

ALESSANDRO ESTERI HAS BEEN A FIXTURE ON THE DESIGN SCENE FOR YEARS, BUT WITH THE LAUNCH OF HIS NEW 'BLOCK AND WOOD' LOVESEAT, HE HAS NOW BEEN PROPELLED INTO THE INTERIORS LIMELIGHT, SAYS NATASHA BURROUGHS



Designer Alessandro Esteri sitting on the 'Block and Wood' chair in his home. £3,800, made to order

## ITALIAN HOT SEAT

'Italian' has become something of a byword for all that is fashionable and chic in design, but Italy's Alessandro Esteri has created a class of his own, combining the natural flair inherited from his roots with a truly cosmopolitan and international outlook. Having travelled extensively as a photojournalist in the early 80's, documenting the lives of ordinary people in war-stricken Lebanon, and worked in many fashion capitals around the world, on high-profile campaigns such as *Vogue Homme* and *GQ*, Esteri is worldly and wise, his travels very much forming his sense of perspective.

This initial stage in his career bred a passion for fusing quality and craftsmanship, but did not wholly satisfy his desire for a new design language that focused on constantly evolving ideas open to new interpretations. In 1992, he translated this aspiration into Hand Made Group, an international design firm which nurtures a multi-disciplinary approach and boasts a versatile portfolio in various disciplines, including photography,

product design and graphics. The company's design ethos is based on what Esteri and his international associates call a "Hand Made solution" – a unique, tailor-made approach which encompasses a mélange of viewpoints, giving the client a bespoke, individual product specific to their needs. This might not be the most conventional of attitudes, but it is certainly original, and the combination of different styles and techniques serves to create one-off, niche products. Using different strands of creativity has resulted in many noteworthy projects; Alessandro and his team have covered a wide spectrum of commissions, ranging from the complete re-branding of Lanificio F.lli Cerruti to 'One Year of White Pages', the popular, twelve-book diary sold in major art galleries all over the world. Esteri's creative headquarters is located in a restored nineteenth-century wool factory in Stia, a small village near Florence. Evoking a rustic feel and Tuscan charm, this home-cum-studio is the place where he explores and interacts

with materials, his tactile approach producing many ideas: "My home reflects what's going on inside my head; you could say it's an organised mess. It is filled with an eclectic mix of items; the *Stufa*, a hand-crafted, ceramic heating system, antiques and many token objects that myself and my partner have collected on our travels. Every item has a story..." Following the ethos of his previous work, Esteri's approach to furniture draws strength from a desire to combine form with functionality, a dynamic balance between practicality and individual expression. His new furniture collection, 'Block and Wood', particularly the beautifully crafted loveseat, is making waves in the interiors world, so much so that it has been commissioned for the new Lightbox gallery in Surrey. "The inspiration behind this project came from a specific need to sit on something comfortable and beautiful – two aspects that are important to me. I wanted to integrate stunning, antique materials with something very modern, hence the clean, white butcher block. I liked the way these

two materials contrasted each other and yet were also complementary." Displaying elegant simplicity and technical sophistication, the chair is made from cypress wood that has been treated with natural oils, and the cushions can be upholstered in a variety of Italian fabrics, as Alessandro has access to rare, unique fabric collections. Deliciously over-sized, the design has a humorous edge, evoking the feeling of a child stepping into an adult's world, and is perfect for couples who love to lounge. In an age of sensation-hungry design, Esteri's creations are refreshingly close to the heart, inspired by the need to fill what was missing in the designer's life or, potentially, in the lives of others. "I always push my design work to have a real reason to exist. There is so much design out there that has temporary aesthetic appeal; there needs to be depth behind the piece in order that it makes a lasting form of communication." ■

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