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Stam again or Hanomag, Mercedes and Tatra

Mart Stam's famous cantilever chair seems to attract unending interest. While the Dutch, until recently, ascribed practically all right-angled cantilever chairs to Stam, the inventiveness of the architect from Purmerend has suddenly been called into question – to put it mildly. That at least is the standpoint taken in two articles about cantilever chairs by Bernard Hulsman in *NRC Handelsblad*.¹

His reason for doubt was the discovery by the Czech-British architect Ivan Margolius of a cantilever seat in a 1926 car, the Tatra T12. Margolius studied architecture in Prague and London, and occupied himself with architecture and design history, as well as with his design practice.² Like many architects, he is keenly interested in car design, especially the Czech marque Tatra which still vaguely remembered in the Netherlands for the formerly imported Tatra lorries. Tatra's main claim to a place in design history is the model T87, a streamlined limousine from the latter half of the 1930s. Margolius himself bought a later version, the Tatraplan T600 from 1949.

That Tatra had used steel tube for car seats since the early 1920s was already known from the literature.³ The same applied to seats in Fokker aircraft made from 1924 onwards, but the tube was in that case clad in textile or reed. Since it is implausible that Stam had seen a Tatra in the Netherlands or Germany, and even less likely that he flew in a Fokker aircraft in those years, these facts are worth mentioning only as technical or cultural background information and no more than that. Margolius, however, having seen the interior of the Tatra T12, combined his discovery with his literature-based knowledge of Stam's inspiration by car seats, and arrived at a different conclusion: that Stam must have ridden with Ferdinand Kramer in Tatra T12 on the way to a meeting about the construction of the Weissenhof Estate, and thus must have seen this seat.

This story of Stam's inspiration by a car seat is apocryphal, and moreover has two versions. The first, as related by the Frankfurt architect Ferdinand Kramer, was first noted by John Heskett in *Tubular Steel Furniture*: 'On a visit to the Weissenhofsiedlung



FIG. 1 Tatra T12, 1926-32 [Tatra Archive]

in Stuttgart during its construction, Stam and Kramer drove in a small Hanomag car. When the front passenger seat was folded forward to let Stam out of the rear seat of the car, he noticed the tubular steel construction of the folded seat. According to Kramer he immediately began sketching ideas for a chair and on returning home constructed his first model.⁴ I heard something similar from Ferdinand Kramer during a conversation in Frankfurt in January 1980, but he made no mention of a shared car trip or a sketch being made; if I remember correctly, he spoke about a lorry. However, my recall of the conversation may be inaccurate.

The second variant came from Heinz Rasch, who described Stam as having a ‘spark of inspiration’ on seeing a seat in a Hanomag lorry.⁵ Later he admitted that it may have been a Mercedes. The make of vehicle was actually not important, the main thing being inspiration by an industrial product. Rasch too offered this information as a personal recollection. The event must have taken place in Germany, he reasoned, probably in Stuttgart because Stam went there for a conference about the Weissenhofsiedlung on 22 November 1926. It was his sole visit to Germany in autumn that year. The Rasch variant found a place in the literature from 1983 onwards together with that of Kramer.⁶ The source of inspiration was at first attributed to the Hanomag lorry, and only later to a Mercedes.⁷



FIG. 2 Interior Tatra T12 [Tatra Archive]

