

VITSOE Voice

Issue three, 2020

Unravelling the conundrum that is living better with less that lasts longer





“Has anyone been listening?” This trenchant question was asked by Dieter Rams as he wondered whether the lessons of his long professional life were falling on deaf ears.

In this issue of Vitsoë Voice Jana Scholze begins by exploring 60 years of that life. It ends with Rams – of all people – wondering whether design is dead. In between those bookends there are two articles about Betty. One praises “writing in the sky” while the other explores the process that gives rise to a classic. Adjacent on the shelf are the charming booksellers who explain logically why “the concept of living and working under one roof is not new.”

To whichever voice you listen, we hope you will find that some people have indeed been listening.

- 2 60 years of principled practice**
A small, ethical company that has always tried to make a difference
- 6 A writer’s retreat**
Penny Martin creates space for quiet contemplation
- 8 Colour, spontaneity and fireworks**
Italian calligrapher Betty Soldi talks about her work and studio in a once-derelict Tuscan greenhouse
- 16 Heavy lifting**
Architect Juergen Riehm discusses the importance of the psychological nugget when working with Vitsoë
- 18 Harmonising life and work**
How Dieter & Ulrike Zipprich nurture the human spirit via rare and precious books
- 24 Enduring interiors for transient lives**
Interior designer Alex Kalita in conversation with Vitsoë’s Andrew Jones
- 32 Brown Betty**
The refreshing detail of a perfectly comfortable pour
- 38 From the Vitsoë kitchen**
When times are hard, comfort is often found in food. We have turned to the Vitsoë kitchen to ask our chef, Will Leigh, to offer us all some of his wisdom and comfort
- 42 Has anyone been listening?**
Dieter Rams and Mark Adams speaking on the occasion of the opening of Vitsoë’s shop at 21 Marylebone Lane, London, in October 2019



Dieter gives voice to team Vitsoë

Left:
Old and new in harmony,
see page 18

Cover:
Dieter Rams and
Mark Adams at Vitsoë,
Marylebone Lane

60 years of principled practice

A small, ethical company that has always tried to make a difference

By Dr Jana Scholze,
associate professor at
Kingston School of Art, London

“It’s been a tough journey, all the way...” With those words Dieter Rams summarised to Vitsœ’s managing director, Mark Adams, the 60 years since the founding of Vitsœ on 4 September 1959.

Rams stressed, “It has never been easy trying to do something that has not been done before” thereby emphasising the demanding daily challenge of being ahead of, or different to, the prevailing thinking. For Vitsœ, this battle has had to be fought through the design of furniture, its method of working with its suppliers and, most of all, its way of dealing directly with its customers globally. Vitsœ offers an idea of design that encompasses and defines the way we live our lives in – and with – the world around us.

However Vitsœ is not promoting a totalitarian view of good design nor a lifestyle choice. To understand its

Dieter Rams and Niels Vitsœ in the late 1980s



furniture as purely form and function misses the fundamental importance of ethics, which has been central to the company since its beginnings. Even if today Vitsœ is known for manufacturing shelves designed by the eminent German designer Dieter Rams, Vitsœ has never been defined solely as a furniture manufacturer. Nor has it been interested in a business model focused on the increase of sales purely for financial benefit.

In response to criticism that Vitsœ (and previously Braun, too) favour totalitarianism and the ‘individual genius’ through their shared lead designer Dieter Rams, the design historian, Peter Kapos argues: “...we might think of it instead as a moment within the unfolding of a collective project ... intended as an alternative model of freedom.”*

This position and its challenge in the market can best be understood if

we return to the late 1950s, particularly in West Germany where Vitsœ was founded. In the aftermath of World War II the determination to build a new country showed the first signs of the forthcoming economic miracle. Design and technology had witnessed intense development during the war and were now being applied to transform domestic and public environments. The level of war destruction in Germany, and indeed in most European countries, had created a demand for the new in all areas of life, from buildings and roads, to furniture and devices. While the 1950s was mainly focused on clearing the rubble and ensuring safety and security for its citizens, the 1960s was firmly dedicated to build the present and future. Citizens became customers, and nations became markets.

Promoted by the United States through the Marshall Plan, American design became the favoured model

for a new way of life. This was characterised by improvements to housework through new appliances ie, the washing machine and vacuum cleaner; an immediate level of exchanging information through new media ie, radio and television; and faster movement through new means of transport ie, cars and aeroplanes. The war, however, had also heightened an awareness of the power of design to destroy, or heal, and the significance of ethics for decisions regarding its application and distribution.

The Ulm School of Design, founded in 1953 – and often regarded as the Bauhaus of post-war Germany – promoted a holistic understanding of design that, in addition to a multidisciplinary offering, included subjects such as politics, economics, sociology and philosophy. This progressive approach emphasised that design is not only a question of aesthetics ➡

and technology but an understanding of its potential and effects on individuals, society and our world at large.

To include such system-thinking into its teaching, the school fostered close relationships to industry – with Braun as a famous example. Vitsø did not collaborate with the Ulm school directly but its founder, Niels Vitsø, was very familiar with the school’s work.

Echoes of the school’s approach lie in Vitsø’s intent to always convey principles of clarity, order and truthfulness within the company’s products: the object must have an understanding of what it is, without disguise and confusion. It must achieve ease of use, while barely demanding attention for its own sake. Above all, the form and use of the furniture is always connected to the question: why do people need these objects in the first place, and how can they best be made?

These rational and functional principles have often been misinterpreted as clinical and minimalist. In his recent documentary ‘Rams’, the filmmaker Gary Hustwit clarifies that for Dieter Rams, “it’s about getting all these objects that we have to have in our lives and putting them in the background. All this stuff – like a radio or a bookshelf – it should blend into the scenery. It’s doing a job, so it’s very utilitarian and functional. For him it’s about prioritising nature above all this other stuff, trying to make all these other things as neutral and unobtrusive as possible. That’s a big part of his design.”

This neutrality emphasises the vital connection between form and function but, most importantly, it represents a responsibility that takes into account the effects of the product and its production on social systems, hierarchies and, importantly, ecology.

