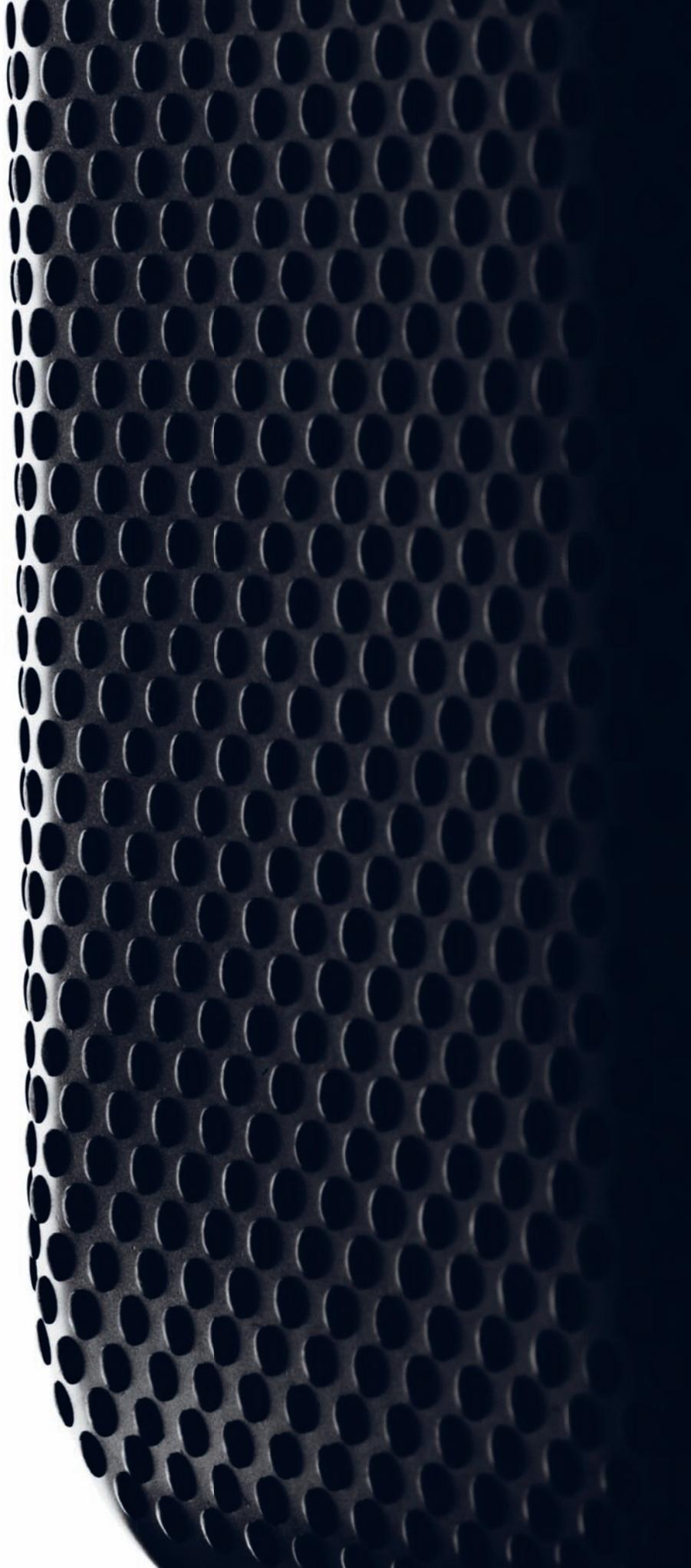


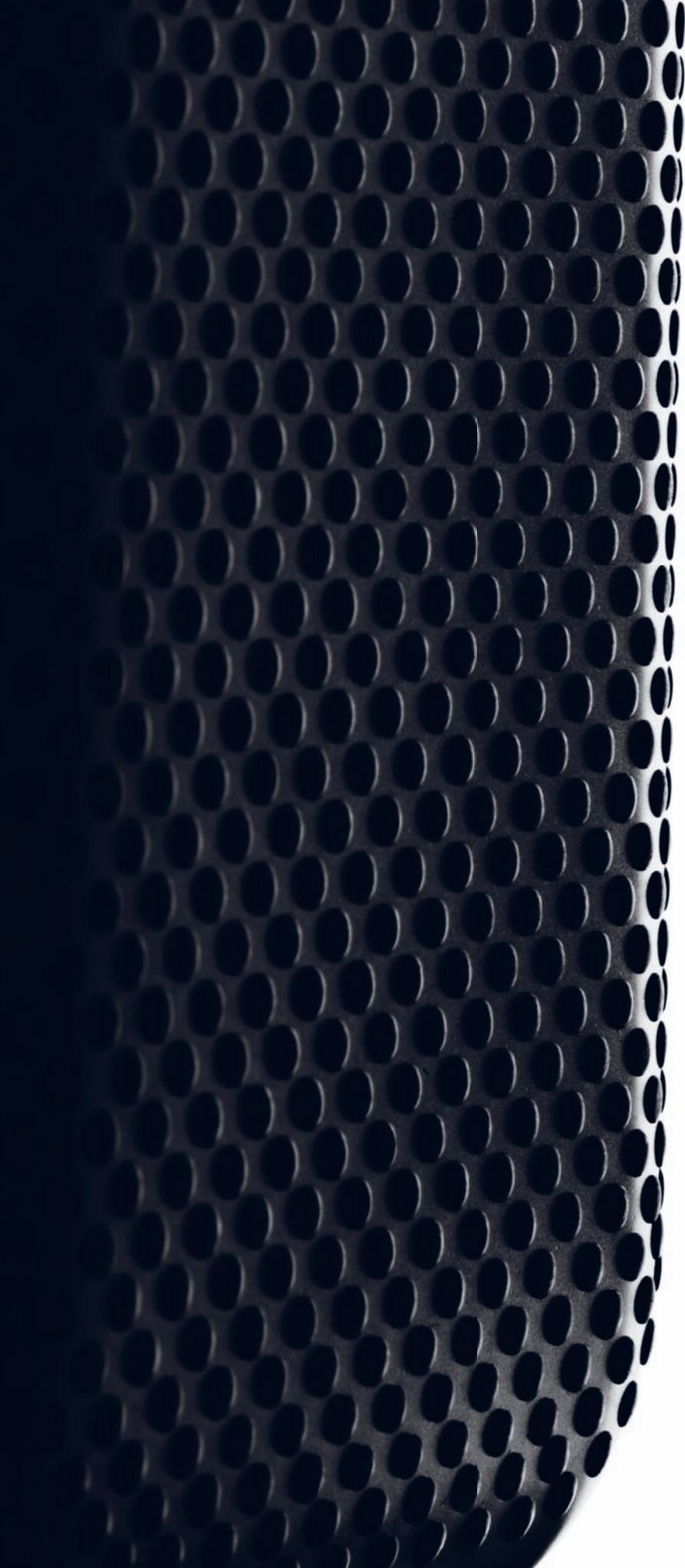
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	Dieter Rams's Legacy	

'Indifference towards people
and the reality in which they
live is actually the one and only
cardinal sin in design.'

Dieter Rams



Preface



During the early stages of working on this book, I travelled to Osaka, Japan, for an exhibition about the work of Dieter Rams in the context of twentieth-century design. On the evening after the opening we were sitting in a bar at the top of a high-rise hotel, looking out through huge plate-glass windows at the nocturnal panorama of the dense industrial Osaka cityscape. It had been a long day of press conferences, opening speeches and seminars followed by a Japanese banquet in Dieter Rams's honour, and now I was in the company of a small group of people including Klaus Klemp, the exhibition's co-curator, Mark Adams and Daniel Nelson from Vitsoë, Dieter Rams and his wife Ingeborg, and Rams's good friend and advisor Britte Siepenkothen, enjoying a nightcap of Japanese whisky.

We were quietly discussing the day's events when Dieter Rams, who had worked hard all day and appeared tired, suddenly said, 'Why on earth do we need another book about me?' At the age of seventy-six, Rams had been famous as a designer since he was twenty-five and despite acknowledging that having people interested in your work and ideas is no bad thing, he hated all the limelight and media attention. 'I want nothing to do with this star designer machine,' he added, suddenly getting rather worked up. We all looked at him. Apart from the fact that, as one of the most respected industrial designers in the world, he was a 'star' whether he liked it or not, the reason why the world needed another book had been made absolutely clear earlier in the day in the huge auditorium packed with young designers and design students hanging on to Rams's every word. A particularly beautiful and precise speech at the symposium by the Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa, who praised Rams's oeuvre of what he aptly called 'correct design', highlighted the level of respect there is for his work among today's top professionals in the field. Klaus Klemp was the first to speak up: 'Dieter,' he said, 'you still have work to do – to communicate and bring your message across to the young people.' There was a chorus of assent from all those present. Mollified, Rams agreed that this was a good reason to do another book. 'But,' he added, looking at me very intently, 'it should be an empty book that says something important.'