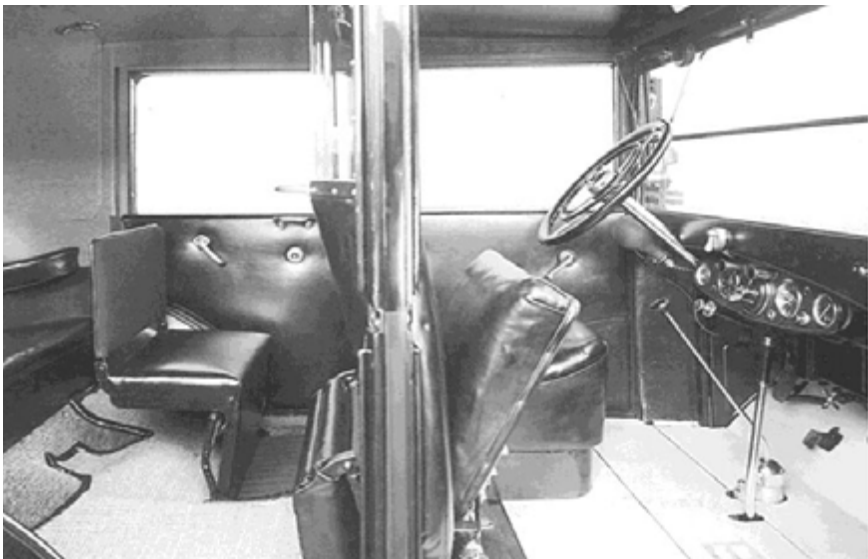


FIG. 3 Interior Mercedes, 1926 [from: Motor Journal 9/2017]

Kramer associated, in his recollection, seeing a vehicle seat with making a sketch, and referred vaguely to its subsequent elaboration. What Rasch recalled was limited to the inspiration as such, without further consequences. But when it came to the cantilever chair sketch, he remembered something entirely different. It was the well-known account of the sketch of the gas-pipe chair, which Stam made for his pregnant wife, Leni, while in Rotterdam. He presented the sketch over dinner in Hotel Marquart on 22 November 1926, during discussions of the construction plans for the Weissenhofsiedlung. Stam drew a chair made of lengths of gas piping connected by elbow joints, in blue pencil, on a card announcing the wedding of Willi Bouwmeister which had taken place two days earlier. On returning to Rotterdam, Stam developed his idea into an 'ordinary' chair. Heinz Rasch wrote of this sequence of events as early as 1960, and stuck to his account.⁸ The article was then largely forgotten, but the story was revived in 1975 in the Delft *Metal Tube Chairs* exhibition catalogue, following conversations between Gerrit Oorthuys and myself. This information thus became more widely known.⁹

Returning to Ivan Margolius: he came across the cantilevered seat of the Tatra T12 while researching the manufacturer's archives for a revised edition of his book on the Tatra marque. The seat had a bent steel frame, visually a single line although the backrest is actually hinged, and rounded corners. He combined this discovery with his knowledge of the general origins of this seat to produce a kind of collage, as follows. From Ferdinand Kramer, he took over the taxi trip and the sketch. The vehicle marque changed to a Tatra T12 because the small Hanomag car dating from 1926 (nicknamed *Kommissbrot* for its fanciful resemblance to a rye loaf) was a two-seater with non-cantilevered seats. From Rasch's account, Margolius incorporated only Stam's presentation of the sketch to his colleagues in hotel Marquart, with no mention of a gas-pipe chair being assembled earlier in Rotterdam. This implied that Stam must have noticed the cantilevered car seat while alighting from the Tatra T12 taxi and was consequently inspired during dinner to sketch a chair with elbow joints for his model dwelling in the Weissenhofsiedlung; according, at least, to Margolius. A new, hybrid story thus came into being.¹⁰ But there was a problem: if Stam had seen the Tatra T12 seat with a continuous bent tube frame, why did he sketch a chair with elbow joints? The answer might be Stam's aversion to curved lines. But this explanation is too easy: Stam could just as well have drawn a right-angled chair frame without elbow joints. Paper is patient, after all.

The version of Ivan Margolius is questionable for several reasons. The first, pragmatic, question is whether Tatra cars actually drove on German roads. This may be answered affirmatively, for Margolius sent me an email with further

information.¹¹ He had researched export data on these cars in the relevant period, and learned that the Tatra T12 was being assembled under licence in Frankfurt by the firm Deutsche Lizenz Tatra – Automobile Betriebsgesellschaft m.b.H, abbreviated as DELTA and then, after 1928, as DETRA. We may still question how wide its distribution was, but it cannot be ruled out that the T12 was to be seen in Stuttgart in that period.



