DOING TIME WITH TYLER

Tyler Brule survived a shooting in Afghanistan and turned into stylemeister to the world. *Wallpaper**, the magazine he founded, is the last word on the right stuff. **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH** spends a day with Mr Cool at work

BEFORE APRIL 13, I thought Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Arne Jacobsen and Eero Aarnio were Scandinavian masseurs you could find on the adult channel. Apres April 13, and I now know that no urban stylemeister's home is complete without Marimekko, Charles Eames and Florence Knoll.

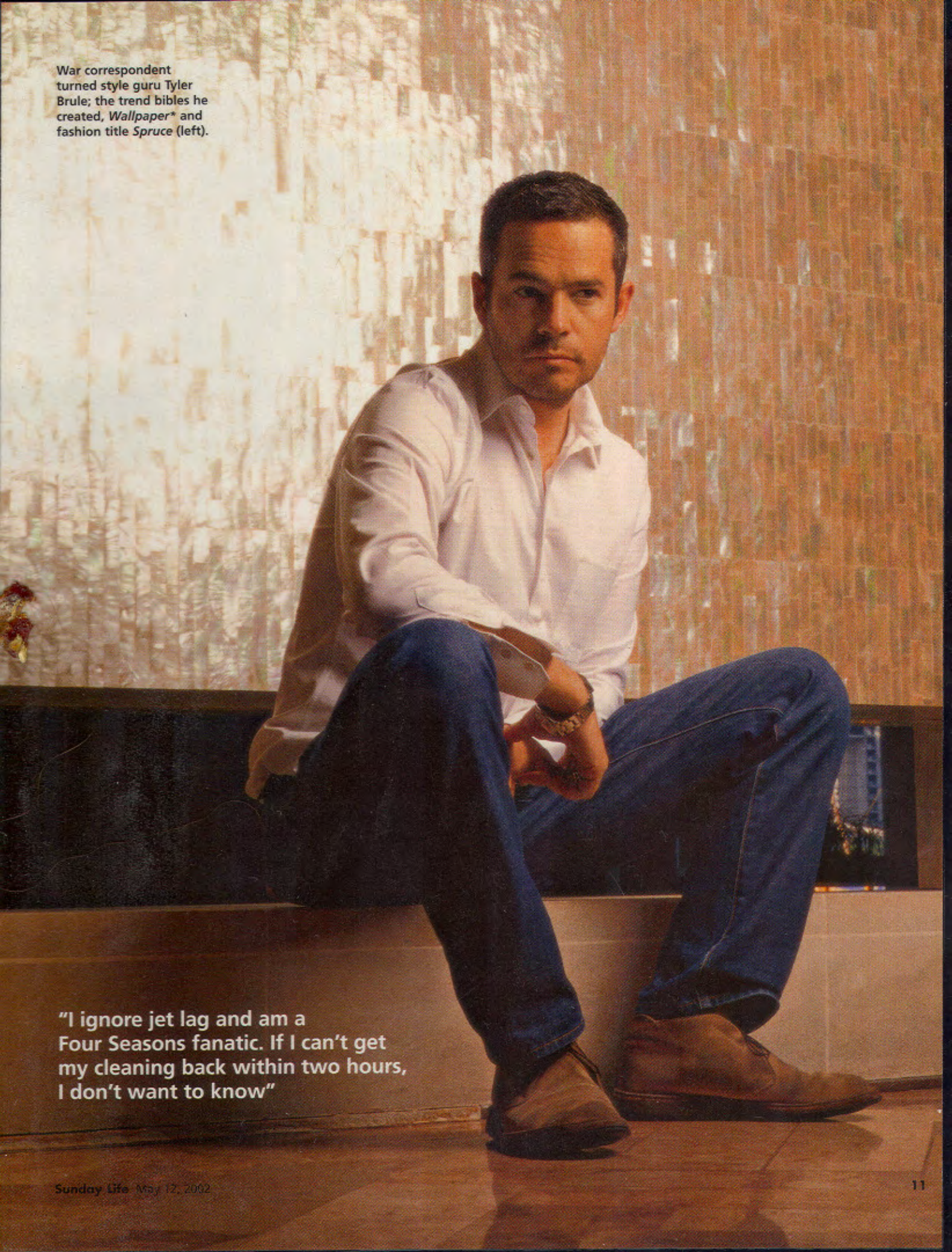
If I were Tyler Brule (pronounced broo-lay), the founder of *Wallpaper** magazine, I would not insult you by explaining further. "We never explain who these people are; if they don't know, the reader will go and find out," says Tyler, whose publication is the arbiter of style for city dwellers around the world. "We talk to our readers, not down to them."

So please forgive my patronising tone when I tell you that van der Rohe, Jacobsen, Aarnio and co are architects and furniture and fabric designers whose mid-20th century work is behind the resurgence of space-age retro and the like.

