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# DYNASTY

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It says "Handmade in Huskvarna. Since 1898" on the door.  
In the fourth part of our series "The Factory", Salka Hallström Bornold and  
Carl Hjelte meet the extraordinary family Wadskog, the fourth generation  
who runs the furniture factory Karl Andersson & Söner.





*The fact that the factory became industrialised with more advanced machines did not mean that the family broke with the tradition of running their own production. Where others outsource one or more parts of it, Karl Anderson & Söner still handle the entire chain from plank to furniture.*

**H**uskvarna is an industrious place. Already at the turn of the century, you could have built pillars taller than the Himalayas of the stoves manufactured there in one year. So wrote the magazine *Julfrid* in 1899, of the industrial society by the “Lake Vatern’s vast water mirror.”

Huskvarna was not only an extraordinarily beautiful picture, with the stream that threw itself in a breathtaking fall from the cliffs. There were also factories, wrote *Julfrid*, that had reputations of doing work of only the best kind. Sewing machines, fireplaces, stoves, weapons, velocipedes, cooking vessels, kerosene stoves. “All finished with much care and great neatness, in an unbroken flow, these various creations venture out on the global market and find good consumption.”

That was the Huskvarna factory one referred to, the “gun factory” that was moved here at Karl XII’s time for the hydropower. At the same time as *Julfrid* burst into symphonies over this diligent area, another business was starting, that too of only the best kind.

Some six miles north, inland from the vast water mirror, master carpenter Karl Andersson laid the foundation for his own dynasty in his home village of Berghem. The business idea was simple: “only well-made and durable furniture” was to be manufactured. The pieces proved so well-made and durable that they are still circulating the auction houses. 116 years on, the name Karl Andersson is written in neon on the factory’s white functionalist building on the outskirts of town. “Handmade in Huskvarna. Since 1898.” it says on a small plaque by the entrance. The turnover is nowhere near the 30 billion of the neighbouring factory. On the other hand, there is history, as solid as an *Öresund* chair.

The legacy of the skilled Smålandian is now managed by his descendants of the third and fourth generations: Ingvar Wadskog and his three children Andreas, Sara and Maria. That it would be them to shoulder the mantle was not a given amongst the carpenter’s many descendants. With his wife Ida, Karl Andersson, who was born in 1871, had a sizeable brood of twelve children, of which one was a foster son. Four of his sons went into the family business. “Stay together boys, and things will turn out well for you,” the father is said to have told them. The fifth went to China as a missionary.

When ABBA’s manager Stikkan Andersson started buying furniture companies in the late eighties, the ownership was divided among a number of relatives. They sold their shares, but Ingvar Wadskog stayed on as CEO. Less than a year later, he bought back the factory from Stikkan’s company. The children have come into the business successively, as the older staff have retired.

– I would never work with furniture and I would never move to Stockholm. But I both moved to Stockholm and worked with furniture, laughs Sara, who was the first of the children to be employed in 1996. Today she is head of marketing.

In a short corridor on the ground floor is a mini exhibition: memorabilia, cabinets and chairs, family photos and old tools behind framed glass. I note the chairs from the Carl Malmsten series *Visingsö* and *Vapensmeden*, from the forties. And a piece of lodge furniture by Göran Malmvall, the one of the brothers who apprenticed with Carl Malmsten. A photo from 1920 is antequely documentary, with the founder’s little boys in the workshop. Ingvar stands with me looking at the drawing that depicts the various guises the factory has had over time. A cottage-like factory that grew increasingly bigger, only to finally disappear in a fierce fire in 1943. Only in 2003 were all operations convened in Huskvarna. Does Ingvar remember the fire? He hadn’t even started school at the time.

