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cover story | Richard Jinman

Starck reality

With his first Sydney development under way, the world's most famous designer hits town.

PHILIPPE Starck tends to define himself by what he isn't. The Frenchman is not the first rock star of design, because he lives a simple life and "it's just the media who attach this stecker to me."

He insists he's not really a designer, despite having created some of the modern world's most distinctive and coveted objects and interiors.

Starck says he is not an architect or an interior designer, either, even though he is intimately involved in apartment projects in cities including London, New York, Miami, Moscow, Hong Kong, Melbourne and now Sydney, where construction of meta, a 77-apartment complex, is under way in Brisbane Street, Surry Hills.

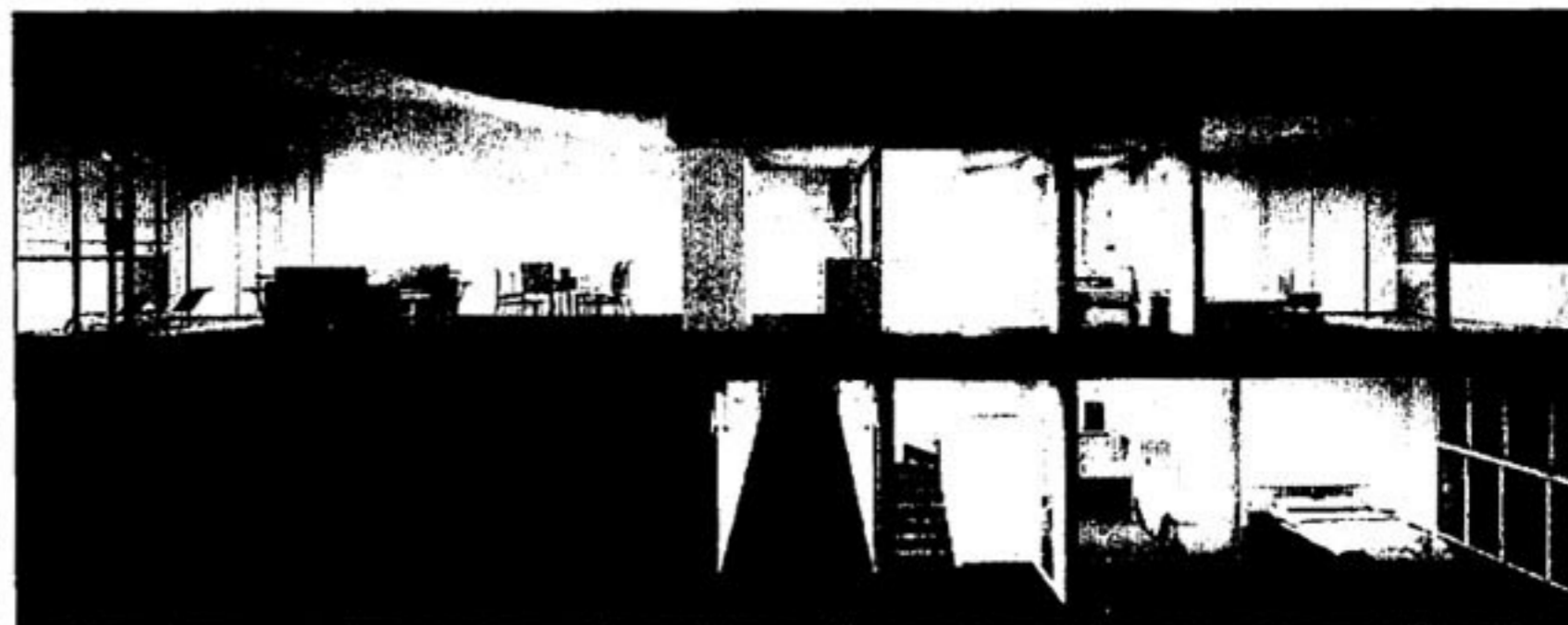
In London, his home defies expectations. Chez Starck – he and second wife Nori Vaccari relocated from Paris about six months ago – isn't a paradigm of beauty, calm and goodness (all favourite Starck words) so much as an old-fashioned mess.

"I live only for my passion, my wife and my children [Ara, Oa and K]. I spend so little energy for myself," he sighs. "It's strange. My house is a mess and there is nowhere to sit. It's my wife's nightmare. I cannot spend one minute for me."

In his own eyes, he has transcended design to become a radical with a political agenda. A motorbike riding rebel ("I drive only motorbikes") he now seeks to "destroy design" by making it affordable. He does this by working on luxury, money-no-object projects one year – a \$289 million power boat, for example – then turning his attention to a mass-produced \$13 chair the next. The prototypes and expertise he develops using money from wealthy clients and corporations are used to make affordable designs for ordinary people.

In the US, about 50 Starck designs – everything from a baby's bottle to a magazine rack and child's pop-up playhouse – have been available at the mass-market retailer Target since May last year. Hard evidence of his campaign to democratise, and thereby kill, design.

"Clearly, this [process] is more political than just design," he says. "The concept of design



Clockwise, from top:
Juicy Sarif lemon
squeezer; Philippe
Starck; the meta
apartments, and a meta
display bathroom.

used to be expensive, beautiful objects for a few rich, beautiful people. I have killed the elitist part of design. It's not design any more, it's just life."

His description of himself as a kind of Robin Hood of design – using the research dollars of the rich to put aesthetic cutlery on the tables of the poor – is characteristically ambitious. Like his most celebrated projects – the golden sperm that crowns Tokyo's Asahi Beer Hall or the alien spaceship juicer he created for Alessi – a conversation with Starck defies conventions. He talks fast, scattering ideas and catchy, but rather obscure aphorisms ("modern intelligence is feminine") in his wake.

