The Stubbornness of Space
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Between 1977 and 1979, the architect and later TED founder Richard Saul Wurman, the late graphic designer Massimo Vignelli, and longtime Knoll executive Christine Raie conducted interviews with some 60 figures from Knoll’s first 40 years. They spoke both to major protagonists—such as the company’s founders and chief designers—as well as to executives, clients, and factory operators. The transcripts, originally destined for an A-to-Z compendium, were ultimately excerpted and appear sprightly in the 1981 book Knoll Design, edited by Eric Larrabee and Massimo Vignelli.

What follows are selections from an oral history, told by some of the 20th century’s great designers, that maps a network of their close-knit personal and professional relationships. Their accounts are illuminating, critical, and sometimes conflicting; taken together, as the editors note, they are “often Rashomon-esque,” with “moments of classic tragedy, failure, and success.” To immerse oneself in Knoll’s origin stories is, they write, “to experience the zeitgeist of the last forty years of design accomplishment and growth in America.”

GORDON BUNSCHAFT
I first met Hans Knoll when he came into our office at the last 57th, I think in the winter of 1937. He was just in from Germany and was selling a special flat spring for upholstered seats. I was new and our office had just started and we were interested in furniture for buildings at the World’s Fair in New York in 1938–39. I told him we weren’t interested in springs, we were interested in seats. He was a young fellow, very blonde, very enthusiastic, just beginning.

Later, 1939 or ’40, I was out in Chicago staying at the Stevens Hotel and I used to see this lady in the dining room, who ... turned out to be Shu [Florence] Knoll. I never spoke to her there, but I met her later in New York, about 1941, when she was working for Hans. He had developed a showroom on Madison and she was working there as a designer.

FLORENCE KNOLL
My relationship with the company started during the war with some special interiors for Hans Knoll, who was just starting out in the business here in New York. He had one good chair that he brought over from Germany ... the design is no longer in existence. I don’t think there are any photographs of it. It’s a shame, because it is still one of the finest chairs. It had a marvelous spring system which has never quite been equaled. We were never able to produce it in the beginning because the steel that was needed was not available. It was wartime.

I was working in an architectural office here in New York ... having just come from the Illinois Institute of Technology where I had gotten my architectural education with Mies van der Rohe. I was working in architectural offices here in the city and started moonlighting, in a sense, doing these extra jobs on my own time, for Hans as an interior space planner and designer.

Before that, I had been at Cranbrook. There were many people there, it was a fantastic group. Charlie Eames was there, Eero Saarinen and people like Ed Bacon, who was a fantastic city planner of Philadelphia; Harry Weese, an excellent architect from Chicago; Ken Baldwin, an excellent interior planner. It was a diverse and very interesting group.

Harry Bertoia was there. He came as a silversmith. He gradually got involved, as everyone did at Cranbrook, in all forms of design.

HARRY BERTOIA
My first encounter with Shu was at Cranbrook. It occurred at Eliel Saarinen’s home. I was a student, and since the student body was perhaps thirty-five at that time, naturally you met everyone. My meeting with Shu was kind of marvelous. When I entered the home, she was reclining on a big beautiful Saarinen sofa. It was a brief encounter. She was a student, I think, both architecture and design. That was my first contact with what later became Knoll.

PETER BLAKE
About the beginning of 1943, I came to New York and went to work as a junior writer for Architectural Forum. One day, Howard Myerson, who was the editor and publisher, told me that he was friendly with a man named Hans Knoll who was making some new furniture out of parachute webbing and whatever wood he could lay his hands on. Howard suggested I go over and meet him. I went to the showroom at 58th and Madison, a funny little room. He had developed a showroom on Madison and she was working there as a designer.

GEORGE NELSON
I first saw him about 1940 or so. I was working at the top of the old Time and Life building and we were on a balcony. I remember Hans huffing his way up with a chair of Risom’s on his back. I remember a moment when he showed me a check from...
The Planning Unit existed because of my background in architecture. It was the very first furniture company [that] ever had a planning department. This came from my special interests. Expansion came from Hans — who was an empire builder.

