

## Splinters Podcast

### Furniture Design: On Chairs

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GR: Hi, this is Gary Rogowski. Thanks for joining me on Splinters. And thank you as well to our partner in education, Highland Woodworking. Please check out their Wood News, latest edition of Wood News. There's an interesting review of their new Workshop Wisdom, search engine. Check that out as well.

GR: Today's chat is with Ashley Piper and Bruce Branson Meyer on Chairs. We talked in a recent episode about design, but chair design is a different animal. It's like got five legs and horns and, you know, it's so completely different. And Bruce is in the process of designing a chair. Ash has done the one or have you done several now?

AP: No, I've really just done the one and then a couple stools and I have a whole host of chairs to sketch and material. So maybe this is good motivation.

GR: Did you find it a challenging project? That's a silly question. I withdraw it. How did you find the process of designing the chair?

AP: I do feel that is comparably difficult to other furniture pieces because I really want to hit all those marks. I want comfort. I want an interesting design. It's something you see from every angle. I think it's a piece of furniture you handle repeatedly all the time, even from different parts. It's not just the back. Your hands come in contact with the seat and the sides. And, you know, I think it's a more intimate piece. So it needs to be comfortable and it needs to feel good and it needs to look good. So it's definitely more challenging.

GR: Yeah. Bruce, how are you finding the experience of designing a chair? Just everything you thought it could be. Relaxing.

BB: It's everything and more. I honestly, I mean, I started thinking about this chair last summer. I mean, at the beginning, you know, after the first year was over, I've been thinking about it and working on it off and on ever since. And I'm having a hard time, you know, nailing it down just because I get inspired by something else, and then I want to adjust this, and then I am inspired. I have not changed the style of chair, and I'm kind of working on a lounge chair. I'm holding myself back from going, oh, I really just a ladder back would be really cool. I think I want to just go do that. So I'm, you know, I'm not letting my focus wander, but it's it's so fun.

GR: It's so hard to understand at first how the three cornered or the three-headed beast. There you go. The three-headed beast of comfort and engineering and beauty. They're all together. And when you push too much on one on the engineering part, changes the comfort or changes the style or the beauty of it. And it's a real balancing act. And it's hard to do. I've been doing a lot of research on Hans Wegner. And he designed 600 chairs in his lifetime. Geez. 600 chairs. My gosh. And probably two or three that are just iconic and are being reproduced to this day. And but 600 is an astonishing number. He was interesting because he started out as a cabinet maker and took, did an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker. So he learned how to how to do woodworking. And I think that, that probably helped him. My goodness, that's a lot of work and a lot of time. Because of all the projects that I've done, I think chair design is the most time consuming.

AP: I agree with you. I feel like it's been the same for me. Anytime I even sit down to rough sketch things, I feel like I get immersed in it and it's just so many different parts of it to think about, well, if I turn it this way, how is that going to change that perspective? Yeah, it seems really easy to get lost in.

GR: And it's so easy to, you know, change a part and just have that affect your whole outlook on why is my shop so poorly equipped? Or why can't I build this the way I'd like to build it. So that's that's a challenge. The starting point and the ending point of a chair design, I think is an interesting journey to watch. So Bruce, is your chair design now back at the beginning where it started, or has it changed?

BB: It's not all the way at the beginning, but it's close to it's really reflective of the gestural drawings that I did in the very beginning that made it, I guess, more of a, I don't know, more motion to it. To try and engineer all the parts that I needed, I was losing the motion, the activity that was happening in it. And for very practical reasons, of course. I mean, it was going to be a smarter build, maybe. And now this one, I don't know, I learned a lot because I went one direction, and I thought, "Oh, that's how I can solve, solve my construction issues this way." And then I kind of go back and go, well, now I can apply that. I learned it going down that road. Now I can go back to the other Y in the road and apply it to my first design. So it's certainly all a learning process. And then I've got to go back and make sure my measurements are right, you know, and make sure that it's comfortable. And honestly, who knows where this will end up. Like you've always told us, it's going to be a prototype no matter where you get. And I'm just excited to see that prototype. Yeah.

