



Interview with an industry leader

We have taken a different approach with this issue of Designing Strategies. I met Edward Miano, President of Varier, USA on LinkedIn and had the good fortune to meet him in person at his company showroom during Neocon. This product line is one of the more unique and innovative ones I've seen in quite some time. He kindly agreed to the interview being shared with you now.

TM: Edward, please tell us a little bit about Varier, USA.

EM: Varier is a Norwegian brand, founded under the name Stokke in 1932. In addition to the seating line now under the Varier banner, Stokke also manufactures an extensive line of juvenile products. In the late 70s, Stokke became known as an ergonomics pioneer. In 2006, Varier Furniture, AS, with its line of ergonomic seating began operating separately. Known for innovation and outstanding iconic designs, the company continued using quality, sustainable materials and introducing additional fresh, innovative styles. The company continues to grow, expanding in the global market and now has a presence in 36 countries.

TM: How did you come to be a part of the Varier business team?

EM: I became involved with Varier right after their transition. The product line disappeared from the US market around 2004. I was familiar with the line and felt it was such a phenomenal collection that I made it my personal mission to bring it back to the market. I did some research and in 2007 began discussions with the new organization. In 2008, [Varier Furniture, USA](#) was started and I became the North American distributor. Coming from a successful career in real estate, this was quite a departure for me. But, every once in a while, something exciting comes along in your life that just calls to you. For me, this line was and is very special and I was thrilled to be a part of it.

TM: To put it mildly, the Varier seating styles look nothing like typical ergonomic seating that has flooded the market over the past several decades. What took Varier in a direction so different from other chair and seating manufacturers?

EM: Well, start with the fact that Varier's design process, unlike most other manufacturers begins with the human body. We make it central to our designs; something we call "A Human Idea". We produce seating styles that work with the human body and are healthy to sit in. Our core principles include open body angle and movement while sitting, concepts considered radical in the 70s. Now, these concepts are adopted by most major seating manufacturers as something new. Additionally, while other seating manufacturers continue to adhere to a dated notion of what a chair should look like, most fail to understand what makes our concepts work. We make no compromises when it comes to function. Then we wrap that function in bold forms.

One of our designers, Peter Opsvik, was really the first designer, and certainly the most influential one, to challenge conventional thinking about chair design. Why does a chair look the way it does, and should it? Is there a better way? At Varier, we continue to challenge conventional thinking, and find that time after time, conventional thinking eventually catches up to us. Opsvik is arguably the single most influential seating designer in the world, and not just from an aesthetics standpoint, but rather for his focus on function. Our Variable *balans* chair, a simple yet elegant little swoosh shaped kneeling chair was named one of 50 Designs That Changed the World.

Varier realizes there must be function. In our view, design for design sake has a place; it is called art. We believe art is better served hanging on a wall. We believe our chairs are art, but art that has function and is healthy to sit in. Probably the easiest thing in the world is to slap a label on your product – ergonomic this, ergonomic that. What is ergonomic anyway? It is an elusive concept. What makes our product stand out is that it is based on something real, and looks the way it does, in part, as a byproduct of what it does. Our designs have remained fundamentally unchanged. Our [Planet chair](#) dates back to the 60's and our [Variable balans](#) model to 1979. The styles look as fresh and timeless today as the day they were released.

TM: As most of the world is still feeling the pain of the uncertain economy, how has Varier managed to navigate the sluggish economy?

EM: It is no secret that the past couple of years have not been kind to businesses in general and the furniture industry in particular. That said, Varier is in growth mode, and Varier USA has experienced triple digit growth over the past year and a half. That is not to say it hasn't been a long, difficult process. If I knew how much effort it was going to take, I might have stayed in the real estate industry! Seriously, it has been a struggle for us during the recent economy, but we continue to focus on growth. We are not growing as fast as we would like, but have faith that in time it will come. As an outside observer coming into the furniture universe, I think it has been beneficial for us to view the industry with a fresh set of eyes.

TM: What strategic directions are in your thought process for the next several years?

EM: First, we plan to continue manufacturing our goods in Norway in a traditional manner, where we can keep our exceptional quality, pay living wages to our people and operate in a manner that respects the environment.

We believe a certain portion of the population cares about quality, function, and longevity. And, they care where, how and by whom their goods are being manufactured. We believe that population is growing. If all you are interested in is price, you are probably not our customer. There is a world of sameness out there for you at a variety of price points.

We are putting focus on the contract market this year, targeting interior designers, architects and other specifiers. They all seem to be clamoring for something truly fresh. Getting them to understand our concepts is the first step and that is pretty easy. The next step is getting them to understand that we offer a better, healthier way to sit. Then, we convince them we offer a better way to do business with Varier as a partner. Getting them to take that leap of faith and take action is the next challenge. Those who have already done so have been rewarded.

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