

# SITTING DUCK

The rather lack-lustre performance of the UK furniture industry in the past decade has made it easy prey for foreign competitors. Adrian Stokes asks if the indigenous office seating sector can now rise to the challenge

The office chair has become a classic design problem which attracts the attention of some great design talent but produces mixed results. The fact is that to design and make a successful chair raises many issues

First, the bad news. In the UK, the performance of the furniture industry is, for the most part, depressingly mediocre. Like many areas of industry in the UK, the furniture sector smugly competes on the home front, yet finds the rug neatly tugged away at the eleventh hour by more-enlightened overseas competition.

With few exceptions, the volume market for office seating in the UK is dominated by companies making ranges from selected bought-in components, upholstered in standard fabrics, and sold through a dealer network. The legacy of this system is an industry concerned with volumes and margins, not with progress towards better seating.

In the UK, the manufacturing climate imposes often impossible pressures on companies to achieve growth. This leaves little room for long-term planning: short-term survival is the main issue. Under such pressures, during the 1980s many of the better UK manufacturers were either taken over or went into receivership. The design culture within these respected companies was swept away. The result has been a decade of stunted design output in terms of quality and quantity alike.

It is now ten years since Hille made Fred Scott's Supporto chair. In that time, the only significant piece of work produced in the UK has been Basys, designed by Geoff Hollington for Syba in 1985.

Today, Supporto is dressed up like

a Sixties go-go dancer, and Basys has been sold on to another manufacturer. To put it bluntly, short-term planning, lack of investment, and inability to appreciate the true value of good design in the wider world have dogged the effort of UK design.

The last straw has been the increasing effect of imports, and it will be interesting to see if the story of the car industry repeats itself. In the contract furniture field, US companies Steelcase, Herman Miller and Haworth are increasingly represented in Europe — Steelcase, in particular, having a huge base stemming from mergers and acquisitions. Such giant groups have the muscle to dictate trends. Some smaller groups such as VOKO,

Olivetti and Mauser are still able to compete as innovators, though — as costs of development rise — this may change. More pertinently, perhaps, there are signs that the Japanese and Koreans have already seen the potential to emulate their success in other industries. The name of the game is to move in on a low rung but eventually to threaten quality manufacturers with more features per product, offered at lower cost.

Okay — so the threat has been recognised: many US companies have come up with new product development methods which allow quicker processing of products. The "fast gun, slow bullet" jibe aimed at Western industry is generating a reaction of a kind, but whether this is significant or not, only time will reveal.

Eitherway, while niche markets will still be there for a range of smaller companies, the major business will be fought for by the US and its Far Eastern rivals. Britain? Well, with luck, the Japanese might open a few plants in South Wales from which to service Europe.

Apart from the cruel effect of the global nature of the business on some treasured names, there is another problem which affects the production of successful seating. Poor design.

Designers able to produce work of a consistently high calibre are few, and even those who should know have demonstrated a certain visual naivety in office seating. Hartmut Esslinger's chairs for Konig and Neurath, and Richard Sapper's work for Comforto are heavy-handed, high-tech creations.

The question of designer input is an interesting one. In seating, as in so many areas of design, the evidence is that there are many technicians but few real talents.

While a successful product is

certainly the result of a team effort, excellent work is often guided by one person who is able to fuse all the possibilities together into a concept which can then be executed by various specialists.

The office chair is a technical, a human, an environmental, and a detail problem. It calls for individuals who can cross discipline boundaries to handle the subtleties represented by the simplest chair.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly good work is being done. Successful in recent years have been the FS Line from Wilkhahn, the Figura from Vitra, the Equa and now the Hollington chair from Herman

Miller. However, these occur exclusively in the market area which charges £350 for a typist's chair. Would Mario Bellini produce a good chair for £150? (Actually, I think he would.) But the real dilemma is that the companies manufacturing for such a market are precisely the ones least likely — or able — to invest in the design of good chairs.

So, what lies ahead for the office chair? First and foremost, of course, the future is being decided at the boardroom table, not the drawing board. Nevertheless, from a design point of view, I favour the approach shown in recent years by Bill Stumpf while working for Herman Miller. He demonstrates the way a designer can be co-ordinator of the possibilities which technology and greater understanding offer.

The successful group of chairs I mention above represents a new approach which acknowledges that complex systems are seldom understood and that the seat is there to serve, not to dictate to the user. With this in mind, seating is developing a human face — and moves in response to the user.