Such thinking connects Rams – and consequently Vitsø – with a discourse that started in the 1960s when critics such as Viktor Papanek voiced concern about design being understood purely as a tool to stimulate and increase consumption – and the effect of such mass production on the world. Papanek identified in his seminal book ‘Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change’ that design practice seemed to have been dwarfed by the manipulation of style while its potential to improve life was ignored.

This title could not be closer in line with Vitsø’s fundamental principles, advocating Rams’s suggestion of ‘Less but better’ while taking responsibility for the effects of its production and consumption on individuals, community and the wider world. It has been a battle for 60 years to stick to these principles, fighting against a dominant

economic system and consequential social behaviours.

Mark Adams tells the story how, on occasion, his colleagues feel under pressure from “instant-gratification customers” who want it all now without any investment in the planning and consideration of their shelving but then demand their freedom to send the product back whenever they change their mind. Adams is adamant not to accommodate such quick-buy and -reject behaviour, even under pressure from competitors, as it is exactly here where the ethics behind Vitsø’s understanding of good design must be communicated.

Deciding what we want to surround ourselves with needs careful consideration, including the effect that every new object, its production, and use has on the world. At Vitsø’s last company meeting Adams handed to every

Vitsø employee a copy of Greta Thunberg’s book ‘No one is too small to make a difference’. He later suggested that it could be used to support situations such as the one described above. Maybe now, 60 years on, more companies and customers – not consumers – are prepared to think and behave a little more like Vitsø. 🖐️

–
*‘*Braun+Vitsø: Total Design*’ curated by Peter Kapos, exhibition catalogue, 2018

Born in East Germany, Dr Jana Scholze is a curator specialising in contemporary design, curatorial practice and theory. After more than a decade at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Scholze is now associate professor and course director of the MA Curating Contemporary Design programme at Kingston School of Art in London.

Dieter Rams and Mark Adams in 2019



A writer's retreat

Penny Martin creates space for quiet contemplation

“I always know where everything needs to go, and once you’ve lived with the shelving, there’s really no going back.”

Photography by Anton Rodriguez



Penny Martin, writer and editor-in-chief of the revered magazine *The Gentlewoman*, lives on a quiet residential street in south-west London with her husband. Here she spends part of the week working on personal projects away from the magazine’s busy central-London headquarters.

After moving from their previous home, Penny wanted a “happy place to work, because the time spent here is quite solitary and stricken with deadlines so I wanted to make somewhere that felt jolly and light.” In order to relieve the feeling of isolation while writing, Penny works with her desk facing towards the window, because, she said, “I have my best thoughts in discussion – rarely thinking alone. So in a way, looking out onto the backs of other people’s houses seems kind of social and creates a different tone of voice. It’s amazing how unguarded people are – you see quite a lot of naked torsos and BBQs on roofs and the different focal distances are more of an abstraction when I am concentrating, similar I suppose to looking up at the sky to clear your mind and focus.”

Their shelves hold a collection of records, many of which Penny inherited after the death of her younger brother Ryan. She talked openly about how they frequented the same music shop in Glasgow and shared the same taste in music. Gesturing towards the shelves Penny mentioned that “some of the mixtapes up there are the ones he made for me. They were burned onto CDs and then they became playlists on Spotify. I suppose people would just email you a digital file now, which is not the same as being given a lovingly-made cassette – they have a lot of sentimental value for me.”

Prior to her career in publishing, Penny was a curator and admits that she has “absolutely no spatial awareness. Creating something in 2D for an exhibition is no problem, but 3D completely flummoxes me. I’m happy to clean, but struggle to tidy – it’s like the Krypton Factor, trying to put the square peg in the square hole, I just can’t make sense or order things easily. Even though I’m messy, Vitsø helps me because I know instinctively that there’s a natural place for things, I always know where everything needs to

go, and once you’ve lived with the shelving, there’s really no going back.” Penny struggles with her growing library. “I’m on a personal project to clear my shelves. I’ve started to read all the books that people have given to me over the years, I’m in a real purple patch with fiction at the moment – which is rare, because working on a magazine you tend to mainly read other people’s journalism. My aim is to read everything I’ve not had the opportunity to so that I can start all over again. It’s a constant edit.

“I occasionally look up and think ‘am I defined by these books?’ because it’s such a strange mixture of titles up there – all the ones about football, Karl Marx and Chairman Mao belong to my husband Barry, not to me! I like the idea of only having a finite space on which to store things, so I enjoy the natural boundaries of a Vitsø shelf. It’s an undemonstrative backbone for our collections, and if you prize the things that are on it, then it kind of disappears – it’s a mutable design statement, always quietly elegant.”👉





Photography by
Maria Riazanova

Italian calligrapher Betty
Soldi talks about her work
and studio in a once-
derelict Tuscan greenhouse

Colour, spontaneity and fireworks

Betty Soldi lives in a world that's bursting with colour – which isn't surprising when you discover she's part of an Italian family who have been making fireworks since 1869. Whilst her ancestors chose gunpowder and string as their creative medium, Betty has always preferred to use paper and ink. Convinced that her pyrotechnic lineage was at the root of her decision to become a calligrapher, she moved to the UK to study design at Ravensbourne University and returned to her hometown of Florence a decade ago, after many years working for distinguished clients in Paris, London and New York.

Settling back into Tuscany's capital, Betty was determined to find a studio large enough to accommodate her vast collection of books and objects. She was lucky to discover a derelict greenhouse with its own garden, just a short walk from the famous Pitti Palace and Ponte Vecchio. Betty explained, "I'm an urban bunny at heart. I love the energy you feel when you live in a sprawling metropolis; there's that inimitable mix of old and new. But the other part of me adores nature, so I've been very lucky to find both of those things together in one place.