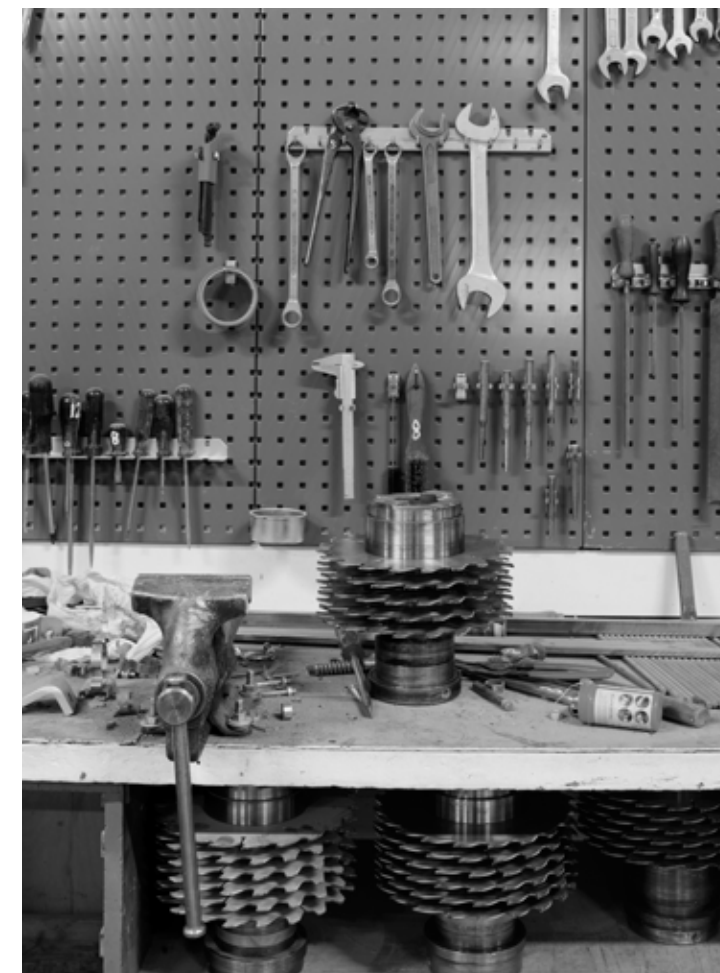
– Yes, of course. It’s etched on my retina, he says.  
– That was where we played, we had memories.

The earliest Karl Andersson specimens have a neat design, with pure wooden surfaces and rustic forms, clearly rooted in utility aesthetics. A first step towards modern design was taken with the Carl Malmsten series. After the exhibition H55 in Helsingborg, the factory involved the Danish functionalist Børge Mogensen, from 1955 to 1967. That resulted in *Öresund*, the furniture range that became a modern classic and the start of a signature style: the unique combination of wooden crafts and contemporary design. Since then, a number of award-winning and aesthetically consistent objects have kept Karl Andersson & Söner continuously current in the design world, from Göran Malmvall’s elegant cabinet *KA 72* (1972) to Malin Lundmark’s mobile table *Lollipop* from 2014.

It was during the Mogensen era that it went from furniture factory to design company. The fact that the factory became industrialised with more advanced machines did not mean that the family broke with the tradition of running their own production. Where others outsource one or more parts of it, Karl Anderson & Söner still handle the entire chain from plank to furniture.

Sara Wadskog takes us all the way into the factory where it all starts, in the lumber warehouse. Here planks are piled high, spreading a lovely fragrance, carefully selected from sustainable forestries. The oak is North American and Canadian, the birch from Finland. Spruce and alder from Sweden are used for another of the house specialties, their own wood veneers. The sandwich construction, with plywood and MDF pressed into a solid core, requires a precise touch. Veneer construction is a critical step, says Sara. The only veneer cutter Lennart Andersson is in his own hangar-like workshop, cutting and joining the ultrathin wooden slats into the most beautiful patterns possible, like a wood tailor. The feeling of a hangar recurs in the many halls, where everything from CNC cutting to hand polishing and varnishing is done. Sparse with people, but all the more dense with machines and wood.

