

BIRTH OF AN OFFICE CHAIR



Alberto Meda at Vitra in Basel during the development of the Physix chair
Photo: Bettina Matthiessen

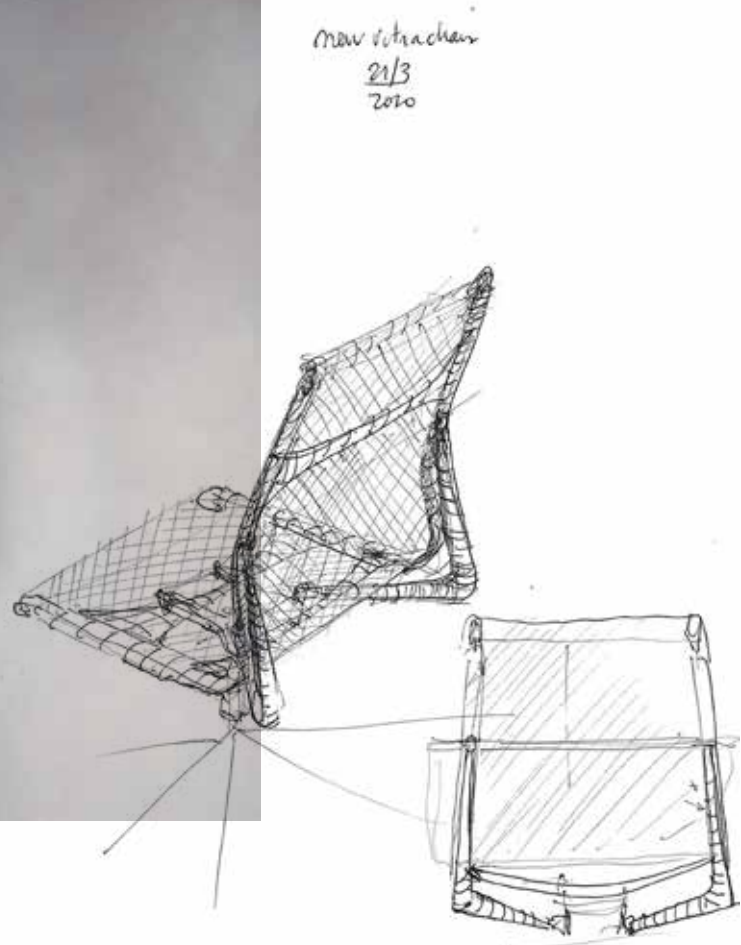
Vitra Physix chair
(black), 2012
Photo: Florian Böhm

No mean feat for design cowboys

There is a marked difference between the design of a chair-chair and an office chair. And Alberto Meda has no difficulty in explaining just what that is. Having inadvertently become well versed in the factors that define an office chair, he has learned how to make a piece of furniture that facilitates a sitting posture while contorting every which way, in soothing and active accord with the human body. Not only that, he has managed to apply clever technologies subtly, to achieve an apparently light form, free of any visible means of support or clunky high-tech characteristics.

TEXT Sandra Hofmeister





Meda Vitracchi
21/3
2010

Vitra Physix chair (white), 2012
Photo: Florian Böhm

Sketches for the Vitra Physix chair, 2010
© Alberto Meda

Detail of the Vitra Physix chair (white)

Vitra Physix chair (black)

Vitra Physix chair (white)
Photo: Florian Böhm

Milan-based designer Alberto Meda is without a doubt one of the major experts when it comes to chairs. His sophisticated constructions might appear simple and light, but they hide complex technologies. For the DAMN° exhibition at Palazzo Litta during the Salone in Milan, the Italian master has chosen to present Physix, his latest chair for Vitra, in order to make visible his design approach. In pleasant anticipation of the event, he talked to us about his experience with office chairs and aluminium extrusions, the role of technology in their making, and the luck needed by designers in their projects.

DAMN°: Designing a successful chair is like entering the Champions League, and office chairs must be at the top of this supreme class. How many of these have you designed over the years – have you ever counted?

