

INDESIGN LUMINARY

Bang Design

Bang Design is a multi-award winning design studio with an expansive practice that includes furniture design, interiors, exhibition and product design along with textiles, packaging and marketing support. Its founders, David Granger and Bryan Marshall have created a signature style which has gained international success.

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1962 David Granger, born in Canberra. Bryan Marshall born in Sydney 1980-1983 Marshall completes Bachelor of Applied Science in Industrial Design, University of Canberra 1980-1984 Granger completes Bachelor of Applied Science in Industrial Design, University of Canberra 1983 Marshall begins work as designer at Digit Design, Canberra 1984 Marshall moves to National Capital Development Commission, Canberra 1984-86 Granger works as designer with Caroma Industries, Sydney 1984-1989 Marshall employed at Rigby Engineering Design, Sydney; Granger employed at Rigby Engineering Design, Sydney 1989-1995 Marshall and Granger begin Bangdesign partnership 1992 Conduct lecture series for industrial design students, University of Canberra 1993 Participate in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's international travelling exhibition, 'Australian Design Excellence' Exhibit as part of 'Design Europeo Anteprema' exhibitions at Milan Furniture Fair. Exhibit and lecture at the Powerhouse Museum, work subsequently included in the permanent collection. Invited to speak at Royal Australian Institute of Architects Winter Talk series. Conduct seminar on Bangdesign at Tasmanian School of Art 1994 Invited to speak at the Australian Design Council's National Conference. Exhibited as part of 'Design Europeo Anteprema' exhibitions at Milan Furniture Fair. Bangdesign work included in International Design Yearbook. Conduct a lecture series for design students

Stepping inside the shopfront in Sydney's Balmain where David Granger and Bryan Marshall operate Bangdesign, the door bangs loudly behind me – a jangling introduction to the spare, low-key atmosphere of the studio. I join Granger and Marshall around a Bangdesign table and sit on lean 'Talon' carbon-fibre chairs, also Bangdesigned, to discuss the progress of their sixteen-year old company. They immediately come across as a couple of nice, normal easy-going guys – open, affable and unpretentious. Their enthusiasm for their work, however, can't be restrained. It's more like zeal, more like the live-it and breathe-it kind of motivation that blazes through.

These days specialisation is all the go, but Granger and Marshall are determined to flout the trend. They roundly reject the pigeon-holing that would position them only as furniture designers or product designers. On the contrary, they thrive on the breadth of the projects they tackle and credit the cross-pollination of ideas that develops from working on a wide variety of projects as providing the insights to constantly come up with new solutions. Since their designs and products continue both to garner the accolades of the design establishment and to generate success in the marketplace, it's a process that clearly works for them.

A quick scan of Bangdesign's history reveals numerous highlights. The company's 'PLUS Series' lounge furniture for Formway, 'Myriad Low-Profile' tapware for Dorf, and the 'Talon' chair, for instance,

have won many design awards in Australia and New Zealand. Bangdesign has exhibited throughout Australia, in Italy at Salone del Mobile, in America at NeoCon and in Germany at Orgatec. It was selected to design various items for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. It is also represented in the permanent collection at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Right from the start, Granger and Marshall had envisaged Bangdesign as a player in the international arena, and the company now has seven furniture designs licensed and in production in the United States with a similar program on the way in Europe. At the same time, their practice is predominantly local, with work produced over the years including furniture design and seating, interior design for cafes, restaurants and offices, bathroom products, architectural hardware and pure industrial design projects.

Bangdesign Signature

Is there a Bangdesign house style? Not long ago, Granger and Marshall might have denied it, but they now relate the story of how, at the recent launch of their new 'Pli' furniture range for Formway, an old friend remarked on its distinctly Bangdesign character. He cited balance and proportion, spatial relationships and simplicity as distinguishing features. "It really struck us then that there is a way that we innately do something, and if we don't do it that way – it's like a dog having its fur on backwards – it doesn't feel right," says Marshall. What does feel right? Granger summarises: "Simplicity, purity, honesty and charm."

The Bangdesign approach takes functionality as a given, as something that can only be improved upon. This is then married with emotive qualities – "Charm, balance, physical poetry, grace, tranquility, joy, fascination – all those qualities that make it endearing. The trick is to add all those things in a way that people don't notice them," says Granger. "That's the biggest challenge."

"The best solution looks effortless. It doesn't look designed," adds Marshall. It also has to be clear and pure to work fast. As Granger puts it: "If you don't get it immediately, we haven't done our job properly."

