

Design

Haus mates

Why Vitra and Artek make for happy co-habitees

PHOTOGRAPHY: OLGA CAFIERO WRITER: NATALIA RACHLIN





THIS PAGE, VITRA DIRECTOR NORA FEHLBAUM (LEFT) AND ARTEK CEO MIRKKU KULLBERG (RIGHT) AT THE VITRAHAUS LOFT, THE FIRST JOINT EXHIBITION SPACE FOR ARTEK AND VITRA, IN WEIL AM RHEIN, GERMANY. PICTURED ARE ARTEK'S 'HIGH CHAIR K65', BY ALVAR AALTO (FEHLBAUM'S SEAT), 'KARUSELLI' LOUNGE CHAIR, BY YRJÖ KUKKAPURO, AND 'PENDANT LAMP A110', BY AALTO. ON THE SHELF IS FRANK GEHRY'S 'WIGGLE' SIDE CHAIR, FOR VITRA

OPPOSITE, THE VITRAHAUS BUILDING, DESIGNED BY HERZOG & DE MEURON



THE VITRAHAUS EXHIBITION, CURATED BY ILSE CRAWFORD, TAKES THE FORM OF AN APARTMENT LIVED IN BY A FICTIONAL CREATIVE COUPLE, ASTRID AND HARRI. THERE'S A CORK MOODBOARD, WHILE 'TRAPÈZE' TABLES, BY JEAN PROUVÉ, ALLOW THE COUPLE TO WORK SIDE BY SIDE, ON CHARLES AND RAY EAMES'

'SOFT PAD' CHAIRS, BOTH FOR VITRA. ALSO PICTURED IS VITRA'S 'NELSON BENCH', BY GEORGE NELSON. FROM THE CEILING HANG A BAMBOO SCULPTURE BY MIE MATSUBARA AND A POLYSTYRENE CHAIN BY SUZANNE STANKUS

TIMELINE ILLUSTRATOR:
THE LUXURY OF PROTEST



VITRA DEUTSCHLAND FOUNDING 1957
 In Weil am Rhein
 By Will and Eika Fehlbaum

STARTS PRODUCTION OF THE HERMAN MILLER COLLECTION 1967
 Including products from Charles and Ray Eames, Isamu Noguchi and George Nelson

THE PANTON CHAIR LAUNCHED 1967
 The first cantilevered chair made out of plastic, by Verner Panton

A FIRE DESTROYS A LARGE PART OF THE PRODUCTION FACILITIES IN WEIL AM RHEIN 1981

FRANK GEHRY MEETS ROLF FEHLBAUM AND A PLURALIST CONCEPT FOR THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE VITRA CAMPUS IS INTRODUCED 1984

FRANK GEHRY FINISHES VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM AS PART OF THE CAMPUS 1993

ZAHA HADID'S FIRE STATION COMPLETE, AS WELL AS TADAO ANDO'S CONFERENCE PAVILION, ALSO ON THE CAMPUS 2004

LAUNCH OF HOME COLLECTION 2010
 Classic products from Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson, Verner Panton and Jean Prouvé, as well as new pieces from Jasper Morrison, Maarten Van Severen, Roman and Erwan Bouroullec, Hella Jongerius and Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby

VITRAHAUS OPENS 2010
 Part of the Vitra campus, flagship store and home of the Vitra Home Collection. Designed by Herzog & de Meuron

VITRA ACQUIRES ARTEK 2013

JOINT CONCEPT SHOP OPENS IN BERLIN 2014

ARTEK 1933
BENT-L-LEG STOOL PATENTED BY ALVARO AALTO 1935
 Solid wood leg, bent 90 degrees

ARTEK FOUNDED 1937
 By Alvar and Aino Aalto, Ylvis-Custaa Hahl and Maire Gullichsen

RESTAURANT SAVOY HELSINKI 1946
 With interior design by Aino Aalto and customised furniture by Artek

