



DESIGN UPDATE No.2

VitrA



VitrA Design Update No.2

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Welcome

This second issue of Design Update focuses on cultural themes in the UK and internationally



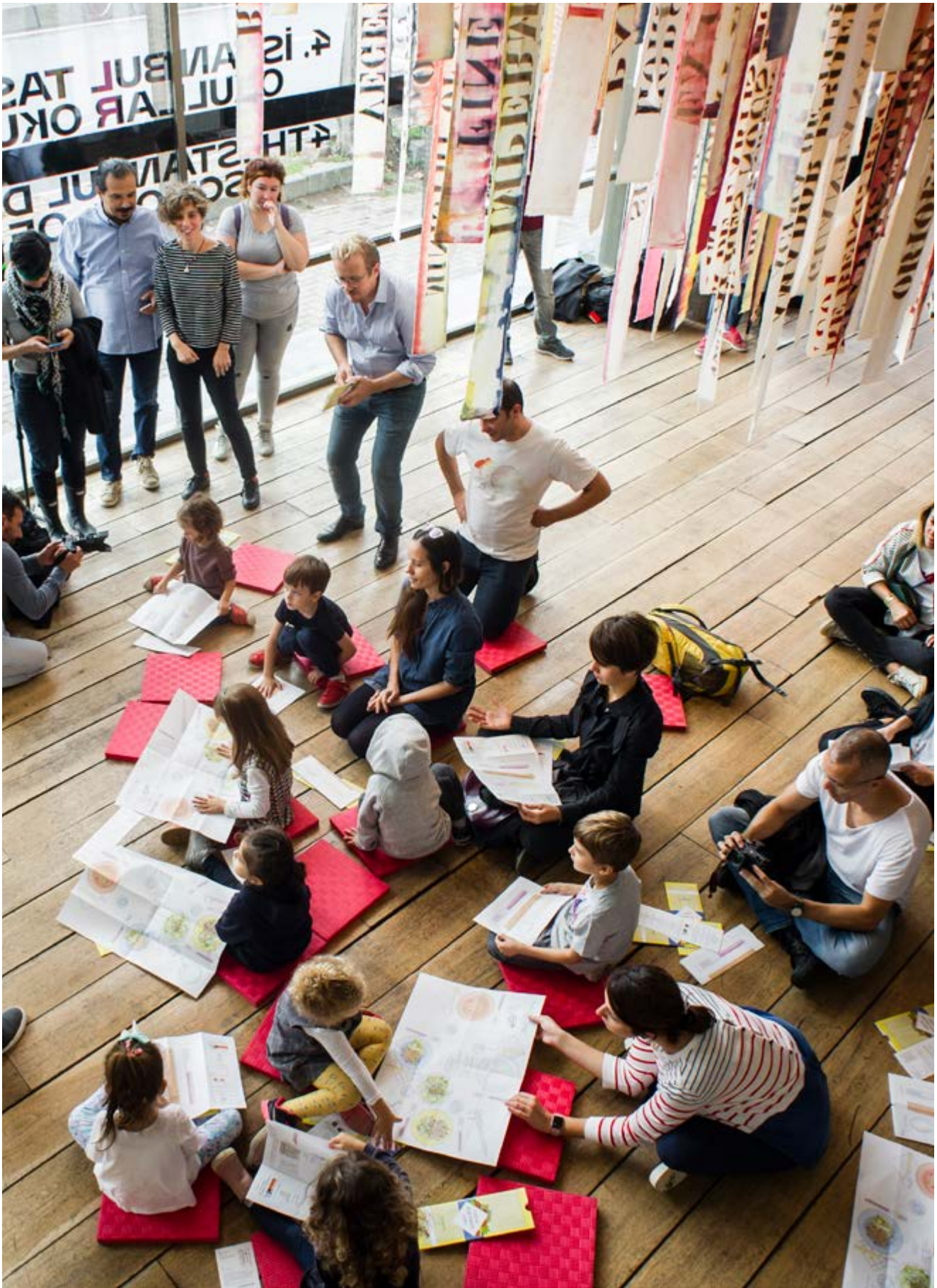
Margaret Talbot
MARKETING MANAGER, VITRA UK

VitrA's involvement in cultural initiatives is long established and includes sponsorship of the Istanbul Design Biennial as well as Turkey's pavilion at the Architecture Biennale in Venice. In this issue, *Design Update* interviews curators Jan Boelen and Kerem Piker about their shared preoccupation of models for design education.

I am also delighted to introduce Bülent Eczacıbaşı, Chairman of the Eczacıbaşı Group, VitrA's parent company, who in our profile discusses social responsibility and the cultural and educational priorities behind the Group's vision.

VitrA is proud to partner with the Royal Institute of British Architects for the RIBA + VitrA Talks Series 2018–20. Find out about the thinking behind the series and future plans in our interview with RIBA public programmes curator, Meneesha Kellay. We also interview RIBA + VitrA Talks speaker Sir David Adjaye, and report on a major exhibition of his public memorial architecture running at the Design Museum in London.

We also unveil VitrA's latest designer collection, *Equal* by Claudio Bellini – a flexible and innovative range that balances Modernist references and fluid forms – and we update on UK activity and market trends. I hope you enjoy VitrA's design and culture round-up!



