

The New Shape

Bold contemporary seating design is reinventing what it feels like to feel good. *By Monica Khemsurov*
Photographs by Sarah Anne Ward

of Comfort

Designer Ara Thorose's Ulu chair is not for slackers. The backrest cradles your tailbone, but the low profile promotes good posture: The longer you sit in it, the more effort it takes to sit up straight. \$10,000; arathorose.com

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airs are often a bellwether of broader societal shifts. What makes one seem comfortable, or covetable, evolves with time and taste: Stiff Chippendale chairs suited the formal dining habits of wealthy Americans in the 1800s, but in leisure-obsessed 1960s and '70s Europe, seating turned softer and more colorful. "Design is meant to suit the way we live now," says Emma Scully, who runs a furniture gallery on New York's Upper East Side. "When our chairs change, it's typically because the way we live is changing."

After more than two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, our definition of comfort is definitely in transition. It can mean the traditional cocooning feel of a La-Z-Boy, but just as often it's simply something that you like to look at.

Furniture stores are packed with chairs right now that appear to be art objects rather than something you might actually sit on. With its plush appearance and dramatic cantilever, Ara Thorose's Ulu lounge chair (previous page) almost looks like it would collapse if sat on. But it's supremely solid, constructed around an undulating steel frame and encased with foam, then wrapped in a tube of wool upholstery. It's comfortable, too, in a bouncy, springy way that gives you a break before you're back on your feet. "We're living in a time with new sources of stress," Thorose says. "We want chairs that hug us physically and emotionally."

Patricia Urquiola, who's designed interiors for the Mandarin Oriental in Barcelona and Il Sereno on Lake Como in

Italy, says that comfort now might be just as much about a seat covered in squishy foam as it is about having something colorful or unexpected in your home.

"I like not only the physical comfort but also the mental comfort," Urquiola says. A comfortable chair, like her Dudet design for Cassina (right), "allows you to obtain a different ergonomics. It doesn't have to be an office chair. It doesn't have to force you to a single position. It should give you a visual comfort as much as a tactile comfort. It should let you find your comfort zone, moving and adapting to your changing postures."

This sort of thing has happened before, and relatively recently. In 1972 a little-known Norwegian designer named Terje Ekstrem created a bizarre-looking, spiderlike foam chair. Compared with the austere wooden seats that were popular in Scandinavia at the time, like Hans Wegner's Elbow or Alvar Aalto's E60 stool, it represented not only a novel aesthetic but also a totally new way of sitting: Its design encouraged users to move and slouch around freely, which Ekstrem believed was more comfortable for the human body than being forced to sit still. Yet the chair looked so odd that he couldn't persuade a single furniture company to produce it until 12 years later, when the ascent of postmodernism and a spike in Scandinavians' disposable wealth made it a hit.

Forty years after it was introduced, it's surging in popularity again, but this time for different reasons—it's gone viral on Instagram. On social media, where we increasingly put our homes on public display, there's cultural capital in owning unique pieces that showcase your personality. "There's a sense in which these objects now function as props," Scully says. "When you're taking pictures of yourself, the unusual things just stand out more."

That said, we did sit-test the chairs you see here—all of them, except the Ekstrem, newly designed—and can confirm that they feel every bit as good as they look.



RIFF ON A CLASSIC

A puffy, three-legged seat is not a common sight, but the Dudet chair by Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola references an iconic 1970s design: the Pigreco by Tobia Scarpa. Where the Pigreco has a slim wooden frame and a separate cushioned seat, though, the Dudet is one continuous, cozy hug of a chair. Its all-over padded upholstery and wraparound arms fully envelop you. But despite its seamless appearance, a hidden zipper in the seat cover means it can be taken apart and recycled at the end of its life, so you can rest easy in more ways than one. \$2,235; cassina.com



THE LOUNGER

Danish designer Kim Richardt's unusual lounge for Copenhagen brand Frama had an equally unusual inspiration: a simple looped metal keychain with two protruding ends. "I looked at it and thought, 'This could be a chair!'" he says. "But only if it was nice to sit in." He and Frama spent two years trying to achieve that, eventually landing on a low, Bauhaus-style seat with a looped tubular-steel frame and an upwardly curved canvas seat. It slides your body back into a relaxed position that's perfect for late-night friend hangs or a lazy Sunday with a book. \$3,698; 180thestore.com



THE SLING, REIMAGINED

For years, Slash Objects founder Arielle Assouline-Lichten has been making austere benches, tables, and lamps out of slabs and cubes of solid marble. But for her first chair, she combines the stone's cool, sculptural presence with a seat that's actually comfortable: a padded mohair sling that conforms to your body and lets you sink in between its arms. "It has a cocoonlike feeling," Assouline-Lichten says. Even the stone itself, available in white, black, and travertine rosso (above), is surprisingly cozy: Its surface feels almost velvety to the touch. \$8,950; slashobjects.com



THE BACK-IN-VOGUE REBEL

First released in 1984, the Ekstrem chair has become a major status object again: Fashion influencers, real estate agents, and design brands are all posting pictures of it holding court in their living rooms and showrooms. Few of them know that for Norwegian designer Terje Ekstrem, it was as much an art piece as a manifesto, a rebellion against chairs that force us to sit in one position. Its unique shape allows you to sit forward, sideways with your legs up on the armrests, or backward with your torso against its backrest—or to fidget among all three, as Mother Nature intended. \$2,999; dwr.com

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THE ALMOST RECLINER

Created for the “Anti Chairs” exhibit at Emma Scully Gallery this summer, Bradley Bowers’s Frank hardly resembles a chair at all—there’s no obvious seat, and the tubular frame gives it a psychedelic pool noodle vibe. Yet the Brooklyn, N.Y., designer obsessed over its ergonomics and optimized the central opening so it’s just big enough to rest your bum without getting stuck. He also streamlined its diameter to be cushy but not bulky. The sense of mystery was intentional: “I don’t want someone to immediately understand how to use it,” Bowers says. “I want them to discover it, then realize how much they like it.” \$12,000; emmascullygallery.com



A STRAIGHT-BACKED ALTERNATIVE

Last year, Gregory Beson decided to give himself a challenge: Could he make a comfortable chair out of a few simple pieces of walnut? The result was the GB100, which looks stiff and spartan but feels good to sit in because of its barely perceptible, eight-degree backrest recline and T-shaped construction. It makes your body “feel as though it’s floating,” Beson says. The minimal shape is suitable for pretty much any use, whether as a dining chair or an occasional perch in the entry hall. Options with a padded seat are also available. \$2,750; gregorybeson.com



ONE THAT SEEMS WOBBLY, BUT ISN'T

The Split Circle chair by Study Hall looks like a cross between a child’s toy and a Constantin Brancusi sculpture, as if a yoga ball had been filled with cement. Playfully constructed from three primary shapes and rendered in solid ash, it’s elevated by its minimal, totemic form and palette. For its designer, Taylor Hall of Study Hall, the chair’s comfort is less about how it feels on your backside and more about a holistic sensation of support. “Sitting on it you feel super-grounded because of its strong central core,” she says. It’s useful as a chair to meditate in, but it makes a great living room accent chair, too. \$2,200; studyhall.us