

Barber & Osgerby and Emeco go green with a recycled, and infinitely recyclable, plastic chair

Launching at Salone del Mobile 2019, the sustainable 'On and On' chair is lightweight and stackable

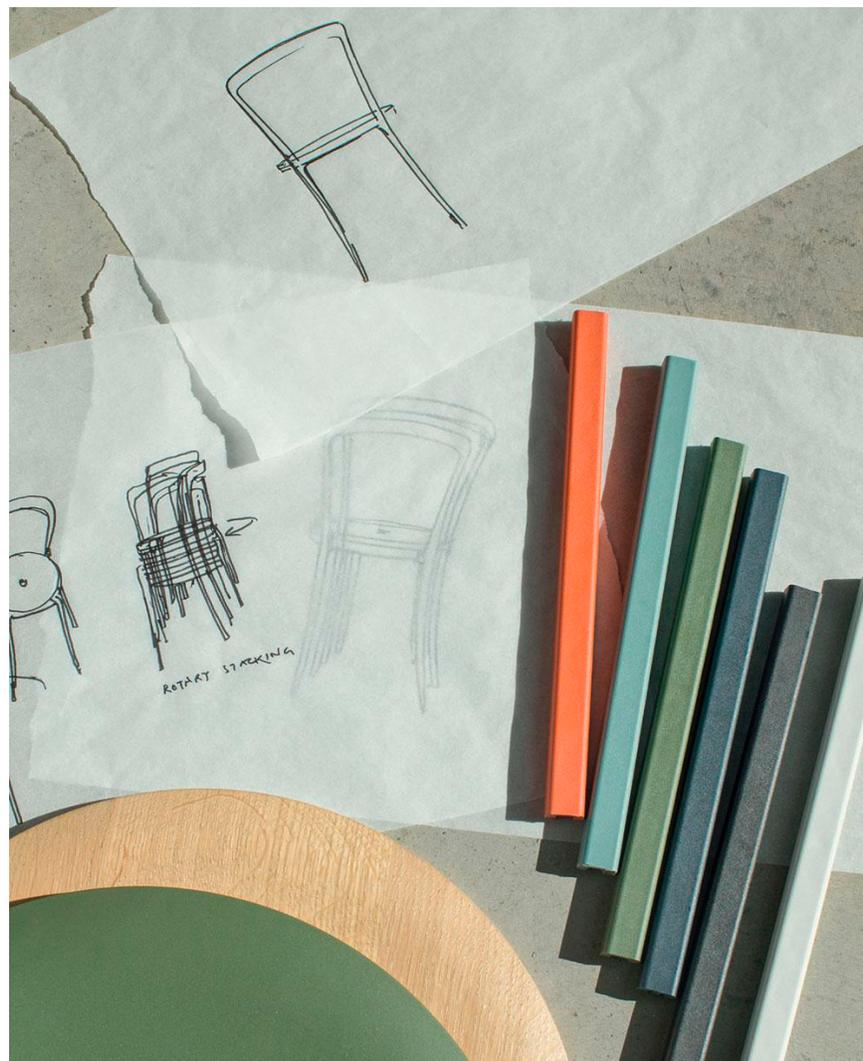


Designers Jay Osgerby and Edward Barber with their recycled plastic 'On and On' chair for Emeco. The frame can also accommodate seats in oak veneered plywood, 'Steelcut' fabric by Kvadrat and faux leather. Photography: Matthew Donaldson

Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby have done it all since setting up their studio in 1996, from designing the London 2012 Olympic torch to reinventing the classroom chair for Vitra and transforming the V&A's Raphael Gallery into a selfie-friendly hall of mirrors for BMW (W*187). Yet there are still projects that excite them. 'We're fortunate enough to be meeting world-famous manufacturers,' explains

Osgerby. 'But not everyone is interested in trying to change things. So when you do meet these people, who are passionate, energetic and fun, you just have to work with them.'

The American brand Emeco is that kind of operation and a new collaborative partner for Barber & Osgerby. Their first joint effort is a stacking chair made from a specially developed recycled plastic, due to launch during Salone del Mobile. The designers first came across the brand while studying architecture at the Royal College of Art in the 1990s, and watched with interest as Emeco grew over the course of the next decade. Although its history stretches back to 1944, when it debuted its recycled aluminium 'Navy' chair (still in production today), Emeco reinvented itself in 1998, when newly appointed CEO Gregg Buchbinder took over and promptly enlisted the help of a certain French designer by the name of Philippe Starck. It was shortly after this that the company began producing some of its first new designs in more than 50 years.



Designed to be stacked rotationally, the chair comes in six colours, including a black version made using recycled car tires

Emeco has spent the last 20 years working with recycled materials. It invested four years into developing a material with Coca-Cola, made out of fibreglass mixed with the brand's discarded PET bottles. A chair was launched in 2010 as a result of the collaboration, but Buchbinder and his team have continued to work on the material, refining its consistency and making it stronger and greener. 'It's been a super challenging material to work with,' says Buchbinder. 'However, we learnt a lot from our mistakes and, over the course of almost a decade, managed to engineer it so that it can be continually recycled – we can now make new chairs from old chairs.'

Made from a higher percentage of recycled bottles, the improved material was presented to Barber & Osgerby, who Buchbinder believed could bring 'poetry to the polymer'. Impressed by the material's credentials, the London-based designers set themselves a challenge: to create a stackable café chair that combined timeless elegance with high functionality. 'We wanted to bring together two thoughts,' says Barber. 'The familiarity of something as archetypal as Thonet's 1859 "No. 14" bistro chair, which was so revolutionary in its time, mixed with something less familiar.'

'This material can be continually recycled – we can now make new chairs from old chairs' – Gregg Buchbinder

The result is 'On and On' – a lightweight chair with a round seat, gently splayed legs and a smoothly arched backrest. When not in use, the chairs can be stacked rotationally. 'Very often when you make a chair stackable you take away 15 per cent of its beauty. It's a compromise as it has that added layer of functionality,' explains Osgerby. 'But there's something about the circular way that 'On and On' stacks that is self-choreographed. You don't just stack it forwards; you place the chairs, so you have this spiralling effect which is rather beautiful,' adds Barber.

Moulded in one piece, the chair's secret strength lies within its simple crossbar leg support detail that's discreetly hidden under the seat. 'It was a real challenge to get the structural requirements into such a simple form,' says Barber. 'But it's the same with all projects – the simpler the object, the harder it is to produce.' The chair will be joined by two stools in Milan and, if all goes well, a whole collection will follow.

It's still an anomaly to work with a brand where sustainability forms the starting point for the conversation, say the designers. 'This material that Emeco has developed is redefining the sector a little bit,' says Osgerby. 'We're not in the business of designing pieces for the wow factor, or for a laugh. We want to create beautiful objects that people want to live with forever,

and plastic does give you that chance. What's exciting about this particular polymer is that it doesn't downgrade. Like aluminum, it can be used again and again.' On and on.