Nightclubs and discothèques are hotbeds of contemporary culture. Throughout the twentieth century, they have been centres of the avant-garde that question the established codes of social life and experiment with different realities. They merge interior and furniture design, graphics and art with sound, light, fashion and special effects to create a modern Gesamtkunstwerk. »Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today« examines the history of the nightclub, with examples range from Italian clubs of the 1960s created by the protagonists of Radical Design to the legendary Studio 54, from the Palladium in New York designed by Arata Isozaki to more recent concepts by the OMA architecture studio for the Ministry of Sound in London. Featuring films and vintage photographs, posters and fashion, the exhibition also comprises a number of light and sound installations that will take the visitor on a fascinating journey through a world of glamour, subculture, and the search for the night that never ends.
Beginning to See the Light

In the 1960s, nightclubs emerged as spaces for experimentation with new media and emerging counter-cultures. They were conceived as multisensory spaces for collective, tribal-like experiences, often connected with happenings in the art world. In Italy, many of these clubs were closely connected to the Radical Design movement and the Italian arts scene.

This section examines the invention of the nightclub as a new type of design space and a new architectural typology, as part of rise of youth culture and the leisure society in the 1960s, and takes the visitor up to the mainstream popularity and commercialization of this success in the 1970s.
A new kind of environment for entertainment, a new kind of space – an illusive space, created by projectors and reflectors, just as music is created by instruments, a space which exists only when in action.

Pierre Restany, Domus, 1967

Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness [all-at-once-ness]. ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village ... a simultaneous happening. ... The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village.

Marshall McLuhan

1. Cerebrum, New York, 1968. Interio and media design by John Storyk
2. Cesare Casati, Gino Marotta, Emmanuele Ponzio, Il Grifoncino, Bolzano 1968
The 1970s experienced the rise of disco, from beginnings in New York gay clubs to worldwide commercialization. New York’s Studio 54 represented the apex of this evolution. It embodied the close connection between nightclubs, celebrity culture, and the fashion world. This section examines the nightclub as a stage set for two-fold experimentation: an autonomous zone for creativity key to design innovation and a safe space for experimenting with individual and collective identities. It is framed by the establishment and the rise of disco culture in the 1970s, which saw a reaction against the commercialization of the night in the 1980s. In this decade the nightclub emerged as a key site for an emerging postmodern condition and a club culture that both clashed with societal norms and was quickly appropriated for its sub-cultural capital.

Is not the great raw material of modern art, of our daily art — is it not, in this era, light?
Roland Barthes on Le Palace, 1978
If the theatre had been a means of clarification, clubs could overcome the nagging distinction between the one who performs and the one who watches. Clubs favour the crowd as the performers; everyone in them performs both for themselves and for one another.

Nigel Coates (AA files, 1981/82)

Time stops here and space takes over.

Andy Warhol on Studio 54
Post-industrial Partying

The colder, mechanical beat of techno music of the 1990s corresponded with the deserted industrial or squatted spaces of its nightclubs, starting off in Detroit or in Berlin’s nightclub Tresor (1992). After 2000, club culture was enriched by a number of conceptual approaches which further reflect the recognition of the nightclub as part of our everyday culture. The years since 2000 have seen the rise of clubs as global brands (e.g. Ministry of Sound), thus becoming too commercial for their countercultural core. In London and other cities clubs are pushed out of neighborhoods they helped gentrify.
Facts

Exhibition floor space
700 – 1,200 m² / 7,000 – 12,000 sq ft

Exhibits
Film, photography, AV media, architectural models, fashion, furniture, installations, graphic design, magazines, record covers, posters, etc.

Curators
Jochen Eisenbrand, Vitra Design Museum
Catharine Rossi, Kingston University, London
Katarina Serulus, ADAM – Brussels Design Museum

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Dates
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein
17 March 2018 – 9 September 2018

ADAM – Brussels Design Museum
21 November 2018 – 5 May 2019

Centro Pecci, Prato
7 June 2019 – 6 October 2019

Designmuseum Danmark
25 January 2020 – 12 March 2020

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Exhibition tour
»Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today« is available to international venues until approximately 2023. The exhibition travels including all exhibits, contextual films and images, exhibition architecture and all media equipment.

Publication
The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive book published by the Vitra Design Museum.

Editors: Mateo Kries, Jochen Eisenbrand, Catharine Rossi

Softcover
12.4 × 7.9 in / 26.5 × 20 cm
400 pages, c. 600 images

978-3-945852-24-8 (English)
978-3-945852-23-1 (German)

If the 20th century was the age of pop culture, the nightclub was probably its most powerful design expression. It’s so much more interesting to produce an experience, rather than simply oil paints or marble.

Carsten Höller, 2009