FIG. 4 Mart Stam, chair for the Weißenhofsiedlung, 1927 [photo archive Otakar Máčel]

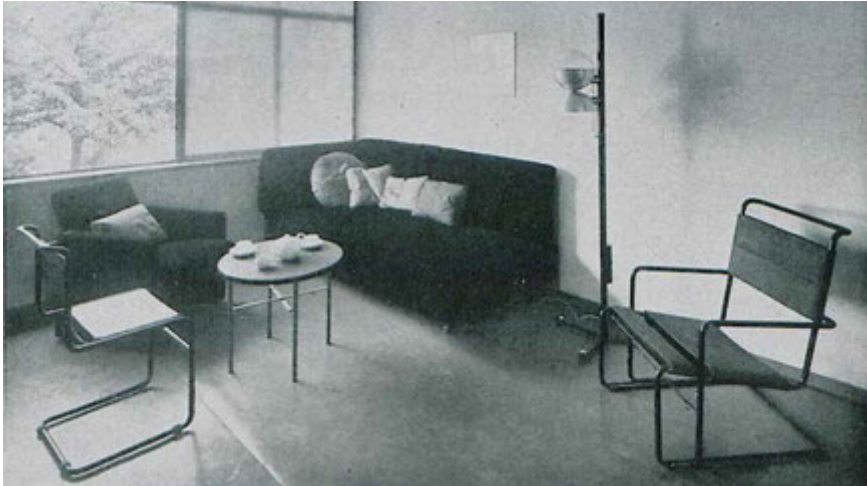


FIG. 5 Mart Stam, interior of one of the houses for the Weißenhofsiedlung 1927 [photo archive Otakar Máčel]



FIG. 6 Chair Tatra T12, from 1926 [from: Motor Journal 9/2017]



FIG. 7 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, chair for the Weißenhofsiedlung 1927 [photo archive Otakar Máčel]

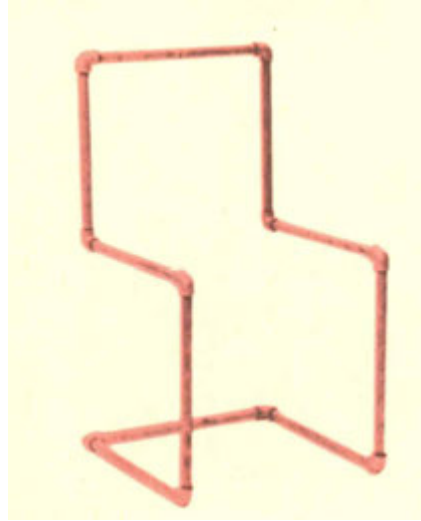


FIG. 8 Reconstruction gas pipe chair by Axel Bruchhäuser, 1985 [photo archive Otakar Máčel]

Accounts of Stam's inspiration by car seats are hard to prove. Both authors have long passed away and their recollections were in any case retrospective. And they contradict each other. Moreover, Rasch's account of the car seat, actually just a brief mention, is inconsistent with his description of a sketch in blue pencil drawn in Hotel Marquart. For this to be plausible, Stam must have seen the vehicle concerned in Germany at an earlier date, gone back to Rotterdam to assemble the gas-pipe chair, and then returned to Germany for the conference where he drew the sketch. This would certainly have been possible, except that there is no evidence at all that he visited Germany earlier in 1926. Theoretically it is possible that Stam saw a Tatra with cantilevered seat in the Netherlands and mentioned it only to Rasch. But then everything becomes rather speculative.

Compared to the tale of inspiration by a car seat, Rasch's description of the gas-pipe chair sketch is more credible. Firstly, the conference in Hotel Marquart on 22 November 1926 actually took place and those attending included Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Stam and Rasch. Willi Baumeister had married in Stuttgart two days earlier and Mies was present at the ceremony, which explains the presence of the wedding invitation card.¹² Witness to the sketch was borne by Heinz Rasch, as well as by Sergius Ruegenberg, a former employee of Mies van der Rohe who noted the comments that Mies made about Stam's sketch in Berlin at the end of November.¹³ It is also striking that Mies never claimed priority of invention as regards the cantilevered chair, although his own cantilevered design was presented

at the same time as that of Stam in the Weissenhofssiedlung. The testimonies of Rasch and Ruegenberg were admittedly *post factum*, but they seem plausible enough in the light of all the other data. However, Sergius Ruegenberg gives rise to small problem: he ceased working for Mies van der Rohe in Berlin on the first of August 1926, and joined the architecture firm Bensel und Kamps in Hamburg; then, nearly a year later, he moved to Karel Schneider, also in Hamburg.¹⁴ It was not until November 1928 that he went back to work for Mies in Berlin. Could his information have come from his Berlin colleagues? Last but not least, Mart Stam himself explained the origin of his gas-pipe chair to Axel Bruchhäuser of the firm TECTA somewhere between 1977 and 1980, and Bruchhäuser reconstructed the gas-pipe chair in accordance with Stam's instructions.¹⁵