"It was all boarded up when I stumbled across it so, at the time, it was difficult to understand quite how spectacular it was. With so many windows, it is always flooded with natural light, even on the cloudiest days, which for me, is

absolutely ideal. It was built for lemon trees in 1801, as part of the first ever 'English garden' in Florence, which probably doesn't sound hugely significant, but back in those days the strict, geometric Italianate style was much more prevalent, and landscaping was all about trying to control nature. This presented a shift in attitude – there was a romantic rebellion to it, because if a leaf or wilted rose wanted to drop on the floor then it could do so, and nobody felt the need to pick it up."

Betty occasionally holds calligraphy masterclasses and cites the unpredictability of nature as something that heavily influences the way she teaches students who come to her hoping to improve their decorative handwriting skills. Pausing for a moment, she reflected on her reasons for encouraging spontaneity as part of the creative process, "Here in Florence, everyone always talks about how great the renaissance was. When we study the philosophy of Michelangelo, Botticelli and Leonardo, we know they were all taught to nurture themselves first before expressing anything to the world. They understood history and this is what gave them all such strong bases to work from – but for me, as a modern calligrapher, I prefer to take note of the old rules of typography, but then make my own way. This is Florentine humanist thinking. Nature inspires us and we have a duty to do something with it. 🍷"







“I prefer to take note of the old rules of typography, but then make my own way. This is Florentine humanist thinking.”

“When I’m teaching, I’m not interested in the perfect ‘A’. Instead, I show the students examples of ‘perfect As’ and tell them that this is just the starting point for design. You learn age-old rules and then find a way to express your own interpretation of them – you take what you know from history and make it authentically yours. I like to try and guide people into feeling (with their writing at least) like they can safely allow themselves to ‘let go’. I love scribbles, I love scrawls and graffiti. There is beauty in everything.”

This sentiment is clearly demonstrated in Betty’s rainbow of colour-coded artbooks and trinkets, which are housed on the 606 Universal Shelving System installed along the only wall which runs across the back of the studio. Renovating such a beautiful but awkward space presented Betty with the challenge of storing and displaying the materials that inspire her work every day. Smiling, she recalled, “I knew Vitsœ would be my saviour. I’m the type of person who likes to have lots of things around them to help fire up the imagination. I needed a solution that would help me keep them, display them and curate them – but most importantly, to allow me to mix them up whenever I feel like it. When people visit, their first comment is always, ‘Wow, you have so much stuff,’ but because it’s organised and contained within the system, people soon get

past that initial shock and start to linger in front of the shelves looking at everything. It’s an attraction, it’s not a deterrent. It draws you in.

“I remember the day before we were putting the shelves up, onto the freshly painted walls and I had this urge to write something. I grabbed a pen and wrote, ‘Thank you, universe’, because this incredible space happened to come to me. I know people are afraid of writing on walls, but I disagree. But then I’m a calligrapher, so I like to write on anything and everything! It’s still up there, hidden behind a book somewhere...”

As a chorus of church bells chimed close by, it was time to finish by asking if Betty had ever regretted not joining her relatives in the manufacturing side of the family fireworks business. With a grin she said, “It’s hard to believe that something that began as ammunition has been transformed into joy, awe and pure emotion. My cousins spend hours laboriously making everything by hand and then the fruits of their labour go up in smoke in seconds! They have always told me the hard work is worth it when you look at the pure wonder on people’s faces. I’ve always thought the explosions looked like writing in the sky; perhaps that’s why I ended up taking this path in life. So really, I do make fireworks for a living – but this time, with ink.”🖋️

Heavy lifting

Architect Juergen Riehm discusses the importance of the psychological nugget when working with Vitsoë



“As someone who was born in Germany, my exposure to Dieter Rams was very immediate,” said Juergen Riehm, co-founder of 1100 Architect. With offices in New York and Frankfurt, business partners David Piscuskas and Riehm started their practice in 1983, from a rented one-room office in SoHo, Manhattan. After humble beginnings, they now employ 70 staff who work across a range of award-winning projects, providing architecture services for cultural organisations, commercial workplaces, educational institutions, local and federal governments and residential clients.

Sitting on the corner of 10th Avenue and West 37th, their New York premises stretch out across the 10th floor of a recently renovated 1917 office block in the Hudson

Yards district. It’s an area undergoing regeneration on a massive scale, with ongoing construction works clearly audible from the streets below. The noise, however, doesn’t distract from the magnificent views across the city – the Empire State Building is visible from windows on the south-east side, and the Hudson from those facing south-west.

Leaning back in his chair, Riehm explains about moving to Frankfurt to study for a post-graduate qualification in architecture at the renowned Städelschule Academy. Smiling, he recalls, “This was the late 1970s, when I was a student at one of Frankfurt’s last remaining art academies. Occasionally I’d walk past this wonderful 1960’s building that had a furniture showroom on the ground floor. I had no money of

course, I couldn’t afford anything, but I was always so curious about their displays. I later learned that the shelves and chairs that the shop called ‘Vitsoë’ was selling were designed by Dieter Rams and even after relocating to the States, I was never able to forget about them.

“When David and I set up 1100 Architect at the beginning of the 80s, we were finally in a position to include Vitsoë furniture in our designs. One of the more memorable projects was in the 1990s, during the restoration of a large brownstone in Brooklyn. Back then of course, during the pre-internet days, getting hold of certain materials and furniture from abroad wasn’t so easy and although the distribution channels for importing goods were riddled with problems, we always wanted to make our



clients aware of things that were not necessarily on sale yet here in the United States. This brownstone was a historic building with lots of original details, so we had a great canvas to work with. We’ve never classed ourselves as ‘traditionalists’, but we’ve always been extremely respectful of history and strongly believe that there’s a much richer expression when you incorporate old with new.”

For every architect, there is a deep desire to find the right solution. There is no easy one-size-fits-all fix and whether the end user is an entire workforce or a solo resident, the end result must enhance the lives of those using the space. Throughout the consultation process, many architects will remain hands-on, dealing with contractors and suppliers and juggling the

inevitable calendar of deliveries once the final sign-off for a project’s fixtures and fittings has been achieved.

