



A man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and maroon tie, is looking to the left. He is standing in front of a large, colorful abstract painting with horizontal bands of green, black, red, orange, and blue. The background is a plain white wall.

Progressiveness

“Our design is like a fingerprint.”

Why does a car need to be beautiful?
Ambra Medda, Director of the “Design Miami/” fair, discusses this issue with Audi boss Rupert Stadler. Both have a passion for the extraordinary.

Interview Dominik Wichmann
Photos Joel Micah Miller

Mr. Stadler, you often speak about how design is one of the absolute core competencies of the Audi brand. At the same time, we are hearing over and over again that the automobile industry is going to have to reinvent itself in order to deal with current challenges. So is the characteristic Audi design therefore going to change?

Rupert Stadler: There is no doubt that our society is going through a difficult period. And the automobile industry, of course, is also significantly impacted by these new challenges. In times of turmoil, people are even more likely to look for orientation and reliability. Orientation is something we as a company need to be able to give our customers. Therefore, the very best thing we can do is to ensure that our products fulfill the same high standards of quality in the future that have made them known and sought after in the past. And, of course, that also includes the design of our vehicles. Their look and feel may change – but only in terms of evolutionary and careful improvements. We want to emphasize the authenticity of our models through our own unmistakable messages, and are thus developing into a signature brand. You could say that each and every one of our cars is as unique as a fingerprint.

Ambra Medda: I completely agree with that approach. Of course, a paradigm shift of sorts is underway right now, and it would be very surprising not to see it reflected in the design area. Good designers react to their environment. But this doesn't mean they immediately resort to hasty action.

Since when has product design played such a decisive role in sales success?

Medda: It's hard to pinpoint exactly when. However, one thing I know for sure is that there isn't a company today that can afford to sidestep the unique selling point design has to offer. Of course, that has a lot to do with the growing importance of marketing. Anyone who wants to set themselves apart from the competition is going to have to articulate this. At the latest, that's when product design comes into play.

AMBRA MEDDA

Ambra Medda, 28, grew up in England and Italy. In 2005, Medda founded Design Miami/, now one of the world's leading fairs for high-end design. In April 2008, Medda published her first book entitled "Destination: Limited-Edition Design," an overview of the 60 most sought-after design destinations in the world.

Stadler: That's certainly true. Nonetheless, design dominance has not suddenly become relevant in recent years. The Audi brand, for example, is celebrating its centennial anniversary this year. The design of our cars was already playing a significant role in our marketing success way back in the 1920s and 1930s. Though it primarily had to do with the notion of "beauty," the basic principle behind it, namely wanting to have this beauty for oneself, is the same today as it was then.

Would it be true to say that a new era is also always preceded by a new perception of design?

Medda: I believe so. Take the triumph of the Apple iPod, for example. Any one of us could have gone to a store and bought a similar MP3 player at a fraction of the cost. Even so, most of us will buy the more expensive Apple device. And why? Because it looks different; because it has a design that is considered contemporary. It is a product that has come to symbolize the hip and modern face of the digital revolution. And that's why people just have to have it.

"What matters is that the product also has a past. This is always a good basis for a truly sophisticated and creative design."

Ambra Medda, Director of Design Miami/

Stadler: Anyone wanting to sell a premium product today is going to have to be able to give his customers clever and fresh answers to the pressing issues of the time. In other words: Anyone who buys an Audi today will expect it to fulfill environmental standards; they will expect it to combine the very best of today's technology with comfort, safety and driving pleasure. As far as I am concerned, any car that ignores sustainability is not in line with the times. Anyone wanting to grab his customer's attention is going to have to keep thinking outside the box, be willing to take on something new, and put his own stamp on it. That's the goal of a signature brand, which is what we're aspiring to be at Audi.

Medda: There is no comparison between how much more selective customers are today than they were a few years ago. They have come to recognize good design and good quality. They are more familiar with standards so are also less prepared to forfeit them. Design today is no longer a neat gimmick; design is a core component of every product.

Stadler: We have a promise to keep to our customers: "Vorsprung durch Technik." That may sound easy, but it is also important that this claim is underscored by each and every detail of our cars. And that applies to both the visual and tactile appeal of our vehicles: In the premium segment, ▶

Ambra Medda and Rupert Stadler find inspiration in the diversity of color and form at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City.



you always have to keep one step ahead of the times – those are the rules of the game.

What other key challenges do you see for Audi over the next few years? The success of the A1, which you are hoping to bring to market in the coming year?

Stadler: In principle, I am focused on the success of the entire brand. But of course, introducing the A1 is an important subject for us. I have supported and monitored the creation, design and initial planning of this model from the very beginning. It will come as no surprise that I am truly convinced it will be a success.

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Rupert Stadler, Chairman of the Board of Management, AUDI AG

Will this newcomer’s design differ radically from other Audi models? After all, Stefan Sielaff, chief designer for the Audi brand, recently said that the vehicle form would be significantly influenced by environmental demands, for instance by a drag coefficient of less than 0.33.

Stadler: Obviously, an extremely aerodynamic car is going to look different from a conventional one. As a result of the environmental debate, new technical factors are being introduced that will certainly influence our design and pose a challenge. But that is precisely what is so exciting about our job: developing and finding solutions. And that’s why we have designers, technicians and engineers. In the end, I know we will be happy with a result that not only meets environmental requirements, but exudes enough individuality to make it unmistakable.

