

The Design issue // DAVID CHIPPERFIELD / ASTON MARTIN'S NEW CEO / ARTWORKS TO SIT ON

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BY  
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HAYDEN COX WAS STILL A GROMMET WHEN HE TAUGHT HIMSELF THE FINER points of surfboard construction. Using wages from a supermarket job, the 15-year-old purchased the necessary materials – foam, metal racks, a lighting rig – and set up a shaping bay by the creek that ran through his parents’ property in northern Sydney. There, he would work late into the night, honing his craft.

By the time he turned 16, Cox had produced a series of serviceable surfboards. He began selling boards to kids at school, and then to his teachers. The next step was to design a logo that would serve as an artist’s signature on all his creations.

“Typically, on a surfboard, you apply something called a decal laminate,” he explains. “It’s a logo that’s been screen-printed onto lightweight Japanese tissue paper. You place it on the board, underneath the fibreglass skin, and wet it with resin so the paper goes transparent. All that remains visible is the logo.”

Cox didn’t have the money to hire a graphic designer or pay for screen printing. But the crafty teen was undaunted. It was 1997, the dawn of the internet era, and the Cox family had recently acquired a basic Intel-based computer and a first-generation inkjet printer.

“I hacked the set-up and figured out how to run tissue through the printer without tearing it,” he recalls. “Then I designed a logo using Microsoft Paint.”

Cox’s do-it-yourself ingenuity has become the essence of Haydenshapes, the board brand that he established in 2000 and which now has 40 direct employees in Australia and the United States, plus a significant third-party workforce in Thailand.

He’s reinvented the way surfboards are constructed, replacing the traditional balsa wood stringer with carbon fibre around the edges. The technology, which Cox calls “FutureFlex”, is protected by a patent.

He is also a master of geometry. The easy-to-ride Hypto Krypto model he designed in 2007 is widely assumed to be the best-selling surfboard of the past 15 years. Today, Haydenshapes boards are sold in more than 70 countries.

“On a Haydenshapes board, you instantly feel faster, if not a better surfer entirely,” says veteran surfer and former *SURFING Magazine* editor-at-large Beau Flemister. Tom Carroll, a two-time world surf champion, says the Hypto Krypto makes it easy to paddle into waves, and gives the rider a spark of joy. “It can lift your performance fairly swiftly.”

Cox developed both FutureFlex and Hypto Krypto without co-designers or external investment. He has no tertiary qualifications and remains resolutely DIY, operating Haydenshapes from an all-in-one factory/office in a sleepy industrial park on Sydney’s northern beaches. He retains 100 per cent private ownership.

However, his recent output – including an edition of \$3000-plus “eroded” boards with contemporary artist du jour Daniel Arsham, featuring hollow sections beneath a fibreglass shell – hints at a bolder future. Now, brands far removed from the beach are lining up to ride Cox’s next wave.

There’s a line of furniture he’s crafting for upmarket Australian brand SP01, made primarily with resin. Having figured out how to shape the material in large quantities, he’s also dabbling in interior architecture: you can see his handiwork at the spa in Crown Sydney, where thick resin columns section off the hot tubs. He’s working on a top-secret project with Swiss watchmaker IWC Schaffhausen and making wetsuits with New York-based fashion titan Dion Lee. There’s also a separate Haydenshapes apparel line in the works.

Diving headlong into different product categories is a test of his own abilities as a designer. But Cox has always worked intuitively, and the experience is thrilling.

“It’s like riding a reef break: it’s a bit scary, because you’re over shallow coral, and you might not really be competent enough, but you surf it anyway. For me, that’s enjoyment – to achieve something that makes you sit back and go: ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe I did that.’ That’s rad.”

HEADS TURN WHEN COX ARRIVES AT A WATERSIDE CAFE IN Mona Vale for his first interview with *The Australian Financial Review Magazine*. He’s a well-known figure on the close-knit northern beaches.

As a child, he dreamed about the long ribbon of sand that stretches some 30 kilometres from Manly up to Palm Beach, and imagined becoming pals with the pro surfers who called the area home. He would make the pilgrimage

whenever he could: a shorter-than-average kid riding at the back of the cross-town bus, clutching his board. “As soon as I was old enough to travel on my own, nothing could stop me,” he says.

