

The visionary man

As the furniture company Vitsoe opens its new factory in Warwickshire, **Adrian Stokes** reflects on the significance of the modernist brand and the missionary zeal of its managing director Mark Adams



I can't be sure when I first became aware of Dieter Rams but assume it was during my early years at college because by the time of my graduation in 1977 I wanted to be him. His ability to create strikingly different, beautiful, simple, inventive things, that I wished I could afford, positioned me as his number one fan. I saw him in the same light as David Hockney: someone who just sees differently, an industrial artist, rather than a fine one. We had certain things in common: my grandfather was a carpenter and my father an engineer; and I dabbled with architecture before finding industrial design by chance. I emerged as

a work in progress around the time he wrote the rules, that I've adhered to consciously or subconsciously through my entire working life.

I first became aware of Mark Adams on receiving a thankyou note for a short piece, entitled 'Inspired', that I'd written for Design Week in January 2008. It was about Dieter Rams' T1000 radio designed for Braun in 1962. As it turned out Mark had acquired Vitsoe, the company that made the wonderful 606 shelf system designed by Rams in 1960, a wall full of which I'd bought for my studio in 1998 and that I work at every day. If you've kept up, you'll have gathered we were both fans of the great industrial designer, whose wide-ranging work and related ideas are to this day unsurpassed. Rams' approach, immortalized by his widely-touted tenets of design, is ever more relevant to our increasingly benighted world and it's not difficult to see how the Mark and Dieter pairing has become such an important example of how design, intelligence and integrity can combine to offer a powerful message which needs to be heard.

That Rams, born in 1932, has received such recognition in recent years, is due in no small part to Mark, the relatively unsung hero of a continually developing story which I've no doubt will form the basis of some yet to be written

business bible. It's worth noting that in 2007 when I tried to buy a biography about Dieter Rams the only one I could find was about Braun, bought from Germany and in German: good pictures, but short on words I could understand. Unsurprisingly Mark was instigator of the definitive one, produced some years later. 'As Little Design As Possible' was written by Sophie Lovell, with the foreword, of course, from Jony Ive.

At my first meeting with Mark, we went for a sandwich close to the previous Vitsoe showroom in Wigmore Street, London which was part design museum and part sales tool. Either way I'd have happily paid to see so many perfect products displayed on the 606 shelving system. We seemed to get on well, he liked the work my studio had done with Gordon Russell Furniture and maybe my open-mouthed appreciation of the place helped. I found Mark was a rarity, someone more interested in asking questions than answering them. Curiosity and enthusiasm provide the foundations of many of the exceptional individuals I've been lucky enough to know over the years and since I've got to know Mark better I'd add, in no particular order, generous, tenacious, idealistic, considerate, articulate, with great taste, incredible attention to detail and ability to communicate in a way that can fire-up friends, colleagues and complete

strangers. Speaking from a platform he delivers his message with the same crusading fervour that I expect he reserves for all the things he cares most about. I've gleaned this much from the occasional meetings and conversations we've had since that first one, close friends would no doubt add to the list.

I was once a rower and each year my much better half and I, spend Friday at Henley, a wonderful, eccentric, sporting bear pit. Rowing is as much about the boats, the river, the beauty, the culture and the tradition, as it is about the sport. Arriving at the event in 2008 and stationary in our car waiting to cross the bridge, I looked out to see Mark and his wife. They came over and I later learned that his grandfather had won the historic Wingfield sculls event and consequently Mark was a life member of Leander club. Despite not being a serious rower, he got it and would attend the regatta for all five days. Similarly he isn't a designer, but he gets design, probably as much as anyone I know in the business. A slight diversion but there's a point: I doubt if Mark does anything half-heartedly.

Later that year he invited me to meet Dieter Rams who comes over regularly, following the relocation of Vitsoe's manufacturing base to the UK in the mid 1990s. Imagine that, relocating wholly owned, high quality manufacture, to the UK from Germany. Imagine too, being invited to

An important example of how design, intelligence and integrity can combine to offer a powerful message



meet Dieter Rams. I can't think what came over me, but I took some of my work! It was plain to see that the relationship of Mark and Dieter was utterly symbiotic. Dieter's wonderful products and Mark's, every bit as wonderful, ability to recognize and nurture their latent potential.

Mark is a missionary and a campaigner. Shortly after he first wrote to me I watched a speech he'd given at the RSA, around the time I'd written a piece entitled 'Make do and Mend' (ND65) about waste and the growing divide between people and the products they own. This was an area of special interest to me. His talk and many subsequent ones, was about his belief that if we're to avoid an environmental and social catastrophe, we must re-think our entire approach to the way we design and improve products, as a means of extending their useful lives. He can also be heard expressing the view

Opposite | Mark Adams, the visionary managing director of Vitsoe
Below | The 606 Universal Shelving System, design by Dieter Rams in 1960 and in production ever since



back to a British economy that depends heavily on manufacturing. We are a small, densely populated island, in a brutally competitive world and solutions aren't obvious. What's interesting about Vitsoe and companies like it, is that despite the naysayers, they haven't given up. They design and make products that marry the skills of people and advantages that technology can offer, to viably produce high quality, affordable, long-lasting, useful products. These businesses are founded on entirely different principles and offer a visionary view that in my judgement has the potential to capture the wider public's imagination and turn an approach into a movement for change.