He explains, “In order for anything we do to be a success, there has to be an element of trust and relinquishing control. I look at Vitsoë in the same way as I would any other contractor – not just in conduct, but also in the knowledge they can bring to any project. Sometimes we’ll be challenged by a client with particularly high expectations, so we need to examine every single possibility to ensure that on the day we hand over the keys, we’re not greeted with a sigh and the dreaded, ‘oh – I thought it would be different...’. Being able to listen and pay attention to that psychological nugget that reveals the real

intended use for the space allows the Vitsoë planners to actually save us money. They are one of the few companies that actually do that! Most other brands will always be trying to figure out ways of over-selling, enhancing the basics without reason.”

With bright blue skies outside, Riehm explains why he has chosen to specify Vitsoë on so many of the 1100 projects, as well as installing the system in his New York home and office. “We give [the Vitsoë planning team] an idea of the physical proportions of a room and then we’re shown a variety of ways to utilise the space. We’re given accurate drawings, from which we can compare what we feel works best and know that if we need to tweak or edit, you’re there for us every step of the way. We can pick up the phone to discuss any detail, knowing that you’ve got the history of the project at your fingertips – we don’t have time to run through the entire scenario again. We can look at the plans online, we can send them to clients digitally without fuss, everything is reviewable.

“The seamless service aspect is what distinguishes Vitsoë from other companies. From design to installation day – they communicate, they take it seriously. They’re an entity who take full responsibility, so I suppose in that sense, it’s more of a collaboration really.”👏

Harmonising life and work

How Dieter and Ulrike Zipprich nurture the human spirit via rare and precious books



“The design by Rams is so noble, that the contrast between these faded literary artefacts and the clean lines of the shelving actually make the books appear even more beautiful.”

The concept of living and working under one roof is not new. In medieval times, it was commonplace for people to make and sell their wares from a building they called ‘home’. This continued until the Industrial Revolution, when the shift towards factory-based employment created a clear divide between occupation and family.

Advances in digital technology have blurred the boundaries between work and play once more, allowing us to live a more fluid existence, free from the constraints of the traditional workplace. Businesses can thrive away from big cities thanks to the internet, which has fundamentally changed the way society operates by offering today’s mobile population unlimited access to their preferred brands, products and services online.

Until recently, Ulrike and Dieter Zipprich were Vitsœ neighbours as the well-known and respected long-standing owners of an antiquarian bookshop on Türkenstraße, Munich. Specialising in predominantly rare and beautiful books, Dieter has spent his working life sourcing handcrafted rarities for customers and collectors alike. Ulrike offers a knowledgeable helping hand whilst also specialising in a different aspect of the book world – creating beautifully crafted endpapers.

While enjoying the bustling urban Munich environment, they could see that changes in people’s buying behaviour offered them the

opportunity to acquire a different life pattern outside the Bavarian capital. In 2018 after nearly thirty years of conventional retail, the couple moved to Bamberg, a UNESCO World Heritage Site 230km north of Munich. Here they could continue their businesses while allowing them to fulfil their passion for walking in and around the spectacular undulating landscape. The historic town sits where the Regnitz and Main rivers meet and extends over seven hills, each crowned by a beautiful church. Bamberg’s old town includes a Romanesque Cathedral.

With views of the historic cathedral, Ulrike and Dieter’s spacious modern house looks very different to the cramped, labyrinthine interior you’d normally associate with second-hand booksellers. The contrast between old and new is acute, with valuable parchment - and leather-bound volumes sitting in a bright contemporary space. Equally surprising in a bookseller’s is finding Baroque furniture, such as the treasured harpsichord which Dieter avidly plays – but when home and selling space fuse together these are the charming surprises that can occur.

Reflecting on the move, Dieter explained what had inspired them to turn their new living space into a showroom, “For both of us, getting closer to nature was important. We wanted to live in a place with beautiful landscapes and easy access to the countryside. As much as we loved Munich, we wanted



our lives to feel more relaxed. Alongside this there had been some significant changes in the antiquarian book market and with the commercial rent costs rising, it seemed more sensible to live and sell stock from one place – instead of paying for two different premises. We wanted to unify the shop with our personal life, bringing both functions together.”

Both Dieter and Ulrike were determined to design a dual-purpose area that would offer customers a bright and airy space in which to consider their valuable purchases. Instead of rickety wooden shelves jam-packed with rare volumes and leather-bound curiosities, the 606 Universal

Shelving System has been installed throughout to provide a more pleasurable browsing experience. With a smile, Dieter said, “We all expect shops that sell old books to have a certain dusty atmosphere, with everything looking slightly jumbled and messy. Instead, we wanted the books to take centre stage by being totally accessible – I hated the idea of people having to struggle to take something off a shelf. We knew we needed something highly practical to give us the flexibility to move things around as the stock changed, but because the showroom was also our private space it also needed to complement the items of Baroque and Biedermeier furniture around it.



“I think Ulrike was the first to suggest we go to Vitsœ for the solution. After years of running our business on Türkenstraße (close to the Vitsœ shop) we were already very familiar with how the system worked. When dealing with such precious items every day, it’s essential for them to be presented respectfully, so with nothing remotely comparable on the market, we planned our new Bamberg space without hesitation.”

Dieter admitted that visiting bibliophiles are often surprised when they see the Zipprich showroom for the first time and said, “The design by Rams is so noble, that the contrast between

these faded literary artefacts and the clean lines of the shelving actually make the books appear even more beautiful.” Pointing towards the double-height system on the adjacent wall he laughs and described how, “We call this ‘the book tower’”.

Experts in the antiquarian book industry assumed until recently that the rapid growth in digital e-book sales would mean the eventual death of what was once a very lucrative trade. Instead, independent ventures like the one founded by Dieter and Ulrike are thriving thanks to a cultural shift towards analogue objects with an artisanal connection. The renewed popularity in literary

artefacts means customers are prepared to search, then travel outside the realms of the internet in order to hunt for rare titles. It’s a trend the couple feels very happy to be a part of – by appointment only, of course.

