Henrietta Thompson, cofounder, Harth

by JWT Intelligence - Monday, June 04, 2018


A Jeff Koons sculpture in your garden for the weekend? That could be reality rather than fantasy, thanks to Harth, a new platform whose mission is to connect designers, artists and manufacturers with customers who want to borrow their statement pieces.

Henrietta Thompson founded Harth together with her husband and business partner Ed Padmore—they also run the Naked on the Piano creative and editorial consultancy. Thompson says that Harth simultaneously addresses the issue of having too much “stuff” and the (often social media-induced) desire to improve and refine our interior spaces. The service is positioned to appeal both to the growing ranks of permanent—and grown up—renters and to a generation that isn’t hung up on owning things. “The actual concept of owning something isn’t so important. It’s more about experiencing it, or living with it for a certain amount of time, or being photographed with it,” says Thompson, who also serves as editor-at-large at Wallpaper magazine.

Here, we ask Thompson about the impetus for starting the platform, why now is the right time, and how she thinks Harth, which is set to launch later this year, will change the interiors landscape.

What is the idea behind Harth?

Technology is changing the way we live and yet the interiors industry hasn’t really moved forward. In my years as a design writer and editor, I’ve been hearing designers, manufacturers, makers, and artists being conflicted about putting more things into this world where we don’t really need more things. There is this sustainability issue. And we don’t have room for any more things. It just seemed there must be a better way.

My husband and I had a very personal need for a new way of doing things as well, in that we’d moved house four times in two years, and moved our office too. It’s very difficult moving stuff and making it look great in the next place—it somehow just doesn’t work as well. We were paying for storage, but also wanting to buy all these lovely other new things that we saw, but not having the room.
We thought of the concept, and we immediately thought, “No, no one would want to do that,” and thought of all the reasons why not. But then we realized all the reasons why not were really not very good reasons at all. Logistics has changed so hugely over the last few years, it’s much easier to move things around. The insurance industry, which has traditionally focused very much on paying out when something gets damaged, is now much more geared towards a sharing economy. It’s starting to shift. And we thought it would be a really good thing if we could help that shift.

Do you have a certain demographic in mind for Harth?

There is this new demographic of people who are renting their spaces on a long-term basis, but Harth isn’t just for them. Harth is for people who appreciate interiors—for design lovers who don’t want to compromise in terms of putting up with second-rate furniture or want to have bit more fun with their interiors. Then there’s the demographic of the existing B2B customer—we feel they’re not being served. Property developers are looking to furnish show homes. Event organizers might be frustrated with what’s available to rent. Interior designers want to try new things out.

We’ve also found that there’s a huge market for people wanting stop-gap furniture and items. Maybe they’ve bought something or commissioned something, but it’s going to take six months for it to be built and they want something lovely now. Or it could be people who want a showcase piece, but don’t want to invest huge sums. I’d love it if you could bring in a Jeff Koons and have it in your garden for a weekend—why not? We are surrounded by beautiful interiors everywhere, on social media and in hotels, restaurants and bars. People want a little bit of that. Hopefully we’ll be able to make it more accessible.
Is there a sense that this demographic doesn’t have such a need to own things?

I think the attitude to ownership is changing, largely because of the environmental issue, and the idea of “stuffocation.” We have got too much stuff and most people have things in storage these days. Yes, we are always going to have a relationship with our things, and there’s still something very attractive about owning something and what that says about you. But increasingly, through the way we share our lives through social media or wherever, the actual concept of owning something isn’t so important. It’s more about experiencing it, or living with it for a certain amount of time, or being photographed with it. You can be identified with that thing without having to own it. And owning it temporarily can be as rewarding as owning it on a long-term basis, as you’re simply adding to its stories.

How have designers and artists responded to the concept?

We’ve had an amazing response. We’ve had something like a 95% uptake rate from everybody we’ve asked. That’s what’s motivating us—this is obviously something that’s needed. We’ve got the likes of Tom Dixon and Lee Broom, and more traditional manufacturers like Carl Hansen. Then we’ve got Mayfair art galleries and antiques dealers. We’ve got designer-makers, who have pieces that are quite often in storage, and they’re just not seen—also individual artists who have pieces that are currently unseen. And quite a lot of design companies do amazing one-off commissions, and if they’re not sold they end up in storage. It’s such a shame. We’re hoping to bring all these things out of storage and back into spaces where they will be seen.

What will the cost be?

The lenders will set prices that will work for whatever terms they want. If they are interested in renting something on a short-term basis they may set a certain price. If they want to encourage people to rent on a six-month to a year basis, they might set another cost. But Harth will certainly be much more cost-effective than buying in most cases, and much more cost-effective than current rental solutions. We take a percentage commission. We don’t own the stock, but we’re connecting the lenders to the borrowers. The model will be a monthly membership fee that can be recouped against anything you rent.

Where will Harth offer rentals?
London is our focus in the first instance—and we’re already finding it quite difficult to contain Harth within London. We’re looking at the rest of the UK, and then global design hubs and global nomad hubs such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Manhattan. The full platform will be going live later in 2018, but people can apply now and take part in our pilot.

**How does Harth deal with the issue of insurance and the prospect of goods being damaged?**

We’ve got a very particular policy which prioritizes wear and tear, and restoration before writing an item off. It’s very much about looking after things and storytelling.

**What are your future ambitions for Harth?**

I would love to have our own Harth line of designs. And there’s so much potential in terms of how we operate, and the design services we will offer. I see that as potentially being quite a big part of the service.
I would also love [if Harth could create] a shift in the whole interiors aesthetic. The idea of what a great interior looks like hasn’t really changed in decades. It could be really interesting to see what happens when people are a bit more playful. When you own things temporarily, you’ve got freedom to be much more experimental, and have a lot more fun with stuff.

The other thing I’d like to see is how the value of things might change. The current idea is that as soon as a piece leaves the showroom it’s not as valuable. But I don’t think it necessarily has to be that way. Just because something’s had a life, has been pre-loved, it shouldn’t mean that it depreciates in value. It could turn out to be the opposite.

**Could you see more retailers and designers adopting this model?**

Absolutely. I see a huge future for rentals generally. Our point of difference is that we’re connecting users direct. I think the no-ownership idea is potentially going to be one of the biggest changes in the way we live in the coming years.

**Henrietta Thompson, cofounder, Harth**

by JWT Intelligence - Monday, June 04, 2018