

German Design 1949–1989

Two Countries, One History





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An exhibition by the Vitra Design Museum,
the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden
and the Wüstenrot Foundation.

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Introduction



More than thirty years after the German reunification, the exhibition »German Design 1949–1989: Two Countries, One History« reconstructs, for the first time, a complete history of German design in the post-war period. The exceptional case of Germany’s »double history« allows us to compare the role of design in different sociopolitical conditions, with a particular focus on the distinct worlds of capitalism and socialism. Without losing sight of this unprecedented division and the implications it had for German society, the exhibition seeks to unite the two countries in a shared history as a means to examine the parallels and links between them.

To this day, the legacy of a divided Germany is a highly sensitive subject, and few exhibitions have attempted to combine the two narratives into a single account. Specifically, the importance of design in Germany during its forty-year division has yet to feature as the focus of a comprehensive exhibition touring international venues: »German Design 1949–1989« sets out to change this. By taking a broad approach – with exhibits ranging from everyday items, fashion, and furniture to automobiles – the show demonstrates the impact of design on everyday life on both sides of the Berlin Wall, while also highlighting its extraordinary value as a tool for reconstruction, nation-building, and propaganda in Cold War Germany.

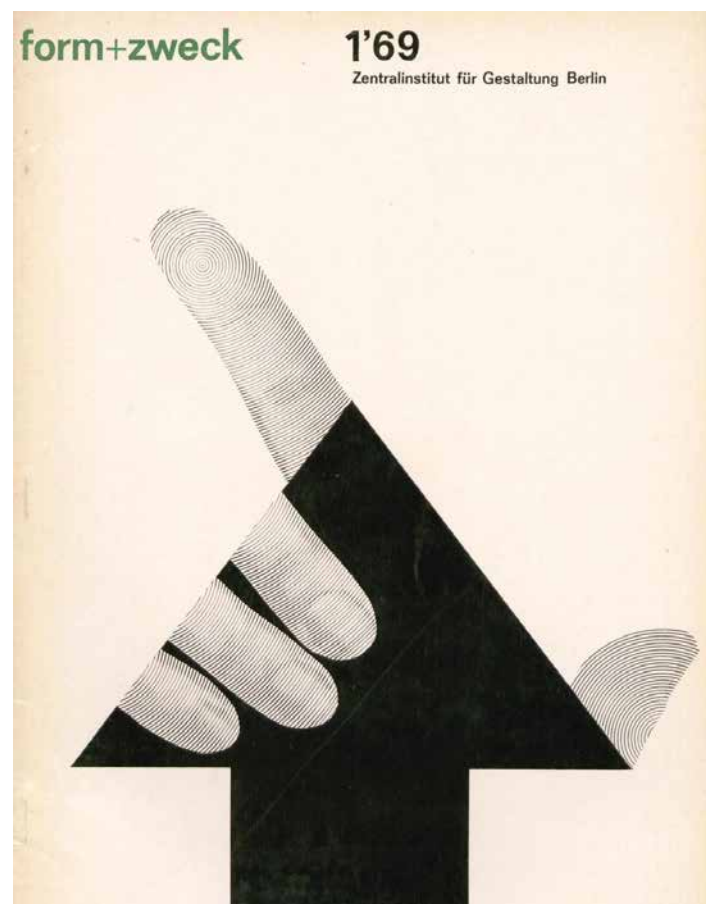
PREVIOUS PAGE:
Interior view of the Palast der Republik in Berlin, 1977

ABOVE:
Construction of the Berlin Wall between Potsdamer Platz and Lindenstrasse, 1961

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
East and West German people celebrate the end of the Cold War on top of the Berlin Wall on November 12, 1989

The inner German border near Travemünde, 1959





Exhibition

Beginning in the twentieth century, design from Germany achieved worldwide recognition thanks to the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus, both of which were forced to close by the National Socialist government after 1933. With the exception of the main protagonists of post-war modernism such as Dieter Rams, Hans Gugelot, and others centred around the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, most accounts of German design generally lose traction after the forties, while many others diminish or omit the East German position altogether. Generally, the exhibition »German Design 1949–1989: Two Countries, One History« seeks to pick up where such narratives leave off, filling in the blanks of design history in a divided Germany by re-introducing forgotten – or virtually unknown – design practitioners from both East and West and situating them within the canon.

