

ECO DESIGN: A CONVERSATION WITH EMMA OLBERS
STOCKHOLM 2019



At De La Espada, we celebrate the home and the meaningful objects that are physical manifestations of the owners' experiences. Furniture that lasts a lifetime is not only more meaningful, it is kinder to the environment.

We value interiors and well-being, along with a responsibility to the very pressing needs imposed by climate change. In this spirit, we are sharing a conversation between De La Espada founder Luis De Oliveira and Swedish furniture designer Emma Olbers, who was named Designer of the Year 2019 by magazine RUM Design for her "strong commitment to environmentally friendly and sustainable design," and was named Environmental Profile of the Year 2018 by Residence Stora Formpris for her environmentally sensitive interior design of the Nationalmuseum library in Stockholm.

SOMETHING GOOD FOR SOCIETY

Emma Olbers has been compared to Pippi Longstocking on several occasions, and she has begun to accept there may be some truth in the comparison. In addition to being full of confidence and passion, the fictional children's book character "does what she wants. And she is maybe very honest to

herself," as Emma explains. And looking around Emma's studio, it is easy to see honesty and a sense of exploration in the items she creates and the space where she has worked for the last 20 years.

"I think...when I compare to [Pippi Longstocking], it's also, she really wanted something good for the society and for...the planet. And I think that I feel a strong feeling for the environment and doing the right thing for that so maybe that's the similar thing, too."

THINKING IN 3D

Emma works in a non-linear way. She credits her dyslexia with giving her the ability to "think in 3D" and keep a high number of tasks "organised like it's a cupboard or something in your head. So it's very easy to find them even if it looks not so clean here, in the studio."

Using these "cupboards" in her mind, Emma is able to address complex subjects, including the issue of environmental sustainability, something at the core of her design work.

PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY

Luis De Oliveira: When I step into that world [of sustainable design] and try to look at it, I find it just so complicated. Imagine a product has got 50 different things that are needed to make it happen. And you manage somehow to get 48 of them to be, let's say, sourced responsibly, have met certain standards, and achieve objectives. And then the last two, it's like, there's no way around that...we're looking for a better [option] and it's just not there. And when that happens, I feel discouraged. It's like, we've got 48 things, we just need the last two and we can say that this product is -

Emma Olbers: Perfect. In a sustainable way.

Luis: It has achieved the objective of sustainability, or responsibility. So don't you feel that despair?

Emma: Yes I do. But, if we go to sustainability - it's always your way or your approach what is sustainability. And for me is the Paris Agreement and that we need to look where the -

PARIS AGREEMENT

Luis: Emissions, right? CO2 emissions. The amount by which global temperatures are supposed to rise...trying to lower that. So that's your guiding principle.

Emma: Yeah.



Luis: That's a big guiding principle.

Emma: And then if you listen to, it's a group of scientists that is called Earth Statement, and they say if we want to keep it to 1.5 degrees this year...emissions [is] the most important thing. So I have chosen to go by the CO2 emission. Because to do this, easier for me to choose the right thing. So if you think

that way, 40 to 50% is the choice of material. And the best materials are wood. Or, the best that I used to work with was wood, but now I know only so bamboo and seagrass and –

Luis: Because they are fast growing.

Emma: Yeah, and they're even CO2 positive. So I've put a lot of effort on the material –

Luis: So you've reduced it with few simple steps, right? And that means that you're not necessarily aiming for perfection.

Emma: No, I think that's hard.

Luis: You are aiming for the best possible result that achieves this change in the progress of the climate, right?

Emma: Yeah.

Luis: Ok, so you don't despair, then. You have a plan.

RANKING MATERIALS

Emma: Yes, I have a plan. And I actually did an exhibition, like 3 years ago, when the Swedish Environmental Institute helped me rank my materials and counted out the carbon footprint.

Luis: Hey, so tell me: what surprised you? So, these are people with the technical knowledge to be able to measure all the different processes and the impact that they have.

Emma: And the lifecycle.

Luis: That's right. So it's a pretty complicated thing. So when these people did this for you and ranked materials, what surprised you?

Emma: The most surprising, I think, it was...that the difference were so big in between –

Luis: The spread, as we say – between the most effective and the most ineffective.

Emma: Yeah, so it was, like, for soft wood, that is, birch and –

Luis: Yes, pine, for example.

Emma: Pine, yeah. To...leather. 300 times. So that helps me a lot when I choose a seat.



LEATHER CHAIR = 600-YEAR LIFE?

Luis: Hey, wait, you need to stop for a second. You said 300 times difference.

Emma: 300 times!

Luis: In impact.

Emma: Yeah.

