

Little children, as everybody knows, don't stay little for long. Parents everywhere are bewildered by the speed with which sweet, gurgling bundles become foul-mouthed eight-year-olds and then sulky, surly teens.

So when it comes to children's furniture, manufacturers might be forgiven for focusing on economy rather than durability or design. If Junior is going to bite, kick, scribble over, throw up on and then have the cheek to grow out of a table or chair in just a few years, why invest in quality? Far better to acquire something more or less disposable.

But in recent years, with a rise in relative prosperity and an increased interest in lifestyle and design, parents are increasingly unwilling to allow their homes to become, as one Hong Kong father puts it, "cluttered with ugly", however temporarily. A generation of young, style-conscious consumers have started to become parents and they recoil at the narrow options traditionally available.

This was the idea that launched Genius Jones, an American high-end supplier of children's products.

"Just because you're now a parent doesn't mean you should have to immediately abandon all interest in design," declares its website. The retailer stocks everything from a full-size inflatable moose head to a sleek dining table made from walnut wood, with tabletop panels that slide towards children seated in matching high chairs and boosters.

Typically, the fresh entrants into the children's interior design industry are designers newly inspired by their experience of having children. One such parent is Julie Marabelle of Famille Summerbelle, who says her papercut-inspired collection of home accessories was the result of cutting out animal and bird shapes from vintage wallpaper for her daughter's bedroom. "It was a great way to make her learn new words," she says. Marabelle also says the growing interest in unusual and creative designs for children naturally leads to a desire to hold on to them beyond their childhood years. "I think we now want designs to last longer and to grow with the family," she says.

The growing appeal of "kidult" design was apparent at last week's Kids.Modern, the first international show dedicated to children's

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Design for children is taking off as furniture makers put the funk in functional, writes **Suji Owen**

Growing concern

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Julie Marabelle, designer, Famille Summerbelle

furniture and home accessories.

More than 50 participants gathered in London to showcase designs from all over Europe.

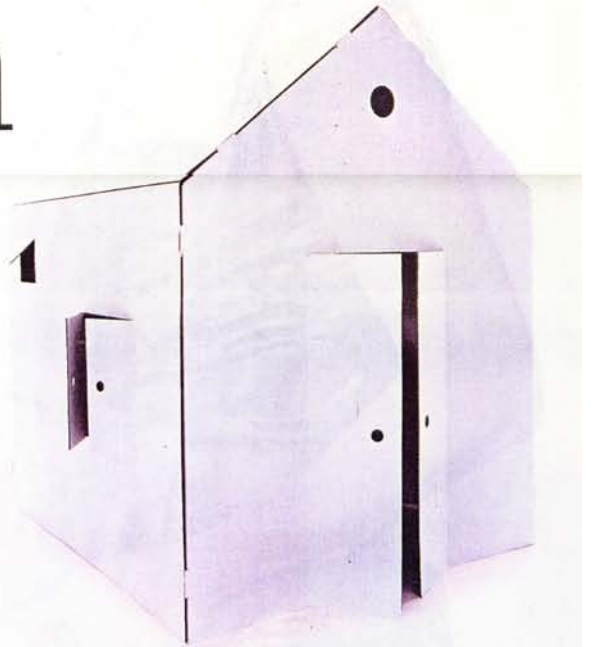
Lucy Ryder Richardson, curator of the show, has spent the past year sourcing pieces for the show according to certain "anti-criteria".

"I did not want fairy wings, seaside themes, Disney and so on," she says. Instead, by focusing on creativity and young up-and-coming designers, she assembled a selection of "fun, thought-provoking designs" that would appeal to adults as well as children. Iconic classics such as mini Eames chairs shared the stage along with new offerings such as Nine to Nine furniture from Spain and Bugge from Norway. Both companies launched their products at the event.

Ryder Richardson also deals in contemporary and vintage furniture for adults, using her own home to display pieces in an everyday setting. Her children, Molly, six, and Bert, three, have ample opportunity to try out the furniture, and their use of the pieces has given her an insight into how much children appreciate the details of good design. "They get very attached to a lot of the furniture I sell from the house for different reasons, so I know kids have an eye at an early stage."

She says Bert has particular affection for a 1960s upside down chair "because he can move it around the house and play drums on it". He's also a fan of Ivy Surface Decor's rocket and spirograph stickers, which are computer-etched transfers of intricate patterns that stick to walls or windows. They can be wiped clean and are unaffected by condensation.

Molly's favourite piece of furniture, Alexander Taylor's Kids Rock chair, also proved popular with the punters at Kids.Modern.



everyday items have the power to stimulate a child's imagination.

"I always seek out brands that will stimulate a child's mind and encourage them to engage fully in what they are doing," she says.

"We are always looking for the unusual or thought-provoking in terms of style, aesthetics and colours but also things that fit into a contemporary home."

Many exhibitors at the fair were also keen to show off their green credentials. Nadia Sparham, who designs quirky wall coverings and handcrafted homewares, says her work is her "contribution to a movement away from the environmental impact of mass production towards an ethical and sustainable marketplace".

Little Fashion Gallery offers eco-conscious shoppers two recycled cardboard products, a doll's house and a white playhouse which is designed for scribbling on by Nume and carried in Hong Kong by Design Link. Kids Gallery, which donates 5 per cent of its proceeds to Unicef, sells a pared-down, modern cot also made from recycled cardboard.

Children's design, it seems, is growing up fast.

