

People

Matthew Hilton, one of the UK's most respected designers, shares his passion for making and materials

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From product design to show and finally into projects, we trace the lifecycle of bathroom event ISH

Products

Italian furniture blazes a trail around the world thanks to its innovative and inspiring producers

Projects

Technology is now a must-have, even in a Grade II listed home. Plus designers discuss tech trends

Professional

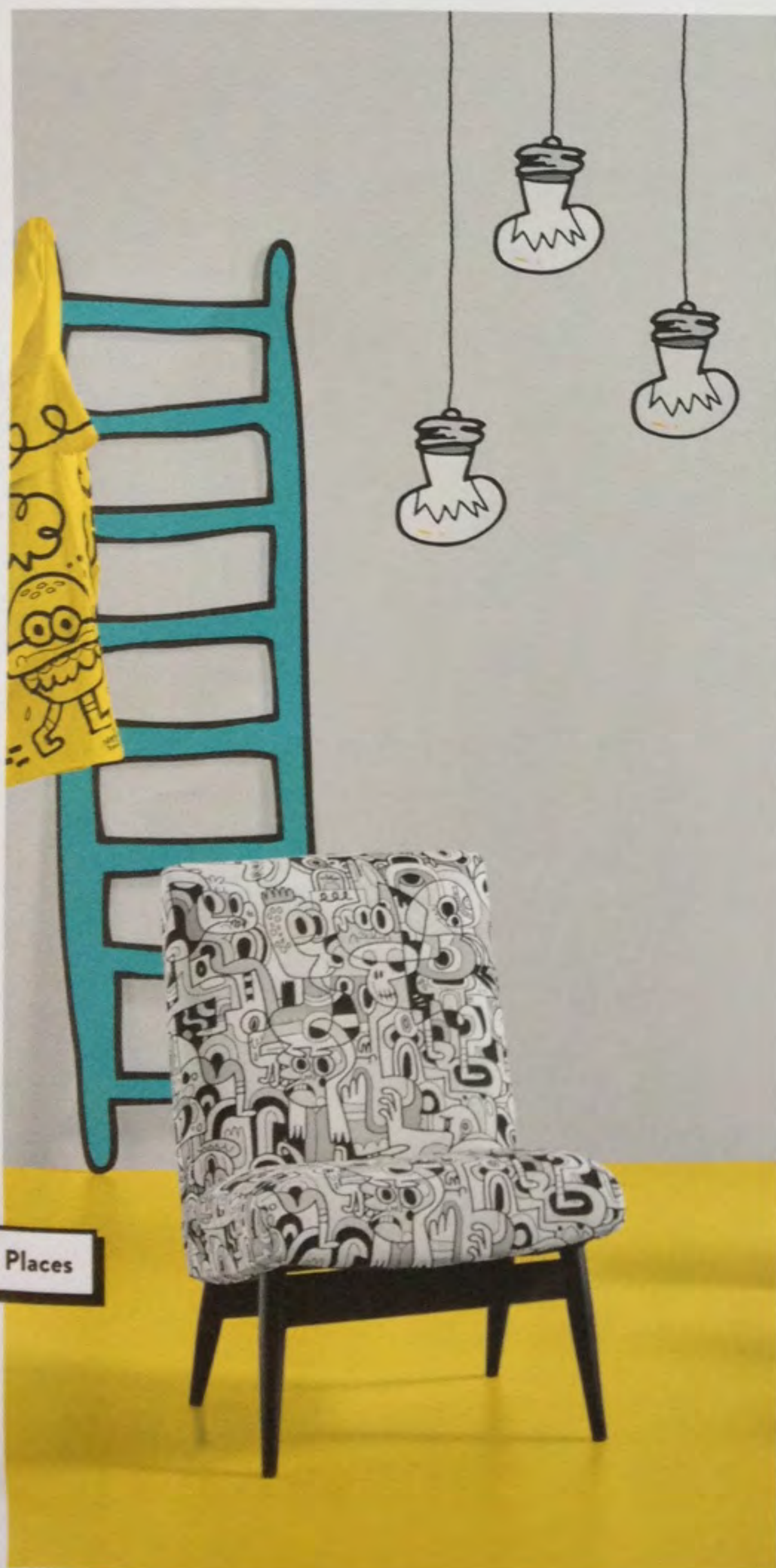
Recent changes in copyright law offer better protection for makers, designers and consumers

