

Alexander von Vegesack

In July 2012, Bárbara Coutinho, Director of MUDE—Design and Fashion Museum, Francisco Cape-lo's Collection since 2006, interviewed Alexander Von Vegesack, founding Director of the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein and the person who set up Thonet Museum in Boppard am Rhein. The subject of this interview is the importance of *Collect—Curate—Exhibit—Publish* to the Preservation and Communication of Modern Architecture/Design.

Interviewed by Bárbara Coutinho

As founder and first Director of Vitra Design Museum, you were crucial in the creation of one of the world's most important collections of Modern furniture. They began as two collections, one compiled by Rolf Fehlbaum since the early 80s and the other one was begun by you in the late 60s. At the same time, you have your own industrial furniture design collection. Why and how did you start to collect? What's your understanding of *collecting*? Your goals and purpose?

I started collecting more than 45 years ago. Exhibitions had been most of the time the purpose for me to collect as I wanted to present stories about the history of the industrial evolution. Objects are used to illustrate these ideas. I was (and I still am) looking at objects from this point of view quite frequently. I was never interested to assemble all the different variations of one product, like many collectors do. I had been looking for key pieces as the best documentation of my stories. The criteria for the selection had been always: pieces that express new ideas, functions or aesthetics, material innovation or new technology. During my life, however I also collected a huge variety of completely different objects. Sometimes, for example, I became curious of an object on the flea market or fall in love with one and when the price doesn't prevent me from buying it ends up either in my storage or—quite often—being integrated into my every day's environment.

From the very first moment on, the goal to do exhibitions encouraged me also to buy books, catalogues and photos about design-related subjects. I found most of them in Europe, in the libraries of retired curators from the 60s and 70s—when design just started to become an issue—and later on in America from former Bauhaus students or teachers, who had immigrated. Their children, who often had no interest in the publications, started selling them.

For me an exhibition needs to convey the entire picture of a subject. That's why I collected books and photographs from all the different disciplines in craft, industry and architecture as well as from the major style periods in order to show how pieces were defined originally and in which circumstances and ambience they were used and to give an overall understanding of each individual designer, his concept and the way he was perceived. Without photography and literature it would be impossible to know how an object was supposed to look. Very often I bought two or more copies of the same book because I just wanted to show different plates of the content.

With the Vitra Design Museum I did not intend to create a museum that cares about the company's history—nobody would visit such a museum more than once, because its content always remains the same. When I started with the Vitra Design Museum I made it clear that we would not show Vitra products from the last 25 years; we would collect the important results of the design process but they wouldn't be the subjects of our exhibitions. Putting objects in the context of their time and technology was much more important. Young designers need good examples of case studies in order to develop and improve their ideas.

When the Vitra Design Museum turned out to be a success, I was contacted by various companies asking for my point of view how to conceive an attractive museum of their own activities. If a company provides an important contribution to history, their documents and products should be conserved and made available for public access. But a museum being limited only in the documentation of its own history is like a car being driven only in first gear. Only when you forget about the direct product promotion and instead care about the overall theme of your

occupation you can really master your discipline, serves the public interest and—ultimately—also grant a long term promotion for the company.

In your collection, you mixed industrial furniture (mass-produced pieces, single pieces, prototypes) with objects people use in everyday life in different cultures of the world, anonymous ones... Saddles, for instance. I read the common issue was the innovation and modernity they can express. Regarding all that you've done until now, why can you define Modern [how would you define Modernity]? I know you are still collecting. Do you recognize a modern perspective in our time?

Joris Laarman, for example, showed us in 2006 with his Bone chair how new technology helps us develop optimized structures in a beautiful example of what Gaudí always wanted to achieve. Gaudí started to do research on how we can learn from nature to build delicate but solid structures. He examined plants and their way to build resistant structures with a perfect course of forces. But at the end of the 19th century it wasn't as easy as it is today. He surely would have adored operating with computers to finalize such a clear demonstration like the Bone chair, a good example to document that conceptually nothing starts from zero. We are always using certain experiences of the past in order to improve our ideas, to apply them in a new field and to enlarge their potential.

You had a main role in the Thonet Museum and you conceived the first major exhibition on the history of bentwood furniture that has crossed the United States museums. You also started your collection with the Thonet chair. Why this specific interest in Thonet and bentwood furniture?

I was fascinated with Michael Thonet who started off as a simple cabinet-maker in Germany. From his early works on he planned to produce chairs in the most economical way and for a large public use. He was not looking for individual clients, but for restaurants, hotels and other large spaces that needed a huge amount of chairs. He was very consequent in all aspects of what we would call today a Modern production and marketing. His factories used the assembly line some decades before Henry Ford; his furniture was only assembled at the selling point and not at his factories in order to reduce shipment volume. The parts for 36 chairs found space in a crate of one cubic meter, being sent overseas and sold there for a much lower price than the local chair production. All this happened already between 1870 and 1890. Michael Thonet became a symbol of the industrialization in the 19th century. Many followers had used his ideas and inventions and today IKEA is probably the most successful one.

