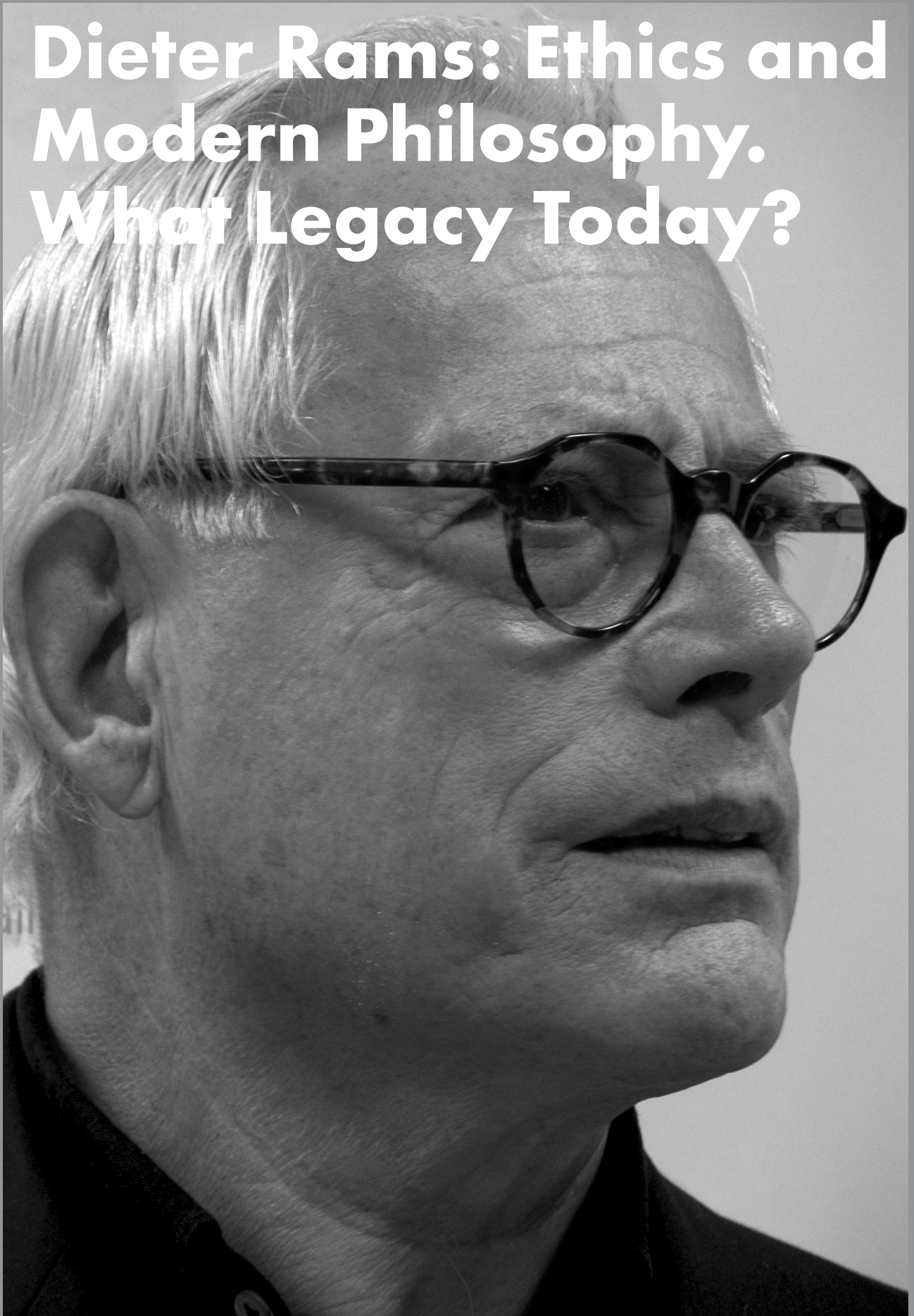


Dieter Rams: Ethics and Modern Philosophy. What Legacy Today?



