

Dieter Rams: Design by Vitsœ

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Jack Lenor Larsen's New York showroom.

The ideas behind my work as a designer have to match with a company's objectives. This principle applies to my work not only at Braun but also at Vitsœ. I have been working for these two companies for about 20 years and – I like to point out – only for these two companies.

I am convinced that design – at least in the terms I understand it – cannot be performed by someone outside the company. I am absolutely convinced that this is true if products are designed as part of a larger system, like we do at Vitsœ.

In 1957 I began to develop a storage system that formed the basis of the company Vitsœ, which was founded in 1959. Thus the ideology behind my design is engrained within the company.

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Ladies and gentlemen, design is a popular subject today. No wonder because, in the face of increasing competition, design is often the only product differentiation that is truly discernible to the buyer.

I am convinced that a well-thought-out design is decisive to the quality of a product. A poorly-designed product is not only uglier than a well-designed one but it is of less value and use. Worst of all it might be intrusive.

The development and changes that we have initiated with our work at Vitsœ are, I believe, positive for the development of good design as a whole.

The introduction of good design is needed for a company to be successful. However, our definition of success may be different to yours. Striving for good design is of social importance as it means, amongst other things, absolutely avoiding waste.

What is good design? Product design is the total configuration of a product: its form, colour, material and construction. The product must serve its intended purpose efficiently.

A designer who wants to achieve good design must not regard himself as an artist who, according to taste and aesthetics, is merely dressing-up products with a last-minute garment.

The designer must be the *gestaltingenieur* or creative engineer. They synthesise the completed product from the various elements that make up its design. Their work is largely rational, meaning that aesthetic decisions are justified by an understanding of the product's purpose.

I am convinced that people have an interest in what we are doing at Vitsœ since our products are useful; I expect they also appreciate the aesthetic that follows. These qualities are the result of progressive and intelligent problem solving. Functionality must be at the centre of good design.

A product must be functional in itself but it also must function as part of a wider system: the home. Vitsœ's 606 Universal Shelving System is successful due to its high functionality and its ability to adapt to any environment. Vitsœ's furniture does not shout; it performs its function in relative anonymity alongside furniture from any designer and in homes from any era. We make the effort to produce products like this for the intelligent and responsible users – not consumers – who consciously select products that they can really use. Good design must be able to coexist.

You cannot understand good design if you do not understand people; design is made for people. It must be ergonomically correct, meaning it must harmonise with a human being's strengths, dimensions, senses and understanding.

Vitsœ's direct contact with its customers has led to a deep understanding of people. Over the years, our understanding of how you use a shelf or an armchair has increased. We have educated and diligent people worldwide who understand how to plan systems in configurations that our customers may not necessarily have thought of at the beginning.

Order and proportion: only orderliness makes a product useful

All objects that are to be used must be subject to a clear order. The remarkable order of design at Vitsœ has the purpose of communicating the function of the object to the user. The design of a Vitsœ product clearly points out its purpose and its use – and facilitates them.

The order of the elements – their arrangement, their shape, their size and their colour – is based on a thoroughly-planned system. This system is the language of Vitsœ design.

But this order is not self-serving; and I would not call it ideology because it is a practical necessity. For design to be understood by everyone – which good design should strive to do – it should be as simple as possible.

Design at Vitsœ brings all individual elements into proportion. An often-cited feature of the Vitsœ collection is its balance, its harmony, its belonging together. All structures, components and finishes coexist as a well-balanced and harmonious design that gives it usability.

The majority of products that we encounter in our day-to-day lives scream for attention or try to impress us with their magnificence or minuscule size. These objects try to dictate our relationships with them. Good design creates powerful long-lasting relationships with products as good design creates objects with balanced proportions; at Vitsœ we go further by trying to create objects in balanced proportion with people.

Good design means to me: as little design as possible

To use design to impress, to polish things up, to make them chic, is no design at all. This is packaging.

When we concentrate on the essential elements in design, when we omit all superfluous elements, we find forms become: quiet, comfortable, understandable and, most importantly, long lasting.

Vitsœ products are in constant evolution. We do not limit our products to the manufacturing technologies available at the time of their design. Built into the language of Vitsœ products is adaptability – adaptability for the user in the home and adaptability in design and manufacture.

We are constantly looking for new and better technical solutions for our products. As technology and production processes are always advancing, innovations are not only possible but they are necessary for a product to continue to be considered good design.

We have experienced that people are more willing than ever to change their lifestyles; that they accept innovative solutions – not fake ones – and are able to rid themselves of old and cemented habits with our products. They expect such innovative solutions, particularly from Vitsœ.

Ladies and gentlemen, our environment is changing rapidly. How will these changes affect our design concepts? Can design that claims longer-range validity be reactive to current circumstances or must it be proactive for the future?

In a room where the proportions are noticed we feel better and we think differently. A neglected and uncared-for landscape will have a different effect on our lives than one that is natural and orderly. There is a lot of work to do on the topic of our physical surroundings affecting our psychological functions. This is the work we do at Vitsœ.

But Vitsœ only makes furniture today. There are larger questions that we need to answer about our urban environment and how it affects us as individuals and as a society.

What effects do electricity pylons, skyscrapers, highways, street lighting and car parks, for example, have on our psyche and relationships? We know that the residents of anonymous concrete blocks can become depressed as a result of their surroundings. But who is researching these things systematically? Who takes all of this really seriously?

I imagine our current situation will cause future generations to shudder at the thoughtlessness in the way in which we today fill our homes, our cities and our landscape with a chaos of assorted junk. What a fatalistic apathy we have towards the effect of such things. What atrocities we have to tolerate. Yet we are only half aware of them.

This complex situation is increasing and possibly irreversible: there are no discrete actions anymore. Everything interacts and is dependent on other things; we must think more thoroughly about what we are doing, how we are doing it and why we are doing it.

Indeed, the collapse of the entire system may be impending.

I have spoken of our surroundings but let us look at the wider environment: the world we live in. There is an increasing and irreversible shortage of natural resources: raw materials, energy, food, and land. This must compel us to rationalise, especially in design. The times of thoughtless design, which can only flourish in times of thoughtless production for thoughtless consumption, are over. We cannot afford any more thoughtlessness.

The complexity of systems and shortage of natural resources should compel a change of individual attitudes and attitudes as a society. We learn as individuals and we learn as a group. We are beginning to understand the changes that we are only just seeing. We must take notice with increasing soberness and, hopefully, with growing alertness and rationalism.

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Ladies and gentlemen, if we at Vitsœ have contributed towards intelligent, responsible design and a higher quality of objects, I believe we owe our thanks to a great degree to the unselfish enthusiasm and the always-consequent attitude of one man: Niels Vitsœ. At the same time thanks to all the members of staff, who sense that they have done a little more than just produce another short-lived consumer product.

Good design is a reality!