

# Chair

# Wars

by Betsy McKenzie

In a library not so long ago, and maybe far, far away, the forces of light and darkness struggled in what has become known as CHAIR WARS.

Actually, this is the story of good architects, a good manufacturer, and a decent sales company locked in torment with a learning librarian over the question of chair durability. When we built our new building, chairs for the library were selected with an eye to enhancing the neo-federalist design. (That phrase is an example of the stuff the learning librarian learned in this process!) Study chairs were purchased with and without arms, in solid cherry. The manufacturer warranted the chairs, and the sales company offered them in response to the specifications developed by the architects and approved by the university's building planning office.

But then, bad things began to happen. The library moved into the new building just in time for summer school to begin. Chairs began to be found with a front leg split from the top down. Always, these were the armless, wooden study chairs. The learning librarian complained to the good architects. The good architects said, "There are bound to be one or two chairs in a batch this large with bad wood in a leg."



More chairs broke in the same way. Always armless. Never did a patron come to explain how the chair broke. The good manufacturer and the good architects said, "Somebody is abusing these chairs! The design is good!" The learning librarian argued that even if patrons were tipping back in the chairs and then dropping them back to all fours, that was not abuse but

regular law library patron activity. The learning librarian argued that the chairs were sold for the particular purpose of use in a law library.

The learning librarian kept complaining, so the good manufacturer challenged her to send the chairs for a test by one of two chair

testers. When the learning librarian telephoned these testers, she asked questions about the tests. The first chair tester explained that there would be a large charge to send the librarian the actual standards and testing procedures for the BIFMA tests he proposed, but he was willing to describe the tests. The learning librarian learned that BIFMA stands for Business and Industrial Furniture Manufacturers' Association, and that the standards



were created by that group. The learning librarian learned that the tests were not as rigorous as she thought they should be.

The learning librarian telephoned the second furniture tester, Carl Eckelman at Purdue University. From him, she learned that there is a library furniture test standard, developed by Eckelman for the American Library Association. The tests are available in *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 31, no. 2, March/April, 1995, American Library Association). These tests are much more rigorous. Eckelman listened to the learning librarians' problems. He thought that rather than the chairs being tipped, the breakage was coming from patrons scooting the chairs sideways. He asked the learning librarian whether the chairs had stretchers (another thing the learning librarian learned—stretchers are the bars between chair legs). The learning librarian looked and said the chairs had stretchers between the front and back legs but none at all going from side to side. "There's your problem!" exclaimed Eckelman. He did not advise the learning librarian to send chairs to be tested, but hoped that she would be able to work out a settlement with the good manufacturer.

At nearly the same time as the conversation with Eckelman, the learning librarian was brought another broken chair by a staff member. The staff member had sat in the chair, found it not quite centered, and scooted it sideways. The staff member could not swear that the chair had not been cracked before, but he certainly could say that the chair leg broke off when

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## "...library furniture must stand up to more 'abuse' in ordinary use than any other furniture..."

he scooted the chair sideways. "Eureka!" cried the learning librarian, and she e-mailed this new theory about the breakage to the good architects, the good chair manufacturer, and the decent sales company.

The learning librarian was just stunned to find that the good chair manufacturer still said that the chairs were only breaking because of abuse and that the breakage was outside the warranty. However, the good architects called a meeting of the manufacturer, the sales company, the university building planning office, and the learning librarian. At the meeting, it was suggested that adding a stretcher between the front legs of the armless chairs might be a way to solve the problem. Everybody agreed to try a few chairs this way and see how it looked. The learning librarian thought there would be another meeting to discuss who would pay and did not want to mess up the agreement by bringing up another contentious issue. Everybody else (except possibly the university building planning office) thought the law school would pay.

The learning librarian brought up the issue of who would pay at the next meeting called to see how the sample chairs looked with their new stretchers. Everybody else was just stunned that the learning librarian would go back on the agreement but bucked up bravely. After quite a bit of discussion, all the parties agreed to chip in some on the cost. The good manufacturer would produce custom-made stretchers at no charge and the local sales rep agreed to help pay part of the labor cost of retrofitting the chairs. The decent sales company agreed to pay part of the labor cost, and the good architects agreed to pay part of the labor cost, if the law school would pay for half of the labor cost. The learning librarian spoke to her deans and discovered that the university building planning office had a contingency fund to pay for such surprises. The deans spoke with that office and then authorized the deal.

A local woodworking company that had been involved in chair repair and other building work gave an estimate and suggested adding better chair glides at the same time. The company decided to cut the labor cost by using rolling work

carts and moving around the library from chair to chair, rather than waiting for chairs to be brought to a central work location. The learning librarian looked at the academic calendar and thought the work could be done during the break between fall and spring semester. The learning librarian asked the associate dean if the library could be closed to facilitate the work. The associate dean was shocked that the learning librarian would consider such a blow to the local bar and alumni. The learning librarian talked to the woodworking company about shutting off parts of the library where it would be working, and how long the glue should dry before using the chairs.

Because the local woodworking company expected to be paid half its labor cost before it would begin amending the chairs, the learning librarian arranged with the building planning office to pay the school's half ahead of time. She soon discovered, to her amazement, that the various other parties to the agreement wanted to send their portions of the labor cost to the university and have the university pay the local woodworking company so that they could claim those costs as charitable donations for tax purposes. The learning librarian also discovered that she then had to become the collection agency to gather and track donations, and pass the checks along to the university building planning office.

The work was finished in time for spring semester. The chairs look very nice, and everybody hopes that the troubles are over.

The learning librarian made a list of some of the things she learned:

- 1 Be involved in the furniture selection process; don't let the university building planning office sign off on designs based only on aesthetic considerations.
- 2 Make sure the architects and university building planning office know that there are library furniture standards, and that library furniture must stand up to more "abuse" in ordinary use than any other furniture (except possibly dorm furniture).



- 3 Look at the chairs offered with issues of strength in mind. Remember that sideways stresses can be more destructive than any other. Look for stretchers going both from front to back and from side to side. The armless chairs were more prone to break because people did not rise entirely to scoot sideways, since they were holding on to the seat of the chair to move it.
- 4 Share information; keep everybody informed. And do not hesitate to complain and keep complaining. You have to live with the mistakes.
- 5 Ask colleagues for advice. Save e-mail information about furniture.
- 6 Ask if your school will buy "attic stock," which is a bit extra of anything for a new building, to be stored until the original wears out or breaks. That way the replacement will match.
- 7 Ask lots of questions. And educate the other players as much and as painlessly as possible.
- 8 Thank everybody, even when you're not sure they deserve it.
- 9 If you can avoid it, don't be the collection agency!
- 10 Hope that your architects, furniture manufacturers, and sales companies are good to work with and will hang in there for you if problems arise. If you have any choice in the matter, ask colleagues for references on architects, designs, and manufacturers.

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