





In October 1970 Niels Vitsoe proudly opened his new showroom on Kaiserhofstrasse in Frankfurt. To the background of the latest jazz its smoke-filled open space became a home for idealistic debate, late into the night. Customers and collaborators discussed passionately how the merits – or otherwise – of self-effacing, adaptable and long-living furniture might inform a wider world that was already becoming aware of its excesses. More recently Vitsoe Voice began life at vitsoe.com/voice to provide a global platform for this ongoing debate. Its popularity there has led to this: the first issue on good old paper. We think Niels would have approved. Your contributions are awaited at voice@vitsoe.com

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Vitsoe in Frankfurt, 1993

Cover and left:
Vitsoe in Royal
Leamington Spa, 2017

Painter Erik Schmidt
accepts the marks of time
in his Berlin apartment.

Embracing imperfection



Photography by
Ana Santl

“Here, I live in the sky,” said Erik Schmidt, a painter who has lived in the same Berlin apartment for 19 years. His split-level home on the top floor of a German Democratic Republic tower block was designed as an artist’s residence in 1970, with living quarters downstairs and a studio space above.

Floor-to-ceiling windows provide panoramic views of the city and flood the rooms with light throughout the day. Upholstery and book spines have faded from years of

sitting in the sun – an inevitability embraced by Erik, who explained that he wanted to kick back against the contemporary desire for polished minimalism and create “a comfortable, cosy place to live.”

“As soon as I took over the place I started to change things; I adapted it to suit my new life. The studio became the lounge and I set about buying furniture from flea markets and finding things on the street. The 620 chairs by Vitsœ were bought second-hand 12 years ago and still ➡





“When I buy things,
I want to keep
them forever.”

have the original fabric covers. I love the freedom of being able to take things apart and rebuild them to see how they are made – the freedom of being able to always refresh your life and change it around.”

Growing up in Germany, Erik’s family home was furnished with antiques, “most of which were dark, heavy and hard to move,” he told us. “Once a piece was positioned, it tended to stay in one place forever, but even as a child I found the idea of not being able to move things around every now and again very strange.

“Living so many floors up, I don’t like the idea of a 3-metre-long sofa – the stress of getting it up here or moving it around is something I don’t need. This is one of the main reasons for having Vitsø.”

Spots of paint are still visible behind the shelving on the concrete walls of Erik’s living space – a hangover

from the days when the apartment was shared with a friend and the studio was in daily use.

“When I buy things, I want to keep them forever; and I know for a lot of people Vitsø is about taking control, but I see it differently. With the shelving ... it’s like a painting ... it’s not fixed. My objects are the shapes and colours that I can move around.

“I like the idea of a reliable system of things that I can change whenever I want. I hate the feeling of ‘finished’ – it’s a horrible moment.”

Erik’s liberal approach to interior design creates warmth and texture, with most of his furniture bearing the scars of daily use, which according to Erik “only add to their charm.

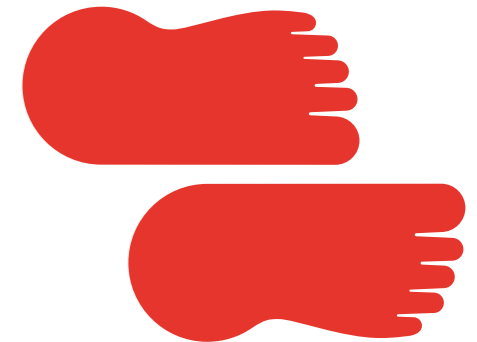
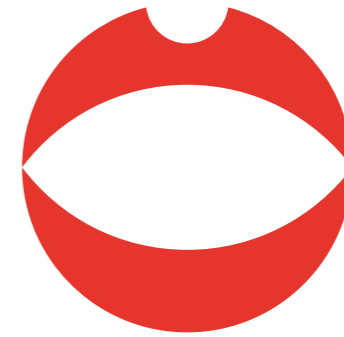
A lot of my things have scratches and slight damage, but to me they are not ‘broken’, they are just ‘used’. Things get old. That’s life.” 🖐️



The pictograms by Wolfgang Schmidt, who was Vitsoe's graphic designer for more than 30 years.

Signs of life

The graphic designer, Wolfgang Schmidt (1929–1995), was known as a messy student. Yet the clarity and precision of the work he left behind is quite the opposite. His friend, Hans Hillmann, said of Schmidt, whom he remembered one winter holding his coat wrapped around him because all of the buttons had fallen off, "It was astonishing to us that the final result, the finished graphic was, including a large white border, absolutely immaculate when he showed it, without a speck of dust unless he had planned it." ←

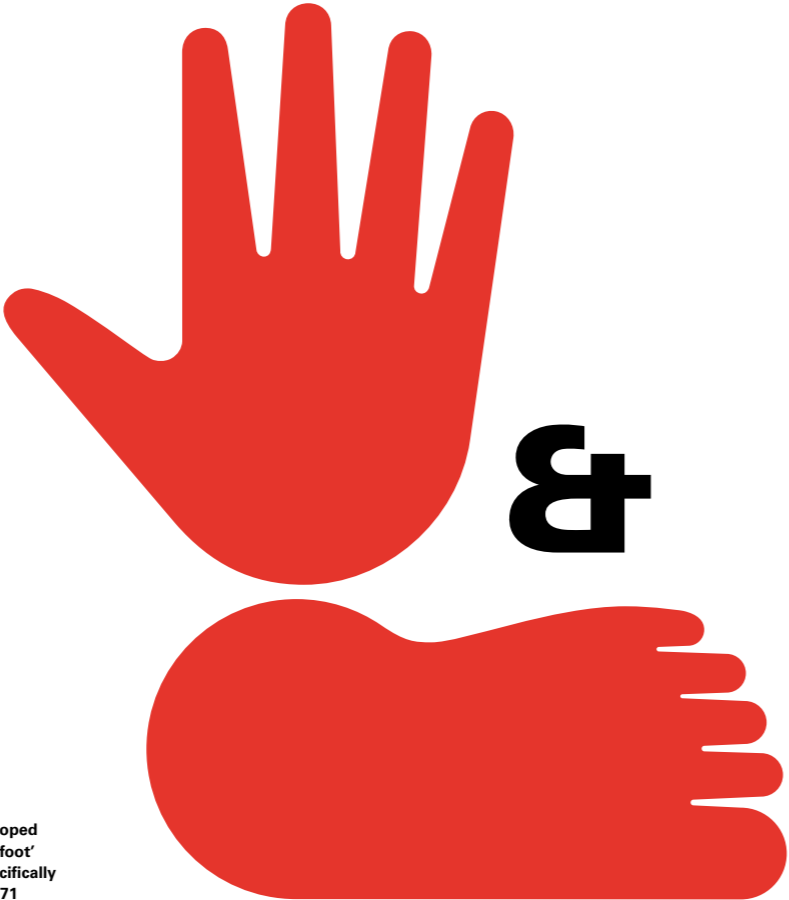


Schmidt was influenced in the 1950s by the treatment of light and dark values in the linocuts and engravings of the artist and professor, Karl Rössing, who taught him at the State Academy of Art in Stuttgart. Schmidt went on to learn how to organise text and images on a page with Hans Leistikow in Kassel; and in Reykjavik, Iceland, he met Dieter Roth who invited him to play with type.

