



 **Zalaba
Design**
KOLB COLLECTION



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Introducing Chicago Kolb

Otto Kolb was a Swiss-born New Bauhaus pioneer who taught design at the Institute of Technology in Chicago during the late 1940s. In addition to teaching, Kolb built several contemporary homes in the US and produced limited-edition modern furniture and lamps: which we call the Kolb Collection. The Kolb Villa, built in early 1980s in Switzerland, is still an important source of inspiration as a fine example of both modern architecture and sustainability.

Otto Kolb's designs expanded into powerhouse furniture brands like Walter Knoll and Louvre – and even MOMA. His original work is rare but still found in renowned museums and major auction houses worldwide.

Otto Kolb embarked on his career as a craftsman and continued to develop his skills as the years marched on: branching into architecture, design, art and staircase construction after completing his bricklaying apprenticeship. This versatility and creativity mixed with an enormous will to persevere led to actionable projects. He enjoyed spending his free time sailing or skiing.

Architect and designer Otto Kolb has a reputation as a teacher at Chicago's Institute of Design (ID) from 1948–1951. The absence of quotation marks, however, characterizes him as a persona incognita within the Swiss architectural lexicon in the 19th and 20th centuries (published in 1998, two years after his death).

Decades later, his much-noticed but limited early Swiss work – realized in the Zurich area – never captured broader interest. Never permanently settling in the USA, he disappeared from the American spotlight and after pitching his tent again in his homeland, only gained a foothold architecturally with his later work. It's high time to shine a light on Kolb as a pioneer in his field who groped his way into terrain hardly touched at the time: his work deemed suspicious or even sneered at. A respect for nature and ecological thinking while building was one of his fundamental maxims.

Kolb moved between disciplines and combined architecture, engineering, art and design: a prime example of which is the standard spiral staircase, patented in 1965 and marketed over the next three decades. Leveraging prefabrication, Kolb merged historical staircases, organic spiral construction plans and – inspired by Max Bill's plastic continuity from 1947 – designed Möbius loops as the focal point of a personal villa he built in Wermatswil from 1980–1982. The cylindrical greenhouse in the Zurich Oberland became a mecca for architecture fanatics and was classified as a protected object of regional importance by the Cantonal Monument Preservation Office in Zurich in 2012. Closing the loop, the first house he built in the USA has enjoyed this status since 1996.

As Wermatswil's Villa Kolb evolved from rotational staircase movement, his opus unfolds through this chef d'oeuvre as nothing less than architectural legacy. His sources of inspiration, teaching, furniture designs and earlier creations all catalyze within him and are addressed in teaching, design and selected buildings and projects chapters.

He reached a culmination point in Wermatswil not least in the adaptation of Japanese stylistic devices, which have since continually developed. Traditional Japanese architecture occupied him throughout his life – reflected in several of his buildings and projects – with a separate chapter dedicated to the same, discussing this in the context of Japan's European reception at the time.

Kolb's work is concentrated in Switzerland with Wermatswil, Brüttisellen, Humlikon, Wallisellen, Fällanden and Zufikon located in Zurich, specifically. In the USA, buildings are scattered across the Midwest and East Coast (Chicago, Beverly Shores, Providence, Plainfield, Princeton, Westport, Hudson Heights and New York).

"Mies, Wachsmann and Xanti Schawinsky became my best and closest friends in America. I owe them not only many happy hours, but above all, productive, often blatant arguments," Kolb once said. Paffard Keatinge-Clay, who described the Institute of Design as a haven for European emigrants, also joined in the tone. Referring to Kolb, he highlighted the role of Richard Buckminster Fuller: "Such talent all having a hell of a good time!" Architect Roth also commented benevolently in his diary: "Otto Kolb is developing very well."

As turbulent as school leadership was, Kolb cherished one constant: "...the creative restlessness that exerted a friendly influence on the students. The basic tenet of all teachers was to develop the critical potential in every student."

An anonymous art critic commented on the same with precision two years later in an Arts & Architecture review of the Open House46 exhibition at the ID: "His sensitivity - often stifled by a passive education which stresses docility and memorization - is revitalized by the active process of working with tools and materials...he has learned to penetrate basic needs rather than imitate or blindly extend accepted patterns." A passage from a lecture provides further evidence of Kolb's emphasis on critical thinking while demonstrating topological properties of the Möbius strip: "It's a kind of phenomenon but it shows you simply...The logical thinking...is just misleading...[It] is built upon a rigid discipline which is funneled into us by education...I do not fill you up with knowledge but teach you...the principle of approaching something. Approach is the main thing: analyses, synthesis and product."

