhattan, a full city block with a (primarily) translucent façade. Windows of clear and frosted glass frame the furniture on display.

Maurice Villency has come a long way. Eric Villency has completely changed the company's look and feel, giving it a forward aesthetic - but his involvement very nearly didn't happen. When he left school, Villency wasn't keen on going into the family business. In search of his own identity, he "succumbed" to peer-pressure - most of his classmates were going into finance - and went to study business at the University of Wisconsin.

Villency also came across modeling; or rather, modeling came across him. While going for a run, Eric was spotted by a photographer who asked whether he wanted to be in an ad. "I said 'sure'," laughs Villency, and a year living in Italy was his reward (it's tough being handsome). He also got his first taste of how to combine creativity and commerce.
‘When there’s a photo shoot, there’s an art director, there are photographers, and make-up artists. They are creating a product, and they’re all being paid. There’s budgets and time tables - and that was a valuable experience for me because I got to see what goes into production.’

Six months after graduation, Villency waved goodbye to Calvin Klein and the glamorous world of fashion and beauty to get on with his career. He tried finance, but didn’t like it. ‘I thought it would be good to explore it and at least learn about it. But what I really learned was what I didn’t want to do. I need to be creative. And then I started spending a lot of time with my father...’

Dad taught him furniture the hard way, beginning at the beginning with: it’s heavy. For five months, Villency was unloading trucks at 5:00 a.m. Then Dad made him do everyone’s job in the company for up to a week.

“That was a pretty progressive way to introduce me into the company. I learned how to design furniture just like a contractor, carpenter or plumber learn their jobs. They don’t go to school, they learn by doing it. I had a real practical immersion in design.”

As a result, Villency loves design, and as the host of iDesign he gets to speak about it to a nation he believes is not showing the same love and appreciation.
When you worked as a model, what fascinated you about the fashion industry?
Seeing the business aspect, I had always been around people who were creative, but not necessarily saw that there’s a real economic component to it. It’s a business, and I think that’s the challenge. When you’re doing anything creatively it can never be pure art. At the end of the day, there needs to be some practicality. If you are going to convince someone to pay money for it, it needs some meat there, and it’s not just your own.

Would you describe yourself as a hands-on designer or are you more involved in the management side of the company?
I’m involved in both. That’s the challenge. When I wasn’t responsible for the overall company, I got to spend a lot more time designing and being involved with the creative direction of the company. That’s something that I love. As the president, I have to be much more involved in the actual running of the company. That’s not something my personality tends to gravitate towards. That’s not the sexy, fun part of the business. Part of me wishes I could spend my whole day in the design shop.

How has the design world changed since the days of your grandfather?
The big thing is technology. It’s computers and the materials available. There are designs that I found from my grandfather’s scrapbook that he just couldn’t build structurally and because he didn’t have materials like carbon fiber or some of the materials you can have cantilevered designs. That’s the nature of design. It keeps evolving.
Contemporary design needs to move the ball forward and needs to change—it needs to not just dwell on the past. It needs to explore new things.

Who do you consider to be the tastemakers in the design industry?
There are so many brilliant people working today, but I love Tadao Ando. He’s a brilliant architect, and he’s not classically trained, which shows that you can be creatively successful without having that classical background. Zaha Hadid is great. She has done fantastic theoretical work that’s taking design in a new direction. The Bouroullec brothers are really inspired. And Yves Behar, he does many different projects in many different areas, showing how many different disciplines you can enter as a designer. Fuse Project is his company, and he does furniture, industrial design, backpacks, shoes—it shows how many different worlds you can touch.

What next?
I’ve launched a new production facility called the Villency Atelier program. The way this company started was that you walked into my grandfather’s workshop, his “atelier.” You’d sit down, he’d pour you a glass of Scotch, start sketching things and custom make a piece for you. I was really drawn to this idea. So now you can come in to our Atelier with a sketch or a photo of any piece you like, and we’ll build it exactly the way you want. You can sit on the prototypes and be involved in the process. It’s really like having your own private design workshop.
In an effort to raise design-consciousness amongst his fellow Americans, he has lectured at FIT and MIT Sloan School of Management.

Villency keeps his own cultural awareness high with regular trips to London, Milan, and Tokyo. He is inspired by the things he sees: a particular kind of fabric, a detail from fashion, from interior design or architecture. “An industrial design, if you take it and throw it on paper, can now be a wallpaper design. You can cross all the different disciplines, and it’s never been easier. The most inspiring thing is to take designs from different disciplines and reinterpret them,” he says with passion.

This same passion for design – for quality and thought – comes out when he talks about his favorite eatery in town (Perry St., in one of the sparsely elegant glass towers designed by Richard Meier). Or the Patek Philippe he bought himself for his 30th birthday. “It’s handmade. The whole craft of it and the quality, for me that’s something I respond to, that I love. Even if I’m buying a baby toy for my son Ronan, I just can’t ever let it go. I care that it has good design in it.”

And so even the crib little Ronan sleeps in is a Maurice Villency, custom-made by the president himself.

In an era of mass production, Villency is reawakening the spirit that started his company 75 years ago. His latest project, Villency Atelier, is all about being in the workshop and interacting with engineers, designers and craftsmen – people who will build whatever you conceive. “This is dedicated to high-quality craftsmanship, and being able to execute any design problem.”

It’s a fitting point on which to end our discussion. Villency has to rush off to the airport with his family – wife Kimberly Guilfoyle, former prosecutor and anchor of The Lineup, and son Ronan. It is Memorial Day weekend, the couple’s anniversary, which they are due to spend at Cap Juluca in Anguilla.

“We’ve been going a lot to island destinations. Places like St. Barts sometimes feel like you’re in a suburb of New York because you run into so many people you know and there’s so much nightlife. We live such hectic lives that we really like to relax and slow down. Anguilla is great because it has nice restaurants, it’s quiet, but it’s still a nice luxury experience.” And for once, Eric doesn’t even mention the word design.