Do you think this mentality and "framework" is missing nowadays?

No, you still find people with such a capacity of global thinking. Just look at the large field of computer technology and telecommunication, where young entrepreneurs carry out extremely influential projects and have a huge international success. The traditional western industry may not be able to react as rigorously as Thonet did 150 years ago, because more and more legal restrictions are formalizing the procedures. But crisis like today's economic one may provoke new approaches from industry and administration—let's hope and fight for it. History gives a good example: in 1851 with the First World Fair, the world opened up and everyone believed engineers were capable of solving all problems. There was a big sensation of trust in the capability of human beings to find new solutions.

How do you conceive the conservation of Modern design objects?

Art and applied art have been collected for a long time. There is a lot of experience and knowledge about its conservation. We can learn from it for most of the Modern design classics. But the moment we start to look at pieces made out of plastics we are facing problems that are extremely difficult to solve because often they quickly deteriorate, we don't know their exact 'ingredients' any longer and we are lacking experience and knowledge about their aging. In some cases we can only preserve the outer appearance of such objects but must accept that they can no longer be used—which for a design object, an object of applied art, is of course problematic.

So, for you, the most important value to preserve is the authenticity in terms of concept and ideology and not so much in the materiality?

Iwould not generalize this, but if you can reproduce the deteriorated parts of an industrially mass-produced object with today's materials and you don't change the volume, the look and the function, I would accept this procedure in order to provide the documentation of the designer's original concept for future generations. Most museums are scared to death when taking out the upholstery foam. If you have a chair with upholstery that was made of foam in the beginning of the 60s, today you only might have a handful of grains left. Of course this piece of furniture should be restored and shown. We need to replace it with today's materials (similar or better ones), keeping the original volume, proportions and forms. I

want to show the idea of the design, which includes the foam, the function and the capability of the material.

Most museums don't have the point of view you've just explained. Why?

Today's attitude in the museum's world is to keep as much as possible the original state of the object. But you are indeed caught between two different points of views. The moment you replace the original but deteriorated parts of an object its market value could easily lose 20 to 60 percent. No employee of a museum wants to take such a risk. Otherwise if you ask the designer of a piece about his intention he or she generally would ask you to restore it: "I wanted my design to look perfect". When Christopher Wilk, today the keeper of furniture, textiles and fashion at the Victoria & Albert Museum, prepared his Marcel Breuer show for MoMA in 1980, he asked Breuer, who was still alive at that time, how to present his early works such as the Wassily chair. The object Christopher wanted to use in his exhibition was a little bit worn out and missed a lot of coating showing rusty parts. Breuer answered immediately "clean the structure and renew the coating. I intended a light and transparent piece of furniture in the space". I guess Breuer would have even preferred to show a new and precise reproduction of his chair rather than the antiquity!

For an exhibition it might be the best to show the old original version with patina and worn-out fabrics as well as a completely renewed or even reproduced example that corresponds to the original. We must respect and communicate the original intention—maybe also with original photos from the period when and how the designer exposed his object first. Regarding products from the 50s, 60s and 70s, I would not hesitate a moment to replace the upholstery if the foam inside of the fabric cover is gone, but trying to preserve the original fabric.

So you consider that museums could have a key contribution in the understanding and safeguarding of Modern heritage if they were able to search new ways to present the original idea of an object and so, underline the formal, structural, technological and functional contribution for the development of design.

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And the conservation of architecture?

I am not so much an expert in this field, but in order to preserve architecture you probably have to accept much more compromises as these objects are exposed to so much more stress. Furthermore, the initial investment as well as the costs for preservation are so much higher and the needs to change a building's purpose or to replace it with another one are much more relevant than in the case of a sofa or a lamp. But in principle I would deal with these objects as parts of a cultural heritage in the same way and try to keep the look and functionality as much as possible. In most cases you will nevertheless be forced to change and moderate its parts and there I always prefer to clearly show what has been renewed or added and what has been conserved.

The oldest museums dedicated to collecting decorative arts and design in the 19th century—such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum or the Museum for Applied Arts in Vienna—try to educate both public and manufacturers, helping them to use and produce better products. Then, after the MoMA, design enters art galleries because of its aesthetic relevance in Modern art. Nowadays which should be the focus of design museums?

A design museum should still be a witness of the design evolution and serve the public with its design collection, interpreting exhibitions, publications and educational projects. It should still serve for research, to inspire new ideas and entertain the public as well as organize expert discussions about its themes. Today, design's connection with other arts, with technology and with social issues are complemented with its relation to almost any natural science as well as humanities—as a matter of fact, design is standing in the focus of all these disciplines. A contemporary design museum should reflect this.

