



Foreword to Braun+Design Collection

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Braun Design has received much attention in recent years - monographs, a world touring museum exhibition, and numerous articles. At the time of writing, a second documentary is in preparation. Given all the information available, it is perhaps not clear why any more is needed, particularly in the form of an electronic re-publication of a book some twenty years out of print, heavy on dates and product codes, and light on attractive colour images. Yet, there is something distinctive and remarkable about this unassuming work. Indeed, the timeliness of this re-publication of Braun+Design Collection has much to do with the fact that its approach to Braun Design diverges so sharply from the norm.

The dust jacket of Braun+Design Collection shows a cropped view of a regularly structured landscape. This is a strange world consisting entirely of electrical products, frontally arranged and ranked more or less regularly in neat rows. The image derives from a slim A4 staple bound booklet produced in 1965 by Braun under the title 'The Image of a Company'. A short text within described the approach of Braun Design as prioritising clarity, function and a direct relationship between object and user. From the consistent and universal application of these principles there arose what this booklet called a 'Braun-order'. It read:

Every detail, be it only a screw head, is related to the other components. The sum of the parts relates to the whole. Carried further, the majority of the individual products fit into complete product systems, which are in turn related to each other.

In this way the 1960s Braun programme was constructed as a stratified universe of rigorously coordinated parts: of components within devices, of devices belonging to systems, and of relations between systems. The result was an extensive product range that, whilst formally and functionally diverse, nevertheless remained entirely coherent. The programme gave concrete expression to the ethos of the Braun Company, projecting a highly rational corporate identity. But the programme also functioned at a level apart from that of the market. For it offered a visual metaphor of a future form of social life. As a whole, the harmonious relation of parts within a rationally devised totality presented a utopian scene made out of toasters, kettles and audio equipment, one in which the rational use of technology had brought about the resolution of antagonism and division. In this regard, the programme's characteristics of unity, harmony and rational necessity may be understood as specifying a form of corporate social commitment.

The idea of such a programme - stringent in its approach, emphatically industrial in character, and utopian in its social orientation - had been transmitted to the Braun Company a decade earlier from a newly opened school of industrial design, the HfG Ulm. Erwin and Artur Braun had approached the school seeking the total transformation of their company's visual identity in accordance with the young businessmen's aspiration for it as a social good. The brief fitted the HfG's own project very well, and over the next five years Ulm lecturers Otl Aicher and Hans Gugelot, together with their students, provided the conceptual blueprint for a rigorous programme encompassing every aspect of the company from exhibition stands, publicity and printed matter, to product form itself.

During that early period of Braun Design, it must be said, an overarching order was more notional than actual. Designers were geographically dispersed, disconnected and casually employed. The result was a disorderly set of internally coherent but ultimately disjointed lines, each feeling its way forwards without determinate plan or reference to the others. In the area of audio equipment this changed dramatically following the submission to the Company of a study on a rationalised system of integrated audio modules undertaken by HfG student Herbert Lindinger, prepared under the supervision of Hans Gugelot. In concept and form, the document set out a complete system of interrelated elements. The practical conditions of its implementation required that the Company cut its ties with the HfG, dispense with the use of freelancers and bring all design work in-house. Following the formation of the Braun Design Department and, under the supervision of Dr Fritz Eichler, head of overall design, Dieter Rams, head of product design, and Reinhold Weiss, Rams' deputy and head of the household category, there followed a truly extraordinary period in the history of twentieth century industrial design, during which Lindinger's plan was implemented without reserve (or economic caution) in the category of audio equipment, and its underlying principle of programmatic unity extended to encompass all Braun product categories. The remarkable achievement of Eichler, Rams and Weiss lay first in establishing and then maintaining the unity of this program throughout its subsequent development and extension.

Although the idea of such a programme is fundamental to Braun Design, its significance now tends to be overlooked. Emphasis is invariably placed instead on the contribution of individuals, and on that of Dieter Rams in particular. To say this is not to diminish the achievement of Rams as a designer and manager, but only to point out that to represent Braun Design through such personal and individualistic categories as 'vision', 'genius', etc. is really to miss the point. Equally problematic is the prioritisation of particular designs. The notion of the iconic object, as much as that of the singular individual, in its isolation and separateness, runs counter to the ethos of Braun Design, which seeks above all to establish relations between objects.

