

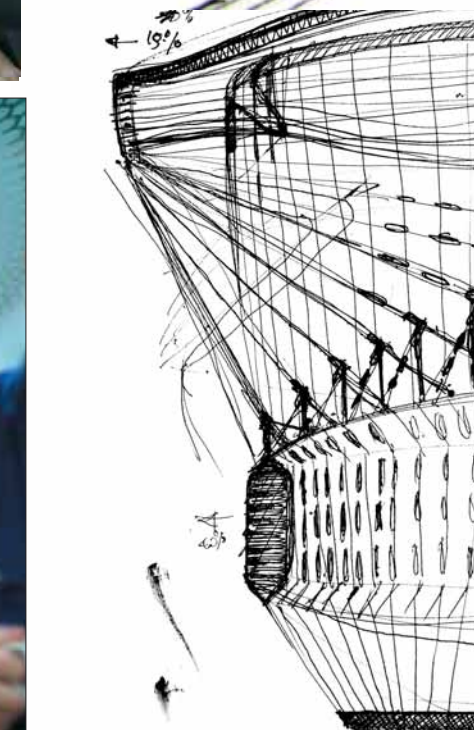
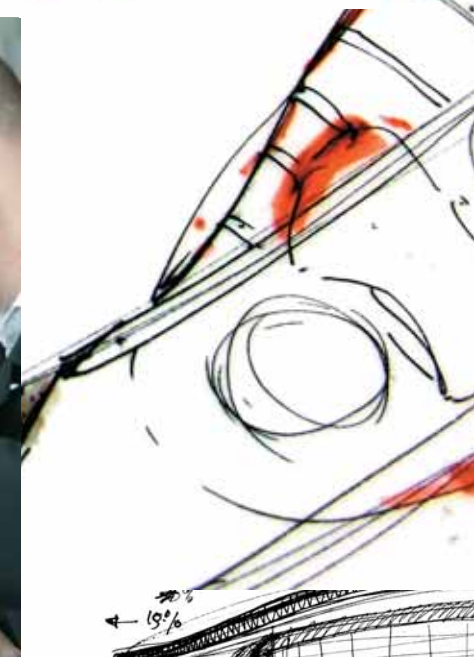
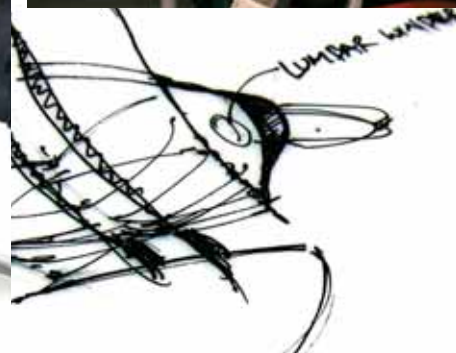
re:formation

Redefining task seating means answering hard questions that sit in the grey area between philosophy and product design. How do we work, how do we sit, how do we interact? 'Be' is the physical manifestation of Formway's answers to those, and other, questions.



Words Michael Barrett

This page: Be in action. 'Be' is a new chair by Formway licensed to Knoll in the United States. On June 16, Be won a Gold Award at the NeoCon 09 trade show in Chicago. Marketed as Generation in the States, Be beat offerings from Herman Miller and Humanscale to take the top prize. **Opposite page, left to right, top to bottom:** Be's FlexTop provides an armrest, provides users with an additional sitting position; a prototype in action at Formway's design lab; material selections and discards; original sketches; Be's FlexSeat offers flexibility without a hard frame or levers along the seat perimeter; lead designer Kent Parker with design director Mark Pennington and Knoll's Benjamin Pardo; original drawing; Prototype assembly at Formway's workshop; original drawing.



I find the word task mildly burdensome. Guilty by association, task seating, as a description, sounds equally onerous. There's another problem with the word task, aside from its mildly depressing definition, and that's its singularity. For many people, work isn't one task, but a collection of tasks; a series of interruptions, collaborations and yes, singular moments too, all interspersed with the leg crossing, leaning, slouching and fidgeting that most people subconsciously go through in the search for the most comfortable position at any given moment.