German industrial designer Dieter Rams has turned eighty this year. His attitude towards product and industrial design, which he has been developing since the 1950s, once again arouses keen interest today. On the occasion of his birthday, a major German daily newspaper saw in him the representative of a 'present-day Modernism that is not as megalomaniac as that of the 20s, 30s and 50s' and also not 'the adolescent unleashing that we erroneously call Postmodernism.'¹ A revision of Postmodernism or, more correctly, a new 'revision of Modernism', certainly seems to have come to stay. Konstantin Grcic, undoubtedly the most prominent German designer active today, wrote in the same newspaper one day before: 'the product lines that Rams developed for the Braun and Vitsoe corporations have founded our notion of representational form and function. The once—from the pre-Grcic generation—so-called cool technocrat Dieter Rams, has now been rediscovered by virtue of his "almost romantic look at the manufacture of products."²

By Klaus Klempe

Rather my goal is to omit everything superfluous so that the essential is shown to best possible advantage.

Dieter Rams, 1980

What distinguishes the particular stance of this designer, who is more popular today among young designers than almost any other? This will be concisely outlined on the basis of his ten design principles.³ In the second part, an essential element of Braun and Dieter Rams' design culture will be presented, namely design transfer and the transformation of shape elements.

1. Design Ethics⁴

Above all in the second half of his professional career—in other words since the mid 1970s—Dieter Rams has reflected on his own activity but also that of industrial designers in general and expressed his theories in innumerable lectures and publications. This was not at least of all the case during his lecturing post at the Hamburg Academy of Fine Arts since 1981.

In this context his ten principles occupy a central position—with the emphasis on principles and not apodictic rules—which he developed over the course of time. First signs are to be found in a lecture he gave in Canada in 1975.⁵ Amongst other things he remarked: "three general rules govern every Braun design—a rule of order, a rule of harmony and a rule of economy".⁶ Rams took up an early analysis of Braun design by Richard Moss, which the latter had articulated in November 1962 in the magazine

"Industrial Design" which was published in New York.⁷

In one of Dieter Rams' lecture manuscripts dated September 1975 "The Designer's Contribution to Company Success."⁸ the following subtitles cropped up "function and performance, feasibility and aesthetic quality". Dieter Rams first speaks specifically about design principles at an International Marketing Meeting in February 1976.

On May 10, 1983 at a symposium of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering and Science he also summarized his remarks in six principles, which he subsequently also articulated at the end of other talks, for instance in Boston 1984: "1. Good Design is innovative, 2. Good design renders utility to a product, 3. Good design is aesthetic design, 4. Good design makes a product easy to understand, 5. Good design is unobtrusive, 6. Good design is honest."⁹ Dieter Rams specifically formulated his then ten principles in a lecture during the 1985 ICSID Congress in Washington.¹⁰ The additional four principles were as follows: "Good design means durability, Good design means consistency down to the last detail, Good design means respect for the environment and Good design means as little design as possible." Durability and respect for the environment can both be seen as coming from the advanced environmental discussion of the time, while the importance of the detail has always been an important aspect of Dieter Rams' work, which was simply reiterated here and "as little design as possible" was on the one hand a response to the excessive Postmodernism in the mid-1980 but also the credo of Dieter Rams' work per se.

There is a one-page paper in Dieter Rams' archives from June 1987 in which these ten principles were published under the title "Braun design department's Design Philosophy".¹¹ As Rams himself recalls it these principles were primarily developed for the Braun Design Office itself, you might say as a self-reflection on their own work.

< Dieter Rams at an exhibition in East Westphalia, Germany, 2005. Photo by Gerhard Milting, Detmold, Dieter Rams Archives.



Figure 1. Vitsoe armchair programme 620. Glass fibre reinforced polyester shell in white, gray or black leather or fabric upholstery, 1962. Photo by Koichi Okuwaki, courtesy of Dieter and Ingeborg Rams Foundation.

Their gradual evolution demonstrates a dialectic relationship between theory and practice, which had made an entry into the design department around 1975. However, this articulation of theories, which precisely in the 1970s saw a boom worldwide, did not serve to paralyze the design activity of Dieter Rams and his team, as largely happened in the 1960s in the HfG Ulm. The productivity of innovative design at Braun remained as high as ever.

However, this articulation of principles by Dieter Rams also indicates a shift in his own take on his work approach. The concept of orderliness still employed by Rams in 1975 and specified by Richard Moss is omitted. By omitting it Rams broke free of a key concept of classic Modernism that was still used by Max Bill. However, what are retained are the initial concepts of design aesthetics and economy of form. The first step for Rams was to add as criteria for good design the following: innovation, usefulness, honesty and being self-explanatory. While the first three terms are also associated with classic Modernism the concept of being self-explanatory makes sense when seen against the background of the new technical complexity and is highly relevant again today. The Braun

operating instructions for the Nizo cameras but also for the hi-fi systems were no more than a few pages, and you could really manage without them.

