The Idea of
a Programm

Peter Kapos 2016

Origin and Ideal of Braun Design

In 1954 the directors of the Braun Company, Erwin and Artur Braun, studied a newly published consumer survey conducted by the Alsenbach Institute. The report indicated a growing preference for 'a modern living style', particularly in the area of domestic furnishing. This, the brothers believed, held logical consequences for the appearance of their radio sets. In a company memorandum they wrote:

> As the radio is a piece of furniture, it has to undergo the development of a piece of furniture (...) The direction is: modern, clear, plain form, attractive material, light colours, reasonable construction, high technical value.

In the same year the Braun Company concluded an agreement with the Ronson Corporation for the licensing and distribution of Braun shavers in America under the Ronson brand. The deal was the largest international consumer goods transaction involving a German company since the end of the war. It provided the resources necessary for the radio's 'development'; the HfG Ulm, a newly established school of industrial design, was immediately appointed to arrange it. One year later, the results were presented at the 1955 Düsseldorf Electronic Exhibition, the first extraordinary appearance of Braun Design.

Despite what they had been called upon to do, the designers associated with the HfG were not primarily interested in issues of style. Their more pragmatic concern lay in an investigation of industrial design's capacity to shape the social world. Rationally disposed objects of daily use, they hypothesized, could serve as models for a more rational social form and in that way channel the maelstrom of productive forces towards a positive (human) result. For this reason they put great store in industrial technology, rationality, and the coherence between part and whole, both at the level of individual objects and their interrelation. These concerns, which may be summarized under the heading 'systems design', entered Braun Design at its inception.

Led by lecturers Hans Gugelot and Otl Aicher, an Ulm working group established comprehensive standards for the Braun Company. From the design of packaging, guarantee slips and instructions for use, catalogues, prospectuses, exhibition stands and letterhead, to every aspect of the products themselves, their form and construction, down to the labeling of operational controls, setting out of dials and positioning of fixings, each part of the Braun program was to relate to every other as elements of a fully integrated and, above all, rational whole. Yet a certain disparity emerged between this ideal and its actuality. Largely as the result of terms of employment, the earliest manifestations of the program tended towards disunity. Between 1955 and 1960, design of the new audio products was largely undertaken by freelancers, Hans Gugelot, Herbert Hirche and Wilhelm Wagnefeld. Working closely with the company but independently of one another, the freelancers produced in general sympathy according to their own concerns. The result was a series of parallel lines, each with a distinct character. Gugelot's enclosures, for example, were systematically modular, worked out on a cellular principle using standardized dimensions. Despite the rigorous coherence of his designs in their relation to each other, the resolutely orthogonal white maple building blocks sat uncomfortably with the fluid lines of Wagenfeld's Combi, and clashed with Hirche's housings in teak on black metal legs. As

a whole, the program lacked unity.concerns. The result was a series of parallel lines, each with a distinct character. Gugelot's enclosures, for example, were systematically modular, worked out on a cellular principle using standardized dimensions. Despite the rigorous coherence of his designs in their relation to each other, the resolutely orthogonal white maple building blocks sat uncomfortably with the fluid lines of Wagenfeld's Combi, and clashed with Hirche's housings in teak on black metal legs. As a whole, the program lacked unity.

The Device as a System

The Braun SK phonosuper series exemplifies the early appearance of Ulm systems design within the Braun program. Unusually, the design arose from collaboration between Ulm and the small Braun team. As the story goes, there was some fraught shuttling between Frankfurt and Ulm before a fully satisfactory result came into view. Gugelot had specified a metal dustcover, but the idea was rejected on acoustic grounds and for the aesthetic reason that the thing had begun to look like a bread bin. Dieter Rams, then twenty-four and in his first year at Braun, is said to have proposed an acrylic hood. Gugelot regarded it as self-consciously novel and showy. Nevertheless, the solution was accepted, and has gone on to become a generic characteristic of turntable design.

