

## CULTURE

# Machines for living with

Dieter Rams' architectural training brought about a modernist revolution in product design, says **David Kohn**

## EXHIBITION

**LESS AND MORE:  
THE DESIGN ETHOS  
OF DIETER RAMS**

Design Museum, Shad Thames, London SE1  
www.designmuseum.org  
Until March 7

★★★★★

In the first room of Dieter Rams' exhibition at the Design Museum are several surprising photographs of his studio taken by the photographer Todd Eberle. While Rams is best known for pioneering the design of mass-production electronic appliances, the photographs show the walls of his workshop to be covered, albeit meticulously, with woodworking tools. The invitation to consider Rams the woodworker in the context of several hundred electronic radios, clocks and projectors is unexpected but illuminates several central concerns of his work.

Dieter Rams' grandfather was a master cabinet-maker and while studying architecture in Wiesbaden in the late 1940s Rams also qualified as a journeyman carpenter. In 1955, he was employed as a showroom designer at the electronics company Braun by the

then head of design and founder of the Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung, Otl Aicher. However, a year later Rams became involved in the product design department and went on to spend 40 years designing an ever-increasing range of domestic products that did not so much expand the design-led electronics market as create it.

Prior to Rams' designs for Braun, radios were housed in mahogany boxes with decorative flourishes that appealed to bourgeois tastes in domestic furniture. In a recent interview, Rams describes his excitement at seeing images of buildings by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and realising the possibilities for product design. According to Rams, it was not simply the aesthetic that appealed but the functionalist ideology that promised to transform design processes from 19th century styling to the posing of new questions with new formal solutions. And, unlike domestic furnishings, Braun's machines were offering ever more complex interactivity to contend with.

Each of the objects on display share certain formal characteristics. They are smooth and restrained, in black, grey or cream, with radiused corners wherever they are to be touched. The dials, switches and buttons are clearly articulated and arranged in functional hierarchies by groups, discrete labelling and colour. All of these design decisions share an authority that results in part from the adherence to a functionalist approach. The little machines anticipate their use at every turn, having been given faces that appear to understand the questions one might have of them. From tuning-in to the programming of stations, the sequence of operations has been carefully considered, broken



Rams' products — smooth and restrained, in black, grey or cream — on show at the Design Museum.

down into its constituent logical operations and arranged spatially to allow the otherwise mysterious world of radio waves to be accessed with apparent ease.

The functionalist rhetoric of the Ulm School's Systematic Design process, of which Rams' work is a clear exposition, cannot wholly explain the pleasure that the products continue to inspire. In this regard, I find similarities in Rams' work to that of Charles and Ray Eames and Achille Castiglioni. Each of these designers managed to instill a child-like sensibility into their products that rewards use with delight. There is always an aspect of figuration, of comfort, of quiet permanence that accom-

panies each design that suggests a much more complex associative design process than single dogmas can hope to encapsulate. As evidence that Rams was aware of these similarities, a Google search of these three designers names led to a photograph of Rams' workdesk published in Wallpaper's July 1994 issue, revealing that he sits at an Eames EA106 chair and reads by a Castiglioni Lampedina table lamp.

Rams, Charles Eames and Castiglioni all studied architecture before concentrating on product design and were guided by an interest in the relationship between craft and manufacturing processes. One could speculate

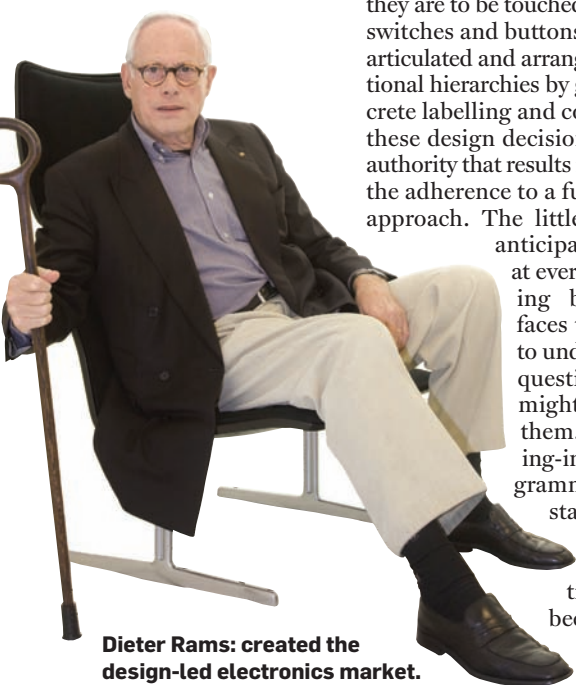
that these similar influences have contributed to an understanding of the time involved in making objects by hand, an interest in products that last and the possibility of translating this time, through design, into manufacturing. Their collective output represents a challenge to the mar-

**The 606 Universal Shelving System is the closest product to architecture that Rams designed**

keting-led strategy of "planned obsolescence" that Brooks Stevens described in 1954 as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary". Rather, the products are designed to persist in the background while life goes on around them.

