A SMALL FUTURE
CONVERSATION 01 / 02026

What is furniture for after Modernism

Jonathan Olivares on protagonists, risk and making a historic company culturally alive again.

INTERVIEWER
Petrus Palmér

GUEST
Jonathan Olivares

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 2026

A conversation with Jonathan Olivares

For the first A Small Future Conversation, Petrus Palmér speaks with Jonathan Olivares, designer, writer and Creative Director at Knoll, about the people who once gave furniture companies their character, why meaningful new work often looks wrong at first, and what it takes to make a historic company culturally alive again. The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

PETRUS PALMÉR

We have been talking for years about where the furniture industry is and why it seems to have so few protagonists. You use that word a lot. What does a protagonist mean to you?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

I have been using it because there are not many protagonists anymore. A protagonist is one of the heroes of the industry: someone who leads its discourse and creates new opportunities and new ideas of what a product can be. You want them to win. You follow what they do and hope they will impress you. That also implies an audience. The leading companies should understand that they have a fan base—that they are performing within a discourse, on a stage, for that audience.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Who are the protagonists from the history of design? Florence Knoll has always been one of my reference points: somebody brave and forward-looking who helped shape the industry.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

She is the blueprint. Artek, Knoll and Cappellini are three examples of protagonism in the furniture industry: Alvar Aalto and the community of designers, architects and artists around him; Florence and Hans Knoll; and Giulio Cappellini. When we started in the industry, Magis was completely Eugenio Perazza. His ass was on the line, his pride was on the line, and he wanted to push and make Magis the best company in the world. The same was true elsewhere. Driade was Mr Astori, Cappellini was Giulio Cappellini, Vitra had Rolf Fehlbaum, Flos had Piero Gandini and Artemide had Ernesto Gismondi. Behind each company was a person.

PETRUS PALMÉR

They were often family businesses too. That feels connected to a period when industry played a much larger role in creating prosperity and a middle class. It was a moment when people could place bold bets and be rewarded. I began as a designer twenty years ago, and going to Salone del Mobile felt magical. I remember meeting Giulio Cappellini and feeling that I had met a rock star. That energy is part of why I still love this industry. What happened to it?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

It is a cocktail of problems. Twenty years ago, the first sign was the anxiety around Chinese knock-offs. Then the financial crisis hit in 2008 and business fell off a cliff. That brought conservative decision-making into the industry. People began selling their businesses, private equity began buying them, and larger furniture groups acquired more brands. The pandemic reshuffled everything again and produced another wave of major acquisitions. It was no longer big fish eating small fish; it was the biggest fish eating other big fish.

PETRUS PALMÉR

That is a stark contrast to the family-run, skin-in-the-game operation on which the industry was built.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Exactly. The owners of the important twentieth-century companies were highly cultured people who devoted their lives and energy to the project of the brand. If ownership shifts to a portfolio manager—a full-time employee behind the scenes whose name is not attached to the company—you begin to lose its individuality and authenticity.

PETRUS PALMÉR

And perhaps you begin playing it safe. You once quoted Anders Byriel saying that the safe room is a dangerous place to hang out.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Yes. I recently found a little book of Virgil Abloh quotations. One idea in it was that what first appears preposterous eventually becomes the norm. At Knoll, I have been trying to help the sales organisation understand why we make genuinely new things. I use the Bertoia chair as an example. When it first appeared, people probably thought it looked like something for grilling burgers over a fire. It was preposterous. Sixty-seven years later it is a benchmark. It sits in the sculpture garden at MoMA, everyone understands it immediately, and it is a consistent business.

PETRUS PALMÉR

That is what gets lost: new classics do not look like classics. In the beginning, the Bertoia chair probably looked foolish. It may have been laughed at. Only in hindsight does it enter the canon. You have to begin with something that looks like nothing else, and that requires risk—especially when the company is not your own.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

That is definitely part of where we are. The strategy I have seen, particularly since the pandemic, is comparative: we do not have that, five other companies do, therefore we should have it too. But just because you have something does not mean the customer needs it from you. They can already get it from three—or fifty—other companies. When everyone looks at the industry itself, it becomes an echo chamber and nobody is solving problems.

PETRUS PALMÉR

What should companies be looking at instead?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Patterns of living: how they are evolving and changing. The protagonists did not simply experiment with materials. They understood how people wanted to live. Some of the products that made the greatest impact landed precisely where those patterns were shifting.