With each project, they try to reduce the brief down to one simple, pure idea. This is achieved through an intense process of listening, observing, questioning and considering, not just in relation to the client's needs, but also many other social, cultural and psychological factors. They also like to imbue the work with humility, honesty and integrity. "You're not trying to be tricky or overly clever, you just want to create a sense of ease. The vast majority of the work we do does carry through a level of humility," says Marshall.

Bang Bang

If any doubt remains that designers are born and not made, Granger and Marshall dispel it. In so many respects, they seem to have come straight out of the same mould. Born in the same year, they grew up in Canberra and attended the same high school. Both loved nothing better than tinkering in workshops making things. Both were directed to the industrial



at University of Technology, Sydney 1995 Exhibit as part of 'Design Europeo Anteprema' exhibitions at Milan Furniture Fair. Work included in International Design Yearbook 1995 Marshall and Granger become directors of Bangdesign 1996 Work included in International Design Yearbook 1997-2003 Marshall & Granger become directors of Fix Systems, Sydney, designing and marketing stainless steel architectural fittings 1999 Exhibit and lecture at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; work subsequently included in the permanent collection 1999-2000 Design and product-manage various items for SOCOG for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games 2000 Win award for Best Furniture Design in New Zealand Best Awards. Marshall and Granger receive 'Distinguished Alumni Awards' from University of Canberra for representing Australian design internationally 2001 Win Australian Design Award for Furniture Design, Design Institute of Australia (DIA) Selection Award, and the Powerhouse Museum Selection Award 2002 Design the Australian Design Award trophy and win Australian Design Mark for Industrial Design 2003 Win Australian Design Mark for Industrial Design and Australian Design Mark for Furniture Design 2004 Win Australian Design Mark for Textile Design, Design Institute of Australia (DIA) Selection Award for Textile Design 2005 Bangdesign work included in the Powerhouse Museum's "Inspired – Design across Time" exhibition

design course at what is now the University of Canberra and both revelled in their design education. As Granger says: "I happened to be interested in something I was good at – how lucky do you get?" Marshall equally expresses his good fortune. "You might find there's a bit of stereo going on," quips Granger.

They also found studying industrial design sharpened their focus in similar ways. Neither could see himself as an artist or craftsman, expressing himself through one particular material. Both appreciated that industrial design offered much broader scope. As Marshall says: "I could see it was really going to push us further, and the desire to expand our minds, to constantly learn, is another common denominator for us. Through design, our work was always going to change and evolve. That was the thrill of it."

After graduating in 1983, they both found work in Sydney at Rigby Engineering. Marshall stayed for six years. Granger, after a stint with Caroma Industries, remained for four. By 1989 they'd decided that the way to get better at the business of design was to head out on their own and do it. Thus Bangdesign was born. The borrowed name – the original Bang was a budgie who lived in a sock – was chosen for its bright, snappy personality and its ability to cover every facet of the design work they hoped to include.

At that stage there wasn't a local role model for such a comprehensive design business, "but there was an international role model," says Marshall. "People like

Antonio Citterio and Philippe Starck, Achille Castiglioni, Ray and Charles Eames, Mario Bellini – they were in the area of product design we were interested in: they were doing a diversity of projects."

Given their common history, it's hard to imagine a finer basis for a business partnership. They speak of a "respect, a level of trust, a focus and a reliability" that goes without question. It was also from this point, they say, that their friendship really blossomed. They share the same heroes in the design world – people like Rae Kawakubo, Jasper Morrison, Charles and Ray Eames, Alvar Aalto, Tadao Ando and Philippe Starck. They also share the same career objectives, and even similar life goals – family life is important to both too.

Bangdesign beginnings

To get their new business off the ground and establish their credentials, Granger and Marshall looked for a vehicle that would express their particular approach to design. They decided to produce furniture. "Everybody understands furniture," says Marshall. "It's a great opportunity to explore form because the function is so rigid." They established relationships within the furniture industry, finding a manufacturer and a retailer. "We decided to form our own consortium, in a sense, and that's helped us learn a lot more about what makes a product get up and go. It's not just having a great idea. Everything else around it has to come together to make it commercially viable," says Marshall.

In 1993, invited by Italian furniture company, Zeus Noto, to exhibit as part of their annual new designers show at the Milan Furniture Fair, Bang presented its 'Swerve' shelf design. The company was invited again in 1994 and in 1995, when it showed the 'Piggly Wiggly' range, which was also exhibited with AlterEgo, to considerable acclaim. This resulted in the inclusion of Bangdesign's work in the International Furniture Yearbook in 1994, 1995, and 1996, to coverage in further publications in Italy, Germany, France and Japan, and recently in its inclusion in Laurence King's *The Design Encyclopaedia*.