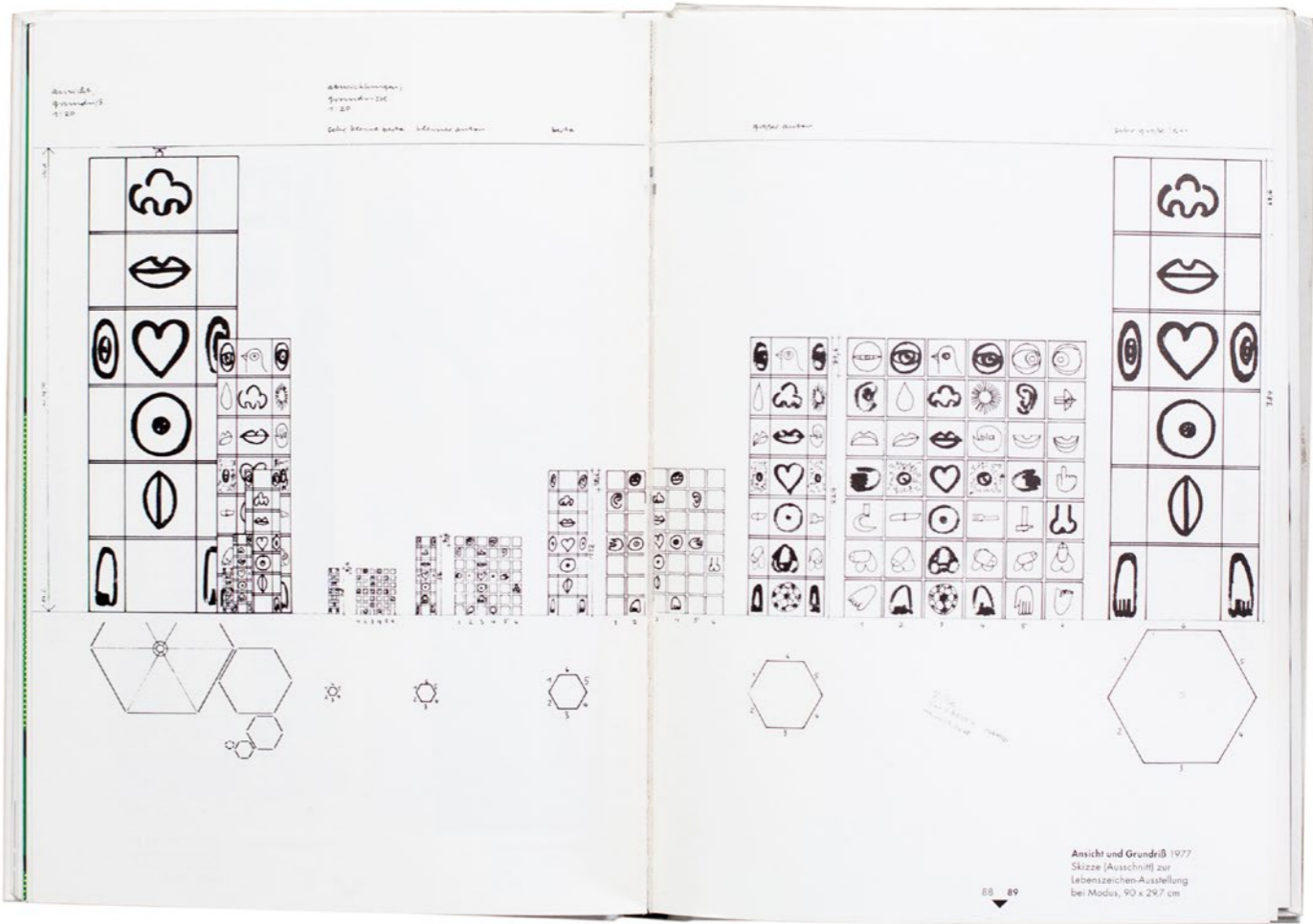
It was at the beginning of the 1960s that Schmidt started to work with Niels Vitsø, shortly after the founding of the furniture company, Vitsø + Zapf. Schmidt’s task, in his words, was to create, “a system for the holistic and concise design of all visual expressions of an institution with the aim of achieving the best possible communication between sender and receiver.” In 1969 he adopted Adrian Frutiger’s Univers font to design Vitsø’s logo that has not changed since. In 1971 Schmidt developed the ‘hand and foot’ pictogram specifically for Vitsø. In German there is an expression to say something has “hand und fuß”, which means that it has been thoroughly thought-out. Hand and foot was central to Vitsø’s identity during the 1970s.

Schmidt’s pictograms known as ‘Lebenszeichen’ (‘Signs of life’) were designed as a personal project in 1972 to represent, as he put it, “almost all human experiences.” While he acknowledged the impossibility of his task, he described the creation process as, “a game that follows strict rules.” Based on parts of the human body he designed a system that allowed the discovery of new forms via the reproduction and iteration of motifs. Over 260 pictograms followed; it was rumoured that he planned 893 in total.

Typically for Schmidt, he did not confine his work just to the obvious eye, ear, mouth, hand and heart but added the vagina, penis and testicles. He used a minimum of marks to make each pictogram while retaining a character that draws a smile from even the most reserved viewer.



Schmidt developed the ‘hand and foot’ pictogram specifically for Vitsø in 1971



Hand-drawn elevation and plan for 1977 Lebenszeichen exhibition. Photographed in ‘Wolfgang Schmidt. Worte und Bilder’

Mark Adams, managing director of Vitsø, who worked with Niels Vitsø from 1985, commented on the relationship between Vitsø and its graphic designer: “Niels and I bonded over our dry sense of humour and I’m sure it was similar between him and Schmidt. You can see it in the graphic design and the written messages they exchanged. They were nudging at the edge of what was acceptable at the time. For all their prim exterior appearance they were cheeky and irreverent behind the scenes. The

playfulness was a good antidote to the seriousness in the so-called design world.”

Schmidt was interested in the process of design rather than the pursuit of a personal vision. Almost unwittingly echoing the ethos of his client, he once said, “Arbitrary interventions to achieve a more beautiful look are forbidden!” He continued to design for Vitsø for over 30 years before withdrawing from public life in 1987. He was declared dead in 1995. 🖐️



Photography by
Dirk Lindner

From Mark Adams,
managing director, on the
occasion of the opening
of Vitsø's new building,
14 October 2017.

The road to Royal Leamington Spa: arrival

[A bell rings]

Here at our company's new home
in Royal Leamington Spa our school
bell is rung at 10:00 for our morning
break and at 12:45 for lunch ...
together.

Do you know the origin of the word
'company'? Cum pane; with bread;
the act of coming together to break
bread. Vitsø's very first chef bakes
our bread in our open-plan kitchen
using flour from Charlecote Mill, one
of the last remaining water-powered
mills in the country, just down the
road from Royal Leamington Spa.

Vitsø's new building has been cre-
ated to allow many people to break
bread together for decades ahead.

But why has Vitsø come to Royal
Leamington Spa? 🍞

First and foremost, as we outgrew the expense and congestion of London, we were looking for a community. We could create a home for Vitsø from anything, but we could not create a community. On our first visit to Leamington we asked to meet the community, not to look at sites. Our experience can best be summed up by the lady I stopped to speak to a few weeks ago tending a garden on Archery Road: she said, “I came here 35 years ago; I knew one person; that was enough to introduce me to the entire community.” People we met on that first day have stood by us ever since.

So we found a community, but where are we?

We are only half a mile away from the Midland Oak, allegedly the centre of England, in the area loved by distribution companies. We are at the centre of Vitsø’s supply chain, and near container terminals so that our 40-foot containers can go by rail to the ports.

We are in an area rich in engineering history: Malcolm Sayer, the E-Type designer, lived nearby; Frank Whittle was educated in Leamington and went on to create the jet engine; Aston Martin, Bentley, Rolls Royce and Jaguar Land Rover are in daily parlance. That’s the physical world.

