

# ***Roy Tam***

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## ***Furniture for LIFE***

This is a practice based presentation on a craft furniture business which I co-ran till 2004. Trannon was set up in the early eighties based on minimising energy usage, and it proved successful enough for us to sell alongside major European designer brands. The presentation describes our principles and practices, and shares some theories that we feel made it work – sustainable sourcing, low energy making, gentle marketing, long product life, and simple design.

An image-rich draft PowerPoint of this presentation is at: [www.3ddesign.org.uk/RoyTamAbstract.ppt](http://www.3ddesign.org.uk/RoyTamAbstract.ppt)

Our peer cabinet makers liked us as highly ecologically minded designers, and we sourced timber more locally than most. We were not typical craft furniture makers. David Colwell and I both trained in furniture and product design, and we met at John Makepeace's Hooke Park Eco College. We source trees rather than sawn timber. By using 200mm diameter thinnings, which are under-used by-products of good forest management, we get stronger and straighter grain timber. Because small trees grow fast, they fix more carbon dioxide than mature trees. Ours was sourced within 15 miles, making a big difference in road use. The supply chain for this abundant source is underdeveloped, but recent developments, such as the Silvanus Trust, have networked sawmills and matched supply to demand.

Low energy making includes simple design, and using energy wisely. Steam bending creates useful curves, and involves low capital and high job satisfaction. Kiln-drying energy is no longer needed because components are seasoned after an hour of steaming. Sustainable design can be a good marketing tool and steam bending naturally communicates the message while quietly adding value. It was this observation that led us to refine our audience experience workshop tour, which we used successfully.

A long product life is more desirable than re-using or recycling, so we focused on making things well, exceeding their purpose, and avoiding fashion. We believed that furniture can have more purposes, such as to help us to interact better with each other socially, eg. after dinner when a chair should help you sit in other ways than straight. And by avoiding fashion, it extends product life because there is no decoration to go out of date.

But the prime reason for competitiveness is in detail design and not concentrating on one-offs. By focusing on small batch production, each maker made thirty chairs in each batch. This way we could increase efficiency by continuously refining the product process overseen by the designer. An example is our C3 Stacking Chair, which after eight years of refinement, averaged just three hours per frame to make – a figure that can compete with industry. This chair was featured in the Science Museum's Materials Exhibition and is part of the V&A Museum's permanent collection.

Craft can add high value. Design can add competitiveness. Together they can take craft to the mainstream.