



## *The Art of Design Management: George Nelson and Fortune magazine*

As author and journalist, George Nelson dealt with the issue of the cultural and economic constraints of design as did no other designer before or after him. Here, one of his central themes was the role and function of the designer - his own role - in the service of the economy. Hence, in the mid fifties, he asserted that „every society experiences its era under the control of certain ideas that are so powerful and ubiquitous that people are hardly even aware of them. In short, these ideas could be described as the dominant sphere, and they spread out until they permeate the very nature of all of society. In the 13th century, one such sphere was the Church. In America today, it is the economy. Science and technology are there to serve this complex and they are promoted by it“. In this context, Nelson regarded the designer's task as being the early recognition of latent yet existing societal trends and then to use the latest findings from science and technology to respond with an industrial product.

Since its beginnings in the late 1920s, design in the USA has been more closely linked with the economy than has been the case in Europe, where the avant-garde among the designers were mainly motivated by social reformatory intentions. After the Great Depression, the main reason why representatives of business engaged designers was in order to increase sales volumes. This very one-dimensional and persistent concept of design was something that Nelson as a graduate architect continually wrote against. Hence one of his primary concerns was to establish design as an integral component of a business - not only in his own practice but also as a writer. The progressive business magazine Fortune provided Nelson, who had

come to design through his work as a journalist and writer, with a particularly suitable forum. Like the magazines Time, Life and Architectural Forum – for which Nelson also worked – this large-sized and bulky magazine was part of publisher Henry Luce's media empire. Luce, a Yale graduate as was Nelson, courageously brought Fortune onto the market in 1930 during the Great Depression at the lofty price of one US Dollar. Fortune had its offices on the 50th floor of the elegant Chrysler building. From there, Fortune was aimed at an emergent business elite which Luce regarded as the new American aristocracy. The magazine had the goal of uniting economy with a modern aesthetic and culture – entirely as defined by Nelson. Noted graphic designers such as Herbert Matter and Herbert Bayer as well as photographer Margaret Bourke White, also employed by Fortune, contributed to this. With their black and white photographs which are still highly regarded today they even managed to aestheticise views of workshops and production processes.

Nelson wrote his very first „design article“ for Fortune in 1934. Here he portrayed the pioneers in this industry while at the same time providing what was probably one of the very first articles to give an overview of the new profession of industrial designer. It was also in Fortune that Nelson published his thesis on the layout, construction method and technology of the postwar residential building. The cover featured a model of the Sherman Fairchild house that he had designed – the basis of his bestseller Tomorrow's House, which was published in 1945.

Two years later, Nelson's first furniture collection appeared on the market with the Herman Miller company. The Slat Bench, which he had originally designed for his office at Fortune, was part and parcel of this. While Nelson used the completion of the Miller collection as the occasion to officially establish his own design office in New York, another of his articles was published in Fortune. This was an extensive and unsparing report on the state of the American furniture industry, which Nelson accused of having backward leanings. His report caused an uproar in this conservative sector.

In another Fortune article in 1949, Nelson returned to the topic that was so important to him – „Business and the Industrial Designer“. He stated that in business the designer with skill and integrity ought to establish himself at a level at which far-reaching decisions were made. Because „this is the level at which the top designer can truly demonstrate that he is worth his money as now his work as a designer will become part of a long-term and coherent company policy that he himself has helped to develop. If the designer really wants to have a constructive influence he has to occupy a position that gives him plenty of room for manoeuvre“. With these words Nelson was accurately describing the position that he himself held as design director at the Herman Miller company, where with Charles Eames, Isamu Noguchi and Paul Laszlo he had selected his co-designers and was influencing the entire image of the company

through his use of catalogues and advertisements. Even though in the design business Nelson had always enjoyed acting as an outsider and liked to make the claim that it was only by accident that he had become a designer, it was as an insider that he wrote his articles about design by basing what he wrote on his personal experiences. Arthur Drexler of the Museum of Modern Art once called his essays a series of sketchy self-portraits.

In the 1950's, Nelson was not alone in his interest in design management but he did put it at the top of the agenda. In 1952 when Nelson reported for Fortune on the second international design conference in Aspen the theme was the same as that of the previous year – „Design as a Function of Management.“

Although Nelson and his office worked for many companies of which some were very large, it was only with a few medium-sized firms that he was able to put his ideal conception of design management into practice. With Herman Miller, Howard Miller the clock manufacturer, and aluminium producer Aluminum Extensions, he met company directors with whom he was able to directly discuss strategic decisions. These relationships between designer and businessman were marked by a deep mutual respect. It was with Herman Miller and Howard Miller in particular that Nelson was able to write such a design narrative. In the late 1970s, toward the end of his career, he noted that „one of the limitations of the designer is that he cannot function without customers. The designer needs a customer with whom he can build a symbiotic relationship and in which the one pays and the other gives out. All too often, the boss has become a committee“.

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