You have a strong knowledge and experience as a freelance curator and a collector adviser for several museums. In your opinion, can curating be an effective way to preserve Modern design? How come? Regarding the times we are living in, with new maintenance technologies, which are the most important goals you tried to achieve with each exhibition? Specially architecture exhibitions?

To curate an exhibition means to interpret the subject and this interpretation takes part in the general discourse of the matter. It therefore always also affects the importance which people attribute to certain objects, documents and ideas, and that goes for ancient as well as Modern ones. However, to connect Modern and often ephemeral things with long historical evolutions may

cause a larger awareness of the relevance of today's phenomena. Design is a marvellous subject, ideal to highlight the manifold network in which our society, especially today's consumer society, lives. In the past years architecture has become more and more a subject that interests a larger audience. And last but not least, because we recognize more the importance of the ecological and social environment for our product-oriented culture. To illustrate the connections between the object on the one side, the human body and spirit on the other, the environment on a third side, the historic background and future expectations on further sides, all these aspects fascinate me and in our exhibitions we try to convey their complexity in the most fascinating and educating possible way.

In Vitra you created a program of traveling exhibitions on design and architecture. Most of them touched Modernity and the Modern Movement, but in a very open way. I remember the retrospectives on Jean Prouvé, Charles and Ray Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Luis Barragán or thematic exhibitions on Czech Cubism and Learning from Vernacular. They represented a very important push forward on the debate on Modern architecture and design. How did you choose the different themes and names? What's the importance of traveling exhibitions?

First and foremost I did not accept any thematic borders. I find my themes in the fascination for phenomena of all kinds that come across discussions with colleagues as well as my daily, probably quite unusual life. I never tried to copy anyone else but followed my own scent of curiosity. My travels, encounters with people, a strong respect for history, a willingness to engage in our present time (especially through education)—all these components make up my way of choosing the subjects of my work.

Travelling exhibitions are a way to multiply the results of our work and to offer them to a larger audience. But they also force us to think twice about the relevance and the comprehensibility of our subjects. Furthermore they can improve the economic feasibility of a project and serve as a promoter for its originating institution.

How do you see the exhibition catalogue and what should be the relation with the exhibition context?

The catalogue should document with images and texts the exhibition's content as comprehensively as possible. But a book lasts longer than any exhibition and not only serves as a mere reference. It preserves research, presents an intellectually filtered essence of the exhibition's content and adds to it with further back-

ground material. It thus is a valuable source for any further research in the respective field. I think in the future, with the help of computers, we should find out how to make research more easily accessible for other museums and experts. We should think more about its proper use in exhibitions, reaching and engaging the public without distracting it from the original artefact.

How do you think an exhibition can achieve that kind of emotional engagement?

The visitor must experience the visit as a unique adventure. Original material, holistic images, a variety of media and environments, which enclose exhibits and visitors alike are the one aspect of this adventure. Profound and yet comprehensible information which visitors can access in a suitable time is another aspect. A third important aspect is the choreography of an exhibition: a proper beginning, a fascinating story with altering highlights and a strong ending. Ultimately you are dealing with images, and these must be stronger than TV or Internet, otherwise people just stay at home.

Alexander Von Vegesack

Founding Director of the Vitra Design Museum from 1988 to 2011 in Weil am Rhein (Germany). As a freelance curator and collector of industrial furniture design, Alexander von Vegesack set up the Thonet Museum in Boppard am Rhein, and advised international museums in shaping and adding to their design collections. He organized exhibitions in Paris for the Centre Georges Pompidou as well as the Musée d'Orsay, and was commissioned by the American Federation of Arts to conceive the first major exhibition on the history of bentwood and metal furniture, which was shown at ten leading US museums. He realized similar projects in Eastern Europe for the German Foreign Ministry, and in 1989 he established the Vitra Design Museum in cooperation with the furniture manufacturer Vitra. As the Museum's founder and director, he created a continually changing program of internationally touring exhibitions on design and architecture, including the publication of numerous associated catalogues and other materials. In addition, he initiated an annual European museum conference to provide the most important museums in these fields with a forum for the exchange of ideas and programs.

Twenty five years ago, Alexander sold a part of his bentwood collection to the Austrian Government and bought the *Domaine de Boisbuchet* in the Poitou-Charente region of France. He established an internationally recognized seminar program in France for designers, architects, as well as artists, craftsmen and artisans from various disciplines. In 1997 the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Vitra Design Museum started to support the program of Boisbuchet. In 2011 this educational centre was recognized by the French Government as a national *Pôle d'excellence rurale*.

In 1993 the Centre George Pompidou presented an exhibition and catalogue of his collection under the title "Miroir d'une collection" and in March 2008 the *Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli* in Torino, Italy organized the exhibition "Scoprire il Design—La Collezione von Vegesack".

Alexander von Vegesack served as a member of the *Fonds National d'Art Contemporain*, he is *Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* and holds the German Order of Merit.