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Mold is enveloping the house. Where is it coming from? **Your Place, D2**

Michael d'Amato's chairs move the body. **Making It, D3**



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making it

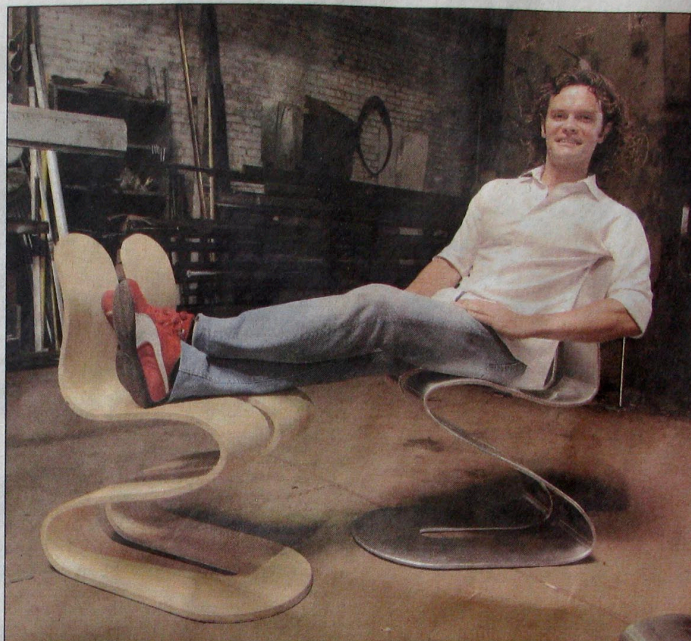
BY CAROLINE TIGER

Michael d'Amato frames his journey to the Fluid Ribbon Chair in terms of Joseph Campbell's trope of the hero quest. Everything in his life led to its making, and he's poured everything he has into developing it. This is a story of design meets divine intervention.

As a kid, d'Amato was obsessed with taking things apart — at age 3 he removed the doorknobs from every door in his parents' house. He flirted with the idea of becoming a doctor but decided to apply his deconstructing skills to building tools for the body — the ultimate machine. After earning degrees from the University of Rochester in biomedical engineering, biomechanical engineering, and entrepreneurship, he started several companies to develop medical devices, but they all hit brick walls. He lost his apartment and was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. "It was that critical time," d'Amato says about his early 30s, "when you either get depressed and desperate, or something happens."

In July 2011 something happened. His brother called and said he couldn't find a chair suitable for his bad back. "You've always been good at making things," his brother said. "Figure this one out." D'Amato realized the ergonomic seating solutions his brother had tried all have one thing in common: They encourage a person to sit still. But even in a perfect posture, sitting still isn't good for your back. He decided to create a chair that encourages the body to move.

D'Amato took all his knowledge of biomechanics, product development, and entrepreneurship, learning what he needed to about things like CAD and laminate, and came up with two prototypes — one in aluminum and one in bamboo. Frank B. Clayton & Sons, a metal fabricator in Frankford, bent the aluminum chair. Making each bend required the pressure of a 20,000-pound brake press for most of a day. D'Amato made the mold and cut and laminated the bamboo for the wood version at NextFab Studio in University City. The chair's shape is similar to Verner Panton's S Chair, Frank Gehry's Wiggle Chair, and Gerrit Rietveld's Z Chair, but theirs are all fixed. D'Amato's is springy. Its split seat acknowledges the fact that the right and left sides of our bodies hardly ever move in sync.



Michael d'Amato shows his chairs in bamboo (left) and aluminum. RON TARVER / Staff

In May, he launched Fluid Ribbon at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, and by June he'd partnered with Lamberti Design, a manufacturer in Italy, to make and distribute it in Europe. The chair was not the solution for d'Amato's brother, after all — he now prefers to stand while he works — but the designer hopes his "sculpture loaded with biomechanics" will act as a preventive for many others. "Beyond the chair," he says, "the message is about how people live."

Caroline Tiger is a design writer in Philadelphia. Visit her blog at design-phan.com.

THE ALUMINUM VERSION

Michael d'Amato's aluminum fluid ribbon chair was first fabricated in North Philadelphia by Frank B. Clayton & Sons.



Michael d'Amato, 36

DESIGNS A CHAIR THAT MIMICS AND MOVES WITH THE BODY WWW.FLUIDRIBBON.COM

Market research:

D'Amato's Kickstarter campaign to raise money to produce the bamboo chair was actually a price-testing strategy. He wanted to see how much people were willing to pay for the bamboo version. It turned out to be around \$200, but D'Amato is pricing it higher because Kickstarter contributors typically expect a deep discount.

Five-star freelancer:

After frequenting several coffee shops, d'Amato happened upon the lobby of Center City's Ritz-Carlton and decided he liked working under its majestic dome. "It's a gorgeous space," he says, "and the WiFi works well." He set up there with his laptop a few times a week over many months. "Some nights I was here till 2 a.m."

Opportunity knocks:

Learning as he went along necessitated many calls to experts who did a lot of nay-saying. "They told me the design wasn't possible," he says. "Their negativity helped me figure out where to direct my attention."

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Michael d'Amato talks about how the Fluid Ribbon Chair is made www.philly.com/makingit

New chair, new name:

Another consequence of his mid-30s crisis is his new last name. D'Amato (formerly Michael Herr) had always liked his mother's maiden name, which means "of love" in Italian. "In the midst of the burning fire," he says, "I realized it was a good time to act on it."