



Although Tom Dixon's copper CU29 chair has been made in a limited edition of eight units, which sell for tens of thousands of dollars at New York retailer Moss, it actually began life at the opposite end of the spectrum: as a mass-produced object offered absolutely free. Working with U.K. polystyrene manufacturers to develop a new application for a material normally used in packaging, Dixon hatched the idea of making 500 EPS (expanded polystyrene) Chairs for a giveaway during the 2006 London Design Festival. "It was an opportunity to do something more radical, and to reach people who are normally impervious to design or who can't afford it," says Dixon. "The furniture business is very old-fashioned, and it doesn't think about clever ways of distribution." His idea of giving away the EPS Chairs for free virtually eliminated shipping and storage. "They vanished in seven and a half minutes, and I paid for the whole event by selling marketing rather than chairs."



To determine the chair's shape, Dixon studied polystyrene's limitations. He realized his design would have to be large and bulbous in order to support enough weight, and that it couldn't have any thin edges. The chairs were manufactured by feeding steam into an aluminum mould filled with polystyrene beads. "It's steamed like a Chinese bun, and the beads expand," says Dixon. "It's more akin to cooking than normal plastic manufacturing." After distributing the chairs last September, he began looking for a way to give the same design a greater sense of permanence. The answer was a thick shell of copper. To coat the EPS Chairs with copper, thereby transforming them into CU29 chairs (the name reflects the metal's symbol and atomic number on the periodic table), Dixon looked to electroforming. In this process – normally used for small pieces, such as jewellery – objects are plated through submersion in a liquid bath with an electrical current. Dixon built his own tank to complete the portly chairs.

The finished product "feels a bit like something that's been on the seabed for a hundred years," says Dixon. "Like all copper, it changes according to the humidity in the air. So it's not a static object; it's still evolving." The process also elevated the design to a coveted (and rather expensive) object – a factor that may help Dixon fund future pet projects. "There's this whole art furniture movement emerging, but I'm thinking about how to exploit it to be innovative," he says. "The idea that people are prepared to pay for collectibles is interesting if it allows for radical new furniture."

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