LAUNCH OF Y-LEG 1954
 Used in chairs and tables, with two 90 degree bends. Originally made from an L-Leg sawn in two

LAUNCH OF X-LEG 1954
 Fan-shaped leg made from sawing an L-Leg into five parts. Now made from a laminated bend, dowelled into seats or tabletops

SWEDISH INVESTMENT COMPANY PROVENTUS ACQUIRES ARTEK 2004

TOM DIXON CREATIVE DIRECTOR 2005

MIRKKU KULLBERG APPOINTED MANAGING DIRECTOR 2007

ARTEK PAVILION AT SALONE DEL MOBILE IN MILAN DESIGNED BY SHIGERU BAN 2013
 Later moved to Helsinki between the Museum of Finnish Architecture and the Design Museum, at Design Miami

ARTEK IS ACQUIRED BY VITRA AS A SEPARATE ENTITY 2013

Alvar Aalto was never a Finnish designer,' says Mircku Kullberg, the straight-talking CEO of Artek, the furniture company founded by the late modernist master. 'He was a universal designer, and we need to try to take these legacy companies out of their national context and bring them to an international audience and platform.' Kullberg followed her own advice when, early in 2013, she picked up the phone and rang the Swiss design giant Vitra.

On the other end of the connection was Nora Fehlbaum, a member of Vitra's board of directors, who left a job in consulting to join the family business in 2010. (Her uncle is Rolf Fehlbaum, chairman emeritus, active member of the board of directors and Vitra's long-time patron saint, who managed the company for decades until stepping back from daily business operations in 2005.)

Kullberg soon discovered that the admiration was mutual and, in early September last year, Vitra acquired Artek from Proventus, a Swedish private equity

firm that had held the Finnish company in its portfolio for some 20 years.

And so, without much fanfare, a new chapter began for both companies: Vitra would provide Artek with an international platform that would enable it to grow and develop and to take advantage of economies of scale when it came to manufacturing, distribution and logistics. Artek, in turn, would add icons of the Scandinavian modernist movement to Vitra's already impressive design hall of fame, which runs from Charles and Ray Eames and Jean Prouvé through to Jasper Morrison and the Bouroullec brothers.

Some eight months into this new partnership, both women are seated in a meeting room on the Vitra Campus in the small German town of Weil am Rhein, the landscape dotted with buildings and works by Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando, Zaha Hadid, SANAA, and many more.

Kullberg has spent nearly a decade with Artek, moving the brand into the 21st century, and inviting contemporary »

Design



IN THE FICTIONAL COUPLE'S APARTMENT ARE 'STOOL', BY CHARLES AND RAY EAMES; 'PLACE' SOFA AND 'CORK FAMILY' STOOLS, BY JASPER MORRISON; AND 'AKARI' LIGHTING BY ISAMU NOGUCHI, ALL FOR VITRA, AS WELL AS 'ARMCHAIR 400', BY ALVAR AALTO, FOR ARTEK
LEFT, ILSE CRAWFORD AT STUDIOILSE IN LONDON. HER TEAM'S GOAL WAS TO VISUALISE THE UNION OF THE SWISS AND FINNISH BRANDS
PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLIAM SELDEN



designers like Hella Jongerius and Konstantin Grcic to, respectively, reinterpret classic designs and create new ones. (Grcic's 'Rival' task chair was launched at Salone this year.) In the process, Kullberg has taken Artek from a slightly forgotten Finnish legacy brand to an international design company. The Vitra sale was perhaps an obvious next step.

'It was time for Artek to make a move and we thought about who could help take us forward in an interesting way,' says Kullberg. 'It had to be someone who understood the products and what it meant to work with design classics, and Vitra seemed quite obvious in that sense.'