But, more surprisingly, we are also in the digital world – the heart of the UK gaming industry. Vitsø is as much a digital business as

it is a physical one. We are also in an area that is surprisingly artistically creative.

Given its history as a spa town, we are surrounded by fine Georgian and Regency architecture and immaculate parks. We are a short walk from the station where we can take the train to London – and walk to our Marylebone shop. We are on the national cycle route. The buses stop outside our door, where our future employees are heading to school. The universities of Coventry and Warwick – with our new collaborator, Warwick Manufacturing Group – are a few miles away.

Warwickshire College Group is visible from our north window while the fine state and independent schools are along the Myton Road, which leads away from the west of our site.

As Ebenezer Howard said in Welwyn Garden City: “Bring together the best of town and country; home and work should be nearby.” While others are rushing to make more cars, we chose a location that allows us to avoid using cars.

Can we cast our minds back to a world before the carbon age – the age when we broke open nature’s closed cycles by consuming resources bequeathed to us over billions of years? We could think, for example, of a 13th century cruck-frame barn constructed from timber with braced aisles on either side of

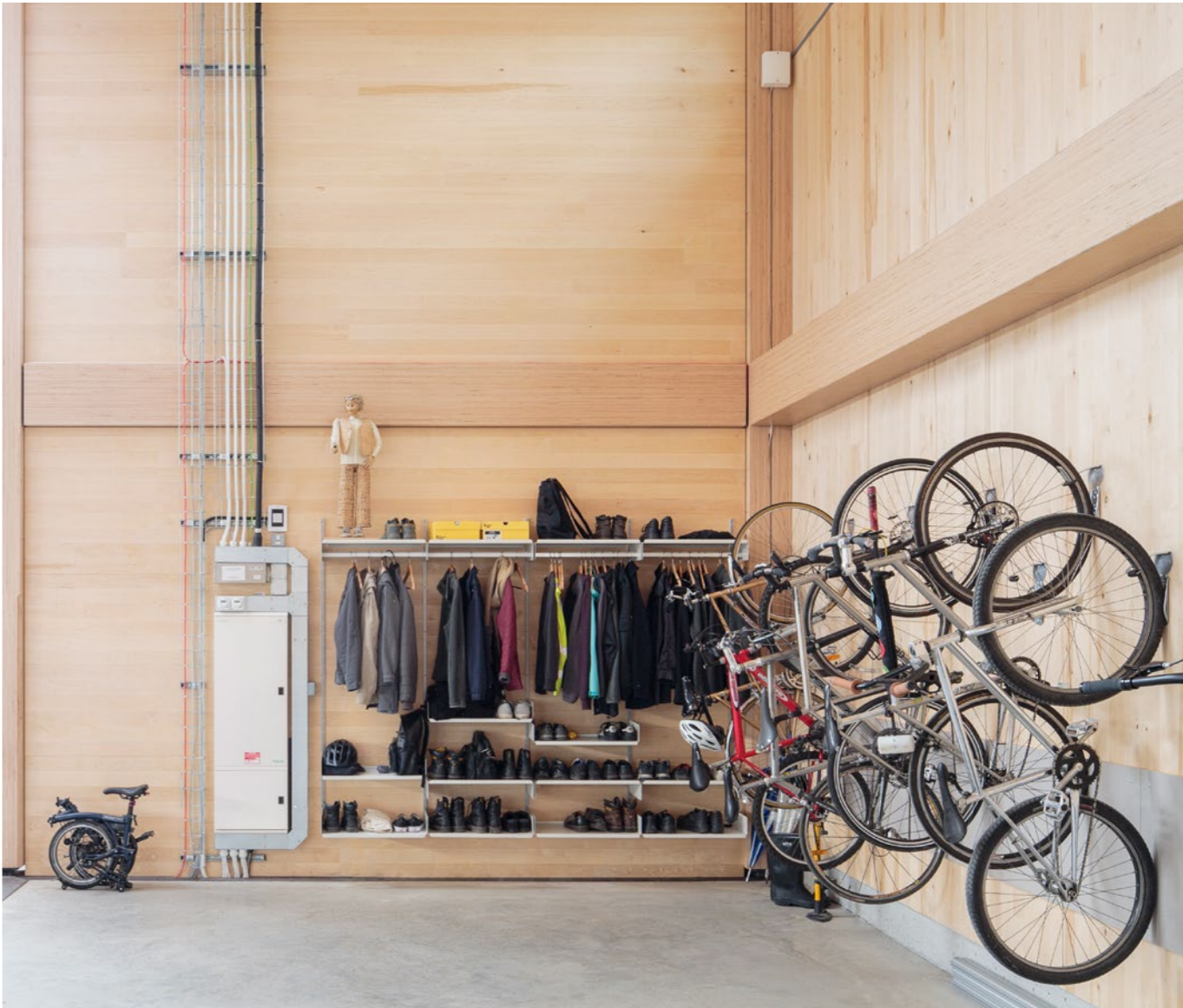
an open nave; and large doors for cross-ventilation to separate the wheat from the chaff as you threshed your harvest.

Or we could think of our favourite cathedral, with its soaring nave, top light and supporting aisles. Or of the brilliant Joseph Paxton who conceived the design for a building in Hyde Park in 1850 for the Great Exhibition and watched Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, an Anglo-German pair, open it just nine months later; known as the Crystal Palace, it was six times the size of St Paul’s Cathedral. On a grid of 24 feet, it comprised repetitive components that could be handled by men and horses; despite its vast size, by all accounts it was human and uplifting.

Or we could think of those factories designed before the age of electricity: they had north-facing rooflights to provide as much even daylight as possible. And finally, Sir Alex Gordon, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1972 who pointed out that the best buildings are: “Long life, loose fit, low energy.” These are just some of the many influences that lead to Vitsø’s new building.

It is perhaps less known that Dieter Rams was trained as an architect in the early 1950s. Later, when he was professor at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, he strove to bring together the disciplines of architecture, interior design and

“We could create a home for Vitsø from anything, but we could not create a community.”





“I would venture that Vitsoë’s new building is not a piece of architecture; it is a way of thinking.”

industrial design. What I have learnt from Dieter is that, above all else, design is a thinking process. I would venture that Vitsoë’s new building is not a piece of architecture; it is a way of thinking. Which is why it has been designed by many thinkers.

Early on it was academic brains from the Centre for Industrial Sustainability at Cambridge, Imperial College and Cranfield University. They advised us not to register for sustainability assessment methods because the box-ticking would constrain us too much from doing the very best for our building. We were joined by environmental and services engineers who devised a strategy based on comfort, to the extent that a lady asked me when visiting here on a June day when it was 32 degrees outside: “where is the air-conditioning?”

We were then joined by Martin Francis, a furniture designer who trained in the early 1960s before joining Norman Foster in his garage to help design my childhood influence of the Willis Faber building in Ipswich. Martin then established an engineering firm in Paris to help design, among others, the Louvre pyramid. Since when he has designed some of the most elegant yachts that ply the high seas before being introduced – by a Vitsoë customer – to be the rock of this project for the last two-and-a-half years. A mutual respect for Paxton bound us at our first meeting.

Beneath our feet in this building is a brownfield site that has been stabilised to a depth of four metres. We are standing on a sealed and polished composite of sand, stone,

clay and water – a material rooted in the earth. It is long-living and noble, concrete.

