

Dieter Rams

Born 1932. Designer of Braun products.
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1. Introduction



The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wikipedia website at www.wikipedia.org.

Dieter Rams (born 20 May 1932 in Wiesbaden, Hessen) is a German industrial designer and retired academic, closely associated with the consumer products company Braun, the furniture company Vitsoe, and the functionalist school of industrial design. His unobtrusive approach and belief in "Less, but better" design generated a timeless quality in his products and have influenced the design of many products, which also secured Rams worldwide recognition and appreciation.

Dieter Rams began his studies in architecture and interior decoration at Wiesbaden School of Art in 1947, now part of the RheinMain University of Applied Sciences. A year later, in 1948, he took a break from studying to gain practical experience and finish his carpentry apprenticeship. He returned to the Wiesbaden School of Art in 1948 and graduated in architecture with honours in 1953, after which he began working for Frankfurt-based architect Otto Apel. In 1955, he was recruited to Braun as an architect and an interior designer. In 1961, he became the chief design officer at Braun, a position he retained until 1995.

Dieter Rams was strongly influenced by the presence of his grandfather, a carpenter. Rams once explained his design approach in the phrase "Weniger, aber besser" which translates as "Less, but better". Rams and his staff designed many memorable products for Braun including the famous SK4 record player and the high-quality 'D'-series (D45, D46) of 35mm film

slide projectors. The SK4, known as the "Snow White coffin," is considered revolutionary because it transitioned household appliance design away from looking like traditional furniture. He is also known for designing a furniture collection for Vitsoe, at the time known as Vitsoe-Zapf, in the 1960s, including the 606 universal shelving system and 620 chair programme.

By producing electronic gadgets that were remarkable in their austere aesthetic and user friendliness, Rams made Braun a household name in the 1950s. In 1968, Rams designed the cylindrical T2 cigarette lighter for Braun. A member of the company's board had asked him for a design; Rams replied "only if we design our own technology to go inside them." Successive versions of the product went on to use then-current motorcycle-like magnetic ignition, followed by piezoelectric, and finally solar-powered mechanisms. In addition to being a successor to the Bauhaus, Rams eventually became a protégé of the Ulm School of Design in Ulm, Germany.

His designs inspired Apple designer Jonathan Ive, including Apple's iOS 6 calculator, a clear reference to the 1977 Braun ET66 calculator.

Rams introduced the idea of sustainable development, and of obsolescence being a crime in design, in the 1970s. Accordingly, he asked himself the question: "Is my design a good design?" The answer he formed became the basis for his celebrated ten principles. According to him, "good design":

1. **Is innovative** – The possibilities for progression are not, by any means, exhausted. Technological development is always offering new opportunities for original designs. But imaginative design always develops in tandem with improving technology, and can never be an end in itself.
2. **Makes a product useful** – A product is bought to be used. It has to satisfy not only functional, but also psychological and aesthetic criteria. Good design emphasizes the usefulness of a product whilst disregarding anything that could detract from it.
3. **Is aesthetic** – The aesthetic quality of a product is integral to its usefulness because products are used every day and have an effect on people and their well-being. Only well-executed objects can be beautiful.
4. **Makes a product understandable** – It clarifies the product's structure. Better still, it can make the product clearly express its function by making use of the user's intuition. At best, it is self-explanatory.
5. **Is unobtrusive** – Products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should therefore be both neutral and restrained, to leave room for the user's self-expression.

6. Is honest – It does not make a product appear more innovative, powerful or valuable than it really is. It does not attempt to manipulate the consumer with promises that cannot be kept.

7. Is long-lasting – It avoids being fashionable and therefore never appears antiquated. Unlike fashionable design, it lasts many years – even in today's throwaway society.

8. Is thorough down to the last detail – Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance. Care and accuracy in the design process show respect towards the consumer.

9. Is environmentally friendly – Design makes an important contribution to the preservation of the environment. It conserves resources and minimizes physical and visual pollution throughout the lifecycle of the product.

10. Is minimal – Less is more. Simple as possible but not simpler. Good design elevates the essential functions of a product.

2. Everyday Objects

The following chapters were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the School of Life website at www.theschooloflife.com.