Fourth Istanbul Design Biennial, A School of Schools, 2018 | 'Tall, Big and Many' Workshop for Children

VitrA's Cultural Ethos

Design Update interviews Bülent Eczacıbaşı,
Chairman of the Eczacıbaşı Group, VitrA's
parent company



Bülent Eczacıbaşı
CHAIRMAN, THE ECZACIBAŞI GROUP

DESIGN UPDATE: The Group's philanthropic vision is characterised by its balance of arts, cultural and educational initiatives. In what ways do you feel these areas interconnect to help promote dynamic and cohesive societies?

BÜLENT ECZACIBAŞI: Only culture and art can enrich life, heal societies and raise nations – they constitute the most effective antidote to the polarisation that imperils the future of society. They also enable deeper appreciation of humanitarian and universal values that unite us, warding off the tendencies of alienation and marginalisation, and uniting us on great goals and common ground. A culture policy that regards all historical and cultural influences and values as assets, that aims not merely to conserve the past but also prioritises the support of young talent, can unleash the imagination of a society, inspire new stories, and overcome perceived boundaries. No miracle is beyond the reach of a dynamic society with a powerful vision.

DU: Your father Dr Nejat F Eczacıbaşı (1913–93) was once quoted as saying that 'the real measure of private entrepreneurship is the success with which it increases the wealth of the community as a whole'. What sort of man was your father?

BE: He sincerely believed that business people have a fundamental responsibility to improve the welfare of society. My father saw economic and social progress as two parts of an indivisible whole: economic prosperity alone doesn't guarantee social progress, which he recognised as a necessary condition for steady, long-term growth. He believed that the creators of economic prosperity cannot remain indifferent to the social problems of their communities and countries; that while charity is admirable it is not enough. Business people, he believed,

should actively contribute to solving social problems through institution building, scientific research, policy debate, and greater access to culture and art.

He was very interested in the arts, establishing the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts in 1973, which today hosts an array of international festivals of music, theatre, jazz, and film in Istanbul and, of course, the art and design biennials. But he also launched awards to recognise high-calibre medical research and created the Eczacıbaşı Sports Club, the first in Turkey to focus exclusively on women's volleyball. So he had many interests.

DU: The origins of the Eczacıbaşı Group lie in the work of your grandfather, the pioneering pharmacist Süleyman Ferit Eczacıbaşı (1885–1973). What are your childhood memories of your grandfather?

BE: I always looked up to my grandfather but it wasn't until I was older that I understood why he was such an important role model. He was dedicated to improving the health and welfare of society through his entrepreneurial initiatives. He was the first university-educated pharmacist in Izmir of Turkish origin, and he was also an active volunteer, leading initiatives such as opening a Red Crescent branch in Izmir, and establishing bath houses and disinfection centres to battle epidemics. He was also involved in setting up the Izmir National Library, and many primary schools and health facilities. His advice was always: 'give back to your country what it's given you.'

DU: You are very involved with both the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art – Turkey's first privately funded museum of

contemporary art – and also the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV). Why do you believe that public access to art – and incubating thriving contemporary art scenes – is so important for societies?

BE: Public access to culture and art is essential for both society and sustainable development. The arts also give meaning to our lives, opening our collective minds to new ideas and questions and helping us to define ourselves culturally while celebrating universal values and common humanity. And, of course, the contemporary arts are greenhouses of creativity, triggering virtuous cycles and attracting talented people to cities, nourishing the creative industries and driving economies.

DU: Vitra has been an important sponsor of the Turkish Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale for many years and is now partnering with the Royal Institute of British Architects on the RIBA + Vitra Talks series. Is cross-cultural dialogue something you particularly value?

BE: Absolutely. Cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration is a critical component of our research and development process. To thrive and innovate we require both an understanding of global trends in architecture and design thinking and also a knowledge of the specific needs, expectations and values of customers in countries around the world.

DU: Istanbul Modern, which was founded by the Eczacıbaşı Group in 2004, has recently commissioned Renzo Piano to design its new gallery building in Istanbul. Is architecture a personal interest of yours?

BE: I very much enjoy architecture on a personal level. On a professional level, I'd like to see Istanbul's architectural landscape enriched by more museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls that raise the prestige and profile of Istanbul as a centre of culture. That is why we've chosen to work with Renzo Piano on this exciting project.

DU: In 1994 you were a founder of TESEV, the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, which undertakes research in areas of public policy including sustainable cities and empowering women. Why is social research and data important?

BE: Actually, TESEV is the successor of the Economic and Social Studies Conference Committee, which my father founded in 1961. Then, as now, one of its principal purposes was providing a scientific basis for constructive discussion and policy development. There are many 'facts' but on closer inspection the reality can be quite

different. Take, for example, the issue of equal opportunity for women in Turkey and their participation in economic, social and political life – many people feel that this is an education issue, that girls and young women don't have enough access but the data doesn't support this view. Actually the problem is more complex and requires a variety of solutions. TESEV's objective is not just to do research and collect data but to synthesize and analyse the findings, and initiate widespread discussion.

DU: You were educated both in London, at Imperial College, and the US, obtaining a Masters in Chemical Engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In what ways do you think studying abroad has influenced you?

