

GUEST RELATIONS



■ Portrait photograph by Julian Anderson

Everyone has stories about their grandparents; Eames Demetrios has more than most. As director of the Eames Office – a Los Angeles-based organisation dedicated to communicating, preserving and extending the work of American designers Charles and Ray Eames – he travels the world telling them.

How, as a boy, he would photograph spiderwebs and play hide-and-seek in the meadow outside the Eames House – that landmark of modern architecture surrounded by gum trees in the Pacific Palisades area of Los Angeles. What an adventure it was to visit the couple he called Charlie and Ray at their office at 901 Washington Boulevard – a renovated garage buzzing with projects ranging from furniture to filmmaking to toys. How, in between gawping at the octopus in the aquarium, a mollusc that came to recognise his grandfather, Demetrios and his siblings would test out prototypes.

There was the time his brother broke a third-storey window with one of the first Super Balls. “Charles thought this was a great proof of concept,” says the LA-based filmmaker, author and artist. “My mum was not nearly as thrilled.”

A roll call of famous people were forever dropping by the Eames home and studio. Inventor Buckminster Fuller, actor Gregory Peck, film director Billy Wilder, a long-time friend and collaborator for whom Demetrios’s grandparents made a one-off arm chair with an ultra low base that let him watch the

boxing and flail about, as he was wont to do. “Charlie and Ray also gave Billy Wilder the first Eames lounge chair and ottoman as a present,” says Demetrios of the famous leather chair, modelled on a catcher’s mitt, that has become synonymous with Eames furniture. “They didn’t design it specifically for him; that’s just a myth people love.”

It is hardly surprising that some of their stories have become legend. Charles (1907-78) and Ray Eames (1912-88) were among the most important American designers of the 20th century. Smart and elegant, with an integrity that seemed to weave its way into everything they created, the husband-and-wife team embraced the idea of modern design as an agent of social change and set about modernising postwar America. Their influence remains strongly felt today.

Heroes to a generation of designers including Terence Conran and Philippe Starck, Charles and Ray Eames made the most impact with their furniture: the Eames

A gift of the gab has made Eames Demetrios a hit on the speaker circuit, where he is breathing new life into the legacy of his famous grandparents, writes Jane Cornwell.

lounge and ottoman that Wilder got first dibs on; the LCW (lounge chair wood) with its honest use of materials – they did not hide the fact that plywood does not want to be a single-piece moulded shell; the much-copied Eames moulded plastic shell chairs, one of the most successful seats of all time.

“Charles said the role of the designer is that of a good host anticipating the needs of the guest,” says Demetrios. “What is beautiful about this philosophy is it puts a person, rather than an ideology, at the centre of things.”

A Harvard-educated father of two with a quick wit and a quirky fashion sense, the 51-year-old Demetrios has helped revive and extend his late grandparents’ legacy partly through his gift of the gab. He has given talks in 43 countries and myriad venues including on the main stage of the TED (technology, entertainment, design) conference, averaging about three or four talks a month. Design, scale, film and storytelling are all part of his patter, with personal stories about his



From left: The Nelson marshmallow lounge; Eames lounge and ottoman; Noguchi rudder coffee table; Eames aluminium group chair. Top: Eames fiberglass shell chair. Right: Eames Demetrios.

