

How the Bronx Became the Last Outpost of Acrylic Chic

[nytimes.com/2018/07/19/nyregion/acrylic-furniture-maker-plexicraft.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/nyregion/acrylic-furniture-maker-plexicraft.html)

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Rafael Padilla works at the Plexi-Craft factory, in the Bronx's West Farms area. Credit: Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

By Hillary Chura

During the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, New York City's once-robust manufacturing sector was shrinking, but a handful of young furniture factories were ramping up, tapping into the mod aesthetic of the day with acrylic chairs, tables and lamps. Hip, creative and sometimes flashy, acrylic furniture marked a clean break from the past and epitomized

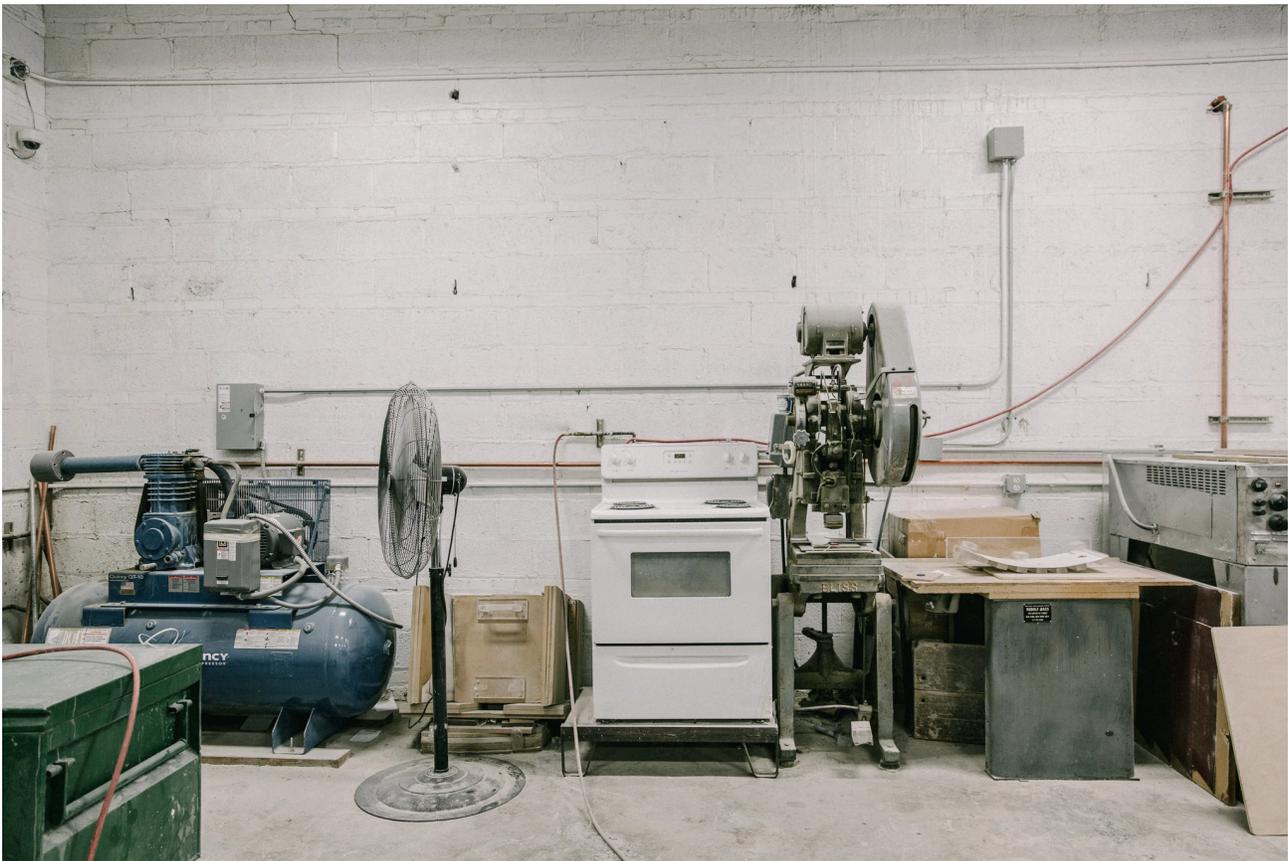
the open and youthful spirit of the age.