The division of Germany lasted for a mere forty years but it has had a long-lasting impact on society in both parts of the country. While it is now one entity, it is nonetheless made up of two historical halves that are each full of nuances, contradictions, and myriad perspectives. The exhibition takes as its starting point the contradictions and differences that characterize each side, yet it goes further than merely highlighting traditional narratives of separation and division between the two states, focusing instead on a critical assessment of their links. Although incompatible political systems were imposed on the GDR and the FRG by outside forces, the two – perhaps unsurprisingly – maintained fascinatingly similar approaches to design, exemplified, above all, by the value they each placed on (re)constructing a sophisticated material culture and, ultimately, on improving their standing in the eyes of the rest of the world. The first undertaking of its kind, »German Design 1949–1989« invites future exhibitions to engage with this topic: this show is just the beginning.



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE:
Philipp Rosenthal presents the Bofinger Chair as the winner of the Rosenthal Studio Award to former Chancellor Ludwig Erhard and Walter Gropius, 1966

Dietrich Otte, Cover for form + zweck No. 1/69, 1969

VEB Textilkombinat Cottbus, East German women's fashion, 1978

ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Peter Ghyczy, Garden Egg Chair, 1968

Erich Menzel, Chair No. 50642, 1949

»You know how I got the idea for my design after the war. We lived in ruins, there was chaos everywhere. We wanted to clean up. We wanted to reduce design to the essential, we wanted to create transparency, democracy. Today we are again at a point where we have to clean up and create transparency.«

Dieter Rams



Context and Clichés



In the first space of the exhibition, photographs and film give a sense of the historical context of a divided Germany and highlight contemporary critical debates on the topic, exemplified by such categories as »Division«, »Reunification«, and »German Design«.

The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 marked the final division of the socialist GDR (German Democratic Republic) from the capitalist FRG (Federal Republic of Germany). The two newly formed countries had their own passports and currency, while the now iconic traffic-light figures from East and West Berlin symbolise the creation of two German points of view from a shared perspective. Furthermore, looking at film material depicting everyday life from each side of divided Germany in the four decades after World War II presents a paradox: inherently different realities that nonetheless bear many striking similarities.

To engage more fully with the topic of »German Design« and expand its definition, it is important to look at East and West German designers’ shared adherence to functionalism and industrial production, which grew out of the pre-war work of modernist greats such as Mies van der Rohe and Wilhelm Wagenfeld. Overall, it is revealing to consider the work of East and West German designers as an ongoing dialogue with their shared heritage. The space includes various object pairings which highlight additional links between the two countries’ design worlds during their 40-year division.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was one of the most unforgettable global events of the twentieth century. A great deal has transpired in the more than thirty years since German Reunification and there is still acute sensitivity about the topics of (East and West) German cultural identity, memory, and material culture today. This is accentuated by the negative effects of what many still consider a »takeover«, including population shifts, economic exploitation, and forms of cultural colonialism.



PREVIOUS PAGE:
Hans (Nick) Roericht, Stacking Tableware
TC 100, 1959

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:
Dieter Rams, World Receiver T 1000, 1963
Karl Peglau, Designs for the East German
Ampelmännchen, 1961

ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Guido Zimmermann, Cuckoo Block Hamburg –
Kirchdorf Süd, 2019
Margarete Jahny and Erich Müller,
glass series »Europa«, 1964

Reconstruction and Shared Traditions

1949 – 1960

The total destruction of German cities and dwellings at the end of World War II was followed by a complete reset: the »zero hour« (Stunde Null). Even as millions of Germans moved back to the newly partitioned military zones post-1945 to find a lack of basic goods and housing, the Soviet and US occupation forces encouraged opposing ideologies for the two Germanies – either through investment or the threat of military force – and each of these quickly materialized in design. Historical material including books, film, images, posters, and flyers can be used to chart the deployment of design as a symbol for social and political rebirth in both East and West during reconstruction.

