

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

CLOSE-UP

A whole host of manufacturers jostle for a slice of the office furniture market, and the office chair occupies a central position in their marketing strategy. Adrian Stokes puts the whole thing into perspective with a review of the past, present, and future constraints on and opportunities for the designer

Office furniture is a relatively young market, but it is maturing at breakneck speed because of the sheer numbers of people trying to succeed in it. In the earliest days of Eames' Aluminium group chairs, for example, the chair was seen as a visual and manufacturing problem of huge complexity if the desired result was to be gained.

It was a challenge to the manufacturing ingenuity of the makers. Correct posture, the range of adjustments, and cost were determined by the designer — and the salesman went out and sold the product.

Not so today. Bureaucracy, pseudo science and marketing research tie the designer's hands very firmly in most cases. A chair, any chair, is an expensive investment for a company, and the risks of entering the market cannot be taken lightly.

The past 20 years' experience of market forces has brought us to a point at which certain factors have to be observed by all manufacturers. A star-shaped chair base is an acceptable compromise between stability and mobility; chairs adjust vertically in the most efficient way via a gas lift; certain width, height and depth dimensions are best observed in order to cater for most people; and, finally, you will ignore *standards* and *directives* at risk to your pocket in the long run.

Is there any scope? Well, of course, a chair can pivot in the seat at any number of points; its back can tilt, go up and down, flex in any direction — just as arms can be soft, hard, bendy and height-adjustable. These adjust-

ments can be achieved by mechanical means or by employing sophisticated plastics to "move with the user".

In the Eighties, there really wasn't a set pattern, although generally innovations are made at the top end of the market, (competing on features rather than cost) where the "concept" of the chair is a likely selling feature. Much has been written on the ergonomics of the office chair, and every design magazine wheels out a panel of experts from time to time to test-drive the latest models. But what constitutes a successful attempt? In my view, every design has to be seen in the context of its market, so there is no such thing as the complete answer. If cost is your criterion, you are not likely to be interested in a beauty contest.

Office chairs are produced by two kinds of company: those which buy in and assemble and those which invest in the development of their own and therefore unrepeatable version. Either way, the early Eighties saw the chair become increasingly mechanised with synchronous movements made possible by an assortment of highly engineered devices. Stripping away the upholstery was like looking at a Terminator without his clothes on. The outcome was that many users never understood — let alone used — the range of adjustments offered. A full set could mean understanding and operating five or six facilities.

The move during the past six years has been towards the chair that moves with the user, leaving perhaps height adjustment and general shell tension as his or her only two concerns. Herman Miller's Geoff Hollington chair is perhaps the most satisfying example of the genre; an elegant and accommodating object. For many of the rest, certain directions have emerged even at the buy-and-assemble end — the front-pivoting seat is a must, and many operator's chairs have integral seats and backs.

With the move to rationalise the functional complexity, though, there will be greater scope for more interesting visual solutions, and of course technology will allow some scope for new directions to emerge. But things are hotting up in all markets. Cost is increasingly an issue. In a competitive market, no longer will a name and a good idea alone be enough to sell the product. Value for money and quality, ser-

vice and reliability are factors in all areas of the market and all manufacturers will have to measure up if they are to stay in with a chance.

Future directions? Well, for sure, there will always be the one-off — witness Hille's Meridio chair, to be launched in early September, and, previously, Draberts Diagonale Z — but, at the grown-up end of things, I would foresee a period of consolidation forced by certain external factors. Recession will curb some extravagance and the current raft of legislation such as the European Community VDU directive and the harmonisation of standards will encourage manufacturers to wait and see before investing in an approach that may prove to be illegal. The use of more advanced materials, particularly plastics, is expensive and also time-consuming in development.

One common factor in systems and seating is that simplicity is always preferable — which is a very natural human response to much we have seen in the past ten years. Making furniture look less machine-like and straightforward is an increasingly vocal demand by end users, and, looking back, my own top four office chairs — Eames' Aluminium group, Bellini's Figura, the Hollington chair and Citterio's seating for Vitra — all appeal to the heart before the head. In a world in which designers are increasingly hamstrung by those on the fringes, be they legislators or marketing men, a little freer rein to the intuition certainly wouldn't go amiss.

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Hollington chair for Herman Miller: 'Satisfying example of the genre'



Prototypes of Michael Dye's Meridio chair for Hille: 'Always a place for the one-off...'