BE: When it was time for me to go to university, I hesitated between two offers: one from the dazzlingly venerable Cambridge and the other from Imperial College, the legendary home of chemistry. My father encouraged me to choose the latter because it was in London: 'one of the greatest centres of culture in the world.' The purpose of university education, he said, was not merely to acquire a diploma; it was to become a cultured and multi-dimensional human being. 'Study whatever you like at university,' he advised, 'but set aside time for museums, exhibitions, concerts and plays.' And so I did. At MIT, I was impressed by the sheer volume of talent from around the world, engaged in cutting-edge research and development, often in collaboration with industry – an experience that undoubtedly contributed to my interest in innovation. However, I will also never forget my time at the German High School in Istanbul where we were instilled with respect for every belief and culture while being encouraged to appreciate our unique cultural heritage. Education from the very beginning has a profound impact on all of us.



Istanbul Modern, 'Artists in Their Time' Virtual Tour, August 2017 – March 2018



Gwangju River Reading Room



UK National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre



Sclera Pavilion

Making Memory at the Design Museum

A new exhibition on the work of British-Ghanaian architect Sir David Adjaye asks: what are memorials and why are they important for cohesive societies in the 21st century

Making Memory explores in seven built and in-progress projects the themes and preoccupations behind David Adjaye's growing international portfolio of memorial projects. 'The show came out of something beyond a retrospective,' observed Adjaye at the Design Museum launch, 'It allowed me to reveal a thread from early in the practice'. This thread is the ways in which architecture in the 21st century can embody collective cultural memories, and in this the Design Museum show deviates from the norm of the architecture exhibition by inviting designers to 'think in public' about a theme of their choice.

Adjaye established a name for himself in the 1990s as the designer of innovative one-off houses for Young British Artists including Chris Ofili and Jake Chapman. He has since gone on to build projects at civic scale across the world and – with more than 50 completed projects at the age of 52 – is now a figure at the forefront of architecture internationally.

The show opens with a visual overview of the history of monuments and memorials around the world – a survey ranging across typologies from arches and obelisks to spatial and site-based forms, and taking in ancient structures such as Stonehenge and the Giza Pyramids as well as 2018 statue by artist Gillian Wearing honouring women's suffrage campaigner Millicent

Fawcett. 'Monuments and memorials,' remarks Adjaye in his introduction to the exhibition, 'are society's way of marking our triumphs and failures. They are complex places of public memory that can prompt strong emotional responses – from celebration to loss.'

Four overarching themes about how architecture can create relevant 21st century monuments emerge in *Making Memory*. The first is about forging public space for collective reflection. Projects such as The Gwangju Reading Room, which commemorates students massacred in the South Korean city's pro-democracy uprising of 1980, safeguard space for public congregation. The project, a timber pavilion completed in 2013 in collaboration with writer Taiye Selasi, hosts a collection of 200 books documenting histories of protest and social justice. In a similar way the 2008 Sclera Pavilion, which is part reconstructed at full scale in this exhibition, created a temporary immersive space on London's South Bank – a contemporary, secular interpretation of sacred space as a place of shared retreat.

Another theme is building form. Adjaye is adept at creating bold monumental forms that evoke cultural memories. His 2016 Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, for instance, presents a series of exhibitions of



Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture



National Cathedral of Ghana



Sir David Adjaye

black history. But the building exterior also expresses cultural values in its symbolic form, referencing in its profile the historic crown motif celebrated in West African Yoruba sculpture – as illustrated by the historic carvings on display. In a similar way the design for the National Cathedral of Ghana is conceived as a ceremonial landmark in the city landscape, representing the collective cultural memories and hopes of a relatively new nation (in 1957 Ghana became the first African country to achieve independence from colonial rule). The building's dipping roof silhouette, as the exhibition demonstrates, alludes both to the tabernacle, one of the earliest structures of western religion, and the symbol of the Golden Stool, the divine throne of the Asante people. There are also references to traditional Ghanaian ceremonial umbrellas and Baoman canopies. Meanwhile in the UK the Mass Extinction Memorial Observatory (MEMO), will commemorate extinct species and loss of biodiversity in a building that takes its form and spatial organisation from the inspiration of a spiralling fossil embedded in the limestone landscape of the Isle of Portland.

The tectonics of building – elements of their construction, materiality and craft – is a further facet of architecture deftly manipulated in Adjaye's memorial projects to invoke collective cultural memories. In the exhibition, filigree facade and interior panel prototypes from the Smithsonian are presented for close inspection, lit to create shadows on the gallery walls and revealing an intricate web of cultural references including pre-slavery West African ironworking skills and the ornate ironwork common to buildings in the southern states of the US. Similarly, the Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr Memorial to be unveiled in

Boston – which immortalises the speeches of the civil rights leaders – and the MEMO building will, in acts of memorial, incorporate the carving of stone.