At Vitsoe the values of its owner are in full view. If you wish to get any idea across, make sure you have it to hand to demonstrate your point. Products can be immensely powerful

My generation of designers experienced the decline and abandonment of the vast proportion of the skills-based manufacturing industry that once provided the economic and social foundations of communities the length and breadth of the UK. Today the economic model which the world subsequently placed its faith in, has exacted a price. In a little over three decades the degradation of the global environment and national economies all over our planet has led to an international feeling of unease and in our neck of the woods it could be argued, led to Brexit, and in the USA, Donald Trump.

In western economies there's talk of re-balancing and making things again. All great soundbites – "The March of the Makers"/ "The Wisdom of the Hands"/ "The Northern Power House" but a little optimistic. There is no way



Opposite top | The 620 chair programme by Dieter Rams for Vitsoe (1962)

Opposite bottom | The 621 table by Dieter Rams for Vitsoe (1962), a partner piece to the 620 chair

Below | Exterior view of Vitsoe's recently opened Leamington Spa factory

emissaries for a wider outlook as a visit to Vitsoe's showroom or spectacular new factory will demonstrate. These products and their environment are crafted. From initial insight, to installation and ownership, there is an overriding sense that nothing has been left to chance. What always strikes me is that they look as fresh and modern as they must have done 50 odd years ago when they were designed. Clever, adaptable and as interesting as components as they are assembled, not only are the products beautiful, but they have undergone a quiet process of continual improvement and, unlike so many products, are designed to encourage engagement. When our shelving was delivered it came with a jig and spirit level to aid accurate installation and a postage-paid cardboard tube so it could be returned to base after use. These are delighters,

unexpected details, or aspects of service that make the owner feel valued and it seems to me that if we were to look at all products and services as Vitsoe do, then there's the basis for new business models which treat customers as valued partners not dumb, cash cows.

Last October I was invited to attend the opening of the new Vitsoe factory in Leamington Spa, on the fringes of an area that was once the manufacturing heartland of the UK. The Leamington factory seems to embody the very

Curiosity and enthusiasm provide the foundations of many of the exceptional individuals I've been lucky enough to know

values that Mark Adams espouses in its location, architecture, the working environment and the people who work there. It's unlike any factory I've ever been in: strikingly simple on arrival, with interesting features and materials close-up, but inside it's an industrial designer's paradise.

The atmosphere is palpable, rather like walking off the street into a fine church, calm, wonderful ethereal light, a huge central space, but then just look at the details. Based on the north light, saw tooth, weaving sheds of old (without the noise and dust) it's a beautiful product design, an adaptable system of parts assembled for now, but reconfigurable as required. Look up and marvel at the perfectly aligned cable supplying the smoke alarms on the face of each beam. I thought they were routed slots! It's a phenomenal achievement and a fitting home for a benchmark business.



Interestingly there were two events on the day. The first was for Vitsoe customers who'd taken the opportunity to buy a bond to help fund the factory development. That so many did speaks volumes. Vitsoe customers love Vitsoe. Vitsoe never lets them down and as a Vitsoe owner you are a de-facto member of a rather cool club. From Mark's standpoint the fact that so many responded to the call must have been utterly gratifying. The other vital part of the story are the Vitsoe team. It's a handpicked and unconventional group. Quirky, committed, affable, individual, interesting, interested, are words used to describe them and bearing in mind who was on the selection panel, you must add an eye for detail and an undeniable work ethic. This is in part because in a small organization people need to get on and of course have each other's backs and Mark has made it clear that the future of his company rests in the hands of its employees.

In a world of private equity myopia, at Vitsoe Mark has set out to create something for the long term. The plan is to structure future ownership in a way that rewards long-term commitment and protects the company and the team from predatory paws. This is inspired: an enlightened, generous, sensible thing to do. Imagine if a tiny fraction of the dosh lavished on the flighty, financial speculators who caused such damage

It's a phenomenal achievement and a fitting home for a benchmark business

to their country was, as he suggests, offered in tax incentives to businesses who wish to follow Vitsoe's lead.

And so, I'm arriving at the crux of this piece. A short prologue to the story of a rare individual whose doggedness has created something important. Somehow we've ended up with a world which over complicates everything. We all feel it, and our daily experiences confirm as much. If we are to have a future that allows us to lead worthwhile, productive lives with some degree of dignity, it requires visionary 'doers'.

There's no shortage of thinkers/ writers/ conference attendees/ bureaucrats and bull shitters, telling us what's wrong, but we desperately need inspirational individuals who are not only prepared to 'think' differently, but get off their backsides and demonstrate what this means. At Vitsoe there is such an individual, who, helped by a wonderful team, has fashioned something extraordinary.

Mark Adams and Dieter Rams deserved each other: their ideas and values are right for this time and Vitsoe is a great testament to their relationship. The design profession, Design Council, and the various bodies and institutions that make a living from design should wake up and make sure the Vitsoe message is heard and as the self-appointed number one fan, if a Vitsoe movement for change gets off the ground, I'm joining! |

Adrian Stokes is a practitioner, thinker and occasional design writer. He is the principal of asa designers limited.

www.asadesigners.com

Opposite | Inside the Learnington factory
Below | The 'Sorry no Sale' message is a playful testament to the longevity of Vitsoe's products

