

## Meet Stephen Kenn Design: Founders Q+A

How Stephen Kenn Design is built on problem solving and fun



Stephen Kenn came to Los Angeles from Canada 15 years ago with a denim company and passion for design. Over the years, jeans became leather bags and then finally in 2011, he and his wife Beks Opperman started Stephen Kenn Design to introduce their first line of furniture. 360 sat down with Opperman to talk about that journey and learn what makes Stephen Kenn Design tick.

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**360: How did Stephen first start designing furniture? How'd he go from denim and bags to sofas and chairs?**

**BEKS OPPERMAN:** Stephen is interesting. He's very much a designer. But I wouldn't say he's the classic "maker." He enjoys making things, sure, but the fun part for him is the new idea, then the problem solving, and then figuring out how to make it a good idea. Originally, it was jeans. He started a denim company with his friends because they were into making their own t-shirts. They were 20 and making jeans seemed like the obvious next thing. The initial bit for him was learning – this was back in 2000 when really distressed jeans were cool – and they were mixing dyes and bleaches. Tearing things apart and putting them back together. I think that's still design for him: that first big idea, that first flash of creativity. Then, he really likes the learning, refining and making it great. But once he's got to that point, he moves on in his mind. So, in that sense it was very natural for him to switch categories. Because he'll get interested in something and be like... "How can I get creative with those restrictions whether it's with a sewing machine and panels of denim or something else?"

He actually had two different denim companies, both of which he sold to investors. He'd stay for a while and eventually move on. The bags happened in 2008 after his last denim company lost all its funding because of the financial crisis. He was on unemployment and just started making bags. He already knew how to sew. He had all this vintage military material and one day he just decided "I'm going to make myself a bag." Again, he got really into it – designing, experimenting and eventually selling bags. Before long, it was real company. But he didn't want to run the business so he sold it to an investor – I don't know if you're seeing the pattern here.

### **360: How did he get into furniture? How did you get involved?**

**BO:** After a couple of years, the bag thing was starting to feel like it wasn't right. I was working at a hospital as a respiratory therapist. We had been married for about two years. We'd recently moved into a loft and he was like, "We need cool industrial furniture and I want to make it." So, he took apart a couple of pieces of vintage furniture – a sofa and a big stuffy armchair apart to see how they were put together. And that's what got him. He had a friend who was a welder who taught him to weld so he could make the first frame. He already knew how to sew so he could make the upholstery. And he made us a sofa for our loft and that just got him kind of hooked into the category. So, when the bag company was feeling uncomfortable, he was like "I think we can do this. Let's make this same design, but let's also do a chair and chaise lounge." This time around, I said, "Look I'm pretty left-brained. I've got a pretty good schedule at the hospital. What if I figure out the business side and then you don't have to worry about finding an investor? Then maybe we can grow it as slow as we want." We spent our savings on building a website, and that was it. That was six-and-a-half years ago.



**360:** Can you share how you guys think about materials and sustainability? It seems like that's an important part of your story.

**BO:** Yeah, that is really important to us. Sometimes people say things like, "Oh, you're a recycled furniture company." We're not that. We use a lot of new materials. But it's true our first collection – and really the only material we offered for the first two years – was made with vintage military canvas. We both just loved that material. It was hardy. Every piece was unique; sometimes there was like a soldier's name scrawled on it or a unit number. We had access to this huge supply of it here in LA, so it made sense. From day one – and Stephen and I have always seen eye-to-eye on this – we had this philosophy of buying less but buying better. In a sense, it's practicing sustainability through repair. Not buying the cheap thing knowing it'll only last a year and then you'll need another. We try to be really thoughtful about what we're buying and what we bring into our home. Trying to do as much repair as we can. And we do that with everything we make. We say we want to create products worthy of repair.

We have a leather bag collection because Stephen still loves bags. We purposely don't put a lining in because that's the thing that wears out in a leather bag. That's the thing that makes you think, "Oh this bag is gross and old." When leather gets stained and beat up, you love it. It tells a story and looks amazing. But when the liner gets torn up you think, "I need a new bag." So, to avoid that, we stained the inside of the bag to give it an interesting look, but there's no lining, it's just leather. It's kind of built-in sustainability. We want a bag that you can carry for a decade. We feel the same about everything we make.

**360: How important is Los Angeles to you guys as a company?**

**BO:** Honestly, it'd be hard to do our company anywhere else. So much of who we are is this place where we live. You can make something here on a small scale. There are so many people in this city who will make things for you - who will make all the elements or teach you how to make them. It's not the kind of thing where you have a sample price and you have a minimum order of 500 or something. In most manufacturing cities, that's how it works. Here, you can just go down the street and find a welder. One of our current welders was making security gates - he had Starbucks as a client. Steve went in there with a drawing and just asked, "What do you think? Can you do this?" And the guy was just "Yeah, man." It's essentially like you have a team that is willing to do sampling for you, but they're all over the city and there are hundreds of them. We have a bunch of upholstery contractors and fabricators and welders and finishing houses and sandblasters. There are so many resources here. It allowed our company to start with really small orders. It's the reason we've been able to start small and invest a little bit at a time.

**360:** That's really interesting and maybe a little bit unexpected.

**BO:** Yeah, from the manufacturing side, L.A. has been a dream. And it's still so fun. We just met someone who is a glassblower, and he wants to start working with artists. And now Stephen is like, "Maybe we'll do a lighting collection. We can work with this glassblower. We'll work with the LED person." You meet people who are doing something and it makes you imagine what you could create with them. It's fun. It feels like there is a lot of possibilities here. And the design community has been so welcoming. We try to add to that by opening up our space and having it be a place where people can come hang out, learn and talk about design. We try to share as many resources as possible. We're not scarcity mentality people. We're abundance mentality people. I think that's an L.A. thing. There's more than enough to go around and we've yet to be proven wrong about that. It's all part of this place feeling like so much is possible.

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