The division into a three-semester basic course and five-semester postgraduate course – which brought specialization into a subject area – was also reflected in didactics. Kolb summarized the attitude of the school during the first year and a half of study: "Analysis important, thinking important, result unimportant." As for the first half of the postgraduate course, he wrote: "Analysis, think process and result important.»*



From Bricklayer to Architect

Kolb was born in Zurich on November 5, 1921 and grew up in Schaffhausen, where he eventually built a studio apartment, designed his first furniture collection and also made contact with Bauhaus representatives. Kolb was armed with practical tools as well as a predisposition to the field: his step-grandfather Jakob Geisser worked as a building contractor for Walder shoe factory construction and the Walderdörfli workers' accommodation in Brüttisellen, while his father Otto Kolb was an engineer at the steel and machine factory Georg Fischer AG (+ GF +) in Schaffhausen.

After completing a bricklayer apprenticeship (1938–1940) in Schaffhausen, Kolb attended the technical school for structural engineering at the Technikum Winterthur for four years and graduated on April 14, 1944. Early the next year, he joined Alfred Roth's architect studio and gained an opportunity to experiment with Durisol: a substitute material utilized in light of the war economy and valued by Kolb.

In autumn 1945, Kolb married fellow Schaffhausen native Heidi Müller. The couple first lived in Zurich for a short time, then in Brüttisellen in the atelier house. In 1948, their daughter Gabrielle was born. In the meantime, Kolb was the office manager at architect studio Roth and enjoyed access to the Bauhaus and artist community. He experienced the fruitful atmosphere of intellectual debate among artists, architects and writers. Johannes Itten brought him to the art fabric school in Zurich, where he taught technical drawing in the general department.

In his first project – the conversion of a barn into a studio in Brüttisellen (1944/45) – he utilized specially designed lamps and furniture and a theme he would go on to evoke throughout his life. The studio building earned Kolb swift publicity and a December 1948 feature in *Werk* magazine. One year later saw mentions in *Domus*, *Interiors* and *Industrial Design* magazines and then a 1950 feature – almost simultaneously – in *Arts & Architecture* and *Architektur und Wohnform*. Kolb – or rather, his buildings – were off to a great start in internationally renowned trade journals and thus captured expert attention.*



A US Bauhaus Pioneer

Kolb felt the urge to head overseas and teach at the Institute of Design in Chicago. In observing the first publication of Mies van der Rohe's abstract model for the I.I.T. campus, Roth spoke up: "That is no campus. It is an industrial complex, dull boxes on the asphalt! Not a single tree! Mies can do better than that!" "I don't agree," Otto replied. "It's beautiful. Look how the rectangles relate! I love Chicago! That is where I am going to go!"

«My parents went to the USA by ship in November '48,» Kolb's eldest daughter reported. In mid-November 1948, the family landed in New York and reached Chicago on December 16. Now in the US, Otto Kolb not only met the author of the buildings that had inspired him but also found Mies van der Rohe as the friend and teacher he went on to pay homage to in the mid-1980s.

As one of his first ID tasks, Kolb "represented Serge Chermayeff in showing the Russian constructivist Naum Gabo the nearing completion 21-story 'Promontory Apartments' building by Mies van der Rohe" and first met Rohe on this construction site.

"I was still young enough to be able to learn from him, but much too old to become his epigone," Kolb opined. He also encountered a multicultural society he was familiar with from Switzerland, with those in his immigrant circles sharing the same fate as those from his circle at home; artists and architects who frequented the Giedion house and the Roth office were not just advocates of new building and classic modernism but also refugees driven out of their home countries by national socialists.

Kolb described the location of his and Heidi's first apartment: "We live about 3 minutes from Lincoln Park, which stretches along the lake shore / this is the best of Chicago, its undeveloped waterfront." In addition to teaching, Kolb devoted himself to personal projects, designed an unspecified ice rink in Chicago («ROLLER ICE SKATING RINK ON SOUTH SIDE») and teamed up with architect Harry Weese for a «major office building competition.» «TULSA OKLAHOMA CIVIC CENTER» sketches referencing Weese were in fact located in Kolb's estate. A restaurant followed: «SENECA GRILL INC. CHICAGO ILL.»

Disagreements between ID and the Illinois Institute of Technology – primarily revolving around architecture education competition – ultimately sparked Kolb's decision to withdraw from the school alongside other motives. In the summer of 1950, he separated from Heidi and moved in with Sion Soiesman (née Oppenheim): transplanting his domicile from Chicago to Algonquin. "An hour from Chicago out in the country by a small river in a small house for me alone," he described.

