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Kinda Blu

Blu Dot brings designer furniture to Portland with the help of Waechter Architecture



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot cofounders Maurice Blanks (RIGHT) and John Christakos. They saw online sales were strong here so they opened a brick and mortar store in the Pearl District. The bookcase behind them has been in stock since they designed it in 1997.

When college pals Maurice Blanks and John Christakos came up with the idea for a furniture company in 1997, they, along with pal Charlie Lazor, wanted to sell good, modern design — something between IKEA and the type of high-end European furniture only an architect could source.

"Our goal was to try and make good design a little bit more approachable and a little bit more affordable," Christakos told the Business Tribune recently. They were at the grand opening of their Portland store, in the building across Northwest 13th Avenue from Wieden + Kennedy. Free food and drink may have played a part, but the place was unusually crowded with Portlanders kicking the tires on \$3,199 camel leather lounge chairs and \$1,999 Chicago 8 box walnut bookshelves. Blu Dot started as an idea for a collaborative product design company, which evolved into a furniture company with a showroom. The physical stores came later.

But why Portland, when all their other stores are in big cities (New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Seattle, and the home base Minneapolis)?



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot's owners loved the raw space with its mass timber columns, but something had to be done to cover up the elevator shafts and other protrusions. In places the wooden ribbon has its slats become semi transparent, and its middle section comes and goes to be a display surface. The store's interior was designed by Ben Waechter's team at Waechter Architecture in Portland.

The owners looked at their online sales and saw they were strong in Portland. It was worth gambling on opening a showroom. Only if they could do it with style.

Christakos is quick to distinguish Blu Dot from Portland's other go-to fancy furniture store a few blocks north, Design Within Reach.

"They're a retailer. They're buying other people's goods and selling it at pure retail. We're designers — 100% of what's in here we created. We've turned into a retailer, but we started as designers and manufacturers. From the consumer standpoint, it might feel the same, but the origin of the designs is different."

Five designers

Early on, they were just a small firm, Blanks said.

"We just designed stuff. And because in the early days, we sold through other retailers, we would sell to the cool design shop in a given city. We might have 20 things that we created. They might pick two or three of them. So, it wasn't crucial that they all work together. They were picking individual objects. But as soon as we got into our own stores, which is about 10 years ago, and we put all of our stuff together in one space, it became more important how things work together. We realized we didn't have rugs, we didn't have lighting, we didn't have all the things you needed to make a furniture store happen. So, it changed the way we design."



COURTESY: BLU DOT - Blu Dot cofounders Maurice Blanks (RIGHT) and John Christakos. They saw online sales were strong here so they opened a brick and mortar store in the Pearl District.

Blu Dot has five designers, plus Blanks and Christakos, as creative directors. Blanks and Lazor trained as architects, Christakos as a sculptor.

Retail, they say, is working out fine for them.

"I think it's because furniture is something that people want to see in person," Christakos said. "They want to understand the scale, and they want to sit in it or touch it and see if it's comfortable. Only a fairly small piece of furniture retail has migrated online compared to books and things that make sense to be online."

Their model retail environment is Aesop, the cosmetics store. The nearby one at 1300 W. Burnside St. has a large enamel sink in the middle, and it feels more like an early Twentieth Century apothecary. They like Aesop because although it's a chain, management lets local designers produce the look.

Blanks added, "When it comes to store design, we like to work with a great local architect, and it's fun for us to be the design client, on the other side of the table. We don't want any of our stores to look exactly alike."



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - In places the wooden ribbon has its slats become semi transparent, and its middle section comes and goes to be a display surface. The store's interior was designed by Ben Waechter's team at Waechter Architecture in Portland.

Business with Ben

Blanks and Christakos picked up-and-coming local firm Waechter (pronounced Wockter) Architecture. Ben Waechter's firm is known for its humble-looking designs, which often have expectation-defying interiors, with hidden staircases and various levels.

