

Burkhard Schmitz, a partner in Studio 7.5.



The five designers of Berlin-based Studio 7.5 developed the Mirra chairs for Herman Miller.

Carola Zwick, part of the Mirra chair team



A CHAIR DESIGNED TO FIT ALL



The Mirra chair comes in colors, in contrast to the typical office chair.

By Inès Cho
Staff Writer

If a person's shoes are an indicator of class status, then the corporate equivalent would be the office chair.

One of the most prominent manufacturers of the status chair is Herman Miller, whose \$700 Aeron model became the symbol of dot-com excess in the United States in the late 1990s.

Herman Miller introduced its latest model in April 2003, the Mirra chair, which was the result of a collaboration with a team of German designers, known as Studio 7.5, based in Berlin. Composed of five designers — Claudia Plikat, Burkhard Schmitz, Nicolai Neubert, Carola Zwick and Roland Zwick — Studio 7.5 has been specializing in product design, communication and interface for the past 12 years.

For the past year, Studio 7.5 designers have been traveling around the world to tout the new chair to industry professionals and the press. Last week, two members of the studio visited Japan and Korea as part of their tour before returning home briefly.

Herman Miller began in 1923 as a manufacturer of traditional residential furniture and then started building modern furniture in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, the company developed ties with leading industrial designers, such as Gilbert Rohde, George Nelson, Charles and Ray Eames and Verner Pantone.

The company's founder, Dirk Jan (D.J.) De Pree, who constantly sought innovative ideas and talent, worked with Robert Propst, a prominent sculptor and inventor in the 1960s, to create an innovative system called Action Office, which transformed the modern office space by using cubicles.

The company first entered Asia in 1982 in Japan, followed by Korea in 1984 through exclusive distributors. The Mirra chair, whose price starts at 790,000 won (\$650), is made in

Korea for the Asian market.

Mr. Schmitz and Ms. Zwick were in Korea recently to present the newest model at Sugar Club in southern Seoul.

The IHT-JoongAng Daily spoke with them about their design collaboration with Herman Miller.

Q. Is Herman Miller a real or imaginary person?

A. Schmitz: Herman Miller was a Dutch immigrant who settled down in the Zeeland area in Michigan.

He owned a small traditional furniture company. It was actually his son-in-law, who had married Mr. Herman's daughter, who took over the company in the 1930s.

D.J. De Pree turned it into a big business to become what's known as Herman Miller today.

Most furniture companies then only relied on in-house carpenters and never hired freelance designers to work with them. Mr. De Pree took a different approach and asked George Nelson to work with him. The result was great.

Mr. De Pree would discover unknown designers and work with them. One of the designers he worked with was Charles Eames.

Herman Miller adhered to the family's Dutch origins, and their value and approach were so Calvinist, which means all products had to be simple, down-to-earth, practical, and with solid materials, and furniture had to be reasonable and convincing to customers. It was honest.

Mr. De Pree once said all furniture must show the entire procedure of making. In Charles Eames chairs, each part — bolt, hinge, the material — was visible. That simplicity in design and minimalism in philosophy were an integral part of what was to become of modernism, the new trend in art and design in the early days.

If you look into the history of Herman Miller, the list of collaborative designers includes most of the leading designers of the Modernism movement.

What were you doing before working with Herman Miller?

Zwick: We were designing and teaching independently and had built our reputation in the industry. We set up our own studio in 1992. In Studio 7.5, there are five of us who work as all equal partners along with many interns.

Schmitz: Our namecards are designed to be connected; without partners, we cannot exist.

Zwick: When we were starting out, like any other young designers, we had no money. So we thought of opening our studio in a GDR [East German] truck, a kind of moving studio that we drove around to clients. The maximum truck load was 7.5 tons. We ended up finding a space but we took the name.

Schmitz: We have designed quite a number of chairs, which became studies for Mirra chairs. In other words, all the chairs we designed are made into Mirra chairs. What we specialize in is interface.

To give you an example of what interface is: A computer is made of chips and numbers, and without a user-friendly interface, such as simple icons, letters and programs, it cannot be used by people. We wanted to develop an interface for a chair with existing technologies and materials.

Zwick: If Aeron chairs were well-made, handsome leather oxfords for a gentleman, the Mirra chair is a Nike. It's functional, easy and stylish — for both men and women in any professions.

How did you come to partner with Herman Miller?

Schmitz: To designers, working with Herman Miller is like being discovered in Hollywood — a star is born. We won the competition in 1998 and began working on the actual production a year later.

There were a lot of meetings between the company and us; if a company plans to spend

\$14 million, it takes a lot of communication. In April 2002, the chair was officially launched by Herman Miller in 40 countries around the world.

Entering a competition can be tough and highly stressful. We knew exactly what a chair had to be, if we were to design for Herman Miller. The latest chair in Herman Miller was the Aeron chair, and we decided to benchmark the famous chair.

Zwick: I noticed that Koreans sit on the floor, but in Western society, a chair signifies the status and position of the sitter. So most chairs are large to fit men, not necessarily women.