Finally, the exhibition demonstrates how architecture can manipulate space and light to create emotional responses in visitors. The show includes a mock up of the entrance portals to the proposed subterranean Holocaust Memorial for Victoria Tower Gardens in London, designed by Adjaye in collaboration with Ron Arad and landscape practice Gustafson Porter and Bowman. Integral to the design are 22 tall bronze fins – representing the 22 countries directly involved in World War II – which will corral visitors into separate channels, focusing the gaze on a darkening route to underground exhibition space. As the mock up demonstrates, the fins will be offset at a scale that means visitors will only be able to enter the memorial singly.

Making Memory is not the first solo exhibition on the design of David Adjaye – recent mid-career reviews have included *Form, Heft, Material* (Haus der Kunst Munich) and *Making Place* (Art Institute of Chicago), both of which toured internationally. But by focusing on a single building type in depth, it breaks new ground and brings to the architectural exhibition the added dimensions of stories of social history and anthropology, many from beyond the Western canon.

UNTIL 05 MAY 2019
AT THE DESIGN MUSEUM, LONDON



Q&A with Sir David Adjaye

Design Update asks Sir David Adjaye about The Smithsonian, working on civic projects in different cultures, and how architects can exert positive influences on societies

DESIGN UPDATE: The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC was visited by nearly 3 million people in 2017, the year of its opening. In a digital age why do you think there's such a public appetite for the physical monument or museum?

DAVID ADJAYE: The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture is truly so much bigger than a building. It is the culmination of a 100-year struggle to do justice to the complex and significant history of a people whose stories are still too rarely told. For me, the project was about uncovering history and trying to convey the contributions of a community whose importance to the social fabric of American life has too often been invisible. There is an immense responsibility inherent in this project. That was weighty and challenging, but also invigorating.

Ultimately the museum has become a real cultural phenomenon and a pilgrimage point to people from all communities and backgrounds. The interest and positive reception is immense. To be afforded the chance to contribute something with so much resonance is what architects dream about. It's a true testament to the power of a politically and socially charged space.

DU: Adjaye Associates is working on civic projects all over the world and yet its buildings remain culturally specific. How does your practice research local cultures, history and context?

DA: In my work I've always been very interested in the way in which one has to look at the accomplishments of past generations, learn from that, but move forward. This idea of always looking back and understanding human settlements, human patterns, geography, place, light; and then understanding the nuances of the pres-

ent, the production, the relationship and using them as clues to fabricate fictions about possible futures.

If you're lucky, these are realised, and for me, that is the act and art of creativity. It's not the act of waiting at home for an idea. It's the act of looking at many facets of the past and the present and allowing that to saturate through the haptic systems that we have as human beings and then allowing that to permeate out as mediations that will come out because that is our system.

DU: You were named as one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2017. In what way do you think architecture today can exert positive influences in societies?

DA: Architects are required to build in a culture where people understand buildings. When an architect is brought into the equation they are technically very proficient and progressive, but they also are doing other things. They are being asked to solve issues that are not easily understood in the binary sense of can you do it or can you not.

DU: Architects are being asked to think about questions on historic conditions, understanding new environments, taking into consideration demographics, diasporas and multi-cultural agendas within nations, cities and states, right down to what the emotional impact of architecture on an individual user is.

DA: I believe, metaphorically, that the question of looking for an architect is almost like being an actor. The architect has to, as it were, play the role of the end user in order to understand how best to create a world for that person and I think that the better the architect is at imagining what that individual user experience might be, the better architecture becomes.

The Balanced Bathroom

Designer Claudio Bellini discusses the evolution of a new design language for the bathroom



Claudio Bellini
DESIGNER

‘It’s all about contrast and balance,’ says Claudio Bellini of *Equal*, his new designer collection for Vitra. ‘It’s about organic shapes being contrasted with clean Modernist lines that can be further articulated in graphic lines. I wanted to create a collection – a language even – that allows individuals and designers the options to finely tune the aesthetic balance of their own spaces.’

Bellini explains that in designing *Equal* he elided two sets of visual references – those from nature and those from Modernism and the built environment. But the fundamental inspirations behind *Equal*, he says, are water and time. ‘Everything in nature falls into place with the passing of time, including the action of flowing water in shaping our landscapes. I wanted to capture that essence in *Equal*, in the way the basins hold water for instance – as if the volumes themselves were formed by water over time.’

The result is a collection that contrasts fluid volumes with geometric forms, as well as the dualities of black and white: ‘All parts of *Equal* related to water have their own soft and smooth nature. Even the almond-shaped overflows follow the idea of the flowing surface,’ says Bellini. ‘But while complex in its inner shapes, each piece is surrounded by a clean and pure massing; white and simple ‘architectural’ forms that are suitable for many types of domestic and commercial interior. And then there is the option of further contrast with framing in black powder-coated metal.’

Bellini is used to working across scales. He grew up influenced by the approach of his father, the renowned architect-designer Mario Bellini, and at a young age learned to explore freely and embrace without prejudice any possible direction during the concept and development

phase. This, says Bellini, his father called the ‘Darwinian process’ of design. Today Bellini’s Milan-based studio is involved in projects ranging in scope from kitchenware and furniture collections to architecture and urban planning. Asked how working as both a designer and an architect has influenced his approach to *Equal*, Bellini observes: ‘My approach to design is definitely focused not only on a specific product; its detail, features and appearance, but overall on the final user experience in a real context. Working on the *Equal* collection I had in mind from the beginning, as a crucial point, the result in relation to the architectural spaces where it will be placed’. This is an instinct reflected, for instance, in the geometric forms of the *Equal* wall-hung WC and bidet options.

