

Mediation as Mating Game

Courting designers in corporate design museums

Sabina Maria Michaëlis
University of Southern Denmark
Kolding

Abstract: *In branding and retail literature the power of the museum format has become evident through studies of various spaces for unfolding the retail spectacle. The classic scenery for spectacular retailing is the brand flagship store, and a specialized section of these that add ‘historical linkage and museum-like characteristics’ in the building of brand identity are identified as brand museums (Hollenbeck et al 2008: 336-41).*

Both Vitra Design Museum (1989) and Kartellmuseum (1999) are corporate museums relating strongly to a brand, respectively industrial furniture manufacturers Vitra and Kartell. As such the museums are part of mediation platforms that also include flagship stores, trade fair exhibitions and biographic publications, as the most immediate channels of cultural corporate positioning. Both are governed by companies that are strategically structured around collaborations with independent designer studios for the development of the brand’s product portfolio. The companies thus depend upon their ability to attract and tie prestigious designers to their enterprise. Analysis suggests that these two publically accessible brand museums are a vital means to this end. In both cases the museum act as a platform for articulating each company as an innovator and precursor of the design profession, securing them a head start in the designer-manufacturer mating game.

Keywords: design museums, corporate museums, Vitra, Kartell,

INTRODUCTION

A company or corporate museum can be defined as “a corporate facility with tangible objects and/or exhibitions displayed in a museum-like setting, that communicates the history, operations and/or *interests* of a company to employees, guests, costumers, and/or the public” (Danilov, 1991, italics added). In most cases what is collected relates to the company business, but museums are increasingly utilized to position the company through mediating the special interests of its leading figures, resulting in corporate collections of e.g. fine art, antiques, cars and lately also design.

This paper explores how industrial furniture manufacturers Vitra and Kartell are positioning themselves in the design profession through corporate museum mediation. It is suggested that this strategy is primarily aimed at building attractive partnerships.

Theoretical Framework

In retail and branding literature, studies of branded spaces such as the brand museum tend to focus on the brand-consumer relationship. The consumer's opportunity to learn about the brand is presented in brand museums as a privileged experience, and the legitimizing role of the overall museum institution is central to this strategy (Kozinets et al 2002; Hollenbeck et al 2008; Borghini et al 2009). According to Borghini et al. (2009) "...presenting something with a historical, traditional set of values in a museum case is sure to get your consumers' attention" (373).

Organization studies (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012) assert that corporate museums are also utilized for building loyalty and a sense of corporate identity in employees, without the museum necessarily being charged with a branding assignment towards external communities. Corporate museums create the experience of prestige through the demonstration of heritage and continuance and, in fact, much of the corporate communication that appears to be aimed at external audiences is actually projecting favourable images to and strengthening the identification among corporate members (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

This paper is based on a Ph.D. chapter that focuses on the mediation in and of corporate design museums for the purpose of determining their relation to end consumers (1). Analysis of the (personified) corporate capacities expressed in PR films, press releases, websites, catalogues and books promoting the museum activity, heavily indicates that the purpose of both Vitra Design Museum and Kartellmuseo is to strengthen the relation to prospective creative partners rather than to the end consumer.

Kartellmuseo

The Kartellmuseo opened on occasion of Kartell's 50th anniversary in 1999. It was installed in the original 2.500-m2 showroom at the company production plant and headquarter in Noviglio near Milan. Two years prior, Kartell had opened its first flagship store in the centre of Milan, clearing the headquarter showroom for a permanent display of the company archive. Approximately 1.000 objects, counting products, prototypes, documents and images, were selected for display, but the collected archive contains around 28.000 entries - primarily photographs - documenting the company history (Kartell.com, undated).

According to the mission statement, the museum is organized as a separate foundation and works in cooperation with other national and international cultural institutions (unnamed) towards public dissemination of 'knowledge of industrial design and its aesthetic and production processes' (Kartell.com, undated). The *declared* scope thus transcends that of merely branding; Kartellmuseo foundation sees itself as a key

player in (Italian) industrial design historiography. Italy's identity as industrial culture is clearly expressed in the national endorsement of company museums through the Museimpresa, the association of Italian company museums and archives founded in 2001, of which Kartellmuseo is a member. The story of Kartell then is presented as bigger than the company itself; In the words of CEO Claudio Luti, it is also the story of the city of Milan and its cultural elite in the postwar era - as the only time and place in which Kartell could have emerged (Storace & Holzwarth (eds.) 2012: 17)