As to Ivan Margolius' proposal regarding the Tatra T12, the car seat was indeed very modern for its time and could in theory have served as a source of inspiration to Stam along with other car seat designs and other examples of cantilevered structures. But that does not imply that Stam must have seen it. Inspiration does not after all imply making a literal copy of the source; on the contrary. Margolius moreover selected only data that was consistent with the Tatra T12 car seat, and ignored anything that did not fit. Consequently, the inspiration for the 'Kragstuhl' (a 'bracket chair', as the cantilevered chair was formerly called in Germany) remains shrouded in mist. Hardly anything is exactly right, although there must have been source; and inspiration by a car seat is in any case consistent with the myth of early modernity.

Notes

- 1 Bernard Hulsmann, '“Zitten op lucht” komt uit een auto', *NRC Handelsblad* 26 september 2019 and 'Zitten op lucht' – maar wie bedacht de vrijzwevende stoel?', *NRC Handelsblad* 25 november 2019.
- 2 See e.g. Ivan Margolius, *Cubism in Architecture and the Applied Art*, Newton Abbot 1979, or *Automobiles by Architects*, London 2000.
- 3 See e.g. Otakar Máčel, *Der Freischwinger. Vom Avantgardeentwurf zur Ware*, Delft 1992, 46; Werner Möller, Otakar Máčel, *Ein Stuhl macht Geschichte*, Munich 1992, 51; Mathias Schwarz-Claus, 'B 3 Wassily', in Alexander von Vegesack, Peter Dunas, Mathias Schwarz-Claus (ed.), *100 Masterpieces in der Sammlung des Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein 1996*, 212.
- 4 From Heskett's interview with Kramer in 25 May 1977, John Heskett, 'Germany: The Industrial Applications of Tubular Steel', in Barbie Campbell-Cole, Tim Benton (ed.), *Tubular Steel Furniture*, London 1979, 23.
- 5 Reported by Heinz Rasch to Otakar Máčel, 1979-80, during preparation of the book *Stühle aus Stahl*.
- 6 See e.g. Otakar Máčel, 'The Legend of the Steel Chair', *Plan 6* (1983), 42, or *idem.*, 'Il caso Mannesman', *Rassegna* 14/2 (1983), 28.
- 7 Otakar Máčel, 'The Continuous Line of Sitting', *Rassegna* 47/3 (1991), 51.
- 8 Heinz Rasch, 'Aus der Zwanziger Jahren', *Werk und Zeit* 11 (1960), 3.
- 9 Jan van Geest, Otakar Máčel & Gerrit Oorthuys, *Metalen buisstoelen 1925-1940*, Delft (Het Prinsenhof) 1975, 16; Jane Beckett, 'W. H. Gispen and the Development of Tubular Steel Furniture in the Netherlands',

in Campbell-Cole/Benton, *Tubular Steel Furniture*, 29; Jan van Geest, Otakar Máčel, *Stühle aus Stahl. Metaalmöbel 1925-1940*, Köln 1980, 26.

10 Ivan Margolius, 'Cars, Furniture, Architecture – How Tatra Car Seating Inspired an Iconic Modernist Chair', in *The Friends of Czech Heritage* 14 (2016); idem, 'Automobily, nábytek, architektura', in *Motor Journal* 9 (2017), 40-43.

11 Email 17 January 2019.

12 See i.a. Heinz Rasch, 'Wege der neuen Architektur', *Stuttgarter Neues Tagblatt* 26 November 1926; Karin Kirsch, *The Weissenhofsiedlung*, New York 1989, 102, 107.

13 Rasch, 'Aus der Zwanziger Jahren'; Axel Bruchhäuser (ed.), *Der Kragstuhl*, Berlin-Beverungen 1986, 50, 95, 127.

14 See Eva-Maria Amberger, *Sergius Ruegenberg*, Berlin (Berlinische Galerie) 2000, 16-17.

15 Bruchhäuser, *Der Kragstuhl*. Bruchhäuser verbally confirmed the information to Otakar Máčel in 1985.