Today only two of Rams' designs are still in production, the 606 Universal Shelving System and the 620 Chair Programme. This might suggest that the project of "planned persistence" failed. However, there are several conspicuous reasons for the survival of these two products. First, their design is unaffected by the ever-increasing rate of technological

PHOTOS: LUKE HAYES



Dieter Rams: created the design-led electronics market.

## Epiphany of inhabitation

Philip Christou reports on a symposium discussing the spirit of place

## SYMPOSIUM

**SUSTAINING IDENTITY II**  
Curated by Juhani Pallasmaa  
Victoria & Albert Museum,  
London

★★★★☆

Juhani Pallasmaa argues that the architect's ability to engender a sense of place and belonging has become an ever more needed skill in our increasingly globalised culture. For the V&A's second Sus-

taining Identity symposium, he invited 10 international speakers from six continents to each give a presentation on this theme.

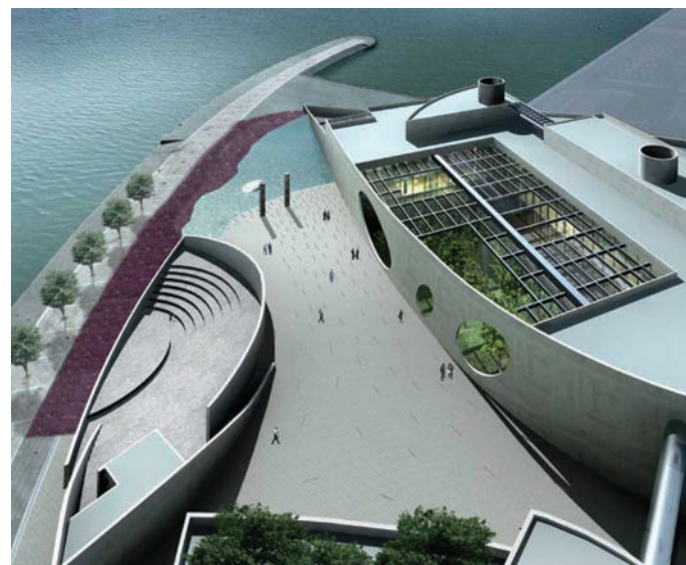
The most mature architect speakers were especially engaging. Charles Correa showed images from projects, ranging from the Champalimaud Cancer & Neurosciences Research Centre in Lisbon, Portugal (currently under construction), to the high-density low-rise Incremental Housing at Belapur, New Bombay, 1983-86.

His modest way of using cultural symbolism and traditional architectural form (often highly decorative and multicoloured) comes close to appearing like a thin postmodern confection but it surely is not. The difference lies in this architect's ability to make the building "tell you where you are", he says.

"All great architectures are regional," he explained, "because they are so specific to place, they become universal. You don't start

out to make it universal." It is his insistence on the architect's role as one who reaffirms the quality of place that is most powerful. With the same conviction he is able to make a meaningful sense of place in a new research laboratory building at MIT or a high-rise apartment building in Bombay.

The day's other high point was the presentation by Gawie Fagan from Cape Town. Practically unknown outside South Africa, Fagan showed built works from



Charles Correa's Champalimaud research centre in Lisbon.



**More events** An extended what's on guide is available at [bdonline.co.uk/listings](http://bdonline.co.uk/listings)

# Allusions of grandeur

Stern's theories of post-modernism sound convincing, but the realities surround us, says **Andrew Mead**

## BOOK

### ARCHITECTURE ON THE EDGE OF POSTMODERNISM

By **Robert AM Stern**  
Yale University Press,  
204pp, £30.

★★★★☆

Robert Stern's book opens with an essay from 1964 on SOM's then recent Pepsi-Cola Building on New York's Park Avenue. Though allowing that its glass-and-aluminium envelope is very sophisticated ("the curtain wall par excellence"), Stern finds the building "almost completely abstracted from everyday experience" and contemptuous of its surroundings. It encapsulates for him the failings of orthodox modernism — the international style — which his subsequent 20 essays then address.