Luis: So this is measured, like, per kilo of material, right? And so if I have a kilo of leather – I don't want to pick on leather, make it the bad guy of the gang –

Emma: Yeah, but kind of it is.

Luis: But I've got the soft woods on the other side, it's a factor of 300.

Emma: Yeah, or even kind of more if you have seagrass, like the chair I'm sitting on. You have the seat...and then a lot of designers, you think you're just choosing the look: "Leather or seagrass?" And then you choose; you don't really think about it.

Luis: I like leather.

Emma: Yeah, but then that chair

has to last 300 times longer.

Luis: To be able to compensate for its higher cost of –

Emma: Yeah, and seagrass at least lasts for 20 years. So that would make it 600 years for the leather chairs.

Luis: Wow.

Emma: Ok, with that said, I try to not use –

Luis: So, hold on. Before you throw away entire categories of materials, because that's your conclusion, give me, what's the next step? Material is such an important decision, starting point to meet these objectives. What is the next thing? Surely you don't only use material to help you get –

Emma: No, no. What...in the CO2 emission it's...now I don't really remember exactly, but the smallest one is transportation from the factory to the storage. It's only 4% of the –

Luis: The transport. You know, that's a real surprise.

IMPACT OF CONSUMER TRANSPORT

Emma: Yeah, so that's also what people not are thinking. But it's like 15% of the total lifecycle is you or us as consumer going to the store buying it. So next time you have to walk to the store and buy your table.

Luis: So the individual pick up of the product, the individual delivery of the product, is significantly more costly than the transportation, I guess, probably in a group of other things.

Emma: Yeah.

Luis: Wow. That's another insight. So, I guess portable furniture is the way forwards, right? Because if you want people to carry it...

Emma: No, I don't...stackable you can use also. Or, longevity is of course important too,

because if you have in one life you need 3 chairs or if you can have only one, it's different. So, and I think it's longer life -

Luis: Would you rank that number two? So material, number one. The most important variable, right?

Emma: Uh, number one is material. Number two, I think, it's that you can repair it.

REPAIR

Luis: Ok that helps - which connects us to longevity, right? Because repair it, I can use it for a longer period.



Emma: Yeah and into a repair I think it's a finish. If it's oil or -

Luis: Right, because in things that are being used all the time, the surface is what suffers the most, right?

Emma: Yeah, totally. And if you have plastic coating, especially if you - we that know wood - if you get a bump into it it's really hard to take away but if you have oil or wax or something you can just put some water.

Luis: In principle it repairs easier, yes, and you can get around the problem.

Emma: Yeah.

HOW DOES FASHION COMPARE?

Luis: Ok so that gives me some

pretty clear guidelines here for products within - I guess it's within the world of furniture, but I've noticed recently you've worked on a handbag.

Emma: Yes. It's a little bit of Bambi on it. [laughs]

Luis: So hold on, I know that was a one-off project, right? So when you designed fashion, did you think differently? Did you have different priorities?

Emma: No...the same priorities but...it is in leather though.

Luis: What does that say? Does it say that we compromise in the end? That perfect is the enemy of the good?

Emma: Yeah, but I wanted it really, it was really important for me that it was vegetable tanned.

Luis: Ok, so in theory, that is one of the least chemically intensive processes...for transforming hides into leather.

Emma: Yeah, and I really wanted it to come from a tannery in Sweden. It's not like Sweden is better but I know that tannery and I know that the cows are fed on grass and so and so.

Luis: Ok so you tried that. But I want to explore this - I guess I was hoping for different guidelines for fashion but I think by not answering you're saying that no, I followed more or less the same steps, right? That I've got for my other design projects.

Emma: Yeah. But it is different for fashion if you go to CO2 emission because washing is a big part.

INDEPENDENT DESIGN

Luis: You are an independent designer, meaning that you could have worked for other companies, you could have worked in other studios. But...you have been here for 20 years...20 years of independence where you choose your clients and you choose your work. Many people say this is a really really tough way

of earning a living. That it's unpredictable...So, you know, tell me if you were starting all over again whether you would do this.

Emma: Yes, I think I would.

Luis: What advice would you give [your younger self]?



Emma: What I would say is that the good days always come, maybe. Because I think it goes, like, the problem always solves itself in some way.

Luis: This is a very comforting message. Because there's a lot of people who are starting out their careers who look at the evidence in front of them and say, "I don't know how this will work out." But now, looking back, your message is "Just let it be; it will work out."

Emma: But...you have to work a lot, of course.

Luis: Oh, yes. That minor detail.

Emma: Yeah, the detail.

Luis: But not in a structured, organised way, right? In a Pippi Longstocking kind of way. [laughs]

Emma: [laughs] Yeah, kind of.

This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Text by De La Espada
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