Keep it Simple
The Early Design Years of Apple

Nobody can copy the genius of Steve Jobs, but like him we can strive for lifelong learning, respect creativity as an economic and cultural power and be courageous about fundamental change.

—Hartmut Esslinger

Hartmut Esslinger, Founder of frog design
Arnoldsche Art Publishers
Hartmut Esslinger has changed the world of design and has done so on a global scale. From the serenity of the Black Forest, he and his ideas have emanated from Germany and Japan all the way to the US and now China. Hartmut Esslinger is one of the very first to have succeeded in deploying design as a strategic component by working with product development from the outset, and not simply viewing design as a mere extra. This was not the easy way and has indeed earned him a reputation as a confrontational maverick; still, success has shown how right he was.

Esslinger and esslinger design, the company he founded in 1969 while still a student, received a commission to design a new line of hi-fis and television sets for Wega, a German business that would later be taken over by Sony. That was how Esslinger got to Tokyo. By 1971, his Wega Color 3000 had come to epitomize the modern TV set. What is less well known, on the other hand, is that he designed a showerhead (Tribel) that same year for Hansgrohe, a German company, and more than 15 million Tribels were produced. With the Tribel, form followed both function and emotion.

The roll of Hartmut Esslinger’s clients is long indeed and very international, which led in 1982 to his company being renamed frog design. He and his wife and business partner, Patricia Roller, subsequently expanded it into a creative agency that is active worldwide. Today—even though Esslinger retired from the company in 2006—it employs a workforce of about 1000 in fifteen studios around the world.

Esslinger had been working with Steve Jobs since 1982 and was of paramount importance for the look of Apple products as an external designer—as of 1983 also as Corporate Manager of Design. The start of
The deeper you go, the higher you fly.

When my wife and partner-for-life, Patricia, found the original Snow White design contest briefing I received from Apple back in March of 1982 (which, oddly enough, bears the incorrect date of March 1983) on a bookshelf in our home in Germany, she called me and insisted: “...even though you’ve already said and written a lot about your experiences with Apple, it’s time for you to write the full story!” I thought about it for a while, then realized Patricia was right; this was a story that needed to be told.

An old hand on the Hollywood scene once told the English copywriter, Fraser Southey, “All you need for a story is a character, a goal and an obstacle.” The story of Steve Jobs’ quest to bring a radically new design language to the historically desert-dry sensory experience of computer technology certainly has all three of those elements. Beyond the intrigue of its twists and turns, the story you’re about to read also serves as an important historical account—a bridge over the chasm that divides the reality of the incredibly challenging process of creating one of the world’s iconic commercial design statements from the mythology carried forth by many people who view the early Apple years through their own reality-distortion filters. As Ernest Hemingway put it: “Everybody can sell everything to oneself.” Fortunately, I haven’t relied on fond memories or wishful thinking for the details of the events I’ve written about here; I’ve drawn upon a large archive of physical documents, records and images to bring you the most accurate and complete picture possible—and no sales job.

Of course, there are many books about Steve Jobs and Apple. Professionals everywhere want to be like Steve—or want their company to succeed like Apple—so they avidly snatch up accounts of his work, hoping to find the magical recipe. For those readers this book is a first, because it tells the story of
My first encounter with Apple was at the ICSID World Design Congress in Helsinki in 1978, where the company had installed a working Apple IIe system in the lobby of the Congress Hall. Actually, the term “system” may be a bit of a stretch, but the computers were loaded with VisiCalc and a basic email program, so people could play around with them. I liked Apple’s simple approach to technology—I was struck by how well these rudimentary products worked and how inexpensive they were, compared to the professional computer systems I had designed for CTM. Apple’s rainbow logo radiated fun, but the words “apple computer” scrawled across a badge in an ugly typeface were a downer. The promotional material for the system was nice, even though it suffered a bit from “American overload.” But, as is typical for a startup, the product design was clunky. Semantically, the Apple IIe looked like an old typewriter without its ribbon and roller, and the keyboard stood at a wildly non-ergonomic height above the desktop. Two primitive 5-inch floppy disk drives made of generic sheet metal rested on top of the computer case, capped by an off-the-shelf Japanese monitor that displayed green characters on a black background.

Of course, you have to consider what Apple was competing against at the time. The tiny field of “home and personal computing” was occupied by the Commodore PET and the 64. There also were a variety of self-assembled kits, which were mostly for hobbyists. Companies such as Osborne (a portable computer within the size of a boarding case) and Altair (more “system centric”) completed the field. Except for the Commodore 64, all home and personal computers in 1978 were ugly beyond imagination, and the C64 suffered from a lousy display quality due to the digital signal shredding necessary for display on its analog TV screen—drawbacks which didn’t stop the company from selling millions of the machines. The
Sony Style

Classic Sony:
Lisa study, 1982
Snow White, Americana from Macintosh to Lisa and Workstations
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Ventilation
Same as monitors.

Inserted floppy

1. disc
—are tested.

2. floppy on top!
Bashful: MacBook 1, study, 1982
Macintosh SE (redesign) with minimal keyboard and new mouse, 1983–1984
Photo: Dietmar Henneka
BabyMac, design model
Photo: Manfred Rieker, 1985
Apple Wrist and Ear Phone, study, 1983
Apple Standup Phone, study, 1983
History is Future
MacBook Conceptual Design Study, 1982  Snow White Design Strategy
Snow White Lives
MacBook Air, 2008, Design: Jonathan Ive & Apple Design Group
Photo: Roman Raacke
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