Dieter Rams is one of the world's greatest designers of everyday objects. His mind, which might in other eras have been employed making sculptures for altarpieces or precision scales for diamond traders, is devoted to producing carefully-made calculators, shelving, office chairs, TVs, radios, watches, record players, egg-beaters, fruit juicers, video cameras, and electric shavers.



His career has been extraordinarily successful. The company he made famous, Braun, was – when he joined – a medium-sized manufacturer of radios in Germany and grew to become a global titan of consumer goods production. As head of design, Rams's work ended up in hundreds of millions of homes. Apple took up his work with enthusiasm, finding inspiration in his T3 pocket radio for the first iPod.

Why is design important? Partly because poorly designed things slow us down and sadden us – the stapler that doesn't work, the bag of walnuts that doesn't open, the TV remote control that is impossible to figure out. All are symbols of miscommunication and lack of empathy. Bad design is also depressing given the price it exacts on the planet. Modern capitalism can seem to be stuck filling the world with junk, much of which ends up floating around the Pacific Ocean choking sea turtles and albatrosses.



Rams shows us that capitalism need not produce poor-quality products. His life and work are a guide to the values that we might make more central to our lives and our businesses. There are five underlying lessons to be taken from his work, These form the content of the next five chapters.

1. The value of simplicity

Rams wanted to reduce everything back to just a few things that matter most. You can see this in one of his early products, the PC3SV radio.



There are many more things which could be done with a radio: one could add in bass and tenor controls, separate AM and FM dials, an alarm clock, an output cord for larger speakers, and so on. Rams pushed in the opposite direction. He sacrificed things that were valuable, but not top-priority in order to achieve simplicity. He made the on-off switch a part of the volume control, which hadn't been done before, and which people argued against. But the end result is satisfying.

Simplicity is so satisfying because our lives are cluttered, and the experience of having too many options is a constant drag on us. When we see simplicity, we know that we value it. But in many other contexts in our lives we find it difficult, even embarrassing, to be simple. If we get promoted to manager we might find ourselves feeling a bit awkward around still using a biro. Or we might feel the need to beef up a report a little, even though all we really wanted to say could be said in one paragraph.

Our true selves might secretly yearn for something basic, but we might have lost touch with ourselves so much that it feels weird to seek it out. For example, in an expensive restaurant, there is a pressure to order something elaborate, even though deep down we might actually just feel like ordering cheese on toast.