This fact isn't lost on Formway, the Lower Hutt-based designers of workplace staples such as Life (the chair, that is, not the origin of species) and Hum (the desking system, not the noise issued by singing a wordless tone with your mouth closed). Formway's latest project, launched on the world via Knoll at NeoCon, the USA's the largest exhibition of contract furnishings is another chair, a chair with a difference. It's also chair that seems to be receiving nothing but rapturous reviews Stateside, and even more recently, a coveted Gold Award at NeoCon, which bodes well for its reception locally, one imagines.

With Be, or Generation as it will be marketed in the States, Formway wanted to do more than tap into an existing market segment, it wanted to tap into an unrealised sector - to an extent, that meant meeting the needs of people who didn't know their needs weren't being met. To do this, it took a long, hard look at how we work. To oversimplify the results of many years research, one thing the company discovered, blindingly obvious in its simplicity, is that, "we all sit differently".

Be is a flexible chair, designed to meet any number of sitting needs of the modern user. These needs can be grouped into three categories, says Ed Burak, Formway's general manager of marketing, "individual, active and interactive". Be is a chair that naturally flexes to assist the user to change position; its armrests are attached to the branch frame, freeing up space for the users legs to swivel to the left and right; and perhaps most obviously, it features a flexible backrest that allows the back edge to roll, forming a ledge, for want of a better word, for leaning on that is designed to assist natural collaboration and encourage the flow of information. Aside from this, Be is also a chair for a dedicated task (singular), and it's a chair for all things in-between.

When Kent Parker, lead designer on the project, says, "Be is not an iterative product", he means that the new chair is not a variation on a theme, or Life Mark II. "It's an evolution of knowledge and, with respect to Life, it certainly is an extension of the dynamic and flexing performance," he says.

"What is most important and is not iterative about Be, is that the design's foundations are based on new research and insights into the changing workplace - the understanding that we don't just sit in the traditional task postures, but move between different work modes from 'focus to collaborative' continuously throughout the day."

Burak says the original one-dimensional view of task ergonomics, "the image of the stoic worker, head down, eyes front, back straight and shoulders square is all too well documented and promoted as the accepted definition of how we should be supported".

"This support is still critical, but today our working day is far less structured, it combines different degrees of communication, chaos, singular thought, reasoning and expression. We're finding ourselves shifting often and almost seamlessly from one working state to another to another.

"Our three guiding principles were movement, comfort and intuition," he says. "This notion of intuition is what drives the simplicity of design. We want our products to almost anticipate the requirements of its user, without thought, without control. In other words - users of our products have better things to do than figure out how to manipulate his/her chair in order to work more effectively or more comfortably."

The shifting state, described as "trans-postural and trans-activity" by Benjamin Pardo, Knoll's director of design and senior vice president, over the phone from New York, is the essence of Be, and one of the factors related to the changing face of the office that interested Knoll in the chair. Another factor that excited Pardo, "as a Knoll guy", was the use of new materials. Historically, Knoll is a company that has encouraged the inventive use of materials: Marcel Breuer's use of tubular steel, Eero Saarinen's use of fibreglass, Harry Bertoia's use of steel wire and Frank Gehry's bent wood constructions come to mind. Formway is in esteemed company to be associated with that pantheon of design greats. Perhaps as such, Pardo is firm on his expectations of designers, but praises Formway's abilities: "There's a great clarity in terms of conversation associated with brief, research associated with it, setting of environmental goals, the choice of materials, all of those questions. It's very clear that you can march from point A-to-B in the various goals. Formway do a wonderful job with that. In fact, that would be my expectation of them and everybody else."

