



Making of Slow Chair

It all started with ladies' tights.

"We'd long been captivated by the idea of applying the elasticity and comfort of silk tights to furniture", says Erwan Bouroullec, the younger of the two successful French brothers. "In theory, they seemed ideal for making a chair that adapts flexibly to the shape of the body in various positions, rather than having a rigid form determined by the function." For the initial models, tights were actually cut to pieces and stretched over flexible wire in the Bouroullecs' studio in Paris, resulting in the first small chairs. The construction was as simple as it was ingenious, and the people at Vitra were very enthusiastic.

In Birsfelden, where Vitra's headquarters are located, the firm had been rethinking its roots for two years. The focus had long been on the office sector, but home furnishings, and the Eames classics in particular, were what originally accounted for the company's growth. In fact, an indoor-outdoor recliner from the Eames's Aluminium Group (1958) was a source of inspiration for Slow Chair. "The Aluchair, as it was called, was a prime example of a chair that could be used both indoors and out," says Eckart Maise, head of the Vitra Home Division. "Nowadays, life in the summer is increasingly moving outdoors. This shift requires furniture that combines aesthetics with a high level of comfort, not to mention materials that can be used, at least temporarily, on a terrace or balcony, or in the garden."

The Bouroullec brothers have been designing for the Vitra Home Collection since its inception in 2004. Their contributions include shelving, various types of tables, sofas, the Zip carpet and Algues, decorative elements that have captured the imagination of millions. Vitra asked them to design "a relatively affordable, light chair that is fairly transparent", a request that tied in perfectly with the notion of translating tights into a chair covering made from water- and UV-resistant knitted polyester. Developing the idea was not easy, however. They had to create a strikingly textured knitted fabric, stretch it over a tubular-steel frame and obtain an attractive yet ergonomic form that would be both stable and durable. Admittedly, Vitra has experience with 3D-textiles; at Orgatec this coming autumn, the company will be presenting a new office chair by the Bouroullecs that features a similar material. The fabric used for Slow Chair is unlike the 3D spacer fabrics that are currently making headlines and that are increasingly found in the mattress and car industries. In the furniture sector, spacer fabrics initially appeared as a covering for Patricia Urquiola's Lazy Lounge Chair for B&B Italia.

The Bouroullecs fabric, however, is somewhat softer and stretchier.

Soft and stretchy: these two qualities posed a problem for the designers. "Upholstered seats need to be large enough so that the user does not rest on the frame. The frame, which consists of two tubular-steel components, is about 95 cm wide and almost as deep," says Egon Bräuning, technical director of Vitra. "However, as it leaves the knitting machine, the covering has to be much smaller. The highly elastic material achieves stability – enough to support a man weighing 120 kilos – only as it stretches." The knitting-machine program was altered endlessly, and countless fabric covers were made (a time-consuming operation, as the machine takes around two hours to produce one backrest cover), fitted experimentally and rejected before the optimum measurements were determined. "Prior to being attached, the material for the backrest is about the size of a child's pullover," says Erwan Bouroullec. The two knitted "stockings", also tubular, fit snugly around the strong, two-part frame, which is made from 25-mm-thick tubular steel. After the steel components are inserted carefully into the covers, four die-cast aluminium legs are attached, completing the chair. By extending the two back legs, the designers created a backrest with just enough give to support the user's lumbar region. "Varying degrees of elasticity make for zones that differ in tautness and flexibility," says Maise. "However, the average thickness of the material is around two mm, which produces a chair with both the desired transparency and a sculptural look."

In typical Bouroullec style, the form is somewhat familiar in appearance, recalling chairs of the 1950s, yet refreshingly contemporary in its transparency and lightness. And it looks good from all angles, even – or especially – the rear view of the frame, with its extended legs. In Milan, the prototype of Slow Chair featured at the Vitra stand, also designed by the Bouroullec brothers, was clearly a crowd pleaser: those who tested it didn't want to get up again. In

early 2007 the chair will be on the market, selling for less than €1400 and available in several colours.

The moment of sinking into the seat gives meaning to the name of the chair. And, as if the knitted covering were not comfortable enough in itself, the Bouroullecs have added loose cushions in two matching colours, as well as a woollen cover. "The cushions can be placed in various ways, depending on whether you're sitting in the chair to read, to chat or just to relax," says Erwan, who hints at the prospect of a Slow Chair for two. In any case, Vitra is so pleased with the basic concept that plans for a chaise longue and a small sofa are in the pipeline, to complete the idea of the "stocking chair".

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Photos: Courtesy of Bouroullec Studio