Two decades on, Cox is a northern beaches celebrity. But the 39-year-old doesn’t come off as cocky – in fact, he’s polite to a fault. Working relentlessly for more than 10 years before achieving professional recognition seems to have kept his ego in check. With no external funding – not even a loan from mum and dad – he was forced to balance his ambition with financial pragmatism. “When I got my first factory, in my early 20s, I started to get really nervous,” he says. “How was I going to make sure I had a steady stream of orders?”

At the time, Haydenshapes’ customers were mostly Australians who admired Cox’s independent spirit. He continued to hone his shaping skills, board by board. But conquering international markets would require a next-level manufacturing innovation to set the brand apart.

“I started getting very deep into materiality and thinking about how the materials could contribute to the ‘flex’ of the board, which is essentially how it moves through the water and how it responds under your feet,” he says.

“I knew that altering each material might change the flex only slightly, but those minute changes could add up to something substantial.”

Traditional surfboards consist of three main components: a piece of polyurethane foam, known as a core, that makes up the basic shape and mass of the board; a thin piece of wood, known as a stringer, that bisects the foam core lengthways and strengthens it; and a fibreglass laminate, or skin, that encases the board.

Cox began experimenting with all three components. “I looked at how changing the weave of the glass fibres within fibreglass might change the flex, for example,” he says. He teamed up with Sydney company Colan, which had been manufacturing surfboard materials since the 1960s, and fabricated dozens of prototypes. No adjustment was too small. Cox even spent time thinking about resin, which is used in small quantities to attach the fibreglass skin to the foam core.

Within a year, Cox had formulated new fibreglass and foam materials that he says improved the flex of his boards significantly. But he wasn’t sure what to do with the wooden stringer, which was key to both the strength and the flex of all surfboards. Then, in 2006, a breakthrough: “I started thinking about removing the wooden stringer entirely,” he says.

Instead of a stringer, Cox wrapped the perimeter, or rail, of the board in newly developed carbon-fibre tape that provided superior structural integrity and flex. That carbon-fibre frame makes up his patented FutureFlex technology.

“One of the advantages of the carbon-fibre frame is that you can apply it after you’ve shaped the board,” he says. “That means you can customise every board you make.” He also had the sense to make the tape black, creating a signature look.

Cox brought FutureFlex to market in 2007, around the same time that he designed Hypto Krypto. Each was a step change in surfboard design: FutureFlex made boards lighter and faster without compromising strength, and Hypto Krypto made it easier for beginners to catch waves while giving pros a single board they could ride in diverse conditions.

These two innovations underpin Haydenshapes’ commercial success today, but neither was embraced upon release. In fact, launching FutureFlex almost bankrupted Cox. “When FutureFlex launched, the idea was to license it to various manufacturers around the world,” he says. “But it didn’t stack up, numbers-wise. The margin structure wasn’t right.”

Cox wasn’t making enough money from licences to repay the R&D costs he had racked up, and he lacked the distribution know-how to boost international sales of his own boards.

“It’s a very hard thing to be 29 years old, having designed an amazing technology that everyone says surfs great, and to be failing commercially, and having to sit back and really reflect on that,” Cox says. “It’s daunting to reassess yourself and realise that, maybe, you made the wrong decisions.”

Cox seems to have become better at making business decisions in recent years. FutureFlex is now exclusive to Haydenshapes, which has forced competing brands to spend time and money developing comparable materials. As he points out: “Every major board brand has a board with carbon-fibre rail in its line-up now. That’s the influence FutureFlex had on our industry.”