Dieter concludes by mentioning how he believes, “Books are frozen history. Ulrike and I are both equally fascinated by what we do and every day we discover something new. Books will outlast us all by many centuries, but for now, our daily contact with them gives us the opportunity to learn and understand a little more about the human spirit. We feel very lucky.”👉

Enduring interiors for transient lives

Interior designer Alex Kalita in conversation with Vitsoë’s Andrew Jones

In times of economic turbulence, many people are choosing to improve, enhance and invigorate their temporary living spaces instead of taking a leap into the uncharted waters of home-ownership. Brooklyn-based interior designer Alex Kalita has responded to this shift in real estate attitude by developing a business that actively encourages tenants to make subtle, but significant changes to their homes with the addition of good quality, easily transportable fixtures and fittings. With affordability, value and a reductive aesthetic at the core of her philosophy, she has been working with clients across New York since 2013, helping to maximise the potential of inner-city rental apartments, renowned for their limited floor space.

An enthusiastic Vitsoë customer, she is a firm believer in the benefits of investing in what she calls

‘long-term furniture’, even for those who are not in a position to take their first steps on the property ladder. Working closely with Vitsoë planner Andrew Jones, Alex has specified the 606 Universal Shelving System for many of her interior design projects. Sitting in Alex’s sun-drenched apartment in leafy Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, Andrew and Alex offer a new perspective about short-term accommodation and the advantages of adaptable home improvements.

Alex: There has always been a preconceived notion that interior designers are dictatorial and frivolous – a real indulgence for the elite. Traditionally, they were incentivized by the commission-based model of directing clients towards more expensive goods whilst acting as the gatekeeper and keeping the trade price of furniture or textiles confidential. When I

Alex and Andrew in Alex’s studio in Brooklyn



started my own business, I took a different approach, which was influenced by my time working 80-hour weeks in the financial regulation department of a law firm. Back then, I took so much comfort from my own space my home was a refuge, a place where – could feel calm and relaxed. I loved the problem-solving aspect of interior design and the idea of being able to really add value by providing a service that is more accessible to a younger market and people who are renting. The proportion of home-owners to renters here in New York is probably 50/50, so it makes sense for me to promote the idea of movability, flexibility and momentary security.

Andrew: As far as the culture of renting property is concerned, I think there is definitely a difference in attitude between the USA and the UK Rent stabilization programs offer tenants protection against unpredictable rent increases and offers automatic lease renewals over here in the States – so if you’re lucky enough to get a great deal with your landlord, you know you’re not going to be left floundering when your rent gets unexpectedly hiked up.

Alex: With such a huge chunk of the local population renting, I base my brand strategy on understanding the way you live; finding out what works

for you and your family, looking at your functional needs and optimising the space by installing adequate storage for a better way of living. I focus on where in a property I can add value to the lifestyle of the inhabitants and charge exclusively for my time – for those value-added tasks. There are high-end designers who say, ‘Write me a cheque, hand over the keys to your apartment and get out of town for 6 months. When you come back, I will have turned your apartment into every other apartment in my portfolio’. That’s not me. It seems to be that if a client discovered me on Instagram, or they’ve read an article about my place here in Brooklyn, it’s likely to be my personal aesthetic they’re drawn to. They might feel frustrated that they know what they want, but don’t know how to get there.

Andrew: Going back to the point you made about helping renters meet their practical needs in terms of storage, there is always that conundrum of where to put everything, but for me personally, I’ve always thought that if you feel proud to own something, you shouldn’t want to scuttle it away somewhere. It should be something that you want to celebrate, otherwise, why do you have it? I think this is an unintentional benefit to the 606 Universal Shelving System – it allows you to think about the things you own and really

appreciate them, especially nowadays when we are consuming so much. As consumers we need to be more conscious, we shouldn’t be buying anything just for the sake of it – we should think about the impact on the environment.

Alex: I agree with the sentiment of thinking more carefully about our purchases, but in my experience of working with clients, all of us still have objects that should be concealed. Who wants to sit looking at a stack of scruffy, but essential work files? What parent wants to display the ratty stuffed animal toy that their child refuses to part with, that they’ve slept with and cuddled for the last eight years? Our homes, rental or otherwise, need places for us to put the things we can’t easily live without. We need furniture flexible enough to adapt to the changes in our tastes, or in the lives we lead.

I think Vitsø is somewhat self-selecting. A Vitsø customer is, for some reason or another, drawn to it. By the time they’ve hired me it’s very rare that someone who didn’t have any aesthetic leanings in a Vitsø direction would hire me as an interior designer, so anyone who’s coming to me is at least open to the idea. From speaking with clients, I would say that Vitsø’s biggest competitor in the home-owner sector is the custom built-ins. 🍷

Below and next spread:
Image courtesy of Alex.
Client home in Brooklyn,
New York. Photography
by Mark Weinberg







Alex sitting in a 620 chair
with swivel-base

I've found that people's storage needs are so specific that, as a 606 evangelist, sometimes I'll find myself saying: 'Well, let's explore the custom built-in solution. Talk to your realtor and see if they believe that what you're contemplating will add value to your property. Make sure it's an investment because you can't take it with you'. Secondly, 'Let's get a carpenter in for a quote, with the sanding, sealing, painting, finishing and certificate of insurance all included and see what the final cost will be.' It's never less than the Vitsø but sometimes they just need to see that comparison number. Then the realtor will say to them 'Well, you know what you're contemplating is ideal for your needs but it's not really generic enough. You may be building toy storage and whoever buys your apartment they don't have children. You might be building in bookshelves and whoever buys your apartment might not read or read on a Kindle. I just don't think you ever want to eliminate your options in that sense; in real estate, when it's such an important investment.

Andrew: So once a client has made the decision not to go down the custom-built route, you're able to

show them the solutions drawn up by the Vitsø planners free of charge! Surely this makes your life so much easier? You know that the service is there which just relieves some of the burden from your shoulders as well. You can trust the lineage of Vitsø – we're in our 60th year. Customers can come back to us at every stage of their life journey for advice regardless of whether they are renting or buying; installing three shelves or 300.