GR: Do you find that gestural drawing is an important part of the process then? I mean, could you have done this without those drawings?

BB: No, no. And you know Ashley was talking about drawing and redrawing, and it's hard to draw a chair. I mean, if you're not a, you know, a technical illustrator or something, you just don't know where to go. Yeah, sure, I'm really good at getting on my computer and doing a side view and a front view to get the feel of the piece for myself. Even a top view, you can sort of put together. But once you want to try and do a three-quarter view or something, especially if you're using all kinds of arcs and things, which I'm using in this, I can't do it. And I can barely draw it. So here comes the model, right? That's where the models are important. And that's probably why I've been working on it for so long, is just that they're a lot more work than something that's rectilinear.

GR: Yeah. So in the Online Mastery Program, the chair project is in the fifth term, the second to the last term. And I urge people to make a sittable prototype, which doesn't have to look like the chair, but it has to have the angles and heights, maybe some vague shapes, but you can take it farther if you'd like. But it

has to be something you can sit in and say, this is going to work. This is not going to work. I can fix this. I can change this. I've taken a saw to a student's prototype chair and we've sawN off legs and things. And that's one aspect. And then a quarter scale model, the aesthetic model, I think, also gives us a lot of information. And so doing a full-scale model and a quarter scale model is a part of that process in order to build the chair. So I just wanted to let people know about this process. It's a long one.

GR: And you know if you put a box, cardboard box around the chair and take away all the stuff that isn't chair, you've got four times the waste sitting there or 10 times. The chair is very small in that space. But so everything's got to be right. And that's that's very challenging. I used to have us do this when we were meeting in person, but I would take my stool and put it on a bench and everyone would have to draw it. But they would have everyone would have a different perspective. You can't draw it by drawing out the shapes of the legs. You have to draw the space, you know how many negative spaces do you have? And if you draw those correctly, then you've got half a chance. It's tough. It is tough.

GR: So thinking about, well, the Hans Wegner chair, the wishbone chair that I've been studying has 14 pieces, I think, in it, 14 pieces of wood. And they're all pretty tiny. They're all pretty tiny. So everything's got to be right.

AP: Have you seen the Italian chairs? They're Fratelli Levaggi I think it's Chiavari is their chair. They're like a bar stool chairs. They are so dainty and stylish. They have such a lightness about them that.

GR: What was the name again?

AP: Fratelli Levaggi. And they're just so classy and light. And I think they hit the negative space just right.

GR: Are they wood or metal?

AP: Yes. Yeah. They're wood.

GR: Yeah. Wow.

AP: Yeah, they're delightful.

GR: Wow. Cool. Yeah.

AP It makes me think of that same way that Hans Wegner just kind of hits that balance of material and negative space that's just so appealing. They take away the weight, but the structure remains. It's interesting.

GR: Right. Right. Yeah, it's really fascinating to when you look at the Wegner chair, you know, if you're if you don't like Danish modern, it's just some dowel rod. It's just brown dowel rod. They rounded the ends. Big deal. Oh, yeah, it's got a hoop back. Big deal. I see that down at the diner. There isn't a view on it when you 360 the chair that isn't intriguing because of some very simple curves. They give it strength and mystery. Actually, I think it's a fascinating design. I'm trying to think when I designed my cafe chair, it didn't lead me down a road. Do you have ideas for other chairs now, Bruce?

BB: No, no.

GR: Your mind is taken up. That's what mine was. I was just completely filled with this one idea. And I'm still refining.

BB: I'm going to focus on this one now.

GR: Yeah, well, no, I think that's why I was just wondering if any new ideas came up. Yeah, there's still refinement. I just think that this is such a, not arduous, but a long process of going, oh, yeah, I could, I could do that differently. And I could change that. That might help. And they can be very subtle. Like the Wegner chair, I stared at it for years. And it was only last summer I looked at it and went, Oh, those front legs tip in towards each other. I never noticed it. I've been looking at it so long. You just notice that they're like an inch and an eighth round at the top, tapering down to three quarters of an inch. So you say, oh, they're tapered. And that's all that's all I saw. But then I really looked at it and I went, oh, they're tipped in. That's so interesting. And then I started to notice that there are no perpendicular pieces hitting the ground. Everything's tipped just a little bit.