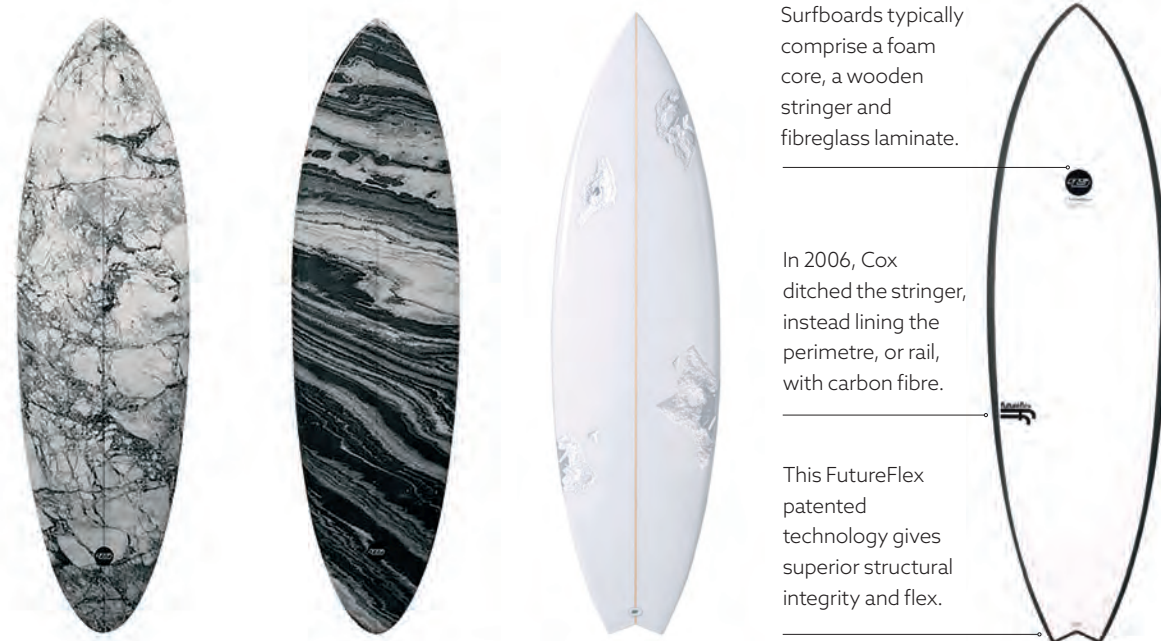
## SHAPE

## SHIFTER

Having won peer and commercial success with surfboard designs, Hayden Cox is broadening the scope of his output.

STORY BY DAN F. STAPLETON PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES BRICKWOOD





Surfboards typically comprise a foam core, a wooden stringer and fibreglass laminate.

In 2006, Cox ditched the stringer, instead lining the perimeter, or rail, with carbon fibre.

This FutureFlex patented technology gives superior structural integrity and flex.

Left to right: Two of the five marble-print surfboards Haydenshapes created for Alexander Wang in 2014; Eroded surfboard collaboration with Daniel Arsham.

Cox's standard boards are manufactured in Thailand by a 200-strong, third-party workforce he trained himself, while custom boards are largely crafted at his Mona Vale HQ.

For a young company producing high-cost goods at low volume, Haydenshapes seems to be in robust health: the 500 boards he developed with Arsham sold out online in seven minutes, bringing in \$US1.25 million (\$1.65 million), and Haydenshapes says sales of its regular boards have doubled since the beginning of 2020. Last year, with wife Danielle and their two young children, he moved into a \$3 million Palm Beach home and picked up a \$3 million investment property in nearby Clareville.

Cox is quick to credit much of the company's success to Danielle, who began working for Haydenshapes soon after the couple met in 2011. (They married in 2015.) Her official title is marketing and communications director, but those who know them say she is just as involved in executive decision-making as he is.

"You really get this sense that Hayden is the artist and the hands and Danielle is so tuned into the marketing side and exploring possibilities with him, but in this lovely, open, organic way, so it doesn't feel corporatised," says Matt Lorrain, co-founder and creative director of SP01.

Danielle, nee Foote, has a somewhat unconventional background: born in Adelaide, she did not attend university and rose to prominence as a contestant on *Big Brother* in 2006. (She released a pop song, *Underneath the Radar*, that year.)

By the time she met Cox, she had forged a career in marketing and publicity, working for media and fashion brands including MTV. At the time, Cox was drowning. "It wasn't an easy time for him," Danielle says. "He had a good \$500,000 in debt. But he really believed in the product."

She hesitated when he asked her to join the company. "I told myself: 'I'll give it six months, and then I'm going to do my own thing. I've got my own career.' But I think the best work that I've ever done has been with the Haydenshapes brand – the most challenging projects, most exciting projects."