However, it was Gugelot's housing for the SK 4 that broke decisively with established assumptions about the appearance of audio equipment. Until then, radiograms concealed their technical origin beneath folds of varnished wood and panels of fabric interwoven with gold, betraying a deep ambivalence about industrial technology. The SK phonosuper exulted its productive possibilities. Accordingly, the device's constructive principle aimed at a complete disclosure of its industrial origin. The corpus was formed from one piece of sheet steel, bent four times on a tight radius along a single axis to preserve its flatness. Grills of pierced slot openings exposed the sheet's gauge. Users, for their part, were addressed not as fearful fantasists but as operators whose needs in relation to the object stemmed from their practical engagement with it. Ornamentation was dispensed with; controls were rationally set out in an immediately comprehensible operational hierarchy.

It is important to add that the arrangement of controls and other elements was not only self-clarifying but also highly abstract, as when an unexpected void divides vertically aligned knobs from a Braun logotype suspended above. Every element of the design, down to the fixing, articulated as a unit within a functional system and a compositional element balanced against others in the formation of a harmonious unity. This double operation of constructional self-evidence crossed with a reductive and highly controlled formalism produces a particular experience of the object. It is an aesthetic experience, one in which the object's literalist aspect is modulated by a feeling of the object's rightness in its formal arrangement. The object appears to be the result of a series of finely weighted judgments, and an inevitable consequence – a self-ordering of elements according to an inner rule. The peculiar and contradictory relation between

conscious action in the rational control of nature (technology) and the seemingly inevitable self-formation of an integrated whole carries a profound utopian implication. Through its formal and abstract aspect the design acquires a figural significance as a proposal for the reorganization of social life.
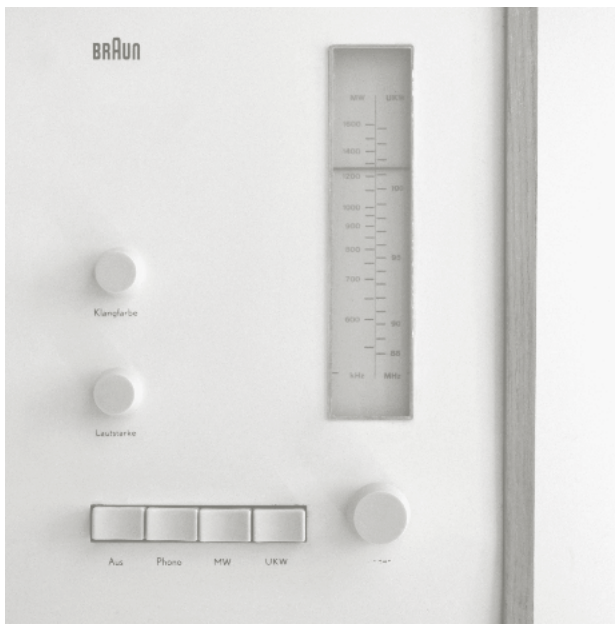
A System of Devices

Dissatisfied with the collective disunity of their personally authored audio lines, the Braun Company commissioned an Ulm research unit headed by Hans Gugelot, Development Group II, to produce a comprehensive product analysis, one that would provide the conceptual blueprint for a fully unified program. Their work focused on operational metrics, resulting in a complete system of standardized units. Herbert Lindinger, then a student, proposed a system of wall-mountable audio elements consisting in a tuner, amplifier and turntable. 'A manufacture of standardized units of sets for acoustic and visual storage-information transfer in living quarters', he called it. Although the idea sounded impressive, it exceeded existing technological limits and the design was not be realised. In 1959 the working group submitted its findings to the client in the form of a plan. In the following year the Braun Company established an internal design department with the purpose of implementing it; thereafter, substantial ties with Ulm were cut. The HfG had developed the conceptual preconditions for the expansive Braun audio program of the 1960s, but the foundation of the design department, and with it the possibility of terminating the ad hoc personal product lines, presented the necessary practical conditions of the Braun program's actualization as a coherent unity.

