

The Human Touch

In 1993 I went to Magdeburg, in what was once East Germany, to give a lecture. Although the Cathedral in the City had been closed to the public during the communist regime it had miraculously survived as one of the most outstanding medieval buildings in Germany.

The interior is a magnificent space, which at the time of my visit was entered through a door on one of the long sides of the building. I was intrigued by the handle to this door, which was cast in metal in the form of a stylised bird. It was not only good to look at; in its own way it was eye-catching. But more important and equally memorable was the way in which it sat in the hand - so comfortable and generous.

I remember thinking at the time what a good experience it was just turning the handle and opening that door. It made such a deep impression on me that I arranged for someone to photograph it and to send the images back to the office.

When we accepted the challenge to design a range of door handles for Fusital I was reminded of my experience in Magdeburg and indirectly that was one of a number of influences on the project.

A door handle can be likened to architecture in miniature - it has to work well for those who use it but it must also look good. In another sense it is an important part of the furniture in a building - literally one of the few points of physical contact. In the tactile sense the handle has to feel good. But then it is easy to forget that architecture is about all of the senses.

In most of the buildings that we design, including those for our own use, we have consistently specified the classic D-handle with a semi-matt finish in aluminium or stainless steel. The design is intellectually satisfying, sparse and abstract - even though it is acceptably comfortable to use. In that sense it is an excellent compromise with an agreeable economy of production - it is after all a simple bent bar.

The appearance of the D-handle conjures up the spirit of an earlier age of functionalism, with strong overtones of the 1930s. It does not however offer anything like the satisfaction that most earlier, traditional door handles could offer. If the D-handle is in a tradition of Bauhaus abstraction then those earlier examples are in a tradition of anonymous design that was functional in the ergonomic sense of the word. To put it another way they fitted well into the palm of the hand.

The sculptural forms that resulted from such considerations then assumed a visually satisfying dimension that is far removed from the minimal qualities of the D-handle. Some of the best examples have the sensual qualities that I would associate with say the flowing sculpture of Brancusi. With a few exceptions they all stem from an age before the period of so-called 'modern' architecture. Our design exploration for Fusital was in part a quest to rediscover this lost tradition.

I am fascinated by buildings from all ages of history and gain pleasure from playing the visiting tourist. It seems to me that the best architects of any period not only had an encompassing vision but their passion also permeated the fabric of their creations down to the smallest detail. That integrity of concept was true both before and after Mies van der Rohe, but he certainly made the point with the well-quoted remark that 'God is in the details'. I remember, for example, being impressed in Finland by the personal stamp that Alvar Aalto would imprint on the doors of his building, through handles that would be customised for each project.

More recently I had the opportunity to study the production of luxury cars. Within the standard design of say a Porsche or a Rolls-Royce there is an extraordinary latitude to customise the car of one's choice - to such an extent that it ends up being unlike anybody else's car. On the automobile production line it is fascinating to see how the appearance of an interior can be transformed, depending on the final choice of materials - each with their own distinctive colours and textures - even though the forms of the individual fittings are identical.

This experience raises an interesting question about the fittings which come together to create the interiors of buildings. Why is it not possible to have the economic benefits of mass production and still be able to customise such fittings as door handles so that they can be more individually tailored for a project? What other artefacts besides cars could we learn from as designers?

One more source of inspiration was the world of penknives. I am compulsively drawn to any shop window that is filled with these objects. In Valencia recently I gazed spellbound at shelves packed with penknives of every shape and size with handles in a variety of materials that ranged from wood, pearl, plastic and metal with colours from every hue of the rainbow. The interesting thing about a penknife is that the blades with their mechanism are really the middle of a sandwich, which can then be packaged in between moulded grips in a variety of materials. These can be soft, hard, matt or shiny, precious or basic - the choice is extensive and determines the appearance and quality of the end product. Significantly the packaging is not cosmetic - the best penknives are a joy to handle, to hold and to contemplate.

Our project for Fusital uses the same principle. The spine of the handle is a flat metal plate attached to a well-engineered locking mechanism. The plate is then sandwiched between mouldings that can be produced in a variety of materials such as metal or plastic in red or white, timber, black rubber or even covered in leather. The choice of metal for the spine and its finish together with the nature of the mouldings determines the final appearance of the handle. Its feel is the outcome of the shape of the mouldings, which are contoured to the hand and the material from which they are made. The range of options that the end users can choose from is therefore very wide. This opens up a new range of creative opportunities for designers.

The concept of this handle is one of separate laminations or layers. In the world of aviation there is a wing section known as a laminar-flow aerofoil, which was developed for high-speed flight. These qualities of flowing shape and layers have suggested the name of 'Lamina' for this new generation of door furniture.

To write down these influences on the design of the Fusital door handle is to make the process sound like a step-by-step progression. How simple life in a design studio would be if it was that easy. The reality is closer to a game of snakes and ladders. At one point it seemed that the answer might be a single moulded form - this version of a handle was superbly comfortable to use and very beautiful. It looked as if it was derived from the propeller of a vintage ship or aircraft. Some of us fell in love with it but the production costs would have made it unaffordable.

At the same time we were struggling with the original idea of a spine plate to which additional layers would be added to make up the handle. Intellectually the idea was convincing but the early explorations were unsatisfactory - they either looked or felt wrong. Some had a curiously dated appearance - like throwbacks from the 1950s. There was a profusion of sketches, which gave way to ply and foam full-size models, interspersed with factory-made prototypes. These were fixed to doors in the office to see how they felt. 'Seeing how they felt' is an interesting and relevant play on words. Samples were from time to time passed around the office for comments - generated by innocent questions such as 'Would you specify this handle instead of the usual D-handle?' In its way this proved to be a valuable form of market research.

Our time on this project was determined by an approaching trade fair and the patience of Fusital, which in a good-natured way had been well stretched. At almost the last minute everything snapped into place when one day the pieces of a final prototype arrived in the office from the factory in Italy. It was close to a victory celebration. We were like children playing with our new toys. The mood was infectious and anyone passing by that part of the office was drawn into the game and shared the joy. Since then the concept of 'Lamina' has grown, and sketchbooks bulge to show how further pieces for doors and windows are evolving to extend the product line.

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