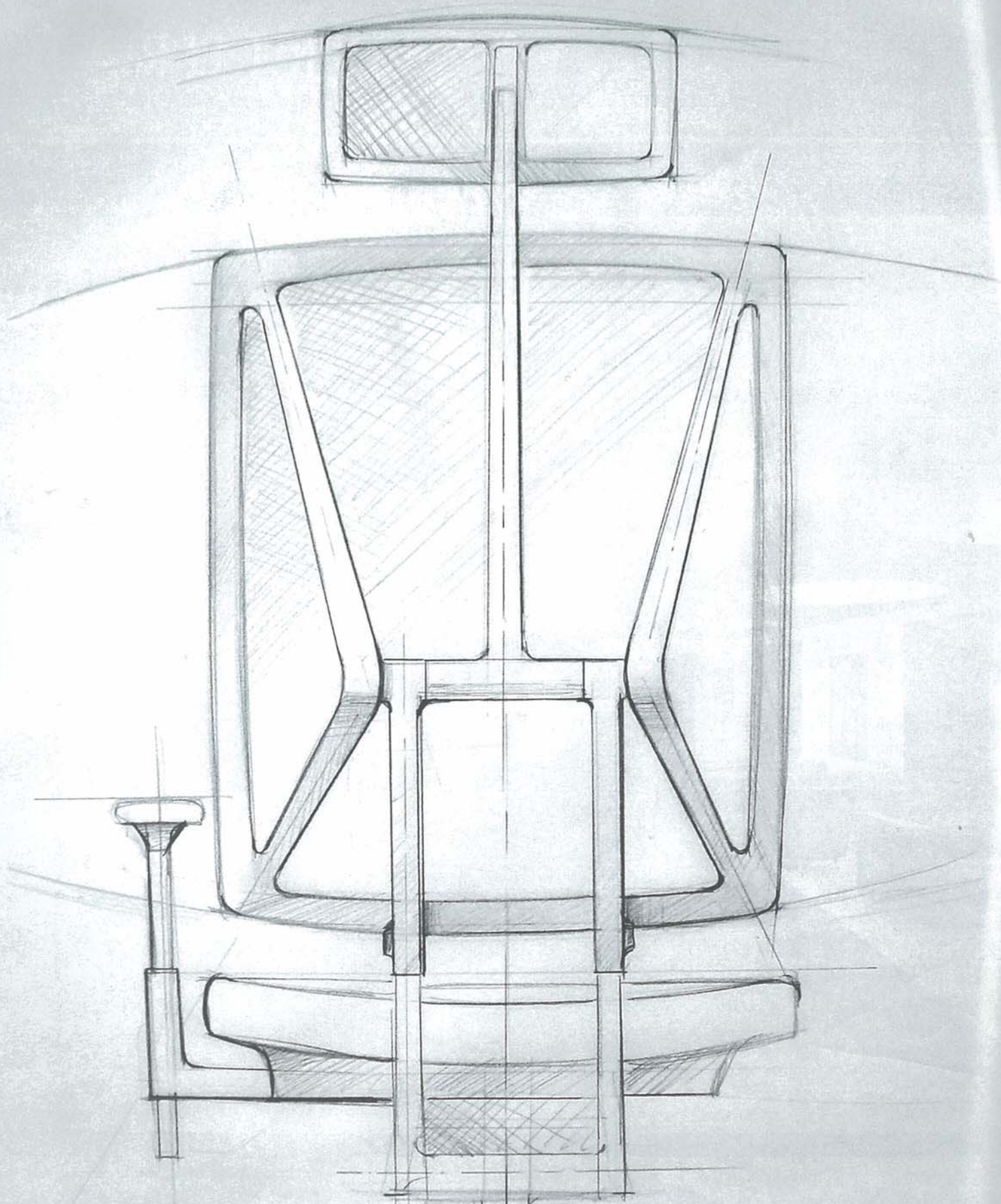


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INTERIORS





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Micro Scope

This didn't turn out how we expected at all. By which we mean that what we thought we'd write about turned out to be a subplot. A really important subplot, but not actually the main story at all.

You see, we thought we were going to produce an in-depth piece about a new chair called Scope. And that's what we've done. It's all here: the research, the design, the tooling, the testing, the marketing...the whole kit and caboodle.

