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Kevin McCloud

When is a chair not a chair? When it's an iconic seating sculpture, of course. But while Kevin laments the triumph of aesthetics over comfort, he takes heart from the way Britain is waking up to the importance of good design at affordable prices

Is a chair for sitting on or for looking at? One of the more outlandish ideas in contemporary furniture design is that while it's unacceptable for a table lamp not to illuminate when you switch it on, it seems to be perfectly OK to design a chair that's excruciating to sit on. It's not a new idea either. Take the iconic La Chaise by Charles and Ray Eames. Designed for a 1948 competition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it has been hailed as one of the most influential organic pieces of furniture ever designed. Now, reissued by Vitra – who describe it as an 'assertive seating sculpture' – it costs £4,500. But have you ever tried to sit on it? I lasted a minute and a half before twanging a nerve in my back and sliding to the floor.

I recently had the opportunity to try out one of the seductive Antelope chairs by Ernest Race, designed for the Festival of Britain in 1951. The epitome of elegance in metal, it also proved hugely disappointing to use. The combination of a seat that slopes backwards at an alarming angle and a backrest of steel bars went to work like an instrument of torture, forcing my body into a curl that was rammed against the metal frame. Self-flagellation would have been a less-stressful alternative.

Combining seductive aesthetics with comfort can't be that difficult, can it? The Ercol Butterfly chair, Jasper Morrison's Air-chair and the Marcel Breuer Isokon reclining Long chair are all delightful and ergonomic pieces that manage to support almost every size and shape of human frame. So why do designers persist in supporting the mythology of the non-chair? Next time you visit a showroom for some new seating I suggest you take a cushion.

On which note, I'm concerned someone might reissue some of that Forties and Fifties uncomfortable utility furniture in plywood and tubular steel. Next year is the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain – what better way to mark the event in our current straitened times than to launch a Coalition Recession Range, under the Cameron-Clegg brand? Suitably miserabilist.

British design comes home

I am, however, more positive and celebratory about the way British design is becoming more democratic. Just 20 years ago, our taste was still being controlled almost entirely by Terence Conran, while the cream of our design talent was being whisked up by Italian manufacturers. Some even saw the Royal College of Art as the design engine of Europe – but not the UK. It seems to be changing. British industry is slowly waking up to the idea that products can be designed by specialists in ergonomics, efficiency and styling (product designers) rather than amateurs (the MD's wife). And as household names embrace the design process and produce original, contemporary goods, so volume drives down the price. You can buy Jasper Morrison-designed



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products in any number of designer outlets and his name is associated with the likes of Artemide and Magis. And now Ideal Standard as well, which manufactures a gorgeous tap designed by him. At the other end of the scale, Triflow has commissioned a tap range from Zaha Hadid. Taps, it seems, are the twenty-first century equivalent of the chair – the *ne ultra plus*, not to mention *sine qua non* products of the age, expressive of the active rather than the passive, cleaning rather than sitting, flow rather than stasis.

We have Conran to thank for getting us here, or rather getting design under the noses of British manufacturers. And Easyjet, too, for enabling cash-poor executives from Midlands engineering firms to make it to the Milan furniture fair for one day. And James Dyson and Ikea as well. And budget modern hotels. Even *Changing Rooms* made its contribution, not to mention one or two other television series. **GD**

IN THE DIARY

In December, Kevin will be celebrating the protected quiet period in the construction world's calendar: by taking the traditional Builders' Christmas as the entire industry shuts down for several weeks.