



# Well seated

Faith in his design abilities and a firm vision of the future enabled Rodney Kinsman, co-founder of OMK, to shrug off initial poor sales and forge ahead with airport seating which would become a classic. Richard Woolf

Rodney Kinsman established OMK with fellow Central School graduates at the height of London's '60s boom years. Thirty years on, the naive enthusiasm and belief that designers could control their own creative and commercial destiny has proved to be an enduring success. As OMK plans to launch its latest seating range for the millennium, the company's founder discusses design, business and bums on airport seats.

'There's no room for wood in spaceships,' is Rodney Kinsman's blunt way of expressing his view that the future of furniture lies in foundries, not forests. Kinsman is just as direct concerning the design direction OMK, the company he co-founded over 30 years ago as an ambitious furniture graduate, is headed. 'I always wanted to design for mass production, to access the technology of the automotive and aircraft industries and create high quality, low cost components. As a student I was not interested in the designer-maker tradition. I found my early experience of timber-based production limiting. Beautiful as it is, there is no place for wood in the future. I still love timber, I use it occasionally, I like it around me, but is not the future, it's not where I'm going.'

It has been 10 years since British Rail commissioned OMK to provide new seating for its InterCity stations, a design which has evolved into the Trax range of airport and concourse furniture – now the product with which OMK is internationally recognised. Trax embodies

Kinsman's love of an expressive industrial aesthetic generated from analysis of need and a pragmatic understanding of the market it is to serve. It is also a product which he continues to refine both technically and commercially. With over 60 airports worldwide using its seating products, OMK is one of the few truly vertical furniture design and supply companies in the UK.

This control relies on Kinsman's keen commercial sense and risk taking nature. He is able to develop work which might otherwise become compromised at manufacture by virtue of the fact that all development investment is under his control. It requires a long term view and utter faith in the product, a lesson learnt from his Omkstak chair designed in 1971. Trapped by the vagaries of low margin retail sales and desperate to produce a truly industrial product for contract market, Kinsman invested substantially in tooling for an all-metal chair, personally funding production in advance of sales.

The initial take up was virtually zero. Kinsman sold the product in small batches, mostly in Italy and Germany, stocking the steel seat and back blanks over a four-year period. Had the design been sold to a manufacturer it would have been dropped in 12 months, a fate known to many designers expected to provide instant sales. Eventually, an Italian manufacturer who felt the product would complement its existing portfolio of predominantly metal-based studio products produced the chair in parallel with the UK. For some unexplained reason which Kinsman refers to as



Facing page, Rodney Kinsman with the Seville seat designed for the British Pavilion at the Seville Expo in 1992. Above, the visible structure of Trax has made it an all-time concourse classic



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the 'Italian effect', sales rocketed, and in the late '70s Omkstak eventually took off. A long wait, but a profitable one as Kinsman had developed a sophisticated licensing arrangement which combined royalties on production with a renewable licence to manufacture based on a pre-established and increasing year-on-year sales plan. 'I was astonished, it was a real eye opener,' comments Kinsman. 'Since then I have continued to pitch products for a 10-year life, if possible 20.'

Trax, now in its 10th year of development, took this long-term view a stage further. Researching the potential market for transit seating globally, Kinsman actively identified airport authorities or architects involved in airport design with whom OMK could work from product specification through space planning to installation. OMK had by now refined its seating range, eliminating any hand-finishing by utilising high quality volume aluminium pressure castings for the main seat components. It has also substituted the original steel beam in favour of an aluminium extrusion. 'You have to be involved with an installation in the tropics at 100 percent humidity to realise the advantages of a light-weight, non-corroding material,' jokes Kinsman.

The commercial success of OMK, manifest at its smooth-running west London showroom and in Kinsman's love of fine automobiles and a healthy obsession

with polo, belies the early years in a London mews studio with nothing but an article in Vogue and hope that the phone would ring.

Kinsman recalls: 'It was a can-do time. Youth had the world by the tail. The establishment was confounded and didn't know how to handle our generation, however the bank managers were receptive. Rather than showing us the door, as they would have done a few years earlier, they knew youth was commercially viable and could do something serious.

'But we sat around in an empty office in Tottenham Mews waiting for the phone to ring. It really was a joke. We had no work but fortunately some publicity, which led to our first commission. I ended up running around the country selling furniture from the back of a van, building up quantities of fives and tens at a time. It was very disillusioning.

'I can remember travelling to the States, arriving at a Fifth Avenue store and lining up with the other salesmen outside the buyer's office, trying desperately to assemble a chair in five minutes. Finally the buyer lost patience and kicked me out. As I couldn't find a place to disassemble the wretched thing I ended up on the streets in the summer heat of New York with a chair perched on my head walking five blocks back to the hotel. I had failed, was in an alien culture and out of my depth. It does make you question what you're doing.'

Having survived three decades at

the heart of the design industry to become one of its more enduring practitioners, are there any observations that Kinsman has on current developments and the new wave of British furniture and product designers? 'It's great, fantastic. There is an identified Brit-pack which we lacked in our day. Suddenly Britain is the place to be as opposed to Spain, Italy or Scandinavia. But I feel a lot of the work is far too superficial, stylistic rather than designed. There is an anti-design aesthetic that regards simplicity as quasi-honest. Less can be more as long as you have more. You can't set off saying less is more and deliver even less. If your chairs fall apart, tip over and are not functional, then don't design furniture, become a sculptor.'

So what of OMK in the future? Kinsman is candid: 'We have had a dry period in terms of bringing out new product. I've been developing Trax which is into another phase and am currently working on a new product for the millennium which is technologically driven and carries a large price tag in terms of development.' To those that would criticise his devotion to technology, Kinsman is blunt: 'I am a Modernist, if that means looking into the next century and where we are going. For me, the modern is about technology, designing for the machine and the future. This is where I feel at home, at odds with fashion, style and pastiche.' **FX**

Above, the Omkstak of 1971. Utter faith in the design carried it through initially poor sales to become an enduring product for OMK