

***Now I Sit Me Down*, by Witold Rybczynski New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016 ISBN: 978-0-374-22321-2**

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A simple but profound point opens *Now I Sit Me Down*: that chairs illustrate a kind of democratic manifestation of our relationship to things. Unlike architecture, and to a lesser extent built in furniture, chairs bear witness to our capacity for change, and are variously championed, maligned, forgotten or simply *used* without a second thought. Our history of creating, owning and using them is a social history, and so offers a direct and uncolored indication of our shared history of sitting, and therefore inhabitation. This connection is reciprocal; it offers the reader not just a detailed context in which to place the selected works, but a springing point for much wider associations with the philosophy of interior practice.

In part, these associations are formal, or at least related to the development of made things. Rybczynski recounts the history of sitting, from semi-prone one-handed roman revelers to the elevated thrones of kings; explores the profound consequences of sitting etiquette on materiality and interior form. Lineage is not hard to find; the northern Chinese *Kang*, for example, an elevated brick seating area heated by steam, can be seen as a precursor for modern interior thermal mass strategies.

Though not exhaustive, *Now I Sit Me Down* is an effective catalyst for further exploration and resonated strongly with my own experience as a furniture designer and maker. I found myself reading alongside a laptop, in order to refer to a wider set of illustrations than could be shown by Rybczynski's competent but rather small hand drawings. What did Adolf Loos' café and museum chair for Thonet look like? Essentially an update of the no. 14 Café Chair, it turned out to predate the silhouette of Arne Jacobsen's 3107 chair by a satisfying 56 years. Lineage here is a recurrent theme, though key developments in technological and social fabric are described in lucid – and sometimes lurid – detail. A passage on the unconventional marital and decorative arrangements of Enlightenment polymath couple Voltaire and the Marquise du Chatalet, for whom telescopes, harpsichords, and morning coffee bore equal significance, is a delight.

Just as chairs mediate our human experience of built form, Rybczynski draws on his own experience to discuss the discrepancy between idealized seating and the reality of taking the load off. We feel his disappointment at the thigh chafe that accompanies a much-anticipated Breuer Wassily Chair, and his subtle appreciation of the stories of sitting, bookended by the Greek Klismos and the contemporary plastic monobloc. This is a history of the medicinal, even the political properties of sitting. The 'wooden narcotic' properties of the rocking

chair, which Swiss theologian Phillip Schaff regarded as representative of the Americans living 'in a state of perpetual excitement', were profoundly democratic. One could be found in most front porches across the United States, and a wooden rocker was proscribed to alleviate president Kennedy's back pain. Chairs can in themselves be microcosms of precisely those logics that give rise to perfected interiors; the vernacular perfection of the American Rocker, the Windsor chair, the Greek Klismos, all speak of the simplicity obtained when nothing more can be subtracted. Chairs are not just messages about us and how we sit, but are manifestations of how we live, and how we go about creating spaces for living.

In keeping with a book that rejects, or at least refuses to subscribe to, the unquestioning adulation of 'iconic' chair design, Rybczynski also addresses the issue of design gestation in a penultimate chapter entitled *Human Engineering*. Rybczynski discusses the task chair and the relentless iterative journey towards a better, or at least less damaging, way of sitting for the office environment. In contrast to Rietveld's rejection of ergonomic knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Diffrient's approach to designing the World task chair is praised for being process-driven. Considering each of the actions of the chair in turn, he did not start with a concept, sketch or predetermined form. But in moving conceptually closer to a computer, car or warhead, which can be quantifiably better, faster, or more deadly, a task chair can also be made obsolete more readily by the same metrics. A positioning outside the frivolity of prestige, status and fashion ironically undermines its longevity.

The history of chairs is inseparable from the wider social, environmental and political forces that shape all design practice. Rybczynski illustrates this well by describing Thomas Chippendale's rise from provincial craftsman to master of pattern books and self-promotion; if Chippendale were alive today, he would be master manipulator of social media. The intricate carvings promoted by Chippendale's 1754 publication *The Gentleman and Cabinetmaker's Director* required Mahogany imported from Jamaica to replace the French Walnut, the export of which was banned after a particularly harsh winter. This material shift in turn fuelled the deep red, varnished finishes that became associated with English cabinetmaking, and continue to influence the generations of furniture commissions.

Practitioners and students of Interior design will be engaged by the presence of the making process in *Now I Sit Me Down*. Contradictions between ergonomic need and the desire to project status certainly resonated with my own practice. Despite my protests, a wealthy client insisted on a higher backed, heavier and less practical chair when the need to cherish the status of guests trumped the need for the same guests to move the chairs themselves. At the time, I was surprised by the strength of my client's conviction that status trumps ergonomics, but Rybczynski explains that this conflict has a long history and furthermore is socially embedded. Only those who could afford servants to move their chairs inward could afford to ignore the basic mechanical needs of sitting; higher backed chairs became a marker of wealth precisely *because* of this impracticality.

More than a fluid and perceptive account of chairs, *Now I Sit Me Down* elegantly articulates the reach and definition of the act of sitting; as Hans Wegner says, 'a chair is only finished when someone sits in it'. Rybczynski's writing has the same effect as sitting in a Wegner Round Chair; it feels somehow *right*, in the way that the best cabinet making embodies understanding of sitting. Throughout this remarkably comprehensive history, it is the smaller details that delight; when describing the canvas deckchairs that Ludwig Wittgenstein chose for his rooms in Cambridge, Rybczynski wonders 'Were they striped? ... I don't know, but I like to think they evoked happy memories for the severe philosopher'.

The cumulative effect of this discussion is to remind us how chair design resonates with wider design practice and philosophy. "Form does not follow function, it follows culture" is the recurrent theme; to analyze made things we need to understand the design process as more than the resolution of a problem. Could Hans Wegner's *oeuvre* been possible without a Danish craft tradition to make it, or the Thonet's commercial success be achieved independently of a rural community of low waged workers willing to take on their manufacture? In fact, the maker is a constant presence in Rybczynski's writing; we are aware of the constant truth that all things, be them buildings or teaspoons, are brought into being by someone in response to the rich, contradictory and sometimes delightful needs of our collective culture.

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