

The Business of Furniture | July 21, 2021

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**The Case for Creating Office Furniture
for the Great Outdoors**



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The ideals behind yoga are key to Aura Seating. Instead of forcing the user to adapt to a product, Aura believes the product should adapt to the users.



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Aura Seating Creates First Furniture Designed for Yoga Lifestyle

THE IDEALS BEHIND YOGA ARE KEY TO AURA SEATING. INSTEAD OF FORCING THE USER TO ADAPT TO A PRODUCT, AURA BELIEVES THE PRODUCT SHOULD ADAPT TO THE USERS.

by Rob Kirkbride

The practice of yoga has existed since at least 3,000 B.C. and traces its roots to the Indus valley civilization in South Asia.

It is about prayerful meditation, but in the West, has become known more for its healthful exercise benefits. Now, its spirit is being designed into a line of healthy office seating.

To be sure, Aura Seating is about more than jumping on the yoga bandwagon or latching onto a marketing gimmick. The company's furniture is designed to be healthy – from helping the user to helping the environment.

But Aura Seating began as a way to help the president and chief executive officer of the company, Minal Mondkar.

“I was born with a type of scoliosis, and yoga really helped me with my posture, with my sitting position,” she said. “And it really corrected that problem, not completely, but most of it was done. So I said, ‘Hey, you know what, I’m an architect by profession. Why not use this beautiful knowledge that we have and use it for the well-being of people?’”

That's exactly what she did with the help of her husband and business partner, Sanjay Murty, an engineer with a background in sourcing and procurement at Ford Motor Co. and the former vice president of supply chain for SitOnIt Seating. Mondkar is an architect who received her master's degree from Lawrence Tech University. Aura Seating is based in Torrance, California.



Though it is called Aura Seating, the company has a complete line of office furniture, from task to lounge seating, desks and tables to outdoor furniture and accessories.

The design process at Aura Seating is different. Mondkar said in addition to more traditional furniture designers, the company consults yoga practitioners, physiologists and physical therapists when designing products. And when it comes to seating, here's what really sets Aura's seating products apart: They make you sit up straight in your seat.

The upright seating posture came from observations the couple made about workers slouching in their seats. "We came up with a design that would make you sit with your head shoulders and the backbone in a straight line,"

Mondkar said. No matter how you sit in the chair, you're always in the right posture, she added, which takes the stress off your lower back with the overarching idea of increasing worker well-being.

Helping the community is part of the company's DNA. Aura Seating actively donates its products to groups in need, including veteran's groups and the Salvation Army. Aura also makes a point of hiring veterans and others from at-risk groups.

Sustainability is important at Aura Seating. The company uses sustainable components in its design, including soy-based dyes and bamboo fabric options. The goal by 2025 is to have as little plastic in its products as possible. That goal is less than 5%. Making true connections with dealers, customers and employees is important to the couple as well.

"We consider them as our family," Mondkar said. "We are very proud of the fact that the relationships are very high on our list."

The ideals behind yoga are key to Aura Seating. Instead of forcing the user to adapt to a product, Aura believes the product should adapt to the users.

"I sit on a chair, and my feet don't touch the floor because I'm 5 feet, 3 inches tall, and the





Santa Clara

chairs are all designed to be 18 (inches from the floor),” Mondkar said. “It’s too high for me. Same thing with the table. So what we did historically, we made products because they were easy to manufacture, not because they were right for me. The way to fix the problem, they told me, was to put a box under my feet or ... basically raise myself, but that didn’t solve the problem.

“You’re basically forcing me to adapt to a product. And so we said, we would make products that adapt to you. Our chairs can go lower than 18 inches. Our tables can go below 29 inches for short people like me. On the flip side, I have a great friend who is head of marketing at 9to5 Seating, and he is 6 feet, 6 inches tall. And for him, the table is too low, and the chairs are too low, right? So we are not making products to fit the person, we are making the people fit the product. Hence with the idea of yoga, we are trying to focus on the individual, the health and well-being of the individual. That’s how we came up with how to solve the problem for one person at a time, as opposed to making millions of products and trying to hope that we hit the 95 percentile of the population.”

To be sure, yoga is a great mantra for a furniture company. Yoga (the exercise and stretchy, overpriced pants to go with it) is a hot market. The global yoga market size is forecast to reach \$66.2 billion by 2027 and expected to have a compound annual growth rate of 9.6% from 2021 to 2027. Aura Seating hopes to add to its success because people understand the idea of yoga and its healing properties. In 2019, the global mental wellness industry was worth \$120.8 billion.

*Opi Oval*

To understand Aura Seating, you need to understand a bit about yoga itself. The development of yoga can be traced back to more than 5,000 years ago, but some researchers think yoga may be up to 10,000 years old.

*Opi folded*

Those who truly practice yoga are not really exercising, even though that is how yoga is perceived in Western culture. It is, at its most basic, a form of meditation and prayer. In Sanskrit, it literally means “union,” as in the union between the practitioner and the divine. Of course, it has come to mean more. The Oxford Dictionary defines yoga as a Hindu spiritual and ascetic discipline, a part of which, including breath control, simple meditation and the adoption of specific bodily postures, is widely practiced for health and relaxation.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, yoga masters began to travel to the West, attracting attention and followers. This began at the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, when Swami Vivekananda wowed the attendees with his lectures on yoga and the universality of the world’s religions. The importation of yoga to the West still continued at a trickle until Indra Devi opened her yoga studio in Hollywood in 1947.

The practice of yoga as an exercise started in the U.S. in the 1970s, but really exploded onto the workout scene in the last decade.

Prior to the pandemic, Aura Seating’s go-to-market strategy was to create a



nationwide network of reps and dealers and try to sell products through traditional channels, Murty said. With hybrid and at-home work taking hold and likely staying with us for a while, they shifted gears slightly. The focus will continue to be on the dealer channel, but also to add an online component. That online portion of the business will run through Aura's dealers, making sure they get a proper piece of the virtual business as well.

"We're trying to do the hybrid, even with our dealer and the sales strategy," he said. "So we want to make sure that our brick and mortar distributors and rep groups are protected while they also give the opportunity for a retail customer to come and buy our product. In August, when we launch our e-commerce store, we are investing very heavily in SEO, in Google marketing, in Facebook, Instagram, all of those are up and running."

A new website for the company and e-commerce site are in the works. True to its yoga roots, the company's website will include a "Yoga at Work" link that will act as a resource for those in the office that would like to see quick tips and videos about simple yoga exercises to correct bad posture and help them feel better.

Aura Seating is primarily focused on mid-market price points, slightly above big box office retailers and below the majors. Look for it to compete with the likes of SitOnIt, 9to5 and Highmark. **BoF**