Under names like Lucite and Plexiglas, acrylic resin was an invention of the early 20th century. The crystal-clear substance was used in World War II to make airplane cockpit bubbles. It began turning up in high-end furniture in the 1950s, but demand exploded into the residential market in the 1960s and '70s.

"In the 1970s, people became interested in modern," said the designer Tony Ingrao, who lived in Manhattan in the '70s. "It was a reaction to the free love and hippie movement. Everyone wanted to be free and let loose. Why not free up furniture?"

At its plexiglass peak in the 1970s, the city had 10 to 20 factories that specialized in acrylic furnishings and accessories. But over time, rising rents, high costs, cheap imports and changing tastes forced most of the manufacturers to relocate or to close. Now the city is down to a lone survivor: Plexi-Craft Quality Products in the Bronx.

Image



New York City used to have 10 to 20 factories that specialized in acrylic furniture. Now, only Plexi-Craft is left. Credit Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Through a combination of business savvy, family work ethic, a prescient real estate purchase, three relocations and the 2016 sale to a passionate new owner, the more than 50-year-old company has remained in business. It has gone from making clear trash cans for suburban families to producing \$15,000 office desks, shelving for Sarah Jessica Parker's shoe stores and furniture for Sean Combs's living room overlooking Central Park.

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Back in 1972, George Frechter, a pet supply salesman from New Jersey, was flipping through The New York Times classifieds. When he spotted an ad for an acrylic fabricator on the Lower East Side, his wife, Marlyn, saw the potential. A few months later, Plexi-Craft was his.

In the beginning, Plexi-Craft made translucent accessories like tissue holders and cigarette cases as well as simple furniture like nesting tables. By the early '80s, the Z-shaped chair, made from a single slab of acrylic, had become one of the company's hottest sellers. It showed up in a Playboy magazine centerfold and, some 20 years later, in a promotional photo for "Sex and the City," said Allen Frechter, the youngest of George's three sons, who would eventually run the business.

The showroom on Chrystie Street was open seven days a week and was staffed on many weekends by George's nieces, nephews and then-teenage sons. When business was slow, the boys would assemble products or pack up shipments in the back. When the family drove in from New Jersey, they would park in a weedy junkyard at Chrystie and Houston, down the street from what is Whole Foods today.

Image



Hans Kretschman, a former commercial banker, was advised to "stay away" from acrylic manufacturing. He ignored the advice and bought Plexi-Craft in June 2016. Credit Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

George eventually bought a three-story building in Chelsea at 514 West 24th Street and shifted the factory and showroom there.

"Our customers were middle- to upper-income people from the suburbs," Allen Frechter said. "They had nice homes and wanted quality stuff." Most furniture pieces cost less than \$200, the equivalent of \$1,600 today. "It wasn't like shopping at Target for furniture," he said. "More like going to Crate & Barrel."

Interest in translucent furniture petered out in the late '80s as decorating turned traditional. Demand lagged until 2002, when the French designer Philippe Starck introduced the \$900 Louis Ghost chair, said Julie M. Muñiz, a California-based curator and historian specializing in 20th- and 21st-century decorative arts.

During acrylic's slow period, the company survived largely by catering to high-end clients. But 2007 brought new challenges: The elder Mr. Frechter died, followed by the financial crisis. By the end of the year, Plexi-Craft's revenues had dropped by 40 percent. In 2008, Allen and David, the middle son, eventually put the West 24th Street building on the market and relocated to a rental in Long Island City.

Image



Hector Molina buffs a plexiglass chair leg. "The chairs we make are very heavy," said Phillip Sookhai, the shop manager. "Our lightest chair is 40 to 50 pounds." Credit: Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Allen, a technology and telecom consultant, would shuttle in almost weekly from the Boston suburbs to run operations. David, who had had a travel business, focused on design and marketing, mostly from his home in North Carolina. After nine years of commuting, Allen wanted out. His accountant mentioned the company to another

client.