Mies van der Rohe visited Kolb's refuge in 1951, leaving a nostalgic mark on Kolb's memory: "Mies said: 'Your house may not be a 'lousy building', but what don't you do to visit the Fox River. Instead, it's a fun shack with the clarity and structure [balloon frame] that shows all the simplicity of generations with warmth and beauty, like an echo of an old song.'»*

The balloon frame also defined Kolb's first realized architectural project in the USA: a Beverly Shores, Indiana house (1948–1950) he built for Maria and Imre Horner with a salon atmosphere similar to that of the Giedions: «We were the beneficiaries of the Horners' never tiring curiosity which has brought so many diverse people into their circle and Maria's, 'salon' in, of all places, Beverly Shores, Indiana."

In 1952, second wife Ridi and Kolb moved to Hudson Heights, New Jersey with ten-year-old Antony from Ridi's first marriage. It was at this time that design became a second mainstay alongside architecture. A year later, daughter Barbara was born, and in 1955, her sister Michele. The family had discovered the weekend vacation paradise of Cape Cod, and Kolb began planning a house for Lecy Clark's family in Watchung, New Jersey: executing this project in addition to the Tennant House, which was completed in 1957. From 1956–1958, he realized the Botway House in Westport, Connecticut and in 1958/59 the villa for Maria and Morris Solotorovsky in Princeton, New Jersey.

From 1953 onwards, he frequented the Cedar Tavern at 24 University Place in New York: a magnet for abstract expressionist artists and writers of the Beat Generation. It was during this time that Kolb designed a house for writer Jack Kerouac, a project never fully realized due to a lack of client funds. Another connection between Kolb and those who frequented the Cedar Bar ran through Antony Spiesman, a son from Ridi's first marriage.

Ridi and Otto's home life temporarily deteriorated when Kolb was diagnosed with a brain tumor and underwent subsequent operations from 1955–1957. Nevertheless, he remained full of energy and in 1956 was inspired to construct an apartment building on his own Wall Street property: an idea that never materialized. Bright and sunny recollections of their house, however, are reflected in the memories of Emilie Lapham, daughter of Morris and Maria Solotorovsky: "As children we loved going to visit the Kolbs. Their house had a wonderful view of the NY skyline. It was a relaxed and lively atmosphere." Xanti Schawinsky also immortalized the breathtaking panorama and launched «City Pictures» – variations on the NY skyline theme – in their home in 1952.

Despite his optimism, the operation left Kolb with deep scars – also in his relationship with Ridi. He informed Roth about their split en passant in a 1958 Christmastime letter: "I'm writing you first a short note before Christmas. As you might have heard from Lohse I'm not living with Ridi anymore." He rekindled his connection with Jane Lace – a woman he had met back in 1956 – and the two married in 1959 before ultimately settling in Westport, Connecticut.

His state of health improved, but only slightly. His eyesight remained limited and balance disorders – a consequence of hearing impairment in his left ear and resulting in an unsteady gait – would not disappear. This handicap impeded his Switzerland «comeback,» and his wife took offense when people misinterpreted his condition for drunkenness. Nevertheless, he visited Switzerland for two months in 1959 to explore the terrain and make preparations for his return.



Building Legacy

When Otto Kolb returned to Switzerland from the USA in 1960 – deemed “Chicago Kolb” by his friends – he brought with him his experience as a lecturer at the Institute of Design (ID) in Chicago as well as furniture and lamp designs and pictures/project plans he had realized in the USA: which would one day become his legacy, the villa in Wermatswil.

Jane's mother Susan Lace-Stanberry contributed 50,000 francs of start-up capital for a new venture in Brüttisellen, which Kolb used to launch Otto Kolb Design in 1965. He established his office in the house on Geisserweg – which he had converted before his appointment to the ITS – and in 1959 added a sleeping wing for his new family with two daughters, Jane (1966) and Claudia (1968). In 1976 – before building a workshop to produce the spiral staircases he ultimately patented – he built multi-family houses in Brüttisellen and Wallisellen. In the years that followed, he constructed single-family houses in Humlikon, Zufikon and Fällanden. Nevertheless, roadblocks ensued as other projects fell through; the conversion of a Intragna rustico failed due to a building permit while two studio house projects fell victim to precarious finances. Kolb, however, forged forward with a leap in scale and entered into competitions for a Baghdad opera (1962) and the Zurich Stadttheater (1963) while also planning Munot district development in Schaffhausen (1969). Although commissioned by the city, the project stalled but at least enjoyed a mention in Werk magazine.

Kolb ultimately went on to earn his living not as an architect but as the inventor of the standard spiral staircase: for which the Swiss Federal Office for Intellectual Property granted him a patent on May 15, 1965. The system's inherent variability made the stairs a bestseller as a space-saving vertical connection within the family home, an escape staircase on factory premises and a climb to the diving platform in swimming pools.