In the final phase of devising the principles Rams included the environmental and resources aspect (durability and respect for the environment) but also the importance of the detail. The latter was as important for him as it was for the Eames, who expressed their conviction succinctly: "Ultimately it is always the details that breath life into a product." A final interesting point is the notion of restraint that Rams introduced to the design debate and expressed as follows: "Products should be as neutral and reserved as possible, leaving room for the users' self-expression." In other words reduction is seen here as offering the user a means of expression and not as a limitation or even a normative specification. Reduction may also be viewed in analogy with Marshall McLuhan's idea of 'cool media', which evoked active participation on the part of users.¹²

In 1990, at the opening of the exhibition "Designed in Germany" Dieter Rams emphasized once again the practical application of theories and principles: "Design



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Figure 2. Meeting with the Marketing Team of Hi-Fi equipment. Photo by Abisag Tüllmann, Dieter Rams Archives.



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Figure 3. Braun ET 66 calculator. Main body made of black plastic and buttons of brown, yellow, green and red plastic. 1987. Design by **Dieter Rams** and **Dietrich Lubs**. Photo by Koichi Okuwaki, courtesy of Dieter and Ingeborg Rams Foundation.

Figure 4. Braun SK 4 Radio-Phono-Kombination, 1956. Design by **Hans Gugelot** and **Dieter Rams**. Photo by Koichi Okuwaki, courtesy of Dieter and Ingeborg Rams Foundation.



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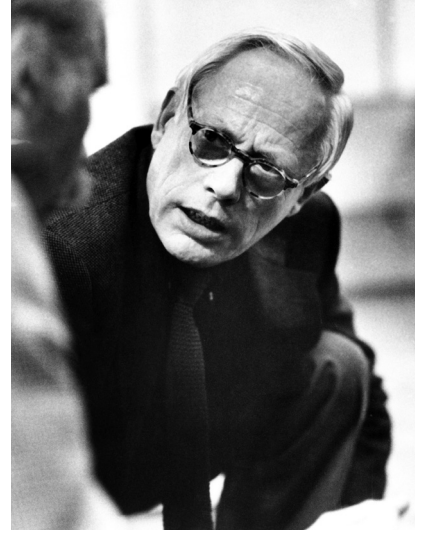
Figure 5. In 1968 a new line Hi-Fi device was created: the compact radio receiver combined with an amplifier of high performance. From the flat rectangular product line of 1959, studio 2, the 500 series was developed as devices with an aluminium and steel housing and with a display panel where all the controls were located. Model "Regie 550", 1976, design by **Dieter Rams**. Photo by Koichi Okuwaki, courtesy of Dieter and Ingeborg Rams Foundation.



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Figure 6. Relocation of the Braun design department to Kronberg in 1972. **Dieter Rams** in his office on the occasion of the publication in Lufthansa Magazine. Photo by Tim Rautert, Dieter Rams Archives.

Figure 7. **Nils Vitsoe** with **Max Werner Engelhart**, who succeeded **Wolfgang Wetzl** as Sales Manager, c. 1975. Dieter Rams Archives.

Figure 8. Studio at *Haus Rams* in Kronberg, c. 1975. Photo by Marlene Schnelle-Schneyder, Dieter Rams Archives.

is not a theory or a philosophy. Design is a practical art, evolved under continuously changing social conditions. Therefore, it is probably best to frame hypotheses which are regularly tested for their viability, so as to derive from them a sensible action plan. It is unquestionable our task to overcome the deficit in sensuality engendered by Modernism. To clad it in the mantle of Post-modernism would be a sad triumph for cynical rationalism.¹³

At the start of the 1990s Dieter Rams stressed the relationship between rationality and cultural quality, between art and technology and frills: "It would be desirable to expand the functional concept so that it is no longer abused to justify an economically motivated, rigid canon of forms. Objects must also possess, and exert fascination. However, it should emanate from the objects themselves and not be tacked on for the sake of artificial affectation and superficial decoration. Even if the concept of functionality were to abdicate part of its absolute, authoritarian leadership and its influence on society, the rationality on which it is based need not be surrendered. Retaining the functional constants—simplicity, intelligibility, utility, longevity—does not mean bogging down in stagnation. They quite surely provide a basis permitting the development of new forms. Designers, however, should not let themselves be deluded into thinking exclusively in technocratic categories; rather they must bear in mind that their most important potentials—creativity and innovation—are no less influenced by art. Their vision must embrace both technology and art."¹⁴

