

# Tools for life

OMA FOR KNOLL

# Tools for life



# Inter-views



**“Tools for Life” is an 11-piece collection of furniture designed by Rem Koolhaas and his studio, OMA. Overall, it’s a frank and, at times, frisky expression of the idea that furniture is, ultimately, equipment for living and so has an obligation to perform at a high level.**

Today people work everywhere—not just in an office—and the message here is that pieces that are easily adaptable are more likely to remain relevant. Many of these pieces move up or down or laterally, taking different, sometimes unpredictable positions or even shapes, according to what users need. Architect, author, curator, professor, self-made sociologist, and full-time provocateur, Koolhaas has produced a wide range of projects, though it’s the large, such as the Rothschild Bank in London, the extra large, such as the CCTV tower in Beijing, or the super-sized, such as a master plan for a city of 200,000 people in Doha, that have dominated his office in recent years. For this, his first official foray into product design, Koolhaas had to rethink his own preconceptions about practicing at such a small scale. Tapped by Knoll to help mark its 75th anniversary, he joins an august group of architects who have shaped the company’s history, including Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry. Below is a condensed and edited series of interviews outlining the principles behind “Tools for Life.”

**Rem Koolhaas;**  
Partner, OMA  
**Ippolito Pestellini**

**Laparelli;**  
Associate, OMA

**Benjamin Pardo;**  
Executive Vice President,  
Design Director, Knoll

**Khalid Masoud;**  
Lead Product Design  
Engineer, Knoll

## WHY DID KNOLL WANT TO WORK WITH OMA?

**BP:** Because of the way Rem Koolhaas thinks about architecture. In general, I'm drawn to his thinking—not always to exactly what it is that he's saying, but to the frankness with which he says it and his ability to dismiss extraneous stuff. And we wanted to see a contemporary figure interpret Modernist ideas. Some of the pieces are, in their static state, very much like Florence Knoll pieces: They are the background pieces that create sub-architecture in an architectural space. Yet there's a kinesthetic quality to this collection—many of the pieces adjust, move, or transform. Certain pieces undergo a metamorphosis. It's the first time since the Frank Gehry collection where we've done something that says: "Here's an architect of today who is challenging us to think about furniture and ideas related to both business and domestic environments." And it's not just about wonderful objects but also about how people interact with space and architecture. It's a collection of products that really pushes how it is

that we are working, thinking, and living. What does it really mean to be able to sit on the floor with people and have a meeting and then, an hour later, use that same table at a full standing height for something entirely different?

## WHY FURNITURE? WHY NOW?

**RK:** I had always felt that designing furniture was kind of redundant. But due to some experiences in my private life, at home, I was designing at that scale. I had thought that it would be almost impossible, but actually I enjoyed it. It unlocked energy. So I decided that our so-called principle of not being involved in design needed to be thrown overboard.

**IP:** It was an interesting brief: To design furniture for something that is in between an office and a domestic environment—a hybrid or fluid environment. So the pieces themselves are hybrids and have multiple uses. Our interest was more in how the furniture could perform—what the pieces could do for users—and not what the pieces look like.



## HOW DOES THE FURNITURE COLLECTION RELATE TO OMA'S ARCHITECTURE?

**RK:** The pieces all perform different tasks. The furniture is, in a way, mutable and changeable and so for that reason it corresponds very closely to my interest in things that perform rather than things that have particular shapes. So in that sense there is a kind of seamless incorporation of the same logic, but at a totally different scale.

**IP:** There's a common attitude—one that's related to function more than design.

## HOW DID THE COLLECTION DEVELOP?

**BP:** From the start, what was important to me in terms of talking to Rem about this project was that I wanted to be able to talk about office space planning concepts in the most neutral possible fashion and to tie them back to residential ideas as well. In the initial discussions, I was trying to avoid any kind of aesthetic imposition or any question of geometry or any kind of influential materiality. Strangely enough though, that neutrality is very much part of what the furniture has actually become. So, the real conversation at the start was about height, adjacency, and visual division. I said that I wanted to focus on work, not the office. And

the distinction is that people work everywhere. And one of the reasons why height, boundary, and spatial relationships are so important is because you find yourself working in very different kinds of circumstances. So, what was critical in terms of the overall concept is being able to work in any position from sitting on the floor to standing up, and that requires height adjustments of tables more than anything else. The next question was really one associated with partitioning: how can we have some kind of architectural form that physically divides space? So, we talked through all of those different kinds of abstract ideas that might apply equally to the office as to the home.