We are looking at a north-south grid of 7.5m between the columns, by coincidence, almost exactly Paxton’s 24 feet. We are surrounded by natural, breathable materials that have grown from the earth: a beech laminate-veneer lumber frame; birch-faced cross-laminate timber walls; and wood-fibre insulation. In other words, a few good-quality components. Constantly we have asked during this project: “What can we leave out?” We have spent more on structure, and virtually nothing on finish.

When the first bay was erected on 28 November last year, the internal finish was there, on day one. Nothing has happened since; the structure is the finish. The mantra for this building of “no paintbrushes” has held true.

Above our heads are the openable windows that allow natural ventilation. Up there is also natural light, from the north, and the photovoltaic panels facing south. Also up there are the pipes and wires distributed north-south through the cutouts in the beams before dropping down to move east-west in the floor channels beneath our feet.

Outside is our ridge-and-furrow landscape that will settle and mature over the years ahead; it has just been seeded with wild flowers.

In the middle of winter last year it took just 23 working days to erect our building. And the total construction cost of the square foot ➡

VITSOE





“Nobody had ever done it before; there was nervousness; we learnt; but we did it. This is a building that will adapt and learn.”

on which we are standing, from 4 metres down to 9 metres up, was £145. That’s £5.7m for the almost 40,000 sq feet in which we stand. We are assured that is a good figure.

Construction professionals or industrial-sustainability gurus will look around our building with critical eyes, spotting the problems. But, on Dieter Rams’s own admission, a certain shelving system was fairly crude in the early 1960s. Today we are still working on that kit of parts, constantly improving it.

Welcome to this kit of parts. In stacks on the floor of our building are the large beech LVL beams with

which we will continue to adapt it. The aluminium dovetail joints that hold the beams to the columns allow us to insert beams or relocate them, as we did two weeks ago when we moved our first beam. Nobody had ever done it before; there was nervousness; we learnt; but we did it. This is a building that will adapt and learn.

Internally this building is about visibility and serendipity; bumping into each other; fewer meetings. We have heard the research about our problem with a lack of exercise and the fact that we must do our 10,000 steps. We are advised that we need technology to encourage us to do that. But if we walk/cycle/train/bus to Vitsø and spend our days in here, the problem is solved – without technology.

We have also heard about the increasing problems with our immune systems due to the fact that we spend our years under artificial light at an artificial 22 degrees. In Vitsø’s building we will be warmer in summer, cooler in winter, and exposed to daylight because no lights are on during daylight hours. The result is that our immune systems will be happier.

Externally, this building is open to its community. It has windows so that we can see out to the greenery but so our future employees can see in – and be tempted. This building is designed to be part of the community that has welcomed Vitsø so warmly.

But, above all else, this building will last because it will be loved.

At Vitsø we are often asked about our business model; the questioning goes something like this:

- you make furniture to last a long time
- you encourage your customers to buy less of it
- you then encourage them to take it with them when they move
- you encourage them to repair it
- you even encourage them to hand it on to the next generation (as we hear increasingly, Vitsø is put in our customers’ Wills)
- and, to cap it all, you don’t do what everyone else does: you don’t launch new products as often as possible, or even offer new colours, all to encourage your customers to keep coming back to buy more.

How on earth does that business model work?

We know the three planets argument: we cannot all survive on a finite planet with inexorable growth, especially when that growth depends on continued disposal. If the ferocity of recent hurricanes, or the destruction of our coral reefs – both fuelled by warming seas – is not enough to remind us, we have made a mess of our planet. As the prescient EF Schumacher told us back in 1973 in *Small is Beautiful*, greed and envy are the root of the problem.

But how does that explain why Vitsø has built this building? A building that is larger than its current needs...

Because, as Nancy Bocken and Sam Short of the University of Cambridge wrote in an academic paper published in 2015, Vitsø is a rare example of a “sufficiency-driven business model: businesses that seek to moderate overall resource consumption by curbing demand through education and consumer engagement.”

At Vitsø we genuinely want our customers to buy only what you need from us. We want more people to buy fewer things of better quality and to make it last longer – people who understand that they are not rich enough to buy cheaply.

Our creaking planet needs many more of us to behave in this way; and we know that our existing customers are, by a country mile, our number-one advocates and the source of our new customers.

This building is a statement of intent: if ever more people around the world will buy less from us, then this building, and all it stands for, will be justified. 🖐️



Colourful duo Sue and Alan Ravitz balance art and psychiatry in New York.

Staying power

The prospect of living and working together as a couple spells disaster for some, but Sue and Alan Ravitz have found a way to make it work. On the corner of Manhattan's 6th Avenue, the duo's workspace spans east-to-west across the 12th floor of a 16-storey building.

Sue laughed while she explained how she and her husband 'Al' decided to take the plunge just over three years ago, "We thought it would be a fantastic idea. I'm a rug-maker by trade, and before we opened up the '57W57' gallery, I used to work alone making tapestries at my studio. Since Al and I took over the space, we've been able to adapt it to suit us both. We have a series of sliding doors 🚪

separating my studio and art gallery on the west side, and Al's psychiatry practice on the east, where he specialises in divorce and conflict management. Luckily, we get along, so it's a nice experience being together all the time!"

A mutual appreciation of colour is evident in both areas, with essential office supplies neatly stored away in Otto Zapf Softline System cabinets, and walls adorned with artworks created by Sue and the artists her gallery represents. They bought their Vitsø shelving systems 25 years ago, just before they moved from Chicago to New York, and it's been a part of their distinctive furniture collection ever since.

"We've always been drawn to the European designers," Sue said. "I think the American attitude to modernism was influenced by the Bauhaus, because lots of those

designers came to the States during WWII, and when it comes to interiors, people like Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe had a huge impact on America's ideas on lightness and space." Alan added, "We've always been interested in stuff that has staying power, and Vitsø really has that. It's a classic, it looks just as good today as when it was invented, and that's what appealed to us."

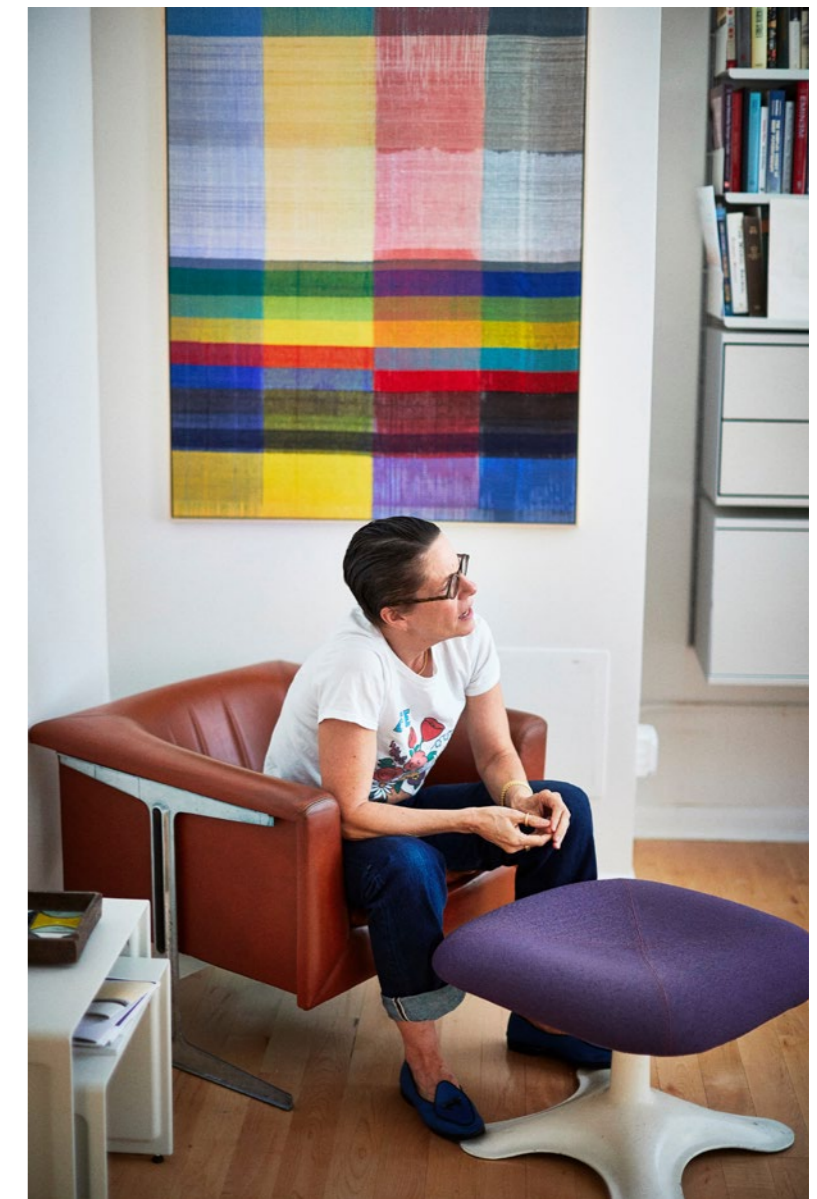
Alan chortled that his architect patients sometimes notice Vitsø in his office but to most people it's invisible. "Sometimes I even forget it's there," he said. "I can be sitting here working, and I'll glance up and think to myself, 'aah, that's so nice.' Sue and I have always used the system for storing our books – I love the way they look as aesthetic objects, it's almost like having a painting on the wall. We tend to put various little objects we find along