But back to April 13, the day a girl whose idea of interior design is to "throw a white sheet over it" got to spend the day with Mr Brule as he performed for the design devotees of Australia at industry conference Designex (five halls in Sydney's Darling Harbour filled with chrome, marble, chocolate and aubergine palettes and chairs that swivel on one leg). Tyler Brule, the 33-year-old Canadian responsible for marketing terms such as "genderation inspecific" (boys who like girls who like girls who like boys who like boys) and whose creative agency, Wink Media, counts the likes of Stella McCartney, Adidas and Boeing as clients. Tyler Brule, who delights in photo stories about architectural design in totalitarian places like Pyongyang.

I have flashbacks to schooldays, banging ▷

STEVE BACCON. PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE PARK HYATT, SYDNEY



War correspondent turned style guru Tyler Brule; the trend bibles he created, *Wallpaper** and fashion title *Spruce* (left).

"I ignore jet lag and am a Four Seasons fanatic. If I can't get my cleaning back within two hours, I don't want to know"

Images from *Wallpaper** (below) and *Spruce* (left) show Tyler Brule's passion for design; Sandra Bernhard and Brule at the launch of *Spruce* (right) in London.

"All I remember is trying to get below the window line of the car – as if Toyotas are bulletproof!" I ask him how Afghanistan changed him. "I was a bit of a bitch before"

on the window protecting the cool gang from the likes of me. A day with Tyler Brule, making note of his every gesture, breath, grimace and accessory and it would be me behind the window waving out!

9.30 A stubbled Tyler arrives in the foyer of his hotel, The Park Hyatt, at the appointed time. He's dressed in jeans, a loose white shirt and beige suede lace-ups. I can't spot a label and curse my penchant for *Seinfeld* reruns instead of the Fashion Channel. (When I e-mail later to check, Tyler tells me his shirt is Bally, underwear Calida, socks Falke – they stay up – his blazer is bespoke and the boots are by Prada.) He's shorter than I imagined him to be, with a resonant gravelly voice and a commanding presence. He shakes my hand with a strong grip, twisting his hand into the superior position on top, and I think, I'm in trouble.

10.00 I am staring at the second hand of Tyler's stainless steel Rolex Oyster as it sweeps around the face – yep, it's real (you can tell a fake if the hand jerks from second to second). He's telling the story of being ambushed in Afghanistan in 1994 while writing a freelance piece for Britain's *Sky* magazine on Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders). It was only his second sojourn as a print journalist in a war-torn country, but he had spent a few weeks in Beirut prior and caught the "war journo" bug.

His obsession with design, colour and detail is obvious. He refers to the "crappy baby-blue Toyota Cressida wagon" which would land him in the middle of crossfire.

"All I remember is trying to get below the window line of the car – as if Toyotas are bulletproof! I remember the crack of really cheap tail-light plastic. The car had been sprayed down the side and I was looking up at the beige vinyl ceiling of the car and the whole car just went red." He had been shot.

I ask what went through his head. "Definitely not a bullet," he says. No, the bullet went through his arms and grazed his chest, and the scars are graphic. He lost most of the use of his left hand. A left-hander, he had to retrain himself to use his right.

The idea for *Wallpaper** was born over a pitcher of vodka and cranberry seabreezes while he was recuperating in Chelsea, London. (He says they helped his recovery and, no doubt, his post-trauma depression.) Tyler has been obsessed with style from a young age. His mother, Virge, was an interior designer who redecorated the numerous houses in which the family lived as they followed the career of Tyler's footballing father, Paul, around Canada.

Tyler saw a need for a magazine that visually detailed how to live. With help from his then-partner, shoe designer Patrick Cox, he created a bible of, as that asterisk says, "the stuff that surrounds you". The first issue of *Wallpaper** was published in 1996 and the magazine, which now has a circulation of 134,000 in 60 countries, was sold after four issues to Time Warner. Tyler retained editorial control and became a millionaire in the process.

I ask how Afghanistan changed him and he says, "I was a bit of a bitch before."

10.30 We wander up the road to The Rocks. The conversation turns to airlines, and I am curious to know what the man who convinced Swissair (now Swiss) to spend more on cleaning their plane exteriors (so whenever you saw a Swiss plane, it looked schmick hot), and to dim interior lighting (so the passengers looked "sexier") thinks of travel. "I only fly first-class," he says, "though I am forever checking out business and economy. I steal menus, make note of colours, take my tape measure and measure the width of the seats."

He flew Qantas to Sydney and says the 14 seats in first-class are too many. He will experience Emirates and Singapore Airlines before he gets home to London (he also has homes in Zurich and St Moritz and on his own Swedish island). One airline he won't be flying is Air Canada. He says he's been banned for life after alighting from a plane before take off some days after September 11. The doors of the plane were still open and passengers were boarding. He changed his mind about flying and walked off. He has since been recorded on the company computers as a "security risk" and is not allowed to fly until he says sorry. I can't see it happening.

"I ignore jet lag and am a Four Seasons [hotel] fanatic," he says. "If I can't get my cleaning back within two hours, I don't want to know."

PA/SNAPPER MEDIA

11.00 On duty for a media interview, we're picked up in the official car of Designex, and the winner of an Australian Design Award for industrial design the night before, the new Holden Monaro. I inform Tyler of the award, and he seems less than impressed when I fail to find a coat hook within the car's interior on which to hang his jacket.