In this respect, I have perhaps failed in my task. How do you write an empty book about someone whose working life has covered more than half a century and who has designed well over 500 products, and at the same time transmit all the complex interrelationships and contexts in which these products came into being? It would all be much simpler if one could state that Dieter Rams's work and principles arose from him alone. But Rams would be the first to say that what constitutes his 'work' as an industrial designer is inseparable from the systems and networks through which it was produced. As such, assigning individual authorship to his work is, to some extent, meaningless. He could never have resolved his concepts without the ideas of his predecessors and his contemporaries, in what was an extraordinary era of worldwide growth and change. He could not have produced the things he did without the other designers at Braun, nor without the technicians, the managers, the materials manufacturers, the vision of the

company's original owners and even the marketing department. The same goes for his furniture design with Vitsœ, albeit on a smaller scale. Even beyond this vast network of people required to create his products, the designs themselves were modular and thus system-related. In nearly every instance, there are complex interrelationships within and between his designs: the improvements of individual components, how the products work with one another, how they are related aesthetically and in terms of intent, and how they function in the home. Last but not least, Rams's products – in fact, his whole attitude and his principles – are geared towards the end user: they have to fit into the social systems, the lives and homes of a multitude of different kinds of people, and serve all of them discretely, reliably and comfortably. It would be wrong to remove the work of Dieter Rams from these contexts and yet trying to explain them has involved many words and many pictures. I trust he will forgive me for not writing an empty book, but there was much that needed to be said about his extraordinary life and work in order to transmit the essence of his message: 'less but better'.

Who is Dieter Rams?

BRAUN

A high-contrast, black and white close-up photograph of a Braun shaver head. The shaver head is the primary focus, showing its fine mesh texture. The word "BRAUN" is printed in a bold, sans-serif font on a small rectangular label on the side of the shaver head. The background is a plain, light color, creating a stark contrast with the dark, textured shaver head. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours and texture of the shaver head.

BRAUN



Dieter Rams was a child of World War II. Like so many of his generation, he experienced a childhood affected by totalitarianism, bombs, separation, confusion and hardship. But during his teenage years and early adulthood he was caught up in an era of new hope and optimism, in which many people passionately believed that they had been given a new chance to build a better, more egalitarian and modern world. This new world, full of light and new buildings, with hot and cold running water and labour-saving devices for all, was to be as far removed as possible from the dark days of the recent past.

Rams was born on 20 May 1932 in Wiesbaden, Germany. His parents, Martha and Erich Rams, separated when he was very young. His father was an Elektroingenieur (electrical engineer) who travelled around the country for much of the time, installing hilltop radio stations. An only child, he spent much of his childhood being shunted between parents, grandparents and, at one point, a foster family. Even at an early age Rams showed himself to be somewhat wilful and stubborn. 'I was an absolute outsider,' he recalls, and often got into trouble with authoritarian figures. His early school career was somewhat mixed due to the War and his frequent moves. At one point he says he was sent to a military-style Jungvolk¹ boarding school, but he was demoted and ran away because he refused to fit in, hating all the military manoeuvres and field training in particular – an act of rebellion that could not have been easy under a totalitarian regime in wartime.

Rams's memories of his childhood are not particularly rosy but could easily have been worse. Aged thirteen, he was just young enough to miss being called up by the Volkssturm² to fight at the end of the War. His paternal grandfather, Heinrich Rams in Wiesbaden, had a significant influence on his early years. Heinrich was a master joiner and the young Dieter Rams spent many long hours with him in his workshop, learning about making traditional furniture and polishing it by hand. Through his grandfather, Rams developed a lifelong love of honest, simple handmade wooden furniture. 'My grandfather had no machines. He rejected them. He preferred working alone. Workers did not do the job well enough for him ... Now and again he would make small pieces of furniture, individual items. He took great care in selecting the wood he used at specialist dealers and shaped and planed it by hand. So in a totally natural way something straightforward arose, which did justice to his work ... Needless to say, back then I did not register this consciously, but I adopted it and even today have not given it up. I was always concerned that things should be plain, straightforward. For as long as I can remember that was what I wanted.'³

¹ The Deutsches Jungvolk (German Youth) was the junior branch of the HJ or Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth), for children between ten and fourteen years of age.

² The Volkssturm ('People's Storm Troop') was a militia established by Hitler's decree in late 1944, which mobilized all civilian men born between 1884 and 1928.