the way in front of the spines – old postcards and interesting things we find at flea markets. I like having the shelves right there in front of me, so I can pull books down as and when I need them for my writing."

Living without clutter isn't something that came naturally to the couple. "Sue and I weren't raised that way," Alan said. "It takes training to be reductive. What happened? Well, I'm not certain if this happens to everybody but what happened to us is that our taste became progressively quieter the older we got.

"Our daughter has just bought her first Vitsø system, but then she's far more neat-and-tidy than we were when we were young. We really do our best to only keep the things that are significant, and as the years



"We have a series of sliding doors separating my studio and art gallery on the west side, and Al's psychiatry practice on the east..."





"I love the way they look as aesthetic objects, it's almost like having a painting on the wall."

pass by, we've really tried our best to maintain a serious reduction in the amount of crap we keep – although saying that, you should see my desk, it's an absolute mess!"

As sirens sounded below the window, the couple nudged each other playfully when asked how they maintain such positivity in spite of being together 24/7. "Well, Sue's busy in her part of the building, and I'm busy here all day too; but I love having her here," Alan grinned. "It's the best feeling to be able to walk over to her gallery in between patients to get some emotional sustenance from my wife. I feel very lucky."

Sue smiled and recognised how perhaps what they have is unique, "Not every couple would be able to work the way we do and still have things to talk about over dinner. We're lucky, we have a magical connection, and it's still going ... 40 years later." 🖐️



The home of good design

Dieter Rams's 1971 house has been protected for future generations.

Photography by
Ingeborg Kracht-Rams



The modest L-shaped bungalow in which Dieter Rams and Ingeborg Kracht-Rams have lived in Germany since 1971 has been listed by the Hessen Office for the Preservation of Historical monuments. It is now protected for future generations and will remain as a manifestation of his philosophy for good design.

The unique 'doppelbungalow' stands within the Roter Hang estate, parts of which were originally designed to house Braun employees based at the company's headquarters in Kronberg. After purchasing a small plot of land within the site, Rams undertook his only fully-realised building project in partnership with Rudolf Kramer, an architect from nearby Königstein.

Dieter Rams wrote candidly about his home to accompany photographs taken by his wife Ingeborg. We leave you in their hands:

"My house in Kronberg, bordering the Taunus woodlands, is part of a concentrated housing development that I had originally helped to plan. The house is built and furnished according to my own design and I have lived here with my wife since 1971. It goes without saying that we live with Vitsø furniture systems. Firstly, because I have only ever designed furniture that I myself would like to have and secondly to get to know them during daily use to better recognise where they might be improved or developed further. In instances where the

"The house is built and furnished according to my own design..."



Vitsø programme is not complete, I have selected furniture from other manufacturers that have been designed from a similar perspective, such as the bent wood 214 Thonet chairs around the table that we use for dining, or the Fritz Hansen stools at the breakfast bar between the kitchen and living area.

"In the centre of the living room area there is a loose group of 620 armchairs, my version of a seating landscape. It is a lively and much-used area with a view of the garden. Here we sit together, talk, entertain our friends and watch television. Plants, books and pictures lend atmosphere. The composition of these rooms represents the basic intention behind my design: simplicity, essentiality and openness. The objects do not boast about themselves, take centre stage

or restrict but withdraw into the background. Their reduction and unobtrusiveness generate space. The orderliness is not restrictive but liberating.

"In a world which is filling up at a disconcerting pace, that is destructively loud and visually confusing, design has the task in my view to be quiet, to help generate a level of calm that allows people to come to themselves. The contra position to this is a design that strongly stimulates, that wants to draw attention to itself and arouse strong emotions. For me this is inhumane because it adds in its way to the chaos that confuses, numbs and lames us.

"Inside my house I can adjust my senses and my sensitivity. I often work at home – in a room that opens out onto the garden, just like the 🍷

living room. Working for me does not mean so much designing in the usual sense of the term, but more contemplating, reading and talking. Design is in the first instance a thinking process.

“In traditional Japanese architecture, living spaces are designed from a position that is similar to my own. The aesthetic of an empty room with its clear and precise organisation of floor, walls and ceiling and careful combination of materials and structure is much more sophisticated than the European aesthetic of opulence, pattern and loud forms.

“In the design of my relatively small garden, I have allowed myself to be inspired by Japanese gardens. It is not a copy of any specific garden, rather a homage to the essence of the Japanese garden, a translation into our time, our landscape and our climate. I find working in the garden stimulating – it is a kind of design work that is comparable with a room, a furniture system or an appliance.

“It may seem surprising that I, as a designer of the late twentieth century, as a designer of technical products, also draw inspiration from design cultures such as traditional

Japanese architecture and view their achievements with total respect and recognition. But it would be even more surprising if there was nothing in the long history of design that had inspired me or helped strengthen my beliefs. The lack of historic interest in many contemporary designers is, in my view, a weakness.

“Just as with the old Japanese design culture, I feel equally drawn to the architecture of the romantic period. The medieval Eberbach Monastery in Rheingau is one of the pearls of Romanesque architecture and lies not far from my native city of Wiesbaden. I visited it often when I was young. Another most exceptional architectural achievement is, to my mind, the octagonal thirteenth-century Castel del Monte in Apulia, Italy, built by the emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. Years ago I became acquainted with Shaker design, which deeply impressed me with its straightforward approach, its patient perfection and respectful regard for good solutions.”👉

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All quotes first appeared in ‘*Less but better*’, published by Gestalten.
© Jo Klatt Design+Design Verlag

“The composition of these rooms represents the basic intention behind my design: simplicity, essentiality and openness.”



The Archers on Vitsoe and West Coast architecture.

Personal, precise, organised chaos



Photography courtesy of The Archers

The most widely-used method for recording the world’s weather patterns, the Koppen Climate Classification, confirms rainfall as rare on the streets of Los Angeles. With year-round sunshine and distinctive hazy-blue skies, California’s most densely-populated city has attracted artists and writers since the early 1900s.