Issue 3 / 08.2015 / £4.95

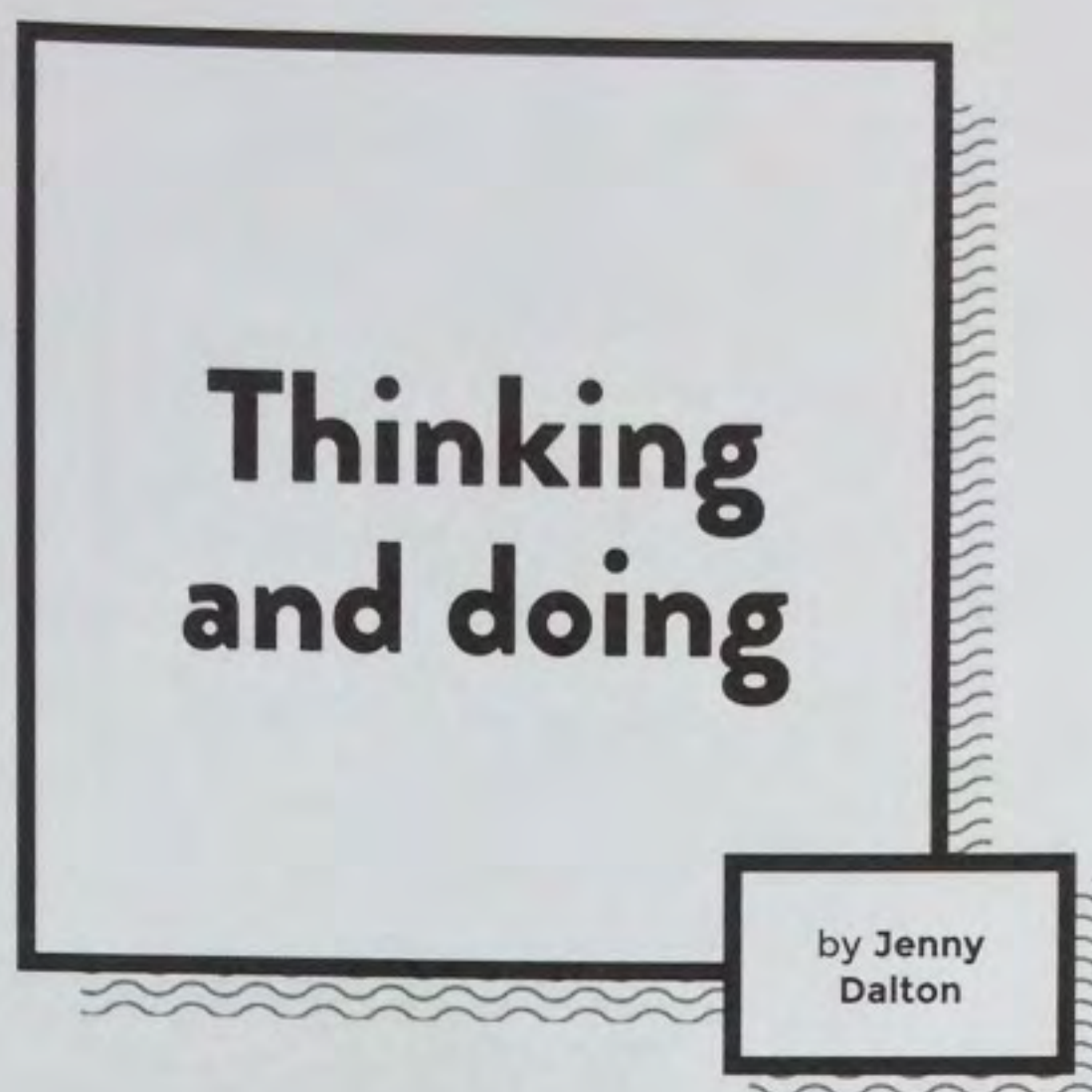
ISSN 2058-623X



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Matthew Hilton is one of the most thoughtful and successful contemporary British designers. His independent and considered approach is a thread that runs clearly through all his work. And after four decades of design, his furniture remains hugely popular while his ideas continue to evolve

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MATTHEW HILTON has always seemed the most poised of British designers. Successful, good-looking, modest, talented, he appears to have navigated the British and international design scene with immense ease over the past 30 years. His designs are equally easy on the eye. But there's complexity beneath, just as underneath that easy Hilton exterior there's a lot going on.