Kolb not only made this the linchpin of his “inhabitable sculpture” but also derived an entire house from the spindle standard staircase designed in 1961, for which he received a Swiss patent in 1965. It boasts a cultural and historical genesis: from the myth of a ladder to heaven, archaic labyrinth representations, medieval ideas of the Tower of Babel and imaginations of the afterlife to lantern spirals of Francesco Borromini's church. Beyond the function of vertical spatial connection, Kolb's staircase is a catwalk, a stage as Berthold Lubetkin understood it: “By nature, every staircase is a kind of machine for going up and down, but in its best definition through the fine arts, it is a stage, a dance.”

Kolb's villa went on to reflect his manifesto and legacy, and in the 1990s, non-smoker Otto Kolb contracted lung cancer. He died in 1996 at the age of 75. *



Furniture Design

ID chair designs during the post-war era featured a separation of the organically shaped seat part from the constructive aesthetics of the base. Kolb's "bat chair," a favorite at the 1949 teachers' exhibition, was also based on the separation of the systems: "Because of its unusual shape, this chair quickly became the focus of the show and Playboy soon called it the 'Love Chair.'"

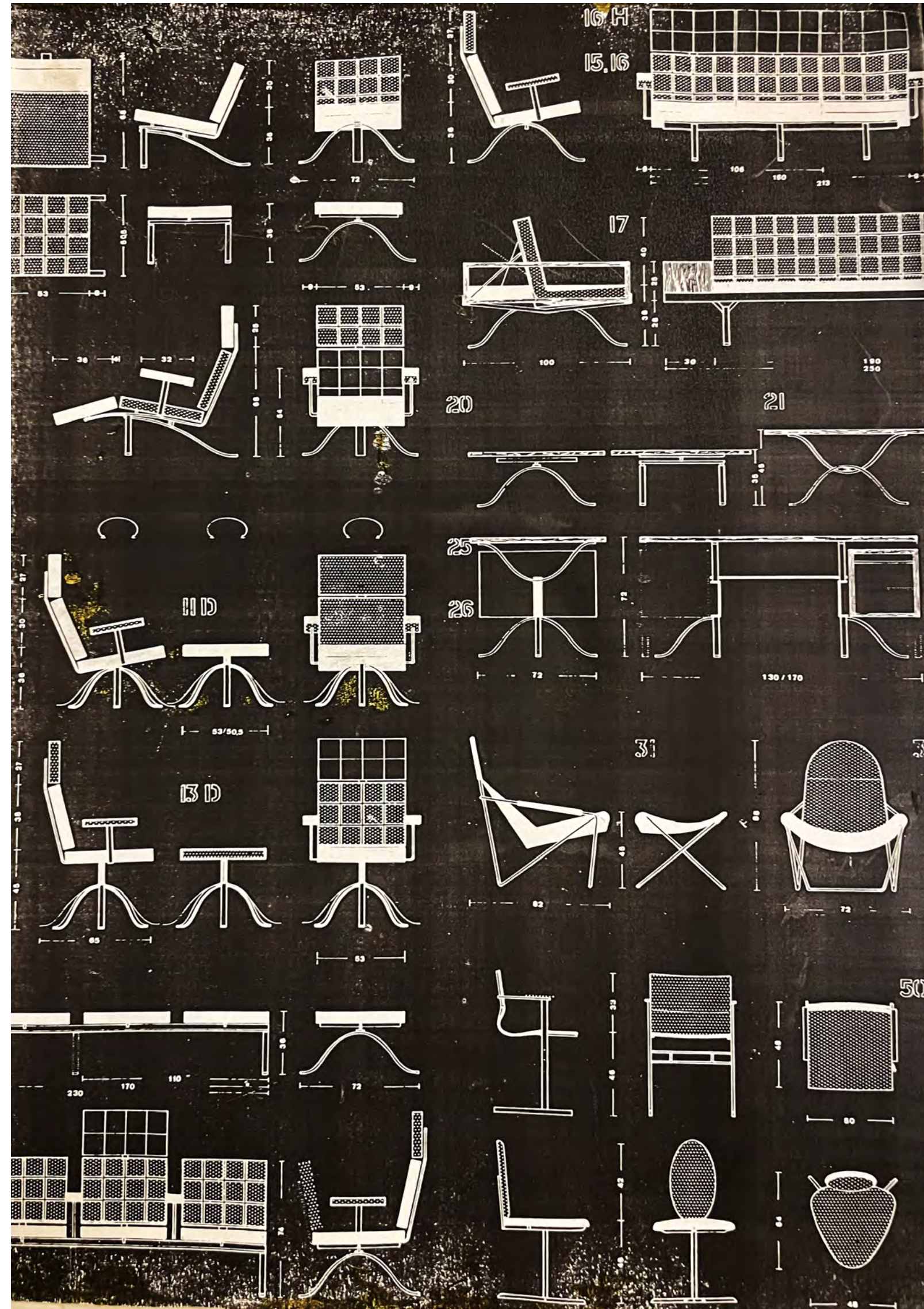
The designs Otto Kolb created over the course of 25 years can be divided into two phases. In keeping with the nomadic character of his first 15 years of work, early chair, armchair, lounge, table and cupboard designs testify to mobility and lightness. Following Kolb's return to Switzerland, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's influence was palpable in a collection of sturdier and heavier armchairs and loungers.