Enabling an unusual degree of aesthetic calibration on behalf of the end-designer, the *Equal* collection incorporates a flexible and interchangeable array of formats. Its four basin types, for instance, are each designed with a range of mounting options in mind – countertop, wall-hung or supported on bespoke metal frames, with the latter incorporating low-level storage for folded linen. Further bathroom storage options are freestanding, with variations of low-level or mid-height cabinet, offering additional enclosed storage and also additional counter surface.

‘It was my goal to change attitudes to the idea that bathroom furniture needs to be fixed,’ says Bellini. ‘Thanks to the idea of framing modules into an open, expressed metal structure they are much easier to move. They aren’t built in, there’s no need to drill holes in tiled floors, so users can more freely adjust the compositions of their spaces to create different ambiances over time. It might be the end of the monotony of fixed bathroom furniture – isn’t that wonderful!’



Washbasins from the **Equal** range, designed by Claudio Bellini for Vitra



Wall-hung washbasin unit and mirror from the **Equal** range, designed by Claudio Bellini for Vitra

However, the metal-framed options aren't just about function, says Bellini. 'It's about the ability to emphasise the architectural aspect of *Equal*'s character, fine-tuning the balance between the human-made and natural forms. Those graphical lines of the metal frames can make the washbasin more 'sharp', more clean. They also increase the sense of the unexpected in the contrast with the softness of inside the piece.'

Accessories to the *Equal* range include under-basin towel rails, LED-illuminated mirrors in three sizes with metal frames that complement the basin stands and, for some variants, wooden cover plates crafted in elm or black oak. Asked if he has a favourite piece, Bellini is initially perplexed: 'You wouldn't say that you preferred one of your children to another. I'm very happy with the whole *Equal* family, down to the very smallest details such as the red rope light pull that hangs from the very minimalist lamp of the illuminated mirrors.' He considers for

a moment before adding: 'Having said that we did a lot of work in refining the shape of the WC unit to make it unique and subtle, and the double basin is a very beautiful piece.'

And did he enjoy the process of developing the collection with Vitra? 'Of course. It was a very well balanced and organised development process. Not too fast and not too slow,' says Bellini. 'There's a strong Vitra ethos, a motivation to excel, and this comes across in the in-house research and development teams that are managed by design director Erdem Akan. You can never fully predict how any project will evolve and there will always be unexpected challenges, but working on *Equal* everything was resolved in the best manner, thanks to good engineers and good co-operation – a true 'Darwinian process'.



The *Equal* range, designed by Claudio Bellini for Vitra

VitrA in the UK

VitrA's collaborative design culture and current sector activity in the UK



The **Plural** range, designed by Terri Pecora for VitrA

Valuing design thinking, and understanding what it brings to the conversation with technology, engineering and production is an approach that has led to increasing design recognition for Vitra. Since 2017 the company has won over 27 international design awards including Good Design, iF Product Design, Iconic Interior Innovation, and Elle Deco awards. Most recently the accolades have been for *Plural*, the designer collaboration with Terri Pecora that launched in 2018.

The decision to work with independent designers was made at Vitra in the late 1990s when the company was looking to expand its design horizons as the brand grew internationally. The first major collaboration was with Ross Lovegrove, whose debut Vitra collection *Istanbul* launched in 2004. The fluid forms of *Istanbul* proved revolutionary not only in terms of bathroom aesthetics but also in terms of production, with the single cast basin and pedestal requiring exceptional engineering skill. It may have presented a production challenge at the time but the iconic styling of the award-winning range means it's as relevant now as it was 15 years ago. The Vitra-Lovegrove partnership has since continued, with an open-frame *Istanbul* basin launched at Salone del Mobile in 2018.



The *Istanbul* vanity basin, designed by Ross Lovegrove for Vitra



The *Water Jewels* bathtub with gold fixtures, designed by Matteo Thun for Vitra

Design collaborations are developed at Vitra's purpose built Innovation Centre, which incorporates a Smart Connected Technologies Lab where products such as smart mirrors and panels, child locks and intelligent-WC pans are developed. Vitra believes that these are just the starting point for electronics in bathrooms and that future possibilities are profound, particularly in terms of sustainability and accessibility. Vitra's Rimless WC technology, for example, has proved surprisingly important in environmental terms because it massively reduces the amount of chemicals needed for cleaning. Another example is intelligent flushing systems, which encourage people to understand how much water is being used and how they can control their consumption.

Since the debut *Istanbul* collection, Vitra has added designers including Sebastian Conran and Matteo Thun & Partners to its growing roster of international talent. Collaboration with designers has in fact become a core value, and key to Vitra's success in this area is an understanding that every designer has their own process and works in their own way, each pushing Vitra forward in a different sphere. Each designer collaboration usually takes at least two years and can involve around 50-60 product variants.



Kampus, Manchester, designed by ShedKM and Chapman Taylor

In relation to technological change in the wider construction sector Vitra has been quick to recognise the needs of the new generation of off-site fabricators springing up in response to increasing modularisation and prefabrication in construction. Recognising that dimensional accuracy is vital and that supply is key, Vitra is able to offer fast delivery of a large selection of products in a range of dimensions. There's no doubt that Vitra's order books reflect a snapshot of current design and construction activity in the UK.