Alberto Meda: (laughs) Well... many years ago, in 1990, I designed a chair for Alias called Frame. It was the progenitor of a series of chairs that all had the same constructive modality. The idea was to combine

an aluminium extrusion with an inserted textile and pressure-cast elements that keep the textile in tension. This idea was realised in different typologies – a chaise longue, an easy chair, and others. Over the years, Alias had built up a considerable catalogue of different typologies based on the same construction concept. Then, at a certain point, Vitra offered me the possibility to design an office chair. The theme of a moving seat was not simple. I wanted to design a piece of lightweight furniture, not something with a black box and a mysterious mechanism but with a clear form that is easy to sense. After several twists and turns, the Meda Chair was born.

DAMN°: From the Meda Chair, released in 1996, to Physix, your latest chair for Vitra, the idea of the office in general has pretty much changed. Nowadays, every chair that makes the user feel comfortable is considered an office chair...

AM: Even if the border between home and office is much more nuanced than in former times, not every chair can be considered an office chair.

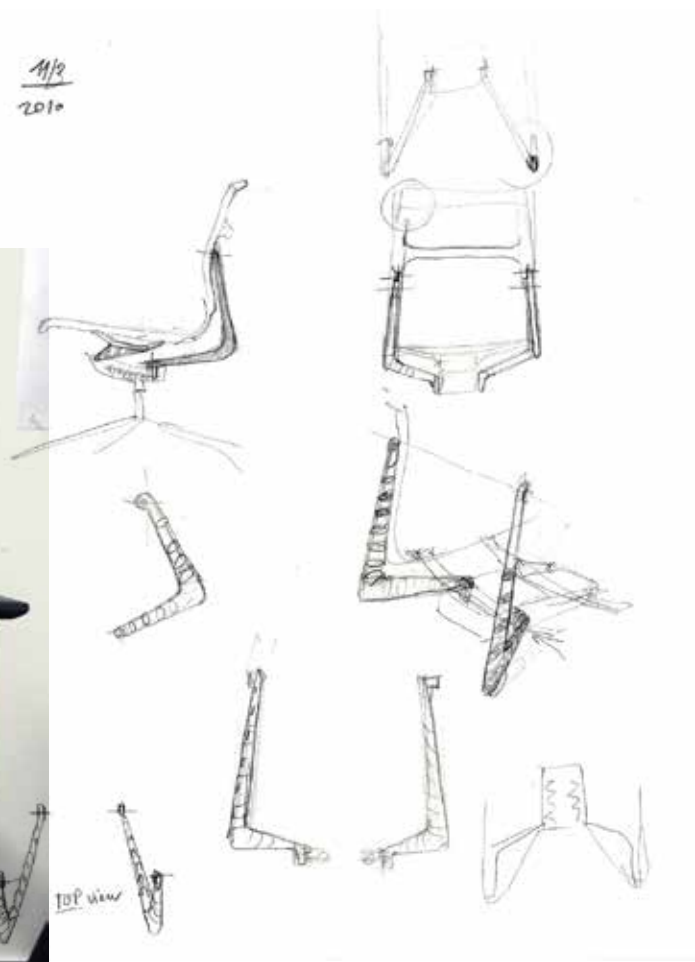
DAMN°: What do you think of this development?

AM: In a certain sense, the attempt has been to improve comfort while creating the possibility to pass from a working condition to that of relaxation, which means to adapt the chair to the needs of the user. And surely those needs are not stable. There must be the ability to move, to change position, and to exercise dynamism. We carried out intensive research in that direction. Physix is an answer to this tendency; its form is derived from the lumbar support profile – the office chair allows a synchronous movement of the seat and backrest, as well as a lot of flexibility, without the complication of height adjustment in the armrests. The chair's performance is due to its 'plastic' nature. In my eyes, development is moving in the direction of guaranteeing comfort and a better grade of freedom for the users.

DAMN°: Where does the name Physix come from?

AM: From the fact that the attention of the project is especially addressed to the relationship between the chair and the person's physicality.





