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INTERIOR DESIGN – CONTEXTS OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY - THE CHAIR

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century is the period with very strong, we could say, turbulent evolution. Technical revolution, modern technologies and new materials primarily caused this. But not only technology was the one which influenced the evolution and development – it was also dynamically alternating aesthetic values, economic prosperity and territorial differences. Architecture and interior design surely also have taken a part on this transformation.

Even if chair seems to be a common piece of everyday use, through its physical and psychological relationship to the user we can say that it has a very special position in the civilisation of man. Christopher Dresser defined basic form of a chair in 1873 as “a stool with a back-rest while stool is a board elevated from the ground by supports” (P. and Ch. Fiell, 1993). Even if this definition of the chair seems like absurdly simplistic for today, for over the last hundred years, the chair has been a subject to a succession of revolutionary transformations. It became a phenomenon of culture many times loaded with symbolic and iconological meanings. Thanks to the modern technology, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century offers a real gallery view of seating furniture. Never before has this theme been developed in shape, plasticity, colour and material.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the chair has become not only ordinary consumer or useful object but also an object of important aesthetic values. As a symbolic object the chair has a lot of equals, which can express power and authority (for example throne or electric chair) or status of its user. More than any other type of furniture, the chair can be seen as a social barometer. The chair uses to mirror the social and economic contexts of the human society. In time of economic depression rationally designed and durable chairs are preferred while in periods of relative prosperity there is a general tendency to prefer more anti-rational, ornamental or extravagant forms. The proof that the chair has a special place in development of design and human society is the work of architects as well. They use to design chairs more often than other types of furniture. One of the reasons is the quest for greater unity between interior design and architecture of their buildings. Another reason is the fact that through the chair design they could more easily and quickly, than with architecture, express their design philosophy and opinion in three dimensions. Architects with their background knowledge of engineering were especially well placed to develop new furniture products and designs that were both functional and aesthetic.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the chair became an industrial product. Michael Thonet and his results of the pionering research of the steam-bending of wood became revolutionary for the future chair production. His company Gebrueder Thonet manufactured the first truly mass-produced chairs thanks to the newly patented technology for steam-bending. The Thonet chair

represents a norm of modern chairs with strong influence for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century chair design and production. It is the absolute synthesis of form and function and the perfect integration of material, technology and purpose. The proof of the real mass production is the production of 40 million chairs of the “Model No. 14” at the break of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The value of Thonet



chairs was appreciated by a lot of architects during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who used them in their interior projects. Thonet models were produced during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> Century and even today are being produced in modified form.





Thanks to the mass production, Thonet chairs can be considered an industrial product and therefore a promoter of the Modern chair. Modernism, which is characteristic for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is not a style but a philosophical movement which promotes a classical and humanizing ideology that can be applied to furniture design. The tenets of modernism are the unification of the physical and the spiritual; the harmonizing of functional and aesthetic; internationalism through abstraction; innovation; truth to materials; revealed construction and the responsible use of technology. Within Modernism there are two different approaches to design: geometric abstraction and organic abstraction. Geometric abstraction was promoted by the pioneers of the Modern Movement such as Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. The second approach was founded in the work of Scandinavian designers influenced by teachings of Kaare Klint such as Alvar Aalto or Eero Saarinen.

Except of different movements and approaches there are three technological phases highly influential to the design evolution during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the bending of metal tubes (1925), laminating of wood (1931) and moulding of plastic materials (1948). They were not only of practical importance but they also played their role with regards to formal inspiration. The very new artistic solutions and approaches to the design were supported by the above mentioned technological discoveries.

As it was mentioned at the beginning, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can be seen as very progressive in evolution of the chair design. Thousands of chair designs have been created with different success. Some of them were more successful, some of them less. In this uncountable mass of chair designs, the most influential master pieces have also been created. These chairs became the icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century design.



The "Red-and-blue-chair" designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1917/18 is generally regarded as the first truly Modern chair. Although Rietveld did not incorporate new materials or construction

techniques in this chair design, with its simple geometric plans without traditional upholstery he broke all existing rules. Its design suggested that a chair did not need to have the visual and material weight that had associated traditional furniture with luxury and high cost. The "Red-and-blue-chair" was shown at a general exhibition at the Bauhaus in 1923 as the first chair to express a radical Modern ideology.

Marcel Breuer has the primacy. In 1925 he created "B3-Wassily" which was the first armchair using bent tubular steel. This chair design was meant an aesthetic turning point in furniture production as well as the start of an important branch of industry. The most important innovation of Breuer's designs lay not only in using tubular steel but also in reducing the basic design from a traditional heavy club armchair to a light frame. In "B3-Wassily" design is possible to find influence of Gerrit Rietveld's furniture. This chair was originally created for Wassily Kandinsky's Bauhaus studio, so it can be seen like integral part of unified interior design. Barcelona chair designed in 1929 by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the German pavilion at the Barcelona world's fair, had been an integral part of unified interior scheme as well. The fact that the chair designs of two "founding fathers" of the Modern Movement have been created like integral part of unified architectural design ironically ran counter to modern philosophy. But with a step of time these designs can be evaluated like Modern thanks to their later great universality.