**HERBERT MATTER**

I was in California in 1945. One day Hans wrote a letter and said he would like to see me and he came to California. Actually, the first few ads were done by Alvin Lustig. I really don’t know how he heard about me. He knew about Eames, perhaps he heard about that. So Hans came to Santa Monica to see me and Shu came also. Somehow I decided I would come back to New York and I would come to see him and start to work. As a company, I had never heard of it before. When we came back to New York in 1946, I started to work right away. First was the trademark, then some booklets and ads, especially the catalogues.

**FLORENCE KNOLL**

We had various designers in New York working on our ads — Alvin Lustig, who has since died, and Paul Horan, and I never liked what they did. I was completely dissatisfied. Their work just seemed frivolous or not strong enough. I had seen some of Herbert Matter’s work and decided it was what I wanted. I flew out to California. He was working with Charlie Eames on furniture and graphics. I went out to see him about doing our ads. He said yes, he was very interested. I think it was just the thing he needed, he wanted to come back east. That’s how it all started, and we worked together beautifully. We were doing many, many years ago...
Herbert Matter advertisement, ca. 1948, featuring his logo for the company, created the year prior.

Herbert Matter’s “chimney sweep” ad for Eero Saarinen’s Womb Chair, ca. 1955. The ad ran on the inside front cover of The New Yorker’s anniversary edition from 1958 to 1971.

The Mies van der Rohe Collection

Richard Schultz

The thing that is now such great fashion, namely graphics in interiors. The showrooms were done in combination. We designed it together in the sense that we had a wall made of string. He designed the string thing and I designed the structure for it. In the showroom on Madison Avenue, we created a space in the entrance where the big case became a whole wall of design. I consulted him about colors for the showrooms and we worked together.

RICHARD SCHULTZ

We used to go over to the Knoll showroom as students and turn the chairs over and look at them. It was an exciting period—1949 or 1950—just after the war when everything was starting to move. Eero’s Womb Chair—the whole thing was exciting. That whole period in my life was exciting because I had gone in the wrong direction. I had gone two years to Engineering School and was very unhappy with that. When I got to the Institute of Design, I really liked it. We were very conscious in that school of being an extension of the Bauhaus.

HERBERT MATTER

I was in Basel in a railroad station and suddenly a chimney sweep on his bicycle passed by and made a very strong impression. When I was back here and thinking about an ad, it came to my mind. At that time, Martha Kai worked in the Promotion Department so I worked with her. Through her connections, she knew a Shakespearean actor… so we chose him to be the chimney sweep and he was wonderful. We used him afterwards as a juggler too, the one who juggles three chairs. Hans was really excited when I showed him, and Shu was absolutely against it. She did not think it was dignified. This was not exactly her idea of an ad. The ad was received very well. I think it was probably the most striking ad we did.

FLORENCE KNOLL

We saw Eero constantly, of course. He was like my brother and we talked a lot in those days. One thing led to another [in] the development of the furniture. His first one was in laminated wood because we weren’t able to get other materials. That was a perfectly nice chair, but it wasn’t one of the great successes. I don’t know what it was called. It was the only laminated wood chair he did.

Then the advent of fiberglass came along. Eero was working on that approach; but—this all sounds simple now—in those days, it was very, very difficult. We finally found a ship builder in New Jersey and he was working in fiberglass. We got excited about it and Eero developed the Womb Chair. This was at my specific request because I was sick and tired of these chairs that held you in one position. We were just bowled over.

Richard Schultz

American, born 1926. Richard Schultz participated in and earned mention in one of the Museum of Modern Art’s many Good Design competitions in the 1950s. A crucial member of the Bertoia team at Knoll, he was tapped to develop several outdoor designs to complement the wire-form chairs. His 1966 “Leisure Collection” of outdoor furniture initiated at the request of Florence Knoll for her Florida home is a modern classic.
Margot Weller is an Associate Strategist at the design firm 2×4. She has worked as a researcher at Knoll and as a Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA.