The Vitra deal wasn't without its detractors, though. Some homegrown sceptics practically accused Kullberg of selling off a piece of Finnish national heritage. 'Of course it's our obligation to look after this national treasure,' says Kullberg. 'But at the same time, it's also our obligation to keep on supporting the really rather radical ideals that Artek was

founded around: bringing new things to new people – and I think this is where Vitra will really push us forward.'

Founded in Finland in 1935, Artek – a literal fusion of the words art and technology – was the brainchild of architect Alvar Aalto and his wife Aino, art historian Nils-Gustav Hahl and art promoter Maire Gullichsen. It was born of an ambition to promote a modern approach to living through a furniture and lighting collection, as well as through exhibitions and educational programmes. Today, the collection extends far beyond Aalto's own designs and includes pieces by Finnish greats including Ilmari Tapiovaara and Yrjö Kukkapuro, as well as works by Grcic, Jongerius and Shigeru Ban.

'This is really about allowing Artek to continue this progression,' says Fehlbaum. 'We don't want it to be that we brought a status quo in 2013, integrated and that was that. Vitra and Artek undeniably have values in common, which is what makes this work.

Both companies have humble beginnings among family and friends, and we have both showed a lifelong commitment to education, consistently engaging in a dialogue about what good design means. But while we have ideas in common, we are very careful and adamant about having separate collections: Artek will remain a separate institution and have its own brand identity.' Proof of this commitment to independence arguably came at this year's Salone del Mobile, when Artek and Vitra showed their work from separate stands.

But that isn't to say that Kullberg and Fehlbaum want to downplay the compatibility of the two collections: to formally introduce the partnership to the public, Kullberg and Fehlbaum invited Ilse Crawford's team at Studioilse to curate and design an exhibition that would visualise the marriage of the two companies.

It seems fitting then that Crawford temporarily transformed the loft on the top



floor of the Herzog & de Meuron-designed VitraHaus into the flat of a fictitious couple: Harri, a Finnish musician, and Astrid, a German set designer. The results are seamless and Vitra's diverse collection, from Jasper Morrison's 'Cork' stools to Frank Gehry's 'Wiggle' side chair, plays well with the Finnish additions. Perhaps most poetic is the dialogue between each brand's hero figure – throughout the space Eames and Aalto sit in conversation, and it feels entirely organic, obvious, maybe even meant to be.

'The two companies are really well-matched in terms of their integrity,' says Crawford. 'I think Vitra has more muscle

'It's like the perfect marriage: they both want to be more like the other one'

than Artek because of its sheer size, but you could argue that Artek has more soul because it's smaller and closer to the root, and it has a very domestic application. It's the perfect marriage really: they both want to be more like the other one is, but they have enough in common to make them a compatible couple.'

This April, the two companies opened their first joint-venture, a concept shop in Berlin, and their partnership will, of course, be increasingly visible, with all Vitra showrooms carrying the Artek collection. In some instances, as in Japan and Finland, where Artek has a strong hold, Artek outlets will also offer Vitra's home collection.

The question is briefly floated, whether this might be the start of an acquisition strategy for Vitra. The notion is quickly quelled by Fehlbbaum, however, who notes that the company has never acquired before, and wouldn't have, had it not been Artek who called: 'Right down to the font of our

logos to the five letters of our names, we have so much in common. This was possible because it was really a loving relationship, and those aren't easy to replicate – there needs to be that spark for something like this to work,' says Fehlbbaum.

For now, both Kullberg and Fehlbbaum agree, it's really about getting back to business. After a year of big changes, the year ahead will be spent on product development, fine-tuning retail strategies, and putting the focus back on selling the product.

'We kind of have this mantra at Artek, for people coming into the business,' says Kullberg. 'You have two minutes to sell yourself to the company, and then you have the rest of your life to sell the product,' she explains, revealing an inter-company mantra that seems to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. 'Sell the company, sell the thinking, and then it all starts happening.' ★
Vitra Artek, Bikini House, Budapest Strasse 38-50, Berlin, www.artek.fi, www.vitra.com