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## Modernist mastermind

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# MODERNIST MASTERMIND

Hong Kongers will get a rare insight into the life and works of trailblazing designer **GEORGE NELSON** when an exhibition of his work arrives in March. **ALEX PRICE** looks at what all the fuss is about.



George Nelson is without doubt one of the towering figures of post-war design. From the 1940s until the 70s, he helped shape the way Americans led their lives, having a profound influence on furniture, clocks, buildings – even the modern pedestrian shopping mall.

Hong Kong is in the lucky position of hosting an exhibition showcasing Nelson's work in March 2014, offering us the chance to see a range of his designs and insights, from iconic spindly-legged furniture and colourful ball-clocks to his writings and company brochures.

Jochen Eisenbrand, chief curator of the exhibition's home at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, explains why Nelson and the collection are so important.

"What really sets George Nelson apart from his contemporaries and secures his unique position and importance is the fact that, in addition to his own design work, he wrote about design and architecture very intelligently and reflected upon the role of design in society."

Before becoming a designer Nelson was a journalist in the 1940s for design magazines, introducing the European avant-garde to American readers, and he used this journalism skill to promote the influential creative values he developed.

"There is no other designer who had so much to say about design in such a thoughtful, well written and critical manner," says Eisenbrand. "Nelson was also a design manager, who, particularly in the case of [furniture company] Herman Miller, brought other designers into the game, even though that might have meant more competition for him, because he put the benefit of the company before his own ego. And lastly, Nelson is exceptional, because he was an author designer as well as an industrial designer.

While his signature pieces such as furniture and lamps were always marketed under his own name, some



TOP: GEORGE NELSON, LATE 1940'S  
ABOVE: MARSHMALLOW SOFA, 1956



Vitra Design Museum

of his other designs just served their purpose without George Nelson even being mentioned in marketing, such as the packaging designs for the Abbott company created in the late 1950s. Usually designers do not work in both signature design and anonymous design, but Nelson did both."

Nelson was a pioneer of modernism and driver of the holistic, ergonomic school of design that places human needs and behaviour at its centre. He believed designers should concern themselves with people's real needs, both functionally and aesthetically, and so should have a wide understanding of the world around them, rather than be too specialised. Nelson famously

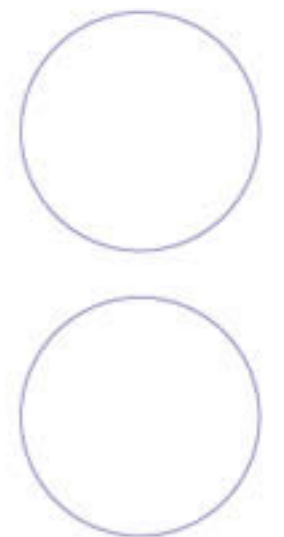
noted that, "total design is nothing more or less than a process of relating everything to everything".

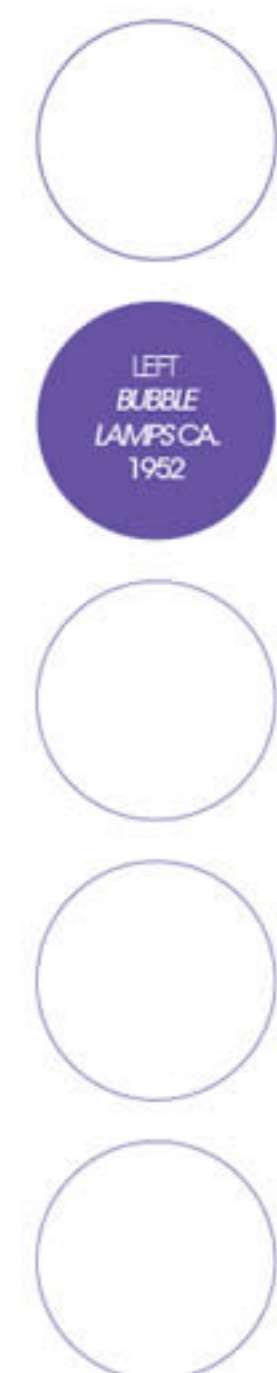
Nelson's wide-ranging concept meant that his design related to the whole cultural landscape, the entire increasingly urbanised "man-made environment". In order to achieve this, he believed designers should be active and critical in their perception of the everyday environment surrounding them; to consider the human and social effect of their work and what they wanted to achieve.