Architectural trends that Vitra is witnessing in the UK include plenty of ambitiously scaled inner-city regeneration, characterised by projects like the FCBStudios

masterplanned Circle Square development on the former BBC site in Manchester – in effect a whole new city district with 1,700 new homes and 1.2 million sq. ft. of office space being built alongside retail and leisure facilities. At Circle Square FCBStudios are also architects of several individual buildings including a phase of upmarket student housing that incorporates Vitra's *Zentrum* wall-mounted WCs, semi-recessed washbasins and *Nest* WCs and basins into compact bathroom pods.

Vitra is also seeing an increase in the imaginative reuse of existing fabric alongside new build, such as at Kampus in Manchester. Masterplanned by Mecanoo for Henry Boot Developments and Capital & Centric, the scheme

repurposes mid-century brick mill buildings and a 1964 concrete tower into a lively inner city mixed-use development incorporating over 500 homes. Bold housing and urban regeneration visions require ambitious solutions, so it's no surprise that more than 500 bathroom pods were recently delivered to the ShedKM and Chapman Taylor designed project.

Another area of change is the make-up of mixed-use schemes, which are increasingly being re-thought beyond the standard retail/residential formula. The Makers in Shoreditch, London, by Avanti Architects with Woods Bagot designed interiors is an example – the scheme incorporates a new school and a gallery space as well as larger family-sized apartments and shared residents' spaces such as a library, a screening room and roof gardens. The scheme's 175 upmarket apartments are defined architecturally by 'winter garden' extensions to living areas, sleek kitchens that blend seamlessly in open-plan space, and bathrooms that challenge the norm with statement black Vitra flush plates above *Matrix* wall-hung WCs and bespoke cabinetry incorporating *M-Line* countertop basins.

The drive for innovation is a constant at Vitra, and the company continues to seek out opportunities through its research and development activities and through designer collaborations and industry partnerships – both here in the UK and globally.



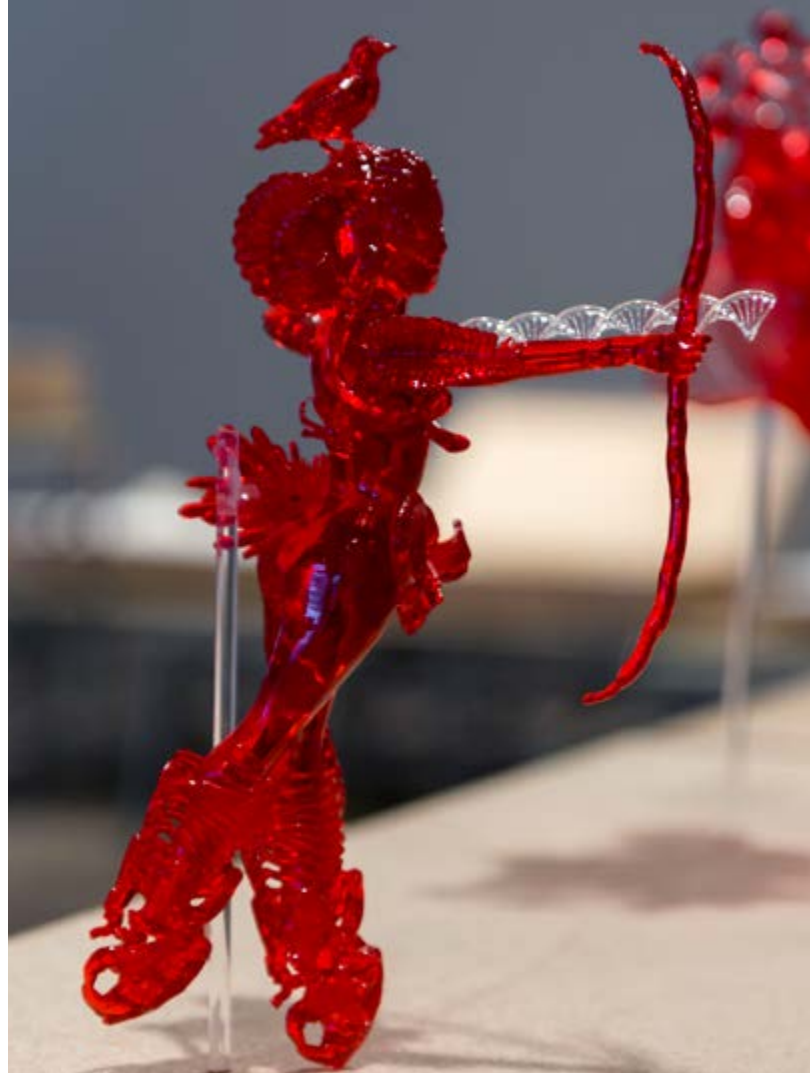
The Makers, Shoreditch, master bathroom, designed by Woods Bagot



The Makers, Shoreditch



Fourth Istanbul Design Biennial, A School of Schools, 2018



Fourth Istanbul Design Biennial, A School of Schools, 2018 | Scales School, Pinar Yoldaş, Genetically Modified Generation (Designer Babies)

Cultural Initiatives in Venice and Istanbul

Rob Wilson explores the common theme of education that lies behind two Vitra-sponsored cultural initiatives in Venice and Istanbul

It was notable how at two of the main events of the architecture and design calendar last year – the Istanbul Design Biennial and the Venice Architecture Biennale – similar concerns informed choice of theme and focus. This was not the usual – occasionally onanistic – obsessing over form, material or function that often occupies designers and architects, but a turning of the spotlight onto the less material forms and ways of learning: not

just the theoretics, but the actual discussion and dissemination of the ideas and issues relevant for design to be engaged with now.