PETRUS PALMÉR

I think that is the only systematic route left. The other is simply to pursue what genuinely interests you; enough passion is its own permission. But if you want a method, you have to look radically at what is changing. We are still focused on typologies that were necessary fifty or a hundred years ago because there were not enough of them. Now the opposite is true. Modernism optimised for abundance, and abundance has become the problem. We do not need more things for their own sake. So what is a furniture company with a spine, an identity and people with skin in the game supposed to do?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Modernism in design was about accessibility: good design for all, benchmarks that could solve everyone's problems. Think of an Iittala coffee cup—it is nearly perfect, everyone can have it, so why change it? But follow that tendency to its conclusion, add global supply chains and large retailers squeezing prices and opening more

shops, and the end of that beautiful ambition is basically Walmart. I think the Modernist project died at Walmart.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Now there is Wayfair and Temu. Even IKEA is being pushed to lower prices because it is being undercut. What happens when you are no longer the cheapest game in town and your whole proposition is being cheap? It is Modernism eating its own tail.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Exactly. But return to patterns of living. The Bouroullecs' Alcove sofa arrived as the office was loosening up. People wanted the workplace to feel more like home; they wanted acoustic privacy and somewhere to lounge. The sofa became a catalyst for looking at the office differently. There is always a lag between people sensing what they want and that thing reaching the market. The closer those moments are, the greater the impact for the brand that makes it.

PETRUS PALMÉR

You had a similar experience with the Perron Pillo sofa at Knoll.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

After the pandemic, the living room became less formal. You are not hosting; you are crashing out, watching Netflix and spending time in the utmost chill zone. Dealers kept telling me they were missing a big, relaxed sofa. The wrong response would have been to look at who already made one and create our version. I do not look at furniture for inspiration. I look at skateboarding, graffiti, art and architecture. Back in Los Angeles, I visited Willo Perron and saw this massive sofa he had made for a rapper's house—a person who smokes weed, plays video games and chills with friends, living a life many of us would like to live. Every part of it was a pillow: the base, arms, seat and back. Florence Knoll once briefed Eero Saarinen on the Womb chair by saying she wanted a basket of pillows. There was a strong concept and a connection to Knoll's history. We put it on the market and it became by far the bestseller in its category. That is one of those moments when you put your finger on the pulse and say: now we do this.

PETRUS PALMÉR

In a few years there will presumably be twenty versions of it, including one from Wayfair.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Probably. But we do not compete with people who make knock-offs. Knoll's proposition is for architects, designers, design connoisseurs and aspiring

connoisseurs. Just because design can be copied does not mean the copy carries the same authenticity or meaning.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Someone recently told me that design is now a rich man's game: making things well and preserving authenticity has become a niche for people or spaces that can afford it. That breaks with the Modernist story. But was high-end design ever truly affordable? The Eames lounge chair was never cheap. Perhaps design has always carried a premium; what changed is that other players learned to make its appearance affordable without being as mindful about quality, production or longevity.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Design is generally a luxury. To receive design—to know that someone thought about you—is a luxury. George Nelson wrote about pre-modern Japanese packaging: five eggs wrapped in leaves to create an impeccable structure. It was not a luxury good, but it was an act of care, a way of passing something beautiful from one person to another. That can happen at the highest or lowest price point, but a company has to decide where it plays. When people ask whether Knoll is democratic or luxurious, I remind them that the Barcelona chair was made for the King and Queen of Spain.

PETRUS PALMÉR

I have a problem with the phrase democratic design. Democracy has nothing to do with furniture. The more structural problem seems to be where we began: the absence of protagonists and skin in the game. You once told me that without a creative conscience, a brand becomes frozen in time. How do you bring that conscience to an eighty-eight-year-old company? You are standing on the shoulders of giants, but also carrying all that history.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Whether you are an eighty-eight-year-old brand or a start-up in Berlin, you have to win hearts and minds. It is like a band. Cappellini, Vitra and Knoll in the 1950s changed the design world at scale. I believe that is absolutely possible again inside a historic maison. Look at Demna at Balenciaga or Phoebe Philo at Céline.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Fashion seems more comfortable moving between eras. It can put its full force behind a creative director. Furniture rarely does. Yet it feels as though you have been given unusual freedom at Knoll, which is necessary. You have already shown that you are not afraid to break with tradition.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

It is the only way. You have to not care—at least not care about the wrong things. Culture continues to provide waves for designers and brands to surf. You have to identify the wave and take it at the right time.