Like revolutionary can be seen Mart Stam's chair that uses the architectural cantilever principle. Stam's chair was the first of its kind, later followed by well known designers like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe ("Model No. MR 10") or Marcel Breuer ("Model No. B32 – Cesca" and "Model No. B33"). All these were constructed from resilient bent tubular steel without back legs.

If bent tubular steel furniture is mentioned, Le Corbusier's (in cooperation with Ch. Perrand) designs have to be lifted. His "Grand confort" and the "Model No. 2072 – chaise longue" (called also "machine for resting") used the combination of tubular metal and leather.

Different way of design in comparison with Bauhaus, mentioned above, is the style of Scandinavian designers. Their approach to Modernism is based on the use of natural woods and other organic materials. The technology of wood lamination enabled Alvar Aalto to create his bent laminated wood "Paimio chair" in 1931. This method of wood processing had enabled the return to the more sculptural approach to design, which was later perceptible in the works of Bruno Mathsson or Arne Jacobsen.

The Second World War had an enormous impact on the furniture industry. The enormous increase of research during wartime as well as development in other manufacturing fields, especially the aircraft industry, meant that furniture industry and designers had an opportunity to use the latest and most efficient technologies for the production after the war. Using former military purpose data



of human engineering chairs can adopt forms that were more suited to sit the human body. The seat and back started to be moulded in a way that closely followed the line of the seated body. Thanks to the economic boom in postwar America and later in Europe there was a huge demand for domestic furniture. This era was a hopeful and forward-looking period in the history. Many architects – designers concentrated their talents on the development of innovative furniture rather than on architectural projects. Manufacturing companies were able to offer the low-cost and yet high quality Modern furniture.

Highly influential chair design has been introduced by “DAR” (Dining Armchair Rod) and a group of shell chairs and armchairs with different base in 1948 by Charles and Ray Eames. This was the first chair with a shell seat 3D moulded in fibre glass. With this design the Eames had won the second prize at the international competition “Low-Cost Furniture Design”. This fibre glass design had meant the turning point in the history of chair design – it had achieved till that time unrealized organic unity of design and had influenced many other designers in the next future.



Influenced by Eames's research Marco Zanuso began exploring the potential of foam rubber as a suitable material for upholstery. In 1950 the “Antropus chair” by Marco Zanuso was the first design using latex foam.

By the mid 1950s, the chair became even more sculptural in form, still with the goal to accommodate the human body better. This sculptural effectuated the chair becoming one of the central points of the modern interior. With domestic interiors becoming generally smaller in scale, more multi-functional, being used for such purposes such as writing, dining and lounging.

With the rise and celebration of popular culture in the 1960s, the status of the chair has rapidly changed. In this era of booming consumerism a chair started to be perceived as a disposable short-lived object. A lot of designers tried to change the tradition that had associated furniture with high cost and long lasting permanence. Peter Murdoch and Peter Raacke presented their view on this trend by designs constructed from paperboard and cardboard. In the period of history when production was

orientated to the youth based market, the chair was no longer seen as durable product for the home, but as a lifestyle accessory of fashion. Confirmation of this approach was the introduction of new seating formats – inflatable “Blow chair” designed in 1967 by Jonathan De Pas, Donato D'Urbino, Paolo Lomazzi and Carla Scolari as well as the “Sacco chair” – beanbag seat designed by Piero Gatti, Cesare Paolini and Franco Teodoro in 1968. Gaetano Pesce's “UP” series (moulded polyurethane foam covered by stretch fabric) of seats can also be included among these new formats. These revolutionary innovations combined with availability of “flat-pack” furniture greatly simplified the act of purchasing – a chair could be now bought right from the shelf. This fact also confirmed transformation of the chair from a durable product to a lifestyle accessory. Main furniture manufacturers realized that the only way to maintain their position within the market was to accelerate research and development projects with the goal of creating new seating formats. Significant progress was achieved in the area of injection-moulded plastics. Using of thermoplastics such as polypropylene and ABS, new possibilities had been open to the manufacturers of Modern furniture. During this period, Italian designers such as Vico Magistretti, Marco Zanuso or Joe Colombo were assisted in establishing the status of plastics as materials of quality and luxury through their Modern chair designs.

The first chair completely made like single-piece construction was designed by Verner Panton, ironically a Scandinavian. With his cantilevered “Stacking chair” (known as well as “Panton chair”) Panton realized Eero Saarinen's unrealized ambition of total design unity.

