

# Glaze of glory

Interiors | Ceramic furniture

is surprisingly durable but crafted more for aesthetics and sustainability than for comfort. By Tom Morris

When most people think of ceramics, they think of small stuff like porcelain cups," says Floris Wubben. "As a designer, I am always searching for boundaries to break. Making something big out of ceramics is a huge challenge. Bigger is better."

Wubben's forays into clay furniture began when he started producing vases by pushing clay through an extruder machine to reveal custom-designed tubular shapes in a process not too dissimilar from how macaroni is made. The vessels soon morphed into stools and he has since produced clay furniture for Isabel Marant and Chloé fashion stores. The Dutchman is not alone. Against the backdrop of the digital age and a world of shiny screens, a generation of product designers is embracing the challenge of turning such an unpredictable, messy material as clay into furniture. They are relishing the frisson of making sturdy, useful pieces — yes, you can sit on them — out of what many people believe to be fragile media. In turn, interior designers and the public are relishing the tactility, durability and earthiness of having the pieces in their homes. Ceramic design is white hot.

Wubben does not like to call himself a ceramicist but a "designer who by accident works with ceramics". He uses a four metre-high extruder to produce his stools. The results are slightly wonky, colourful gems that he coats in resin instead of glaze. "Ceramics is not easy, it can be really terrible, but when you have success and have created something beyond your normal creative process, it gives you a feeling you can't explain," he says.

This attraction to working with a temperamental, tactile material is something that Wubben shares with Chris Wolston, a New York-based designer who last year launched a collection of terracotta armchairs, stools and tables. His lumpy wonders were an immediate hit with interior designers such as Los Angeles celebrity decorator Kelly Wearstler (ceramic furniture is especially popular on the warm West Coast, according to Wolston's dealer). Wolston studied glass at college but discovered the joys of clay while on a research trip in Colombia. "Glass is great but you can never touch it with your hands," he says. "For me, it's fascinating to be able to directly impact a material. I also love that clay is disgusting and unappealing. You're covering yourself with mud basically."

Wolston's pieces are coil built (a prehistoric technique of layering up sausages of clay to create a structure) in a painstaking process. Drying them alone takes a month. This kind of messy, slow design has great power in an age of instant gratification and mass manufacturing. "The relevance of ceramics has to do with a revolt against everything being manufactured. A decade ago, everything was so sleek and people have got tired of that," Wolston says.

Indeed, materials don't get less sleek than clay, a fact that many designers are making no disguise of; there is an undeniable imperfection to the contemporary zeitgeist. Wolston, for example, decorates his pieces by pawing at them with his fingertips. Reinaldo Sanguino, a New York-based designer, graffiti's over his small thrones with slashes of glaze in a brilliantly painterly way. Apparatu, a ceramics studio based near Barcelona, produces an oak table sitting on four irregular "fang" stoneware legs thrown on the wheel. The wobbly rings produced by hands gripping the clay are left for all to see. This current crop of ceramic furniture makes no apologies for being made by hand.

Why? "People want something a bit rougher and imperfect," says New York-based dealer Patrick Parrish, who sells Wolston's terracotta collection. Immediately after the financial crash of 2008, Parrish says, his clients wanted warm, comfortable things in their homes, hence the rise of the "perfect, perfect, perfect" Danish modern look. "Now we're coming out of that. People are starting to want amazing things that are



Pressed stools by Floris Wubben, \$1,690 each, [thefutureperfect.com](http://thefutureperfect.com)



Le Cabinet by Doshi Levien for Sèvres, limited edition of eight, £52,505 — [Philippe Fragnière](http://PhilippeFraginire.com)



Metallic Ceramic chair by Reinaldo Sanguino \$6,800, [thefutureperfect.com](http://thefutureperfect.com)

Yoshihiro Makino

a little outrageous, colourful, handmade and messy," Parrish says. There is a huge appetite among collectors. "We have seen the trend move across the

market as people become more and more interested in the one-of-a-kind nature of these pieces," agrees David Alhadeff, founder of The Future Perfect gallery, which sells furniture by Wubben and Sanguino. "Even in a series where a form is being repeated, you are able to understand the artist's hand in every piece."

Clay objects offer a warmth, opacity and depth that counteract the glassy, transparent austerity of a world full of technology. Ceramics has the power — like indoor plants or textile art, which have both experienced a surge in popularity in recent years — to bring a bit of analogue life to inert spaces in a digital

world.

