From the Desk of ...

Max Gunawan

INVENTOR AND LUMIO FOUNDER

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Courtesy

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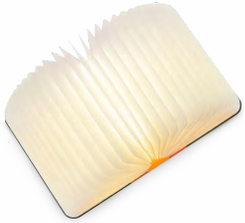
A decade ago, Max Gunawan was working in architecture when he realized that he missed building stuff with his hands. He also had an idea for a portable light—one that by now, you've no doubt seen. The Lumio Lito book lamp looks like a simple hardcover book bound in lasercut wood, but when opened, it transforms into a warm, sculptural light illuminated by a high-performing LED. “Within the span of six months, I prototyped my idea, quit my job and launched it on a crowdfunding platform—that's how it all started,” he remembers. “I was living in San Francisco and luckily, the entrepreneurial energy in the city made me curious enough to take the plunge.” To say it was a hit would be something of an understatement. That stylish book lamp was also the invention that got Gunawan onto Shark Tank (which also landed him his first major investor after all five sharks made him an offer). It's now an award-winning bestseller, sold in more than 200 retailers across 30-plus countries and is the foundation for Lumio's mission, which is to enhance our senses through design. First came sight, followed by sound with a high-end audio speaker disguised as a kintsugi sculpture.

WHAT’S CURRENTLY ON MY DESK

- TGV aluminum lamp by Ionna Vautrin
- Apple MacBook Pro
- Notebook and pen
- A Fan Ho collotype (waiting to be framed)
- Teno speaker
- Current inspirations
- Hayden Shapes “Marble” surfboard (not technically on the desk)



Gunawan is a cool guy, who's always searching out new inspirations and keeping his eye open. In the short time I spoke with him, he recommended shops in Hong Kong and Milan, along with the must-see spots on Japan's preeminent art island, Naoshima. He's got a stylish personal uniform and the manners of a classic gentleman, so something told me that we could learn a lot from taking a peek inside his office. We caught up with the globe-hopping founder and inventor at his new home office in Paris, where he's still getting set up but had enough time to talk about how he got started and what's been the secret to his success so far.

My workspace is pretty sparse at the moment.

I recently moved to my new apartment in Paris, which has been undergoing a remodel over the past year. I'm slowly re-discovering things as I unpack the boxes. In general, I try to surround my workspace with objects that make me happy and can take me to a “quiet space” when things are hectic at work.

The surfboard next to my desk brings a bit of California and reminds me of my old workspace in San Francisco. The Teno speaker's shape and its light keeps me calm, so I keep it around to play music while I'm working. I have always loved the form of the TGV lamp designed by Ionna Vautrin for the French high-speed train (hence the name). They came up with a limited edition in a matte silver finish a couple of years ago that I just couldn't pass up. So I got one for my new desk.

Speaking of the desk ...

I love the simple curved corner detailing of my work desk from Bruno Moinard Editions. The surface is natural brushed oak. The textured wood gives it a grounding feel when my skin touches the surface.

Forsa desk,
$14,788 by Bruno Moinard Editions

The chair is more comfortable than it looks.

Although comfort is key while working, I've been known to make concessions to aesthetics when I really like an object. The Triangolo chair is the perfect example of this. I never thought I would choose triangle-shaped seating for my work desk, but when I saw it in the space, it just felt right. Plus, it forces me to not slouch since it doesn't have much back support, which I suppose helps my posture in the end. See? I'm justifying form over function!

It’s a long way from the desk at my first job.

I used to work at an architecture firm where the set-up was purely utilitarian. I now want to work surrounded by objects that I love and that make me smile.

The most sentimental item on my desk ...

Is this small rock with an orange thread tied around it as a memento from Italy—given to me by a good friend. The thread is a loose piece that she “recovered” from Christo's floating Piers installation at Lake Iseo. We were supposed to go there together, but I had to cancel last minute because of a work emergency. I was disappointed I couldn't be there but instead, she brought back a piece of the installation for me. Every time I see it, it's almost as if I'm being transported to that floating installation on the lake.

But the newest item in my workspace ...

I was traveling to Hong Kong for work a couple of months ago and I randomly stumbled upon a small gallery. I was immediately attracted to this black-and-white photography and I was almost certain that it was the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson (one of my favorite photographers). Of course, I was wrong. It was an eye-opening experience to discover the work of Fan Ho, a name that I've never heard of. He was a Hong Kong based photographer, which I later learned, was known to be the Cartier-Bresson of the East. I bought a collotype of his of a woman leaning up against the wall with a simple geometry of light and shadow. It makes me gasp a little every time I see it. Now, I just need to get it framed.

I’m currently working on several projects.

We are introducing a collaboration with Gaetano Pesce at Design Miami in December. It's a collection of five lamps inspired by the Amalfi coast that we've been working closely together on over the past year. It's been fun because they are pretty quirky and the style is quite different from what I normally do. I'm also working on a playful sculptural desk lamp inspired by Calder that I'm hoping to introduce in January. Though most of my time, I've been working on a new concept for a minimalist modular furniture system that you can adapt into many different uses and configurations. I'm hoping to introduce the product in the spring of 2024.

Currently, my schedule is two-pronged.

I have my to-do list for the week, and then I use my calendar as a daily reminder for each task from the to-do list. That way I can keep track of everything.

You have to be digital these days, but you can’t beat a pen and paper.

I still have a soft spot for the simplicity of pen and paper to convey ideas, so I tend to stick with that. I keep it simple. I don't use many productivity apps. Pen, paper and occasionally 3D paper models when I'm working on a new idea for a product. I find it best to use my hands to make things.

Max Gunawan note/sketchbook

It helps me stay on track, too.

I'm always carrying around my note/sketchbook to scribble all my ideas in and the to-do list to keep me in check.

No day is ever the same for a founder, I think.

Every day, I'm juggling between design, running the office, managing our e-commerce site, manufacturing, logistics, etc. My schedule keeps on changing based on what needs to be done.

The hardest/most annoying part of my job is ...

Wearing too many hats and constantly tackling different things throughout the day. It's mentally exhausting to keep jumping around, so I have to be mindful when the multi-tasking becomes counterproductive.

I'm firmly against eating lunch at your desk.

Like 110% against it. Look, I've done my fair share of splattering salad dressing on my laptop, so I can safely say now: Never again!

"Inbox zero"? Do people really achieve that?

As you can see, I have some work to do. But if anyone wants to help me with this, I'm all ears.

When I want to "switch off" after work ...

Nothing beats an intensive workout followed by a long warm shower to clear the mind.

Perseverance has definitely been the key to my growth.

Even a dull chisel will get the job done if you keep at it. This is to say that even when I'm not good at something, I will keep on doing it until I get good at it.

Something I learned early on that has stuck with me throughout my career ...

I heard this quote many years ago from Maya Angelou that stuck with me. She said that "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." This quote haunts me ever since and I try to live by it. It's the absolute truth.

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