

Reflecting on furniture

Adrian Stokes explores why workplace furniture has so often posed an irresistible challenge to the industrial designer

I trained as an industrial designer. My second job, eight months after my first, was at a wonderful studio in London called Sampson Fether, which when I joined had just been named in *The Sunday Times* “who will be who in the 80s”.

On my first morning I was given 60cms of office furniture brochures to look at; my project was to design a completely new office system. The product, Office Kit, was launched in 1982 and encompassed desks, tables, screens, storage and storage internals, task and ambient lighting, and even drawer slides. It was a huge undertaking and for someone ten months out of college, who had never worked on, or considered furniture of any kind. It proved a gateway to a career of insomnia and work in a field that has provided the biggest and most interesting challenges of my entire professional life.

Office systems and office seating are the two main strands of a huge global industry and at the end of that first day the question most on my mind was who buys all this “stuff” and where on earth does it all go? Nothing changes, the same questions apply, except now the industry is bigger still and with globalization, the market massively increased. In the West we became a knowledge economy rather than a knowledgeable one and moved a huge portion



of our workforce out of overalls and into suits. We sat them on a chair behind a desk, screened off and alone, except at coffee times.

Since setting up my studio in 1984 we have worked on systems and seating with some illustrious companies including Herman Miller, Steelcase, Artifort, and close to home Gordon Russell, Mines & West, and Hands of Wycombe. As industrial designers' our responsibility is to the user and if we've done our job then the manufacturer, customer and user will benefit, but having been around in this field for so long, it's clear one patch of grass is much the same as any other. We've witnessed huge changes in our society, brought on predominantly by the impact of technology, but also the need to facilitate growing expectations

and changing patterns of work. Experience provides perspective, insight and a window on the future in the right hands, however, there's no guarantee and during this period there have been few real breakthroughs. Instead, in my experience, there has been a tendency in the industry, to follow rather than question, innovate and lead, independently.

New products are often naïve, or over complex and poorly integrated; the financial cost to manufacturers and customers has been immense, the cost to the spiritual wellbeing of users incalculable. The market for office furniture has reached late middle age, showing all the accompanying signs of uncertainty and inertia. On one hand, there are still openings for simple, well detailed, smart, conventional products but these are emulators not originators. In the premier league companies such as Steelcase, Herman Miller, Hayworth, Knoll and Vitra are constantly trying to peek over the horizon in search of a direction that draws together different strands of thought, into a single, integrated, problem solving, narrative, appropriate to current and future generations of office workers. A unification theory as elusive as Einstein's, but there's a big prize for the winner and the search continues.

It could be argued that for the last 50 years, the leading players in this ongoing saga, have

Opposite | Adrian Stokes

Below | "System furniture's grandparent" - Action Office (1960s)

conducted a series of sneaky experiments on the millions who turn up to work each day. Unlike "proper" science, this is not conducted by men in white coats, but more often self-appointed opinion formers, let loose in a spawning ground for jargon, built around their take on the psychology and social make up of work, workers and the workplace. Research in search of a thesis around which to base a new idea, gain an advantage and sell more product.

A brief history

In the mid 1960s system furniture's grandparent, Action Office 2 (AO2), was created by Bob Propst and George Nelson to bring order to cavernous US office spaces. It provided a work surface, personal storage and space division which could be arranged in any number of ways. For the next 45 years these three items became the central components in the hundreds of AO2 aping office systems, most sold on price and nondescript, some making headlines before joining a growing list of furniture footnotes. Life in the well-intended "workstation", became known as "cubicle hell". Thirty years on when interviewed, Bob Propst commented "The dark side of this is that not all organizations are intelligent and progressive. Lots are run by crass people who can take the same kind of equipment and create hellholes." This is perfectly true, today the facilities manager reports to the finance director.

Whilst Action Office was intended to craft order out of office chaos, the pioneering work of Nelson and Propst could not have anticipated the relentless advance of technology and its impact on all our lives.





Paradoxically products and tech that were supposed to free-up the desk-strapped office worker brought about the development of new products and principles that would have the opposite effect, leaving them feeling exposed, distracted and adrift. The idea of shared work space, exemplified by the ubiquitous hot desk and large bench workstation, in turn created the need for a hybrid that allowed collaboration, but also privacy and all round flexibility. A new generation of products for the so called "Third Space", were widely touted, the first iteration of which was Bene's Parc's system.

In the same period office seating drifted, from the gorgeous Eames Aluminium group

chair in 1959, to Mario Bellini's Figura in 1983. Manufacturers attempted to offer their customers products that would keep their staff comfortable and at their desks for as long possible. Until that was, Herman Hiller produced Bill Stumph and Don Chadwick's Equa chair and Steelcase produced Criterion, an all adjusting sitting machine. One employed advanced composite materials to allow the chair to flex and move in response to the sitter's movements and the other achieved a similar end mechanically at the press of rather a lot of buttons. The user was intended to have infinite choice of position. Out of the two emerged probably the most innovative and ground breaking office chair of all time.

From the same duo came Aeron, a combination of super advanced materials, manufacture and mechanical adjustments which became the modus operandi of task seating designers for the next 25 years. Aeron conceded that no two people were the same, but as with office systems, technology changed the requirements of the hot desk nomads that worked at them and it became less relevant. Aeron and its huge extended family depended on being adjusted to the individual. In newer offices, people were moving about more and they adjusted their chairs less. In fact, today 90 per cent of office seating isn't adjusted at all once it's been set up for its first occupant. The reality of locating the levers and buttons on many chairs, let alone adjusting them, is akin to solving a particularly difficult cryptic crossword puzzle. As a result, the "Third Space" office now requires matching "Light Touch" seating, or seating with little or no adjustment.

Since Action Office every new trend has been as certain of its ground as the one before and what often happens is that concern for the varied reality of most working lives, is parked and a form of quackery takes over. Unsubstantiated theories are pedaled and beautifully choreographed set pieces created to seduce specifiers and facilities managers. The victims of this courtship are those who spend their daily lives in a room set from which there's no escape, not to mention the organization footing the bill. The words used to justify every new wave of products are often contrived and pompous, if we believe most pundits, we're currently in the age of collaboration; coming

Opposite | Bene Parcs System

Left clockwise | Equa chair by Herman Miller,
Criterion chair by Steelcase
Aeron chair by Herman Miller
Kenesit chair by Arper

together in not very comfy places, or pods, to exchange ideas and solve problems. "Third Space" systems and "Light Touch" task chairs are what the industry is currently placing its faith in, as a visit to the last three Orgatecs will confirm and as ever, they're all at it!

I've tried hard to avoid this piece reading a little cynically, but it does reflect my experience and I freely acknowledge that between Aluminium Group and Action Office and Third Space Systems and Light Touch Seating there have been some beautiful, notable designs, probably scores of them. My concern down the years, has been that in their creation the handy side-stepping, by designers and makers, of key issues in both systems and seating has come at a cost, most of which is born by the individual on the chair and at the desk, who rarely has any choice in decisions which affect much of their waking lives. Probably I'm being naïve and designing products for this new world, constrained by regulations from the old one and given the commercial needs of the manufacturers, will inevitably mean that Catch 22 is the status quo. As someone who's been through the mill, round the houses, up the garden path and at the coal face, I can confirm that despite the flakiness of so much that makes it to market, wasting time, resources and other people's money, when the opportunity to be part of the ongoing search for furniture grail presents itself, I've yet to say no, besides which, I love puzzles. |

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