Hans Kretschman, a former commercial banker in his 50s, wasn't exactly looking to buy a niche furniture company. But when he toured the factory in Long Island City, he was flabbergasted. "There were people with masks, odors and dust. I'm used to corporate offices," he said. "I saw them doing things you would not think were still being done in this country, much less New York City."

He was intrigued. "What was coming out of that factory door was some of the most gorgeous furniture I'd ever seen in my life."

He sought advice. It wasn't encouraging.

"Anyone who knew anything about manufacturing in New York City, anything about numbers, anything about acrylic furniture — they all told me to stay away," he said.

Image

A small studio adjacent to the factory floor is used for product photography. Credit Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Undeterred, Mr. Kretschman completed his purchase of the company in June 2016. The first order of business was to find Plexi-Craft a new home. The company had been bought out of its lease in Long Island City, which housed both the showroom and the factory.

Mr. Kretschman selected the [New York Design Center](#) at 32nd Street and Lexington for the showroom. For the factory, he signed a 10-year lease on an 8,500-square-foot space in the Bronx's economically challenged West Farms area. It was affordable, convenient for employees and visiting designers, and it was close to public transportation and highways.

Perhaps most important, Mr. Kretschman said, "I wanted to be able to continue to say 'Made in New York City.'"

Plexi-Craft is tucked among a sanitation cleaning station and a high-rise housing complex that's under construction. It currently employs 18 people, including Phillip Sookhai, the shop manager. Mr. Sookhai started as a machinist 24 years ago. He said that while quality and efficiency have improved over the years, the manufacturing process has changed little, and that makes all the difference in the final product.

Image

A Plexi-Craft product, an acrylic shelving system, as seen in SJP, Sarah Jessica Parker's shoe store. Credit Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

"There are still a lot of people out there who just know quality just by looking at a piece of furniture. Like acrylic chairs, some of those from China are very light. You could pick one up with one finger. The chairs we make are very heavy. Our lightest chair is 40 to 50 pounds," Mr. Sookhai said.

Interest in acrylic spans budgets. Walmart's chairs and tables can run less than \$100. Design websites like [1stdibs](#) and [Chairish](#) currently list vintage pieces that cost thousands of dollars more. The home remodeling and design site [Houzz](#) said searches for the word "acrylic" increased by 38 percent from October 2015 to June 2018.

Despite the uptick in demand, acrylic fabricators continue to close locally and nationally. Mr. Kretschman said that since he purchased Plexi-Craft two years ago, three other local factories have closed, left the city or shifted to other materials. Chad Phillips, the director of merchandising at the Brooklyn Museum, estimated that there are about 10 remaining such factories nationwide.

Because its manufacturing process is so labor intensive, Plexi-Craft does not compete with chain stores that sell mass-produced furniture when it comes to pricing. Plexi-Craft's heavier pieces, however, are unlikely to break or yellow and can be up to eight inches thick. Cheaper imports will likely max out at around one inch and can be held together by screws or scratchy glue lines.

And clean lines can be important when it comes to interior design. Acrylic does not compete with other furniture "because it is clear, so it cannot clash," said Dina Bandman, a San Francisco designer who has worked with Plexi-Craft since the Frechters' time. "It provides an opportunity to mix classical elements with more modern design and

can have a beautiful balancing effect in a room.”

Two years ago, Moon Kim, who lives with her family in the East 70s, bought a Plexi-Craft side table. “I wasn’t really sure what acrylic was, but it fit with my aesthetic,” she said. “I like it because it’s clear and transparent — it’s less obstructive.”

While much has changed since the Frechters parked in an empty lot on Houston Street, Plexi-Craft remains a family affair. Paulette Massaro works alongside her husband, Mr. Kretschman, while their four sons pitch in, too: Austin, 9, cleans and polishes furniture in the showroom; Luke, 13, also cleans furniture and hands out brochures at trade shows; Christopher, 15, helps with social media, works trade shows and has designed a chess table; and Justin, 17, designs furniture and coaches his father on Instagram.

“No matter what happens,” Mr. Kretschman said, “Plexi-Craft’s future is in good hands.”