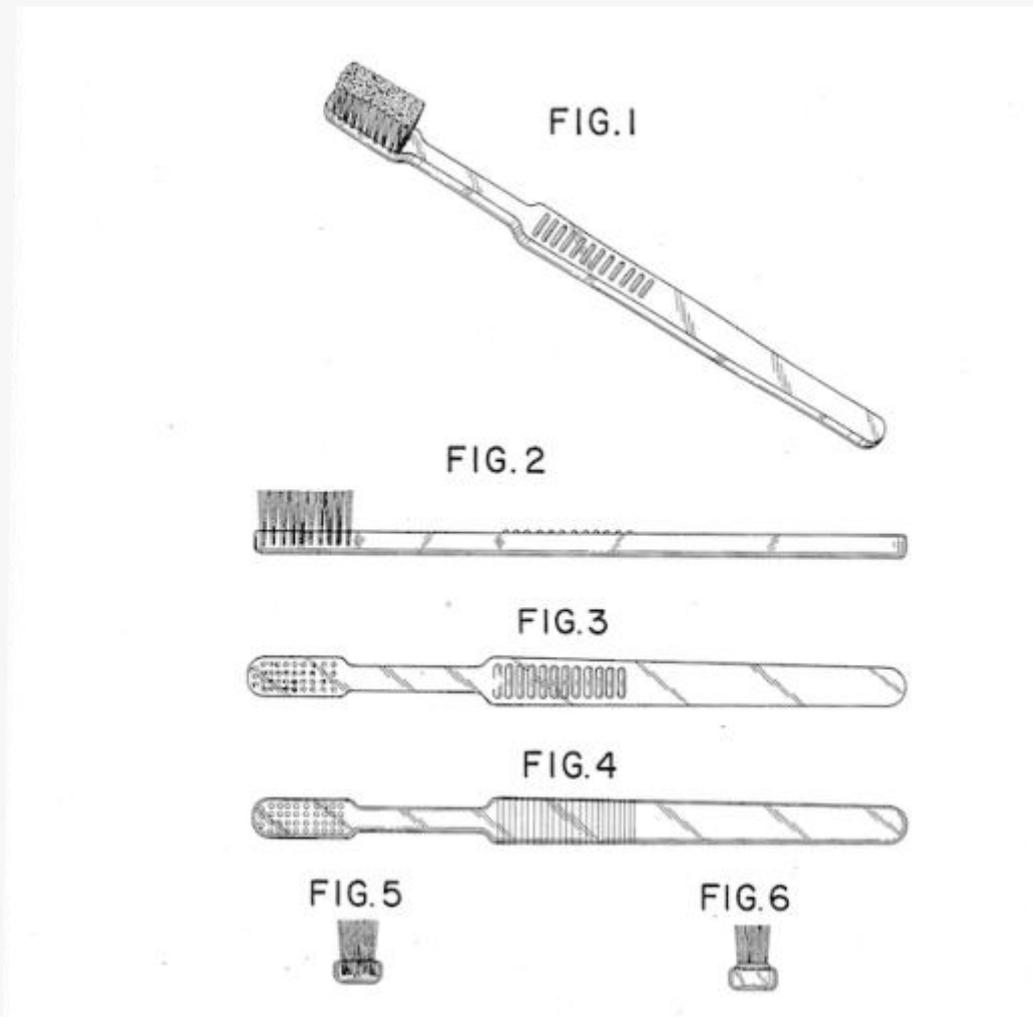


Being simple can make you feel vulnerable. But simplicity is really an achievement – it follows from hard-won clarity about what matters.

3. The value of modesty

When designing a toothbrush, Rams spent weeks thinking about and experimenting with the ratio of the handle to the bristles, the width of the handle, the number of ridges for the thumb to grip onto. But this large amount of work is not obvious in the final product.

This follows from a principle of modesty which Rams lives by, and which goes back to the Roman poet Horace: “the art lies in concealing the art.”



Rams had modesty as a person. Although he originally trained as an architect (and a carpenter), he wanted to make products that improved people’s lives, rather than design spectacular one-off buildings to promote his own glory. And the products he designed are also imbued with modesty: they don’t try to attract your attention for no reason. They are happy to sit in the background and do the work.





He spent 18 weeks agonising over the placement of the buttons.



The shelves stay in the background, modestly helping to maintain some order in the life of their owner.

Modesty is the opposite of being showy. It is part of a broader ideal of service – which is a central ideal of good capitalism. One is not there to attract attention; one is there to help the customer to live a better life – like

a discrete waiter. There can be few more quietly helpful tools out there than the 606 Universal Shelving System which Rams designed for the company Vitsoe, and which has been in continuous production since 1960.

True modesty comes from confidence. Modesty is a lack of anxiety about being ignored.

4. Empathy with the customer

One of Rams's principles is that an object should be easy to live with, and easy to encounter for the first time. Rams was the first product designer to get rid of instruction manuals. The object should be obvious from the beginning.



The ability to create a welcoming experience for another person is a great skill. Not many people can do it well, however, because it derives from an unusual source. That is, Rams's user-experience is guided by remembering what it is like to be distressed. He is in touch with what it is like to be lost – to feel abandoned, frustrated. Although his work looks serene, it comes from knowing how easily we get angry and muddled and ashamedly confused by instructions which any normal adult should be able to understand.

We are more like simpletons than we pretend to be. We actually want things to be easy and user-friendly. But we don't readily tell other people that we are a bit stupid – although everyone is in many ways. Which is why it is the job of the designer (or the hotelier, or the customer feedback agent) to remember with tenderness the fact that we are all childlike and a little bit lost. Rams is like a parent: he is making the world friendlier for us.

Rams is not making things for actual 6-year-olds. Rather, he mixes insights about our childlike nature with a context of elegance and dignity. For example, this calculator with colour buttons to show you where the main functions are.



Remembering that everyone is more easily confused than they pretend to be should be a basis for the reform of architecture, hotels, street design, websites, car manufacturing, phone companies, and writing books.

5. Being classic

Rams was classic, which means he tapped into things that don't change. This means we don't have to buy new things all the time. A classic book, for instance, is La Rochefoucauld's Maxims. It is a classic because the essential lessons in it are still useful for us to hear, many hundreds of years after it was written.

