

BELL CHAIR

Interview: Konstantin Grcic



Mr. Grcic, was the development of the Bell Chair a special project for you?

KG: Yes, it was special, because it turned into so much more than just designing a chair.

Can you give us an example?

KG: We realized that there was an opportunity and need to address certain issues surrounding the project. The fact that we were developing a chair in plastic raised fundamental questions as to why... and how. While designing the chair, we started looking into the use of recycled plastics. That in turn triggered discussion about the brand's general position on sustainability and how the chair could become the archetype for future strategies.

What was the general process like?

KG: The project was set up between three partners. In addition to Magis and my team, there was a highly specialized plastics manufacturer on board from the very beginning. This company was responsible for the structural engineering of the chair, mould construction and final production. The same company also developed and patented a new type of recycled polypropylene, which we are exclusively using for Bell Chair.

How did the project start?

KG: The project started with the hypothesis that we could develop a chair that would sell to the public for just € 65 (excluding VAT). This figure conditioned everything: from the technology and type of material we used, right down to the exact amount/weight of material per chair, its cycle time in production, logistical footprint, etc. During the most active phase of development there was a constant exchange between us, the designers, and the engineers. I remember that, at one point, we were changing and adjusting the chair several times per day. My most challenging task was to keep the overall design idea in view. In short: I had to make sure that the chair wasn't turning into an engineer's dream, while losing its original design intent.

What were the goals?

KG: Our aim was to develop a high-quality chair with the bare minimum of material. This target was important to us for ecological reasons, but it also had a strong economical impact on the project. We wanted Bell to be affordable for everyone. In order to achieve this, we had to find the right balance between technology, performance and aesthetics. It took many prototypes and a lot of testing to finally get to the chair we have in front of us now. It was a very intense process of re-working the chair over and over, making it better and better. Everyone involved in the project put a lot of work and commitment into it. But the project always had a great energy, and that carried us forward.

Bell Chair is made entirely of plastic. Why?

KG: Simply because you cannot produce a chair at this price using any other technology than plastic injection moulding. Of course, we did ask ourselves whether the world needed such a chair in the first place. I was quite critical at first, but the more I got into it, the more I could see

a great opportunity for our project. There is a need for chairs that are both affordable and versatile, but the products on the market tend to be either cheap or too exclusive. We saw interesting potential in creating a very economical, but well-designed, well-engineered chair. The big breakthrough came with the commitment from our supplier to provide us with a high-quality recycled material. This material is not retrieved from post-consumer waste, but obtained from industrial waste. Thus, Magis turn the waste accumulated by their own furniture production into a new product.

Do you see the Bell project as a lodestar for the furniture industry?

KG: I hope that the story of Bell will herald a shift in the consciousness of the industry. Our project shows that you can do things a little differently. Transparency and honesty were imperative for us. We want to show how we worked, what materials are used, to uncover the entire process. We are also ready to talk about things that we were not able to achieve. In this sense, the project sets an example for a new approach.

What did you learn from designing a monobloc chair?

KG: If you think about it, the plastic monobloc is the most popular chair in the world. It has sold in billions, but at the same time it is tainted with a lot of negative connotations: it is considered to be ugly and cheap, it is commonly agreed that its widespread use is polluting our planet. It was clearly a challenge to tackle an object that, despite its undeniable success, is loaded with so much rejection! Looking for what is good about these types of chairs, I came to realize just how rational they are. And from there I started to see the great potential of the project – in terms of design as well as sustainability. The simple fact that Bell uses no more than 2.7 kg of plastic – almost half an average chair – illustrates this quite vividly.

What role did your long-term collaboration with Magis play in the development of the Bell Chair?

KG: We have been working together for over 20 years. We have produced an impressive number of projects starting with Chair_One around the millennium. Obviously, not all projects come up trumps. We have also done a large number of projects that never made it into production. Paradoxically, it is these unsuccessful projects that have cemented our relationship. After so many years we both know each other very well, which means that we can always count on each other's loyalty and trust. These are precious assets in the industry, and they are key when working on ambitious projects like Bell.

What is special about this relationship?

KG: Eugenio Perazza, the founder and creative head of Magis, has always given me two things: incredible freedom and extraordinary challenges. This is a very special mixture and rare to find. Design development is never an easy business, there is always friction ... and there are ups and downs. But, if you have a partner that understands this and is ready to take this journey together, something very special is guaranteed to come out of it.

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