Dieter Rams succeeded in acting as a bridge between classic Modernism and the present-day, though he did not, as in Ulm, substitute the "reform touch" of that early avant-garde, the "Montessorian" still evident in the products of the Bauhaus and New Frankfurt, for a cynicism of the technical but achieved a formal language that was both precise and poetic. He achieved this by sensitively advancing most of the foundations of this very Modernism but not as a strict revision.

"Indeed, in my eyes indifference towards people and the lives they lead is the only sin a designer can commit. Design that does justice to the intended function comes about from the intensive, comprehensive, patient and thoughtful examination of life, the needs, wishes and feelings of people. The design of a product reflects the designer's vision of man... In the same way that you can read a person by the way they have furnished their living space."¹⁵

Today, Dieter Rams has a great number of admirers and followers among a younger generation of designers who feel their design ethics very deeply. Achim Heine, who for many years was in charge of the German Leica camera firm, may be regarded as belonging to this

generation, together with Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa. A prominent current reference to Dieter Rams' design ethics is Jonathan Ive at Apple, with his iMacs, iPods, iPhones and iPads. Many of these new products possess a visual appeal and functionality comparable to those of the devices designed by Dieter Rams and his respective teams for Braun and Vitsoe. To meet new technical requirements, new 'original' forms have emerged. The phenomenon of rupture between the existing and the new will be discussed in the following section.

2. Transformation and transfer

Practically no term has been so successfully used in product advertising over the last century as the word 'new'. It is the Western counter model to the Asiatic 'better'. Creating the world from scratch was the aspiration of renaissance artists who, with the advent of Humanism, broke the divine order to become creators of the world. This new dictum was given an enormous boost by industrialisation and has constituted the nucleus of Western culture until the present day. Even so, there have not been so many real innovations in the arts: the apparently new has almost invariably been developed from the existent, something that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe expressed as follows:

*Only from the appropriation of somebody else's treasures arises a big one.*¹⁶

People always talk about originality, but what does it mean! As we are born, the world begins influencing us and this goes on until the end. Anyway, what can we then call ourselves other than energy, power and will! -if I could say what I have come to owe to all great predecessors and contemporaries, not that much would remain.

Goethe zu Eckermann, May 12, 1825¹⁷

I would point out here that even the ancient and the medieval philosophers, from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, understood "*Ex nihilo nihil fit*" (from nothing comes nothing), just as Gottfried Semper formulated in the nineteenth century: 'new has to be no copy of the old and relieved from the empty influence of fashion.'¹⁸

Innovation, copy and transformation form three categories of design. Here the last one will be compared with respect to Dieter Rams' work. That it was constructive and innovative for him is further hypothesised. As a definition we may refer to the American "styling", which "was forced since the 30s to be aimed at the demand of competition and sales market"¹⁹ and that also transferred the extensive forms from one type to another. As an example, I should merely point out the speed suggestive drop form of the "Streamline", which Raymond Loewy used indis-

tinctly for locomotives (where it was no longer really functional or necessary) as well as for the mechanical pencil sharpener of 1933 or for the Coca Cola cooler. It was not about function but about production of symbols, as Elke Gaugele recognised: “parallel to the job outline of the industrial designers, ‘styling’ enhances the tasks of designers as a production of symbols, which should be built as much through a selective transformation of surfaces as through an intensified communication of the products.”²⁰ The predominance of sign characters of products was criticised immediately by the influential German graphic designer Otl Aicher: “[...] this temptation to raise everything from the symbol carrier, instead of making an insinuation of the looks or showing only its external shape, is a determining trend of today’s design [...]. A symbol is the authoritarian form of signs, the symbol carrying the product points to its user as subject, as submitted.”²¹

