



Design Processes – Individual Authorship at Vitra

Vitra works with independent “authors” – primarily with designers, but also with architects and graphic artists. What distinguishes the work of these people from that of other designers is the fact that their personal imprint and outlook is reflected in every one of their products.

In contrast, designers in fixed employment must adapt their personal interpretation to the requirements of the client. We do not define our roles in terms of client and contractor. Two business partners – the designer and Vitra – embark on a common quest for an optimal solution. Vitra’s task is to provide a stimulating environment, technical support, conceptual input and constructive criticism. Yet even this is no guarantee for success. Sometimes a product just does not come together, making it necessary to start all over again. And the development process always takes a lot longer than anticipated. Sometimes the result is very different from what was originally planned. The product has to come into being, to find its identity. This understanding, and the ability to carefully channel it, is the art of design management.

The field of design covers a wide area: from the creation of edition pieces (which are close relatives of art objects) to design activity within the framework of mass production; from the collector’s item to the anonymous utilitarian object; from the sensationally extreme to the suitably practical to the tritely mundane. It is obvious that “extreme” manifestations are perceived differently than suitable ones. The objects that typically find their way into collections and archives are extreme: they break with tradition; they present a brilliant solution to one aspect

of a problem by ignoring other aspects. In short, they are spectacular individual works. They leave little room for the practical object. The latter is absorbed into everyday use, serves its intended function, provides pleasure to the user, but rarely ends up in a museum, even when it has made a significant contribution to the evolution of a genre.

However, there is another kind of newness – so practical and perfectly suited to its task that its reception is almost immediate, and it becomes established as a standard within a short period of time. This newness is typological. Even typologically novel objects are rarely shown in museums, in spite of the fact that they set new standards. One reason is that the quality of such objects is seldom demonstrative or spontaneously evident, in contrast to exciting, striking new designs. Paradoxically, much more basic research and development – time and effort, trial and error – is invested in the typologically new object than in the dramatic virtuoso piece. The introduction of Vitra Edition pieces in 1987 provided a vivid example of this: an object that was developed within just a few months attracted more attention than an office chair that had taken years to develop, offering novel mechanical features, innovative materials and a fresh appearance in conjunction with a new office concept. Both types of newness – the extreme and the practical – are important for design, but Vitra puts its primary focus on the practical.

Sometimes a practical solution is remarkably striking at the same time. These are the great moments in design. Every discipline experiences such moments: literature, film, art. Something new is created and finds its definitive expression straightaway. When something is new in a climactic, epochal sense (and not just a hill in the mountain forelands), it determines the direction of subsequent developments for a long period of time. A pioneering work that began as a heresy becomes a classic. It remains relevant until the next epically new development comes along, bringing with it a paradigm shift. The validity of this type of newness is not based on the fact that it is new, but on the establishment of a new equilibrium. This is especially true when innovative materials and technologies become accessible – as ultimately exemplified in the work of Charles & Ray Eames.

Vitra has worked with a number of designers for many years and with others from time to time. A sustained collaboration over a long period is possible and productive when it is both economically and creatively beneficial to the designer, while also bringing continuity to Vitra's pursuit of its central themes. Vitra's special relationships with certain designers will be described in more detail below. The temperaments and working methods of some designers do not lend themselves to a continuous, long-term relationship with Vitra, yet project-oriented collaborations have produced groundbreaking results.

The most important figures in this group include Frank Gehry, Philippe Starck and Ron Arad. In addition, the designers and artists of Vitra Edition during the 1980s deserve mention here: Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini, Borek Sipek, Gaetano Pesce, Denis Santachiara, Richard Artschwager.

Cooperative work with other designers has just begun. While the first results of these efforts can be seen, it is not yet apparent where these collaborations will ultimately lead: Christoph Ingenhoven, Alfredo Häberli, Hannes Wettstein, Arik Levy, Greg Lynn. There is also the new Vitra Edition, which among other things has brought the acquaintance of Konstantin Grcic, Naoto Fukasawa, Jürgen Mayer H., Jerszy Seymour and Jürgen Bey. Each one of them embodies in their own particular way what is typical about the relationship between Vitra and "its" designers: a melange of pioneering spirit, interest in scientific research, unswerving determination, and the understanding of design as a "love investigation", as Charles Eames called the confluence of dedication and passion that leads to successful design solutions.

Rolf Fehlbaum, 2008