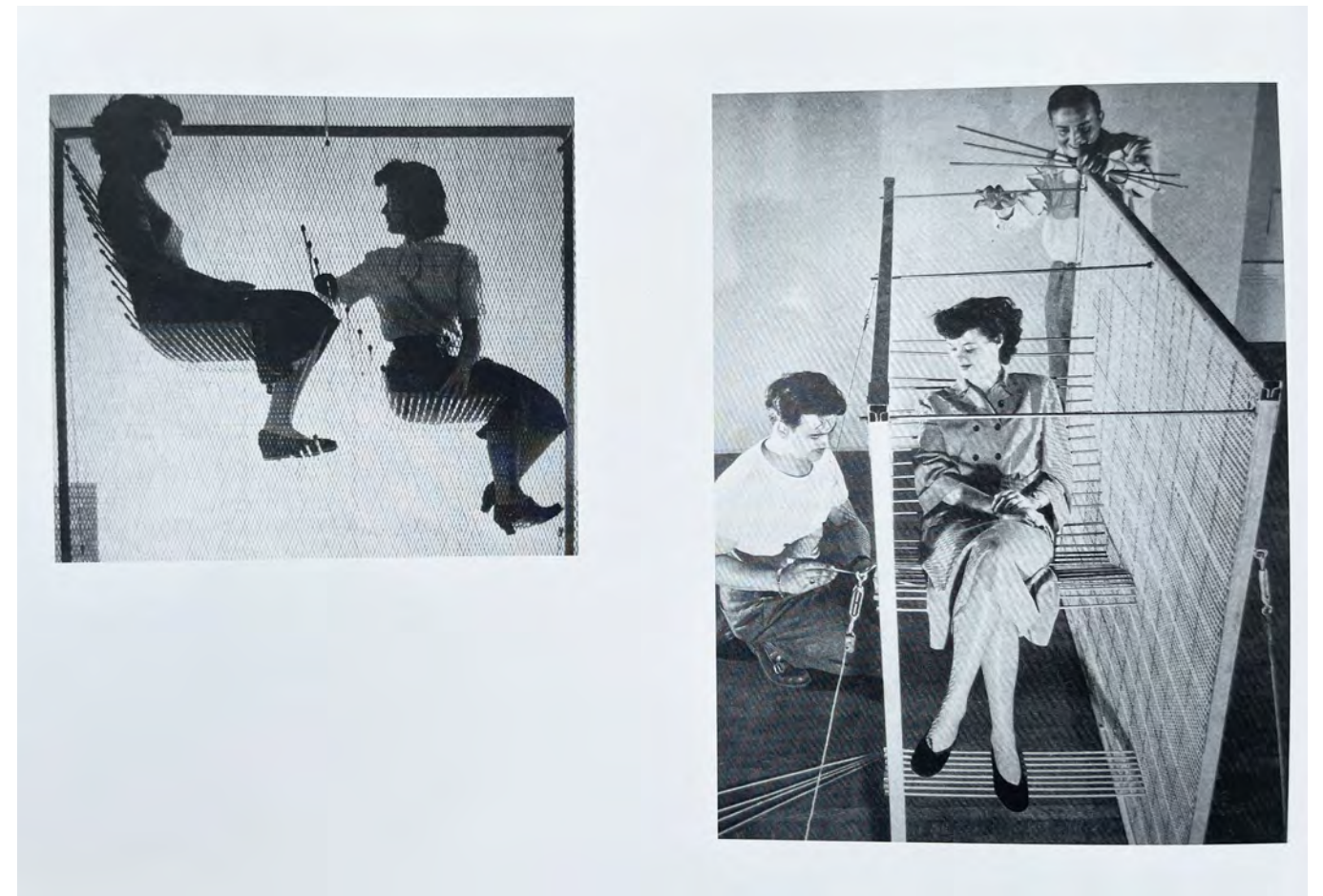
However, the break that seemingly emerged was merely superficial. Core principles – modular structure, organic design, minimal use of materials, congruence of form and construction as well as the design process and product – remained the same throughout his life. Kolb implemented these in the form of concept, construction and material transfers (including recycling), which manifested themselves both within and across genres. They even ran between architecture and design, when house and furniture changed and the standard spiral staircase became the *raison d'être* of the house.