We discuss how fame has impacted on him and he relates the story of a Danish model who was stalking him. "If he wasn't such a psycho, he might have stood a chance!" Instead, Tyler took out a restraining order.

It's not his first trip down-under, but this time he's brought the new man in his life, Matt, a banker from Stockholm whom he met via e-mail. Matt sent Tyler a business proposition and a two-month online relationship sprang up before they finally met. That was eight months ago.

After touching down in Sydney, he took Matt to sip lattes and view the concrete, glass and chrome interior of Woollahra providore Jones the Grocer before experiencing what celebrity restaurateur Bill Granger can do with a breakfast egg at Bills in Darlinghurst (wonder if they had to queue?). Just to assure the Swede that Australians really are civilised.

12.00 We're at Nick's Seafood at Cockle Bay, chosen for its close proximity to Designex, not its view across the water to Darling Harbour's 1980s-style design. "They really got the tail end of that era," says Tyler. He's eating white fish, I'm eating red fish and we're both drinking Brokenwood chardonnay. Peeking through his still-white shirt is a tiny, almost invisible, string necklace he bought for $2 on the streets of Brazil. Something a backpacker would purchase.

I ask about his father, who doesn't speak to him, and Tyler makes a mental note to try to contact him again soon. The last time they spoke was 1998. It's hard for a testosterone-fuelled Canadian ex-footballer to acknowledge his only child, a man, is gay. Brule snr had met a number of Tyler's boyfriends but chose to look the other way. His mother, on the other hand, is a guiding light of his life. She's the one who advised him to go easy on design when he bought his homes. You must be able to live in it, she reminded him.

1.15 We meet the PR girl for a fresh juice in the *Vogue Living* lounge at Designex. Another media interview begins at 1.30pm. It occurs to me that to the average writer a *Wallpaper** by-line means big bucks (Tyler pays his writers £3 a word – that's $9,000 for 1,000 words) and, thanks to an office chef, a cushy work life. "We don't want some woman from Essex making us sandwiches each day," says Tyler, who may see those lush conditions changing now *Wallpaper** is under the guidance of British magazine giant IPC courtesy of an AOL Time Warner acquisition. There are rumours Brule is considering resignation. He refuses to comment.

2.15 The PR girl wrestles the (female) journalist, still with tape recorder in hand, away from Tyler at the men's toilet door. He handles it all graciously, even giving her his mobile phone number in case she has other questions.

3.00 Australian fashion designer Wayne Cooper is booked to interview Tyler on camera for the pay-TV program *Stylebyte TV* at 3pm. Tyler is at ease on camera; he worked as a reporter on the BBC youth program *Reportage* in 1989, stationed in Manchester, "the shithole", as he refers to it (his mother cried when she left him there). He went on to work for Australia's Channel 9 in the early 1990s as a London-based producer for *60 Minutes* and ended up covering the Libyan war with Richard Carleton.

3.30 We go upstairs to the rehearsal space with Tyler's book of slides to prepare for his presentation. Gabby, his personal assistant (and sister of one of his ex's), has faxed him some points to remind him what he is to talk about. He calls these talks "Gabby's shoe money" as he pays her a percentage to book and negotiate the fee. She calculates her commission in Jimmy Choos and Manolo Blahniks. I start plotting Gabby's demise.

Flicking through covers and photo spreads from his magazine, he says, "I love looking at these; it reminds me I haven't been sitting on my arse." Asked later how much chairs, curtains and plane interiors matter in a post-September 11 world, he brushes the queries aside with, "Design improves the way you live, so of course it's relevant in any climate. Would you opt for flying a Russian-engineered airliner or an Airbus?"

4.30 Tyler is on stage in front of 450 people. He talks for an hour; it feels like 10 minutes. Author and editor Maggie Alderson says, "He's more up to date with world media than anyone else I know. You can never get one over on him by making a reference to an Argentinian knitting magazine – he's always read it and had lunch with the publisher, too."

5.30 We retire to the *Vogue Living* arena for a champagne. The final interview is with another design editor who claims he knows Tyler "from before" and treats the meeting as a job interview. He has brought his CV. Jacquie Byron, from Ann Morrison Public Relations, which handled Designex, says, "I was getting calls from complete strangers wanting to send their business plans through so he could take a look. I wonder what he gets in New York and London if this is the reaction he gets here. Can he ever go to a party without five people pulling out their business cards?" Meanwhile, the design editor is suggesting story ideas unaware that when you work for Tyler, you get paid to write what he says.

6.00 We're back where we started. This time drinking Russian cocktails and fruited whips in the hotel with canapes of frittata and olives. Alcohol and acerbic humour seem to be prerequisites for cool (but only if the alcohol is served in tall glasses with masses of crushed ice). An ironed Matt arrives, streamlined, peach-skinned and looking fresh from the pages of *Wallpaper**. They are obviously excited to be in each other's company.

I ask Tyler what's next and he says "dinner at Otto with Ian Moore from [architecture practice] Engelen Moore". He asks what's next for me and I say home. I thank him for his time and make what I hope is a stylish exit (which I know is not likely as I have had one too many cocktails). The time is 7.45pm. It takes a lot out of you, being cool. □