

# ICON

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# Peter Opsvik

Over the past 50 years, he has liberated the human body from the tyranny of 'correct posture' and introduced the concept of dynamic sitting

By Debika Ray  
Portrait by Jimmy Linus

**OUR IDEAS ABOUT** posture have an almost religious quality to them. Being upright, motionless or gliding smoothly is considered virtuous – the stuff of soldiers, great leaders, yogis and dancers – while slouching or lolling around in your seat is slovenly, uncivilised, almost sinful, a bad habit to be trained out. That's why chairs for public use generally come with implicit instructions for how to sit on them – erect and still, in keeping with its height and curves. Furniture for reclining or relaxing exists mostly in the privacy of the home.

The question is, should design seek to impose a 'correct' way of being or respond to people's natural instincts? It's the latter approach that has framed the work of Norwegian designer Peter Opsvik, who literally wrote the book on sitting (*Rethinking Sitting*, 2009). 'My theory about sitting is very simple: if we are allowed to move, we move,' he said in 2013. 'You never see people waiting for the train for example, standing still.' In other words, there's no

single correct posture for sitting: any pose held for too long feels uncomfortable.

Opsvik has made it his life's work to liberate us from the sedentary, passive lifestyle that office-based work has imposed upon so many of us and return towards the state of perpetual movement that characterised daily life in the pre-industrial era. The countless chairs he has designed allow people to vary their position continuously and intuitively, prioritising freedom over support – or, as he sees it, constraint. 'I am proposing that the dynamic area around the body be expanded at the expense of the static one,' he writes.

One of his largest collections, *Balans*, includes chairs that allow for a supported kneeling or a semi-standing position, or that function equally well whether you're upright or reclining. *Globe Garden* – more a thought experiment and art object than a piece of furniture – recalls a time when our ancestors lived in trees, and offers multiple unconventional ways and levels to sit and to fold your limbs. *Swing and Reflex* suspend various seating components on

wires so they respond to every twitch or turn of your muscles, while *Capsico* is inspired by the dynamic posture of the 'first long-term sitters' – riders of horses and pack animals – to allow for an almost unlimited range of sitting postures. The effortless tilting motion incorporated into many of his designs is an obvious forebear of Barber Osgerby's *Tip Ton* for Vitra.

But the most famous of all his works is the *Tripp Trapp* (pictured with Opsvik): a chair designed to grow with a child, from infancy to adulthood – with the adjustable slats shifting progressively downwards over time and its open front allowing children to dine at the same table as adults rather than from a tray affixed to a high-chair. A design classic, more than ten million *Tripp Trapp* chairs have been sold since its launch in 1972 and Opsvik has developed a series of similar designs based on the same idea for different contexts.

The fact that Opsvik is a talented jazz saxophonist seems appropriate. The parallels between his musical interests and his approach to design are unavoidable. In both he rejects traditional form, places emphasis in counter-intuitive places and celebrates free expression. His work is a lesson for us all in paying less attention to convention and more to our bodies' natural rhythms. ♦