For starters, at the beginning of his career Hilton never felt as comfortable working for foreign companies as some of his equally famous peers did. "I found it very difficult. I didn't feel I knew enough about the companies," he says. "I always wanted to understand things better. There's so much not known - cultural differences, language differences - and there's distance. Distances seemed much greater then than they do now. Even 20 years has made a big difference. On the whole, I found it frustrating. The most successful working relationships are those that are very close."

Today, these are the relationships Hilton fosters. Sheridan Coakley at SCP is a long-time friend for whom Hilton initially designed his famous leather Balzac armchair. An upholstered furniture range, set to launch this autumn, is their latest collaboration. At Case and Ercol, meanwhile,

two more British operations, new designs are scheduled for next year. All three of these relationships are long term.

In 2007, however, Hilton decided to go solo with the majority of his work, producing his own brand collection for the first time in order to take control of an increasingly splintered design landscape. Just after Hilton launched his first handmade prototypes at 100% Design that year, he was approached by De La Espada's director, Luis Oliveira, who suggested they work together, taking the manufacturing pressure off Hilton's shoulders. Now, their exclusive relationship and a growing collection of timber-based furniture, such as Mary's chair (a dining chair influenced by a visit to a cathedral in San Francisco and a play on weight and weightlessness) and the Overton table (which features sections of timber that are cleverly joined so they can be produced in lengths longer than the height of a tree), is being marketed by De La Espada around the world. "I'm more involved. Not just with product development but I do my own photography and graphic design," says Hilton. "As far as possible we do every aspect of everything visual in the studio. It's far more of a representation of me than anything I've ever done before."

Design-wise, the relationship is a progressive one. It has allowed Hilton, who wanted to fill the gap the Scandinavian modernists had left with their warm, comfortable yet forward-thinking timber mid-century designs (which in 2007 few were addressing) to experiment significantly in manufacturing technology. "CNC [computer numerical control] machining has not been around that long so everybody is still learning what you can do with it. What's changed in recent years is that we used to work out most of the design at the prototype stage. Now with our growing experience, we can develop designs far more in depth before prototyping. Generally what we draw is exactly what we get. You have more control of it all and it's more efficient," he says.

Hilton also appreciates that De La Espada's factories, based in Oliveira's native Portugal, don't produce huge volumes. "They want to produce very high quality. It's about a certain choice of materials and price not being the most important consideration. Every product in furniture, for sure, is in some way a compromise. Nothing is perfect. Nothing is exactly what everybody really wants. And so it's about getting as good a compromise as you possibly can," he says.



Top The De La Espada stand with Matthew Hilton's furniture at this January's Maison & Objet

Left Hilton's Swan candlesticks are now considered as design classics

Bottom left The angular Bridge armchair, designed for Case, is made from oak

Below Hilton's Cross sideboard and Profile chairs, also designed for Case



However, not content with just designing in timber, Hilton is pushing De La Espada's resources to introduce metals and marble into his products. And furniture isn't enough. The designer's next issues will be a rug collection, made under his own name with a Mexican company, and he is also looking into hand-blown glass.

