



Collecting and communicating: the Vitra Design Museum

Imagine if Volkswagen were to open a museum of car design. A museum of car design that was based on bringing together all the archives of Henry Ford, Pierre Boulanger and Harley Earl, with a collection made up of the most significant cars in the development of automobile history from three continents, going back for a century, alongside a selection of the most intelligently designed engines ever produced. Or consider the likelihood of Chanel doing something similar with fashion not limited to the company's own output, or Boeing contemplating such an initiative with aircraft, and you have an idea of what Rolf Fehlbaum, its founder, and Alexander von Vegesack, its director, have achieved with the Vitra Design Museum in just twenty years. Of course neither Volkswagen nor Chanel, despite their generous cultural patronage across many fields, have attempted any such thing. Vision apart, there are simply too many questions of conflicting interests and ambitions at stake for them to try it.

A less confident company than Vitra, or perhaps it is better to say, a company without the level of curiosity that drives Vitra, would be too busy asking itself why it should be investing in safeguarding and celebrating the heritage of what could be seen as commercial rivals, to invest so much time and effort in the enterprise. But moved by Fehlbaum's sense of curiosity about design, a curiosity and enthusiasm that go far beyond the boundaries of his own company's output, Vitra has created one of the most remarkable collections of twentieth-

century design anywhere. Much more than a corporate museum, it offers a perspective about what design can be in the contemporary world.

There are many design collections in the world now. Among the oldest of them is that of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London which established the idea of collecting design in the 1850s. Its purpose was not so much to entertain the public, as to educate it, and, above all, to provide the research and the reference material that the British government believed its manufacturers would need to help them make better products which in turn could better overseas imports. The Victoria and Albert was followed by a wave of similar institutions, from the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (the MAK) in Vienna, to the Neue Sammlung in Munich. In time, of course, the Victoria and Albert became something else. It suffered mission creep, and turned into a museum of decorative art, where snuff boxes and Raphael cartoons, and collections from throughout Britain's colonial possessions accumulated apparently almost at random to fill up hall after hall. Now, it is a museum that is about a lot of things, but a focused idea of what design can offer a contemporary manufacturer is no longer one of them. It was followed in the 1920s by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where industrial design was admitted to the collection on the basis of its aesthetic relevance to modernism in art. It was another definition of design, one which proved just as influential as that of the Victoria and Albert, and inspired as many other institutions to follow its lead. But the price of admission for design into the art gallery was that it would be presented as if it were art: as large-scale sculpture in neutral white spaces, with no sense of context or process.

Vitra's collections have been assembled with an awareness of both these purposes in mind; they have learned from each of them and moved on. The company has a unique track record in manufacturing and conceiving new typologies for furniture. Studying the collections has played a real part in making that possible, in a way that the founders of the Victoria and Albert would recognize. In the early 1980s, before the Vitra Design Museum had been built, you could wander through the offices attached to the Vitra factory and find in between the desks the battered and faded survivors of the heroic days of the modern movement. They were a challenge to do better today, object lessons for a creative company, rather than trophies. And this collection is still there, in the midst of the company's production facilities, as a kind of reference encyclopaedia.

It is also a reflection of Fehlbaum's world view; in which industrial design offers a crucial insight into the nature of the contemporary world, engaged both with the material, and the cerebral. Of course, a collection like that of MoMA or the Pompidou in Paris has a wider range. Vitra does not collect computers or cars, washing machines, or helicopters, or guns, or fashion. Its focus is on furniture in the context of architecture and interior design. And with the

exception of a few classically styled pieces that demonstrate innovation in mass production, it limits itself to modernism and its descendants in its stylistic choices. But in its chosen territory – and that now extends into lighting – of the modern period, Vitra has unmatched depth. When Ray Eames died, there was no American museum with the resources ready to take on the bulk of the archives of what was perhaps the most brilliant mid-century design studio in the world. Vitra found the means to do it – and for its pains was presented for a moment as an unwelcome interloper, making off with a priceless piece of American heritage. Similarly, when the Barrágan papers in Mexico were in danger of dissolving into dust, it was Vitra that rescued them. The Vitra collections include Sottsass and Memphis of course; they have pieces by Pantón, Kuramata, Aalto and Arad, Pesce and Colombo. But they also go back to the dawn of industrial production, with items by Thonet, and even earlier.