Yet, in the face of the growing ideological and political divide, both Germanies simultaneously prioritised the (re-)establishment of institutions devoted to design, including councils, schools, and manufacturers. Of these last, some had headquarters on each side of the border or an overlapping roster of East and West German designers at their service. Objects from both sides of the border thus enter into dialogue with one another, a reflection of the ongoing exchange between the two states during this period and testament to the influence of their shared pre-war modernist design heritage.

The period witnessed a growing shift from a reliance on natural resources and local craftsmanship toward the innovation of new materials and industrialised mass production. Many objects that have a striking similarity come with heavily loaded – and sometimes vastly opposing – political messages, inviting contemplation of design's invisible power. Each country used design as a means to set itself up as the more legitimate, »democratic«, and dynamic Germany disconnected from the unspeakable legacy of the National Socialist past and best positioned to lead the way forward into the future.

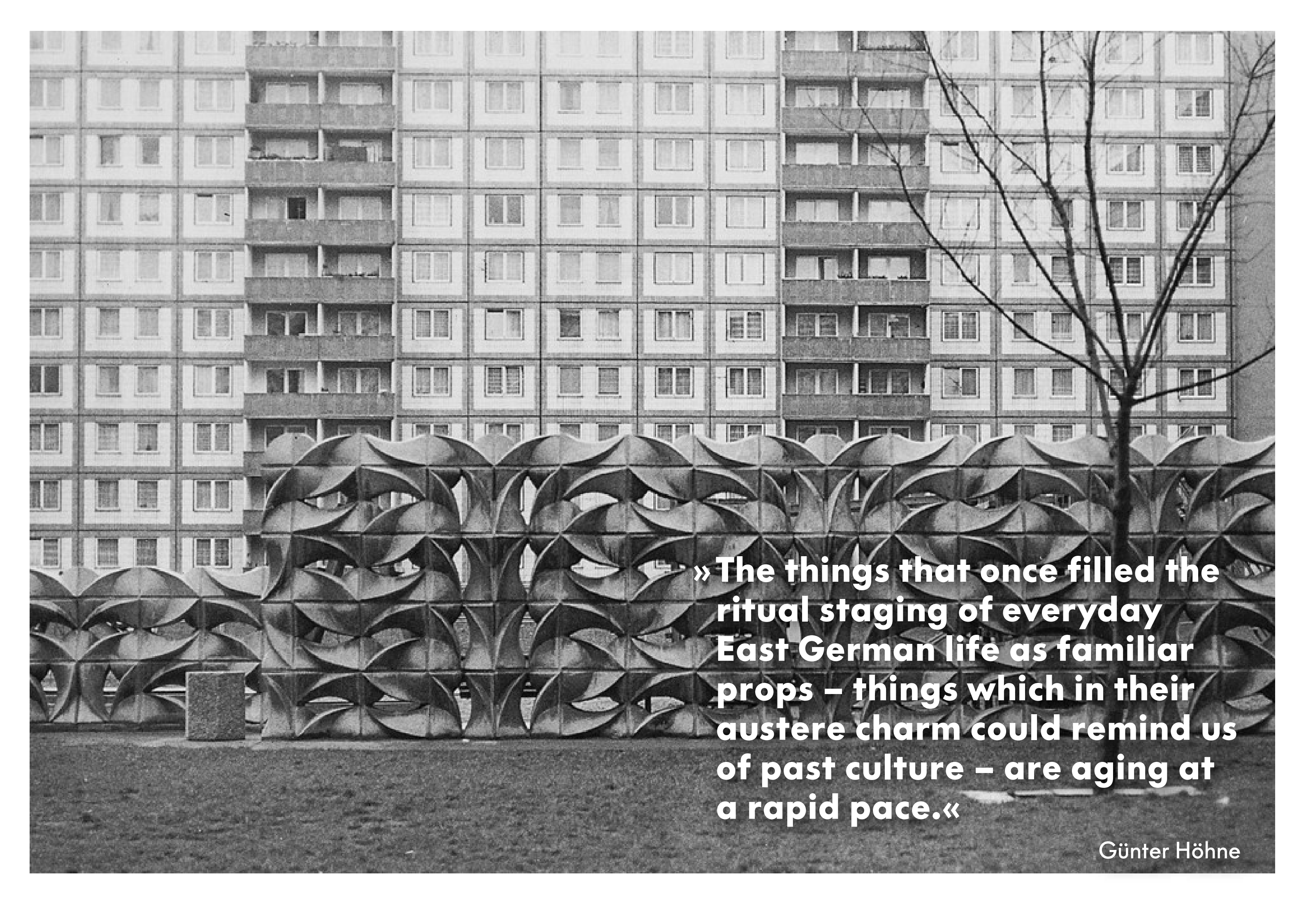


OPPOSITE PAGE:
Max Bill & Hans Gugelot, Ulmer Hocker, 1954

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE:
Max Buchartz in class at the Folkwang School of Design
Essen, c. 1955

Ernst Jupp, Poster for the Werkbund exhibition
»Neues Wohnen«, Cologne, 1949

Hans Brockhage and Erwin Andra,
children's swing cart, 1950



» The things that once filled the ritual staging of everyday East German life as familiar props – things which in their austere charm could remind us of past culture – are aging at a rapid pace.«

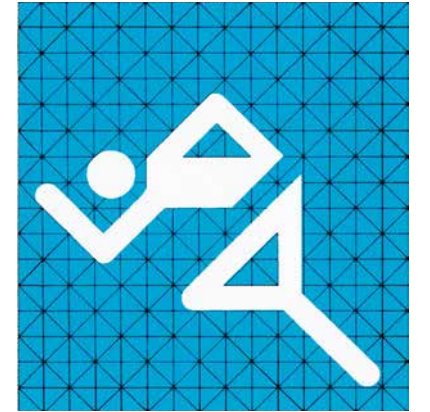
Günter Höhne

Division and Progress

1961 – 1972