³ Dieter Rams, 'Erinnerungen an die ersten Jahre bei Braun' ('Memories of the first years at Braun'), an open letter to Erwin Braun (July 1979), reprinted in *Weniger aber Besser / Less But Better* (Hamburg, 1995), 13. Translation modified by the author

In 1946, Rams's father came back from a brief spell of captivity as a prisoner of war and was soon working for the Americans, helping to set up radio antennae for the media. He must have recognized his young son's creative talent, for he helped to secure a place for him at the re-opened Handwerker-und-Kunstgewerbeschule (Arts and Crafts College) in Wiesbaden. Thus at the tender age of fifteen, Rams went to college to study architecture and interior design together with a mixed bag of war veterans and survivors of one of the most shocking phases in his country's history.

The head of the Wiesbaden college was Professor Hans Soeder. In a complete break from the Nazi-era attitude towards design, in which it was more or less reduced to handicraft, Soeder developed a new school concept for Wiesbaden based on the Bauhaus model, emphasizing the relationship between architecture and design. Students there were required to complete a full training in craftsmanship before going on to do two years of master classes. In 1948, Soeder had the school reclassified as a Werkkunstschule (Applied Arts College). Several other colleges in Germany followed his example and, as the instigator of this pedagogical shift, he can be considered as an important figure in the development of post-war German design education.⁴

Rams completed two semesters at Wiesbaden before doing a three-year practical apprenticeship as a carpenter, which he completed as 'best of year' in the whole state of Hessen in 1951. He then returned to Wiesbaden (by then an applied arts college) for four semesters. There he began to learn about German modernism in art, architecture and design from teachers, such as Gerhard Schrammer, Hugo Kückelhaus and former Bauhaus student Hans Haffner. By the time Rams graduated with a diploma in interior design with honours in July 1953, he was firmly intent on a career in architecture. 'I wanted to stay in architecture,' he remembers. 'I wanted to be a town planner. In fact if I could do it all again, I would have liked to do landscape planning – dealing with the whole system (Gesamtkonzept), not individual elements, such as reclaiming industrial landscapes and uncontrolled urban development. It is all still far too uncoordinated.'⁵ Even as a student he was gripped by the idea of tidying up the world and making it a better place.

Initially Dieter Rams's career remained in the field of architecture. After a brief sojourn at a small local practice, he took a job with Otto Apel (1906–66) in 1953. Apel was the leading representative of the 'International Style' of architecture in Frankfurt at the time. Rams was particularly influenced by the industry-orientated post-war modernism that came back to Germany from the United States through Apel's collaboration with the Chicago-based firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill on the construction of US consulates in Germany at the time. These years were 'decisively important for me,' he recalled in 1979. 'Here I could work just as I had

⁴ Klaus Klemp et al., eds, *Less and More: The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams* (Osaka, 2008), 317

⁵ In conversation with the author (June 2009)

imagined. And here I could expand my knowledge of high-rise building. I must emphasize the influence that the co-operation between Apel and the office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which was just beginning at the time, had on me. I believe that this is what allowed me to cope with what I came up against later with Braun and industrial design.’⁶

The rest of this book examines Dieter Rams’s life and work, his ideas and products, his ethos and influence. He began his career wanting to be an architect but ended up, almost by accident, in the post-war manufacturing industry, and quickly went on to become one of the most important industrial designers of the twentieth century. Indeed, the name Dieter Rams is almost synonymous with that of the German domestic appliance manufacturer Braun. He worked for the company from 1955 until he retired in 1997 and during that time designed or co-designed more than 500 products, from hairdryers and coffee makers to hi-fi systems and televisions, many of which have been hailed as masterpieces of contemporary product design. At the same time, Rams created furniture for a small company called Vitsoe, including a shelving system that is still in production and selling well today, half a century after first hitting the market. British designer Jasper Morrison calls Vitsoe’s 606 Universal Shelving System ^[*] the ‘endgame in shelving’ – as close to perfect design as it is possible to get.

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The pure, rather masculine utility of Dieter Rams’s products is unmistakable and has led to many imitations of his work. His exquisite attention to detail, genius for interface reduction and almost poetic sense of harmony and balance means that few come close, even today, to the level of refinement that he achieved. This applies to many hundreds of products that have served thousands of individual consumers faithfully all over the world for many years. His legacy is a design that is entirely directed towards the comfort of the user, to improving their lives in small but important ways, Dieter Rams is what good design is all about.

⁶ Rams, ‘Erinnerungen’ in *Weniger aber Besser*, 15. Translation modified by the author