The collections began with Rolf Fehlbaum's acquisition of a single chair designed and made by Jean Prouvé, the great, quintessentially French, engineer designer. What intrigued him was the combination of manufacturing skill and aesthetic sensibility that it represented. The collections took on their present form when Fehlbaum met Alexander von Vegesack. After a spell in theatre, and as an exhibition organizer, von Vegesack had knocked on Billy Wilder's door in Los Angeles to look at his collection of Bauhaus designs. Over the years, von Vegesack built up a substantial collection of his own, fuelled by the very special kind of knowledge that comes not from academic history but from the visceral insight into the evolution of production and technique that comes from the focus of a collector. Fehlbaum bought von Vegesack's holdings of bentwood and tubular steel furniture. As Fehlbaum says, he had no clear strategy about where to take the collections next. He has always taken pleasure in seeing where events will lead him.

No collection can be objective. It is in the nature of collecting that it is based on choices. What category of things to collect is one key choice. Which pieces to focus on is another. Unerringly, these choices will reveal the personality behind the collection. Fehlbaum is inspired by how things are made. Standing by the Vitra production line, he becomes lyrical when he talks about the magic that accompanies the moment when a rubber disc closes up to connect the bent metal of a chair leg to the fibreglass shell of the seat. But he is as excited by the cultural significance of a chair and its ability to reflect an artistic moment, or a social development. He has a catholic, but coherent, taste that informs the choice of every object acquired for the collections and it is that taste, as much as anything, which makes the collections so impressive. The idea of building a museum to show the collections was not part of the original plan. Fehlbaum had thought about buying a villa to house them. But then, as part of the wider expansion of the Weil am Rhein Campus of Vitra's industrial buildings, the possibility of a structure to show the collections came up. There was a casual introduction to Frank Gehry from Claes

Oldenburg, commissioned by Fehlbaum to produce a sculpture as a gift to his father for his seventieth birthday. Fehlbaum had already asked Gehry to think about furniture for the company, and somehow never managed to get a reply. The factory with museum attached, or possibly the other way around was Gehry's belated response.

The Museum and the collections have emerged as two distinct, and different, strands in Vitra's strategy. The collections allow Vitra to take a key place in the international museum circuit, to safeguard the historical legacy of the pioneers, and to collect newer work from contemporary designers. But the collections do not just sit on the shelves. The Vitra Design Museum has established itself as an equally important production house for exhibitions, both thematic and monographs that push forwards the debate on architecture and design. It has been able to develop an important critical and curatorial voice, which is as important as acquiring and looking after objects.

Gehry's modest little building, such an unlikely curtain raiser to the age of iconic architecture that his later work made possible, has become a highly effective platform for the exhibitions programme that Vitra orchestrates, rather than a showcase and storeroom for the collections themselves. On a modest scale, and with restricted means – there is not a titanium fish scale to be seen anywhere in the building – Gehry has created a characterful series of spaces that are the antithesis of bland neutral flexibility, but which still offer a distinctive frame for the exhibitions that they accommodate. This is the public face of Vitra, the visible cultural programme that has a story to tell about design. What has made the Vitra Museum so distinctive is a mix of Fehlbaum's passion and his eye, which has shaped the parameters of the collections, with his cool insistence that the Museum does all it can to support itself. An insistence that has brought out the most in von Vegesack's shrewd ingenuity.

Among many other things, it led to the creation of the series of miniatures – tiny scale models of classic chairs – in a special factory, which have enjoyed remarkable sales and consequently play a large part in supporting the Museum. And it has driven the Museum's exhibitions policy, tailoring them to travel easily, allowing it to work with more traditional institutions around the world. Vitra's work with the Barrágan and Eames archives have allowed the Museum to celebrate established reputations and to throw new light on them, as well as in some cases to overcome unjustified neglect. And it has shown the way in which such archives can have a future. The collections have a different role. They have become too large to have a permanent presence on display and are carefully looked after on the apparently endless shelves of the Museum storerooms. They are available for loan to other institutions, and to form the basis of the exhibitions that Vitra mounts.

Their significance and it has to be said, their value, has changed almost beyond recognition in the twenty years since the Museum opened. The explosion of the market in design objects would make it impossible to replicate Vitra's collections now without massive investment. Design is not yet in the same state as the art market which has priced much new work out of the reach of so many art museums. But prices have moved upwards decisively. Prouvé has already become an "old master". It is an unsettling transformation for a category of objects ideologically conceived to be the very opposite. Contemporary design has its ideological underpinning in mass production, which offers perfection in numbers, and promises the democratization that industry can bring, by allowing the many to aspire to the contemporary version of craftsmanship once only enjoyed by the few.

Vitra's collections manage to square the circle. They track the course of technical innovation and the development of industrial manufacture. But they also show the aesthetic intensity of design and what it has to offer to the art galleries. In the end it is the two sides of the Museum, its collections and its exhibitions, that give it the power to shift the conversation on design, to focus attention on the areas that it sees as important, to explore achievements and innovations and to help make new ones possible.

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