

empire building: the king of comfort

From a humble market stall to Oprah Winfrey. **Stephen Lacey** looks at the rise of King Furniture.

Back in 1977, Peter Allen was singing about going to Rio, the HZ Sandman panel van was cruising the beaches, and in a tiny room at the back of their Sydney home, David King and his mother Gwen began sewing colourful covers onto moulded foam chairs to sell at Sydney's Paddy's Markets.

The chairs were an instant success, with customer demand far outstripping supply.

"People loved them, we even had customers turning up to our house with trailers and roof racks," David King recalls.

But not everyone was happy. The neighbours complained about the sudden upsurge of passing trade in their quiet Rose Bay street in the eastern suburbs. The Kings were forced to find alternative arrangements, so they moved their fledgling enterprise into a factory. And so King Furniture was born.

"I think one of the wonderful things about it is that neither of us had a background in furniture, so everything we've done since has been different to what everyone else is doing," King says.

"Our frames are steel, our whole approach is different, our covers are removable, we don't use staple guns.

"It's a given that our furniture has points of difference that people appreciate."

The Kings did much of their early research and development in an opportunity shop across the road from their first showroom. It was full of furniture that people had discarded and King made a point of examining it to see why it had become unwanted.

"The arms were breaking, the



Couch potato: The clean lines and adaptable design of the Strata (above and below) epitomise the King style

webbing had gone saggy. So when it came to developing our product we got rid of all those things – the timbers, the dow, the elastic," he says.

"Timber frames just don't work unless you make them from heavy hardwood. Nobody

uses that anymore. They all use cheap softwoods, even the expensive European brands.

"The thing I find incredible is that people buy Italian-branded furniture and a lot of it is made in China. It has the

sophistication of a fruit crate."

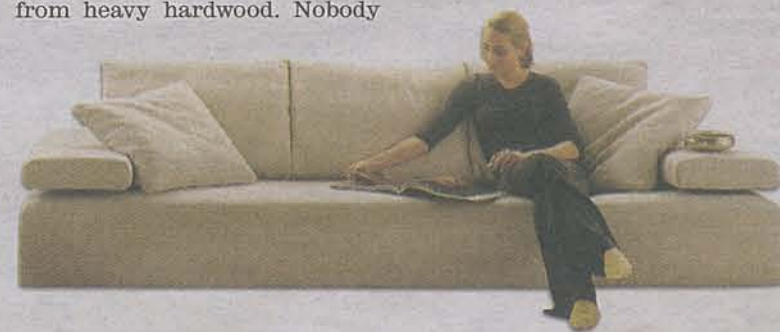
At the heart of every King Furniture sofa is the exclusive Postureflex system. One of the most important components is the seat and back suspension, which is also used by luxury car makers Rolls Royce, Jaguar and Porsche.

David King still has a hands-on role when it comes to sofa design, working closely with local designer, Steven Higgs.

"We don't put ornamentation on things, we keep the designs very simple," King says.

"I think that's very important, that you buy something that is simple and works."

Many of the King sofa



'People don't sit on furniture like our parents used to'

designs are characterised by their flexibility, transforming into various forms, according to the mood and requirements of the owner.

The multi-award winning Delta is a case in point. The Delta is one of the most successful pieces of furniture on the Australian market. It fits into corners, or expands into a more spacious room as a chaise lounge, an armless three-seater and even a queen-size bed.

"People don't sit on their furniture the way that our parents used to," King says.

"They don't sit bolt upright on a three-piece lounge suite. Nowadays, if you've got a laptop computer and a mobile phone, your sofa becomes your home office. The sofa should be able to adapt to your changing needs."

Another of King Furniture's popular sofas is the Linea, which won an award from the Furniture Industry Association Australia in 2002.

The Linea features backrests, that can be raised and lowered at the touch of a lever. And like all King Furniture sofas, it has tailored, removable covers.

The latest addition to King Furniture's range is the Strata. The new low-line design has a "floating" arm/back layer over a floating base layer.

Backs can be used as armrests and vice-versa, and the Strata can also become a comfortable bed.

Already the Strata has been nominated for a FIAA award and a leading homewares magazine has judged it "furniture of the year".

King Furniture is being sold in Europe and the huge US market presents another possibility, following the product's recent success, making a "guest appearance" on the Oprah Winfrey show.

Oprah surprised the American host of lifestyle show Changing Rooms, with a makeover of the host's own apartment using a Delta sofa.

"The response we had was just incredible," says King proudly. "People were asking how they could buy the Delta."

There are two King Furniture showrooms in Sydney: 61 Parramatta Rd, Annandale and 216 Victoria Ave, Chatswood.