

grandparents sprinkled through his talks to illustrate his belief that “design should be taught as a life skill, not just a profession”.

In June, Demetrios will visit Australia to take part in Vivid Ideas, a component of Vivid Sydney, leading workshops on innovative thinking and creative design respectively. He'll discuss his own work including a project called Kcymaerxthaere, a fictional alternative universe which involves bronze plaques being erected randomly through the physical world, from New York to Dubai to Australia.

Think reading a novel by, say, Jane Austen or JRR Tolkien, then going out into the “linear” world to stand in front of a marker, feel the sun and the wind on your skin and reconceive what you envisaged in your head.

“The core message is the importance of looking at the world fresh, and valuing its physicality,” says Demetrios, for whom ideas are as vital, and often as beautiful, as the designs they bring about. “Charles and Ray had a very holistic vision of design.”

Demetrios reaches for *An Eames Primer*, his 2013 biography about the life, work and thoughts of Charles and Ray Eames that he has brought along as a gift. There, between its bright yellow covers, are stories of the duo's myriad works: furniture, printed material, toys; architecture, photography, exhibitions; their prodigious output of film.

As a guest of the Sydney Film Festival as well as Vivid, Demetrios will introduce a curated program of eight shorts by Charles and Ray Eames including *Toccata for Toy Trains*, in which, thanks to expressionistic close-ups, toys are viewed as if from the eyes of a child; *Glimpses of the USA*, a multi-screen presentation made for an American exhibition in Moscow at the height of the Cold War; and *Powers of Ten*, the couple's most famous mini-movie. In it, the camera pans up from a picnic in the meadow at the Eames House out to the edge of space before travelling back into an atom in a sleeping man's hand.

The Eameses' 125 short films showcase their far-reaching interests, with subjects ranging from simple sea creatures to explanations of complex mathematical subjects. Their friend, Elmer Bernstein, scored some 30 of their films, many of which were narrated by Charles. “With all these different areas they explored, they never felt like they were straying from their original intent,” says Demetrios.

Just as the Eameses considered each project through a prism of ideas intended to



Left: Charles and Ray Eames' family home; young Eames Demetrios, yawning in the arms of his mother Lucia, with his grandparents and three of his siblings.

demystify the design process – notions of appropriateness, constraint, scale – so are their methods supported by Demetrios. His teaching DVD, *Scale is the New Geography*, is a companion to *Powers of Ten*.

“Understanding of scale makes students better scholars and better citizens,” he writes, a take on the “better living by better design” creed that his grandparents absorbed as students at Detroit's Cranbrook Academy of Art in the 1940s.

The Eames family relationships are complex. Demetrios is one of five children born to Charles's only child, Lucia Eames. The daughter of Charles's first wife Catherine Woermann, Lucia was close to both her father and her stepmother. Ray and Charles did not have any children of their own. An artist and designer herself, Lucia ran the Eames Office for 26 years. She died in April, aged 83, but Demetrios, the elder of two children from Lucia's second marriage to a Greek sculptor whom she divorced in the early 1980s, has been operationally involved since 1993.

“Us five kids were all raised together,” he says. “After Ray's death (in 1988) it was mostly me running the office as director. But 10 years ago, as the work increased, we all got involved in different roles, in addition to our personal projects.”

His mother gave him Eames as a Christian name as a way of keeping the family name alive into another generation; Charles had one sibling, a sister. “I wish my mother had called me Eames,” states Terence Conran on the back of *An Eames Primer*.

**Several of the Eameses' key furniture pieces** will be on display in the Sydney Film Festival Hub as part of a collection from Herman Miller, the original producer and partner with which Demetrios works to ensure authenticity



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Eames Demetrios

in a market flooded with rip-offs. In 2011, Herman Miller settled litigation with Australia-based replica furniture manufacturer Matt Blatt in relation to Blatt's use of the term “Eames”.

“Herman Miller won an important victory in Australia, basically by making knock-off makers and sellers identify their product as replica,” says Demetrios. “That is a good thing, but it represents the limitations of Australian IP laws, which don't give greater protection – as in the US and the UK – for the product designs, the true product names and the names of the designers.”

The battle is far from over. “What Charles

and Ray designed and what Herman Miller makes is designed from the inside out. What the Matt Blatts of this world sell is designed from the outside in.” He pauses, sighs. “There are two forces that make it easy for these knock-off companies to confuse people. Almost everything in our homes is cheaper and better than it was 50 years ago – our phones, TVs, sound systems – which leads to an unhealthy expectation that everything always gets cheaper and better. When the chair breaks down you only have yourself to blame.

“Then there's the fact we are all less connected with the making process than we were. Today there are far fewer artisans, blue collar workers, people who work with their hands. When the retailer says something idiotic like ‘made to the designer's specifications’ we don't have the confidence to push back.”