‘It’s 100 years since the Bauhaus changed design and design teaching fundamentally and in doing so changed the world. So I wanted to ask what are the new fields of design? What is changing in the world and



Fourth Istanbul Design Biennial, A School of Schools, 2018 | Scales School, Legrand Jager, Deep Digital Twin



Fourth Istanbul Design Biennial, A School of Schools, 2018

society and how can education reflect these changes?' says Jan Boelen, who curated the fourth Istanbul Design Biennial in 2018.

'Of course, design today can still be solutionist – it can still be a chair or a table providing solutions to the needs we have. But design can also be political, critical and speculate about the future – and that is what I wanted to explore in the Biennial.'

The very title he chose clearly encapsulated this idea: The School of Schools. The event was organised literally around six different 'schools' set up in cultural venues across the city. In each of these, projects from over 50 countries – gathered via an earlier global call – were presented, loosely grouped around what Boelen describes as 'fields of interest'. 'One school – the Scale School – was for instance looking at the topic of 'norms and standards', and the legislation inherent in the designing of everyday life,' says Boelen, 'How do we measure and weigh things?'

Crucially each venue also had an adjacent classroom, acting as a focus for discussion and workshops around each key question or 'issue'. Indeed Boelen visualised the whole city as one big school: 'Several of the venues were on the main shopping street and I envisaged the city streets as corridors and the venues as classrooms – into which passers by could just drop in.'

At the Venice Architecture Biennale meanwhile, curator of the Turkish pavilion, Kerem Piker, came to focus on a similar theme of speculation and wider engagement on issues specifically around contemporary architecture practice – if by a different route. This was cued initially by the overall Biennale theme of 'Freespace' set by curator-architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara. 'The idea was literally to create a democratised space for learning in the pavilion,' says Piker, 'In contrast to a sort of public relations programme that the Biennale seems to have become, organised from an elitist perspective and catering to a limited sphere of the architectural world, I wanted to create an innovative platform for meeting, encounter, critical dialogue and co-production



Sixteenth Venice International Architecture Biennale, Turkish Pavilion, The Shift



– one that went beyond a mere exhibition area. There is a need for environments where architectural knowledge is reproduced, shared and discussed.’

Piker’s ambition for the pavilion was also encapsulated in its title, Vardiya, meaning ‘The Shift’ – underlining the step-change in the nature of architecture and design thinking required, particularly among the next generation of designers.

As such he invited contributions from 115 schools, with an open call to students, who as well as submitting portfolios, were asked to prepare short videos answering three questions: Why does the Biennale exist? What does the Biennale do? For whom does the Biennale exist? From this 122 international architecture students were invited to participate, working over 25 weeks of the Biennale alongside professionals and academics, curating and generating their own content in real time. ‘We tried to make the pavilion a meeting space for architecture students from all around the world.’

At both Istanbul and Venice, the intention was to create active spaces filled not with oven-ready solutions – the common fare of design and architecture exhibitions – but with debate and speculation. There were still exhibition elements, but content was developed during the course of the events and part-generated by the collaboration of the participants.

The shared focus on education and dissemination clearly picks up on recent debates around forms of pedagogy, as exemplified in research projects such as Beatriz Colomina’s Radical Pedagogies, which looks critically at models of design education. Elsewhere a questioning and mixing up of traditional educational models with contemporary ideas is being tested in schools such as the Dirty Art Department at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam and the London School Architecture, which link far more directly with action and practice. Set against this questioning of both historical and current structures and ways of teaching design, both Boelen in Istanbul and Piker in Venice looked at the idea of education in a much broader, less formal and more future-orientated way.



As Piker puts it: 'I am not interested in teaching. I am more interested in learning.'

Boelen adds: 'The idea was that everything was presented non-hierarchically – there were no professor/student-type relationships involved. Contributions were broad and everyone's was equally valuable: from design students to engineers, scientists and the public who dropped by. There's a dependency between people learning from each other—that's crucial.'

Asked about what outcomes they see from the events they initiated, both Boelen and Piker see any findings being as speculative and open-ended as the events they set up: 'The School of Schools is ongoing. It's travelling to France in May and Belgium in July. Perhaps after one year one might be able to measure everything but so far I know of several international collaborations that have been formed and of other outcomes such as internships with designers that have resulted'. Piker feels even more strongly about the on-going nature of the process he helped set up: 'I believe it is a bit early to discuss the

post-Vardiya scenarios for now. Outcomes may vary; you may need years to see the actual results'. What both see clearly is the value of the new networks, conversations and relationships that their events helped initiate.