The construction of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961 was one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. The heightened tensions of the period are visualised in different objects from East and West. Each Germany attempted to use design as a means to demonstrate its renewed sense of modernity to the world, while pursuing widely different goals. While design in the East was intended to fuel the socialist planned economy and make its products affordable for broad sections of the population, in the West it became a motor of the German export economy »Made in Germany«.

A long-overdue effort to eliminate housing shortages saw the introduction of prefabricated housing blocks (Plattenbau) in the GDR, ultimately settling all earlier debates surrounding the implementation of the modernist style. Specific furniture was created for the newly scaled-down, standardised East German private sphere, while public space was designed with an eye to beautification and ideological instrumentalisation – this can be seen, for example, in the showcase restaurant Café Moskau in East Berlin or the applied »art in architecture« crafted from mass-produced cinder blocks and colourful mosaics that can be found in other cities.



As a result of West Germany's rapid economic miracle (Wirtschaftswunder) during the 1950s, the 1960s heralded an era of innovative office design and sophisticated corporate identity concepts. The decade also saw an increase in mobility, and the West German automobile and airline industries gained worldwide attention, in part thanks to innovative design. With the help of Otl Aicher's bright and playful design concept for the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, the FRG aimed to present itself to the world as a democratic, liberal-minded nation detached from its pre-1945 predecessor. Yet in spite of the hopeful future unfolding in front of them, by the end of the 1960s, many young West German designers found themselves at odds with the mass consumer culture and political conservatism of the country, leading them to reassess their role – a shift in thinking that would be felt in design for decades to come.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Karl-Heinz Adler & Friedrich Kracht, Decorative concrete stone wall in Berlin-Marzahn, 1979

