

# BMW Magazine

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## INTERVIEW

BMW Group Design  
Director Adrian  
van Hooydonk

## DESIGN

Tyler Hays turns  
wood into art

## TOKYO

Hi-tech and tradition  
in a city of villages

## STYLE THE ALL-NEW BMW 5 SERIES SEDAN



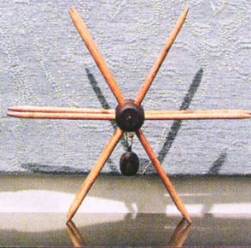




## NATURAL GROWTH

A Manhattan workshop, an artist from the woodlands, and innovative use of traditional materials: Tyler Hays, a lumber lover from Oregon, conquers the New York design scene.





"I love to throw myself at a big piece of wood and get my hands dirty." Tyler Hays turns wood into design.



By  
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Photos  
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Wood. Earth. Grass. Even as a small child, Tyler Hays liked to work with his hands, whether making models, sewing or gardening. "It was like I was possessed," he says. "I just couldn't stop building things." Hays grew up in a small town in Oregon, "an hour and a half from the nearest traffic light," so it's no surprise that most of his early creations were made from natural materials.

Nature still influences his work today, as well as his SoHo showroom. Housed in a huge former stable from 1863 on one of Manhattan's few remaining cobbled streets, it is a cathedral of earth-bound design. Sunlight streams in through the skylights. Chunky planks of walnut and rough-hewn slabs of timber – with bark and moss still attached – lean against a wall.

Hays, now 40, makes furniture – tables, stools, beds, chairs, cabinets and chests – and it's not just his job, it's his passion. Every piece is a handmade work of art uniting the elemental forces of wood and steel with contemporary design – a harmonious marriage of rustic and modern sensibilities, of humanity and nature. Hays does much of his own designing and building, assisted by a team of carpenters, mechanics and builders. His company, BDDW, is a success story of the trendy New York scene, and its products come at a price. So far, the least expensive offering has been a stool for \$850, the costliest a 13-foot Claro walnut dining table, seating 16, for \$75,000.

You might think such an exclusively priced business would do poorly in times of crisis. Far from it. After a short dip and some healthy downsizing, BDDW is faring far better than the competition, and even the \$75,000 table soon finds a buyer. After years of virtual wealth measured in digitalized columns of numbers, people are returning to tangible values. Artisanship – sustainable, reliable and authentic – is back in style, and as Princeton economist Alan Blinder puts it, "You can't hammer a nail over the Internet." Hays uses his nails to construct not just furniture but a solid support for the current *zeitgeist*, there for touching, stroking, sitting and lying on. Interior design offers a refuge from the doom and gloom outside. Nesting is what Jon Thorson, manager of the BDDW showroom, calls this search for emotional security. "People want to tend their nests."



Using wood from the Hudson Valley and iron from his own foundry, Hays and his firm BDDW make tables, stools, cabinets, even working record players.



MID-CENTURY

MODERN

MEETS

SHAKER.









One recent visitor to the showroom was Bill Ruprecht, CEO of auctioneering house Sotheby's, who pointed to one of the huge mossy slabs and said, "Make me a table out of that one!" "No problem," Hays replied. This sort of thing is quite a lucky break for an artisan whose career has been anything but straight-forward, "a very long, slow, but most definitely organic process." This biography is perhaps reflected in the branches and forks Hays works into his furniture

designs, most of which feature natural cracks, rings and bark carefully rendered into styling elements.

Hays studied sculpture and painting at the University of Oregon, but when sales of his works weren't covering the rent, he kept his head above water by working as a carpenter. He soon discovered that hands-on crafts appealed to him as much as art, "but in Oregon I felt like a big fish in a little pond." So Hays moved to New York City. In Greenpoint, in industrial northern Brooklyn, he started a construction firm that made just enough money to support his passion. On the side he built his spectacular furniture, which he initially offered at affordable prices, calling it "art for the masses." But it wasn't enough to live off.

Hays decided to rent a workshop on the Lower East Side, hoping to renovate it quickly, but he was short on cash and had to leave it standing empty for two years (he got the name BDDW from the four mysterious letters written on the fireplace there). Finally, he found his showroom stable, smack on the border between Tribeca's cool lifestyle and SoHo's commerce. Borrowing the deposit from a friend, Hays signed the lease on September 10, 2001.

The next day, a few blocks south, Hays' world almost came to an end, and it seemed like his dreams would, too. Canal Street, only footsteps away from his showroom's entrance, would long mark the border to a dead downtown and the graveyard of Ground Zero. The area gradually recovered, in part thanks to the Tribeca Film Festival, organized by Robert De Niro to draw people back to a district traumatized by terrorism. Along with other, similarly ambitious furniture



"Bikes are design objects you can ride," says Hays. A restored BMW R 60 from the 1950s (above) is parked in the middle of his showroom, among real antiques and brand-new wooden treasures.

makers and designers, Hays struggled on, and his showroom opened on Valentine's Day, 2002. Soon after, New York Magazine praised BDDW as the "perfect, dreamy iteration of a New York City loft" and recommended the collection as its top shopping tip of the year ("mid-century modern meets Shaker").

That's when Hays made a surprising discovery: his inexpensive furniture wasn't selling, but the pricier the pieces he offered, the more commissions he received. His financial problems were soon solved. After 10 years of hard labor, Hays was finally able to pay his team as well as himself. "Even so," he laughs, "I still can't afford my own furniture!"

Hays purchases the wood from private sources, typically lumberjacks from the Northwest who call him when they've found a particularly good tree. Sometimes he sets out on his own research trips and even fells trees himself. Hays insists on domestically grown timber, cut in his own sawmill north of New York. The iron comes from his private foundry. To meet demand while preserving quality, Hays began using automation processes for routine tasks, but he continues to work manually on the details. "I love to throw myself at a big piece of wood and get my hands dirty," he says. His working motto remains unchanged: "Blood, sweat and tears."

This attitude has gained Hays prestige when it comes to furniture. But just as desirable are his oil paintings, his fully working wood-and-iron record players, and the motorcycles he polishes up with his friend, legendary Austrian-born bike constructor, Walt Siegl. Their hobby of collecting, restoring and building tailor-made custom bikes has turned into a second

job. "Bikes are design objects you can ride," says Hays. A perfectly restored BMW R 60 from the late 1950s is his showroom's centerpiece. Ten custom bikes are ready to go right now, with 20 more in production. About a dozen have already been sold at \$70,000–\$100,000 each.

With so much to do – and with such passion to do it well – Hays has no plans to expand BDDW any further. Quite the opposite: time is money, and to the extent the Great Recession may shrink his commitments, Hays regards that as a benefit. "I don't like shareholder meetings and that kind of stuff," he says. "I prefer to work in my studio."

bddw.com



Hays welcomes imperfections in wood: natural cracks, rings, even tree bark, are carefully rendered into styling elements.







WHEN A CEO POINTS TO A PIECE OF WOOD AND SAYS, "MAKE ME A TABLE FROM THAT," HAYS REPLIES, "NO PROBLEM."