

Chairs on Chairs: Mark Pimlott

Pimlott, Mark; Neumann, Malgorzata

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Off the shelf

Citation (APA)

Pimlott, M., & Neumann, M. (2017). Chairs on Chairs: Mark Pimlott. In C. van Wijk (Ed.), *Off the shelf: Projects surrounding the chair collection at the faculty of Architecture* (pp. 81-83). TU Delft OPEN.

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable). Please check the document version above.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download, forward or distribute the text or part of it, without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license such as Creative Commons.

Takedown policy

Please contact us and provide details if you believe this document breaches copyrights. We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 **Preface**
Carola Hein

PART I: TAKE A SEAT

- 6 **The Significance of University Collections**
Charlotte van Wijk
- 11 **Architectural Pedagogy**
Charlotte van Wijk & Elise van Dooren
- 15 **The Music of Chairs**
Patrick Healy

PART II: TAKE A SEAT IN EDUCATION

- 24 **Designing Tables and Lamps for the Chair Collection**
Peter Koorstra & Robert Nottrot
- 54 **Chairs and Sets**
Jurjen Zijnsra

PART III: TAKE A SEAT IN EXHIBITIONS, REAL AND VIRTUAL

- 64 **Chairs on Chairs Introduction**
Charlotte van Wijk
- 69 **Chairs on Chairs**
Interviews by Malgorzata Neumann with Ulrich Knaack, Peter Koorstra, Susanne Komossa, Mark Pimlott, Tom Aevermaete, Alexander Koutamanis
- 82 **Pop-Up Exhibitions**

COLOPHON

Off The Shelf:
Projects Surrounding the Chair Collection at the Faculty of Architecture

Issue 1 / 2016-2017

Editor: Charlotte van Wijk
Design & Layout: Nico Schouten and Olivia Forty
Chair photos by Hans Schouten: pp. 22, 23, 26, 27, 29, 35, 39, 47, 53, 68, 69, 71, 73, 75, 79, 81
Photos of sets by Max Hart Nibbrig: pp. 58, 60-65

This publication consists of the work of several studios at the faculty of Architecture and the built environment. These studios focus on the use of the chair collection currently present at said faculty. With this publication we hope to give insight in the different projects surrounding the chair collection and the work of the program. The different sections are accompanied by short introductions by the respectable teachers or coordinators.

© 2017 TU Delft Open
ISBN: 978-94-92516-69-5

CHAIRS ON CHAIRS: MARK PIMLOTT

Do you have a favourite chair in the Chair Collection?

I have a shortlist of favourite chairs, which is rather long. If I have to choose, I would say that my favourite one is the superlight or 'Superleggera' chair designed by Gio Ponti in the early 1950s. What I particularly like about it is that it hangs on to the image of the conventional Italian chair due to its styling. On the other hand, it looks very modern, like from the space age. Saying 'being modern is being old, too' suits it very well. And this is constantly happening in Ponti's work. He is experimental, radical, and at the same time, traditionally Italian. It is very difficult to have one of his chairs at one's disposal, so the fact that we have it in the chair collection at TU Delft is special.

The Superleggera chair is my favourite, but there are more on my list. For example, JJP's Oud 'easy chair' from 1933, which is very comfortable, is a chair I used to sit on it all the time in our office of Interiors in the old building. Fortunately, they put it in the basement before the fire, so it has survived. Also, Marcel's Breuer 'Wassily chair' (1929-30) or Harry's



Bertoia 'wire chair' (1950-52) are favourites of mine. I am also really interested in Thonet's bentwood and cane chairs and, among others by Achille Castiglione that are not in the collection, a milking chair.

Do you think that chairs that look more

like sculptures can still be called chairs?

I think they can sometimes be brilliant as ideas. It is impossible to sit on the Rietveld chair, but it is nice to see it in the room. I have a bit of a chair collection myself and among them there are some

chairs which you really cannot sit on comfortably. They look great, though. I don't have any kind of moral stand against chairs you cannot use. They are important players, like pets in the house. They have a symbolic value while taking a special place at the table or standing somewhere next to the window. I am fine with that. I am a big supporter of the useless chairs.

Do you think that students who study architecture should design a chair at some point in their education? What could they learn from it?

My answer is going to be an anecdotal one. After I graduated, I was working in an office and I had to design a piece of furniture. I designed a chair. It looked great in the plan and elevations, but when we prototyped it, it was hopeless to use. There was too much material, it was very elaborate and heavy. Then, my employer ordered me to create a copy of a Biedermeier chair from 1830s-1840s. Biedermeier is German, neo-classical, usually made of light wood; this chair was a classic axe-head design. I was obliged to look at it and measure it very carefully, re-draw it and re-make it. That was such a fantastic process. It taught me about the form and technique, about all the essential parts of a chair that held it together and made it strong and comfortable. The proportions had to be very precise and even the most tiny element was essential for the chair. The first exercise, which compares to the task that might be set for a student, of just trying to design a chair is a difficult one

because, in fact, it takes quite a lot of time, effort, and failure to learn how to design something like a chair. The second exercise, learning from a chair that works about how it works, was a fantastic education, and one worth following as model for a student project.

