



Above: An original David Trubridge Coral light on the left, and a Chinese knock-off on the right.
Left: Ross Gardam Oak lights.
Far Left: Coco Mini lights by Kate Stokes.

COPY TAT

Words • STEPHEN TODD

Having feasted on imports for years, counterfeiters have begun ripping off Australian furniture designs. And the law lets them do it.

Earlier this year, I was invited by a publicist of all things glamorous to stay at a new establishment positioning itself as a “world-class designer hotel” in Bondi. Living inland, a beachside break is always welcome, so I packed my flip-flops and headed seaside for a weekend.

On arrival, the staff were young and gregarious, the lobby sparse and colourful, emanating a slightly Balearic vibe. Upstairs, the generous room was filled with bespoke and designer furniture, including a standout pale blue Adam Goodrum Volley chair for Tait. Or was it? Something seemed proportionally askew. On Goodrum’s chair, the loop that forms the back and seat, in fact the entire upper structure, is slightly oblique in order to create a more comfortable posture. This one was simply round, and felt awkward to settle into. On closer inspection, the sled legs were cut square, lacking the elegant radius of the original. The powder coating looked brittle. That’s right, it was a fake.

The chair sitting in a hotel room in Bondi yields no income to its designer sitting in his studio in Redfern, nor to the Surry Hills-based Tait, which invested in the research, development and marketing of the chair. Nor to the Australian factory that makes Tait’s furniture. Instead, the chair feeds a chain of Asian interests. Of glaringly poor quality, it’s a good bet it will be landfill in a few years’ time.

“If you protect the replica industry you don’t foster an innovative new design industry,” says Anne-Maree Sargeant, director of the Authentic Design Alliance. “We’re destined to see a talent drain. Designers will move to protected territories, like the UK. Why would they stay in Australia if they can’t make an income? What’s the point of designing for free?”

We’ve grown accustomed to spotting copies of mid-century modern icons: the fake Eames lounge chairs and ottomans, the replica Jacobsen Series 7 seat, the rip-off Philippe Starck Louis Ghost chairs. But there’s a new menace afoot. The international counterfeit industry has begun cannibalising living Australian designers, those whose clarity of vision and integrity of process are slowly coalescing to form the basis of a viable, innovative local design industry.

According to Sargeant, over the past few years Australian designers including Goodrum, Tomek Archer, Jon Goulder, Kate Stokes, Ross Gardam and Charles Wilson have had their designs knocked off. Some have found themselves sitting on “their” sofa in five-star hotel lobbies. Others have seen “their” limited edition credenza pop up for \$300 online, or spotted “their” pendant lights in the homes of friends.

We simply don’t have legislation adequate to the task of protecting original designs. Our copyright law does not extend to 3D objects and Australia has no grace period in which

designers can test their concepts before being required to register them at prohibitive cost. If a design is published prior to registration, even on a blog, the right to register is nullified.

By contrast, in July, Britain introduced legislation to extend the copyright protection that applies to works of art, books and music to industrially manufactured product such as furniture, lighting and jewellery. Post-mortem copyright has been extended from 25 to 70 years, and businesses that sell replica furniture will be liable to a fine of up to £50,000 (\$80,000) and a custodial sentence of up to 10 years. The move brings Britain into line with much of Europe.

The Authentic Design Alliance wants to bring Australia into line too. Set up in 2010 by a consortium of concerned furniture importers and run by Sargeant since 2015, it has vigorously lobbied the Productivity Commission this year, co-ordinating 24 written submissions and 10 appearances of industry figures in Canberra in June.

“Why does the consumer have a right to a \$200 copy of an \$800 chair? The consumer should just buy the chair they can afford, not a copy of one they desire,” Sargeant argues.

Good point. As for the hotel story, there appears to be a happy ending. Alerted to their error, management replaced all the fake Adam Goodrum Volley chairs with real Volley chairs. You may now be seated. ●

An original Adam Goodrum Volley chair; Jon Goulder’s limited edition Glissando credenza.

