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# Michael Anastassiades

talks to Vassilis Karidis

Best known for his lighting creations and his minimal, utilitarian aesthetic, Cypriot-born designer Michael Anastassiades works for some of the world’s leading architects, including David Chipperfield and John Pawson. An Industrial Design graduate from the Royal College of Art in London, his work is featured in the permanent collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the FRAC Centre in France, and the V&A Museum in London, and he has designed products in collaboration with furniture company Herman Miller and lighting manufacturers Flos. *Dapper Dan’s* editor Vassilis Karidis visited Michael at his home and studio in Waterloo, London, where the designer produces his signature collection of lighting, furniture, jewellery and tabletop objects for his own brand.

**VASSILIS KARIDIS:** You were born in Cyprus and you’ve been working in London for more than 20 years. When did you start your career?

**MICHAEL ANASTASSIADES:** I graduated in 1993 and I pretty much set my studio up in 1994, so it’s been a while, but effectively my studies didn’t give me a good direction as to what I wanted to do and that’s why it took me so long to really find out how I wanted to evolve as a designer. At the beginning I was very much interested in electronic products and how electronic products can affect your life and develop a psychological dependency between the object and the user. So I was doing a lot of experimental work at the beginning. The first product that I ever did, in 1993, was called the Message Cup. It was a cup for recording messages for people inside the domestic environment. The idea is that each person has their own cup, not for drinking but for recording messages. If you want to leave a message for somebody you pick up their cup, you talk to it, you put it upside down on the table. When this person comes home and sees the cup facing down, they know there is a message for him and they simply turn it up. This was before SMS, before all these kinds of means of communication. This was more like research for me, an exploration into how people communicate and the dependencies between objects and users. Another set of products that I designed later on were the Social and Antisocial Lights. These are living room lights: the Antisocial Light, for example, glows only when

there’s absolute silence, so when you talk around it, it dims down. So you have to respect its behaviour in order to get what it is that it’s supposed to do for you. I did a lot of collaborations with this design duo called Dunne and Raby—we worked together as a team of three. One was called Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories. It was a project exploring the relationship and the obsession many people have with their garden. We were intrigued by the idea of taking care of something, especially when you grow a vegetable garden that you eventually are going to eat. We found that barbaric kind of relationship very interesting. There was a series of products that came out of that and we had an amazing response—we showed it in a lot of museums around the world; but they were more like art pieces, conceptual pieces. They were acquired later by the Victoria and Albert Museum, who bought the whole collection.

**VK:** How has this early work influenced your lightning and furniture designs?

**MA:** These came much later on in my career. For many years I was developing all these ideas—it was personal research into design, because my studies were not enough to tell me how to pursue my thoughts as a designer. I was trying to understand what were the qualities that I was after in design and which model to follow as a designer. I realised that I didn’t really belong to any existing models. For many years during this

time I was also practising and teaching yoga, so this is how I was making a living. Then, about 20 years ago, I got this place in Waterloo. That was a critical time because I worked on this house, which is a lifetime project. I did it with very limited means and with a friend of mine who is an architect and it helped me with the interior of the space and then I was looking for things to put in my house and I realised that there was nothing that I really wanted that would suit this space, but it was an interesting trigger for me to say, “Okay, I can actually make these things myself, I can design these things, I’m a designer.” I always had a passion for industrial products, products that you leave in the house, not just the research side of things, and that started me putting a collection together until the point that I looked at this collection and I said, “Okay, there’s been an amazing response to these products, I think I should really produce these pieces,” and that’s when I set up the brand.

**VK:** What is your relationship with London?

**MA:** London for me is a city that I never really got. That you never really feel that you exhaust in any way. Throughout all these years, I have never felt that I’ve been here long enough to really understand it and this is the magical thing about London. But, at the same time, I have to say it’s a very tough environment. On the creative side it’s wonderful because you have all these things that are happening and there’s so much stimulation





Photography by Vassilis Karidis







around but at the same time it's a very tough city in which to make a living. It's also a very hard city in which to be noticed, but I wanted to put myself in this environment because I really believe that you have to do things in extreme environments in order to bring out the best of you; I was interested in that challenge. I didn't see it as a competition, I wanted to bring the best I could and see where I could position it within this bigger creative picture, which is London as an international design centre.