For the past ten years, the city has been home to a small group of designers called The Archers. Co-founded by Richard Petit, the

team creates spaces that Richard described as, “personal but precise.” In addition to working with architects to shape the structure of each space, they source rare, overlooked items of furniture and textiles. Keen to express that their aesthetic is not minimalist, he stated, “We’re not afraid of organised chaos, colour or pattern.”

The landscape of Los Angeles is defined by its variety of mountains, islands, beaches, deserts and the metropolis. The architecture is

almost as varied and includes many a pastiche of popular European forms, but the majority of homes designed by The Archers are in the mid-century style. Architects in Los Angeles are careful to assess the orientation of their houses, as often the external walls are made entirely of glass. So Richard and his team have to consider how the interior responds to the sunlight in each room.

“It’s almost like the Mediterranean in terms of light volumes, and ➡

because of that, we have to be careful when we start specifying furniture,” said Richard. “One of the reasons we use Vitsø’s off-white shelving system on white walls is because it works really well with the amount of sunlight we get here in LA, and the colour is so soft ... it’s like an oyster white.

“The shelving integrates well within any space and because it’s so reductive it sort of disappears, and the wall becomes a volume of books, objects or product.”

Unlike 19th century architects who used skirting boards and architraves to disguise imperfections, the

modern homes in Los Angeles that have become familiar to The Archers reveal everything. “In most of the homes built here – although on the outside they are elegant, machine-like and precise – you’re going to see, ultimately, a lot of imprecision,” Richard said. “That’s because you’re dealing with mass-production of affordable housing, which was pre-pack in many instances ... a kit of parts!

“Perhaps that’s why Dieter Rams’s furniture is such a good fit for us: it enables us to introduce an element of dependable precision. We treat the Vitsø stuff as though it’s part of the architecture, always.”

Working in close collaboration with Vitsø’s planning team, The Archers are able to modify their plans throughout every stage of their design process. Rob Fissmer of Vitsø in Los Angeles explained: “a lot of the time, interior designers will have a hard time communicating how the shelving system works, in which case The Archers are able to say ‘well let’s go over to Vitsø and they’ll show you.’ When the clients arrive we often end up spending quite a lot of time together, to experience what 606 looks and feels like. I think this is at the heart of why the relationship is so unique and works so well.” ←

“...it sort of disappears, and the wall becomes a volume of books, objects or product.”





"We love working with Rob! We can send him our elevations, or rough sketches of what we're trying to do," said Richard. "The end result feels very tailor-made and yet customisable, and it's always installed in such a way that it feels like it's a part of the physical space and not just attached to it."

"Many of our clients have extensive libraries, so I think they like the idea that while this place might be an interim house – they might only live

there for ten years and they'll sell it – they know they can take their Vitsœ with them."

"We never find ourselves having to convince a client to use it and we hear 'Oh! I'm so glad you're using it because I've always wanted it an awful lot.' They understand the value, they know they can recombine the units or add to it in a future project. The endless combinations just make it so much more flexible." 🖐️



The Strong collection

A life's collection donated to Vitsø
for the benefit of future generations.



People collect for various reasons. For Tom Strong, it was an appreciation for the beauty and day-to-day utility of Dieter Rams’s electrical products that led to a passion that has lasted over 50 years, resulting in his remarkable collection of over 250 items.

Collecting is in the Strong genes. “I’ve always been a mad collector,” he explained. “It started aged 7, when my sister introduced me to stamps. I also collect Liberty fabrics, which are like a garden where the flowers don’t wilt and it doesn’t need watering, as well as Swiss posters and sports balls, which I grade by size. I think the desire to collect is as insidious as marijuana!

“The Braun collection fulfills a different need. I began to collect these items because I enjoyed using them and I was fascinated by the progression in design that I was seeing. The products were only evolved to improve their function, not just to change their style.”

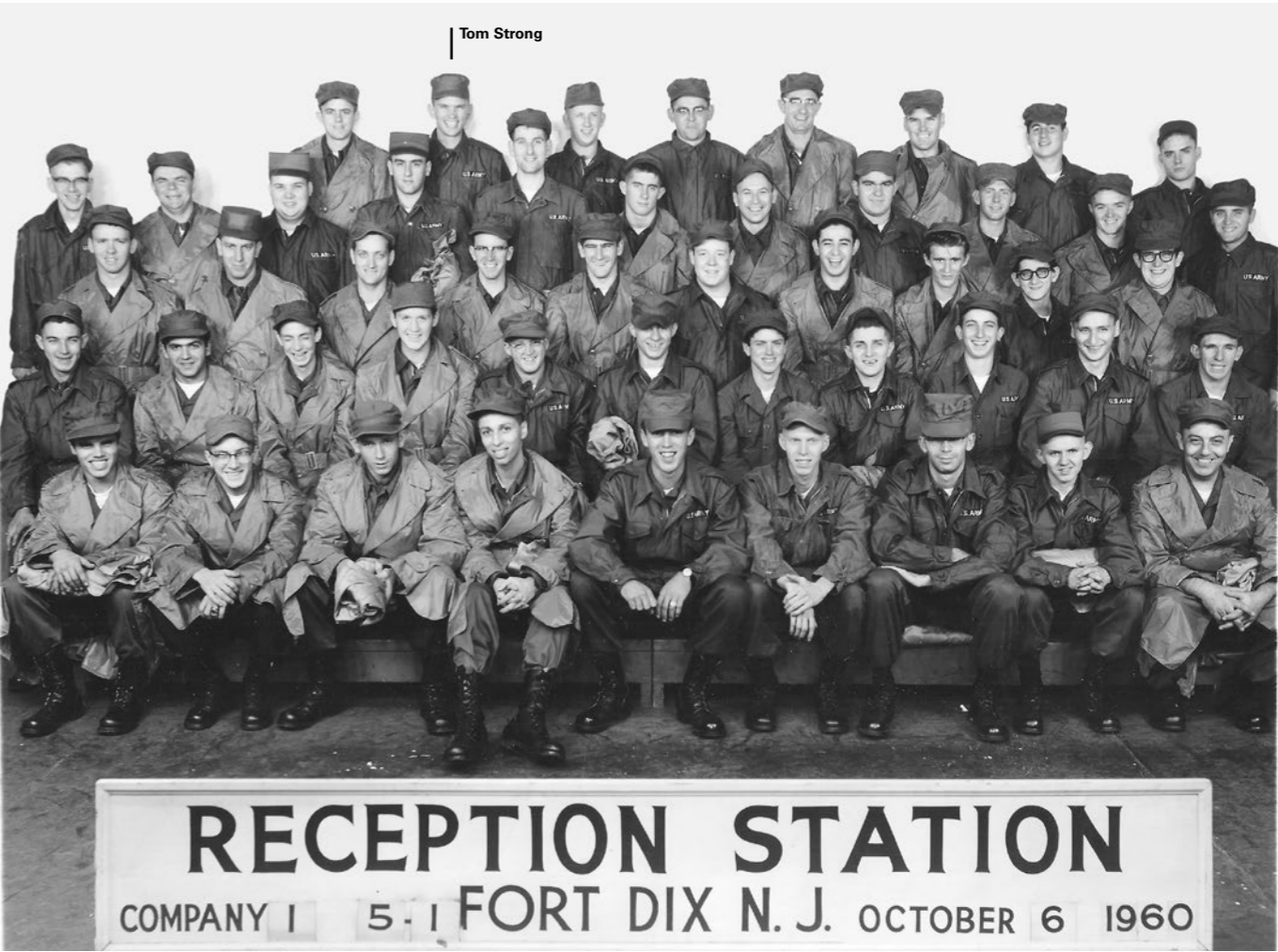
It was during a stint in the US Army that Strong first encountered products designed by Dieter Rams (head of design at Braun from 1961 to 1995). “I never went to ‘Nam, but I knew the G.I.s stationed over there were lonely for America and they missed the sound of our music,” he recounted, settling into his origin story of the innovative Braun radio that could receive short- and long-wave signals. “Those that were lucky enough to have a T 1000 were able to feel closer to home. When I eventually found one for sale in Germany many years later, I raced over to Frankfurt to buy it and carried it on my lap all the way back to the USA on the

flight. There was no way I would risk putting something so precious in my hold luggage!”

