

Starsaylor

It takes something - or someone - quite special to dominate the conversations of not one, but two Orgatecs. Consecutive Orgatecs at that. Anyone who's graced Cologne's Alter Markt of an Orgatec eve will only be too aware of how leftfield conversations can get. In both 2008 and 2010 however, we can distinctly remember people suddenly, despite their levels of alcohol consumption, switching back to the subject of furniture and asking that standard, nee compulsory Cologne question: 'Have you seen anything good?'



good? We've seen way better than that,' we countered. But we're pretty certain they already knew our answer.

You should be all too aware of who and what we're talking about here – the images might have given it away, if nothing else. It takes more, however, than a radical piece of design to open mouths, dominate conversations and wow amateur critics. It takes something much bigger and better, a

holistic approach, a leap of faith, an incredible confidence, bags of talent – and something else. Something undefined.

We've come to Herman Miller's Aldwych mega-showspace to talk with fuseproject's Technical Design Director Bret Recor. Bret works alongside Yves Behar and a diligent and talented San Franciscan design team – a team responsible for the development of Miller's latest conversation dominator, SAYL.

We can't possibly use lazy terms such as 'marmite design' when it comes to this new chair development. For one, SAYL is really, really good – and those of you out there who don't think so are wrong. So there. SAYL is however, in our eyes at least, unique in that those aforementioned amateur critics indeed begin to critique it, focusing (as critics tend to) on any negatives. It's amazing how the negatives quieten once the price-point of the chair is revealed.

'Wow! It's really that cheap?' they ask. 'Cheap? Not a word we'd use for it,' we reply. Cost-effective – certainly, groundbreaking – absolutely, the perfect response to end user needs right now – we think it might just be.

We begin by discussing the most important element of a successful seating product. 'Through our learning and development, we know how difficult it is to achieve total comfort,' Bret admits. 'It takes years and it takes a lot of really talented people to get that right. In the past, to have that quality you have to have a really heavy chair – you have to use a top of the line kit of parts to do that. Because we worked so closely together (with Herman Miller) we were able to steer far away from that. If you look at some of the competitors, it's quite frightening.

'For quality reasons, Herman Miller take the competitor chairs and put them in a test lab. In an accelerated year's time these chairs have already deteriorated. This chair has a 12-year warranty – a 365 day, three shift warranty!

'We had to learn a lot in term of the ergonomic standards. When you sit in a chair it's a full experience – especially when you sit for a prolonged period of time. We're certainly well aware of the ergonomic requirements now! We did a lot of back-and-forth to the test labs to meet those criteria. Of course, being Herman Miller, it wasn't just about meeting the criteria, they ▶▶▶▶▶





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'Essentially, this was about how we create that same brand messaging, quality and heritage, but bring it into a more attainable price-point – and do that in a way that it's not a me-too chair. It had to fit within the family here as well – in terms of price and also aesthetic. This couldn't be the ugly step-kid!

'We looked at things from a different perspective; we used the expression 'Life is too short to live in a box'. The tag-line we've used on some of the advertising – Life Unframed – was something that we were really living when we did the project. We were always thinking outside the conventional frameworks used to design a chair. We backed up a long way and started working on materials with engineers very early in the process. What that allowed us to do was to ask questions that weren't traditionally asked – and through those questions we able to find inspiration in different ways. At Orgatec, for example, there was a big banner showing the Golden

Gate Bridge tower. Through thinking about simplified structures, elegance and maximising your support with a minimal amount of visual aid and a minimal amount of materials, the bridge made sense. We utilised that inspiration to come up with prototypes. We – myself and a some of the Herman Miller engineers – literally placed string from a tower to a span, to create a contour, which in turn created the optimum contour for the back. We were able to sit in this – and then we knew we could do this, with the minimum amount of material you need to support a body.

'We then back and forth with the mock-ups, then we went on to CAD, mapped out all the points – but we still constantly went back and did 1,000's of sketches where we really refined the aesthetic and continued to remove the material. It was a balance of ergonomics, balance and aesthetic – and all these variables had to be balanced properly.

'The final thing was getting the tower to emulate the bridge – and have that not only support the tension of the back but also allow a little bit of motion at the top, so you get this freedom of movement. It was an intense effort to develop. The principles of the chair were not just about the 'sail', we needed to build structures around that. We wanted to design and engineer all the

aspects of the chair for this product – and by doing that we were able to remove a lot of the material. We were able to combine some parts, for example, which meant we could create a lighter structure with less material.'

We move on to talk about the bigger picture; the global perspective. 'This was not going to be a chair for just America and Europe,' Bret explains. 'The design was thought about in terms of keeping the chair a different scale – making it lighter. It's 37lb, which is lighter than most task chairs. The proportions were carefully considered to cover the range of different markets. The way the breathing mesh and the intelligent back works, it does adapt to its user – it cradles every body type. Our approach ensured this was a global chair. One of the things that we thought of in development was that this should be a chair for a different era; it's a chair that doesn't scream at you, it's understated.

'We never compromised on the design. I think that's really, really important.'

Herman Miller earns a lot of victories; the past two Orgatec 'ticker-tape parades' prove this point quite perfectly. SAYL sets very high new standards. Can the company complete a three-peat in 2012? We can't wait to find out ●