The experience of a chair is not how it looks across a room, he adds. “It's how it lasts, sits, feels; how it responds to care, and to wear. All these things are part of the [Eames] design. Another thing for the copyists is that Charles and Ray were always trying to improve their designs. The chair they were designing is the chair that Herman Miller makes tomorrow.”

It's in this context that Demetrios will be launching a new, more sustainable fibreglass version of the Eames moulded plastic shell chair while in Australia. The first fibreglass edition was discontinued in the late 1980s according to Ray Eames's wishes. “Right before she died Ray was becoming very concerned about the environmental side effects of the production and post consumer life of the plastic chair in fibreglass,” Demetrios says. The Eames moulded plastic shell chair was reintroduced in 2004 in polypropylene with no fibres and has been available ever since. As a result of several years of research, a new edition is being made in eco-friendly fibreglass.

“The problem was that the chemical properties that make the fibreglass resin toxic also allow the resin to hold colours brilliantly. There were other issues such as the old technique of binding fibres together with wet glues that could release toxins into the environment,” he says. “Now we use a dry-bind where heat is used to melt the fibres together; one of the charms of the new eco-friendly chair is that each one is a little unique, like a snowflake.”



Welcome to Kcymaerxthaere, an alternative universe that involves bronze plaques erected in the real world. Demetrios is geographer-at-large for the project, “which is where most of the storytelling energy from my films goes these days”. From top: two sites in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia; and bottom, one in the Torres Strait.

As Demetrios and the Eames Office move forward – inventing an Eames font, restoring the Eames films, using education to help people see the big concepts behind the Eames work – so his grandparents' intensely human aesthetic remains. If Demetrios has to work seven days a week in order to do his personal projects – since 1985 he has made more than 70 films, mostly short documentaries but some fiction features and animation – and keep the Eames legacy shining, so be it.

“The way I see it, I have two more than full-time jobs,” he says. “One is being the geographer-at-large for Kcymaerxthaere, which is where most of the storytelling energy from my films goes these days. The other is being director of the Eames Office, which I probably spend the most time on.

“I'm pretty lucky to have a rewarding life in both ways. I help take care of some of the most beautiful designs and ideas the world has ever seen, and I get to go around the world telling stories that knock people out.”

He's got a million: how Charles Eames was on set at the MGM studios the day the roaring lion logo was recorded. (“They dangled a raw steak next to Leo the Lion's face.”) How Charles worked with Billy Wilder on films such as *Spirit of St Louis* and *Love in the Afternoon* and said he learned more about architecture from watching Wilder direct than he had anywhere else. How on the final leg of a round-the-world trip in 1967, Charles Eames photographed the Sydney Harbour site of his friend Jorn Utzon's controversial Opera House project.

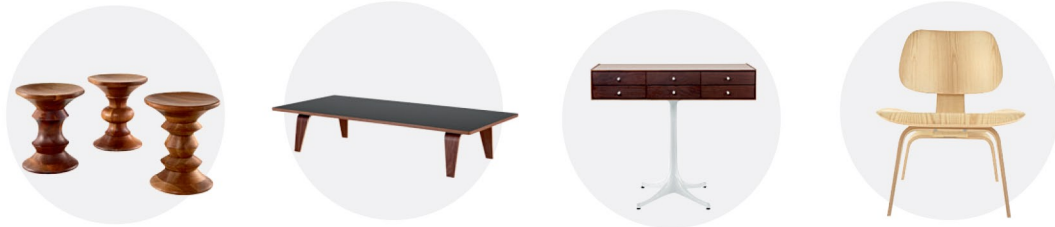
“I show clips, too,” Demetrios says. “I've developed a DVD with a menu to make my talks even more audience-driven. So if people want to learn about furniture, that's a journey I can take them on, but they might want to know more about the films; we can go there too. I love that spontaneity.”

The popularity of live talks and workshops as programmed by the TED conferences and the likes of the Sydney Film Festival and Vivid is encouraging, he says. “There are a lot of things happening now that are a response to the heavily virtualised world. People are really hungry for the direct experience, to make a connection with a person.”

Or even, at a push, for a guest/host relationship. Charles and Ray Eames would undoubtedly approve. “One of the nice things about the guest/host relationship is that it's extremely cross-cultural,” says Demetrios. “As someone who has been to Australia before, I definitely have a sense of being treated like a guest, of feeling they want you to have the best possible experience of their country and culture.

“It's an almost primal feeling. I mean, there is no culture in the world that doesn't have an idea of the host being responsible for the guest. So when you design with this at the centre of your practice you get a sort of universality that means you will stay in line with the customer for a pretty long time.”

He flashes a grin. “When you think about it, it's no wonder my grandparents' designs travel so well.” ■



From left: Eames walnut stools; Eames rectangular coffee table; Nelson miniature chest; Eames moulded plywood lounge chair. Above: Eames moulded plastic arm chair.