GR: So very first year of the Online Program, I found this interesting article on Mughal Khan of India. And it was it was an interesting portrait of him that I think I've got the name right. It was an article in the New York Times and Muslim design, but also Indian design. So there was a human, but incredible detail. One of my students was Indian. And he said, did you know that the Taj Mahal, all the columns are tipped out two degrees? I'm like, no, I didn't know that.

AP: Interesting. Yeah.

GR: They're tipped out two degrees. So if there's an earthquake, they will fall away from the tombs that are inside. Just little stuff like that. That's the point of this story. It's just two degrees. When you look at the Taj Mahal, you say, oh, columns, you don't think about that. But it's that sort of attention, as you mentioned earlier, Bruce, about considered design. And I think it's so interesting about the Wegner pieces over and over and over again they're thinking about stuff. And yet you can do all of that and then end up with a piece that's comfortable and well engineered and as ugly as sin. And like one of my students once, this was Jim some years ago, you sat down on that chair and you went, dang, hold it. I didn't say I didn't think it was a very pretty chair, but it was really comfortable. First time out of the blocks. I mean, it's like, wow, hitting all three of those things at once. Comfort and engineering and beauty is, that's a tough one.

AP: I would say do you think that just certain styles of chairs tend to be more difficult than others to build, like a lounge chair versus a dining chair, like the style of them is more difficult to design?

GR: Oh, lounge chairs are easy. Come on. Throw some cushions on it. What do you got? I mean, well, those, you know, the wing chairs and those upholstered pieces are, I'm not going to say they're easier to design. No, I'm not going to say that. But you're covering up the structure. So you can do whatever you need to under there as long as you've got, you know, enough room for the padding and the upholstery to fit around it. My Club Chair was based on an upholstered chair and doesn't look anything like it. But so in some respects, yeah, I think upholstered chairs are a little bit easier. I really like the idea of the Thonet café chairs, you know, all the hoop back. And it's all completely knock down. And they made thousands and thousands, and they're still making them. It's this marriage of engineering and pretty nice, pretty

fairly pleasing design. Not all of them are great. But, you know, you look at a Café chair and you go, oh, yeah, but they're light, they're comfortable enough for, you know, an afternoon of drinking or lunch. It's hard to, it's hard to improve on something like that. That's one of the ones that, that's a home run.

AP: And those were like the first mass produced chairs, weren't they?

GR: Factories all over Europe. Yeah.

AP: Kind of hard to compete with that.

GR: And they flat packed. Back then, they flat packed. So the hoop in the back, which became the rear legs, a hoop for the seat. The front legs were just screwed on. Yeah.

AP: It had a cane seat, didn't it?

GR: Yeah, so that was a, you know, so they would make the, I assume they would bend the seat piece and then THE cane seat into it. There it is. Yeah, there were probably there was a railing around and that connected the front to rear legs. But all that stuff is just screwed on. Remarkable, just remarkable. But I think part of the problem is that we're so stuck with these iconic chairs like the Wegner chair or the Thonet chair. I'm not stuck on the Klismos chair, but that ancient Greek piece, that it's hard to think about other ways of doing it.

AP: I've been looking at some other Brazilian designers too, Bruce, since we talked a little bit. And I was just so curious. I noticed from that same time period, I think it's fascinating a lot of the chairs look very 90 degrees in the seat to the back. And then it started to make me wonder, you know was it just form over function? Like it was like kind of a renaissance of building playful designs because a lot of the chairs have you know like the circular patterns or like these interesting pillows at the back or like extra parts you know that are unnecessary for functionality of the chair but really make this whole big design thing happen. But I noticed so many of the seats in these like you know lounge or like kind of hangout chairs have these 90° looking back to seat and I'm in my mind thinking like that looks so, I don't know, uncomfortable.

BB: Was it 90° and then they tilted it back so that it?

