

Zen Master



Dieter Rams

Talk

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In the third in a series of talks with designers who've earned their spurs, Dieter Rams discusses good design, good manufacturers and the short supply of both.

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Dieter Rams is best known for his 40 years at Braun and his 10 principles of good design. Photo Alexei Tylevich

The Universal Shelving System 606 in Rams' living room is a design he made for Vitsoe in 1960. The Braun hi-fi equipment and speakers are also his designs.



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Dieter Rams, perhaps best known for his 40 years of product design at Braun, has become something of a 'design Moses' over the decades, his 10 principles of good design (see page 224) always close at hand, his commandments (thou shalt design less but better) never far from his lips. Rams calls himself an optimist, but he isn't happy with much of what he sees today. He claims he can count on his fingers the number of companies making good design at the moment.

Rams has just flown into New York City from his native Germany to celebrate the 50th birthday of his 606 Universal Shelving System, designed for Vitsoe. Several hours before the festivities kick off, we sit down together at the Vitsoe store in the East Village. We're joined by Mark Adams (managing director of Vitsoe), as well as the birthday shelves themselves and several other collector's items by Rams, including his 620 armchairs and 'Snow White's Coffin' record players. It feels a bit like a Dieter Rams museum of greatest hits in here, but this is only a small showing of the iconic pieces the designer has accomplished in over five decades of practice. I'm not sure I can call him a 'designer' and sleep easily, though. Indeed, Rams, trained as a carpenter and an architect, allies himself with a generation of German architects who saw the years following the Second World War as an opportunity to make things better. And when US customs officials recently asked for his profession at the airport, his reply was, 'Architect'.

From what I've read about you, I understand your intention is to make timeless design, but how do you reconcile that goal with the fact that time does go on? Especially when you consider technology . . .

Dieter Rams: I don't know that I was ever after timelessness, exactly; what I've always had in

mind is to eliminate the superfluous. Maybe that idea belongs to something we call 'timelessness' today. Timeless things are those which are not decorated with materials that we need for other, more important resources.

Of course, technology is a short-lived thing; it develops further. Even so, I am proud that most of the technological products for which I'm responsible are now collector's items and not just throw-away products. Then, too, furniture is not dependent on technology. It may develop further in terms of materials

'We do not need star designers; we need good designers'

used, but there is basically no reason furniture ever has to become obsolete. You do have to keep it alive, find a way for furniture to be up to date – again, though, you have to be careful about details and materials. I'm always saying that a well-designed product is the summary of good details.

That said, do you think of your products as finished works or as perpetual works in progress?

Every product is a work in progress. You never

finish. Designers are always on the edge of something 'even better'. Of course, one of my credos is: less but better.

Today it's a credo that feels at home with talk about 'sustainability' and 'green' and 'recession', but was it well received when you first said it?

I first said it nearly 30 years ago, when most people wanted more, not less. [Laughs.] Especially the marketing departments. But I was lucky, because I had good relationships with chairmen. I met Erwin and Artur Braun in '55, and a little bit later, in '57, I met Niels Vitsoe. This is important, because as a designer you must remember that you do not work in an empty world: you need entrepreneurs that support you.

An example of good design in the '50s is Olivetti: this was a combination of the entrepreneur, Adriano Olivetti, his people, his staff, and the architects. Even earlier, at the turn of the century, you had the combination of Peter Behrens, architect, and the German company AEG. These kinds of collaborations share the purpose of going forward and looking to the future. But we humans are masters at disturbing our own good ideas.

Do you mean that in a smaller or a larger sense?

Well, with respect to Peter Behrens and AEG, of course, the First World War interrupted any developments taking place in design at the time. Design had barely awakened again in the '20s and '30s, with Bauhaus, when it was interrupted by the Nazis. When we started again, after the war, we saw it as our chance to make things better – many young architects felt that way. And I do mean 'better' and not 'less but better' – because at that time we did need a lot of things. ...



Displayed in Dieter Rams' workshop are various prototypes of the door handles he designed for FSB.

Opposite: In the storage room next to Rams' office, books, brochures and products fill the shelves he designed for Vitsoe. The T 220 portable radio can be seen as well (bottom right).



... It's amazing, I was 15 years old when the war ended, and at that time you had to stand in line to get something to eat. It was really terrible. Today people stand in line when Apple comes out with a new product. I've never seen anything like it – people standing in line for new design? And, in this case, good design. I think that's quite unusual, and it was achieved through a combination of serious designers backed by entrepreneurs.

Are you saying we've come a long way?

You know, I'm often asked how many companies are making really good design today. And I have to reply that 50 years ago I could count those companies on my ten fingers. And I can still count them on my ten fingers. There are very few companies worldwide that are truly making good, honest design. It is very rare. There's Apple, a big company, as well as some smaller ones around the world. But no more than ten companies approach design honestly.

Why have you come to that conclusion?

Because only a few entrepreneurs today really think about what will be needed in the future; most think only about how they can optimize their turnover. Look at most companies: their main objective is to make more money. Well, I think it's time for tremendous changes. We need better politicians, better engineers, better entrepreneurs and, of course, better designers. What we don't need are more fashion designers. We have a lot of fashion designers. Everybody wants to study design today; everybody thinks they know something about design. The media has done a lot to promote it, but not in the right way. Just look around; you see too many unnecessary things.

Now, I trained as an architect. When they ask me at customs for my profession, I tell them I'm an architect, not a designer. Twenty

years ago, if you asked somebody on the street to define design, you'd get no answer. Today people know what design is, but most of them think of it as 'fashion art'.