Alex: Absolutely. I don't know if you work this way with all your designers, maybe it's because we specified a lot of systems together, but I think you already have a sense of what my preferences are. I just have to explain the context and give a little bit of guidance and you come up with the initial design and then I provide feedback. Then I'm in a dialogue with the client, and we're all in the same conversation together. It's very collaborative. I know I can make as many revisions as I want, or space-out the execution of the project in a way that's comfortable with their cashflow. We're able to encourage them to only buy what they need, what they can afford, safe in the knowledge they can always come back for more. 🖐️

“The proportion of home-owners to renters here in New York is probably 50/50, so it makes sense for me to promote the idea of movability, flexibility and momentary security.”



Photograph by
Angela Moore

The refreshing detail of a
perfectly comfortable pour

Brown Betty

“The chances are, if I asked you to draw a teapot from memory, you’d think of a shape not too dissimilar from the Brown Betty. That’s because it’s one of the most manufactured teapots in British history.” So says ceramicist Ian McIntyre who, as part of his Collaborative Doctoral Award with Manchester School of Art, York Art Gallery and the British Ceramics Biennial, set about examining the origins of this noble pot.

Brown Betty is a product of evolution, with form and function refined over decades, rather than the authorship of any single designer. It emerged as a cheap, utilitarian pot for the working classes, absorbed into the fabric of everyday life. This evolution resulted in a teapot modest in appearance yet perfect for the task in hand: brewing and pouring tea. By quietly performing its job so well it has endeared itself to generations.

Despite its popularity however, surprisingly little is known about the teapot’s original makers.

The very character of the pot comes from the quality of the clay, which has been mined in Staffordshire for red-ware teapots for over 300 years. “I think it’s safe to say that a Brown Betty that isn’t made of Staffordshire red clay, isn’t an original Brown Betty at all” states Ian. This clay – Etruria Marl – was first refined around 1695 by two Dutch brothers, John Philip Elers and David Elers, in Bradwell Woods, North Staffordshire. Prior to this the potteries which existed were small family-run outfits, producing crude wares like butter pots for farmers to transport their produce to market.

The brothers used this clay to make teapots to emulate and compete with the expensive red stoneware Yixing teapots, which were being imported from China by the East 🏹

India Company. It is widely agreed that the refinement of this clay, which could reliably withstand the temperature of boiling water without cracking, gave rise to new technological experiment in Staffordshire, and became a key catalyst for the industrialisation of the six towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent.

“The Brown Betty is a purely rational design, stripped of anything superfluous to its function and production methods” explains Ian, who over the course of his studies sourced multiple Brown Bettys of various shapes, dates and manufacturer to evaluate the principles behind the design transformation. He discovered that over the years the Brown Betty form migrated into a globe, which

was seen as the best shape to infuse the loose-leaf tea when water was added. The shape and the wall-thickness combine to keep the tea warm.

The most innovative maker of Brown Betty was Alcock, Lindley and Bloore, who operated through the 20th century. The body of an Alcock, Lindley and Bloore teapot was made in three parts. The globe was pressed before the handle and spout were applied. This enabled a potter to crudely punch a grid of holes into the globe before attaching the spout. The grid held the tea leaves in the globe when pouring. These are details which the Brown Betty sadly lost over the years, as they were cast in one-piece moulds to reduce manufacturing costs. Ian, however, saw these details as fundamental to

Right:
Ian McIntyre in his studio removing the mould from a prototype Brown Betty

Below:
Etruria Marl clay seam.
Photograph by
Bjarte Bjerkum



the authenticity of Brown Betty and set about making pots of his own to further understand the delicacy of the design detail.

He discovered that the handle presented a functional and ergonomic shape, with the generous loop positioning the gripping hand for easy leverage of the pot. This also minimised the strain on the wrist – when pouring and the return at the top of the loop prevented knuckles burning on the globe. At first sight the spout of the historic pots he analysed appeared poorly finished, but they had been rough-cut deliberately by a craftsman. The sharp edges at the opening – and just underneath the lip – cut the flow of water, preventing tea from dribbling back down the outside of the pot. To be

certain that tea would not dribble a patented non-drip spout had been introduced as an optional feature. Functioning like a tap the spout ensured a straight pour and almost magically eliminated drips.

A classic Brown Betty would have been glazed in either the rich brown Rockingham glaze, or a transparent glaze that reveals the natural colour of the clay. Both have the advantage of masking any tea stains on the teapot. If the glaze were chipped, the red colour of the clay would be revealed – favourable to a contrasting clay – allowing a characteristic patina to lengthen the life of the pot. To prevent the lid falling out of the pot while pouring, an ingenious solution was reached: the lid in the tilted pot slid forward into a groove in its collar, locking ◀

it in position. When the pot was restored to horizontal, the lid released. A more discreet feature of this patented design enabled pots to be stacked for storage by placing the lid upside down in the pot. To support this feature, the spout and the handle stay below the collar of the pot, which also means the pot could drain upside-down after washing.

In 2016 Ian’s research into the history of Brown Betty and his practical investigations were presented in an exhibition at Vitsoe’s London shop. He showed moulds made from an original Alcock, Lindley and Bloore teapot and pots cast using Staffordshire red clay. The culmination of this understanding of the form and function of Brown

Betty led to the development of his first prototype Brown Betty. Following this exhibition, Ian teamed up with Cauldon Ceramics of Staffordshire, a small craft manufacturer of traditional redware and the oldest remaining maker of the Brown Betty teapot in the UK. Together they set about remanufacturing this lustrous beauty. Taking great care to respect the traditions and the years of refinement that have gone before, including the patented locking lid and non-drip spout. Using the authentic clay, the collaboration implemented new production processes and design details to reinstate an authentic representation of a classic Brown Betty.



Ian’s attention to detail has ensured that the traditions of the pot have been maintained. This latest Brown Betty edition is intended to promote the legacy and value of this everyday object that has transcended fashion but is a beautiful and reliable utility object. Or, as Ian says:

“On a personal note I feel that the Brown Betty is a counterpoint to the seemingly unending barrage of new products being launched and discontinued daily in the design industry. I feel that this story reflects a dedication to a material or a design, and the refinement of a process that has given rise to a

classic, not because of nostalgia, but because it’s the best at what it does.”👉

– Ian’s latest edition was nominated for the Beazley Design of the Year 2018 at the London Design Museum and is in the permanent collections of London Design Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Manchester Art Gallery and York Art Gallery.