**VK:** How many people work at your studio?

**MA:** The studio is growing in a very organic and careful way. I'm not interested in having a big studio. I have two sides of my practice—one is the studio and the other one is the brand—so the lighting brand consists of four people and then at the design studio there are three designers and me.

**VK:** Where are they from?

**MA:** From everywhere. Only two of them are English—I have two Canadians, one Italian, one German, and one Dutch.

**VK:** Where do you start out with a new design?

**MA:** It's never one route. Sometimes it starts as an idea without necessarily having a visual reference. I think the String Lights are probably a good example of this because I didn't have an image for what the product would look like. I was interested in how people find many ingenious ways to move a light from one place to the next—like when the power points are never where you want. For me this is really architecture because you're interfering with it and it's almost like drawing in space. I wanted to find a way of expressing that, use it to divide, create and suggest. Another time, a project can just simply start from an image that you have, and you know that this is it, it's going to work.

**VK:** I was reading a book about the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy

and it mentioned that when he welcomed people to his house he was always very obsessed with lighting. He used sit them in a chair and then he would arrange the drapes, turn the lights on and off around the person and he might even ask them politely to change their seat so that the lighting would be better. What is light for you? How do you treat it, how do you approach creating light?

**MA:** Apart from it being a very poetic medium you're dealing with an object that has to work in two different scenarios: being on or off. When it's off you can treat it as an object—the space that it occupies, all the visual elements that are there and the reality of it, the volume of it, the fragility, the texture, the reflectivity in terms of the material. But when it's on it's a completely different scenario because you have to deal with a glowing source that occupies a completely different space within the room. It plays very much on the relationship of all the objects that are placed around it because suddenly you get the shadows that are cast on other objects against the wall in relation to people. It's a fascinating medium. I think that a lot of people don't really understand the two sides of it, but that's what really attracts me, that's the true meaning of light, and I very much relate to this anecdote about Cavafy because for me it's very, very critical how you position things in your house in relation to how they work with the light.

**VK:** I suppose what you said about a light having two realities, on and off, explains why you use opaque glass in round or tubular shapes. You don't usually use translucent materials. The lights have a volume when they're switched off.

**MA:** Yes, the volume for me is very important. I like and I can relate to a lot of materials but the fact that I use these opaline sources is because they have a defined form that you can naturally perceive.

**VK:** Has the relationship that you have with lighting transcended to how you design objects? Does your work with

light affect your other designs, like your mirrors?

**MA:** Absolutely. I think it's an interesting observation because this is where my starting point was and I really believe that it was not an accident that I ended up working so intensively with lighting but of course I can see that my perception of space has changed when it comes to designing other forms. The mirrors are directly related to lighting. Mirrors for me are not something in which to see yourself—they're not about vanity or the user, they're more about reflecting space and light and I think you can see that clearly from the type of mirrors I usually come up with, especially the copper mirrors. It's about their colour, it's about their reflection, with relation to the natural light and architectural lights and how they work together.

**VK:** In relation to your work you often mention timelessness and how it affects your choice of materials. For example, you don't like to work with plastic.

**MA:** Timelessness is a very important concept for me because I see the art of designing an object as a big responsibility. It should last for a long time. I'm not designing props; I'm not interested in designing a prop for a picture. I'm not interested in the first impression a person has when they see an object. I'm interested in the delayed response and how this changes over a period of time. For me that is much more interesting—how one's relationship to one's objects changes over time, that dynamic relationship. That's the quality that makes an object timeless: the form itself, how it's formed, the choice of materials that actually change over time, that acquire a certain patina. I never really use any varnishes; I don't want a pristine object looking exactly the same over the years. I like how things change over the course of time. I think that is a responsibility that every designer should really have.