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Birkenstock, Trade fair advertising, 1972

Luigi Colani, Seat Units Zocker and Colani, 1971 and 1972/73

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:
Klaus Kuni, Flower Watering Cans, 1960

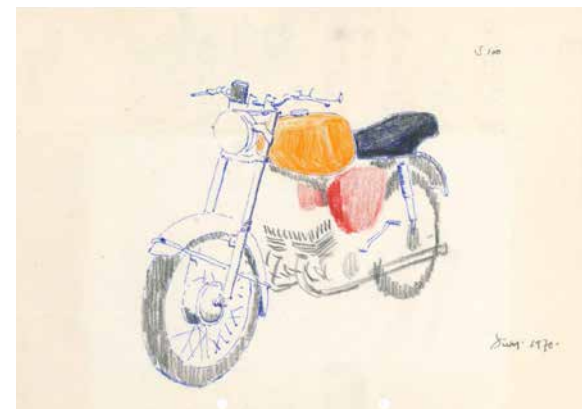
Otl Aicher & Rolf Müller, Runner pictogram for the Munich 1972 Olympic Games, 1967

Protest and Crisis

1973 – 1989

The »Peaceful Revolution« of 1989 marked the culmination of the period of Ostpolitik, during which relations between East and West Germany were increasingly normalised. This political thaw took place, in part, against a background of cutbacks and stagnant growth in both East and West following the international oil crisis of 1973. At the same time, the growing social, political, and ecological tensions inherited from the 1960s materialised as pointed critique in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the founding of the Green Party in the FRG and growing public resentment in the GDR. Whether as a response to the period's surplus or to shortage, designers in both Germanies each sought alternatives: in the West, opponents of mass consumer culture initiated critical approaches based on social need, do-it-yourself aesthetics, and sustainability; in the East, »open principles« of recycling and refitting goods prevailed, and housing shortages meant that a high percentage of rundown dwellings could be modernised (and thus personalised) through government subsidies.

Taking their cue from burgeoning subcultures, designers reflected on self-expression as a means to overcome the official, out-of-date design establishment in both Germanies: the exhibition presents a series of unique design objects – ranging from fashion and jewellery to one-off furniture pieces – that vividly portray the radical zeitgeist of the era and herald the death of »fuddy-duddy« functionalism. The role of the designer also shifted during this period: as industrial design production in the last two decades of the GDR's existence waned and the field became dependent on exporting cheap goods to its western neighbour, some designers initiated collaborative, small-scale production, while others grew frustrated and shifted their focus to other professions. In the FRG the establishment of firms like Frog Design saw the role of the designer broadening to become that of a service provider, consultant, or mediator, a change that was influential in redefining the profession around the world.



ABOVE:
Renate Müller, Therapeutic Childrens Toy »Hippo«, 1970

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE:
Ute Mahler, Fashion photograph for Sibylle, Minsk 1981
Stiletto, Consumer's Rest, 1983

Wilfriede Maaß & Karla Woisnitza, Tea Pot and Cup, 1987
Karl Clauss Dietel, Sketches for the Simoson-Mokick, 1970

Facts

Exhibits

Furniture and design objects, fashion, automobile-related design, books, magazines, drawings, prints, photographs, films, etc.

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Exhibition Tour

»German Design 1949–1989: Two Countries, One History« is available to international venues until approximately 2026. The exhibition travels including all exhibits, contextual films and images, exhibition architecture and all media equipment.