Following his years stationed abroad with the US army, Strong returned to the east coast of America to begin a Masters of Fine Arts in graphic design at Yale, where he confessed to developing “a fetish for grids.” Later, the bold and organised design of Braun packaging reignited his interest. “The bells really started ringing when I recognised how the boxes were just as seductive as the items inside,” he said, “and it made me realise that all the brainwashing with typeface, colour and proportion that I’d got at Yale was important after all. Rams was clearly taking the design very seriously ... to help the people who used the products.

“Rams’s designs made the products understandable and self-educational. He made things that were easy to grasp, to get to know and to handle roughly without breaking. The controls told you quietly ‘lift me’ or

“The controls told you quietly ‘lift me’ or ‘push me.’”
Tom Strong



Strong first encountered products designed by Dieter Rams in the US Army

‘push me’, and the colours are there for your advantage only – like the use of red for the Off switch.”

Rams’s respect for the user of his products adhered Strong to his designs. “I felt that I was part of a family,” he said. “Although we know Rams cared such a lot for aesthetics, he made sure that you felt personally addressed by every package. There would be a fold-out with all the essential details written in every single language and you’d be given the address and phone number of who to call in every

region should you ever need spares or a repair.

“His design team behaved responsibly, which was all part of the charm. Even the broken items have been kept, because they are worth so much more than the value of their function. For me, Rams created products that were most definitely the best in their field. They nailed it.”

Debunking what he sees as the stuffy and short-sighted attitude of art institutions worldwide, who, in

his opinion, fail to see the significance of industrial design, Strong ruefully explained, “there’s this theory that if something is useful, it can’t be art, but that’s not true. To me, the products designed by Rams were just as important as a Henry Moore sculpture – except people could afford them, touch them and use them.”

At 77, the Connecticut-born graphic designer became concerned about the legacy of his collection, preferring, as he enthused, to “give it to someone who would use it as a teaching tool. You can’t take it with you, so you should at least put it into the safe hands of someone that will make good use of it.”

The determination to move to a smaller apartment led Strong to Vitsoe in 2016, when after 30 years of admiring the 620 Chair Programme, he finally walked into Vitsoe’s New York shop. “Had I not decided to buy the Rams chair that I had always coveted, and fulfil my lifelong ambition to own one, the rest would never have happened,” Strong revealed. “It was almost by chance, talking to the Vitsoe team

about my Braun collection, that they mentioned how it could help with their mission to educate the next generation of design students if it was included in their archive at their new Leamington Spa HQ.”

Strong has donated his life’s collection to Vitsoe. Following an exhibition at Vitsoe’s New York shop in May, the collection will be exhibited during London Design Festival 2017 at Vitsoe’s London shop. Then it will move to Royal Leamington Spa to become part of the permanent display in Vitsoe’s new building, which opens later this year.

When quizzed about the paradox of treating himself to a new Rams chair when he was supposedly downsizing, the compulsive collector chuckled, “Good point! I’ve had plenty of other chairs but with this one, I’ve used it nearly every day watching TV with my son since it arrived.”

Strong contemplated, “Was donating the collection to Vitsoe just a happy accident or serendipity? We’ll never know, but I couldn’t imagine a better home for it.” 🖐

“To me, the products designed by Rams were just as important as a Henry Moore sculpture – except people could afford them, touch them and use them.”



Strong’s graphic design studies at Yale informed his passion for Dieter Rams design



Photography by
Anton Rodriguez

Jeremy Leslie redefines
the modern magazine shop.

magCulture's new home

Finding its home in a parade of shops at the bottom of London's first council-built tower block on the 1958 Brunswick Estate, magCulture opened the doors to its first shop in December 2015. Replacing a faltering newsagent with ordered calm, founder Jeremy Leslie invites visitors to pause in comfort with the latest and greatest in print.

Leslie has enjoyed twenty years immersed in publishing. His career as an editorial designer led to the launch of the magCulture website, the success of which prompted the

introduction of his online shop, a collaboration with Vitsø at London Design Festival in 2014 and then launch of this Clerkenwell shop and HQ. Challenging the assumption that printed matter is approaching extinction, his desire to create a place to come and enjoy well-designed independent publications has been realised.

As renovations began, the false ceiling was removed to allow the original saw-tooth roof to diffuse the glancing London light into the shop. Blue vinyl floor tiles were gingerly

peeled back to reveal a magnificent mid-century monochrome terrazzo floor with eye-catching red grout, evidence of, as Leslie puts it, “the stars aligning. People used to crack that joke about newspapers being ‘black, white and read all over,’ and here I have unearthed by chance something that I could have only dreamed of installing. By pure serendipity it’s the colours of magCulture. It’s one of the first things people notice when they walk in.”

The details in the fabric of the building proved to Leslie that there was something “instinctively right about the choice of space and furniture.” On his decision to choose Vitsø for magCulture, Leslie explained that he thought “there

was the need for a shop in London that takes as much care with the presentation of magazines as the magazines take with the presentation of their content.” They are all displayed cover-out on sloping shelves and visitors are encouraged to flick through the titles.