What is, therefore, the prominent feature of Dieter Rams’ design stance? Braun’s design defined itself initially as a clear rupture with existing models. The early 1956 SK4 Radio-Phono-Kombination, created together with Hans Gugelot, differed radically from the common radio sets of the time made of polished veneer with gold borders. This so-called ‘Snow White Coffin’, had identical front and rear sides and revealed its organised technology under the acrylic cover. But even this device had references to existing ones. Slits as loudspeaker openings already existed in the Braun radios of the early 1950s. The equivalence of all sides of an object, and consequently the possibility of freely placing it in different spaces, had already been featured in Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus Dessau building. The wooden frame construction by Hans Gugelot refers to classical carpentry work, while the acrylic cover finds its counterpart in equipment from Wilhem Wagenfeld for the manufacturer of household, “WMF”, of this period.²² The major creative breakthrough, however, was to be found precisely here: not only in the transfer of design elements but also in the abstraction of existing design forms and types and their transformation into a new product. The same is valid for many other product innovations and also for the Vitsoe furniture. In 1960 Dieter Rams designed in a short time his most important furniture systems: the Vitsoe 606 Shelving System and the Armchair Program 620. The furniture in the next years and decades increased and was complemented without reducing compatibility. A shelf from 1960 may be perfectly combined with today’s production. In the first seven to eight years at Braun, Dieter Rams and his team developed an extensive canon of forms which were always practically inserted and which ran through the whole product generations.

The color function of Braun devices and Vitsoe furni-

ture was also extremely reduced and self-reflective. This means that the overwhelming number of signs on these objects is directed towards the function and service of the device itself. As an example, I shall examine the Regie 550 receiver in some detail. The order of all the keys and rotary switches is subject not so much to a grid as to visually balanced categories. There is the oval function switch group, the one of the knob or the station and the frequency switches, all of which correspond to different geometrical forms and volumes. The function switches are high and concave; the station switches flat and convex. The knob has a gloriole of numbers, all of which appear in the dainty geometrical *Akzidenz Grotesk* font. The loudspeaker switch on the left and the rotary switch on the right define the external appearance (elements contrasting in form, such as the knob and dominant rotary switch). Finally, the complementary colours red and green are used, as well as the lower orders yellow and brown. A highly complex and precisely composed image is therefore formed of primary geometric elements. Everything looks motivated and comprehensible.

Dieter Rams and Braun’s design team invariably transferred and transformed developed forms. The drop-shaped rotary switch appeared in the early 1960s in the audio systems, while the flat, convex Regie 550 pressure switch became a central element of calculators. This example should suffice, but numerous such transfers on Braun devices may also be shown. This procedure led to two things: economy of form, where inventing something new was not always necessary, and as a result, and despite the different designer manuscripts, a recognisable Braun corporate design.

Dieter Rams and the Braun design team, of course, has been typical European inventors of new forms. No doubts about this. But the interest of this essay is the question “What is beyond invention?” Dieter Rams’ design process methodology derives, beneath the invitation of forms, largely on the one hand from an ethic catalogue as defined in the ten principles, and on the other from a commitment to transformative design. Even so, his designs are not schematic; the decisive point here is that the aesthetic and functional forms of the product are invariably placed in the centre of the design. The scheme or grid has never been a priority.

Anyone today, from design students to active designers, may benefit greatly from Dieter Rams’ ten principles and his praxis: Design as an everyday challenge.