This is all part of a marketing strategy, of course: make terrible products but call them 'design'. What does it mean, anyway, 'design'? The English word means exactly this: construction, innovation; both, together. And the classical word *designo*, from the Latin, means almost exactly the same. Nothing against the word, but the way it's used today is

‘There are no real magazines any more’

making it become ... obsolete. [Laughs.] It's time to rediscover the word 'design'. But for now I prefer to say I'm an architect. In Germany, sometimes I say I'm a 'gestalt engineer'.

But the word 'design' does sell ...

It sells too much. Look, design has nothing to do with all this fashion. Some of the best design is anonymous. We do not need star architects. We do not need star designers. They have done many good things, of course, but we don't need them

to be stars. We need good salesmen and good engineers and good designers. It's so easy, isn't it? But nobody believes that it can be so easy.

How important is the media's role – architecture and design media, as well as media in general – in achieving a redefinition of the word 'design'?

The media is fashion-oriented. Only a few magazines worldwide go beyond this – again, I can count them on my fingers. Basically, there are no real magazines any more.

Do you think our needs fundamentally follow the changes in product design?

It sounds a little fanatical, but we are on the way to destroying our planet, and it's time we break with our bad habits. We need to save our resources for things of greater importance.

Given the increased awareness of environmental and economic crises, are people paying more attention to saving resources – specifically with respect to design?

My feeling is that they aren't, not at ...



On one shelf of Rams' Universal Shelving System 606 are scale models of a chair, a radio and several vintage cars.

Good design, according to Dieter Rams ...



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... is honest

... makes
a product
understandable

... is long
lasting

... is innovative

... makes a
product useful

... is
environmentally
friendly

... is aesthetic

... is unobtrusive

... is thorough,
down to the
last detail

... is as little
design as
possible

Dieter Rams draws a sketch for a friend.



In the living room of the Rams' residence
is a dining table with chairs by Thonet.

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... the moment. When you come across something like this exhibition [at Vitsoe], you get the feeling that it exists on an island. Which brings us back to the beginning of our discussion: only a few companies are taking a look at their own identities. And the same can be said of countries.

I am not the oracle of Delphi. I have no idea what direction we're going in. I only know we have to start from zero, with education. I also want to see more examples of good design. I'm missing active museums. Look at the museums today: they have such wonderful things in storage, and what do they have on exhibit? Sweet cookies. That's what I call postmodern things that have no substance or meaning – things that haphazardly connect to what you find in all the department stores. The museums used to serve as examples, but it isn't that way any more. In Germany they used to have what was called a *Kunstgewerbemuseum* [museum of decorative arts]. Now it's *Angewandte Kunst* [applied art]. The name has changed, but what they are doing has not. They communicate nothing to the public. And what the public needs is education – and examples of what we could be doing. No museum is showing such things. Only a handful of companies, like Apple, are doing it right.

Do you find resistance towards the idea that one must learn about design or architecture in order to understand it? I'm still a designer, which means I'm still an optimist. I believe that if we have more examples of good design, then we have a chance to change minds. We have this exhibition travelling the world [Less and More: The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams], which opened in Osaka and has appeared in Tokyo and London. It's moving on to Frankfurt now, where it was conceived, before returning to

Japan and South Korea via San Francisco. And I have to say that I've been very impressed by the interest this exhibition has received, and not only in Japan. The Japanese have always had a greater sensibility for these kinds of things. It has something to do with Zen. My basic design philosophy and my 10 principles

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are similar to the Zen philosophy. So because the Japanese have a sensibility for these things, interest was very high in Japan. But it was also high in London. Fifty-five thousand people saw the show in London. For a design exhibition, that's an enormous number. Again, I believe the best way to educate is through example.

Going back to the idea that 'design' has become an overused and even obsolete word – at the very least, wouldn't an increased interest in the word create an increased interest in an exhibition that includes the word? We need to develop a greater interest in the basic things and not in all the superfluous things. To summarize, we need to return to

Dieter Rams

- 1932 Born in Wiesbaden, Germany
- 1947 Began studies in architecture and interior design at the School of Arts & Crafts in Wiesbaden
- 1953 Graduated with honours and went to work for architect Otto Apel
- 1955 Joined Braun as architect and interior designer
- 1956 First product designs for Braun
- 1957 First furniture designs for Zapf
- 1959 Cofounded Vitsoe+Zapf with Otto Zapf and Niels Wiese Vitsoe
- 1961 Appointed head of the Braun design department
- 1968 Appointed director of the Braun design department and elected Honorary Royal Designer for Industry by the Royal Society of Arts, London
- 1981 Appointed professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Hamburg
- 1988-1998 Served as chairman of the German Design Council
- 1991-1995 Served on the board of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design
- 1995 Promoted to executive director of corporate identity affairs at Braun
- 1997 Retired from Braun and became professor emeritus at the Academy of Fine Arts, Hamburg

Dieter Rams has received numerous design awards, and his work has been featured in countless exhibitions. In 2008 the retrospective *Less and More: The Design Epos of Dieter Rams* opened at the Suntory Museum in Osaka, Japan, from where it travelled to Tokyo and London. In 2011 Phaidon Press published the monograph *Dieter Rams: As Little Design as Possible*.

my favourite idea of 'less but better'. It's not the time, now, to think only about spectacular things. We have enough spectacular things. We have spectacular wars happening all over the world, and we continue to fight one another.

Now the discussion has turned towards new energies. So, maybe we could change our world if we had more solar-panelled buildings, but we are not on the way to thinking in this direction, are we? We have achieved a little bit here and there, but there is very little movement in the right direction. I don't know why we're drawn first to the spectacular, but I do know that we have to start thinking in a different way – and design can help. _