The global recession of the 1970s terminated previous era of popular consumerism. More conservative approach to design within the industrial mainstream started to be preferred. The chair was now more seen again as equipment for sitting. Smaller markets and cost reductions as an effect of recession pushed designers and manufacturers to return to a rational approach. Rodney Kinsman's “Omkstak chair” from 1971 is the example of design that period with using industrial materials while expressing a machine aesthetics.

The prevalent conservatism within the furniture industry during the 1970s caused formation of several radical design groups in Italy. Global tools, Superstudio, Archizoom and Gruppo Strum, all questioned the philosophy of Modernism and signalled a mode of design based on spontaneous creativity and philosophical pluralism. In 1976 Studio Alchimia has been established. Alessandro Mendini was the leading protagonist of this highly influential design group. His redesigns of Joe Colombo's “4867 chair” to which he applied a faux marble finish and Gio Ponti's “Superleggera” to which he ironically attached yachting signs, ironizing so called Good Design. Noisy anti-commercial and intellectual in content, Studio Alchimia used decorative ornaments to express its believe that the Modernism is dead.



In 1981 the Memphis design studio was founded. Like Studio Alchimia, Memphis had created furniture that ran against the accepted principles of design and culture. Borrowing ornamental details from previous styles, Memphis successfully popularized anti-design and helped to its general acceptance within the furniture industry's mainstream.

Based on economic boom and the failure of Modernism, Post-modernism emerged in the 1980s. Post-modern furniture designers had viewed styling rather than functionalism in order of importance. But unlike that of the Pop era, post-modern furniture is characteristic by the use of expensive materials and a strong construction what makes it perceived as longlasting and durable. A new visual language had been created but at the expense of any real meaning or value to the consumer. In the mid 1980s, the pluralism in design started to be accepted. General economic prosperity caused an ever greater stylistic diversification in the furniture design and decorative arts. Designers started to work outside of the industry so they could expressed more spontaneous creativity, produce ever more fanciful chair designs. In this period of relative prosperity, specialized furniture galleries were established to exhibit these experimental and challenging redesigns.

Another part of avant-garde designers who were working within the industry, continually produced new chair designs to satisfy the public's desire for novelty during the 1980s. Like the 1960s, this was the decade when furniture design had followed fashion rather than the quest for solutions to real needs.

The beginning of the 1990s is characteristic by new environmentally orientated approach to the chair design. Philippe Starck's "Louis 20 chair" (1992) is the example of an innovative construction of recyclable materials. Another example of using recyclable materials is the Alfred Homann's highly rational "Ensemble chair" for construction which he used newly developed recyclable plastic. Further to the environmental concerns of today, these "recyclable" designs are admirable. But in the longer term, ecological requirement would be better when simply producing less last longer, following the quote of Marcel Breuer: "A peace of furniture, and above all the chair, is not an arbitrary composition: it is a necessary component of our environment... the outward expression of our everyday needs, it must be able to serve both those needs that remain constant and those which vary. This variation is possible only if the very simplest and most straightforward pieces are used, otherwise changing will mean buying new pieces. Let our dwelling have no particular "style", but only the imprint of the owner's character." (P. and Ch. Fiell, 1993)

The above briefly stated shortview of the chair in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century clearly shows a significant influence of the social and societal status of the human society on the design development. In the way of life, as well as in the material base, it had become significant changes during this Century. The possibilities, better said the needs, of people had changed by radical means. The primary impulse of such whole development has been the technics. Architects and designers were among the first who were influenced by the technical products. Searching the unity between architecture and its the inner space, architects became the co-founders of the modern furniture and the chair design as well. Their dissatisfaction with possibilities given by that time and the offer of the interior furnishing was the moving force of the progressive development. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century is characterized by the liberating of architecture and also the interior design from the historical period-style influences. In the forefront it gets "the call for new design", that will be reachable to everyone. With the ambition to fulfill such effort, modernism is the main style or rather said movement. It is, although, in the last quarter "beaten" by plural views, without unified style classification. From the perspective of relationship between the chair and other interior design and furniture, the unified development is characterized for the first half century, while on the other hand, in the second half of the century, has such "unified" development divided. Therefore, the chair has come into a contrast position against the rest of the interior.

Except the mentioned social and societal influence, the material base had an enormous influence on the development of the chair. With every new material within the whole century, the chair design form was changing rapidly. It is interesting that many projects that looked like a utopia at the time of its rise, but later with new materials and technical possibilities became a common reality. Therefore from such a perspective, there is certainly a lot to look for the moment when the vision of Marcel Breuer will be fulfilled. He has formulated an idea believing that once in the future we will be able to sit on "an invisible column of compressed air" ... (M. Lamarova, 1982).

#### Literature

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