



# SEEING THE LIGHT

Pablo Pardo seeks the human element in lighting design.

**WHEN PABLO PARDO** arrived in California in the mid-1980s, he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He had recently graduated from the University of Cincinnati's prestigious industrial design program and moved to Los Angeles to be near his sister and twin brother.

First, he worked in auto design, like his brother, devising concepts for motorcycles and BMWs. Then he joined ToyLab, where his sister worked, designing toys. In 1990 he moved to San Francisco to be an industrial designer for the global firm IDEO.

It was only when he rented a small space from a furniture company in the city's Bayview neighborhood that he literally saw the light. Inspired by the work of others around him, he started making a small lamp. He created a pliable base

that looked like a miniature leather punching bag and topped it with a minimalist aluminum shade that "floated," so it would remain level no matter how the base was angled. He called it the Piccola. It was modern and playful and witty.

Others thought so too. Pardo took the lamp to the New York International Gift Fair in 1993 — and walked away with 600 orders and a manufacturing contract. It was the nudge he needed to found Pablo Designs, where he is creative director. It also coalesced the vision that inspires his work to this day.

"I think what drove that particular design, the Piccola, was my interest in bringing a more human quality to lighting," Pardo says. "I wanted lighting that was more interactive, more tactile, and that used premium materiality. And

there was this magical point that happened with that design, when I almost allowed it to design itself." He remains fascinated by this "human quality," and the belief that light can create harmony between people and their environment.

For proof, one only need visit his showroom and studio in a large warehouse in San Francisco's Dogpatch neighborhood. Located by Pier 80 and across the street from train tracks, this doesn't seem like a place where you'd feel particularly Zen. And yet: his fixtures have clean, modern lines that enhance or blend into the setting. The light emitted is soothing and warm, even though it's all produced by LEDs. Despite the creative chaos — the clutter of prototypes, the computers and drawings of concepts-in-progress — there's a sense of order and ease.

## VOICES

That harmonious aspect is mirrored in the company's worldwide appeal. Today Pablo Designs has offices in San Francisco and Amsterdam and hundreds of dealers in countries including the U.K., Germany, Israel and Greece. Pardo retails his products through Room & Board and Design Within Reach, and he's the only lighting partner for Haworth, a global workplace furniture manufacturer. Several of his designs are now in the permanent collection of SFMOMA.

"Pablo is a big voice in the industry," says Anne Fougeron, a modernist architect in San Francisco, who has included his work in residential and commercial remodels. "And in this town, he's certainly the person who does this best."

Rob Forbes thought so too. When Forbes founded Design Within Reach in 1999, Pardo was one of the young designers he reached out to. "I was looking for great, underexposed product designers to complement the usual mid-century modern suspects and Italian designers," he says, "and I liked Pablo's work for its playfulness and integrity. His success speaks for itself."

After the Piccola, Pardo continued to break new ground in lighting, particularly with the Brazo task light he created in 2007. It's an innovative design, a slender beam of light that rests on an aluminum base and can swivel 360 degrees. It's also design simplicity at its essence, what remains after everything else has been whittled away.

Though Pardo works tirelessly to hone his ideas, creativity is also in his blood. A native Venezuelan, he hails from a long line of engineers and designers. His father, a civil engineer, was a Julliard-trained classical guitarist. Two of his five siblings are also industrial designers. One of his sisters is an artist. "Growing up, I was making things all the time," Pardo says. "I loved tinkering."

He and his team create three to five new designs per year, often collaborating with other designers such as Peter Stathis, whose Pardo co-creations include the Corner Office. A glare-free, dimmable corner task light with power ports embedded in its armature, it's a prime example of human-centric design embracing technology. Another example is Pardo's Contour lamp, which upends common expectations of lighting. Here Pardo has eliminated the shade; instead, the slim aluminum and molded wood frame itself becomes the shade. You can look right through the lamp and rest a book inside its base. The inconceivably thin LED light has a diffusing film to eliminate glare.



**Clockwise from top left: The Piccola was one of Pardo's first designs; the Uma Sound Lantern doubles as a Bluetooth speaker; the Contour lamp for use on a table or on a floor; the 2007 Brazo task light.**

"The quality of light is really important to us," Pardo says, walking through the showroom in a black sweater, puffer jacket and white sneakers. "When the first LEDs came out, I didn't particularly care for them. They were too harsh and too blue. But there is a lot of great LED technology available now, and you wouldn't be able to tell if you were looking at an LED, incandescent or halogen bulb."

Four years ago, he also created the Uma Sound Lantern, a conical-shaped fixture that doubles as Bluetooth speaker, streams audio from mobile devices and all but begs to sit at a pool party. "This is probably the most celebrated design we've ever done," Pardo says, "because it's stepped out of the bounds of the lighting space into another category that hadn't been done before."

But there's one difference between his work and most of the tech industry's: his products are built to last. He's a hiker and cyclist, draws much of his inspiration from nature, and feels a responsibility to protect it. "Our vision of sustainability is to get as long a life out of the design as possible," Pardo says. "I try to create products that stand the test of time."

Accordingly, they're made with technology that can be removed and updated, which keeps lamps out of landfill. They're also priced with affordability in mind. (The Brazo table lamp costs \$500; the Contour floor lamp is \$720.) "When you own one of our products, maybe something you bought 10 or 12 years ago, we can change out your LED light source, which may not have been as great a quality as it is today," Pardo says.

Lately, he's fascinated by the possibility that artificial light could replicate the natural phases in our day. "There's a lot of information out there now about how light affects the human condition and how we can be either more productive or less productive" as a result, he says. "Light, in itself, with the new technologies that are out there, is going to be able to mimic natural light. I'm not as interested in being driven by technology as in arriving at the right place using technology."

That "right place" includes aesthetics, he concedes: "Beauty is really important. Good lighting should be beautiful. But beauty only happens after all these other steps have been taken," he adds. "That includes using honest materials, making sure the light source works as well as it can, and that the design is producible. For it to be a beautiful design, all these different aspects have to work in harmony." ■