Positioning Kartell at Kartellmuseo

The prominence afforded to designer individuals in the museum's printed output can hardly be overstated; the press release names 89 designers individually to have worked with Kartell over the years (Kartellmuseo, 2016) – an interesting strategy for an announcement of the museum itself. Especially considering the stated mission to mediate 'production and use of a product in a cultural system'. The ambition, then, is to transgress the conventional idolization of authorship in popular culture. Instead the mediation seems to rely on *designer magnetism*, and designers are articulated almost as a sort of Kartell inventory. They even feature in the press release front-page among other key museum figures.

Kartell founder Giulio Castelli was a chemical engineer and as manufacturer Kartell identifies with technological innovation. It is therefore conspicuous that designer individuals are given such massive attention while technological personnel and partners – beyond Castelli - receive none. Rather than mediate the production of design as a cultural system this approach reproduces the Pevslian dogma of instating *the designer* as the one true – heroic - source of design. Privileging *the designer* in the story of Kartell has obvious advantages in terms of imagining future communities. This brings us to look at how Kartell as company and the Kartellmuseo are articulated in relation to other cultural positions in the design field.

The Kartellmuseo catalogue (Kartell, 2015) perpetually portrays a company of innovation and prestige. In the 63 editorial pages (of a 121 in total) there are 17 claims made to products being the 'first ever in the world' of their specific kind. The accentuation of records broken is outspoken, perhaps to the point where it jeopardises the soundness innovation criteria, as when the La Marie is hailed as 'the first plastic chair that, because of its transparency, could be placed in any environment in the home with furniture of any style (...)'. The catalogue contains at least 20 individual mentions of award wins - *beyond* the initial statement on page 2 that Kartell has collected more than 100 prizes over the years, and the specified listing of 36 'selected awards' that concludes the catalogue (p 114-115). The prestigious Compasso d'Oro Award, which Kartell has received 9 times, is emphasised throughout. And so is the recognition of the Kartellmuseo itself. In fact both the catalogue and the press release state in the very *second* sentence,

that the museum was awarded the Guggenheim Enterprise and Culture Trophy in 2000. In the catalogue this information is immediately followed by testimonials about Kartellmuseum by prominent design museum personalities, such as Jane Pavitt of the V&A, Paola Antonelli of MoMA, and Deyan Sudjic of The Design Museum.

This is one way in which the catalogue works to inscribe Kartellmuseum into the international design museum scene. Another is through references to Kartell's inclusion in international museum exhibitions and permanent museum collections (MoMA 1972, Centre Pompidou 2000). This theme is repeated in the catalogue on 5 individual accounts. The press release lists 23 museums in Europe and North America with Kartell products in their holdings. Again, promoting the Kartellmuseum through positioning it in relation to other 'well reputed' museums is a noteworthy tactic of creating prestige and social recognition. First of all, it creates an image of Kartell as a prospect among leading museum institutions, as though the company itself is destined for cultural greatness. Such a message is surely effective in aiding employees to identify with Kartell SpA. Secondly, there is an aspect of imagining future collaborations in articulating a high level of cultural prestige *and* a perpetual acknowledgement of named designers within the same framework of the Kartell company.

Prizewinning products are emphasized in the catalogue to an extent that entertains the thought that this is representative of the entire Kartell portfolio. It displays a certain sort of ambition and attitude that makes Kartell an attractive collaborator to designers of reputation – or looking to build one. The enormous potential of this strategy is exemplified in another company museum, the Vitra Design Museum, to which we shall turn next.

Vitra Design Museum

Vitra Design Museum (VDM) opened in 1989 and was founded on the private furniture collection of Rolf Fehlbaum, the former Vitra CEO and son of company founder Willi Fehlbaum. The collection was originally intended for entertainment on business related plant tours only, but Frank Gehry's iconic museum-like design for the separate gallery sparked the idea for a business campus dedicated to architecture and open to the public. VDM has no publically declared mission statement, but the museum website holds detailed information about the scope and premise of the collection, as does the book chapters by Sudjic (2008), von Vegesack (2008) and Wilk (1996).

