



DAVID ROWLAND REVEALING THE DESIGN EVOLUTION OF HIS INFAMOUS STACKING CHAIRS

"In 1945, I completed 24 bombing missions over Europe. Accompanying the dramatic strains of war, including some missions of 12-hour length was the fact the seats were beastly uncomfortable. I resolved to do something about that if I ever returned home safely.

CONCEPTUALISING

In early 1952, after receiving my Masters Degree in Industrial Design at Cranbrook Academy of Art, I arrived in New York to start a professional career. To support myself I got two jobs: one as renderer for the famous Norman Bel Geddes, and the other a night job at A.C.Nielsen Co. drawing graphs. But I wanted to design chairs and no one would hire me to do them, so I started designing them anyway. At that time, almost no companies were producing modern chairs, other than Herman Miller, Inc. and Knoll Associates. As Florence Knoll had also studied at Cranbrook, I felt that gave me a good "in".

Instead of showing her sketches, I built a 1/4 scale model and called her for an appointment. Yes, she would see me in their showroom. At our meeting she most kindly and thoroughly critiqued my design and most graciously turned me down. I was disappointed but decided to study harder and come up with another design. After some months I came up with another concept and called for an appointment. Again she would see me, giving me another conscientious critique and turning me down.

DESIGNING

This procedure was repeated several times, with months turning into years. After a final turndown, I decided to stop trying to outguess her taste and try to think of a feature where she couldn't turn me down. The idea of high-density stackability came to mind. I laid it out on my drawing board and came to the conclusion that I could use 7/16 " diameter steel bar for the legs and achieve a stackability of 40 in a height of 4 feet, a heretofore never accomplished feat. But this time, in order to present it to Mrs. Knoll, I'd need to build it full-scale to illustrate its comfort; and not just one chair but



two, to show its stackability. This was all going to require considerable expense. And so, at this time I sought to get advice from someone who should know. It occurred to me that I should contact Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. His family was certainly well practised in selling furniture, owning department stores in the Pittsburgh area, and they surely had a high level of artistic sense since they had hired Frank Lloyd Wright to do their summer house "Falling Water".

Yes, Edgar Kaufmann would see me. In his office as Director of Architecture and Design in the Museum of Modern Art, I explained to him that I was working on a chair design where you could stack 40 in a height of 4 feet. He looked me squarely in the eye and said, "Mr. Rowland, there is no market in the United States for a stackable chair".

PROTOTYPING

With this most disappointing news, I decided to grit my teeth and go through the long ordeal of building my prototypes anyway. This involved the construction of 32 chairs to work the bugs out. Finally on completion, I called Florence Knoll again to say I had another chair to show her. She looked at it and sat on it. "Actually, it's two chairs", I said while pulling them apart. "We'll take it", she exclaimed. And with that, we undertook to write a licensing agreement, as I had my patents applied for.

At this point, rather than paying royalties, Knoll Associates offered me \$20.000 to sell them my patents. While this was the most money I had ever seen, I decided to be firm and go for royalties instead, knowing that the quality of the design would be indicated by how many would sell. During the next six months Knoll and I worked on readying the tooling and the product for market. Finally I received a letter from the Knoll president indicating they were turning me down due to their conclusion that they wouldn't be able to properly market the product. This happened despite the fact two of their vice-presidents felt Knoll needed it in their collection. During the ensuing months, I looked everywhere around the country and the industrialized world for a licensee.

MARKETING

In a front page newspaper article I read about the existence of trade companies as being the large firms in Japan. It mentioned the Itoh Company with offices on Park



Avenue. I called a Mr. Matsumoto to tell him of my product, realizing that space in Japan is particularly dear. I showed him the chairs and he asked for pictures to send to their head office in Tokyo. A month went by and I called him. He reported, "I have not heard from head office, Tokyo." Another two weeks later I called him. He said, "Meester Lowland, I just received cable from head office Tokyo. They say Japanese people still sit on floor." So this was another disappointment.

PRODUCING

Subsequently there was an office furniture exhibition in the New York Coliseum. It had walkways and aisles. As I went down a walkway and started to turn into an aisle, at the far end of that aisle I saw the National Sales Manager for Knoll. My first instinct was to pass that aisle by. After all, Knoll had done me the great displeasure of turning me down on a major project. But a little voice within said "No! You have as much right to breathe this air as he does. Go down the aisle, extend your hand and say, 'Hi Chuck, how are you?'". He replied, "I'm just out of a job."

And in the ensuing minutes he reported that he had wanted Knoll to put my chairs into production. He then described how he would suggest I go about selling my design. This included contacting Mr. Davis Allen, Head of Interior Design at the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. Allen liked the design and immediately, wanted to specify it for a new university campus they were designing where 17,000 chairs would be needed. He put me in touch with GF, and a license agreement was signed on 15th November 1963. The rest is pretty much history, except that many interesting things have happened in the ensuing 40 years with no break in production.

WINNING

The Triennale di Milano was, at that time, the most prestigious exhibition and contest in Industrial Design in the world. The various nations would have Triennale Committees to consider entries from designers in their countries. The US Triennale Committee included none other than Edgar Kaumann, Jr. We submitted chairs and the Committee accepted the 40/4 to be sent to Milan.

Subsequently, Mr. Kaufmann reported to me, "Mr. Rowland, during our 4 1/2 hour deliberations your chair was so comfortable, I had to give my vote". In Milan, the



many international judges voted to give it the Gran Premio, the highest prize in the world. This made me the second American to receive that award. Three years previously, R. Buckminster Fuller had received it for his Geodesic Domes.

The 40/4 is in many museums around the world, not only in their design collections, but it is also used as furnishings there. These include Le Louvre in Paris, Museum of Modern Art & Metropolitan Museum In New York, Art Institute of Chicago, The National Gallery and British Museum in London, etc. The US Navy specified it as the most used in their history for its sturdy construction and compactness in storage. There are 2,500 of them in St. Paul's Cathedral, London and 1,800 in Salisbury Cathedral, said to be Britain's most beautiful church. During Soviet times, 1,800 were sold to Radio Moscow. The story is endless as many millions have been sold over 40 years."

David Rowland, February 2004