PETRUS PALMÉR

You can catch that wave briefly, but you cannot own or bottle it. Perhaps that is why so many historic—and, strangely, new—brands feel stale. They try to preserve what they had rather than keep surfing.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

The important difference between fashion and furniture is that when a fashion designer presents a new collection, the piece from 1965 does not also have to be in the show. With a legacy furniture company such as Knoll, perhaps eighty per cent of the portfolio is historic. My ambition is to grow the business so that, in fifty years, what we do today represents a meaningful part of it. But the other challenge is making the old pieces feel alive now.

PETRUS PALMÉR

How do you do that without damaging them?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

Take the Barcelona chair in a chrome base and black leather. That is how it was intended, and ninety-nine per cent of people should probably buy it that way. But if you see it presented identically over and over, you stop seeing it at all. Years ago at MoMA, Herzog & de Meuron guest-curated an exhibition of the collection. They hung familiar Picassos and Matisses densely, even placing some works on the ceiling. By forcing you to look at them differently—your neck hurt a little—you saw them again for the first time. We try to do something similar. A seemingly ridiculous contemporary colour can make you look at an old object again. Putting conservative historic pieces next to new pieces also sends an electric current through them. The new generation gives energy to the old, like a grandchild does to a grandparent.

PETRUS PALMÉR

Furniture involves longer and more expensive bets than fashion. If you invest in tooling and industrial processes, you live with the product for years. That makes it difficult to back a creative force that might feel risky—especially when the company belongs to a management team, a board or a fund rather than the person making the decision.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

There are people at the parent company who have given me a great deal of trust—the keys to the car in some respects. I am grateful for the opportunity to try something different and see what works. We make mistakes, learn and keep going. There is nothing certain about any of it.

PETRUS PALMÉR

At Salone del Mobile, you walked me through Knoll's pavilion and described the garden as being inspired by something like a burned-out crack house. Other people from Knoll were standing nearby in suits, trying to find the vocabulary for this very different turn. I loved it.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

The source material I bring in can be strange, but there is no reason to tell everybody about all of it. The pavilion by Kersten Geers and David Van Severen is meant to feel like a house, not a commercial stand. Every year the plants imply a location. I had been scrolling through the news and saw photographs of a DEA raid on a meth lab in Arizona. Outside was an extraordinary garden: half of it cooked dead by the sun, completely nonchalant, against a galvanised corrugated steel wall reflecting the light. Our pavilion has aluminium panels, so I gave that image to the landscape designer as the reference. People loved the result. It felt wild and interesting. Then I would tell them it came from a DEA-busted meth lab.

PETRUS PALMÉR

That brings us back to the Bertoia chair looking like a grill. Nobody acting conventionally would identify a meth-lab garden as the perfect reference for a high-end furniture brand at Salone. But you did, and people responded to it. We need to keep placing bets on unconventional people. Where do you see the protagonists today?

JONATHAN OLIVARES

It is Hem, baby—all the way. The rise of Scandinavian furniture over the past fifteen or twenty years has been interesting. Before that, the field was dominated by Italians and a handful of international companies; then Sweden and Denmark produced this

new powerhouse. Every great movement rises and eventually begins to decline. The questions are when, why and what the audience wants next. Hem avoids the cliché of what Scandinavian design has come to mean. It feels internationally and culturally driven rather than heritage-driven.

PETRUS PALMÉR

For somebody entering the field today, the industry can look as though it is grinding to a halt: Modernism is over, design furniture no longer matters, go home. The more optimistic reading is that there has never been a better time to redefine what the industry is. Life is changing extraordinarily quickly, and the tools are available to almost anyone.

JONATHAN OLIVARES

The opportunities are insane. Last week I made a dance-pole side table for my house. Twenty years ago it would have taken two months. I ordered the pole and it arrived the next day. With AI, 3D-modelling software and a web browser open together, I engineered a collar that slid onto it, specified the hardware and brass inserts, found the tutorial for heat-pressing them into 3D-printed nylon, and uploaded the table top to a sheet-metal fabricator in Reno. Within five days every component had arrived. It took twenty minutes to assemble. In the past, you would have spent weeks finding suppliers willing to make one piece, travelled with drawings and found specialist hardware shops. What we can do with today's tools is extraordinary. It is a golden moment of possibility.

PETRUS PALMÉR

That feels like the right place to end. We may have to redefine both the industry and ourselves as practitioners—but perhaps there is more possibility now than ever.