The freelancers had been a loosely affiliated group, shifting prototype housings for existing technology around Northern Germany in the boots of their cars. The in-house design department now permitted a collaborative work practice between industrial designers and electrical engineers in the sustained development of new products. Around the same time, the move from valve to transistor components made possible the production of significantly smaller enclosures. So, from 1960 a combination of factors - a centrally

organised design process, new reproductive technology and
a definite plan for an integrated program - led to the emergence
of a new form type for Braun audio devices: a shallow rectangular
steel housing, painted light grey, with an aluminium faced control
panel. Rectangularity was stressed to the point of severity, relieved
in a few cases only with the addition of a 'soft' clear acrylic hood.
Initially, the new audio range was still somewhat divided between
flexible modular systems of small lightweight units and substantial
unitary systems. The two tendencies became increasingly fused
in a single type as the emphasis shifted towards a universal high
quality system of substantial functionally discrete modular elements.

By 1962 technology had caught up with Lindinger's proposal, and
Dieter Rams was able to produce the astonishing wall-mounted audio
system TS 45/ TG 60/ L 450, a horizontally fixed ribbon of unrepentant
technology. Although emphatic, the design's modular aspect rendered
its formal statement somewhat contingent. Its units might be placed
like this. But they might also be placed quite differently – on shelves,
on their backs looking up, on specially produced 'kangaroo' stands
or, indeed, other units might be used. The design, in other words,
was not so much this combination of elements as the more general
possibility of systematically combining elements in various relations
and positions. In the best Braun products of the '50s, such as the
SK 4, the systematic aspect of the design tended to be restricted to
the arrangement of internal formal factors. During the '60s the concept
of a system underwent significant development. It was raised from
the level of bounded functional and compositional relations to that
of the totality of functional and aesthetic relations between objects
within the (expanding) range.

The element of formal abstraction remained, but it was limited
to the setting out of operational controls, dials and labels and the
severely reduced cubular forms of the units themselves. But it was
the overriding impulse towards functional and aesthetic integration,
the formation of a single, vast systematic whole that lent Braun Design
of the '60s its heroic character. In this regard, it is also important
to recall Dieter Ram's work for the furniture producer Vitsoe+Zapf.
His furniture designs of this period, in particular his RZ 60 Universal
Shelving System, issued in 1960 and now known by the code 606,
were related systematically to the audio products he was designing
at the same time for the Braun Company. They were connected
conceptually through their highly reduced modular organisation. But
they were also linked by a number of formal and material continuities,
in particular the use of anodized aluminum and light grey paint
finishes, and common constructive principles. Rams designed Braun
audio equipment in dimensions corresponding to the standard units
of the Universal Shelving System, so that audio devices could be
fixed into it directly as modular elements. The integration of audio
and furniture design, in other words, was thoroughgoing: conceptual,
aesthetic and physical.

Whereas the SK 4's relatively modest intervention had been
to affirm the self-sufficiency of audio design against its formal
dependence upon traditional furniture, the Braun project of 1960's
was rather more extravagant. It sought to dissolve all distinctions
between object sets based on internal morphological conventions,
unifying them under a single aesthetic regime. Thus, photographic,

kitchen, personal grooming, audio equipment and furniture were conceived on the universal criteria of rationality, self-clarity and order, not on received ideas of what certain objects should look like, nor upon conventionally established indications of an object's prestigious status. At its height in '68, the universe of Braun Design comprised a unitary and outreaching system of systems, one that in taking up within itself every aspect of the Braun range also implied its extension to encompass the design of buildings, districts and cities...


The Device as a System within a System of Devices

The heroic period of Braun Design came to an end between the years 1967-68. Its conclusion was defined by two events: the Gillette Company's acquisition of a controlling share in the Braun Company and the closing of the HfG Ulm in the following year amidst financial insolvency and bitter internecine dispute. In a significant respect, however, the crisis of Braun Design had already broken some years earlier. Artur and Erwin Braun's decree that radio housings must conform to modern furniture was based on the assumption that the radio set was itself as a piece of furniture. What followed was a kind of modernist dress-up as the radio was re-fashioned according to the emerging stylistic conventions of modernist furniture, hardly a respectable modernist operation. On the other hand, this difficult relation to furniture carried within it a condition necessary for a speculative design practice on the Ulm model. This condition is phenomenological. An object may figure the whole, that is to say, fulfilled history, if it appears as a unitary and self-bounded item within the field of vision. In other words, the object should not be too large.