Exhibition Floor Space

600 – 1,000 m² / 6,000 – 10,000 sq ft

Dates

Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein
20 March 2021 – 5 September 2021

Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen Dresden
15 October 2021 – 20 February 2022

Tsinghua University Art Museum
10 January 2023 – 16 April 2023

Vienna Furniture Museum
13 September 2023 – 14 January 2024

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Installation Shots



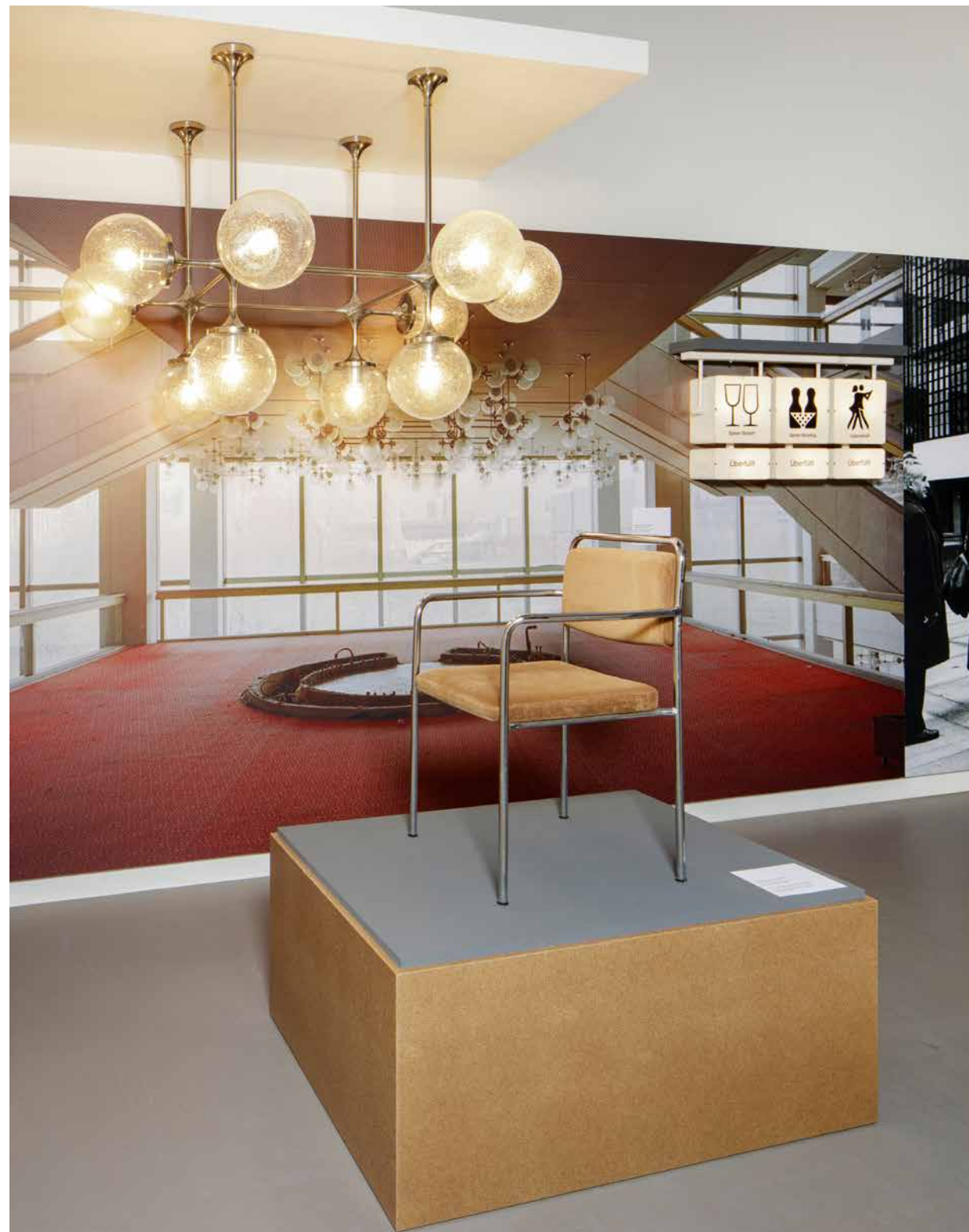












Video





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