Graduating a year before the Second World War ended, Kolb entered into this phase and engaged in the reconstruction and design of furniture for emergency housing – as described in his 1945 publication *Reconstruction*. In doing so, he designed a set of dismantlable furniture elements including a table, chair, sideboard and bed, based on an angled base element as a uniform structural system. This dual principle was at play at Villa Kolb in the relationship between the central stair core and adjacent room balconies. In a 1994 ETH Zurich lecture, Kolb specified the concept per the “balance-contrast” principle: «The spatial experience is supported by spatial elements that are full of discoveries, surprises, contrasts and also balance (high-low, wide-narrow, etc.), so that a controlled conception in the sense of contrast-balance is created.”

Kolb was inspired by a desire to «develop and construct new types of furniture» to help «the realization of new ideas with the correct use of the material and its static stress» and thus achieve a breakthrough. He had already practiced material justice and constructive stringency in the first models he designed for his “Glass Nest,” deriving the «thin wire base» on which a tea table glass top balanced from the lattice girder.

The tubular steel chair, whose plans date from February 3, 1945, could be fixed in various positions and equipped with quilted and removable cushions. The support structure was designed as a bracket into which an ergonomically shaped frame covered with belts was clamped or hung. Ultimately, Kolb managed «with few means, simple methods and materials to create living objects that meet today's demands. They should be light, practical, organic and have aesthetically clean forms.»*





Lamp Design

The constructive trend characterizing Kolb's chair design was equally effective in lamp design, manifesting itself in joint and connection studies – the organic component of which derived from human limb function. For his Brüttisellen studio building, Kolb devised a ceiling lamp whose cone of light could be swiveled in numerous directions. The ID also moved away from static light sources and replaced them with dynamic, flexible lighting fixtures. This dynamization was accompanied by the aestheticization of mechanical parts, with studies sparking various lamp designs. The Model No. F-1 W floor light exemplified an interest in joints and connections as elegant as they are functional.

