

The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design

Galen Cranz

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RETHINKING CULTURE, BODY, AND DESIGN



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Galen Cranz : The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design:

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book, *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design*. Professor Cranz takes a look at the history of chairs, their place establishing hierarchical relationships among people, and the various design attempts artists and architects have made at creating chairs. Cranz makes clear in her book that in chair design often the "emphasis is on materials—plastic, metal, and wood in varied applications—rather than on the effect of the chair and its structure upon the body and its structure." The chair becomes an object, an everyday sculpture, that oftentimes disregards the fact that it is being used in particular ways for particular purposes, with substantial impact on the individual who sits in the chair. In recent history, an increasing focus has been made on the way chairs affect our use. For anyone interested in the way we use ourselves, the portion of the book that examines the ergonomic attempts to create a more body-friendly chair reads like a dark comedy, as various attempts are made to address one part of the body, without adequately considering another part. Cranz takes us through this process and helps us see the misconceptions that many designers have built into their chairs. One of the first, and biggest, problems facing designers is figuring out how to determine what would make a chair that facilitated ease and comfort. Comfort is a particularly vexing concept, for reasons obvious to any Alexander teacher, since the old familiar habitual patterns are going to tend to feel comfortable, at least in the short term. Cranz suggests that the various attempts at measuring comfort, including the use of "Electromyogram tests... stresses along the spine, using needles in the discs or pressure-sensitive pills" have been unsuccessful in measuring a meaningful change in comfort level for the person sitting. Another refreshing aspect of the book is the radical notion put forward by a new breed of ergonomic designers that chair design specifically, and workplace design in general, should not be restricted by "traditional cultural expectations. They want to change traditional workplace design. For them, the beginning and end of design should be the body." Cranz gives a short history of the Alexander Technique in her book, but only references the Technique when it is relevant to the general design questions at hand. The Technique is presented as a unique approach that can help inform chair design, without proselytizing about the specific benefits of the Technique itself. The Technique has simply become, in effect, part of the relevant literature on design issues. In one section of the book, Cranz talks about how one's conception of gravity will change one's design ideas: "If a designer thinks gravity is the enemy, he/she will design chairs like bags to hold our collapsed structures. But if the designer believes that gravity is useful to us, the sitting surface can function more like a platform so that the structure of forces and counterforces helps us spring into the body's natural volume—as opposed to being stacked from the bottom up like a wall or collapsed into a heap." She goes on to say that "The most wide-ranging philosophical insight from the Alexander Technique and the somatic perspective generally is that human beings are designed for movement, and that more important than any single given posture is the quality of our movement, our overall coordination." Cranz questions the traditional notions of lumbar support, of chair backs that do not continue high enough to support the shoulders and head, and of the various other design decisions that have interfered with a more natural use of the body. In the last sections of the book, Cranz lays out her recommendations for a better chair, ("a forward-tilt seat, firm-textured surface, a flat uncountoured seat, butt space between seat and backrest,") as well as examining some of the more unconventional approaches that have been taken to try to address the complex challenges of more intelligent and humane chair design. Cranz has successfully turned a topic that could easily have been relegated to the back shelves of university libraries into a fascinating account of what chairs have been, done and stood for over the centuries, and what they can become in the future.

This work offers a new perspective on one of the most common cultural artefacts, the chair, explaining the history, physiology and politics of how and why we sit the way we do. The chair, ever-present in our habitat, forcefully shapes the social and physical dimensions of our lives. Tracing the history of the chair as we know it from its crudest beginnings in the Neolithic Age to its place in the modern ergonomic office, Galen Cranz uses anecdotes, literary references and famous designs to document our ongoing love affair with the chair - despite its potentially harmful effects on our bodies. Cranz reveals how the chair's evolution in Western society has been governed not by a quest for comfort or practicality but by the designation of status. Part social history and part manifesto for a new way of living, this book brings a critical eye to the place where we spend most of our waking lives.

From *Publishers Weekly* The oldest surviving chair comes from the tomb of King Tut. "Roman chairs were rare, decorative items of luxury." Chairs themselves represent the West—or the "barbarians"—to cultures that have done without them. Office seating uses shape, fabric and size to make clear which chair belongs to the boss. And current home seating—even the "male" La-Z-Boy—increasingly tries to accommodate women's bodies and tastes. So reports Cranz (*The Politics of Park Design*), a professor of architecture at the U.C.-Berkeley, in this concise, multidisciplinary gem. Cranz begins by surveying the chair's historical kinds, styles and meanings; then addresses issues of back support, body shape and ergonomics; and ends up in a vigorous, detailed argument against the standard right-angled chair and "chair-desk complex," in favor of "body-conscious design" in an attractively described Ideal Workplace. "Sitting is hard work," Cranz's research reveals; seatmakers should, she says, abandon the common principle of lower-back support; the Alexander Technique of somatic therapy holds lessons for furniture designers; "human beings are not designed to hold any single posture for long periods"; garden-variety office furniture is bad for you; and the

famous chairs of Modernism are, in general, even worse. Cranz's clear book—half survey, half polemic—may successively delight, instruct and alarm professors in their endowed chairs, designers at their slanted tables, drivers in drivers' seats, parents with carseats and, of course, the armchair intellectual. 85 photographs and illustrations. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Berkeley architecture professor Cranz takes a radical departure from her first book, *The Politics of Park Design*, in offering up a soundly intellectual perspective on the chair—its history, styles, uses, and evolution. Far from being an object of desire, the four-legged wonder as commonly designed and perceived wreaks havoc on our bodies, making the phrase "comfortable chair" a thoroughly modern oxymoron. In fact, Cranz examines in depth most of our sitting apparatuses—from Breuer's Cresca chair to Norway's Balans—and finds most wanting. Her solution? A five-point checklist, a new philosophical perspective (somatics, the science of body-mind relationships), and a range of novel ways to align and support torsos properly. Provocative yet thoughtful, with more than a kernel of truth. Barbara Jacobs [A] lively, often acerbic survey of the history, physiology, and sociology of that object in which most of us spend too much time. Much of what she has to say is far from favorable to her subject. I cringed to imagine what she might think of my new seat. -- Metropolitan Home, Peter Hellman, February 1999