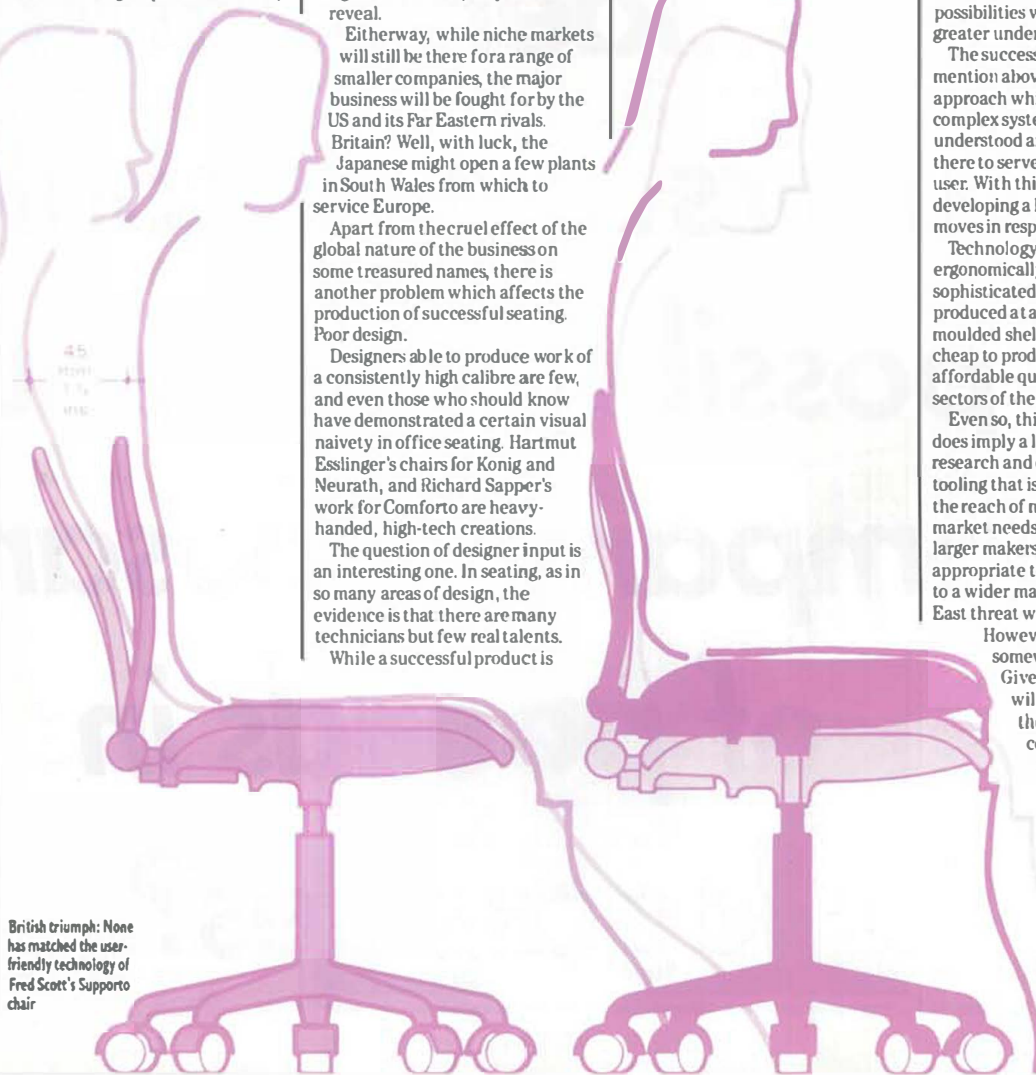
Technology is such that ergonomically and visually sophisticated seating could be produced at a low cost. One-piece moulded shells are easier to use, cheap to produce, and could bring affordable quality to bums in all sectors of the market.

Even so, this kind of approach does imply a level of outlay on research and development and tooling that is increasingly out of the reach of many groups. The UK market needs the will from the larger makers to develop the appropriate technology and apply it to a wider market. Perhaps the Far East threat will encourage this.

However, I remain somewhat pessimistic.

Given the manufacturing will, the technology, and the participation of the consumer, I have to reiterate that the record of UK designers in converting possibilities into reality is poor. It's sad — but it's true. ▲

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British triumph: None has matched the user-friendly technology of Fred Scott's Supporto chair