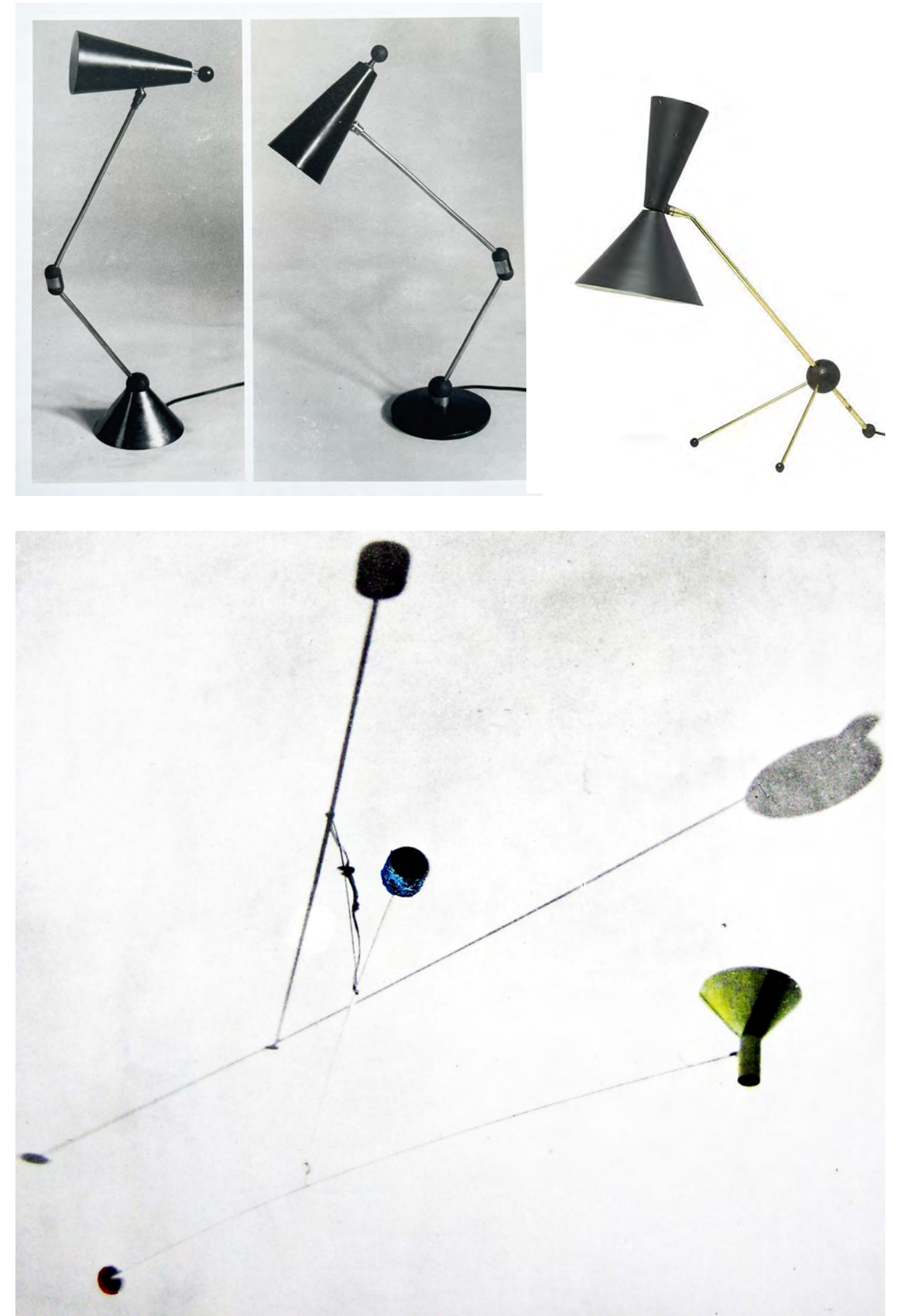
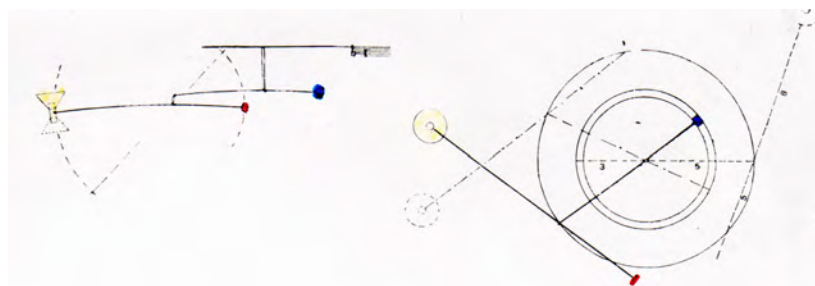
The lamp won first prize in the 1951 Low-Cost Lighting Competition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who displayed the lampshade. The stand was balanced by a cone-shaped piston into which the cable ended, acting as a counterweight. A hidden element ensured mobility: the sleeve holding the crow's foot together contained a magnet stabilizing the steel ball into the respective position. During this time, Kolb also constructed a table lamp displayed at the 1951 Good Design exhibition in Chicago. Although he emphasized a base designed in two versions – flat/circular and conical – he paid more attention to the joint, thanks to which the light source could swivel in various directions.

Connection studies in wire figured as finger exercises for the lamp design. Kolb specified such a piece of wire as «FOUND OR BOUGHT,» and Institute of Design management attached importance to these experiments: «The simple wire joint, made almost playfully in the foundation course assumes its wider ramification when calculated with exactitude for new immense structures in advanced building research.» The relationship between the detail and large form was also reflected in interdisciplinary cooperation between equipment and shelter design, boundaries between storage space and simple dwelling concepts compatibly fluid.

Nevertheless, shelving balance seemed precarious due to a sloping position – almost like the mobile lamp, which, like the book tree, also occupied Kolb later on in Chicago. The principle of the hammock, already appearing in the wicker chair and a piece of furniture hung like a chairlift seat, becomes clearer and clearer and finally culminates in Villa Kolb's cantilevered rooms. Comparable to his reflections on architectural designs, Kolb pondered experimental constructions that boldly calculated gravity via floating and balancing models (e.g., a sofa rope construction for a Chicago ice skating rink and his own house). He even borrowed a tension rod system from the engineering department for chairs and lamps, seemingly with flexible buildings in mind.

Kolb was fascinated by articulated joints and exhausted his balance powers, straining them to the extreme. He combined a shifted, counterweight-controlled center of gravity in his mobile lamp with a scissor mechanism and studied adaptation for a table lamp: which he equipped with rod-shaped reflectors and fixed to a tabletop with a screw or crow's foot.*

* Text inspired by Rahel Hartmanns
book Otto Kolb



REDESIGN



ORIGINAL



Bauhaus Classique's

The Kolb Collection is an interpretation of the Otto Kolb Bauhaus Classique's, which has lived on as an aesthetic for over a hundred years. The recovery of Kolb's mid-century modern design is perhaps one of the last unprecedented series of revivals that brought back to vogue characteristic styles of the Bauhaus periods.