As design museum collection the Vitra collection is dominated by Fehlbaum's personal predisposition towards modernist furniture design. This issue is addressed is addressed with transparency by the museum biographers mentioned above; instead of making claims to objectivity and exhaustiveness, Fehlbaum is promoted as the passionate mastermind behind the enterprise, and the validity of the collecting scope is then generated through establishing Fehlbaum as an authority on the matter of design and architecture. His taste, passion and dedication towards design, and furniture design

especially, are articulated as the sanctioning focal points that make up for what the collection may lack in range (Michaëlis, 2016).

Positioning Vitra at Vitra Design Museum

The museum does not consider itself a corporate museum, since the object collection is not limited to Vitra's own production. There is, however conspicuous convergence between the designers celebrated in exhibitions and the company's product portfolio, e.g. ten out of nineteen monographic shows held between 1997 and 2016 portray Vitra-affiliated designers (Michaëlis, 2016).

To regard the VDM as unrelated to Vitra's marketing structure is thus naïve, as Wilk put it: "...the Museum has undeniably grown into valuable affirmation of the passion for design felt by Vitra's owner... the message is clear; Vitra is a company dedicated to design. ...It also, not incidentally, aligns current production with the most significant work of previous decades" (1996: 15). Even if Vitra's own products do not take centre stage the museum is 'a celebration and reinforcement of the firm's activities' (ibid p. 16); today, this interpretation extends to the entire Vitra Campus. I agree with Wilk that the beneficial relationship does not by default detract from the museum's integrity, but awareness of this circumstance is essential and must be acknowledged. Perhaps the corporate value of cultural enterprise is best understood through looking at the museum in the context of the entire Vitra Campus.

Vitra Campus refers to the company production ground in Weil am Rhein, Germany. After a devastating fire in 1981 the factory had to be completely rebuilt. Fehlbaum then decided to commission a structure of architectural significance, first from Nicholas Grimshaw and then Gehry (1989, 2003). The Vitra Campus has since been graced with eye-catching work of Tadao Ando (1993), Zaha Hadid (1993) and Herzog & de Meuron (2010, 2016), to name a few.

According to Fehlbaum, the campus as architectural melting pot emerged organically and was never a conscious strategy. He is, nonetheless because of it, recognized far and wide as a courageous and pioneering patron of contemporary architecture and design. The fact that the 'Campus architects' are all but one Pritzker Prize winners caused one critic to name Fehlbaum 'an architectural talent scout' with a neck for handpicking architects on the rise (Kailay, 2010). This sort of recognition has helped Vitra reach the point of critical mass, where the campus and company as a whole represents a larger cultural significance than its individual constituent parts. And so, instead of Vitra looking to position itself through architecture, it has become a site for architects and designers to position themselves. The Campus facilitates a mutual commitment between the company and its prominent designing partners. In publicity movies like *The Project Vitra* (Vitra, ca. 2010) and *A Film about Vitra* (Vitra, ca. 2016) Fehlbaum expresses his high regard

for the design profession and in return Jongerius, Ogersby and the Campana brothers all explain Vitra as *the* creative Mecca of the furniture industry.

VitraHaus

Due to lack of space the museum no longer has a permanent display of the museum collection and therefore the role as corporate museum has been blurred. In fact, the cultural brand mediation is replaced to the commercial sector of the Campus, at the flagship store known as VitraHaus. VitraHaus has been misidentified as ‘the other Vitra museum’ (Weirup, 2015), presumably because several typical ‘museum-signifiers’ are in play. For one, the building by Herzog & de Meuron is of a distinct character (fig. 1). Secondly, the ground floor holds a restaurant and a gift shop, which slightly obscures the fact that it is all a store. Also at ground floor the Lounge Chair Ateliers serves as a small visitor’s centre dedicated to the Eames lounge chair; here the visitor can learn about the story and production process of a true ‘Vitra Classic’.

Figure 1. VitraHaus (2014). Photo: Author



VDM may escape a traditional definition as brand museum because mediation of the company story is not a prime trajectory. This element is inserted into VitraHaus instead. In a narrow hallway at the second-top level visitors encounter a wall-length time-line

installation (fig. 2). This wall features the story of the Vitra Company from the foundation in 1934 to the present day, told through the collaborations with prominent designers and architects that have shaped the company over the years. Divided into decades, the wall displays products – life size and from the Vitra miniature collection – by Ray & Charles Eames, George Nelson, Alexander Girard and Verner Panton. In between the products are numerous photostats portraying the designers at work or socializing with each other or with Vitra personalities; a visual effect that entertains the image of the Vitra Company as a family of creative individuals.

