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DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Chairs With Talking Points

By [PENELOPE GREEN](#)

AHMED KHOUJA'S Bean rocker is not exactly a precarious seat, but neither is it particularly stable. Shaped like a slatted lima bean, it requires your participation — to cross your legs just so and use your stomach muscles — to avoid tipping over.

The two ideas that the Bean embodies — first, that sitting is a collaboration between chair and human, and second, that sitting right now is an activity requiring alertness, and is not merely a matter of plopping down — were evident in many of the chairs at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair. The fair, the design world's annual four-day American showcase that ended Tuesday, included more than 600 exhibitors from 38 countries at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York.

These chairs invite you to sit for a bit, but please don't get too comfortable.

And don't call them chairs.

"I don't use the word so much," said Mr. Khouja, 29, an architect and designer for Knoend, an eco-design company in San Francisco (knoend.com) who prefers to describe his Beans, which will cost between \$150 and \$250, as body props. The word chair, he said, "has all these preconceived notions about how to sit a certain way." Mr. Khouja is interested in what he called ground-based seating — the ground being "the mother of all seats," he said — and the way sitting on the ground forces you to tweak your position to stay comfortable. "The best seat you can come up with," he continued, "is one that's just comfortable enough, but encourages you to keep adjusting. Your body doesn't want to sit in the same position indefinitely."

The Beans were housed in a square white tent hung with blue plastic lanterns cunningly conceived by Ivy Chuang, Knoend's design director, to be their own packaging. Ms. Chuang and Mr. Khouja wore bright green T-shirts and served cookies and pomegranate juice to visitors scrambling happily in and out of Mr. Khouja's tiny rockers.

Chairs matter in design probably more than any other domestic object. To paraphrase Paola Antonelli, senior curator of design and architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, in creating a chair, heaven (that would be the creative spark) and earth (the process of making things) have to come together for "design's sublime unit of measure, the human body." And not only does a good chair have to carry your bottom comfortably; it now must also be eloquent, and come with talking points about the times we live in.

The chair of the moment, the plastic cantilevered Myto (about \$440, from icfsource.com), which has been making the rounds of Europe's furniture fairs, is described by its designer, Konstantin Grcic, as being shaped like an animal about to pounce. Its handlers were offering Myto-abilia — a Myto magazine and an adorable Myto miniature that fits in the palm of your hand — to an audience that included Adam Glassman, creative director of O, the Oprah magazine. He climbed onto the stage where the chairs were displayed and sat in a deep-plum-colored version, his eyes squinting in the hot lights. "I've been looking for something that's out of the box," he said approvingly.

Brent White, who calls himself an objectologist, also imagines animated furniture. His critterlike Kunigi Unus (\$1,000 each) do seem ready to scramble off on their own. Fashioned as possum-size footed pods, with a knobby appendage on the front and a hole at the back, they are designed to fit together like children's beads, and be sat upon like a small, fat pouf. "I wanted to create a relationship between the objects themselves that I'm not a part of," said Mr. White, whose San Francisco company is called Impeti (impeti.com). "I like the idea that when you leave your apartment, your couch and your chair might talk about you, and when you come home at night you might look around and think, Hmm, there's something different here."

Mr. White was inspired by the Italian designer Andrea Branzi, whose mid-1980s series, called Domestic Animals, conceived of furniture as pets, though Mr. Branzi's "animals" — all animal hide and prickly wood — seemed barely tamed. The soft-foam Kunigi — the word is Esperanto for unite, Mr. White said — you just want to cuddle.

Stefan Knox's LoJoBalls are the children of poufs and beanbag chairs, he said. Perch on them when the night is young, and unzip them as your energy flags. Filled with two inflatable pouches, they will support your back the way a pouf never can, and with less mass than a big squashy beanbag (\$120 to \$150; lojoballusa.com).

Body architecture is another way designers talk about their furniture. A massive aluminum club chair, padded with vinyl that looked like pebbled steel, recalled the early stages of Iron Man's carapace. "People call it the Captain Kirk chair," said its designer, Bilhenry Walker, who is from Milwaukee, "because it looks like it's going to take off. It's a flyer. Someone said, it looks like it belongs in the Space Age. I said, Honey, this is the Space Age." For his part, Mr. Walker calls it simply Sofa Chair (\$14,000; bilhenrygallery.com).

Laurie Beckerman's white tête-à-tête rocker (\$11,000; lauriebeckerman.com) looks and works like a seesaw: sitting in it becomes a partnership between you and another. When Ms. Beckerman began working on her first prototype last year, which she made from plywood lacquered white to look like Corian, she started to see tête-à-têtes everywhere, she said. "There was a steel one, horribly uncomfortable and made by a man, of course, but I didn't let it freak me out." This year, Ms. Beckerman brought back her rocker, made this time in actual Corian.

A chair can be both problem and solution. Nick DeMarco's XS chair, the winning candidate in a studio at the California College of the Arts sponsored by Bevara Design House and

[Walmart.com](#), is made from end-roll scrap vinyl. Mr. DeMarco stuffed his with empty Vitamin Water bottles and paper trash, but his idea is that you fill it with whatever you like. It might be for sale at [walmart.com](#) sometime this summer, for about \$60. By e-mail, Mr. DeMarco, who is 21, explained that one of his goals for the project had been to highlight the “negative aspects of Wal-Mart/mass consumer disposable culture” and that he was still conflicted about making a product to be sold by the big box giant; if he demurs, Bevara ([bevaradesign.com](#)) will sell the chair. “It’s been something I’m still mulling over a lot,” Mr. DeMarco said, “but ultimately I think it is a positive thing for its potential to reach an audience that is not all that green-minded yet.”

The most eloquent seating encouraged you to not really sit at all. Maruja Fuentes, a Puerto Rican designer ([marujafuentes.com](#)), has made what she calls leaning molds, which are molded plastic elbow shelves that fit together like a puzzle and are intended to be used in public spaces like bus stops. for folks to lean up against, the way a cowboy leans against a stile.

And three young New York designers who call themselves Rich, Brilliant, Willing (for Theo Richardson, Charles Brill and Alexander Todd Williams) presented Perch, which was shown downtown at Kiosk on Spring Street ([kioskiosk.com](#)). Kiosk is a highly curated, satisfyingly obsessive temple of ordinary objects like pencils, manila envelopes, a tin of Mentholatum, a dinged-up stepping stool, which this week surrounded Perch, an assemblage of PVC tubing and copper pipes (\$1,700 at Kiosk or [richbrilliantwilling.com](#)).

“It’s a transient spot, a temporary resting place,” said Mr. Richardson, who explained that Perch was based on the way Excel spreadsheets display information. “We continue to be inundated by all sorts of visual data, so it’s a response to that, and it is meant to appropriate that, too.”

To me, Perch looked more like a Tinkertoy, and it felt like a fence rail, not totally uncomfortable but definitely not an object to hunker down with.

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