Model for the frame of the Vitra Physix chair
© Alberto Meda

Sketches for the Vitra Physix chair, 2010
© Alberto Meda

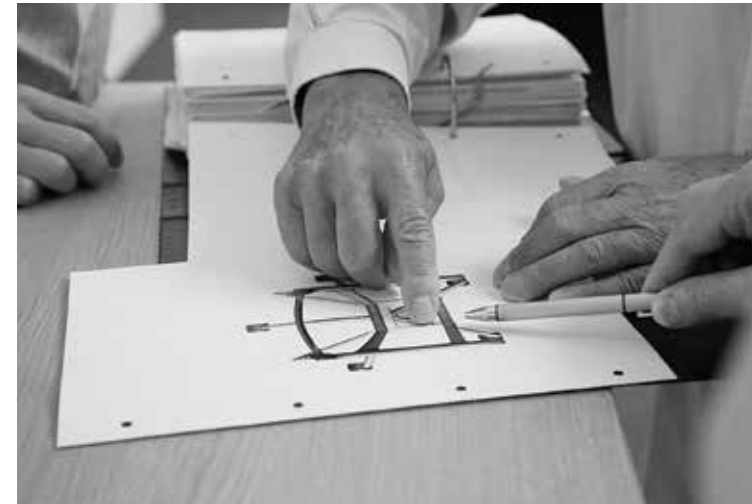
► Alberto Meda at Vitra in Basel during the development of the Physix chair
Photos: Bettina Matthiessen

DAMN°: Are you referring to the ergonomics?
AM: Yes, but I am also considering the fact that the human body has physical characteristics. This might be different from person to person, but still, when sitting on the chair, the body is in contact with a structure that is able to move and adapt, and that is not in conflict with the body.

DAMN°: What materials have you used for the chair and what makes these significant?
AM: Physix is made of a flexible structure, an elastic textile and a mechanical frame that stabilises. The flexible side-profiles have a controlled elasticity; because their sections are thin, an integrated hinge is needed in order to follow the movements of the body. The textile is inserted between the profiles and kept in tension. In addition, there is a mechanical element that guarantees the stability and flexibility of the whole. The structure is made of polyamide with different contents of glass fibre, depending on the component. This means that the material is tailor made. The side profiles contain a lower percentage of glass fibre than the elements underneath the seating. The possibility to differentiate between materials in the structure is a big advantage, because it allows for different performances. The result is a frame that is physically and also visually light. In former times, office chairs were pretty much fully upholstered and heavy looking. In contrast, Physix uses a textile that

supports the body and creates a thin, elastic structure without diminishing the comfort level. All together, the aesthetic is simple, agile, and elegant.

DAMN°: Is that the difference with former times, when technology was so much on display?
AM: In my eyes, this aspect only relates to the design approach. I personally try to hide the complexity and create simple objects. I think objects today must be simple, not banal; they must have a meaning, a long life, and be produced with as little material as possible so as to preserve material and energy. The trick is to use technologies not as an end in themselves, but as a tool to realise simple objects. In the case of Physix, the adopted technologies – be it the cast plastic or die-cast aluminium – integrate different functions. They reduce the number of components and derive an almost organic image. This is similar to the human hand, which is made of many elements that are put together, but every single one of these elements integrates its relation to the others. The designer's attention, therefore, should not primarily be on the form, but on the relationship between the different parts. The form then emerges slowly, as a consequence of the constructive coherencies. Once, high-tech had the aim of displaying the technology and emphasising it. I am against this idea. Technology must be adopted to produce simplicity.



Alberto Meda at Vitra in Basel during the development of the Physix chair
Photo: Bettina Matthiessen

The knitted fabric for the Vitra Physix chair
Photo: Florian Böhm

Detail of the Vitra Physix chair (black)
Photo: Florian Böhm



DAMN°: This is a nice thought.
AM: (laughs) Technology itself is not bad or good; it always just depends on how you use it...

DAMN°: What is your favourite project with Vitra?
AM: I have had so many of them, it is difficult to say... Seven or eight office chairs, table systems... I do not have a real favourite, but maybe I am most devoted to the very first project, the Meda Chair. At the beginning I could not have imagined there would be a positive outcome. That was a big surprise for me, a magnificent occurrence. But every new project is an occasion for understanding, an adventure, and a path. For sure, some projects went more smoothly than others, because they had the good fortune to find a harmonic conclusion. However, this fact is not dependent upon the designer's ability, but on many other unforeseen parameters. For this reason, designers need a good dose of luck. •

albertomeda.com / vitra.com

Alberto Meda is exhibiting his Physix chair for Vitra in an interpretation of the theme *A Matter of Perception: Tradition & Technology* hosted by DAMN° and Mosca Partners at Palazzo Litta in Milan during the Salone del Mobile, 12 to 17 April 2016.

lapalma



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