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Up Everest in a Volkswagen

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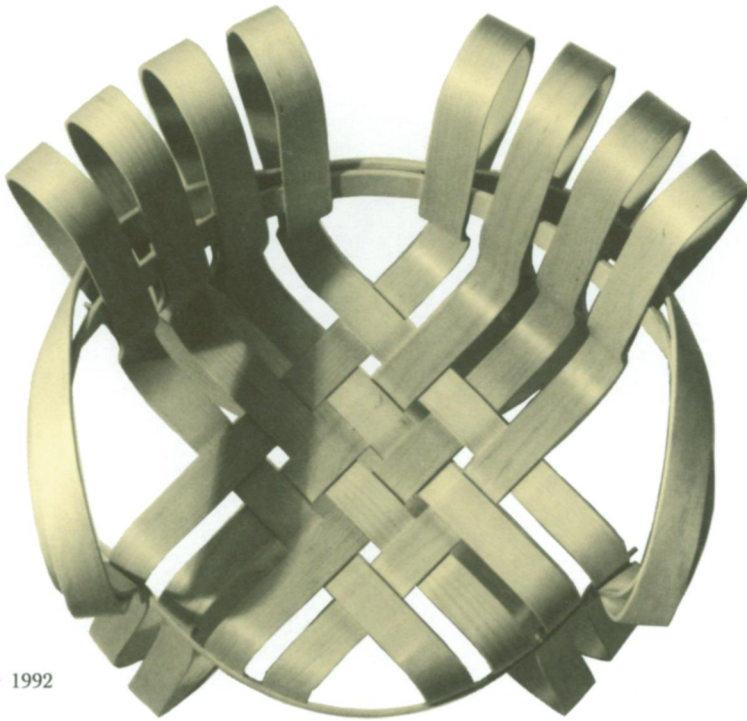
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# Up Everest in a Volkswagen

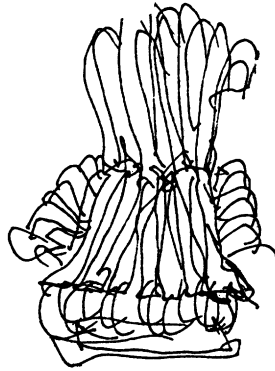
by Frank Gehry



Frank Gehry  
Cross Check chair 1992  
(overhead view)  
laminated maple  
33 5/8 x 28 1/2 x 24 7/8 in.  
KnollStudio

A chair is the essential structure. It's the most basic kind of structure, and it's a fascinating problem. I don't know if the world needs another new chair, but it seems to. Whenever a new one comes out, it solves problems in a way that deals with the environment and with issues that are important at the time. In other words, it's contextual; it becomes related to what's going on. Ten years ago I was asked by Rolf Fehlbaum, the director of Vitra, the German furniture company, to design a chair. At first I wouldn't respond because it's such a complicated problem. When you think about starting to design a chair you say to yourself, "My God, what am I doing here?" It seems like Mount Everest. How can you take a basic structure and reinvent it one more time? By my rules, designing a chair can't be a stylistic reinterpretation. It has to be an integral and essential event. It can't just hang another coat on four legs and a seat. When Fehlbaum asked me to do a new chair, I avoided it because it was like asking me to find the meaning of life while standing on one foot. It's impossible. It's like a Talmudic question.

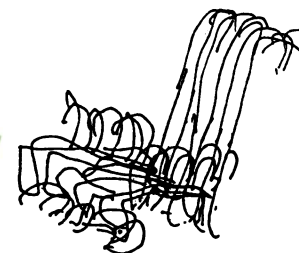
Frank Gehry  
Sketches for Power Play chair 1990 (details)  
pencil on paper  
9 x 12 in.  
Collection Frank Gehry



Fehlbaum is a very knowledgeable man who has built furniture in Europe and comes from a long family tradition; they're friends with the Thonet family, and it's all intertwined. I asked Fehlbaum what the issues were, and he gave me a laundry list. He had thought about it a lot and said what was needed was a chair different from those being made for the office. The ergonomic chairs of the 1970s, which move in different directions and have movable joints, had led us to new expectations. The chair could no longer be a hard thing that you just sat on, but you couldn't have upholstery everywhere, either. What was needed was a structure — in wood, he thought — that would respond ergonomically but would be simpler than the ball-joints and high-tech details that everyone was doing, like Emilio Ambasz and Giancarlo Piretti with their Vertebra chair. Fehlbaum thought that all those things were too complicated for a general side chair or café chair or people chair; ten years ago he described the chair I've done now. Back then I started by thinking about the chairs I knew that had the qualities of integrity and flexibility. Certainly there was the Thonet chair, but as far as I was concerned, it had the problem of being an innovative structure compromised by a separate attached seat. It didn't have the oneness of my Easy Edges and Rough Edges furniture, which I also wanted for my new chair. Then there was Aalto, but his pieces were a little harder and also separated their elements — a heavy support structure and a light seating structure. And Eames got flexibility with steel and rubber joints, which at that time was a breakthrough but still didn't fit my definition of a complete, one-piece chair with structure and surface completely integrated into a single unit.