The space Blu Dot is in was once home to developer Homer Williams's office. Gutting it left a square room with heavy-timber columns and beams.

"As soon as we just demolished everything that was in here, you saw this beautiful field of columns, this heavy-timber construction that is really beautiful," Blanks said. "(We asked) 'How do we let that kind of still shine, but do all the things we need to do to make a store?'"

Three things jutted into the space: a ramp from Everett Street, the tower for the stairs and elevator, and the mezzanine with bathrooms and offices.

"So it's this beautiful, perfect square with the columns, and then these three things pushing into it," Blanks said.

Waechter created a ribbon made of ash wood that runs inside the building at head height, curving around the obtrusions. It looks like a large piece of corrugated cardboard, but it is the same color as the new white oak floor.

"It's a nice, quiet backdrop, clearly designed, clearly intentional, but not anything that interferes with the furniture," Blanks said.



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot's owners loved the raw space with its mass timber columns, but something had to be done to cover up the elevator shafts and other protrusions. At left is the mezzanine which needed to be more discreet. In places the wooden ribbon has its slats become semi transparent, and its middle section comes and goes to be a display surface. The store's interior was designed by Ben Waechter's team at Waechter Architecture in Portland.

Is retail dying?

The space now has three different elements: "There's the original architecture, this new intervention, and then the furniture, Blanks said. "It was really, like, how do we keep it simple?"

The ribbon has three levels to it that come and go but are at consistent heights, even though the building is on a slope. It also hides the mechanical equipment and has subtle air vents built in. In some places, such as near the 13th Avenue entrance, the slats have no backing and so become semi-transparent. The Blu Dot owners — as clients — especially liked not having a ceiling littered with spiral ductwork.



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot's owners loved the raw space with its mass timber columns, but something had to be done to cover up the elevator shafts and other protrusions. Small walls were added for display purposes.

Having spent good money on shopfitting, they must be confident about brick and mortar retail.

"The death of retail is overstated," declares Blanks. "There's definitely the death of bad retail. Think about the stores that have gone out of business. They're pretty, tired, crappy department stores. They're not specialized, high end or unique; they're trying to be all things to all people. Just not a very exciting retail environment."



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot's owners trusted local architect Ben Waechter's team at Waechter Architecture to come up with a solution. Weachter added a curing ribbon of wood to hide ugly things and to unify the room. He rarely does curves, but in this case they worked better than adding more rectilinear design in what was already a square room with many columns.

That rug works

They're against stores that try to be encyclopedic, which the web does so well.

"Our feeling is that you need to come in, and we want you to put things together so that you can understand what our pieces look like together. 'Oh, that rug works really nicely with that fabric and that nightstand, and I'm inspired by that. I want my life to look like this.' That, I think, inspires people, as opposed to just, 'Here's everything we can possibly show you.'"



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot designs and sells \$3,199 camel leather lounge chairs and \$1,999 Chicago 8 box walnut bookshelves.

There are no big touch screens for designing your own living room, and no virtual-reality headset. It's all very analog, just as the furniture is very solid, and built of clean modernist shapes.

Being a designer store, there is a good share of statement lamps (bulbs jammed in glass bell jars) and uncomfortable seating (sharp-edged copper bar stools covered in fingerprints). But the goal seems to be simple and solid without being folksy or too Amish — Midwestern without the flowers.



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot's owners liked the industrial neighborhood and Waechter Architecture added an aluminum rain canopy to catch the eye.

History

One of the first things they designed was the Chicago 8 bookcase. It still sells well today, even though knickknacks have largely replaced books. The Buttercup chair has been selling since 2002. A team designs items in the studio, and with the input of engineers and fabricators. So even if they start in Blanks' sketchbook, they all touch it and can consider it a group effort.

They come out with new pieces twice a year, but it's not like fashion.



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Blu Dot designs and sells \$3,199 camel leather lounge chairs and \$1,999 Chicago 8 box walnut bookshelves.