Danielle is an advocate of big-picture thinking and is jointly steering the ambitious partnerships that Haydenshapes has under way. Where some of his early team-ups were head-scratchers (the surfboards he created in 2014 for American fashion designer Alexander Wang were particularly incongruous), the latest collaborations seem to have evolved out of Cox's interest in raw materials.

Chief among them is the furniture range with SP01, which will launch in November exclusively through Space. Designed by Cox with input from Lorrain, the limited-edition collection will consist of half a dozen as-yet-unconfirmed small pieces, such as coffee tables and mirrors, with the possibility of larger items made to order.

"When we first met to discuss the design, we had each put together a bunch of briefing images, and the amount of crossover was just uncanny," says Lorrain. "We were, quite literally, on the same page."

The range will be manufactured at Haydenshapes HQ in Sydney using a newly developed form of resin that contains both bio-based ingredients and upcycled surfboard waste, such as foam dust and fibreglass offcuts. "When cast, it has the weight and high-end feel of stone, yet we are able to achieve transparency and colour capabilities similar to glass," Cox says. "The way that light passes through the finished cast resin is art in its own right."

Then there is the project with IWC Schaffhausen, the details of which are under wraps. "Hayden is an excellent fit for us," says chief executive Christoph Grainger-Herr. "He is a talented designer, a trusted collaborator and a bold entrepreneur."

These collaborations reposition Cox as a multi-faceted designer, moving into the realm of the likes of Marc Newson and David Caon. That prospect, he admits, is daunting.

"They're very challenging," he says of collaborations in general. "They're very stressful. There's a lot of tears, a lot of feeling that you're failing, because you've entered into it knowing that you've got to step up."

Yet he remains committed to diversifying as a designer. "The minute you start relying on what you've already created, that's when you're going to get left behind."

ALL SHAPERS UNDERSTAND CERTAIN fundamentals of surfboard design. Larger waves require longer boards. Flatter boards will go faster "down the line", and curvier boards will ride slower but fit closer to the wave's curve.

What sets Cox apart is his fascination with the minutiae, with the mathematics and the physics. He becomes animated describing

how the shape of a board's tail can affect its performance. A V-shaped swallow tail will increase the radius of the turn because of the longer and straighter rail line that is created behind the back foot, he says. A rounded pin tail means the water can pull around it, and it can turn and sit in the tighter part of the wave.

He says surfing from a very young age helped him understand these nuances on an instinctual level. He started surfing at four years of age, borrowing his older brother's board until he had his own. "One of my earliest memories is sitting on the beach, waiting for him to come in from the surf, so I could have a go."

Cox was not a natural surfer – "not compared to my brother. It was just through pure repetition that I got better." But he loved the freedom he felt in the ocean and the meditative quality of riding the same wave over and over. "Surfing gives you solitude," he says. "It gives you space. You have this environment where you're free to think."

His mother, Jennifer, a school teacher with an economics degree, and his father, a municipal engineer and trained metallurgist, ran a tight ship. In addition to homework and extracurricular activities, Cox, his brother and their three sisters were expected to help renovate the houses Jennifer flipped on the side.

"I just wanted to educate my children," Jennifer says. "To do that, I had to make more money than teaching, so I decided I'd start property development. It entailed trying to make as much money as we could from the projects, so we did a lot of the work ourselves."

Aged 15, Cox broke his surfboard. Rather than buy a new one, he decided to sign up for work experience at a local shaping factory and make his own. Within a month, he had assembled his backyard shaping bay. Then, after graduating from high school, he moved to the northern beaches, renting a bay in the same factory where he shaped his first board.

His parents were less than impressed. Buckling under pressure, Cox enrolled in a business degree while continuing his shaping activities. He only lasted a year at university, but the effort seemed to allay his family's fears.

There was a limit to their support, however. "I decided I wasn't going to finance him in any way," says Jennifer. What followed was a decade-long slog. "He never had any money," she says. "It was tempting for us to help him where we could financially, but I didn't think that was a good basis for anyone starting a business. And, to give Hayden credit, he never asked us for money. Never – even when he really, really needed it."

It's clear that Cox is commercially ambitious. In 2012, as soon as he could finance it, he established an office in California to better serve the United States market; and the company recently re-established a direct-distribution model



Cox designed thick resin columns around the hot tubs at Crown Spa Sydney.