Isn’t this need for individuality in fact the meta-theme of contemporary design?

Medda: You have to differentiate here between industrial design of a classic nature and the creation of individual pieces and limited editions. As far as the latter is concerned, since it has to do with a different and much more intensively handcrafted approach, then individuality and uniqueness naturally play a more important role than they do in traditional industrial design. But even products geared towards the mass market are beginning to exhibit the same trend, which only goes to show how individuality is playing an increasingly important role here as well.

Stadler: Are you alluding to personalized design?

Medda: Yes. With customers becoming ever more aware of design and improved technical possibilities, it has become

INTERESTING DISCUSSION

A video clip of the interview can be found at:

www.audi.com/ar2008/progressiveness

completely normal to find a product being manufactured in countless variations – options a customer can choose for himself. Anyone who cannot – or will not – offer such options to his customers is going to fall quickly behind.

Stadler: I welcome this development with open arms; it means customers will identify even more closely with their products of choice. For example, anyone buying an A8 can choose almost any color for the leather interior. In our factories, 36,500 stitches are sewn according to the customer’s individual wish. This is a service that unites our brand’s claim to perfection with the individual needs of our customers. It’s one of the ways a brand acquires substance. It means that as a signature brand we are able to conform to society’s new understanding of luxury. Customers aren’t just looking for craftsmanship and high-quality products; they are looking for intangible assets like charisma and style – that unique something, in other words, which offers superb handcrafted quality and also meets their wide-ranging needs.

Medda: What are some of the most unusual design requests you have had from your customers?

Stadler: Unusual requests are certainly no rarity. One of

DESIGN MIAMI/™



In 2008, AUDI AG was the exclusive automotive partner and exhibitor at Design Miami/ for the third time. Inspired by the fair’s theme “Beyond Organic – Design in the State of Nature,”

the Audi brand interpreted modern design under the influence of nature with its installation “Audi Coastline Marina.” The main attraction: the Audi Q7 coastline. The fair is considered a highlight on the design calendar and is held twice annually, in Basel and Miami.

DESIGN AWARDS

The Audi brand once again demonstrated its commitment to the world of culture in 2008. In cooperation with design colleges and ART COLOGNE, the sales regions presented the “Audi Art Award for New Talents” and the “Audi Design Award.” Audi France has been honoring up-and-coming artists in the areas of contemporary art, industrial design, sports and music with the “Audi Talents Award” annually since 2007. In the UK, the Audi brand founded the “Audi Design Foundation” in 1997. The foundation supports artists and young designers who make a positive difference in people’s everyday lives with their work. AUDI AG sponsors the “Audi Mentor Prize by A&W,” which the well-known German home and design publication “Architektur und Wohnen” has awarded to up-and-coming designers since 1997.



The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York is considered to be one of the world's leading addresses for contemporary art.

the strangest was an order we received years ago from an A8 customer for Nogaro Blue Alcantara trim and a matching dress of the same material, a request she made when ordering the car. She then wore this dress when she came to collect her car. As everybody knows, there is no accounting for taste. So, for a surcharge, any customer can have his car delivered according to his individual wishes and ideas.

Ms. Medda, as a design expert, do you view such developments with a certain amount of esthetic skepticism?

Medda: Of course, not everything people put together reflects my own personal taste. But that's not the point here. What is more important here is that design is becoming increasingly anchored in society. No longer is it just some exotic hobby pursued by certain curators and older couples who eat prawn cocktails at design exhibitions. The design debate is finally back on the agenda. Design has regained its relevance.

Stadler: You have played a significant part in this with the Design Miami/ fair.

Medda: Certainly not on my own. But the fair does provide a platform for anyone who is committed to a contemporary understanding of design and is passionate about it. Of course, that is above all the artists and designers themselves. Exhibitions are not only about sales; they are about providing a platform for a substantive discussion on the subject. Newcomers are promoted; stars of the scene are honored.

Are you finding that the trend is more about content and less about simple design language?

Medda: Certainly content is playing an increasing role in contemporary design, which is only natural given the increased emphasis on craftsmanship. Pure surface design is no longer enough.

Stadler: I think this is a positive development. At Audi, form traditionally follows function. Function is an obligation for us. In this respect, we follow the tradition of modernism wholeheartedly – we only come up with something interestingly new when there is a perfect interplay between designers and engineers.

What feeds inspiration for designing new Audi models?

Stadler: The role our company's history plays should not be underestimated. We continue to draw on a specific design language from our past and develop it further and further. In this way we are able to build an esthetic bridge to the past and the tradition of our brand.

The Audi design language has also been an extremely German design from the very beginning. Why?

Stadler: Our culture is heavily influenced by technology. Craftsmanship, precision and ingenuity mean something in Germany. At the same time, our cultural proximity to Mediterranean countries, especially Italy, is very obvious. Our longing for the country beyond the Alps has always made its esthetic mark here. Today, we believe this mix – this fusion of technology and beauty – is characteristic of our vehicles. It reflects not only how much the product, but also the country, continent and its people have changed.

Medda: But what matters is that the product also has a past. This is always a good basis for a truly sophisticated and creative design. An object shouldn't necessarily look "designed," it should just look good – timeless and without frills. That's what we mean when we talk about a modern classic. Such a title is the best design can hope to achieve. ●

Dr. Dominik Wichmann, journalist and book author, is the editor-in-chief of the multi-award winning Süddeutsche Zeitung magazine. He is considered one of Germany's most creative chief editors.