
History

German Design Council – a look back at 60 years of design culture

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∴ ——— “Good design is good business” – which is how Thomas Watson, the former head of *IBM*, already put it in a nutshell in the early 1950s. The proper design is crucial for the success of a brand. However, what constitutes a good design? How is it defined? In any case, good design must always be assessed in the context of cultural and socio-political developments; it is therefore itself subject to continual change and has its own respective history.

In Germany, this history is inextricably linked with that of the *German Design Council*, an institution established by the *Federation of German Industry* and several leading companies as a result of a *German Bundestag* resolution in 1953. The goal of the non-profit foundation is to support the German economy in the use of design as an economic and cultural factor, hence promoting its overall competitiveness.

There is apparently a need for action shortly after the Second World War. The image of German products or German exports at trade fairs abroad is regarded throughout the world as so old-fashioned, that there is an increasingly louder call for an official neutral authority for German design. Ludwig Erhard, then still the Minister of Economics, noted in 1952: “The post-war exhibitions in New York, Chicago (1949) and Milan (1951) demonstrated the deficiencies of German products in terms of taste with shocking clarity.” He then took it to the next level by adding: “Despite acknowledgement of their technical perfection, they do not satisfy modern design requirements.”



Barbara Hahlweg

The establishment of the *German Design Council* slowly changes the dynamics of the German design landscape. Mia Seeger, a German design theorist and author who previously worked at *Werkbund* (German Work Federation), is appointed as General Manager and possesses a wealth of experience. She also knows how to interact with the industry. The first major project is the participation in *X. Milan Triennale* in 1954. An exhibit equaling approximately 500 square meters is developed together with the architect Egon Eiermann for the purpose of shining a new light on Germany's culture: cosmopolitan and modern. This not only includes a presentation of the developments in industrial design, architecture and handcrafts, but in liberal arts as well. Mia Seeger is primarily concerned with re-integrating the federal republic into the international community of states. Design exhibitions throughout the world belong to the core business of the *German Design Council* during the coming decades. Design is seen as a bridge to the world. People themselves are hospitable and international; they don't only visit, but invite others to participate in joint dialog and exchange. Under the patronage of Ludwig Erhard, the *German Design Council* initiates an international symposium which lasts several days for the first time in 1957. More than 200 participants attend in Darmstadt to discuss the first topic: “Gute Formen schaffen und verbreiten” (Creating and Distributing Good Designs). Things then proceed on to Berlin, where “die Verantwortung des Unternehmers für die Formgebung” (The Entrepreneur's Responsibility for Design) is discussed.

Now there is more to the history of the *German Design Council* than just a sequence of exhibitions and symposiums. It is in fact also the history of its member companies, whose number has increased to nearly two hundred to date. They stem from entirely different fields of the design-relevant German industry and have made German design history themselves over the decades with design icons. The *German Design Council* and its foundation companies managed, especially during the first decades following its establishment, to ensure that international development in the field of design did not take place under exclusion of the Federal Republic of Germany.

In the 1960s – parallel to societal discourse – design and its conceptual formulation are questioned. A debate begins regarding the functionalism and scientific claims of the discipline. The reasoning that characterized the 1950s, namely to merely cover the needs, is increasingly questioned; there is more to design than just progress and increasing sales! At the same time, the public's interest in good design grew as well. “The standards for the evaluation of design quality profoundly changed,” explains Prof. Dieter Rams, then Chief Design Officer at *Braun AG* and currently an honorary member of the *German Design Council*. “During the first decade following the Second World War, the German consumer goods industry primarily manufactured for the domestic market and satisfied the enormous backlog demand. The markets opened up in the 1960s. Export was a challenge in the beginning as well as a test for the design. We noticed back

X. Triennial in Milan in 1954:
The first big project of the newly
founded *German Design Council*.

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Reception with the Italian president
Giovanni Gronchi and managing
director Mia Seeger in the German
division during the *Triennial* in 1957.

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Bonn: The winner of the 1957 *Triennial*
visiting Ludwig Erhard, then Minister
for Economic Affairs. In the center:
Mia Seeger, first managing director
of the *German Design Council*.