We could have written 1,000 works alone on the prototyping and the 85 unique tools that contribute to an impressive new chair family. We've got loads of early sketches and Polaroids showing Scope's two year evolution from a pencil sketch to a fully fledged chair line all polished up, smartly kitted out and ready to ship.

But something happened in Neunkirchen. A little digital 'bing' sounded in the cortex, and we thought, 'Oh, hello'. Actually, there were three bings in less than five minutes, and they came out of the blue. We'd been chatting for about 40 minutes about Viasit's background (sorry, should have said we were at Viasit), dealer channels, export markets, products and so on. All good stuff, all relevant. All well worth hearing about if you're going to write a focus piece on the new Scope chair. Then Martin Ballendat said, 'Here, the company is small but the output is high' (Bing – what does that mean, exactly?).

Then he said, turning to Werner Schmeer (Viasit's boss), 'You wanted to do something exciting' (Bing – hello!).

Then, 'The investment in Scope was €2 million (Bing! Bing! Bing!). You see,

we'd already been told Viasit's turnover was €25 million. So our hosts had invested not that much shy of 10% of sales in new product!

We're interested, very interested. Because we're now realising the Scope story is the subplot – the headline story is about balls and the ambition.

Let's face it, nobody punts 10% of their business on a new office chair design unless a) they're bonkers in the coconut or b) they've got a very clear plan and the chutzpah to deliver. You know what? These guys are not crazy. They say they're going to double turnover in the next five years – and we believe them.

Before we get on to branding, marketing and channels and all the other good stuff that's going to make that target happen, let's get back to Scope. Because it is the catalyst, the touch paper that's going to make it all happen.

Viasit's been around for about 30 years, roughly half of which time it was part of the sprawling Schaerf/Samas companies. When that uneasy coalition broke up, Viasit found itself independent once more, with opportunities (and challenges) galore. The first priority was to shore up and revitalise the customer base.

As Viasit Sales and Marketing Director Thomas Schmeer explains: 'A lot of our dealers were Samas dealers. After the sale of the German part of Samas to Kinnarps they ▶▶▶▶▶





»»»» were no longer our customers – so we had work to do. We created a programme to reward and support our best dealers – and made sure we developed personal relationships and serviced them to the hilt. We're very ambitious – we want to be number one in the eyes of our dealers in a highly competitive market. Our philosophy is that we don't do this just by discounting – you've got to engage with them on every level, personally give them support – and of course you've got to give them the right products.

'Since 2005 our best selling line has been Linea, designed by Paul Brooks, but we knew we had to have a product for the future, for the changing market. We asked ourselves, 'How do we fight the big companies?

'We analysed and researched what our customers wanted. We realised that what we needed was a product that had identifiable design features, better ergonomics and was very saleable, with a good price: an image product wasn't good enough. It has to have

unique features. And not be 'me too!'

'Another big difference,' confirms Werner, 'is that we decided from the beginning that we would develop an extensive family – a bigger collection than most of our competitors in the upper segment – but with the difference that each model would be independent. Normally you see task chairs which have all the bells and whistles but the side chair is an afterthought. Scope is a complete family.'

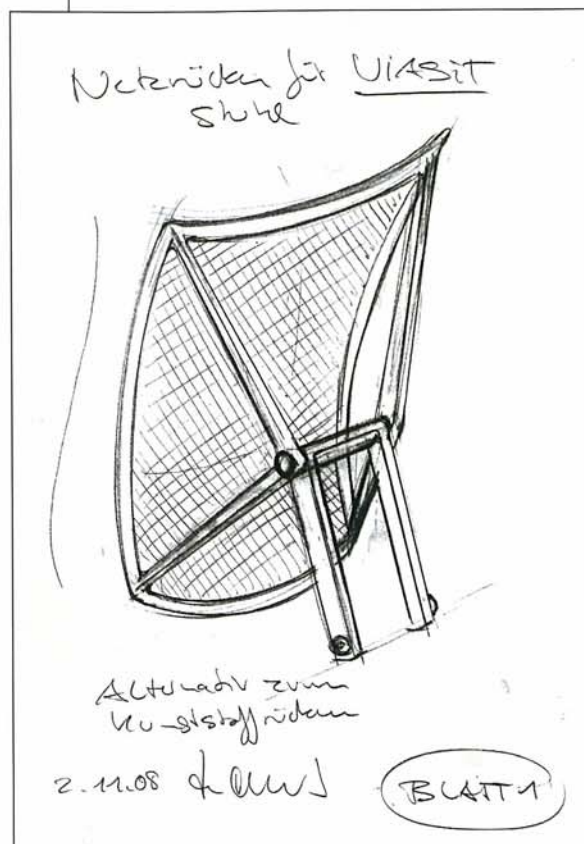
'We're going to double our turnover in five years,' adds Thomas, 'and to do that we must find new customers in existing markets, and find new customers in new markets. We're already strong in the public sector – to do better on large commercial projects we need to have those unique design and architectural features, with international appeal that conforms to all the different European norms – that's Scope.'