Overall, the global economy needs to be more classic. The fashion industry, to take what is currently the least classic business, could play more to our need to have items of clothing that are versatile and dignified in many contexts and less to our drive to set ourselves apart.

We have a Romantic ideology, which tends to emphasise what is new. Rams, in contrast, is interested in what is permanent. His goal was to create a product that wouldn't go out of date, so we would never have to throw it away.



6. Art and product design

If you cared about bringing more attention and care to the little things of everyday life in 1650, you might have gone into painting. The Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer was an advocate for paying more attention to the humble objects in daily life. In *The Little Street* (valued at £100 million) he portrays a life governed by simplicity and modesty.





Vermeer loved the precision of the scales. Rams loved this too, but his work reached many more people.

Vermeer notices the details: the lived-in neatness and order, the sturdy seats outside, the basic broom. Rams values the same things that Vermeer does, but he has turned these values into products we can use in our own lives.



There is no dividing line between art and product design. Paintings were originally meant to be part of daily life, to hang in your kitchen or the hallway, so they would seep into your life. Nowadays, we might only see Vermeer's work once or twice every few years. Whereas Rams's work we can buy and live with every day.

Rams raises product design to new heights. The true artist of our age designs phones and alarm clocks, rather than pieces of canvas. All the intensity, focus, high-standards, and the pursuit of integrity that is found in art can be brought into the realm of everyday design. And this is where it stands more chance of affecting people, as they check the time, or press the snooze button on their alarm.

Rams shows us what good business could be: elegant, long-lasting, dignified. All capitalism should be like this. Ideally, entrepreneurs would study his work and devote themselves to the values of simplicity and modesty at the heart of his worldview. Rams's mindset is currently unique, but it should become mainstream and widespread.



7. Interview

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Dezeen website at www.dezeen.com.

In a rare interview, German designer Dieter Rams has called for a return to well-made, long-lasting products, even if it comes at the expense of design innovation. In the interview, published in the latest issue of Kinfolk, Rams said that restrained aesthetics and optimised functionality are key to creating products that will endure, even if these qualities "act as a constraint upon innovation".

"I have always tended to steer well clear from this discussion about beauty and argued instead for a design that is as reduced, clear and user-oriented as possible, and simply more bearable for a longer period of time," he said.

"The only plausible way forward is the less-but-better way: back to purity, back to simplicity," he added. "Simplicity is the key to excellence!"

Rams, 84, was head of design at Braun from 1961 to 1995, where he established himself as one of the most important industrial designers of the 20th century. His iconic designs ranged from watches and calculators, to audio equipment and furniture.

He is seen by many as the biggest influence on the pared-back aesthetic of Apple's bestselling products.

His latest comments reiterate the values he promoted in his Ten Principles for Good Design, which were first published in the late 1970s, and argued that the long-term usefulness of an object is intrinsically linked to how it looks.

"We really should consider very carefully whether we constantly need new things," he said. "I have been arguing for a long time for less, but better things."

Rams has also compared his achievements at Braun with the work of fellow German designer Peter Behrens – mentor to architects including Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier – in showing "the value of collaboration between top management and design".

"When I arrived at Braun in 1955, their products were still conceived by engineers and detail engineers and censored by salespeople," he said.

"In the early years, we began working on a more modest product language that derived from function but was stripped of the formal mendacity that

was commonplace at the time. This was thanks to the appreciation and support given to design by the top management – in particular, Erwin Braun himself."

Read on for the full interview with Rams, published in Issue 23 of Kinfolk:

Alex Anderson: You were an early pioneer of sustainability in its broadest sense, and a critic of wastefulness, visual pollution and triviality in design. Now that environmental sustainability has been in the public consciousness for a while, these broader issues are beginning to come around again. Would you agree with Lance Hosey, an architect and author on aesthetics and sustainability, who declared, "If it's not beautiful, it's not sustainable. Aesthetic attraction... is an environmental imperative"?

Dieter Rams: Beauty, not just appearance, that is both exemplary and instructive, certainly intensifies and prolongs the relationship with the user and therefore also makes sense ecologically.