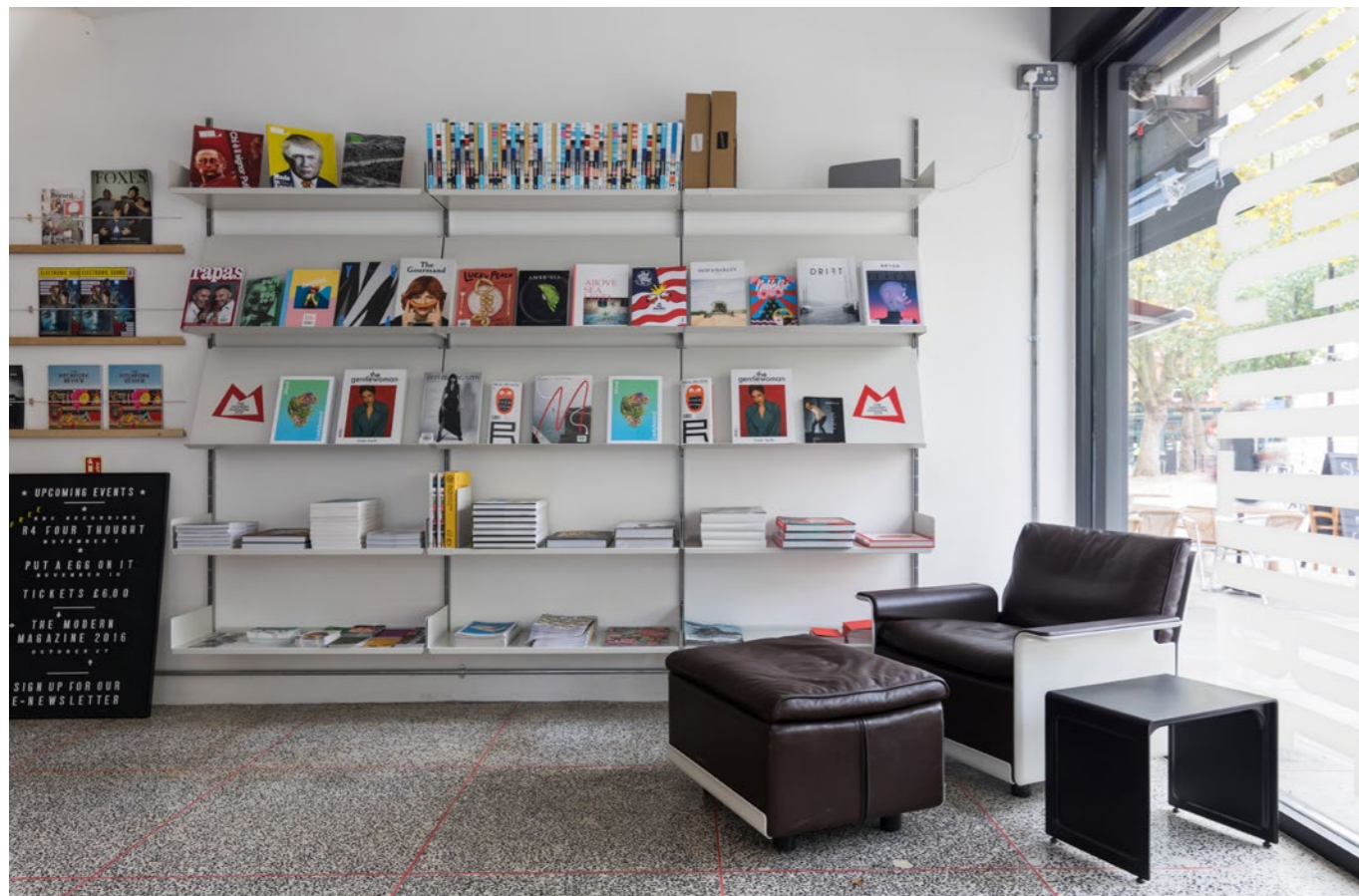
“People often spend around 40 minutes poring over everything, which we welcome.” Leslie said. “The creators of the magazines have invested their time and effort, so our customers should be free to examine every page if they wish to. Despite the temporary nature that they are perceived as having, these publications are in fact wonderfully written and photographed reflections of our society and our lives at any given moment in time.”

“Both the building and the Vitsø systems were devised within the same modernist era. They fit so well together, and so from a historical, cultural and practical context they are ideal. The flexibility of the systems is vital, and means we’ve been able to constantly adapt the space to suit the stock we have in at the time.”

Our shelves, chairs and tables encourage customers to pause and consider purchases at their own pace. By pairing magCulture’s informed selection of printed matter with Vitsø, Leslie hopes to translate what constitutes good design and demonstrate the value of living with artefacts that are decidedly long term in their nature. 🖐

“...these publications are in fact wonderfully written and photographed reflections of our society and our lives at any given moment in time.”

Jeremy Leslie's 620 chair makes magCulture the most comfortable magazine shop



Thoughtful interactivity

Our quirky team of affable planners is focused on building long-term relationships.



There was a time when shopkeepers remembered their customers' names; a time when building trust within a community was more important than making transactions. The teams of planners at Vitsø's shops strive to work in a similar way – listening to the individual needs of customers to help bring them a better quality of life. Unusually this service is focused on solving problems and

building long-term relationships rather than pursuing a sale. This service is free and for life.

The desire to meet new people every day – digitally or physically – is more important for a planner than a clutch of qualifications in interior design or architecture. The London team, at 3–5 Duke Street, takes a moment to explain...

Joana Marques

"We always ask about wall types straight away, which could seem strange I suppose, but it's so important because we need to make sure we supply the right fixings. Once we've established the basics, we can start to find out what the customer needs ... and what they don't. Occasionally I'll go to houses that aren't very organised, which is why they've come to Vitsø for shelving, to give a bit of order to their lives.

"Direct contact with the final client was one of the main reasons I came to work for Vitsø. Before moving to London I worked as an architect in Portugal and would be sitting at a computer for long hours, never meeting the person I was designing for. But now I have a customer that has moved from Lisbon to Ethiopia with UNICEF and last week she sent me pictures from her work because she knows that I appreciate what she does." 📌

“A collection shouldn’t be hidden away up there in the rafters, it should be on your shelf.”



Robin Maude

“One of the best parts of the job is not being able to guess who’s going to walk through the door next. Customers who come to Vitsø tend to be quite interesting.

“Not everyone decks-out the full house, we have some people who will buy small amounts, but frequently, and this is how we build up relationships. We need to be sponge-like and make people feel like they are in safe hands. I often find myself saying to customers ‘if you buy everything at once, you’ll end up having that hotel finish. If you do it bit-by-bit you’ll have something much more organic.

“Several of my customers are in the same age bracket as me and started with two tracks and a couple of shelves. Over the years they’ve fleshed-out whole walls, so I’ve got to know them quite well; this means we have an idea of what they might ask for the next time around, so everything becomes so much smoother for the end user.

“I graduated with a degree in Fine Art from Kingston University, trained

as a draughtsman and then started working in kitchen design. That kind of work was very incentivised towards sales and commission – there was a lot of competition within the team and a fair bit of back-stabbing. I didn’t like that culture of ‘design something, get the cheque, and think about the problems afterwards’. Service was always an afterthought. I’d also been thinking about how wasteful the fashion aspect of kitchen design was – people would pay a small fortune for granite worktop and then two years later they would be ripped out and chucked on a skip. I wanted to work somewhere that was kicking back against all of this, and Vitsø was ticking all the right boxes.

“I like to have a laugh with my customers and I always want to make it more fun than just buying some bookshelves. It’s an exciting development – they’re finally going to get the chance to properly display all that pottery that’s gathering dust up in the loft. A collection shouldn’t be hidden away up there in the rafters, it should be on your shelf.” ➡

“...we can offer a more thoughtful service that isn’t rushed or pressured.”

Lauren Juozokas

“Whether you’re refurbishing an entire property, fixing up a bedroom or moving house, most people experience a mixture of stress and excitement, so as a planner we have to be sympathetic to that cocktail of emotions.

“Long-term thinking informs our customer service because we’re not a company that sells products that will be obsolete in a few years time – there’s no upgrade to the ‘better version’ next season, and there’s no half-price sale next month. This means as planners, we can offer a more thoughtful service that isn’t rushed or pressured. You could say we’re the ‘measure twice, cut once’ kind of people, who encourage customers to buy less and add more later (if needed). There’s plenty of room to reimagine the system in the future, it can be taken down, re-planned, reduced or added to – that’s the beauty of it. It helps to be level-headed and work methodically, considering all the details while simultaneously thinking of the bigger picture.

“Not everyone can visit our Duke Street shop, and although we realise nothing beats being sat next to someone when you’re building a relationship, a telephone call is the next best thing. It is so appreciated now, in a digital age when it’s become less common to pick up the phone. Hearing someone’s voice on the other line is reassuring for both parties and helps customers to feel they are being understood.

“In my previous design jobs, it was hard to wrap my head around the idea that I could design a bespoke interior for someone I’d never had any personal contact with – here I actually get to know the customer. I love hearing back from them and seeing photos of how their systems are filling up and how their homes are taking shape. Sometimes it feels like you’ve been on a journey with them during the planning process, so finding out how much of a difference it’s made to their lives is always fulfilling.” 🖐



Thank you

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Vitsoë's kitchen in
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See page 12





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