In retrospect, the high risk, speculative but far more affective and engaged way of curating seen at Istanbul and Venice made for two events that had a more memorable and far reaching effect for those involved than any spectacular installation might have done. As Boelen observes: 'Existing problems cannot be solved by existing solutions – we have to come up with alternatives to just more of the same. We have to rethink our society – and so rethink education, which is where society is formed and made.' From the evidence at Istanbul and Venice, this seems a pretty good place to start.

RIBA + Vitra Talks Series

RIBA public programmes curator Meneesha Kellay discusses curating the RIBA + Vitra Talks series



RIBA + Vitra Talks, Kate Macintosh



RIBA + Vitra Talks, Mary Duggan

In the RIBA's new ground-floor bar space Meneesha Kellay is reflecting on the highlights of the inaugural RIBA + Vitra Talks series, which launched in Autumn 2018. 'There's a huge public appetite for architecture at the moment, observes Kellay in the midst of a bustling 66 Portland Place, where a new exhibition is being installed in the adjacent gallery to the sound of a piano being tuned upstairs in the Florence Hall. 'London is a hub for international dialogue in architecture, and with the Vitra programme we've been able to really spark off that energy'.

A central thread of the Institute's public programme from Autumn 2018 – Spring 2020 is the RIBA + Vitra Partnership, which reflects a shared commitment to add social, cultural and economic value to society through the global exchange of architectural discourse. The first season proved a sell-out success, attracting younger audiences too.

The Partnership came as a result of a series Kellay put together in 2017 in which emerging architects from European countries with shared borders were paired in discussion-based talks. Vitra were impressed and wanted to support a talks series with a similar energy and focal range that would feature a mix of internationally celebrated architects and emerging talent while addressing social and cultural themes in contemporary architecture. So the Autumn 2018 series opened with international architecture star Kazuyo Sejima – who was awarded a Pritzker Prize in 2010 and was in the same year the first female director of the Venice Architecture Biennale – talking about projects from her Tokyo-based practice SANAA. In contrast the series also featured community-focused collective Assemble, the first architects to win the Turner Prize for art, presenting their first major building commission.

Kellay also proposed an inter-generational aspect to the series, in which

younger practitioners are paired in conversation with established architects. One of her personal highlights of the first series was Kate Macintosh – the under-sung social housing innovator who in 1965 began designing the pioneering Dawson Heights in south east London – in conversation with Mary Duggan. The two women engaged in a frank investigative dialogue about their experiences of designing social housing across a generational divide. 'It was a nuanced discussion', says Kellay, 'highlighting the fact that while some possibilities in architecture, such as those for women, may have opened up, in some ways the role of the architect overall has been eroded since the 1960s.' Kellay reports on a groundswell of interest in areas at the interstices of architecture and other disciplines – areas where architects can bring significant value. Curiosity and discussion within the profession is, she says, currently focused on engaging in productive, creative dialogues to improve outcomes in a wide



RIBA + Vitra Talks, Frida Escobedo

range of senses for the greater social good – with communities for instance, but also with planners and developers.

‘The RIBA is looking at where architecture can have the biggest impact socially and culturally,’ says Kellay ‘We have a responsibility to reflect the needs of society and also to promote aspects of architecture that go beyond the reach of the traditional remit.’

Another highlight for Kellay was Sir David Adjaye in conversation with Professor Lesley Lokko, the Ghanaian-Scottish architect who heads the Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. ‘The in-conversation format created a new level of intimacy, and that allowed more personal insights’, Kellay explains. ‘Being in conversation with Lokko, discussing shared memories of Ghana for example, brought fresh insight into Adjaye’s architecture’.

The RIBA + Vitra Talks continue to gain momentum in 2019, with a Spring series featuring non-profit MASS Design Group – whose model of practice is designed to deliver maximum impact in communities across Africa and the Americas and whose work spans the design of buildings, research, policy, education, and strategic planning. Highlights also include rising star Frida Escobedo, who in 2018 became the youngest ever Serpentine Pavilion architect, and Aga Khan Award-winning international architect Emre Arolat. In April the talks will take on a further international dimension with Daniel Libeskind speaking in both London and Istanbul. A series of regional events is also planned, including Feilden Fowles speaking at their new visitor centre for Yorkshire Sculpture Park, The Weston, with further events in the pipeline in other areas regionally.

Kellay is proud of her record in closing gender and ethnicity gaps in public



The Weston, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, designed by Feilden Fowles



RIBA + Vitra Talks, Michael Murphy and Alan Ricks of MASS Design Group

programming at the RIBA. ‘When I arrived in 2016 the male to female ratio of speakers here was 70:30 for 2015. In 2018 for the first time we programmed more women than men. BAME representation was 6 per cent in 2015 and it’s now a more respectable 24 per cent, but there is still more work to do in this area’, recounts the curator, who sits on the RIBA’s advisory panel, Architects for Change. Her interest in reflecting a multi-faceted profile of architecture as a socially, economically and culturally valuable discipline is clearly reflected in the Vitra programme: ‘New ideas and a new level of diversity are emerging in architecture – our job is to encourage and promote this as widely as possible’.



The Eczacıbaşı Group

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