Hilton is approaching 60 and is both proud and bemused that his early designs for the likes of SCP, such as his UK-made, sandcast Swan candlesticks from 1986, are being reissued and appraised as classic pieces. However, his motivation has not changed. If he were starting out in design today, he says he would simply produce his own designs, rent a stand at the design shows and persevere. "What I want is to better understand all the aspects of manufacturing, the needs of the company I'm working for and desires of the market. I'm trying to understand the whole picture better. It is a big puzzle really. What's peculiar to product design and manufacture is that the puzzle isn't really a huge amount about what something looks like. It's always in the background, in the forms we choose, but that's not really what's driving the product. But, in the end, that's what people are drawn to." matthewhilton.com

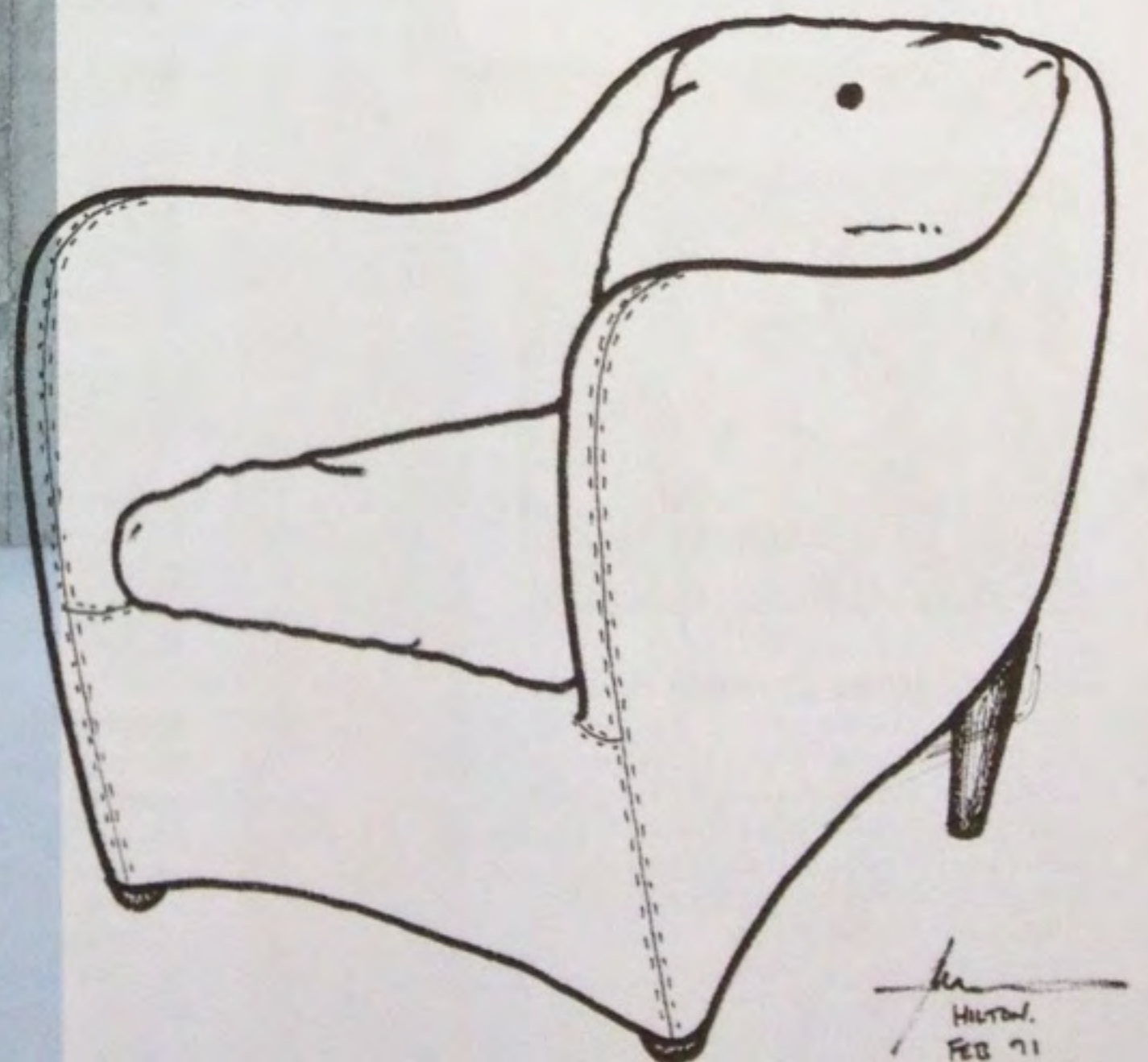
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Above The various components that go into making Hilton's iconic Balzac chair for SCP

Left The finished Balzac chair, accompanied by a matching footstool, both covered in tan leather



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