

Beautiful Curves

How the Aeron changed chair design

By Tia Phillips



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“Would Keats have ever written an ode to the Aeron chair? David Coleman doesn’t think so. It is a “wonderfully designed object, designed to be used and abused,” but it’s not a “thing of beauty.” While the Aeron chair may never inspire an ode, its innovative, ergonomic design performs its function: it’s a chair you can really sit in.

A New Design

Don Chadwick and Bill Stumpf would be proud of Coleman’s estimation of their Aeron chair as something of use rather than beauty. In collabora-

tion with Herman Miller, they set out to make a chair whose form would meet ergonomic, functional, anthropometric, and environmental criteria.

Ergonomically, the chair could not be harmful to people if they sat in it for long periods of time. Functionally, the chair had to be simple to move and adjust and support any position a person wanted or had to be in. Anthropometrically, the chair had to fit any person, large or small. And finally, it had to be environmentally friendly, using renewable, sustainable, and recycled source materials. The result was a groundbreaking chair with its own new signature shape that differentiated itself from other office chairs.

“The human form has no straight lines,” said designer Bill Stumpf. “We designed the chair...as a metaphor of human form in the visual as well as the tactile sense. There is not one straight line to be found on an Aeron chair.” Instead, it is all curves, following the natural contours of the body. Chadwick and Stumpf consulted leading ergonomists, orthopedic specialists, and physical therapists to evaluate the chair’s design. They fine-tuned and refined the design of the chair to ensure that it would fit the shape of the body; anybody, the chair being available in three sizes to accommodate anyone from the 1st to the 99th-percentile.

This philosophy of using the

Design Criteria

- Ergonomic
- Functional
- Anthropometric
- Environmentally

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human form as a guide was used in the design of the material used for the chair as well. Unlike what you'd usually associate with comfort when thinking about comfortable chairs, the Aeron chair doesn't have any upholstery or padding. Instead, it has a thin transparent layer called the Pellicle that stretches over its frame, like skin covering bone. "Its transparency symbolizes the free flow of air to the skin," said Stumpf, "in the same way lace, window screens, and other



Recent Aeron design with PostureFit technology



permeable membranes permit the flow of air or light or moisture." The Pellicle's flexibility and transparency allow the weight of the body to be evenly distributed and body heat and moisture to leave the seat and back of the chair.

In line with Chadwick and Stumpf's belief that "objects [should be] less intrusive in the environment, Aeron is a non-intrusive chair." Largely, the components of the chair are made from recycled materials, such as two-liter plastic beverage bottles, that can be recycled when the chair is disassembled.

A Big Splash

What was the result of this new and innovative design? The effects were felt immediately. A month before its intro-

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duction at a trade fair in Germany, the Aeron chair was chosen for the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art on September 21, 1994.

But it wasn't all smoothsailing, "The only hesitation after people sat on it and found it to be a fantastic chair was that it looked somewhat awkward, a little bit ungainly," said Terence Riley, chief curator of architecture



Aeron Office Chair. 1992. Part of the Museum of Modern Arts' permanent collection.

and design at the Museum of Modern art. "But when something is truly new, it's never going to look as one might expect it to look." It may not have looked how people expected it to, yet, it was what its designers designed it to be.

Years Later

The Aeron chair has been in production for thirteen years. The original structure of the chair hasn't changed much. It's essentially the same chair Chadwick and Stumpf designed years ago, with some recent improvements to improve its ergonomic design.

In 2002, with the help of Dr. Brock Walker, a spinal care and ergonomic seating specialist, Herman Miller engineers and Bill Stumpf developed PostureFit technology to work with the body's biomechanics to support the natural forward tilt of the pelvis. PostureFit's design easily integrates into the Aeron design. "It reflects what we are learning about the human torso...it's leading the next wave of ergonomics," said Stumpf.

They are also continuing their dedication to design as being non-intrusive to the environment by introducing, in 2003, new CMF (colors, materials, finishes) options that are designed to blend seamlessly with today's more open work settings. They are continuing what they set out to do at the Aeron chair's conception, which is to rewrite what people expect from a chair.

So would Keats have ever written an ode to the Aeron chair? Maybe not. But that doesn't make the Aeron chair any less beautiful. The very thing it never tried to be.

