

# Peter Opsvik's Philosophy of

## HISTORY

How has the human body moved throughout history, and why have many of us ended up like Homo sedens?

## MOVEMENT

The only condition in which a human being is completely still is death.

## OUR ACTIVE PAST

In Stone Age societies, people led physically active lives. In contemporary nomadic societies they still do.

Constant walking, hunting and picking things up off the ground and down from the trees were prerequisites for finding food.

Even after people began to settle in agricultural societies with permanent abodes, the physical labour necessary to produce food required varied use of limbs and muscles.

## OUR PASSIVE PRESENT

Recently, across large parts of the globe, lifestyles have changed radically.

We have suddenly become more passive, and there is less variety in the kinds of physical tasks we expect our bodies to perform.

We do less physical labour, and our bodily activities are fewer. For most of us, hard physical toil is no longer essential to our survival.

## Tools

When Homo habilis started to use tools it was the advent of a new lifestyle. We should, of course, be grateful for all the strenuous labour that our tools have eliminated and for the improved standard of living they provide us. The consequences were especially adverse



for people who had to use the same tools again and again over an extended period of time.

But unfortunately for many of us this led to monotony and passivity.

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## SITTING POSTURES

"A number of postures between standing and lying down"

Throughout history, sitting positions, or the way we have placed our limbs while sitting, have varied from period to period, culture to culture, and continent to continent.

We know that the human body can command an enormous repertoire of sitting postures. So why did standardisation committees around the world choose a single sitting position as the starting point for their standards? This question is highly relevant, because sitting has become such a dominant part of our everyday lives.

## SITTING ON A SEAT—THE MESSAGE OF LANGUAGE

In many languages, the verb "to sit" also signifies holding a position of power.

Idioms such as "sit on a committee" and "She sits as cabinet minister" say more about power than about sitting. Expressions such as "a seat of learning", "the sitting bishop" and "a sitting of the court", as well as

"chairman", "parliamentary seats", "to be in the chair", "to take the chair", "to chair a



meeting" and the "chair" all refer to social status and powerful positions.

These examples suggest that sitting positions and sitting traditions refer as much to social circumstances as to specific needs for support.

## THE CHAIR AND THE AUTHORITY

The first formal sitting device may have been a stone or a tree stump, which enabled the leader of the tribe to sit in a higher position than the others when giving his instructions, the extra height lending him the authority he needed over those who sat on the ground.

# Sitting

Status and authority were the primary functional requirements for the first "chair", and for the further refinement of sitting devices.

## THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

In the nineteenth century the major changes entailed by industrialisation led to chairs becoming a standard piece of equipment in the workplace, schools and private homes.

No analyses were performed to determine which positions and ergonomic solutions were the best suited to the work in question.

It is clear that the factory worker's and the office worker's work chairs were designed according to the established chair standard, based on the accepted way of sitting in the upper echelons of society.

## HOW FUNCTIONAL WAS FUNCTIONALISM?

As far as furniture for sitting is concerned, there are grounds to query whether the twentieth century's functionalism really did lead to more functional solutions for the user - the sitting human being.

The new pieces got rid of a lot of unnecessary ornamentation and detail, and they certainly became simpler to manufacture and easier to clean. However, the basic concept of sitting



was not subject to review. With a few notable exceptions, the focus was not on the needs of the human body while sitting.

In this sense, most of the furniture produced in the functional era was not more functional than the styles it replaced.

## LEARNING FROM THE FIRST LONG-TERM SITTERS

Modern society has made us sit on chairs to get our work done. The sitting position has historical roots based on selected social and cultural ideals. How might things have been different if we had turned to history to learn from earlier eras' "long-term sitters"?

Riders, whether they rode oxen, donkeys, camels or horses, must be among the earliest long-term sitters.

Riders always sit with a good posture and a well-balanced upper body. However, the saddle was not a source of inspiration when chairs were designed for factory workers.

## RITUALS—THE SOLUTION TO AN ERGONOMIC PROBLEM?

Church rituals were developed where worshippers had to alternate between different positions and thus get the movement and variation necessary to get through the long service: standing up to sing, kneeling down to pray.



When I was a child, we had to stand up when the teacher entered the room, when we were asked about our homework and when we had to recite a poem, read something aloud or sing.

This traditional alternation bears witness to the fact that the need for a variety of movement and changes in bodily posture was widely understood in the past, and indeed up until quite recently.

CLOCKWISE: "Embracement," 1986, design: Peter Opsvik; Photo: P. Opsvik; Studio Håg; Supporter, design: Peter Opsvik 1985; Photo: P. Opsvik; Swing, design: Peter Opsvik 1999; Photo: P. Opsvik; Håg Swing, design: Peter Opsvik 1999; Photo: Tollefsen; Håg Capisco, design: Peter Opsvik 1984; Photo: Tollefsen.