**RK:** Knoll presented a series of interconnected typologies they wanted us to do and those turned out to be in themselves very, very interesting almost to the point that we decided to translate the typologies into a kind of apparatus—to be very literal about them. We thought we ought to make the pieces perform but we ought not to mask them in terms of adding “design.”



**THE COLLECTION TOOK ABOUT A YEAR FROM CONCEPT TO LAUNCH. HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO DO THIS IN SUCH A RELATIVELY COMPRESSED TIME PERIOD?**

**BP:** We wanted it in time for the 75th anniversary. Our priorities established the fact that it could move forward. We put an enormous amount of engineering resources and many people on it. It took up a lot of my design time, and Rem made his time available to participate in all the reviews. So, overall, I think that Knoll was extremely proactive and OMA was very responsive.

**RK:** Knoll was very flexible and very present in Europe, near us. They let us work with European factories for prototypes so it was an extremely easy thing for us to do, easy to integrate into our way of working.

**WHAT DOES THE COLLECTION SAY ABOUT KNOLL AT 75?**

**RK:** They had wanted to work with us for a very long time, so the first thing that I would say is that Knoll has stamina. The second is ambition.

**IS THE COLLECTION DIFFICULT TO PRODUCE? ARE THERE ANY TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS?**

**IP:** Since these pieces need to perform at a high level, a wide range of motion is necessary—in fact table height adjustments range from 40 to roughly 120 centimeters high. And it is important that the physical expression of the pieces should be as honest as possible—exposed mechanical systems, a simple palette of materials, and so on.

**BP:** Kinesthesia is a very large part of what the product range is about. Most of the pieces move. And one of the things that we spent a lot of time on is showing you a point of activation. So, red normally signals

“push me here and I go up and down or move from side to side.” There’s an iconography of color throughout the collection that expresses motion and, in some cases, you’ll notice that there’s a way to see into the mechanism and how the movement is taking place. With the tables, for example, there is a clear acrylic tube around the hydraulic system and it shows you what’s going on and its height defines how far down the vertical surface can be adjusted. It shows you the stopping point.

**KM:** If you look at 06 Table, you see that it’s supported by one column. Nine out of ten engineers will tell you that’s impossible. That’s what makes the whole product development team, myself included, work hard, but we’re happy to do that because this collection really stretches the engineering imagination. We knew we were pushing the limits of what’s possible. We started off working with 04 Counter, which on paper also seemed impossible until we got into it. And, by the way, the Knoll management team basically told us “Figure it out. No restrictions. No limitations. Use whatever technology you need to get it done.”



**BP:** One of the things that is great from my perspective is that this project gives our product development team exposure to work and to an architectural studio that they're not going to get every afternoon.

**ARE THE ENGINEERING INNOVATIONS FUNCTIONALLY NECESSARY OR ARE THEY FOR DRAMATIC PURPOSES? WHY, FOR EXAMPLE, IS IT IMPORTANT THAT THE BEAMS OF THE 04 COUNTER ROTATE AS MUCH AS THEY DO?**

**BP:** 04 Counter is a wall. Also, it's a piazza of sorts, as it brings people together. Once people discover that the object moves, they want to engage with it, gather around it. When all the beams are aligned, it's a wall. When the top two beams start to rotate, the wall begins to dematerialize and people are able to walk through a space that was, seconds ago, occupied by a massive solid. Now you are suddenly using the different beams in different ways, even sitting on them. And then when

you're finished with whatever it is you're doing, you align the beams and it's an architectural partition once again.