Aeron chairs, with their strong image and black color, stand for a male-dominated society. We wanted to make softer, flexible chairs that can embrace women. So colors are softer, brighter and varied. Each component's color can be individually selected and matched. There are 5,000 different color combinations available.

The National Australian Bank in Melbourne, one of the biggest clients of Herman Miller, ordered 6,000 chairs that had different color combinations. The idea was to reflect the environment of the bank; the glass tower looks down a harbor whose docks display piles of containers in so many colors.

What's the Mirra chair about?

Schmitz: When we entered the competition, instead of proposing a glossy, look-good design package, we submitted a graphic rendering of the chair design and the real-size mechanism of the chair. To us, a chair was more than just design; it's what people use and sit on in real life. Over the three months of preparation for the presentation, we intensively researched human movement.

Through our research, we corrected some widely known misconceptions about chairs. Contrary to popular belief, comfort from a

chair doesn't come from a high back or neck rest. It was the lower part of the backbone that needed support.

The shape, thickness and perforation of the back were determined by the shape and pressure the sitter asserted. Each hole, in the shape of various circles and oblongs on the back, was redesigned and readjusted so many times that she [Carola Zwick] memorized each hole by its name.

The Aeron chair is available in three sizes, small, medium and large. But when a company buys the chair by bulk, they buy medium size, which loses the point of having different sizes. So our chair is one-size-fits-all.

Every component of the chair can be simply adjusted without ever getting out of the chair. The length of the seat also plays a crucial part in giving comfort to the sitter, so it can be hand-adjusted by pulling up or down the edge — right behind the knees.

Did you receive any inspiration from this trip?

Zwick: This is our first time being in Asia. We're in Tokyo for four days and two days in Seoul. The two countries are so different; it's like comparing Germany and Italy. Little things like the artificial flush noise in the bathroom were so interesting.

Schmitz: In the gas station, the pumps fall from the ceiling. I figured it is a space-conscious place, and to save space for cars, the system was made.

We've been greatly inspired by the way things are and work in Asia. Again, it's about our mission as designers — figure out interface, etc.

Zwick: Now we wish we had more Asian clients so we could come back more often and learn more about the new experiences.

You should definitely improve airplane seats now.

Zwick: Yes, we're looking into applying our technologies to different sectors. Airplane chairs, for one, desperately need improvement. We're planning to contact one of the largest airplane seating companies in Germany soon.

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Yoo Sun-sik stages "Join" at the 6th Dream and Vision Dance Festival in Seoul.

Festival gives form to choreographers' visions

By Joe Yong-hee
Staff Writer

Since its inception, the Dream and Vision Dance Festival has been an opportunity for rising young choreographers to present their latest works.

The 12 choreographers in the festival's sixth edition, being staged at the Post Theater in the Hongik University neighborhood through Sunday, are 25 to 35 years old, with styles varying from modern to traditional Korean.

"We wanted to give them the freedom to present their best work, whatever it may be," says Julie Jung, with EO Creative, the festival's organizers.

Opening the festival Thursday were performances by Kim In-ok of Choi Deresa

Dance Company, a dance teacher named Jung Hoon-mok and Lee Kyoung-soon of Madeindance.com.

Three pieces are scheduled for tomorrow and Thursday. Song Jin-ju, with the newly launched Dance Company the Body, is presenting "Buttonhole," a piece that depicts a world of happiness and fear, one that at times seems large, at other times too small.

Park Jung-sun of the Samsung Dance Company will present "Heuksari Muggeut" (a term used in the card game Go Stop), a traditional Korean dance about hope and the future. Lee So-young will perform "Wedding Steps," staged with four dancers who examine their lives before marriage.

For Saturday and Sunday, three more pieces are featured. Park Su-jin of Chang-

muha will be presenting the traditional dance "A Side," addressing a person's shadowy other half. Ms. Park explains the dance by saying, "There's a different person on my back, but until someone told me, I didn't know. I had never seen my back."

Yoo Sun-sik's "Join," performed with five others, is about being an outcast in society. He wishes to belong, but also wonders if he fears and loathes society. And Min Sun-young will be presenting "Light Green" (Yeondu), a piece about spring, first love and hope. While Ms. Min has an established history as a dancer, this is the first time a piece she choreographed is being staged.

Over the years, this festival has become a launch pad for up-and-coming choreographers. "We look for talented young artists

with vision, and we give them an opportunity," says Ms. Jung.

Three choreographers from the festival's first round — Kim Eun-hee, Park Ho-bin and Kim Yoon-kyu — have become established choreographers. Kim Eun-hee, for one, is performing at the upcoming Modern Dance Arts Festival at the LG Arts Center.

More recently, Lee So-young, who choreographed "Wedding Step," performed a duet by Jung Young-doo, "Craving for More" at Dream and Vision 2003. Subsequently, Mr. Jung submitted the piece to the Yokohama Dance Collection, where it won first place.

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Tickets are 15,000 (\$13) won. For more information, visit www.ticketpark.com.