

SIT BACK AND RELAX

Finding Your Furniture 'Comfort Zone'

Comfort. It's a subjective word that means something quite different to everyone. Webster's Dictionary gives us several choices, including relaxation, tranquility, luxury, and a state of physical ease similar to the coziness of a warm quilt.

But what about furniture? When it comes to the design of a chair or sofa, it may seem obvious that furniture should be comfortable. But although a piece of furniture may look great, it doesn't always translate into comfort.

San Francisco- and New York-based furniture designer Ted Boerner believes that good furniture should embrace the human body.

"I don't think like an interior designer," he says. "There's much more to be considered than the color of the upholstery or trim. Furniture should be designed around a specific function—creating the conditions for an experience. How will people use it? That's the key."

Boerner began his design practice in 1994, and today, along with partner Frank Pontes, provides custom furniture to an international architectural and design clientele. His graceful designs reflect a broad range of influences, among them Japanese and African folk art, Shaker, rural European, American rustic, Bauhaus, and art deco styles, yet his signature is unique.

Earlier in his career, he designed theater sets and costumes, which trained his eye to make people feel comfortable in their surroundings and in their characters. So when he moved into furniture, the same rules applied.

"I drew the human body a lot," Boerner recalls, "and began to understand human proportions—a critical consideration in making comfortable furniture. If a designer understands universal and specific human proportions, they're on their way to making great furniture that's authentic and should last for decades, handed down from one generation to the next."

First of all, furniture needs to relate to the architecture of a space, Boerner says, adding that a well-appointed room should be filled with pieces that are not pretentious in size or scale. "When you look at a piece in a room, it should feel right—like, I know where the human body goes in relationship to this," he says, explaining that he cautions against large, overstuffed chairs or sofas that are frequently sold on the retail market.

"Sometimes I've sat upon a granite boulder that's more comfortable than an overstuffed sofa," he chuckles. "Pieces loaded with foam and Dacron are the worst offenders, because they're kind of squishy. The material bounces around and you're forced to hold your body in a particular way in order to sit in them. Although it may seem luxurious at first, your body ultimately gets tired rather than relaxed. That's not true comfort."

When Boerner begins a design, he thinks first of how his piece will enhance the experience of living; for example, how a table affects sharing a meal; a bed influences sleep; or, in the case of his newest chair, the "Lux," the way a person sits in order to read a book in a comfortable position. "It's actually a character chair," he notes, "because when you sit in it, your body is in a relaxed state for something to happen. You become animated instead of falling asleep."

The geometry of a chair is subject to its materials, says Boerner, depending on how stuffed or unstuffed it is. But reduce it to a framework of plywood and you begin to see how the basic construction of a piece affects its comfort when finished. "When sitting normally, you're at a 90 degree angle," he comments.

The higher the seat, the straighter you sit. The lower and longer it gets, the back pitches up, the seat depth gets shorter, and the foot area swings out. Also, a chair will sit differently depending on whether it's covered in leather or fabric, because fabric yields and has a "memory," and leather is more rigid. "They don't move in the same way, and that affects the comfort," he says. Boerner favors goose down stuffing, because it "conforms to the body and stops."

The designer encourages us to consider where on this span from sitting up to lying down we find our own comfort range in a piece of furniture. "There's no science to the mechanics and nuances of comfort," he says. "It's a feel thing. The idea is to know that there is a difference, to ask about it, and play, experiment. You'll get closer to your own comfort zone that way." *Written by Robyn Roehm Cannon* **YHL**