Vitra's history is communicated in details in video footage shown on small tablet screens. Removable study cards illustrate the greatest advantage of mediating the company history in the store; every product on the wall is in current standard production and can be handled. There is no 'hands off' indication anywhere and the removable study cards underline this privilege. In this way the museum-like installation, set in a commercial framework, successfully mediates the company's design historical significance, while overcoming the ambivalence that regularly occurs in proper museum displays of functional objects.

Figure 2. Vitra Company time-line in VitraHaus (2014). Photo: Author



CONCLUSION

Both Kartellmuseum and Vitra Design Museum are scrupulously positioning their patron companies as industrial epicentres of design creativity and prestige. In the case of Kartell this narrative is built through a strong emphasis on award winnings and international museum community recognition. In the case of Vitra the VDM is only the spearhead of the cultural positioning that takes place in the collected Vitra Campus, which has long since received the attention of international popular and professional media.

In both cases designers are emphasized as special stakeholders in the company history of success. This focus constructs Kartell and Vitra as solid platforms for designers to build a reputation and it entertains the notion that a creative collaboration with either one leads to cultural recognition in an

ENDNOTES

1. The analysis in this paper is extracted from my Ph.D. *Articulating Design in design Museum*, submitted for assessment to the IDK/SDU on May 26th 2016. In my dissertation the corporate museum properties are compared to historicised communication to end consumers in designated retail environments.

REFERENCES

- Danilov, V. J. (1991). *Corporate museums, galleries, and visitor centers : a directory*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Hollenbeck, C. R., Peters, C., & Zinkhan, G. M. (2008). Retail Spectacles and Brand Meaning: Insights from a Brand Museum Case Study. *RETAIL Journal of Retailing*, 84(3), 334-353.
- Kailay, S. S. (2010, 28.2.). Den arkitektoniske talentspejder. *Berlingske Tidende*, p. 16.
- Kartell. (2015). Kartellmuseum. In Kartellmuseum (Ed.), (pp. 112 illustrated). Noviglio, Milano: Kartell. Kartell.com. (undated). Kartellmuseum.
<http://www.kartell.com/experience/en/pages/museum/> retrieved 28.8.2016
- Kartellmuseum. (2016). CS ENG Kartellmuseum [Press release]
- Kozinets, R. V., Sherry, J. F., DeBerry-Spence, B., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., & Storm, D. (2002). Themed flagship brand stores in the new millennium. *Journal of Retailing Journal of Retailing*, 78(1), 17-29.
- Michaëlis, S. (2016). *Articulating Design in Design Museums*. Department of Design and Communication. University of Southern Denmark. Kolding.
- Nissley, N., & Casey, A. (2002). The Politics of the Exhibition: Viewing Corporate Museums Through the Paradigmatic Lens of Organizational Memory. *BJOM British Journal of Management*, 13(S2), S35-S45.
- Stigliani, I., & Ravasi, D. (2012). Organizational artefacts and the expression of identity in corporate museums at Alfa-Romeo, Kartell, and Piaggio. In L. Lerpold (Ed.), *Organizational identity in practice* (pp. 197-214). London; New York: Routledge.
- Sudjic, D. (2008). The Vitra Design Museum. Collections and mission. In C. Windlin & R. Fehlbaum (Eds.), *Project Vitra : sites, products, authors, museum, collections, signs; chronology, glossary* (pp. 257-263). Basel: Birkhäuser.

- VeGESack, A. (2008). Origins and holdings of the Vitra Design Museum collections. In C. Windlin & R. Fehlbaum (Eds.), *Project Vitra : sites, products, authors, museum, collections, signs; chronology, glossary* (pp. 299-304). Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Vitra (Producer). (ca. 2010, 16.5.2016). The Project Vitra. [Film] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMpUjuoEQuM>
- Vitra (Producer). (ca. 2016, 16.5.2016). A Film about Vitra. [Film] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsRJbCTt7pg>
- Weirup, T. (2015, 28.8.). I Vitra-land. *Berlingske Tidende*.
- Wilk, C. (1996). Introduction. In A. v. VeGESack, P. Dunas, M. Schwartz-Clauss, & M. Vitra Design (Eds.), *100 masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum collection* (pp. 13-16). Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum.