

Meet MIO: Co-Founder Q+A

The co-founder of MIO on bridging the gap between business and sustainability through design.

Since 2001, Philadelphia-based design company MIO has been deeply invested in designing sustainable, contemporary furniture and socially and environmentally responsive products, services and experiences to promote a more sustainable culture.

Jamie and Isaac Salm, the brotherly duo behind MIO, have become leaders in sustainable design practices with their fully formed design process driven by research and new way of thinking about materials, supply chains and waste streams.

360 sat down with Isaac to talk about MIO's design processes and some of the unconventional materials they use to create their collection.

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360: How was MIO started?

Isaac Salm: MIO was founded by my brother and I back in 2001. His senior thesis project had to do with school furniture—he found that there was an infrastructure for recycling paper, but there wasn't anything similar for school furniture so, at the end of every school year, there was an enormous amount of waste. His thesis explored the possibility of making furniture out of recycled paper, which yielded a couple of small items that were made out of molded paper pulp. He went to some local stores to see if he could put some of the items on display on consignment. The items, small bowls and that kind of thing, were spotted by a visual merchandising director for Anthropologie who offered to start putting them in their stores. That was our seed money.

We decided I'd run the business side and he'd handle creative, and we launched our first product collection for Idea Fest at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York.

360: Where were you located at that time?

IS: Philadelphia. We were born and raised in Colombia and came to the United States to study. I went to the University of Miami and Jamie went to the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. I moved up here to join him when we started MIO.

360: How were you able to get the company off the ground?

IS: That first product collection that we sent to ICFF was well received in New York, and the three-dimensional wallpaper tiles made from recycled paper became our first big hit. The Smithsonian National Design Museum right out of the gate said that they wanted it for their permanent collection. Our first exhibition and suddenly we were in a museum. It was surreal.

After that, we started growing the collection. We started to form our design process and began looking at behaviors to design from. Our products aren't just based on what we want to do, they have to cater to a real need. Plus, they have to match a waste resource or waste stream and an existing manufacturing technology. We use very mature technologies that aren't normally used in the furniture industry and that's how we come up with our innovations.

360: How has MIO been received for its design process?

IS: We have two business units to our company—product collection and consulting. Sometimes clients come to us because they love our products but they aren't looking to buy, they want to learn from our innovations and processes.

360: How have you continued to innovate on the product side?

IS: The more we honed our design and research processes, the more we were able to recognize voids in the market. When we saw that the residential markets had problems with acoustics, we took our paper forms that were purely aesthetic wall tiles and added material to provide acoustic benefits. We evolved our Nomad system, a decorative room divider made of a cardboard-like material, to a sound absorption system that's basically a room in a box. When you need walls, you have them, and when you're done you can pack them back into the box and put it in a closet.

360: How are design & sustainability interrelated at MIO?

IS: It goes back to a philosophy that Jamie had conceived while working on his thesis. We call it Green Desire, which basically means we want all of our products to be sustainable from an environmental, social, and financial standpoint. It's the triple bottom line—people, planet and profits. We make sure that we hit each one of those marks. If we're going down a path and see that we're missing one of these pillars, then we evaluate whether we can redesign it or it might not be a valid product for the collection.

360: How does MIO choose its materials?

IS: To quote Jaime, "There are no inherently bad materials. There are just bad uses for materials." Every material has a sustainability benefit if used in the proper context. The way we go about selecting our materials is to make sure that the supply chain is solid and mature enough to handle replication. There are so many amazing experimental, sustainable products out there, but if you want to have success with a product you have to make sure that you can produce a lot of it in a timely fashion. We keep everything local. We're extremely efficient. These kind of things have become second nature to us.

And, we don't always start with material. Our design briefs are more focused on solving a behavioral problem rather than just picking the right material and applying it to something. Our new Work is Play Collection is all about behavior in the workspace, challenging the preconception that play is only for children. There's a correlation between productivity and having fun.

360: What excites you about the future of MIO?

IS: The work environment is being redefined and there are new behaviors that need to be addressed. What does it mean to be working in 2020? Everyone wants co-working spaces to feel like a living room, but there is such a thing as too much of a living room. We're all nomadic now, but we still want people to feel comfortable and productive. We're doing a lot of research into those type of work environments and the unexpected needs that might arise because of them.

MIO

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