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New York used to have as many as 20 factories that specialized in mod-looking plexiglass furniture. Now only one remains.

By Hillary Chura

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During the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, New York City’s once-robust manufacturing sector was shrinking, but a handful of young furniture factories were ramping up, tapping into the mod aesthetic of the day with acrylic chairs, tables and lamps. Hip, creative and sometimes flashy, acrylic furniture marked a clean break from the past and epitomized the open and youthful spirit of the age.

Under names like Lucite and Plexiglas, acrylic resin was an invention of the early 20th century. The crystal-clear substance was used in World War II to make airplane cockpit bubbles. It began turning up in high-end furniture in the 1950s, but demand exploded into the residential market in the 1960s and ’70s.

“In the 1970s, people became interested in modern,” said the designer Tony Ingrao, who lived in Manhattan in the ’70s. “It was a reaction to the free love and hippie movement. Everyone wanted to be free and let loose. Why not free up furniture?”

New York City used to have 10 to 20 factories that specialized in acrylic furniture. Now, only Plexi-Craft is left. Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Hans Kretschman, a former commercial banker, was advised to “stay away” from acrylic manufacturing. He ignored the advice and bought Plexi-Craft in June 2016. Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

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Allen, a technology and telecom consultant, would shuttle in almost weekly from the Boston suburbs to run operations. David, who had had a travel business, focused on design and marketing, mostly from his home in North Carolina. After nine years of commuting, Allen wanted out. His accountant mentioned the company to another client.

A small studio adjacent to the factory floor is used for product photography.

Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Plexi-Craft is tucked among a sanitation cleaning station and a high-rise housing complex that's under construction. It currently employs 18 people, including Phillip Sookhai, the shop manager. Mr. Sookhai started as a machinist 24 years ago. He said that while quality and efficiency have improved over the years, the manufacturing process has changed little, and that makes all the difference in the final product.

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“There are still a lot of people out there who just know quality just by looking at a piece of furniture. Like acrylic chairs, some of those from China are very light. You could pick one up with one finger. The chairs we make are very heavy. Our lightest chair is 40 to 50 pounds,” Mr. Sookhai said.

Interest in acrylic spans budgets. Walmart’s chairs and tables can run less than \$100. Design websites like 1stdibs and Chairish currently list vintage pieces that cost thousands of dollars more. The home remodeling and design site Houzz said searches for the word “acrylic” increased by 38 percent from October 2015 to June 2018.

Despite the uptick in demand, acrylic fabricators continue to close locally and nationally. Mr. Kretschman said that since he purchased Plexi-Craft two years ago, three other local factories have closed, left the city or shifted to other materials. Chad Phillips, the director of merchandising at the Brooklyn Museum, estimated that there are about 10 remaining such factories nationwide.

Because its manufacturing process is so labor intensive, Plexi-Craft does not compete with chain stores that sell mass-produced furniture when it comes to pricing. Plexi-Craft’s heavier pieces, however, are unlikely to break or yellow and can be up to eight inches thick. Cheaper imports will likely max out at around one inch and can be held together by screws or scratchy glue lines.

And clean lines can be important when it comes to interior design. Acrylic does not compete with other furniture “because it is clear, so it cannot clash,” said Dina Bandman, a San Francisco designer who has worked with Plexi-Craft since the Frechters’ time. “It provides an opportunity to mix classical elements with more modern design and can have a beautiful balancing effect in a room.”