Along with this grand theme, Nelson's own designs were sometimes derived from what he called creative "zaps" – moments when a dazzling insight leaps out of the brain from nowhere. Examples of these "zaps" can be seen in his Storgewall designs (which made use of the "lost" space between internal walls) and his plans for outdoor pedestrian shopping malls (the idea for which came when looking at aerial photos of run-down city regions).

So, what intellectual zaps can we expect to get from the exhibition coming to Hong Kong?

ABOVE: A SHOT FROM THE EXHIBITION GEORGE NELSON AT THE VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM IN 2008/09





«TOTAL DESIGN IS NOTHING MORE OR LESS THAN A PROCESS OF RELATING EVERYTHING TO EVERYTHING.»

GEORGE NELSON

ABOVE A SHOT FROM THE EXHIBITION GEORGE NELSON AT THE VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM IN 2008-09

“The exhibition presents all the Nelson classics such as his Coconut Chair, the Marshmallow Sofa, the Pretzel Chair, the Bubble Lamps and a variety of his wall clocks,” says Eisenbrand. “But it also widens the picture by including lesser known pieces such as rare wall clocks, a record player or tableware. When researching for the exhibition the quality of the graphic design that originates from the Nelson office was a great surprise to me, so we are of course also showing examples of brochures and other printed matter he created. Lastly, we are presenting some wonderful films created by Nelson or documenting his work.”

An obvious question springs to mind – a question it is tempting to ask any curator about any large collection: how did you get the pieces?

“Vitra has been manufacturing Nelson pieces for many years, first as a licensee of Herman Miller, then as a direct licensee of the designer. The Vitra Design Museum holds a large collection of Nelson pieces and was entrusted with the Nelson estate by Nelson’s widow Jacqueline Nelson in the 1990s because Rolf Fehlbaum, as head of the board of Vitra, was a close friend of George and Jacqueline.”

Queenie Lau, curator at HKDI, explains how the city came to host the exhibition:

“We are very grateful to get this exhibition, the Asian tour of which is sponsored by Herman Miller. Last year we met some people from the Vitra Design Museum at the Asian

Museum Conference and were able to make good contacts with them.

“Since the exhibition space at different venues varies, HKDI is currently working with the technical team of Vitra Design Museum to adapt the exhibition layout to fit the 600 square metres HKDI Gallery.”

Eisenbrand continues the story. “During the whole preparation of the exhibition we had already been in close exchange with Herman Miller because the story of George Nelson is of course, to a degree, also the story of Herman Miller and because the company archive provided much valuable information,” he says. “Herman Miller also kindly supported the American tour of the exhibition and brought us in touch with HKDI that then hosted the annual Asian Museum Conference that we initiated. Then one thing just led to

another and we are very happy that our exhibition will be presented in Hong Kong.”

For Nelson, reflecting and writing about design and the societal role of the designer often preceded or accompanied the actual design task.

And while many of his designs were sleek and unfussy – in the true modernist style – he was nonetheless adamant about the rationale. Function, in terms of serving the user(s) as a whole, was foremost. This philosophy led to his unambiguous dissatisfaction with one of his company’s most profitable and enduring products, the Action Office II, a modular form of desk and forerunner of the ubiquitous workstation seen in any modern open-plan office.

“One does not have to be an especially perceptive critic to realise that Action Office II is definitely

not a system which produces an environment gratifying for people in general. But it is admirable for planners looking for ways of cramming in a maximum number of bodies, for ‘employees’ (as against individuals), for ‘personnel’, corporate zombies, the walking dead, the silent majority. A large market.”

Nelson’s comments were bold in their derision and insight; there was indeed a larger market. By 2005 sales for Action Office II had reached US\$5 billion.

An exhibition of work by someone who gave the world so much elegant design, and who was so scathing of something that generated his company so much cash? That has to be worth a look. ☺



Vitra Design Museum