In its modest way this book, Braun+Design Collection, resists the prevailing tendency to promote certain parts over the whole. Its aim, rather, is to present the whole. Indeed, the uncompromising clarity, rigour and austere singleness of purpose with which the book renders the programmatic aspect of Braun Design explicit is initially somewhat startling. The book, in its structure, is governed by the product divisions of the Braun programme itself. Chapter titles correspond to product categories, and are further divided into their respective segments. At the level of content, each segment receives comprehensive description. A table specifies the product codes, colours, year of issue and designer of each design produced within the period 1955-1995. These condensed histories are supported by a visual chronology of product development within each segment. At the level of form, the presentation is highly restrained. Numerous small black and white photographic images, often recording seemingly slight differences between designs, are distributed across pages in a tight grid. Larger images are used sparingly and only to indicate the significance of pivotal designs.



This method of combining informational and visual descriptions provides a record of each segment's formal and technical development over a forty-year period, revealing continuities and transitions, discontinuities and, indeed, truncations that, taken together, are constitutive of a complete history of Braun Design. Amongst representations of Braun Design, in exhibition, print and film, Braun+Design Collection is unique for its grasp and articulation of its object as a whole. This book, in other words, understands and articulates the essential truth of Braun Design.

What are the conditions of the apprehension of Braun Design in this form? It is significant that the authors of this encyclopaedic undertaking, Jo Klatt and Günter Staeffler, are not primarily historians of Braun Design but collectors of it. There is, after all, a certain sympathy between the collector's mode of attention, with its implicit orientation towards the whole, and the programmatic character of Braun Design itself. That congruity seems to account for the singular attunement of this book to its object, and perhaps explains the drive that brought it into existence.

Collection is as much concerned with the development of understanding as it is with acquisition. Both were a source of frustration to collectors when Braun Design first appeared as an object of interest in the early 1980s. Before the Internet and the renewed regard for Braun Design of the last decade there was sparse information on either its form or history, whilst simply locating objects for acquisition presented all kinds of practical difficulties. In Germany, where Braun Design has from its beginning attracted intense interest, collectors sought solutions to these problems. The first Braun Sammler Börse, or Braun collector's fair, was held in Hannover in 1982 with the purpose of facilitating exchanges of information and objects between otherwise isolated collectors. Some forty-six such meetings have since been held. Around these fairs other institutions developed, most notably a magazine devoted to the collection of Braun Design produced under the title Design+Design (formerly Braun+Design). The magazine was founded in 1984 by its editor Klaus Rudolph, a role assumed by Jo Klatt, in 1986. Originally photocopied and staple bound in an edition of only 500, the magazine remained in print for 96 issues until 2011, with circulation swelling to 3,000. The magazine's ostensive purpose was to provide information, carrying thoroughly researched articles on all aspects of Braun Design alongside more practical advice

for collectors. However, its ultimate function, to which the small add listings made an essential contribution, was as the hub of an informal social network.

Although collection is generally directed towards completion, this idea regulates the activity as an ideal that is rarely, if ever, achieved. In fact, for the individual, collection has more to do with a feeling of longing arising from a permanent state of incompleteness. This constant dissatisfaction makes collectors an inherently listless bunch – always searching for things they don't have and shuffling around the things they do. But if the endless task of the individual collector resists closure, it finds resolution in the general culture of Braun Design appreciation that has developed in Germany, and continues to exist today, as community. Given form by its institutions and bound by the common understanding (and compulsion) of its members, the coherence of that community begins to resemble its object. It is, if you like, a miniature of the universal community towards which the functionalist project had once been directed. Viewed like this, Braun collection, in its spirit, is not accidental to the history of Braun Design but directly extensive with it. This community, finally, provides the context through which this wonderful book is to be grasped in its full significance. For in presenting a relation between things it seeks to establish relations between people. That, too was the goal of Braun Design. In these difficult and forgetful times it is useful to have a book such as Braun+Design Collection to remind us of it.

Braun+Design Collection is available to purchase in German and English translation from Versions priced £9.99

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