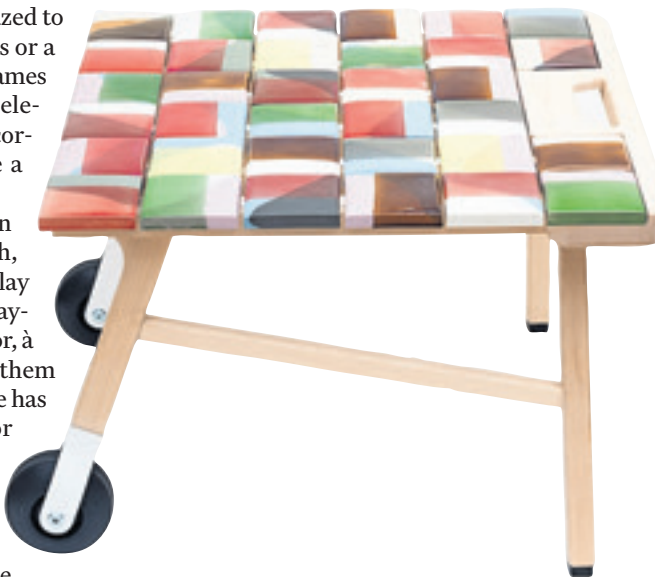
Furniture isn't the only way this is being achieved: ceramics are creeping into homes in other innovative ways too. Wiltshire-based ceramicist Fenella Elms produces wall-mounted reliefs made up of hundreds of porcelain beads. She leaves them unglazed to look like stony bird's feathers or a shoal of fish. Glasgow-based James Rigler makes architectural elements out of clay — corbels, cornices, columns — that have a decorative flourish to them.

Peter Lane is an American ceramicist who creates rough, large-scale, mid-century-ish clay murals. His process involves laying out heavy slabs on the floor, à la Pollock, and hacking into them with his hands and tools. Lane has produced commissions for interior designers Peter Marino and Michael Smith and murals for the LVMH Foundation and Hôtel de Crillon in Paris. How does he believe clay transforms an interior space? "Ceramic has a quality of strength and permanence. It has a presence different from any other material, powerful and personal at the same time. It is literally earth, so it appeals as a truly natural material," he says.

Maren Kloppmann is a German-born ceramicist based in Minnesota who crafts series of porcelain pillows that creep up walls like ship's sails. The floating bubbles give an interior a harmonious sense of nature, despite being made of hard, fired earth. "Ceramics is a powerful material because its process to completion encapsulates all elemental life forces: earth, water, fire and air," she says. "It imbues warmth, cultural reference and the presence of humanity into a home."

Ceramic materials are often seen as a fragile but they are actually among the most durable and can theoretically last millennia. Accidents happen and repairs can be made, though it's not a simple patch-up job. Chips need to be sanded, glazed and then fired. Bigger breakages can be repaired using a special glue, fired once, glazed again and then fired a second time.

Hella Jongerius Tile side table for Galerie Kreo, from €17,500 — [Deniz Guzel](http://DenizGuzel.com)



Wall Pillows Blue Oval I by Maren Kloppmann, \$55,000, [hostlerburrows.com](http://hostlerburrows.com)

Floris Wubben finds a reassuring permanence in clay. "We're living in a world where objects are becoming less and less durable. There are few natural materials as durable as ceramic. In thousands and thousands of years, this furniture will be exactly the same," he says. But

**'The ceramic-making process encapsulates all elemental life forces: earth, water, fire and air'**

what about owners' derrières? "You maybe can't sit for hours and hours on them, but you also don't want to. They are art pieces: it's not about comfort. If you want that, buy an Eames chair."

This sentiment is typical of the new wave of ceramicists. A highly inventive generation has developed what is possible with the craft and has been joined by people from other creative fields — architecture, furniture, illustration, interiors,

painting — who are realising clay's assets and bringing a fresh perspective. Today, there is a lively crossover between craft, design, sculpture and technology that is rethinking the material: what you can make with it and what it looks like. Ceramic furniture is just one outcome of this experimental attitude.

So why stop at chairs? The one thing holding many ceramicists and product designers back is equipment. While clay is a relatively cheap material, turning it into ceramic takes not just mess but space and, inevitably, a massive kiln. "The problem with ceramic is always the kiln. My ceramic furniture is the maximum I can make," says Wubben. Wolston says the same of his terracotta chairs, adding: "I'd like to take and push it as far as possible. It would be interesting to test the limits of scale and create whole environments where you have wall components or entire sofas made out of clay."

*'New Wave Clay: Ceramic Design, Art and Architecture' by Tom Morris is published by Frame (€39)*



Furniture by Chris Wolston including Neblina side table, \$2,400, Colibri and Tanza plant chairs, \$8,800 each, [patrickparrish.com](http://patrickparrish.com) — [Clemens Kois](http://ClemensKois.com)

White and bronze-patinated wall-mounted ceramic sculpture by Peter Lane, custom-made [collectiveartdesign.com](http://collectiveartdesign.com)