Brown Betty is available from Labour and Wait

From the Vitsø kitchen

When times are hard, comfort is often found in food. We have turned to the Vitsø kitchen to ask our chef, Will Leigh, to offer us all some of his wisdom and comfort

Photograph by Jo Lewis



...starts with a bang. In Roman times, the first of the month was a raucous and raunchy affair known as Veneralia; now we know it as April Fools’ Day, which is somewhat tamer. The Romans certainly knew how to party. April is generally received as coming from the verb ‘Aperire’ meaning to open – in that the buds and flowers will open in this month. It is commonly known as the start of the season for planting, as the soil begins to warm and the chance of frost diminishes.

However, in Finnish, April is Huhtikuu meaning ‘slash-and-burn moon’ and, as Finland has the second highest proportion of heavy metal bands per capita within Europe, I’ll leave you to decide who got it right.

April will see the end of the game season in Europe, with the last of the venison. But it will be replaced with wild boar for those who are lucky enough to find such a precious commodity. Lamb, as you might expect, will begin to climb in price as we look at the start of the new season and spring chickens will start to appear.

In the sea, the lighter days bring the first of the lemon sole – which would be a mighty treat for lunch – alongside the red mullets, John Dory (named after the French for yellow gold ‘jaune d’oré’) and scallops that really typify the start of spring.

The wild garlic has finally started to sprout in my garden. A sure sign that the soil is warming, and it is time to get planting. In the fields, spring greens begin to appear: the asparagus season will start; we

might see a Jersey Royal or two, though when they finally hit they’ll be ubiquitous, and our family will spend two weeks eating no other spud – and be all the more glorious for it. For those of you who abide in the countryside, wood sorrel, sea purslane, wild watercress and sea aster will be out there alongside the wild garlic and nettle tips for the foragers to squirrel away, all good for soups, pastas, fricassées and salads alike.

The chef, Rowley Leigh (no relation), once famously said that being a cook ‘coarsens the vocabulary, ruins the complexion, and nobody invites you to dinner – but we do it because we love it’ and there is no time like the springtime to fall in love with cookery. Peas and broad beans sing next to wild garlic and nettle tips; mackerel, burnished with a flame, is anointed with heaps of gooseberry and lovage; a roast of lamb gleams above little Jersey royals and is showered with mint, the list is endless and ceaselessly poetic.

At the time of writing I am prepared to make some hot cross buns – and I might look more at old English-style pastry work. There’s something appealing about the simplicity of traditional bakery – a few caraway seeds in with an almondy cake, or a quick scrape of lemon into a walnut biscuit. My 1775 copy of Hannah Glasse’s ‘Recipes for a modern household’ has come into its own...

A favourite treat from the Vitsø kitchen is my marmalade and poppy seed cake, Here is the recipe for you to enjoy:



Marmalade and poppy seed cake

Ingredients

- 3 eggs
- 160g orange marmalade
- 140g caster sugar
- 170g self-raising flour (gluten-free, if preferred)
- 80g double cream
- 50g unsalted butter
- 20ml sunflower oil
- 10g poppy seeds
- 3g bicarbonate of soda
- 1 pinch salt

Method

Grease and line a 2lb loaf tin – mine are 25cm by 12cm
Preheat the oven to 160C
Gently warm the marmalade, cream, oil and butter – until the butter has melted
Lightly whisk together the eggs and sugar
Mix the flour, poppy seeds, salt and bicarb in a large bowl
Add the cream and marmalade mix to the egg mixture and combine
Gently fold in the dry ingredients
Bake for 35 minutes then turn the cake and bake for a further 15 – or until your cake skewer comes out clean

For added indulgence...
Pile a heap of icing sugar in a bowl and squeeze in a tiny amount of lemon juice, stir well to form a smooth, thick icing. Be stringent in your application of the juice as it will become too thin very, very easily. Inevitably, add more icing sugar to the bowl and thicken your icing. Spoon over the cake with style, panache and elegance; or you can do as I have and pile it on thick and artless. Leave the icing to set for half an hour and enjoy. 🍷



Photography by Olivier Hess

Dieter Rams and Mark Adams speaking on the occasion of the opening of Vitsoë's shop at 21 Marylebone Lane, London, in October 2019

Has anyone been listening?

From Mark Adams,
managing director

It took us just four weeks to turn this space from “very horrible” to “half respectable.” We have moved all of our furniture, lighting and equipment from Duke Street. Before that it moved from 72 Wigmore Street. Even the kitchen sink has moved twice.

We have added longer H-Posts to our shelving system – but they are the same tracks, shelves and

cabinets hanging on them. Our sofa now has a few more seats added to it. Our family has expanded, and our home is bigger.

Our lease means that we might have to move relatively soon but, being Vitsø, we will pack everything up and take it with us. As ever – start small, add to it, rearrange it, take it with you when you move.



From Dieter Rams

The word ‘design’. It has become inflationary in the last few years – everybody understands other things under the name of design. I am always fighting against this because I don’t think the English word is correct. It is applied to some terrible things – it is inflated. Let’s change the word design to the German word Gestaltung. Kindergarten is a common word in English nowadays so why not Gestaltung too. Design as a term and definition used today is inflationary and often misapplied...

From the very beginning, in the 1950s, Vitsø has been synonymous with good, clear and useful Gestaltung, as well as with Gestaltung that considers both the use of materials and the environmental impact.

First of all, Gestaltung is observing, thinking and understanding. Today, Gestaltung is still strongly related to the Roman architect, philosopher and engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (1st century BC). He proposed three basic principles for modern Gestaltung, including the second modernity: firmitas (strength) – utilitas (utility) – venustas (beauty).

