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Going Beyond the Waves to Reshape an Experience



Daniella Zalzman for The New York Times

Thomas Meyerhoffer developed his innovative surfboard design in a tiny shed in his backyard. "It's unusually polarizing," he said.

By JOSHUA ROBINSON
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MONTARA, Calif. — Somewhere over the course of five years and seven prototypes, Thomas Meyerhoffer found that his experimental surfboards no longer looked like surfboards. The pointed nose had faded away. The wide waist had melted inward. And the back stretched into a long, slender tail.

The prototypes were not even close to the conventional boards he had been riding each day since 1998, when he left his job as a designer at Apple. But Meyerhoffer tired of those boards anyway, and he sought a new surfing experience. So, from his home office and a tiny backyard shed here, Meyerhoffer took what was considered the most radical leap in board design in 50 years.

"It's about creating a different feeling," Meyerhoffer said recently. "Like the difference between playing tennis with a wooden racket and a metal racket. Or playing golf with wooden drivers."

Surfers had never heard of Meyerhoffer, who does play golf with wooden drivers. It was

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hard to blame them. Meyerhoffer, a 43-year-old Swede, has spent a lifetime as a designer. He includes Porsche and Apple on his résumé and has made everything from translucent computers to Cappellini chairs, wraparound ski goggles to paper-towel dispensers.

To the surfing world, Meyerhoffer was a voice in the wilderness.

“He’s coming at it from a really innocent design perspective, and that’s what makes this significant,” said Sam George, the former editor of Surfer Magazine and a daily surfer since the 1960s. “The outline of the surfboard has remained remarkably static over the decades. So when a guy like Thomas comes along and fundamentally changes the look, the whole outline, it’s startling.”

The idea behind the shape, reminiscent of an hourglass, is to emphasize noseriding and tailriding for recreational surfers. In the simplest terms, it is supposed to be a longboard that rides like a quicker, more maneuverable shortboard. When Meyerhoffer describes it, however, he cannot help but lapse into design-speak about removing mass, redistributing volume and continuous organic shapes.

He insisted that the crazy lines were not just different for the sake of being different. It was a painstaking process of trial and error.

“I never designed the board to look this way,” Meyerhoffer said. “It became this way.”

The big-wave rider Peter Mel, who also operates a surf shop in nearby Santa Cruz, was stunned when he took Meyerhoffer’s board out for a ride.

“Initially, I thought, What the heck is this thing?” Mel said. “We’re so used to seeing surfboards a certain way that we all get caught in a little box. But when I rode it, I was really surprised.”

Mel was not the only apprehensive surfer. When Meyerhoffer took the board down to the beach two blocks from his house, people took him for a kook with a wipeout waiting to happen. Still, it was more respect than he received with his first experiments: conventionally shaped boards with a colorful translucent section filling up the back.

“You show up with something like that on the beach, and people just shake their heads,” he said.

But Meyerhoffer has been validated by the growing legion of fans from California to Australia who have written to him pledging allegiance to the board. The first run of about 1,000 boards, which began trickling into stores this spring, has sold out. The manufacturing company Global Surf Industries has a backlog of orders that will carry it to February.

“It’s unusually polarizing,” Meyerhoffer said.

Meyerhoffer undertook the project after growing frustrated with the 40 or so boards he kept around the minimalist house he designed for himself a decade ago. He had toyed with shaping boards for windsurfing as a teenager — he even submitted one in his application portfolio for art school — but had not tried again in more than 20 years.

He approached the problem by falling back on his design training and design software. Hand-drawn sketches became three-dimensional digital models before he sent them to be translated into foam by a computerized cutting machine. Most mainstream surfboards go through the same process — the art of hand-shaping foam inside the board is dying —

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before being coated in epoxy.

But Meyerhoffer quickly discovered that the device was not sensitive enough to meet his specifications. So in that tiny shed next to his son's jungle gym, Meyerhoffer taught himself the esoteric craft of shaping surfboard foam. Every prototype cut by a machine had to be refined by hand.

"Everybody can design on a computer today," he said, "but to go from your computer screen to a board that really works is like cooking food. Anyone can read a recipe, but the master chef will always be much better."

And just as a chef's reward is sitting down and eating his own creation, Meyerhoffer said that taking the board out on the ocean made the sleepless nights and endless glitches worth it.

"It's so much more satisfying than when you design a mobile phone," he said. "Then you just make a call. Here, you get to surf."

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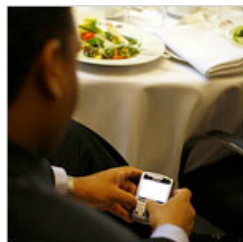


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