He was born in Paris in 1949, the son of an aircraft designer. An enthusiastic draughtsman, he spent hours sitting under his father's drawing board dismantling and reassembling bikes, machinery and other objects. Starck was educated at the Parisian design school Ecole Nissim de Camondo and set up his first design company in 1968. He consolidated his reputation by fitting out several hip nightclubs during the '70s, then grabbed the spotlight in 1982 when president Francois Mitterrand commissioned him to decorate a suite in the Elysee Palace. A star, or rather, a Starck was born.

Today, he's a one-man brand; an international celebrity in the no-first-name-necessary club and a master of self-promotion. A visit to his web site, www.philippe-starck.com, reveals the scope and ambition of his vision. There are lamps, chairs, kitchen utensils and impossibly hip interiors, naturally. But Starck has also designed sleek motor scooters, a plywood project car and entire ranges of luggage, clothing and foodstuffs; everything from champagne to spaghetti, nut spread and organic muesli.

All this, from the man who declares: "Tomorrow there will be less."

Starck is making his first visit to Sydney this week. He was in Hong Kong when we spoke, giving television interviews and inspecting Jia, a Starck-designed complex of serviced apartments. His first Sydney project, meta, will have half its flats inside a 90-year-old warehouse. The rest will be in a new building next door.

I have killed the elitist part of design. It's not design any more, it's just life. – Philippe Starck

The project is a partnership between Yoo – Starck's London-based residential development company – architects fjmt (Francis-Jones Morehen Thorp) and local developer Carrington. Prices range from about \$500,000 for a one-bedroom unit to about \$1.5 million for a penthouse. Only 17 of the apartments, which will be completed by next April, remain unsold.

Meta is Yoo's second Australian residential project. The 427-apartment Tribeca development in East Melbourne went on sale last year. Starck was involved in almost every aspect of the design. Sketching his ideas by hand – he eschews computers – he's responsible for everything from the height of the ceilings to the carpet colours.

I ask him about his perceptions of Sydney.

"I am never really interested by the city," he says. "Everybody knows it is one of the most beautiful [cities] in the world, but I am more interested in the people. I know there is a lot of young energy in Sydney. It's free, alive and energetic."

Our young energy is precious, he says, because many once great cities are now dead. "Every day, there is a country that dies," he says grandly.

Which ones, exactly?

"I don't want to go into that," he says. "But they [are dead] for different reasons. Some because of politics, some because of economics ..."

Very little in the meta apartments will be generic or off-the-peg. Starck designed the patterned bathroom mirrors for the project and the basins are equipped with his own \$1500 Axor faucets. A chocolate-coloured carpet was commissioned to meet his requirements.

Meta clients can go all the way and immerse themselves in Starck by picking furniture and accessories from his catalogue. They can squeeze their lemons on his juicer or bask in the glow of his La lune sans le chapeau lamp. No wonder he describes his loyal customers as members of an international "Yoo tribe".

"The tribe is not defined by power and money," insists Starck (although they're not living on the bread-line, presumably). "We want people with real human values. A smart tribe. People who recognise the real value of things, who don't follow trends stupidly. The sort of people who read more and watch less television, who have original ideas and different, angular views, who will not change their car because of advertising."

He pauses to catch his breath. "Or perhaps they won't even have a car because they don't need it."

Starck makes a strong distinction between giving his clients design choices and imposing design on them. He has little time for the traditional role of the interior designer.

"Some of my friends are very rich and they can rent an interior designer," he says. "I'm sad for them because they live all their life in the brain of someone else. These people are lost in

a way. I refuse to make interior design; I want people to make their own life. But if I can help, then I will help. That's why we have created Yoo."

It's rumoured that Starck stipulates he must have access to a motorbike whenever he travels overseas. I ask him if we'll see him roaring through Sydney's streets, but he's unsure if he'll have time. I believe him when he says the life of an internationally famous "dreamer" isn't as glamorous as it looks.

"I am never happy with what I do," he sighs. "I see only my weakness, my laziness and my lack of talent. I see only the negative things, which is not fun. But it's also a good process to build on the mistakes and hope always I will one day do it well."

CITIZEN STARCK

1976 First interior, for La Main Bleue, a Parisian nightclub.

1979 Starck Products is born.

1982 Commissioned by President Mitterrand to design the private apartments at the Elysee Palace.

1984 Makes his name internationally with the interior of Cafe Costes and the three-legged Costes chair.

1986 First Alessi job, a set of Laguiole steak knives. Future Alessi designs include a corkscrew, ear-cleaning spatulas, fly swatter and, in 1990, the Juicy Sarif lemon squeezer

and coffee cups (left).

In following years, Starck collaborates with Vitra, Cassina and

Diade.

1987 Creates a wavy penne for pasta company Panzani.

1988 Wins Grand Prix for industrial design and designs first hotel, the Royalton, in New York. Hotels to follow include the Paramount and Hudson (New York), Delano (Miami), Mondrian (Los Angeles), Cliff (San Francisco) and St Martins Lane and Sanderson (London).

1990 Asahi Beer Hall, Japan.

1991 Bubu stool (right) for XO.

2000 Awarded Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Legion d'Honneur in France.

2001 Awarded Compasso d'Oro. Launches Boem vase stools (top) for Kartell, followed in 2002 by Louis Ghost chairs (below) for XO.

2002 Collection for Target in the US.