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then that modern design in the sense of *Braun* achieved great international acceptance. This commercial success encouraged us.”

The federal prize “Gute Form” (Good Design) was awarded for the first time in 1969. It was organized by the *German Design Council* and sponsored by the *Federal Ministry of Economics* to pay tribute to the increasing importance of design. Today, the premium award of the *German Design Council* is called the *German Design Award* – a prize that focuses on the economy, while at the same time communicating and promoting design as a tool to improve the overall image in international competition.

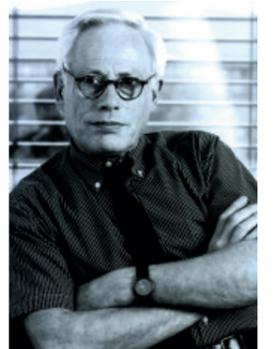
However, is it even possible to measure design? Which criteria and standards should be used to evaluate products and communication? These questions, which first and foremost pertain to the newly created federal prize “Gute Form,” are posed in the 1970s. Herbert Ohl, former Technical Director of the *German Design Council*, developed a sophisticated assessment procedure in which each submitted product was evaluated according to no less than 768 aspects. The system for the assessment especially of industrial products, whose design was drawing more attention from the specialized press than ever before, was intended to be as objective and conclusive as possible.

Ever since its establishment, the *German Design Council* has promoted design dialog, thereby transcending political boundaries. The exhibition presented in 1984 in Berlin (East) and Leipzig “Design – Vorausdenken für den Menschen” (Design – Forethought for People) demonstrates the high level of mutual interest in a German-German design dialog at that time.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is followed by the reunification years. Germany slowly grew together. The traveling exhibition “Formwende – Design in Deutschland” (Design Turnaround – Design in Germany) throughout the Eastern German cities of Halle, Dresden, Cottbus, Rostock and Erfurt in 1991 refers to the different approaches to understanding design in Germany, a country that was divided for decades. “Only now, since success has not materialized as quickly as hoped, is there a growing understanding that developments are always processes which require time,” writes Prof. Dieter Rams in the foreword of the exhibition catalog. “Design also requires time. Design quality doesn’t stem from quick, changing stylish trends, but rather cautiously develops, downright carefully and meticulously. Different approaches to understanding design are depicted in this exhibition, resulting from different systems, worlds, content-related discussions and interpretations; however, there are fundamental mutual roots...”



Catalogue of the first state prize
“Gute Form” of the *German
Design Council* in 1971.



Dieter Rams, president of the
German Design Council from
1988 till 1998, member of honor
since that time.

German Pavilion for the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958. The *German Design Council* had been responsible for the organization and the concept of the pavilion.



The markets in the East and West started to open up more and more in the following years. A global economy with far-reaching consequences for design emerges. The *German Design Council* also had to change its activities to meet the new requirements. Following the turn of the millennium, companies – whether global corporations or mid-sized companies – are confronted with a never-before-experienced competition and, especially against the backdrop of increasing replaceability, are looking for effective tools to promote the distinction of their brands and products.

Today, 60 years after its establishment, the *German Design Council* is regarded as one of the world's leading design institutions. What started as a small circle of initial founders has developed into a unique organization with several members from the fields of business, design, associations and institutions. They all feel committed to a design concept that is suited to create cultural as well as economic values.

Backed by this capability, the *German Design Council* provides a broad array of services pertaining to the promotion and communication of design. In addition to consulting, transferring expert knowledge and promoting newcomers, the organization makes public appearances particularly in the form of renowned prizes for design. First and foremost is the newly organized *German Design Award*, through which the foundation makes outstanding achievements in industry broadly accessible to the general public – not least through their involvement in the voting procedure for their own public prize.

Nowadays, design is meant to serve the people and contribute to their quality of life – just as it was 170 years ago when Michael Thonet conducted his first experiments with bentwood for chair manufacturing in the Rhine-Hessian town of Boppard.

The fact that products from Germany are highly regarded throughout the world today can be attributed to this understanding. This is certainly also due in part to the tireless efforts of the *German Design Council* over the last 60-plus years.