From around 1960 Dieter Rams stopped thinking of audio designs in terms of furniture. Indeed, in many ways, he stopped thinking about furniture in terms of furniture. Instead, he thought about products as belonging to a single comprehensive system. The particularity of each was subject to a general formal law, and so referred beyond themselves to the system of which they were parts. Such a system, however, has no palpable edges. It is not a discrete object so much as an expanding set of relations whose principle is that of infinite extension rather than totality. Arguably, the crisis of Braun Design coincided with its beginning, at the point at which it withdrew from

the speculative project of shaping a possible future world, and instead busied itself with the task of equipping the existing one. The '60s development of Braun systems design emancipated audio equipment from its problematic dependence on furniture, but in so doing eliminated the orientation towards the future that lay at the basis of the functionalist project.

The designs of Reinhold Weiss, whose work for Braun throughout the 1960's continued to follow a speculative impulse, stand as an exception to this history. A graduate of the HfG and former pupil of Gugelot, Weiss joined the Braun Company in 1959 becoming its first full-time designer in 1960. He worked in the area of household appliances until his resignation in 1967. During that period, he produced a group of designs of immense quality, most notably, the HT 1 and HT 2 toasters, HL 1 desk fan, KM 1/ 11 and KSM 1 coffee grinders, and HE 1 kettle. Whilst these products unmistakably belong to the '60s Braun program, each is characterized by a high degree of singularity. Indeed, it is not always immediately clear what they are. The uncertainty arises from a lack of recognition. In the literal sense, Weiss worked out his solutions from a position of absolute beginning, as if the device was being made for the first time. This refusal to fall back on received notions of generic form, the way in which a fan, say, may represent a fan, led to works that implied something not merely novel, but actually new.
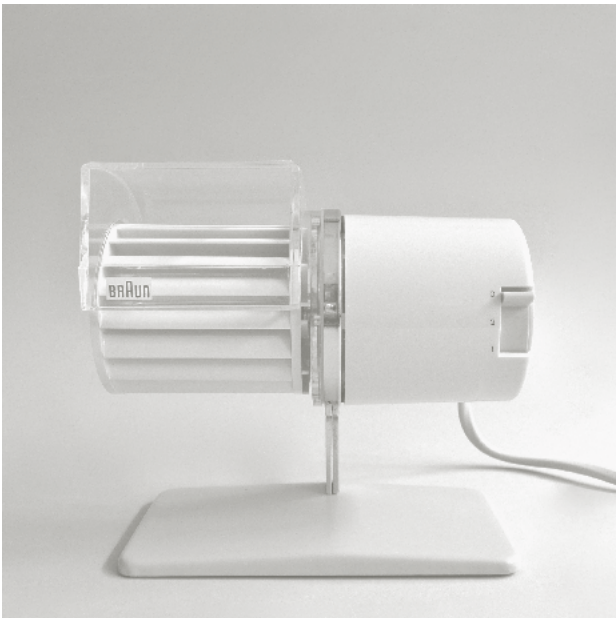
Weiss brought an Ulmer's analytic sensibility to product design. Proceeding from the mechanical facts of the device, he imposed formal divisions on the object corresponding to its functional constituents. These parts were articulated sculpturally with a very high degree of abstraction as an assembly of masses, volumes and densities. A good example of this operation is given in the HL 1 multiwind desk fan. The object is vertically bisected. On one side, a transparent plexiglass cowl partially encloses an open textured drum of horizontal blades; on the other, the motor block casing presents a solid mass, a gently tapered cylinder, its grey austerity relieved by a slightly recessed sliding switch, curving to follow the line of the casing's circumference. The leading edge of the switch quietly answers the bladed texture on the opposite side. A chromed

cuff mediates the junction between the two halves and connects both to the grey base by a thin stem. As with the SK 4, functional self-evidence is combined with an abstract formalism, heightened by the object's intimate scale. Down to the screw head, every part is taken into account. But to call this attention to detail is to miss the point. Attention to detail implies a patronizing regard for elements taken to be of minor consequence. Weiss' procedure, on the contrary, grants all elements equal status in the formation of a convincing whole. Far more so than the audio designs of the same period, his designs for Braun now seem most bitterly disappointing precisely because they held the promise of a world qualitatively different from that in which they circulated as commodities, a promise that remains unfulfilled.

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Das Programm

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