Notes

1. *Welt am Sonntag*, May 20, 2012.
2. Grcic, Konstantin, "Wie Schönheit funktioniert. Dieter Rams hat unseren Begriff von Design erneuert", *Die Welt*, May 19, 2012.
3. A comprehensive description can be found in the catalogue for the exhibition "Less and More", Ueki-Poulet, Keiko; Klemp, Klaus, ed., *Less and More. The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams*, Berlin, 2012.
4. The following discussion of the first part largely follows the third Chapter by the author of the aforementioned volume, 489-495.
5. Since the early 1970s the Canadian government's program "Industrial Design Assistance Program" (IDAP), has organized annual design seminars to which internationally acclaimed designers are invited. In 1973 it was L. Bruce Archer; in 1974 George Nelson; and in 1975 Dieter Rams. Cited from the magazine "Canada Commerce", March issue 1976, Dieter Rams archives. [The Dieter Rams Archives are settled in the Museum of Applied Art Frankfurt].
6. Ibid.
7. Moss, Richard, "Braun", *Industrial Design*, New York, 11 November 1962. German translation in *Design+Design* 7, 1987, 6 f.
8. 26-page English-language manuscript dated September 22, 1975. Likewise a German version dated October 1976, Dieter Rams Archives.
9. Speech manuscript "Boston USA October 1984", Dieter Rams Archives.
10. Summary of the Congress in a text by the Braun Press Department "Worlddesign 85", in Washington: "Neuer Auftrieb für gutes Design?" (New impetus for good design?), dated November 1985, publication of the ten principles, Dieter Rams Archives.
11. All speech manuscripts mentioned are in the Dieter Rams Archives.
12. According to McLuhan, this is the example of cool jazz, the telephone or the university seminar.
13. Dieter Rams, speech at the Opening of the Exhibition "Designed in Germany", May 1990, 3, Archives *Rat für Formgebung*.
14. Idem, 2.
15. Dieter Rams: *Anhang zu den 10 Thesen* (Appendix of the 10 principles), Dieter Rams Archives.
16. Goethe to Chancellor von Muller on December 17, 1824, cit. Albrecht Schöne and Waltraud Wiethölter (eds). *Commentary on Faust*, among others by Friedmar Apel (ed.), *Goethe works*, Anniversary Edition, vol. 3, Frankfurt a.M., Leipzig, 1998, 627.
17. Quoted by Jochen Schmidt: *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik 1750-1945*, vol. 1, Darmstadt, 1985, 344.
18. Semper, Gottfried, *Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst. Vorschläge zur Anregung nationalen Kunstgefühles bei dem Schlusse der Londoner Industrieausstellung*, Braunschweig, 1852.
19. Gagele, Elke, "Vom Styling zum Style", Eisele, Petra; Bürdek, Bernhard E. ed., *Design. Anfang des 21. Jh. Diskurse und Perspektiven*, Ludwigsburg, 2011, 153.
20. Idem.
21. Otl Aicher and Hans Gugelot in Wichmann, Hans, ed., *System-Design Bahnbrecher. Hans Gugelot 1920-65*, Basle, 1987, 18.
22. Compare the butter dish with steel base and acrylic top from 1956 as well. It is unknown who was first with this idea, Wagenfeld or Rams. Both were engaged at Braun in those years. But the effect would be the same. Transform a part of a butter dish to a radio or a part of a radio to a butter dish.

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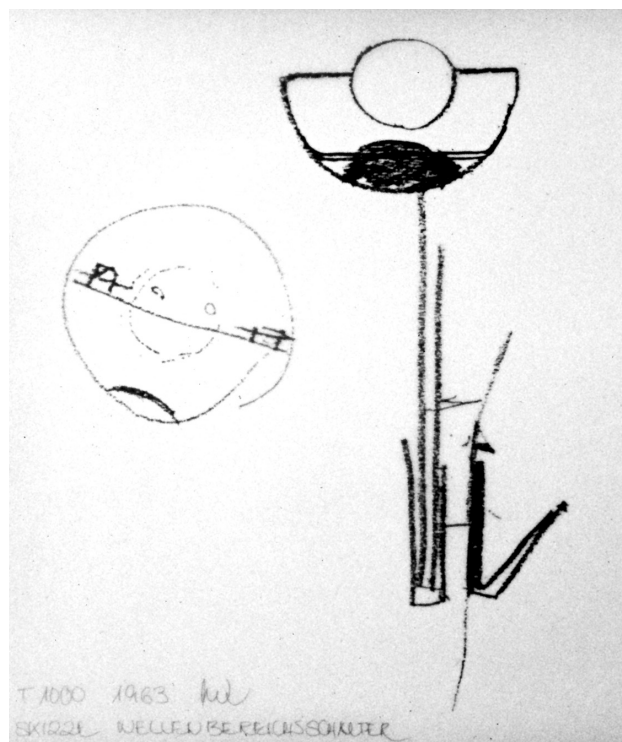


Figure 1. Waveband switch, a key design detail of the T 1000 world receiver. Sketch by **Dieter Rams**, c. 1962, Dieter Rams Archives.

- Lovell, Sophie, *Dieter Rams. As Little Design as Possible*, London, 2011.
- Eisele, Petra; Bürdek, Bernhard E., ed., *Design, Anfang des 21. Jh. Ludwigsburg*, 2011.
- Ueki-Poulet, Keiko; Kemp Klaus, ed., *Less and More. The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams*, Berlin, edition 3, 2012.

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