The only objects I started fantasizing about were baskets; I don't know why. When I was a kid, my father used to bring home wicker furniture a lot, and maybe that stuck in my memory. And as a kid I used to play with wooden bushel-baskets. We used to sit on them, and they bounced around, but I don't think the design came consciously from that. It's the way I work, and I was intuitively exploring wood. At the time, I wasn't thinking of it so much as laminated as I was of just wood bent in some wonderful way, whether steam-bent or shaped and woven like a basket to get the strength of the weaving. The models I first made for Fehlbaum actually did look like orange crates with backs sticking up. But the people at Vitra looked at the designs and said they wouldn't work. Since I knew Fehlbaum liked my work and wanted me to succeed, I assumed they were right and stopped it. Then three years ago Knoll asked me to do furniture, and I thought they were nuts. I said I'd tried to do it with Vitra, but it just hadn't worked. Vitra is in Germany, and Knoll is in East Greenville, North Carolina, but as far as I'm concerned, East Greenville might as well be Germany. It seems the same distance from me in L.A., and I said there was no way that I could work that far away. I remembered Eames had a workshop, and I used to go there when I was a kid. When I did my Easy Edges furniture I had a little workshop in Robert Irwin's studio in Los Angeles where I played with corrugated cardboard. I worked with cardboard because I could control it. I used my own money, and the

I'm really not interested in designing fancy furniture that sells for a lot of money



furniture didn't cost a lot to play with until we got serious with it. I told Knoll that the only way I could work was like that. I didn't think anyone would take me up on it, because I'd already tried it out on Fehlbaum. I said we'd like to set up a little workshop, but that it was just not financially feasible. I told that to Marshall Cogan, who then owned Knoll, and Marshall, who's kind of a high flyer, said, "You've got it." Within six weeks I had it, and we were playing. And six weeks after that we had some chairs.

With the Easy Edges cardboard pieces, I had in mind making the Volkswagen of furniture. In 1973 we ended up making pieces for seven dollars and then had to sell them for seven times that. It was so-called high-style design, but it was cheap and accessible, and people bought it. I'm really not interested in designing fancy furniture that sells for a lot of money. But saying that and accomplishing it are two different things. I'm disappointed that these Knoll pieces are costing as much as they are; the prices have risen a little since we did our first estimates. The problem is that the technology, from the point of view of the vendors who make it, is very complicated. From the point of view of me, the designer, it seems very simple and matter-of-fact, but from their standpoint they haven't done something like this before. It's hard for me to believe that. The Eames chairs have been made, bushel-baskets have been made. How do people make those? It seems to me that everything's already there. But in the world we live in — and in America more than anywhere else — there's such resistance. Maybe Knoll should wait another year and really get things perfect, but they've invested a hell of a lot of money, and I suspect that something like this has to have some return before they go forward. And given how much they've invested, I don't feel they're being arbitrary by going ahead now.

Two-and-a-half years after we started, we're going to market. But now that the themes I've developed on this project are clear, I wish I could start all over again and really go further. I said to Knoll that I'd like to take the language we've developed and work from the manufacturing side back to design. I'm now encountering the people at Knoll that I begged them to let me work with two years ago. I don't know whether they were there or not, whether they didn't know what I was talking about, or whether I didn't ask the questions the right way — it could have been any of those things. I'd like to see where these ideas can go. I'd also like to take this structural concept — which started out as intuition and was then worked out through trial and error in the workshop — and plug it into a computer to rationalize the forms. I'd like to maximize the forms from an engineering standpoint so that they're more efficient. I think maybe that would lead to the Volkswagen again, because I always feel the less material the better. And for me, the end of a project always feels like a beginning. When everyone else is ready for the ending, I'm just ready to begin. It's been the story of my life. I have to finish things, but I also thank God when there's a new project coming along so I can go forward.