



More than 55 years of Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen

From an elite industrial exhibition to an international training and communication center

In 2009 the Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen celebrated its 55th birthday – and can look back on an interesting past. When the institution was founded by the Krupp company and the BDI [“Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie“: Federation of German Industries] in 1954, there were high expectations of the work it was to achieve. The institution was to contribute to a more attractive environment beyond the boundaries of “mere mercantile profit-chasing”, modernise German consumer products and make them fit for export and promote the “added character of attractive, clear and simple design in peoples’ lives”. It was greeted as a “demonstration of protest against the increasing ugliness of the world”. These were very noble demands on an institution that ultimately stemmed from the epiphany by the Krupp company in Essen and by German industry that they had to take image-building measures in order to restore their damaged reputation and expand their sales markets after the war.

The “Industrieform association”, as the Design Zentrum was then called, was thus ultimately a true child of its era. This was an era in which German exports were still sluggish despite the onset of the economic miracle, the US industry was streets ahead in terms of design and there was no communication tool on the German market to disseminate a topic such as “good design” to the wider audience.

Victory over Gelsenkirchen Baroque

In the following year, 1955, the “Permanent Industrieform Exhibition” was opened in the “Small House” of Villa Hügel, the legendary abode of the Krupp family in Essen. The consumer goods exhibition was considered a standard-setting presentation that served as a model for industry and consumers. The exhibition attracted around 450,000 visitors in the first two years alone. On October 12, 1955, the Süddeutsche Zeitung newspaper commented: “‘Industrieform’ is proof that the Ruhr region does not need ‘Gelsenkirchen Baroque’, that we already have the forms and things



that we need to live a decent, good and honest life – even a beautiful one.”

For the whole of the early phase, the exhibitions and behavior of the “Haus Industrieform” were informed by design canon and functionalist values. Bound by the intellectual tradition of the Bauhaus and the Werkbund artists association, this showcase of industry saw part of its task as being the social function of design as a link between people and technology.

Flexibility as a principle for survival

As a self-funding association, the “Haus Industrieform” constantly adapted to the changing design requirements in the following decades. Flexibility became the institution’s principle for survival, where external influences were seen as a productive interruption and a catalyst for change.

For example, the movement of 1968 triggered a critical approach to consumerism and Wolfgang Fritz Haug’s “Critique of Commodity Aesthetics” in the early 1970s. Design was relegated to the status of “nice packaging”, and the “Haus Industrieform” struggled more and more to promote design products. It was in danger of losing its grip on the Zeitgeist. Peter Frank, managing director since 1974, reacted by bringing the institution back into the game as an exhibition hall and an advocate for consumers. Frank made use of the Zeitgeist and its anti-consumerist elite with exhibitions such as “Design for disabled people”, “International street signs” or “Bumper stickers – automobile messages”.

It was not until the structural change at the end of the 1980s that industry and politicians increasingly recognised the promotion of design as a tool for economic development. The “Haus Industrieform” reverted to its original role as a showcase for industry. The product selection first carried out in 1955 was strengthened by the introduction of the label “Ausgewählt durch Haus Industrieform Essen” (“selected by Haus Industrieform Essen”) and a yearbook – similar to a catalog. The institution’s function of promoting design was expanded by means of active design management. This change of role was facilitated by integration in regional business management as well as start-up financing from



the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. This was reflected in the name change to “Design Zentrum Nordrhein Westfalen” in 1990.

On the path to becoming a global player

In 1991, Peter Zec took over the management of the Design Zentrum. He expanded the competition and established it at an international level, first with the “Roter Punkt” (“red dot”) and later in the form of the “red dot design award”. The range of tasks then shifted in focus away from design management and more towards the function of a training and communication center for companies wanting to use design to withstand international competition. In response to the increasing significance of communication design, the Design Zentrum established its own prize for this area in 1993 in addition to the competition for product design.

The institution is now stronger than ever. It has the support of an international network, is involved in EU design projects and the competition is attracting record-breaking numbers of participants each year. red dot singapore was founded in 2005 and organises the “red dot award: design concept” every year, presenting the award-winning concepts in the red dot design museum in Singapore. The red dot design museum in Singapore was opened in November 2005. Since this time it has become a sales magnet and the main attraction of the red dot traffic, a creative center in the former police headquarters in Singapore. The old colonial-style building is located in the heart of Singapore’s business district and since its renovation has become synonymous with innovation and creativity. In addition to the red dot design museum, the red dot traffic houses creative firms such as advertising agencies, schools and design studios.

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