These basic principles, together with the state of our current knowledge of technology, ergonomics, sociology, ecology, psychology and philosophy – and influenced by the three different dimensions – are the new functional Gestaltung.

Of course, these aspects cannot be mastered by an individual Gestalter alone; rather, this entails an

interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work process in which the Gestalter takes on the role of moderator.

And thus we, the Gestalters, no longer need to talk about design thinking, experience design, usability design, participative design or eco design because all these were, and are, implicit in the process of Gestaltung.

Congratulations for 60 years of Vitsø and thank you, Mark and Jennie*. It has been a pleasure working with you. 🍷

–
*Jennie Moncur, Vitsø’s creative director

From Mark Adams

About a dozen years ago Dieter Rams and I were in the back of one of his favourite designs, the black cab. We were discussing earnestly the half century of his career. Dieter fixed me with his steely eyes: “But, Mark, has anyone been listening?”

One of the reasons Dieter agreed to make the film ‘Rams’ with Gary Hustwit was that it might help reach more folk who had not been listening. But – precisely 60 years since Vitsø was founded in September 1959 – listening to what?

We stand here today in critical times: the heat, the cold, the rain, the drought, the wild fires, the spread of deserts, the bleaching reefs, the furious hurricanes, the disappearing Arctic, the disappearing glaciers, the disappearing birds, the disappearing insects.

The science shows that we are in the midst of the sixth great extinction or, as the environmentalist George Monbiot said in the Guardian last week, “the first great extermination.”

It was precisely 60 years ago that the physicist Edward Teller told the American Petroleum Institute that a 10% increase in CO₂ would be enough to melt the icecap and submerge New York. This week – at the Hawaii observatory that has been measuring atmospheric CO₂ for exactly 60 years – we are at a 29.5% increase.

In 1976 Dieter gave a speech – in New York – called ‘Design by Vitsø’. He spoke of intelligent problem-solving, absolutely avoiding waste, well-thought-out design – for intelligent and responsible users – not consumers. I quote:

“I imagine our current situation will cause future generations to shudder at the thoughtlessness in the way in which we today fill our homes, our cities and our landscape with a chaos of assorted junk.”

“The times of thoughtless design, which can only flourish in times of thoughtless production for thoughtless consumption, are over. We cannot afford any more thoughtlessness.”

He concluded: “Indeed, the collapse of the entire system may be impending.”

That was in 1976 – 43 years ago. Indeed, has anyone been listening?

Our founder was the charming and gentlemanly Dane, Niels Vitsø. I was lucky enough to have ten years with him before he left us in 1995.

I suspect he would be proud today to see how his child has grown up, exporting 70% of its production to 70 countries – with America now the largest market.

When Dieter and I were discussing Vitsø’s imminent 60th anniversary he said: “It’s been tough; it was tough for Niels; it’s been tough for you.”

Why has it been tough? Because Vitsø has doggedly stuck to its guns to sell more people less furniture. Furniture that can be rearranged, repaired or reupholstered. Furniture that is taken with you when you move. Furniture that is not intentionally replaced by newer models. Furniture that is put in our customers’ wills. Frankly, by concentrating on making it better, not pandering to human beings’ obsession with the new. ➡

Vitsø, Marylebone Lane
with its floor designed by
Jennie Moncur



How will history relate the rise to global fame of a 16-year-old Swedish girl with Asperger’s Syndrome? Have you read the hate messages on Greta Thunberg’s social media postings?

To which she replies: “I am led by the science.” Well I am a scientist and, so far, I support every word that I have read of her utterances. But I suspect she is feeling it is tough.

We are now all aware of Extinction Rebellion. I paraphrase from their handbook: conventional campaigning has failed to bring about the necessary change; for 60 years the world has done nothing.

And because nobody has been listening they have been forced into non-violent disruption governed by a strict set of rules – drawing inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi and his battle with the might of the British Empire based on his “insistence on truth”. (It is worth noting that many of the successful civil disobedience campaigns have been led by charismatic individuals. Just think of the suffragettes.)

Extinction Rebellion’s message is: Tell the truth; get the truth out. As one of my colleagues said – who took holiday from Vitsø to join XR last week – “It’s either extinction or rebellion.” After increasingly tougher action from the police

I suspect that XR may conclude, “It’s been tough...”

In the ‘Rams’ film Dieter is asked his view of electric cars. He said that he was unimpressed by the technology because we need to rethink the entire transportation system. But it’s not only the transportation system – it seems abundantly clear that the entire system needs to change.

I suspect it needs to happen from the ground up. I suspect that the existing order is under threat. But that’s a conversation for later...

And finally, the question we are all hearing? “What can I do?”

We can all do less, but do it better. Just try it before every decision you take.

Country Life magazine was recently promoting the long-held policy of my family to eat less meat, but to eat better meat. (The scientist in me knows that the solution is just not as simple as veganism for all, or electric cars for all.)

Or one pair of good, repairable, long-lasting shoes. I prefer one glass of good wine, not a bottle of cheaper wine.

We must slow our lives down. We must travel less. We must seek those few items and experiences that are truly fulfilling. We must apply it in our personal lives. And we must apply it everywhere we have influence in our working lives...

Dieter, I hope we can convince you that we have been listening. 🖐️



“We must slow our lives down. We must travel less. We must seek those few items and experiences that are truly fulfilling.”

Thank you

Alex Kalita
Betty Soldi
Dieter and Ulrike Zipprich
Dieter Rams
Ian McIntyre
Juergen Riehm
Penny Martin

Editing

Jennie Moncur
Julia Schulz

Words

Andrew Jones
Dieter Rams
Jana Scholze
Leanne Cloudsdale
Mark Adams
Will Leigh

Photography

Angela Moore
Anton Rodriguez
Bjarte Bjørkum
Geof Howe
Jo Lewis
Maria Riazanova
Mark Weinberg
Olivier Hess

Design

Thomas Manss & Company
Armstrong Studio
Printed in Warwickshire

© Vitsø 2020
All rights reserved
Vitsø is a registered trademark
vitsoe.com





Read more at **vitsoe.com/voice**