As lead designer Kent Parker says, Formway looked at new material technologies and built concepts around them. But, it wasn't a random search - parameters were set around performance, cost,



Opposite: Be, from Formway. The New Zealand company's vision of task seating for today's users. Special features of the chair include a FlexTop, which allows users to roll back the top edge of the back and rest their arms comfortably; FlexBack, which allows for a wide range of multi-dimensional movement; FlexSeat, which supports forward-facing or sideways positions; and a Dynamic Suspension control that counterbalances body weight to provide a smooth ride.

environmental performance, ability to get to market and commercialisation. The choice of materials was important as, because of the chair's flexibility, the materials do the work. Interestingly, much of the chair is comprised of the same family of "elastic polymeric material" (see below), chosen for strength and elasticity.

What is as equally interesting as the design process is the design philosophy that spawned it; the thoughts on the office of the future, how we work and how we might work. From his position at the head of a large, design-orientated furniture company, Pardo has some useful insights, many expressed through his account of why Knoll chose the name Generation.

"Let's just say that it's an exhaustive process ... I think we identified with the name for because it talked about next generation office seating for a new generation of people. I also identified with the word, I liked the letters, and I liked the number of letters, and

what they imply graphically and how they can be set, to use a very old term, they kern well and they do all of those things and there's good visual impact, so I think that all of those factors are significant. I think that it's very much in tune with the language of the time, products of the time and it relates to the people." Additionally, specifically relating to generation, Pardo believes that while today we have very young people working with older people, "we're also moving into a period where there are fewer younger people".

"So the generational question to me is one of retention. There are only so many people who are really good so the opportunity to retain is very important. Even more important than that, you need to put people in an environment where they can work and collaborate and perform in such a way that they're used to and can have an impact on corporate culture." pd

Q. What does winning a gold medal at NeoCon mean to Formway?

Ed Burak, general manager, marketing: This is brilliant news, and a huge deal in the US - Knoll will be stoked, as we are. This will cement our status as a serious global player in the design studio stakes, following on from the Gold we won with the Life Chair about seven years ago.

Q. When did you recognise that people needed a 'better' seating system that let them turn and lean?

Kent Parker, lead designer: Charles Eames said, "The recognition and understanding of the need is the primary condition of the creative act". This quote is relevant to many of Formway's "new-to-the-world projects", including Be. Recognition came with hundreds of hours of Voice of the Customer (VOC) interviewing and observational research. In particular, it came during an interview with a corporate PA who assumed everything but what we would describe as a standard posture during a 40-minute conversation. So, these questions arose for us: 'Why does she take these postures when she knows what the prescribed postures are?'; 'When does she take them?'; 'does everyone do this?'; and 'is it good or bad?'. Understanding of these questions provided the foundation for Be.

Q. Tell me about the chair's FlexTop system?

KP: FlexTop offers the benefits of a low back chair, with a comfortable ledge to rest on when relaxing or communicating. The back support uses new structures and materials for unique performance. Its stature and skin rearranges itself seamlessly to support the wide range of postures users take

throughout the day. The FlexTop gives comfortable shoulder support while facing forward in upright task and reclined postures, but folds over without adjustment to act as a comfortable armrest when side sitting. FlexBack skin is made of an advanced elastomeric polymer that is manipulated to provide a highly compliant, supportive and breathable surface that adapts to the shape of your body.

Q. What are the benefits of the chair's skin?

Paul Wilkinson, senior design engineer: We researched new materials for six months, looking for something that could provide new performance. The skin is made from an elastic polymeric material that can be manipulated to provide a unique combination of strength, toughness and elasticity. Formway had to develop a patented process to produce it, and the resulting surface is strong, tough, UV-stable and wear-resistant. It provides a new level of supple support, compliance and flexibility.

Q. Many components are made from the same type of polymer. What is it, and what are the benefits of this material?

PW: The majority of the structural components of the chair, such as the seat and back frame, are moulded from PBT. This material is in the same family as the skin and flexing elements within the recline mechanism and has several benefits: it allows components to be moulded together providing strong connections without the need for fixings; there is available a renewably sourced version of this material; it reduces the number of types of polymer in the chair which reduces the disassembly required at end of life.