In my 10 principles of good design, I have written that the aesthetic quality of a product is an integral aspect of its usefulness, for the appliances that we use daily have an impact on our personal environment and influence our sense of well-being. But a thing can only be beautiful if it is also well made. Of course, there are general criteria of beauty such as harmony, contrast or proportions, but individual aesthetic sensibilities can vary a lot and can also depend upon knowledge, education and awareness.

This is why I have always tended to steer well clear from this discussion about beauty and argued instead for a design that is as reduced, clear and user-oriented as possible, and simply more bearable for a longer period of time. But "simple" is especially hard to achieve; even Leonardo da Vinci knew that. Simple is especially hard to achieve; even Leonardo da Vinci knew that.

Alex Anderson: Does a conflict between practical utility and abstract beauty still encourage innovation in product design, or are there other more assertive mechanisms at play?

Dieter Rams: Calm, sober and intellectual surprises should always be possible with design. Practical value and beauty are not mutually exclusive, even today, and they are unlikely to be so in the future either.

For me, a restrained aesthetic and function that is as optimised as possible have always been important. These qualities lead to long utilisation cycles: The objects do not become visually unbearable after a short time because they have not pushed themselves into the foreground. Certainly, these qualities also act as a constraint upon innovation.

We really should consider very carefully whether we constantly need new things. I have been arguing for a long time for less, but better things.

Alex Anderson: Early on, artists, critics and manufacturers perceived two key benefits of industrial design: it made products both more desirable and more profitable, and it contributed to a general improvement of public taste.

You seem to perceive a third benefit of industrial design, which is that it reduces wasteful consumption by producing objects that people will like and hold on to, which in turn benefits the environment. Do you think the consumer product industries feel a conflict between those earlier goals and this newer one?

Dieter Rams: I completely concur with [German architectural and art critic] Adolf Behne that we need "comfort" instead of "luxury." He believed that really good design should not be fuel for consumption that brings us nothing but irreparable resource problems and environmental destruction.

There has been much and persistent talk about sustainable growth; it's time to do something about it! The only plausible way forward is the less-but-better way: back to purity, back to simplicity. Simplicity is the key to excellence! Practical value and beauty are not mutually exclusive, even today

Alex Anderson: A number of authors have noted that your work was influenced by the Bauhaus. It seems more productive to think of your work as fulfilling the promise of Peter Behrens, widely considered the world's first industrial designer and mentor to Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and many of their contemporaries.

Very early in his career, Behrens declared that there is "a liberating quality" to the union of practical utility and abstract beauty because these were so often in opposition to each other in his era. Part of his success later, it seems, is that he capitalised on overcoming this opposition – with appealing and often surprising results. During your career at Braun, did you sense any continuity with the pioneering efforts of Behrens in his role of creative consultant at German industrial design company AEG?

Dieter Rams: During the relatively short period of his position as artistic consultant to AEG, between 1907 and 1914, Peter Behrens did indeed – as one of the first industrial designers ever – have the opportunity to shape many areas of that company. What he succeeded with, above all, was overcoming historicism and also to a certain extent Jugendstil, which was so prevalent at the time. For me, his enduring achievement was that he

showed clearly the value of collaboration between top management and design.

When I arrived at Braun in 1955, their products were still conceived by engineers and detail engineers and censored by salespeople. In the early years, we began working on a more modest product language that derived from function but was stripped of the formal mendacity that was commonplace at the time. This was thanks to the appreciation and support given to design by the top management – in particular, Erwin Braun himself. In this respect, there were clear parallel design goals to those of AEG.

I was most certainly aware of the Bauhaus culture during my studies at the College of Applied Arts in Wiesbaden. The founding director, Professor Hans Soeder, had based the school's curriculum on Bauhaus principles. Particular role models were Mies and Gropius, who had also both worked as assistants in Peter Behrens' office.

Alex Anderson: Are there products that you use regularly and that you particularly enjoy, or that you think exemplify the principles of design you developed and refined over the years?

Dieter Rams: My wife and I live in our house furnished predominantly, but not entirely, with products from Braun and Vitsoe. For example, the Vitsoe 606 Universal Shelving system: I designed it 56 years ago and still feel comfortable with it. When you live with products, you get to learn their faults so you can improve them and thus keep the designs alive for longer!