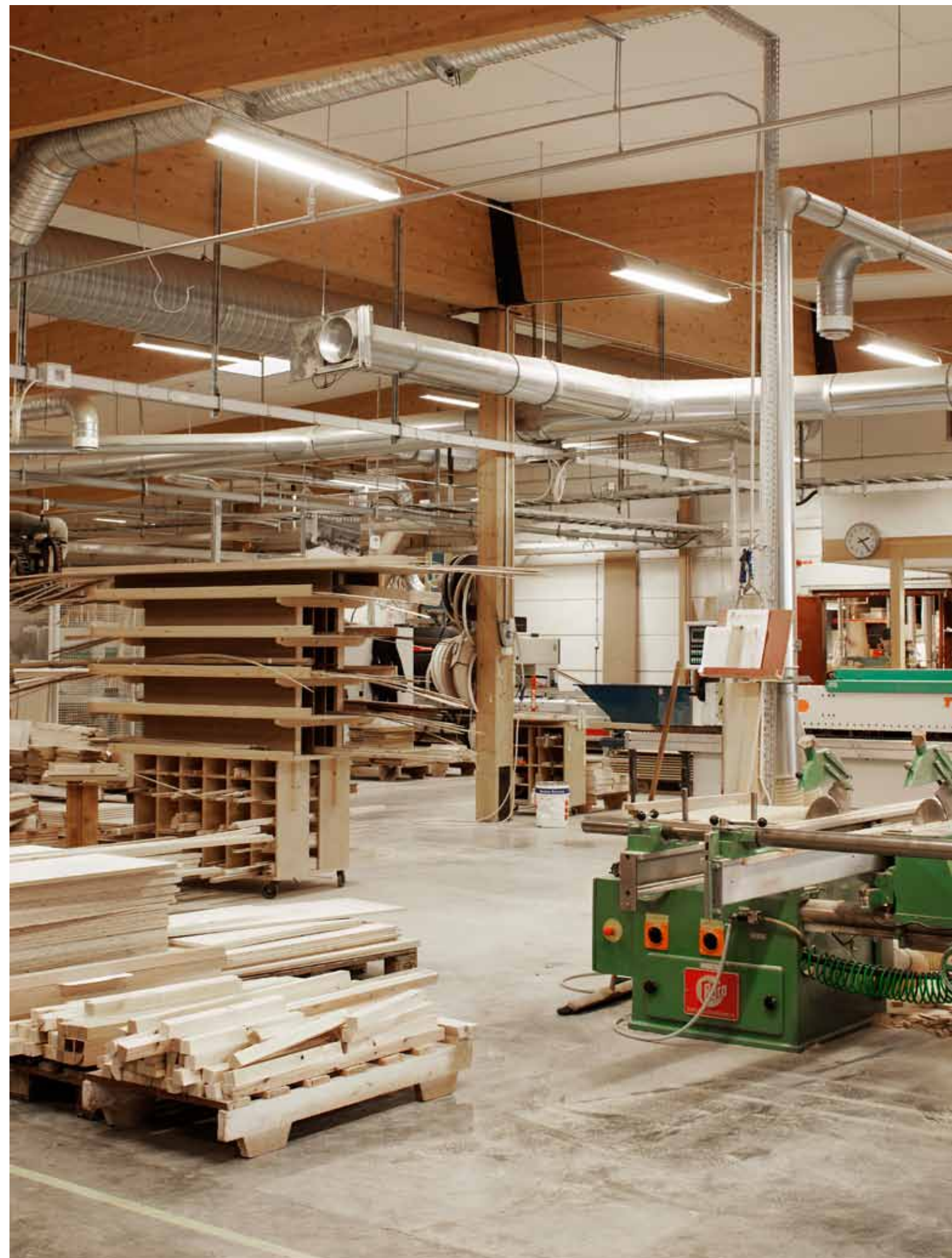
In the actual office building, once decorated by Mogensen, tidbits from the range are scattered here and there: *Lollipop* in



Previous page: Thomas Ekström in the carpentry shop. Above, from left: Andreas, Maria and Sara Wadskog. Bottom right: Lennart Andersson, the veneer cutter.







Above: Boo Helgesson where it begins, in the lumber warehouse. Right: Components awaiting assembly.

the waiting room, Ulla Christiansson's colourful chair *Pastillo* in the lunch room. Up the stairs we sit down in Victor Alm's chic *Yes* chairs: little brother Andreas, middle sister Sara and I. Why is it so important to have your own production?

– To some extent, we want to have control. In terms of quality and finish, there is no one else we depend on. We think that's an advantage, explains product manager Andreas.

– We can also do a lot of special orders, and we have speediness in our production. There is also speediness in product development when there is everything here. Then there are a few disadvantages.

**What are they, the disadvantages?**

Andreas: You can't expose yourself to competition in the same way. What else could it be? Oh yes, that you need a machine shop, which is hefty in terms of investment. If you have an assembly factory, then you don't have the need for capital to invest in machines and other things. We think it's quite nice that we don't need the large purchase volumes. We can start on a smaller scale, with small volumes. Actually, it's all about tradition. If you start a new design company, you hardly start by doing your own production. You build up another skill, with departments for purchasing and quality control.

**You were young when your father took over. Had you ever imagined yourselves as the owners of this century-old family business, together with Ingvar?**

Sara: No, never. Furniture fairs were just so boring.

Andreas: Fairs were the most boring things, and on holiday we would go to furniture shops and we were so bored. And then we worked here during summers and holidays. And now we're doing the same thing with our kids!

**Isn't it hard working together as a sibling trio?**

Sara: No, it's really good. We have different areas of responsibility and are very different. That must be what makes it work, but of course we have our disputes.

Andreas: I think it's a strength, a sense of security to work with one's sisters and father. I have absolutely no problems with that. We socialise to some extent outside of work, together with the families and so on.

Sara: Of course we have our strategies that we have laid as a consensus.

Andreas: We do that continuously, so that we have the same goals, the same direction forward. So that we don't get out of synch or convey different messages. If you do that and respect each other, it will work.

**"KA" as he is called here, is the company's front figure. How much space does he really take, in your family history? What are your thoughts on him?**

Sara: He was quite young when he died, in 1939. Dad has been told how he was. I think he was quiet, and quality conscious. A bit of a teddy bear guy. His wife was probably more strict. She



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managed the money. You know, during both the first and second world wars, the brothers were drafted. It was just her and the youngest daughter doing it all.

