

Design Brands Are Taking Unconventional Routes to Sustain Craftsmanship

Shortly after World War II, Paul Efmorfidis's father fled his native Greece. Because he had a heart condition and was less than five feet tall, he was unable to join the army and found himself as a less than desirable candidate to other employers in the country. "He had no money to survive in Greece, or to even pay for my milk as a child," recalls Efmorfidis. "He decided to leave Greece and went to Germany without any papers. He was more or less illegal."

Once he arrived in Germany, Efmorfidis's father was hired by the American army as a tailor, work he undertook in addition to his job in charcoal manufacturing. "I saw him working in horrible conditions and that made me feel that if I ever employed somebody, it would be a guy in need to honor my father. That's how Coco-Mat began," explains Efmorfidis, the founder and CEO of [Coco-Mat](#), a purveyor of all-natural mattresses.



At its factory in northern Greece, mattress company Coco-Mat employs people with Down syndrome, ex-convicts, and refugees.

Photo: Courtesy of Coco-Mat

When Efmorfidis launched Coco-Mat in Greece in 1989, he hired his first employee: an uneducated man who was unable to provide for himself through traditional employment, but had a willingness to learn the handcraft trade from Efmorfidis. Later, Efmorfidis offered a job to an elderly, deaf woman, who showed up to the factory in northern Greece unannounced with her nephew, seeking a form of financial independence. Though she was unable to communicate vocally, she showed her appreciation for the opportunity to work by stitching a heart pillow. This pillow has become a symbol of the brand's Positive Pillow Project, an initiative that donates heart-shaped pillows to women with breast cancer post-surgery. "It has become a tradition to hire those with disabilities," says Efmorfidis. His workforce includes people with Down syndrome, ex-convicts, and refugees from the ex-Soviet Union and Turkey as a way to boost the local economy while sustaining the craftsmanship of Coco-Mat's handmade beds. "If you help out your community during the day, I think you'll sleep a little better at night," he says.

Efmorfidis isn't the only CEO seeking unconventional hiring routes that preserve the history of handcraft in a world where technology is replacing human hands in the workforce at record speed. "Most people these days just don't have a background in working with their hands," says Dave Dawson of The Urban Electric Co. "We've lost a whole generation of people—no one takes shop class anymore. People aren't exposed to handcraft as they were 30 to 50 years ago."

In an effort to cast a wider net when hiring craftspeople at his factory in North Charleston, South Carolina, Dawson began working with the Charleston Disabilities Board more than a decade ago to find several employees who wouldn't mind performing some repeatable tasks, such as putting hardware in ziplock bags or cutting metal pieces into particular proportions.