AP: Some of them they're not even tilted as I was looking through. I even wrote the one gentleman down Sergio Rodrigues because I was like angles the angles that's been trying to drive me a little crazy. I was so curious. I need somebody to put a bevel gauge in there for me. Let me know. Where's the seat to the back? Is that 10° and it just looks very 90 to me because of the design overall? Yeah, it's fascinating.

BB: It's funny. So many of his chairs that I am aware of were these super over fluffy stuffed almost pillows on top of frames. He would even just put webbing kind of underneath the cushions. They look so comfortable. On those, you don't have to worry about an angle, right? You just got to, it's like a beanbag chair.

AP: Yeah, it'll fit you. You don't have to fit the chair.

BB: Right.

GR: It's difficult in chair design to step out of your design vocabulary to think about things in a different way, you know, instead of, okay, here's the side of my cabinet and here's the other side of my cabinet connected together and the shelf goes here. Thinking about swoops and curves and angles and it's just so very different as a result, very challenging. So I'm looking forward to seeing your chair sometime this year, I hope.

BB: I hope to get sort of a rough prototype together. I'm actually looking at how I'm constructing it in this prototype. So it's taken me a little bit longer than just, you know, screwing it together.

GR: Yeah, I find that that's useful though. Yeah. 'Cause you can work it out and take notes. 'Cause otherwise you gotta build a suitable prototype and then build a prototype and then build a real chair.

BB: Right. I got to get going on the real piece. We're running out of time here.

AP: Yeah. Mill up what you can and let it start to acclimate while you're figuring out some of the other joinery. That's what I'd even did with mine. But I built my prototype with the process in mind for the next one, and it really helped a lot. Yeah, I felt a lot more prepared. It was like building a second chair rather than the first.

GR: Right. Closing thoughts? I don't have anything else.

AP: Chairs are fun, though. They're difficult, but I think that they're a great thing to try to dive into if you want a challenge. Yeah, there's so many different ways to approach it and change them. So yeah I don't think you should be discouraged even if it's a different skill set.

BB: Honestly, I think that what I'm going to do next is I have no problem building other people's chairs. I think I'm going to find three or four different chairs that, you know, I'm going to learn. I'm going to learn. Somebody else has already figured out how to build it. I don't need to stress with that. I just need to learn how to construct it myself and practice that. So probably do that before I dive into another chair.

GR: Well, start with something easy, like the Gerrit Rietveld chairs, you know, so it's one stick laying on top of another.

AP: Chair as loosely defined.

GR: I mean, I thought about, okay, if I build this Wishbone chair of Wegner's what do I need to do? I was like, oh my God. All right, well, I gotta make the bending form. I have to figure out the angle. Oh, yeah, it's just everything is just a little, everything is just a little bit off. So it's challenging, you have to choose your design, design wise.

AP: Yeah. Yeah, I think a Democratic chair is on my list next. So I bought a bunch of white pine that's beautiful, straight, perfect for seat blanks. So I have it. I need to do it now.

GR: I'm sorry, a Democratic chair?

AP: Yes. It's designed by, I think, Curtis Buchanan. It's a lot of draw knife work. So it's a stick chair form.

GR: But it's a Windsor chair.

AP: Yeah.

GR: That's Curtis's strength. Yes, absolutely. Great. Well, this has been fun. Thanks very much for both of you chatting with me again.

AP: Likewise, thank you.

BB: Yeah, thanks. This was fun. Take care, you guys.

GR: This has been Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thanks for joining us. Be sure to check us out at [Northwestwoodworking.com](http://Northwestwoodworking.com). There's information there about our Online Mastery Program and the Setting Up Shop series. So please check that out. And if you have any questions on woodworking, finishes, joinery, lumber, you name it, we'll try to answer them. Send me a note at studio at [northwestwoodworking.com](http://northwestwoodworking.com). And thank you again to our partner in education, Highland Woodworking. Please check out their latest catalog at [highlandwoodworking.com/woodnews](http://highlandwoodworking.com/woodnews) for a great interview with Thomas Lee Nielsen of Lie-Nielsen Toolworks. Thanks very much. Take care, adios.