**One could otherwise get the impression that it was a patriarchal company, given Karl's coined line, "stay together, boys."**

Sara: No, I must say they were extremely focused on their daughters, as well. They were to be educated, as nurses, midwives, teachers. There was one son who went to China, but also a daughter who went to Africa, went straight out in the jungle and set up a missionary station.

**Is entrepreneurship a family trait?**

Sara: Yes, a little bit. That and aid work.

**Was that connected to the Christian tradition here in the area? Were Karl and Ida very religious?**

Andreas: Oh yes. I think they cleaned the factory sometimes to use it as a place of worship.

Sara: They were helpful too. Stories have been told about when Karl Andersson came to the retirement home in Skärstad, the neighbouring village, and happened upon an orphan boy who lived among the elderly. He went home to his wife and asked what they should do. Ida is said to have replied, "To a closed hand, nothing gets in, but to an open hand, everything comes. So bring him home." And he did.

**So Ida was a strong character?**

Sara: Absolutely. In the late 1800s, she emigrated to America with her brothers. I wonder if she and Karl hadn't just met then, but she was so homesick that she came back.

**In families with assets, it isn't unusual with feuds. Have you had any, given that there has been a bit to fight about?**

Sara: Surely there were feuds in the past. If any, it would probably have been among the brothers. The fact that Stikkan Anderson came in may have been a rescue, a fresh start. Because one thing is certain, it would have been difficult with many owners.

**You have worked with renowned designers like Note and TAF Arkitekter, as well as an unusual number of younger designers. Some have started their careers with you, from Dan Sunaga and Staffan Holm to Junichi Tokuda, David Regestam, Lina Nordqvist, and others. How do you go about choosing a designer?**

Andreas: We don't choose designers as much as we do the product. There we have three different methods, one being when designers send a proposal spontaneously. We also go to student exhibitions, at Greenhouse (Stockholm Furniture & Light Fair) and find a prototype. Or we work on a brief together with a

designer with whom there is already a collaboration. How we choose is also about our product range, what we need. It can also be that we want to further build on an existing product.

– We work almost exclusively with trained designers, but the name in itself isn't that important. We like new ideas and are sometimes visited by schools, so we make contact with them early on.

**How does the product development work?**

Andreas: Every product has its unique process. Some products are developed straight off, others require many retakes. The table *Thinner* (2008, design by Tobias Berneth) is a favourite, just because it's one of the most complex development processes we've done, and over several years. It's therefore quite close to our hearts. We used the material in a way that few had done before, with compression moulded laminate. When we saw the product at Greenhouse the first time, we thought it was a fantastic table, but it didn't work in practice. We worked for two years to find the right material, the right treatment and the right glue. It finally became a product and a selling success. It has put us on the map, and the actual product development with a material that wasn't wood, meant a step forward. Things like that contribute to renewal and vitality.

**Has Sara got a favourite?**

Sara: Difficult, but I'd say the *Øresund* chair. It's a solid and beautiful chair, plus it hasn't got such a high back. Børge Mogensen said that the chair should not take the table setting off the table. It's comfortable to sit in, for a long time. And also the stool *Steelo*. The guys who made it have used expanded metal, which is otherwise used in buildings or extractor fans.

**The legacy and family history is an important part of the brand. Will it be made into a museum at some point?**

Andreas: That's the dream. We have collected products that were made long ago, kept materials, drawings, and so on. So it is a little dream for the future to compile it, and somehow create a museum that could be open to the public.

– We're like squirrels, I think. We like to consider many times before we bin something.

Outside, the factory facade has changed character in the twilight. The evening sky is reflected in the functionalist windows, the light has shifted from a Soviet grey to pink. The photographer has taken a liking to the neon sign and hopes it will be switched on, but then we must wait until darkness falls. Is it not an extraordinarily beautiful picture, regardless? Yes, it is. 🍷

#### KARL ANDERSSON'S AWARDS

Karl Andersson & Söner have received numerous accolades and awards for their products. The cabinet *Hommage Josef Frank* (1986), bought by the Nordiska Museet, was awarded the Excellent Swedish Design, as were *Tema* and *Kvadrat i Kvadrat* (1987), *Prima Vista* (1988), *Kaskad* (1993), *Kazetti Office* (1997) and *Trio* (1999), as well as sitting range *Katell* (1997). The tables *Brygga* (2005), *Chamfer* (2006) and *Newton* (2010) were named Furniture of the Year by Elle Decoration. *Newton* was awarded the Nordiskt Designpris in 2009. The same year, the table *Thinner* received the Design S (Swedish Design Award), and in 2012, the shelf *Level* was awarded by Residence.



Above: Showroom on the top floor. Visible in the picture are the tables *Ponoq* and *Mill*, as well as the storage series *Stow*.