Clockwise from top: Hayden with wife Danielle in 2016; in his northern beaches workshop; early days, aged 19; with fashion designer Dion Lee; surfing at Topanga, near Malibu in California

for its boards, which Cox says will boost profits and improve quality control.

More telling, however, is the impending launch of a Haydenshapes menswear line, designed by an in-house team and overseen by Cox. The prototype garments have the look and feel of designer streetwear, and Cox says several upmarket retailers, including Mr Porter, have already signed on to sell the collection from January 2022.

"We felt very strongly that if we were going to make apparel, it should be made to the same standard as our boards," says Cox, "rather than aligning it with the mass market." It's a savvy business move for a young company, not least because profit margins on luxury apparel are generally wider than margins on mass-market gear.

As to the partnership with Dion Lee on a range of wetsuits, readers who associate Lee with smart femininity may be taken aback. But as he himself explains, the collaboration is timely. "Growing up in Sydney, I was extremely athletic and beachy, and since I've been living in New York, I've reconnected with surfing," Lee says during a Zoom call from Manhattan. "I've taken trips to Mexico and Costa Rica recently to do just that."

When he met Cox at a function, a few months before the coronavirus pandemic took hold, Lee was already thinking about bringing what he terms as "more technicality" to his brand. His recent collections, which have included sculpted leather garments, hint at what we might expect from the Haydenshapes team-up. The line is scheduled for an April 2022 release.

"I really admire Hayden," Lee says. "Aesthetically, he has

a strong point of view, and I think he's doing really interesting things with materials." He adds: "Hayden is both creative and a businessman, and those are always interesting people to work with."

IT'S A FRIGID DAY IN JUNE WHEN COX, LOOKING dapper in a Prada windbreaker and designer trackpants, shows *AFR Magazine* around his Mona Vale premises. We begin in the factory's resin room, which is kept at 26 degrees and 60 per cent humidity in order to achieve a consistent exothermic reaction whenever resin is applied to a board. Biggie, Cox's husky-Staffie cross, tags along, circling our feet excitedly.

About half the company's boards are made here; the remainder, in Thailand. Cox describes the Thai production line, run by manufacturer Cobra, as a well-oiled machine. The Sydney factory seems to operate efficiently, too, but it retains the feel of an indie operation: boards are stacked here and there; messages about protocol and safety are handwritten on pieces of paper; and staff wear '90s band T-shirts.

Cox moves to and fro, introducing members of his team such as Sam, a diligent young shaper who has already been with Haydenshapes for six years, and Hiro, an all-rounder and 10-year veteran of the company. While Cox himself delegates the vast majority of the shaping these days, he still uses the factory floor for design and experimentation: upstairs, in the far corner of a room where staff are working on the Daniel Arsham boards, he checks on a deep tray filled with viscous liquid.

He's been trying to figure out the optimal mix of bio epoxy

resin, upcycled surfboard foam and fibreglass dust for the SP01 pieces, which will be made here once the Arsham project is complete.

Cox is acutely aware that manufacturing surfboards is environmentally dubious. The materials used are plastic-based, and the amount of waste generated per board is substantial. His answer, for the time being, is to incorporate his own offcuts into the novel resin-based materials he is developing for SP01, Crown and others. He is also exploring new foam formulations that could reduce the surfboard industry's reliance on plastics without compromising performance. "That's where the next big innovation will be."

He will need to paddle fast to stay ahead. Haydenshapes is considered the board brand to beat – and, as FutureFlex proved, his competitors are not afraid to imitate it.

Given that reality, it's perhaps not surprising that Cox is pursuing design collaborations and diversifying his own product line. He is no longer a lone wolf or a purist. He does, however, remain a surfer at heart. After the factory tour, he stops near the entrance to chat to two men, both in their 60s, who have dropped by to pick up boards Cox himself has overseen for them. The trio discuss local waves and share inside jokes. Cox's eyes light up.

When they leave, his mood turns philosophical. "Those guys have been surfing up here since before I was born," he says. "They're still not tired of it." He continues: "There's always a sense of challenge. It's very hard to feel like you've surfed a wave and actually perfected it. And never achieving it just makes you want it more. So, you go out there and you do it again, and again. That's surfing." ●