"We try to design pieces that will last for a long, long time. We don't want to introduce something, and then a year and a half later, it's discontinued," Blanks said.

One chair, made from a ribbon of plywood, has a shell from Europe and a base from Taiwan. Another chair's frame is made in northwest Italy while its sling is manufactured and assembled in Minneapolis.

They control their global supply chain themselves, having a sourcing team, plus agents around the world, somebody who's on the ground who will go and inspect and check samples.

To source steam-bent plywood, they went to the Czech Republic because that country has a history with it. But then a contact recommended the place in Italy.

Client side

"It's sometimes almost happenstance. We call it the furniture mafia, there are a lot of us around the world. Ultimately, it's not a huge community, and you all know each other. Then when we need a favor in two years, we'll say 'Hey, I gave you that bent ply factory, well I need a molding factory.'"

Christakos says working with Waechter Architecture was a good collaboration.

"We showed (Ben) the space, and they came back to us with a few ideas, early ideas, and this was one of them. We pushed back a little bit. We asked them questions like, 'Should we know if this (ribbon) makes sense? Is it functional? Is it taking up too much space? How do we put stuff against it?' But as creative people ourselves, we try to be respectful of their vision and not try to reduce it to something that is no longer compelling."

Christakos says the hard thing about being a client is knowing when to assert your opinion and when to trust the architect's vision.

"There are probably a lot of architects out there, that if a design firm like us came to them, they would be really suspicious, because they would think 'These Blu Dot people are just going to be up in my business and they're going to be, you know, asking if this is a quarter inch or a half inch and the blue be a little bluer, but those guys (Waechter) were really good.'"

Blanks said it was worth it, once you're spending tens of thousands of dollars on lighting and flooring, spending some "more on some really nice things kind of make sense." That includes the aluminum rain canopy on the loading dock along 13th Avenue.

"This harkens back to those old, old industrial ones, but it's crisper and cleaner. And hopefully, you drive by and are like, 'Oh, wait, that looks new. What's in there?'"



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Architect Ben Waechter (black suit, in front of white column) at the official opening of furniture store Blu Dot in Portland's Pearl District in January 2020. Waechter's firm redesigned the space including the wooden ribbon that runs all around it.

Ben Waechter

"Before we even started, I was super excited at the opportunity to work with Blu Dot just because I really admire their design," Ben Waechter told the Business Tribune. "I met

Maurice and John in Minneapolis, and then after that, it was really Maurice who led the project here. And that was really an amazing collaboration because he's a really good designer to begin with, and he was also an architect before.

"The good thing was just how rich the structure of it was. There's this beautiful grid of heavy timber columns. There's the mass timber ceiling of two-by-sixes that are essentially nailed together to make a floor diaphragm, and then the historic storefront."

The challenge was the three barnacles in the room. "We're always looking for a simple solution. And the solution, in this case, was to create a ribbon that loosely wraps around the entire space and envelops these what otherwise may be barnacle-looking things."

Asked if that sounds like a lot of work just for a shop, he agrees.

"When we put that much thought into it, we want it to be the best that it can be so. (With the ribbon) it's the first time. We don't do a lot of curves. The curve really came from looking at the existing structure and the beauty of the grid and asking, 'How can we complement that?' If we had put rectilinear walls in the space, it wouldn't have balanced or complemented the grid."

In other recent work, Waechter has designed a 224-unit, affordable housing project in Rockwood, which just broke ground, collaborating with Place, the landscape architects who designed a publicly accessible park in the middle. "We designed a set of four-story buildings that essentially wrap around the park, like the ribbon here. Yeah, we're doing ribbons. But no curves."

Team Waechter also is designing their three-story office building on North Mississippi Avenue at Skidmore Street. It's been permitted and will be the first 100% Cross-Laminated Timber building in Oregon.

They're not buying local this time. The CLT panels will be supplied by KLH Massivholz GmbH of Austria.

"They make the panels really efficiently, and their quality control is super high."

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