**KM:** We engineered it in such a way that a person can sit on the top beam even when it's cantilevered way out over the floor. When someone is sitting up there, it looks like they're defying gravity.

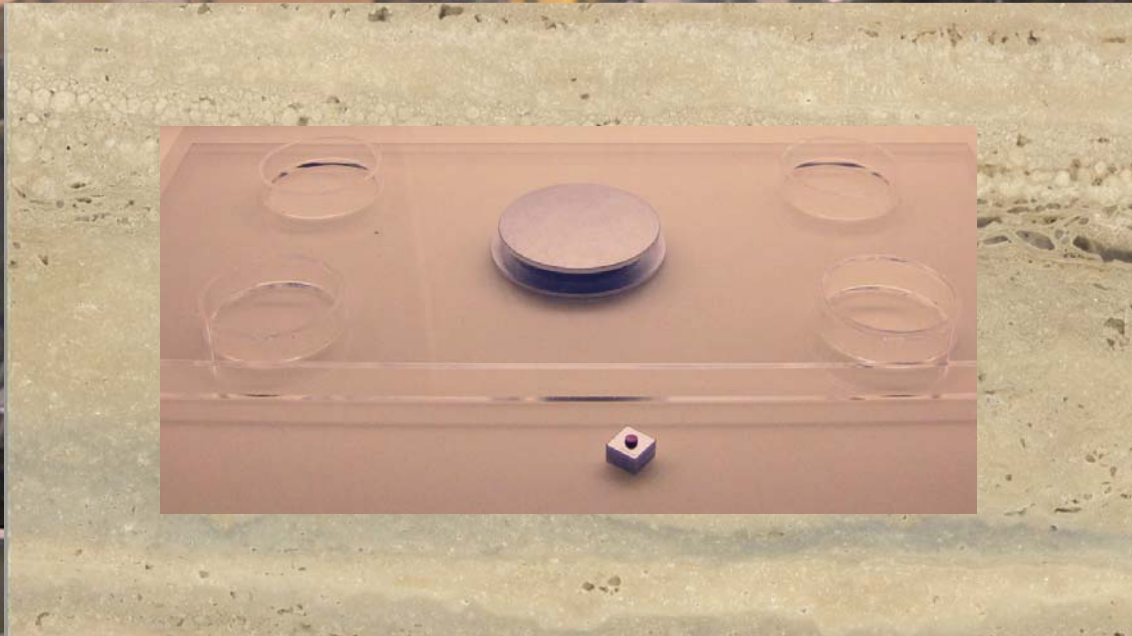
**RK:** The piece that cantilevers in all directions is an amazing piece—an amazing engineering feat—because you simply do not understand how it's done. That is particularly rewarding.



**IN THE PAST YOU'VE SAID THAT ARCHITECTURE IS MORE ABOUT ORGANIZING PEOPLE'S LIVES THAN IT IS ABOUT FORM AND, AS A RESULT, IT'S THE ULTIMATE FORM OF SCRIPT WRITING, WHICH IS SOMETHING YOU DID BEFORE YOU BECAME AN ARCHITECT. WHILE YOU WERE WORKING ON THIS PROJECT DID YOU ENVISION A PARTICULAR SCRIPT?**

**RK:** There was some kind of script about working conditions, about lessening or loosening hardcore distinctions between work and life, about addressing the persistent problem that furniture is inflexible. No, it's not about constructing a narrative; it's about providing a toolbox—the furniture is a toolbox—for countering a number of fixed preconceptions and expanding the number of possibilities. In the end, it's about flexibility.