Of course Stern writes as an architect thoroughly identified with post-modernism, and a hugely prolific one, as several fat monographs from Monacelli Press perhaps make all too clear. But he's also a notable historian who has edited a superb series of books on New York, and as dean of Yale School of Architecture he has ensured the restoration of Paul Rudolph's long-abused Art & Architecture Building — a late modernist tour de force.

All of which suggests that this book won't be narrowly prescriptive, nostalgically pretending that the 20th century didn't happen, and sure enough Stern takes pains to stress he's not just a knee-jerk historicist. As he says in a key essay, "After the Modern Movement" (1977-78), post-modernism "depends on forms and strategies from both the modern movement and the architecture that preceded it, though it declares the pastness of both".

Stern acknowledges that there was more to early modernism than the international style, though he doesn't pursue those other strands as Sandy Wilson did in *The Other Tradition* (1995). He praises Le

Corbusier's shift towards sculptural expressiveness and metaphor at Ronchamp and Kahn's profound response to history, and what he highlights in "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" (1966) is Venturi's attempt "to enrich 20th century modernism by reintegrating it with the grand historical traditions of the



Stern: Not a knee-jerk historicist.

modern as a whole".

Sometimes amounting to mini-manifestos, these essays are bulletins from the front line of American architecture as it evolved over 20 years or more, the last dating from 1988 when the Deconstructivist Architecture show at New York's MoMA announced a new zeitgeist. This leads to some

repetition but there is also the sense of Stern defining his position with increasing clarity, summed up by the three principles of "contextualism, allusionism and ornamentalism". Together they stress a building's concern with particularities of place, its engagement with history and culture, and its ability to express "meaning". The results, he says, may be hybrid and eclectic but won't substitute "pat, predigested imagery for more incisive analysis".

Which sounds fine in theory — so why did we end up with the Sainsbury Wing? Why so much pat imagery and so little analysis in the post-modernism that surrounds us? Where did it all go wrong?

While always an advocate in these essays, Stern does indicate some answers to such questions. Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans "doesn't give us the Italy of the history books but that

of Hollywood"; the neo-Ionic column at one corner of Venturi & Rauch's Oberlin College addition is "outrageously scaled"; Venturi's Learning from Las Vegas is "a bit overblown and supercharged". And perhaps Stern reveals his own weakness for the merely scenographic with his reference to "the unsubstantiated conviction that raw concrete and brick are beautiful or even hold some special morality".

Most telling, though, is the lack of any sustained close analysis of a post-modernist building to convince us that it's as rich and multifaceted as Stern says it should be — no exemplary case study to show his three principles turned compellingly into practice. Stern is as eloquent an apologist for post-modernism as Charles Jencks, but his essays are more about aspiration than achievement and the evidence on the street is against him.



innovation, unlike the electronic products designed for Braun before them. Related to this is the fact that the shelving is the closest product to architecture that Rams designed. Being both able to enclose spaces and provide little spaces to be inhabited by our belongings, the 606 system is even more concretely a background to change. Finally, Vitsoe, the company created to produce and sell the products, has no other product range. Vitsoe therefore represents an engaging experiment in the possibility of obsolescence-resistant design. And in a world increasingly aware of the problem of waste, a shelf for life is a timely proposition.

the early 1960s to the present. The early houses looked so current that they could easily have been built last year.

Here is a fine architect with a good knowledge of the vernacular and historical building traditions of his region, who has been able to translate this into contemporary architecture with a sense of modesty, integrity and a lot of enjoyment.

The so-called "cultural practitioner" speakers — representatives from Unesco and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture — spoke about their efforts to conserve cultural identity in various regions of the world. Their statements and their work are important and well-meaning, but one wonders if many of the results of some of

their actions (such as giving a community Unesco World Heritage status) are more destructive than doing nothing at all.

A diverse group of younger architect speakers including Sean Godsell from Melbourne, Iñaki Abalos from Madrid, Jonathan Kirschenfeld from New York, and Mauricio Pezo and Sofia von Ellrichshausen from Buenos Aires showed works of varied quality. Godsell engaged the audience with his unfashionable and refreshing admission that he draws in pencil on tracing paper, and designs his own window details. He argued for "the drama of a dumb form rather than the stupidity of a complex form".

*Philip Christou is a director at the Architecture Research Unit.*



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