



Cover: Signature of Gerd Lange

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Gerd Lange Design – Fifty Years of Continuity.

This book is indebted to my friendly encounters with a designer who granted me rare access to both his work and his subsequent business responsibilities in the manufacturing process. The furniture designs, which have garnered praise and awards from around the world, all bear the unique stamp of Gerd Lange.

Terms in Flux

As contemporaries born in the same year, we both observed the changes in meaning that the term design had been undergoing since the nineteen-fifties. Originally associated with the demands of industrial production, the word design, whose sense has been progressively adapted and transformed by different factions in recent decades, now appears, in spite of its complexity, to be increasingly bandied about in the media as some fuzzy yet convenient catchword, whose origin can no longer be uncovered. Currently, as the boundary between art and product design has become porous both among practitioners and at design schools, with their renewed academic focus, a new dilemma of mediation has arisen between the rationally measurable and justifiable suitability of a product and the subjective, alienating intentions of its creator. To put it bluntly, these porous boundaries now allow a designer, upon being rejected by a manufacturer, to offer his or her original drawing or design model to a gallery the very next day.

On the other hand, since the nineteen-seventies a growing circle of urban individualists have preferred to furnish their apartments with household effects, furniture, and flooring by anonymous designers of highly functional products sold by specialist vendors or their soon-to-be-liquidated warehouses. In the USA, Joan Kron and Suzanne Slesin documented the phenomenon of this unconventional transfer of function and material in their 1979 book *High-Tech*, a study of industrial aesthetics with an accompanying bibliography of their products, which they classify as high-tech. They thereby supplied both the furnishings sector, already writhing under the motto design, and the media, ever bent on new trends, with an equally errant buzzword: high-tech – interpreted as a new style of design.

Gerd Lange's approach to working with industrial producers is completely different. With his inventive pro-

posals, he tends to actually push the boundaries of given high-tech production methods. For Lange, the term high-tech is a mark neither of a product's usability nor of its formal qualities, but represents rather the economic prerequisite of a rationalized mass production process. It should be clear that these technological processes will influence and affect the appearance of a product, just as they always have.

A Visit with Lasting Consequences

I first met Gerd Lange in Bern in October 1978. It was at tea on the occasion of Lange's lecture on the Swiss premiere of his Thonet Flex (p. 28) chair collection. Up until then I was familiar with his name solely through the Farmer chair produced by Bofinger (p.18). At the time, tea was only offering bentwood and tubular steel classics from the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Lange's Thonet Flex collection thus became seminal for a new generation and for Thonet itself, which had since lost its grasp of complex technology and user potential.

When, in 1980, Ikea asked me, as member of the jury, for nominations from German-speaking countries for the pan-European furniture design award, the name Gerd Lange was at the top of my list of studios I intended to visit. Although the award ultimately went to Achille Castiglioni of Italy in 1981, my visit to Gerd and Renate Lange in Kapsweyer, Germany, near the border to Alsace, remained an experience with lasting consequences. The work shown to me on that one day, along with the enlightening commentary I heard, made me aware of how my activities and judgments had been overly focused on the Swiss design world. From then on I kept the name Lange on hand whenever I would consult with manufacturers.

Three prototypes Lange showed me that time in Kapsweyer have really stuck in my mind. The drip coffee machine for AEG (p. 8) and the follow-up models for the Knirps umbrella and the Dinett tea-cart for the manufacturer Bremshey. No easy task, considering the ongoing worldwide success of both products. What really impressed me about the newly developed umbrella was how it looked when closed – like an elegant accessory that could be hung over one's shoulder on a cord (p. 11).

I was also fortunate enough to behold Lange's kitchen (p. 6), a breath-taking construction employing a wealth of user-centric inventions. Its blue, contrasting design, which was both highly functional and accessible, offset the unostentatiously restored ensemble of two dining areas.

As a result of this encounter in Kapsweyer and my intentions regarding Lange, two models designed at my request in 1985 would ultimately become the first products manufactured by Swiss companies bearing the thumbprint of Gerd Lange: the shelving system Wogg 1 (p. 54–57, 92) and the leather furniture DS 125 for deSede (p. 66–69). Lange startled both manufacturers with an efficiency in design presentation that they had rarely seen before. For deSede, Lange provided a full-scale, completely rendered left half of an armchair that, when placed against a mirror, spoke for itself.

Tested in the Studio

Trained as a carpenter, Gerd Lange also reserves a refuge for himself in his house that is not accessible to everyone: his indispensable, professionally equipped studios. With his resourceful approach as a designer, his creative desk work is often reduced to mere sketches and sectional drawings of a central idea that will become formative for one of his products. Making it come to life dictates his agenda in the studio. For Gerd Lange, toying with designs and comparing various materials, both visually and tangibly, is an essential step towards making a product viable for industrial production. This again touches upon a problem of design schools, which now admit graduates only of academic high schools, not trade schools. Training that challenges all of a student's senses during a design process has either been completely eliminated from the curriculum or relegated to the fringes.

The annotated case studies of furniture on the following pages, drawn from fifty years of design by Gerd Lange, may also serve a younger generation as an indication of the rigorous economic factors and demands of industrial production. This can be seen most clearly in the realm of public and professional seating. For such projects, a manufacturer that invests in new technologies will expect, due to the high production runs necessary to be profitable, a lasting performance edge that provides a range of possibilities for its line of products. Thanks to

the creative continuity of his commercially successful designs, Gerd Lange has been able to live up to the imperative of sustainability that is rooted in industrial design.

I owe special thanks to Renate Lange for the wealth of knowledgeable information she provided me with and for her assistance in acquiring the necessary illustrations.

Alfred Hablützel



Renate and Gerd Lange.

A Functioning System Since 1972

The open-access kitchen in the Lange household was constructed as an example of contrast architecture out of fiberglass-reinforced polyester tubing. It is characterized by numerous functional standards cleverly designed by Gerd Lange himself. The rotatable fiberglass-reinforced-polyester tubes serve as kitchen cabinets and are accessible from both the kitchen and the dining area. The removable shelves can be placed at any height and used as serving trays. The other tubes contain the space ventilation, the range hood above the stove, and the electrical wiring from the floor above. A zinc-plated grate on the floor covers a sump and pan. Rinsing it out makes unpleasant floor cleaning unnecessary.