# Brief



Work surfaces  
at different  
heights

# Pro- cess



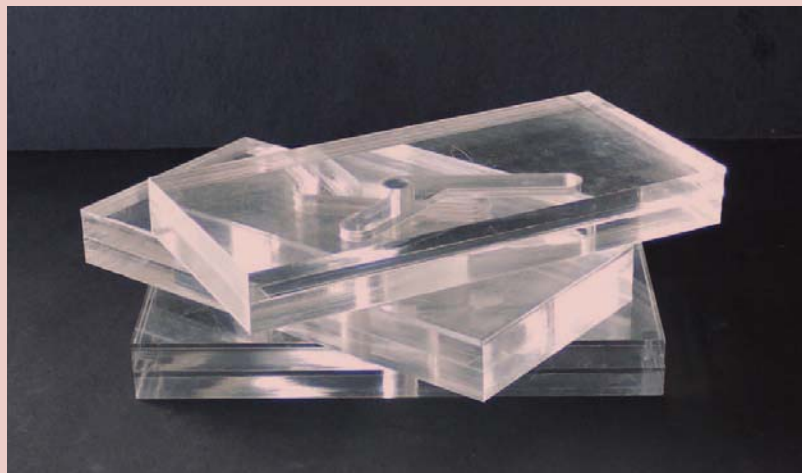
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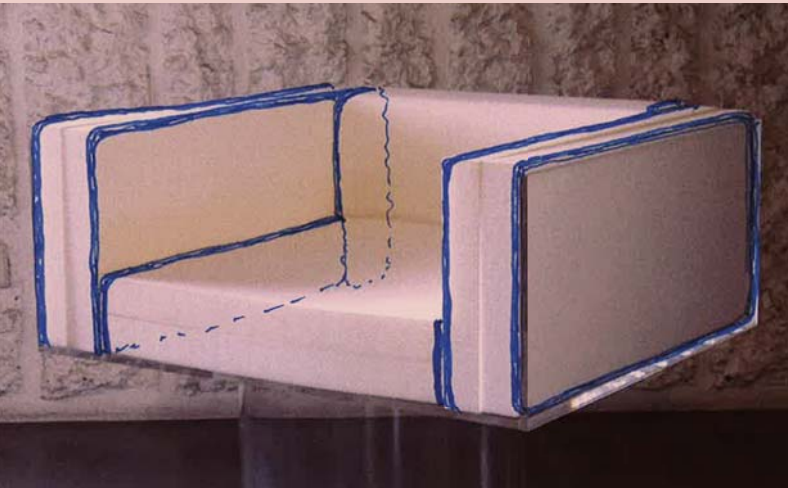


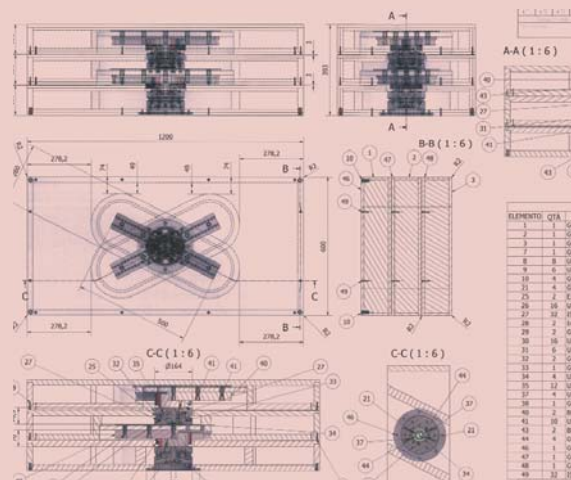
# Function











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# Prada FW 2013

The Tools for Life furniture range made its debut at a Prada catwalk show that OMA / AMO designed for Prada. Prototype versions of the furniture, in provisional materials still being tested in the studio, formed the backdrop to the fashion show.

The audience, seated around the perimeter, faces an "ideal house": an interior populated with uncanny pieces of furniture, objects and manifestations of everyday life. The models weave through this set, acting as characters in a sequence of domestic scenes.