When I started teaching I carried out a little course, during which I used to point to one of the standard TU chairs and ask students: What are we looking at? What is this? Why is it shaped like that? What does it remind you of? I asked about a standard, non-designed chair, a bit like asking about the kind of chair which Le Corbusier typically used in his drawings. He called it un objet-type, an anonymous object. There are many of these in the collection, office chairs and folding stools, and they are very important for me. They are very efficient in the way they communicate to users and usually they have a cultural signifier within them. They contain some ideas and represent how we live in those ideas. I think that especially non-designed chairs can give that information away much more rapidly than chairs which are designed by architects. With students I examined all the different cultural contributions to shape and design of this kind of chair. The standard chairs are not my favourites in the collection, but I know that they are the friendliest ones.

It is often very practical furniture which tells us something about the world it came from. There is a field

chair in the chair collection, created for military camping. It can be taken apart very easily, folded up and carried away. First of all, it tells us about how the military campaign were being fought, but also, its elegant profile reminds me of the profile of furniture you would see depicted on walls of tombs or on papyrus in ancient Egypt. There is a deep historical feeling in it, and about some 19th century furniture, that it has been around forever. I like furniture that alludes to faraway places, like this bamboo and rattan furniture from the collection. There is a Swedish company, Svenskt Tenn, which made a lot of furniture of this type in the early 20th century. The pieces were very suggestive. The fact that in Sweden they would have been very popular items in certain social circles, meant that people who owned it would have been a part of worldwide economy; they wanted to evoke a feeling of 'elsewhere' in their homes. And that is very beautiful thing that chairs can do.

Can chairs tell stories?

Yes, and I am very interested in furniture that tells us a story about the culture that created it, the stories behind furniture, and chairs, are interesting and odd. In 1893, a big exhibition took place in Chicago; the Americans were insecure about what to show. They presented some buildings that looked like European buildings reminiscent of cakes, but coincidentally, they also showed standard stuff like tractors, equipment, tools, chairs, etc. When

the Germans came to the exhibition they were much more interested in these standard objects, than in the buildings. The people from the Deutsche Werkbund, who were solemnly dedicated to efficient and functional furniture, were very much inspired by unconscious American production. So, in the chair collection you can find this German chair from the 30s, which is an incredibly heavy article deriving from German architects' reading or understanding of American standard models. The communication that happens now on a global level between different cultures through mass-produced designs is a very special aspect of chairs.

I've been reading a beautiful book, 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' by Neil MacGregor, the recently-retired director of the British Museum, and it is a story about a hundred items from the British Museum's collection, from ancient times to more or less the present moment. He unlocks these objects' great significance and what they say about themselves, about the cultures where they were made. I haven't come across a chair yet, but certainly every artefact has a lot to tell us, it has a powerful role to play. I think it is amazing that we have the chair collection at TU Delft, particularly because chairs are not straightforward objects. They appear to be straightforward because they are just chairs, but they play an important role in the environment they are in: the immediate environment, but also

the cultural environment. At the university everything tends to be straightforward, scientific. Chairs are complicated and it doesn't make them bad, it makes them good, although I think there is this notion in the air that something that is too complex is not worth hearing about.

What about the worldwide phenomenon of Ikea? It is available everywhere - people use this furniture designed, or copy-designed, in Sweden. What does it tell us about those countries' cultures?

It is interesting that you pointed out Ikea, because Ikea adjusts production of the things they offer depending on where it sells them. For instance, in England they sell stuff that looks older because people there cannot handle 'the modern'. There are also countries that are naturally more adventurous than the others. Each different country absorbs products of Ikea, which, in turn, consist of many other influences. Ikea borrows from enormous range of representations of other, carefully designed furniture. Its products are cheap, of course, it helps to sell them more easily, and through them, Ikea can communicate immediately to its audiences. The function of the standard objects will be always the same, but they are all subtly different in each country. Distinctness of each culture will always have an impact, even in the age of globalization.

Do you think you would have chosen the same favourite chair 10, 20 years ago, in the beginning of your architectural career?

When I started architecture school, I thought the coolest thing was the Wassily Chair designed by Marcel Breuer. I thought it was cool because it was said to be everything that was modern. At that time I was also attached to the 60s chairs, the plastic stuff that looked like it was from the Space Age. Also, I had a longing to the 60s furniture because when I was a child I really wanted to live in Space. For example, the Selene chair by Vico Magistretti or the transparent folding chair by Giancarlo Piretti were inspiring parts of my fantasy world.

Which leaders in chair design do you appreciate nowadays?

There are various designers: Konstantin Grcic, who designs unspeakably uncomfortable, but great, chairs. The late Maarten Van Severen, whose chair is everywhere in this building, with a rubber seat and the legs that stick out; Patricia Urquiola, who is a great designer; there is a trio called Altherr, Molina, Lievore, who design these kinds of 'nostalgic' modern chairs. And I have the greatest—paradoxical—respect for Philippe Starck, who seems to be a very silly man but understands how objects communicate very well. I have one of his chairs, the Costes chair, which was designed for the Café Costes in Paris in the 80s. There are also designers like Piero Lissoni. There are many inventions, but not many of them strike you as being chairs that will continue to cause you think about them in years ahead.



