On Minus

Interview with Designer Sverre Uhnger, of the designer duo Jenkins&Uhnger, about the Minus Chair project.

I've wanted to learn more about this project for a while, having gotten my curiosity triggered by seeing bold claims about a humble chair. My curiosity has been about what (if any) makes this chair so special, and what the experience is like working as designer in a project like this. How do you design for something that comprises so much more than just form and function of the end product itself? As was expressed multiple times during the interview, the entire value chain was the intended outcome of the Minus project. So the chair needed to be made in a way that enables that to work, while still looking «good». It was also interesting to see how I might tie this to my project, since much of the underlying values seemed to be similar, even if manifested in a different specie of wood.

The following interview is translated & edited for length and clarity.

"All chairs are designed to bear the weight of a human, but none to bear humanity's weight on nature. This is our mission. To make chairs the minus way — giving nature the comfort that nature gives us.»

Introduction from https://minusfurniture.no/

Tell me, what is Minus, and how dit it come about?

It started for us with a question form the founders of Minus. They asked wether it is possible to produce carbon-negative furniture, with production that generates more energy than it consumes, and that is positive for biodiversity. The project has expanded to be about developing a methodology for making good furniture, creating compact value-chains, avoiding unnecessary transport, ensuring traceability and utilizing all parts of the raw material. It's about building the infrastructure for building the furniture. The end product, the chair, is a conversation starter for talking about the values and methods of the project. But all this is also about making competitive furniture for both the contract- and home markets, and about making a difference through good, long-lasting furniture with a low impact. So soon there will also be two accompanying tables and a bench.

The Minus chair. Picture from https://minusfurniture.no

When doing something like this you often have to build the infrastructure from the bottom up, if you want to make something genuinely new and different. Otherwise you are bound by established perceptions of what your brand do. A bestseller is both a blessing and a curse in that regard.

Why did you choose to make the Minus chair from pine wood?

That decision is based mainly on numbers – what is most easily available, what can be harvested near the factory and such. Pine is among the most abundant species of wood in Norway, and it is easily available in large quantities. The choice of wood itself is because it absorbs carbon as it grows, in contrast to materials that release large amounts of carbon when they are made through extraction and refinement. It is also interesting to work with pine as it is a type of wood that people tend to have a somewhat conflicted relationship to. Pine has been on its way back for a while now, so it doesn't appear to be a fashion «fad» that will blow past quickly.

The choice of pine, and the principles of the Minus model in general, has informed our choice to make every component slightly over-sized. This leaves room for sanding down the wood when parts gets worn, it means the material doesn't have to be as strong, and it makes it easier to repurpose the parts of the chair after they are worn out.

The chair is constructed with traditional mortice and tenon-joinery and ordinary wood glue. This makes for a sturdy chair, without metal parts. Avoiding metal saves weight and makes it possible to construct slimmer parts, and you save the carbon emissions associated with metal. One challenge with this approach is transport - a glued construction can't be flat packed. But instead we have designed this chair to be stacked, and transported with minimal packaging. This is important, as packaging and transportation contributes to a large part of the emissions from products - especially furniture.

Repair is also a challenge with glued parts, but Minus is working with researchers at NTNU on developing a reversible glue for the chairs, making repairs much easier. It is also not like repairs are always easy with metal hardware in wooden constructions – often the joint gets so loose, before anything is done, that it is too worn to simply tighten the metal fastener.

How have you been thinking about the surface finish for the Minus chair?

Working with the surface of the Minus chair, we have decided in collaboration with the branding studio ANTI, to offer a set of paint colors, in addition to clear lacquer, linseed oil and untreated pine. A lacquered surface is required for appealing to the contract market, but I don't believe lacquered surfaces are a good choice for the home market. With just a few chairs it's easy to maintain the surface with a bit of soap, oil or such.

When choosing a surface finish option in the online configurator you get to see the estimated carbon footprint from each option. Related to this, there is also a calculation of how far we can ship these chairs before the emissions in transport are greater than the carbon stored by the wood used in the chair itself. Currently, that «range» of the chair is northern Germany, and the idea is to start a new hub of local production whenever sales are expanded further than that. So the furniture must be possible to make in other local types of wood. Materials are a local resource, and it is important to maintain compact value-chains and good traceability.

A bit of a side-track from this: Do you have any thoughts on why we don't see more use of birch in products at the moment?

It't probably about trends, both birch and beech have been «out» for a while now, like pine has been. But both birch and beech are used quite a bit for products that are painted, stained, veneered and such. The yellow color it develops over time is probably a factor too, especially when it is lacquered or oiled, somewhat opposite to oak, that develops a richer more noble color over time. It is probably also perceived as a bit boring, with little structure and grain.

Lastly, can you say anything about the future plans for Minus?

We are working on offering Minus-furniture as something you rent instead of something you buy. This adresses both keeping the product «in the loop» as long as possible, and ensures that all parts are handled properly when the product reaches the end of its life. Minus can more easily handle repairs, and set up a line for sanding and re-finishing of worn chairs. That makes maintenance easier for the customer, in addition to lengthening the life of the product.

We are also working on accompanying tables and a bench, to widen the Minus product range. And the founders of Minus will certainly be doing more projects in collaboration with various researchers in order to explore all the various questions and issues that still arise during this ever-developing project.

My takeaways from this interview:

Wood is a local material - as should perhaps all materials be considered to be? (Interestingly there are historical precedence for this also being an economically sound argument – Thonet moved their entire production to where they could harvest their raw material (beech wood) when their production of bentwood chairs grew to industrial scale.[1] This region of Europe, still in the heart of large beech forests, is still a hub for production of products from beech. See for example the Tripptrapp chair. Yet the Minus argument is taking this practice/principle one step further, where you adopt the product to fit the wood most local to your market, hence reducing transport both before and after production.)

Birch (and beech) have become a «non-wood» – it is used but not noticed, and therefore not considered in many circumstances.[2] This is (probably) partly inherit in the wood being relatively neutral with little visible grain. But it is also likely a consequence of a tradition of selecting away any defects and blemishes in the wood as it is processed, removing much of the potential «character». It may also be a result of the surface finish traditionally used on birch and beech and the products made from those species' in the past decades.

Different woods need different treatment - the same lacquer that makes oak more noble over time makes birch unbearably/problematically yellow. Strategies for woking with surfaces and aging needs to some degree to be unique to each species.

Wood choice is (to some degree) fashion and can therefore change without change in technical requirements or properties.

Making a product that works well through the life cycle (may) involve details like developing a new formulation of glue, or setting up a saw mill because no-one is used to deliver the thickness you need. A good product is made from these many small, well-made details working together.

1 Vegesack, Alexander von. (1996) ***Thonet: classic furniture in bent wood and tubular steel***. Hazar Publ., London ISBN: 1874371261

2 Observations from interviews conducted during january and february 2023. Young designers interviewed stated the option of using birch did not even come up in talking with clients like furniture brands.