# The collec- tion





# 01 Lounge chair

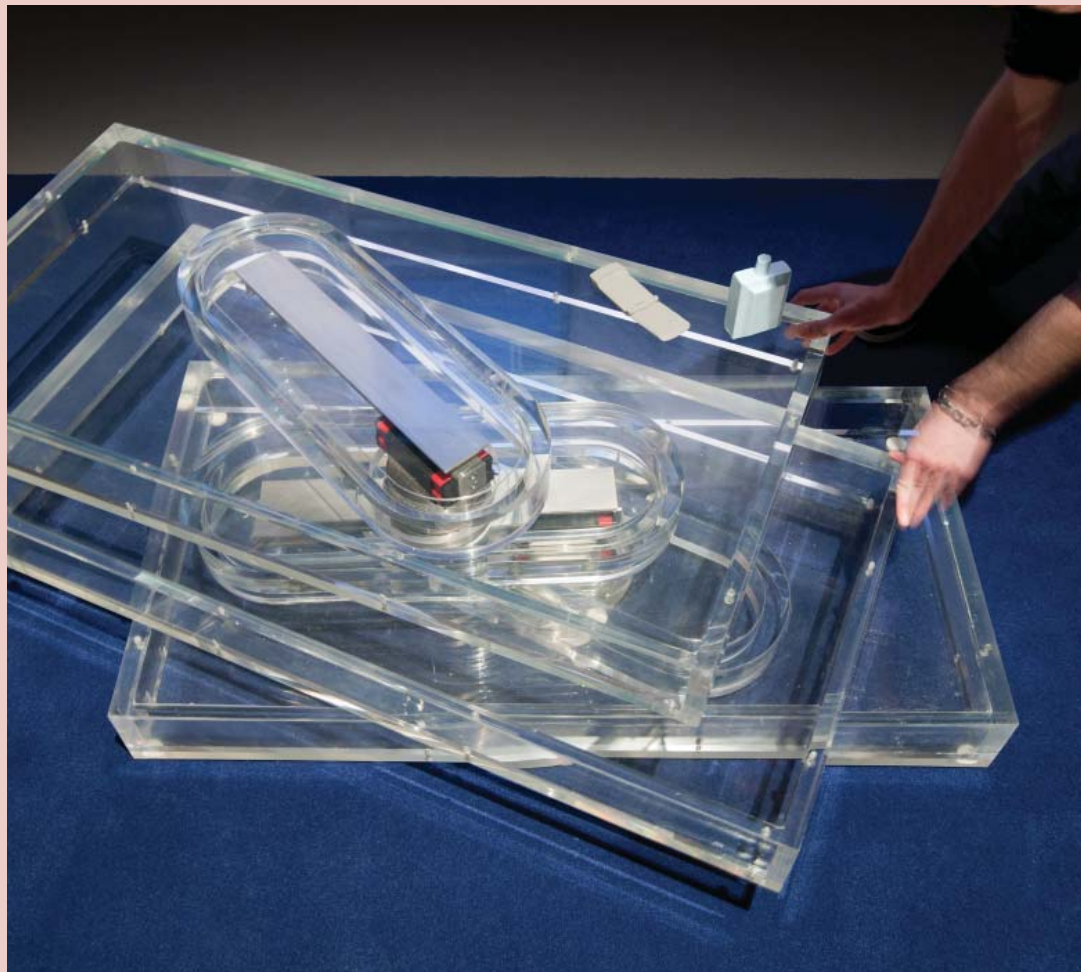






# 03 Coffee table







# 04 Counter







# 05 Round table







# 06 Rectanglar desk



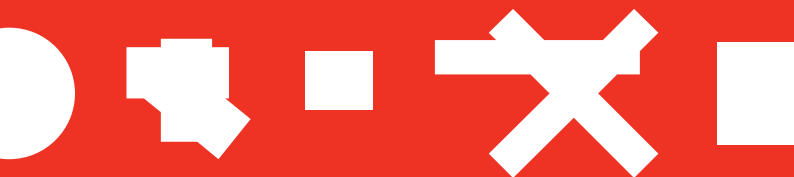




**1954** Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Architect, Barcelona® Chair  
Photo: Dirk Lohan



**2013** Rem Koolhaas, Architect, OMA Collection



9 - 10 April 2013 | Via Fogazzaro, 36 Milan

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