

IKEA in collaboration with designer Piet Hein Eek

Meet the master of recycling

He's the uncrowned king of scrap wood furniture, but although Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek is famous for his cupboards and tables made of salvaged floorboards and old planks (and lots more) he would prefer it if the world got better at building things that last rather than settling for recycling.

When we meet up in Piet Hein Eek's office, housed in a corner of his spacious Eindhoven studio, there is something he wants to show us first of all. He takes out a small cotton padded box from the cupboard behind his desk and reveals a tiny chair made of bits of matches, perfect in every detail.

"I just found it the other day. I made it as a kid."

It's tempting to see the miniature as a starting point for what later became his trademark, furniture made of recycled wood. Regardless, it illustrates the fact that Piet has built and designed things all his life. First his plan was to become an architect, but after a discussion with an architect friend he changed his mind.

"He told me to become a designer instead, "because it's more wide-ranging". It was a stupid advice of course, but I listened."

In all honesty, Piet doesn't seem too unhappy with the way things have progressed since he produced his first ever waste piece as a student at Design Academy Eindhoven in the late 1980's. When he presented his graduation project, a cupboard made entirely from salvaged floorboards and old planks, no one had ever seen anything like it. This was long before the sustainability buzz and it didn't take long before Piet was a name on everyone's lips.

Piet's design philosophy rests on respect for the environment and for the material. It's about efficiency in every aspect of the process and about making new and better products with what's already available. Part of his studio, housed in a big, former factory on the outskirts of Eindhoven, is jam-packed with old planks, boards, doors, windows – you name it – piled up high and sorted according to size.

The days when his work was all about furniture is long gone. Today Piet and his many skilled co-workers have gone on to create rugs, wallpaper, watches, eyewear and much more – all made from recycled materials. Also, the Piet Hein Eek brand can boast with a long list of acclaimed interior design projects.

Now you've turned your attention back to architecture. Why is that?

"I always did a bit of architecture for myself and for a few clients. Then I converted this place which inspired people from the outside to turn to us for architect commissions", says Piet referring to his studio that, apart from the factory and the warehouse, has room for a large office, a restaurant, a gallery, a shop and studios to let.

An old mill in France that Piet bought a decade or so ago, "for way too much money", has been equally important for the renewed focus on architecture. At

the time it was a ruin, today it's a pair of one of a kind short-term rental homes. The philosophy is the same as always:

"If you use what's there and find the qualities of it, you can make something that's even better than the original. It's more efficient and more respectful than making something new."

That leads us right back to the starting point and to Piet's view of sustainability.

"My waste furniture is often talked about in terms of them being a way to care for the environment. In a sense that's the wrong place to start. What we really ought to do is to create buildings and objects that last. If we don't need to tear a house down after just 40 years because it's badly constructed or throw away a broken piece of furniture – then we don't need to recycle either.

Ina Simonsen

About Piet

Pioneering designer and entrepreneur

Lives and works in Eindhoven, Holland

Piet and his wife have three daughters, twins of 18 and the oldest who's 20

All in all, the Piet Hein Eek business has around 100 people on the payroll, 60 full-time