



Are you sitting comfortably?

Form follows function

THEO:

Many designers will argue that if we really want to understand how a chair - a design - came about, if we want to explain why it is the way it is, we have to understand what's the intended purpose. We have to understand what's the function of this object. So there is this very famous phrase - 'form follow function'.

GEMMA CURTIN:

That's right. Louis Sullivan, the 19th-century architect, famous for building skyscrapers in Chicago, coined the phrase. And I think it's a major principle of many 20th century and 21st century designers and architects.

THEO:

It's not very clear, that sentence, in one sense, because what is a function? There are so many different ways to understand the notion of function, isn't it?

GEMMA CURTIN:

That's right. I think even just here, they're all chairs in this gallery. But they all have different functions, whether it's for use indoors or outdoors; for children, for adults; whether it's for use at a dining table or for reclining. These four chairs here are all reclining chairs, from the 1920s right up to Jerszy Seymour's PlayStation chair, designed in 2000, which responds to a new function, that of playing PlayStation. As well as being very practical, very comfortable, it's also humorous. So, in some ways, him designing this chair is a comment on what we do with our lives - a comment on modern life, on today. And it does have a sense of humour. And I think that brings in the idea of a function can be pleasure. It can be about enjoying an object. After all, a chair, when it's not being sat in, becomes a piece of sculpture within your home.

THEO:

There is also economic function, of course.

GEMMA CURTIN:

That's right.

THEO:

So there all these different variety of meanings. And that's interesting about this sentence - 'form follow function' - because it is simple, but it has all these different interpretations.

GEMMA CURTIN:

But I think there are lots of other contributing factors to the actual form of something, as well as function. These reclining chairs, they're from different periods, by different designers, different materials used, from tubular steel, fibreglass, to upholstered.

THEO:

You can have the same function, which is to design a recliner chair, and still you produce different solutions, isn't it? So we could have two designers with the same specification of a function. It is very likely that we are going to have two different chairs. So here we have a very clear example, actually, why this relationship between form and function is not a linear, clear, straightforward relationship.

GEMMA CURTIN:

I think it still is a great starting point for a designer to think of the function, and also, with that, the user. So, rather than it being something in the abstract, you're thinking of who's going to use this chair; who's going to engage with this object. As soon as a designer puts themselves in the position of the user, I think the design is always going to be a better one.