Technical manager Thomas Prowald adds: 'I work with a lot of designers, but no one like Martin Ballendat – he's got design vision and a technical background. The

technical issue is also a design issue – always!'

Scope's designer Martin Ballendat confirms his integrated, holistic approach. 'Design for me is much more than just aesthetics. Good industrial design also includes company strategy, ecology, technology, ergonomics and so on. My procedure is always to find a way between technology and feeling – you always need an emotional element in the product. My approach blends the pragmatic, syntactic and semantic – the last of which is all about associations and symbols. When Viasit asked me to work with them they told me they wanted a product for the future. I wanted to bring out that mood. Perhaps with some inspiration from science fiction movies – dynamic, inspirational.

'I work with a pencil and those early sketches show me the way. Then my team of specialists in the studio realise the renderings. The key technical element of Scope is the 'Pendolo', which allows lateral movement. It's highly engineered, very »»»»»»



»»»»sophisticated – what looks like a horizontal axis is actually vertical. It's the key to Scope's function, but it's also an iconic image – in keeping with the futuristic concept and the strap-line 'The future has already begun'.

'It's a technically advanced mechanism, providing sideways flex and constant support – but it still looks like a chair. With in-house prototyping we had the technical challenge of producing a single piece back frame. This of course is aesthetically pleasing, but equally important is its ecological and production benefits. The original model was more organic, less geometric, but we realised after producing a lot of models in polyester and glass fibre that the original was too 'busy'. Every time, my mission is to reduce complexity.

'A huge amount of time and attention was spent on refining the details. Meeting Dutch standards was a particular challenge as it related to integrating the arms and backrest, for example. Consideration was carefully given to the radii everywhere –

the only way to achieve this level of detailing, integration and refinement was by developing our own tools – over Euro 1.2 million was spent on tooling alone.

'Environmentally too, Scope is advanced. Essentially the Scope range features a big reduction in materials compared to the norm for this level of product. It's extremely strong but lightweight, with minimal fixings. By the time the range was ready for Orgatec in October it already had its TUV eco certificate.'

That wasn't the only thing ready. Seasoned veterans of the Cologne experience will know that it is not unusual for manufacturers to show pre-production prototypes at the Messe. Viasit was committed to exhibit Scope ready to take orders – complete with sales literature.

Orgatec itself was something of a statement for Viasit, confirming our assertion at the beginning of this piece that Scope is just part of a seismic shift for the company as a whole. Orgatec featured a 600 sq m stand – 30% larger than before – with

sophisticated integrated branding, stand design, photography and literature all courtesy of Studio Ballendat.

'We've invested a lot of money in this,' comments Thomas Schmeer, 'so it's important that every detail is right – has the same signature, the same handwriting. And it's not just about function, it's about empathy and emotion too.'

We kicked off this piece by describing this ambitious company as having balls. It's true, but this is not seat of the pants, gung-ho stuff; everything is researched, methodical and intelligent. We had detailed conversations about which market sectors are currently occupied, how new sectors and segments are going to be addressed, and how, precisely, the company will achieve its aims. And it's all done with charm, humour, and an engaging hospitality.

Decisive too. Martin Ballendat noted that with many clients 'The brief, the budget, everything changes every five minutes. Not at Viasit'.

That was a comment that got a bing too! ●