Marcel Breuer American, born Hungary, 1902-1981. Bauhaus student and teacher, architect, and furniture designer Marcel Breuer immigrated to the United States in 1937. Several of his furniture designs were acquired by the company in 1939 with the acquisition of Italian manufacturer Gavina SpA. Breuer probably first encountered Florence Knoll when she worked under Walter Gropius.

GEORGE NELSON

I don’t know exactly what Mies thought about the importance of furniture, but he had designed these marvelous pieces and, as a result of the war and other things, nothing had been done with them. The first I heard of it, Hans and Shu invited my wife and I to a Sunday lunch at the Plaza with Mies. It was a marvelous time. He was a very quiet man and we didn’t really talk about furniture. He likes to talk about marble and was a great lover of marble and onyx. Knoll had the original drawings, and Hans gave me a set because I wanted to make a chair myself. The chair was too big for chroming so I have the only chair that got as far as nickel plating, but never chromed. The steel chairs Mies originally made are mortised at the corners with flush screws, so I had three made that way. The leather straps I had made by a harness man. This was prior to being put on the market. Knoll in turn developed it and made it in stainless, which is why I didn’t think was done originally. They still make it properly and with great care.

MARCEL BREUER

The naming of furniture is a general principle in industry. The automobiles all have names. Once, when I talked with [Dino] Gavina, he said, “We should have a name for this.” This was in the sixties. I said, “All right, what kind of name do you suggest?” He said you told me once that Wassily Kandinsky was the very first person who saw the first experimental chair. I said, “That’s true and he is a good friend of mine.” He said, “why don’t we call it the Wassily?” Then he said, “you have a daughter don’t you. What is her name?”

I said, “she has an Italian name, Francesca. We called her Cesca.” He said, “let’s call the other chairs Cesca.” “Then these benches,” he said. “Do you have a nickname?” I said, “Marcel use officially, my middle name is Lakó.” We called the benches Lakó. He misunderstood the name and in the catalogs he used something like Lefko. That’s how the chairs got their names.

FLORENCE KNOLL

If you look at Herman Miller’s and Knoll’s work, not now but earlier, they took one approach and we took another. Ours was based on planning, [which] was due to me. I saw the development of furniture in sense of need. Charlie Eames and George Nelson saw it more in the sense of an individual piece. When I say need, I mean for a total job. I would say to Eero, for example, “There isn’t a decent office chair, swivel chair, we need one. That’s what we must do.” I felt the need for a nice, big, curling-up chair because there wasn’t one on the market. Charlie designed a chair from the same interest, of course, but they designed more as individual pieces rather than as a cohesive thing for a whole job.

GEORGE NELSON

Recently, I heard some gossip that Herman Miller had been asked to interest itself in acquiring Knoll. I think that would be the worst thing that could possibly happen, because the co-existence of Miller and Knoll is what made Knoll unique. The automobiles all have names. Our reaction is one of much less obvious unity – this connects with complexity and contradiction. It also connects with a variety of symbolism we now allow. We now say taste is relative. We read Herb Gann and agree with him that there are a number of taste cultures. There is not just one taste culture, which is the idea, which is usually upper middle class taste. There is upper middle, lower middle, upper lower, etc. We also say that we react against the forced simplicity of modern architecture. All I’m leading up to is ... when we do a building we do not expect the obvious conformity between the architecture and the interior design based on these two things: [one, that] architecture should be complex and contradictory, and two, [that] it also can involve several taste cultures. You can even mix taste cultures. It can happen in the landscape and it should and can happen in your own living room with furniture. In general, our approach has been that we assume our interiors were not so controlled. We have done interiors where we mix an antique with very good 18th-century reproductions with Knoll International and classic modern.

WE are doing a line of upholstered and non-upholstered furniture — chairs, desks, and things. Essentially, it will be what I was saying before, [that] we are modern architects but we are also eclectics and that is our approach to it.