Granger and Marshall were buoyed by the reception they'd received internationally. "It was a good confidence booster for us: OK, we're on the right track!" says Granger. In spite of this early success, however, the designers made a deliberate decision to stay in Australia. "We realised," says Marshall, "that there were huge opportunities in the European scene and that if we re-located we'd probably make things happen faster for us, but at the same time we'd be moving away from all the things that helped make us who we are. We'd become something different," says Marshall. They opted to consolidate the business on the home front.

"We actually had to survive from our work, so if these products didn't sell in the showrooms, we just didn't survive as a business," says Granger. He describes the "sharp lessons," they had to learn to produce work that translates into sales. "When >

- 1 David Granger, Bryan Marshall
- 2 NetX reception, Sydney (2005) Photo: Tyrone Branigan
- 3 Bar Ristretto, Bondi (2004) Photo: Bang



sombody pulls their wallet out of their pocket and hands over some money, from our point of view, that's a great compliment," says Granger. Those lessons, says Marshall, "gave us a good sense of the value of the things we're dealing in."

Bangdesign collaboration
Fundamental to the success of Bangdesign is communication. "We're acutely interested in our audience." They say it's not a matter of what they themselves might want to express, but what their audience needs. And the best way to find that out is to listen – "both to the people you're working with and to people in general."

"We would not survive without having built up that savvy – it's almost second nature now – about what interests people, both in a physical, functional sense, and in an emotive, aesthetic sense. I don't think you can find solutions to products and environments unless you enquire into what makes people tick."

Equally important is the issue of collaboration. "There's a proverb that says it pretty well," says Granger. "None of us is as smart as all of us." And this, perhaps, is where the humility they talk about as an intrinsic aspect of their practice comes through most strongly. Marshall and Granger are at entirely the other end of the spectrum from the celebrity designer or designer-as-cult-figure that has emerged in recent times. They regard themselves primarily as problem-solvers who bring a particular way of thinking to a collective. "It's not about us," says Marshall. "It's about everybody coming together

and trying to build a rapport with everybody else, to collaborate."

Bangdesign remains relatively small – Granger and Marshall currently employ only two other designers. "Obviously we want to grow, but it's got to be controlled. We want to stay involved, we want to stay agile, not just in the way we think but in the way we operate." Because of this control and the depth of understanding between Granger and Marshall themselves, they say there's not a whiff of politics in the Bangdesign working environment. They are well aware how endemic politics can be in other organisations, and work conscientiously to counter its effects by embracing all points of view, from the top down to the factory floor.

They also credit their success in business largely to this collaborative approach and to the pleasurable personal experience they make of it that encourages repeat business. The system has worked so far. "We've never advertised. Every project we've got has been through word of mouth," says Marshall, appreciative of the way each project often spins off into further directions and opportunities.

Granger and Marshall are emphatic here. They're not just delivering a message, "but delivering the integrity behind it." You can't just be seen to be offering a good collaborative working relationship. It has to be the real thing. Or if a product catches someone's eye, it has to function for them, not let them down afterwards. There has to be follow-through.

Bangdesign direction

A significant influence on the Bangdesign process is the frenetic pace and pressure of contemporary life. Marshall and Granger believe our increasingly time-poor, image-overloaded lives have changed people's expectations and resulted in the need for products that can be understood and responded to quickly. "People are inundated with products on shelves, all saying 'Look at me! Look at me!' You just want a break from that, so we want to create spaces and products that provide you with relief." While the Bangdesign aesthetic falls clearly within the modernist realm, it's telling that the reasoning behind the reduction to simplicity and purity is strictly 21st century. Fifty years ago, the Modernist ethic came as an optimistic expression of the new age. Today, with a similar formal language Bangdesign is offering an escape route from the current era, a way of finding peace and respite, places of calm and comfort in these high-velocity times.

For their part, Granger and Marshall are looking to the future. They want to develop Bangdesign into a recognisable brand – so that what it stands for can communicate faster – and to expand. "Growing an international audience is high on the agenda now," says Marshall. To date, these two highly talented and committed designers have created a body of work that expresses their unified vision. Their efforts have been acclaimed and have met the test of time elegantly. This success has ridden on their innate talents, the strength of their personal partnership, their integrity, focus and drive, and their inclusive approach to the business of design.



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- 4 'Pli' chair (2005) Photo: Jason Loucas
- 5 Sydney Olympics Distance Marker (1999-2000) Photo: Bang
- 6 Sydney Olympics Lane Marker (1999-2000) Photo: Bang
- 7 'Pli' series (2005) Photo: Jason Loucas
- 8 'Figgly Wiggly' chair (1991) Photo: Scott Hawkins
- 9 'Jump' chair (1992) Photo: Scott Hawkins