Public fascination with what is vintage, retro and antique has existed for a long time, especially among artist types. "Timeless style" is something we all strive to achieve in our homes, yet it's still all too common to see fleeting trends come and go. One enduring style is Bauhaus design.

Bauhaus celebrates pure forms, clean design and functionality. The foundation of this style championed the use of basic materials such as leather, steel, wood and glass for furniture design without any unnecessary decoration. There was an emphasis on the smart use of materials and colors, well before ideas of sustainable design became a "thing." Bauhaus is elegant and comfortable.

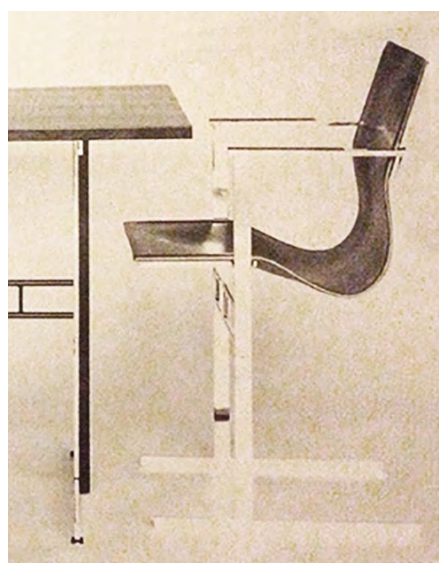
Many ideas written in the Bauhaus Manifesto by Walter Gropius in 1919 are so embedded in art and design culture today that it is impossible to imagine a world without the Bauhaus movement. From the sparseness of 90s minimalism and clever mid-century modern to the boldness of the Memphis movement, we can thank the Bauhaus movement for shaping design as we know it.

The Zurich-based interior studio Zalaba Design, modernizing the Otto Kolb Bauhaus Classique's, is driven by third-generation Bauhaus daughter Ginger Zalaba. She initiated her first furniture collection in honor of her Grandfather Otto Kolb; her modernized but still original Kolb® designs representing the 40s, 50s and 60s era of New Bauhaus. International exhibitions led to a collaboration with Walter Knoll and various design awards.

The Kolb Collection revival is a modern interpretation of the Otto Kolb Bauhaus Classique's with a sustainable twist, combining artisan craftsmanship with the purity of form and function. The essence of materials is just as important as the quality of design. "It's truly an honor to be able to continue my grandfather's legacy of modern furniture. The collection evolves his concepts of modern design while still keeping his integrity for form and function." – Ginger Zalaba

Zalaba's award winning Kolb designs:

- German Design Award Winner 2021
- European Design Award Gold 2020
- Chicago Design Award 2020
- Wallpaper Design Award - Best designer 2019
- European Design Silver 2017
- German Design Nominee 2016



Bauhaus Granddaughter Ginger Zalaba

Ginger Zalaba graduated with a master's degree in Exhibition Design from the Zurich University of the Arts and also studied Interior Design at IED Milan. During her studies, she performed sales and marketing work for local art and furniture galleries. Driven by prosperity, Zalaba moved from Milan back to Zurich and continued to build up her company – Zalaba Design – while working 70% part-time as an interior designer for various architect studios and real estate developer.

She finally landed in the hospitality management field, leading restaurant and hotel design constructions and renovations for Marché International, Mövenpick, SV Group and SV Hotel (Marriott franchisee). With her own company, she was able to further cooperate with private clients and companies to design and develop real estate, interior design and furniture projects on an international level.

Space is a conceptual playground; in fact, it is shaped by cultural norms. We lost the possibility to adventure into our surroundings and should therefore adapt design and lifestyles to our space, utilizing beauty in its rawest form that already surrounds us to experience space and live design in its own way.

The Bauhaus gave us an aesthetic that has remained relevant for a hundred years. It became modern design with some of the most iconic furniture pieces such as the Eames chair and the Barcelona couch by Mies Van der Rohe. Ginger Zalaba takes this aesthetic and further develops it in her own way of interior and furniture design: unusually different, yet sensuous and beautiful.

Zalaba Design stands for bespoke Bauhaus furniture, luxury real estate and modern interior design. "We work with people we love and projects we admire. Our goal is to provide impeccable service to help you realize and sell unique spaces around the world, whilst creating well-being and unique experiences. The progression of space over time is ever-naturally evolving, giving a reflection of our modern society. We experience varying applications of space and design that evoke emotions and influence our mood, as well as adaptive habitual routines: especially since Corona Interior design is something we find of great value." – Zalaba

CEO and Designer Ginger Zalaba

A stylized, handwritten signature in blue ink, likely belonging to Ginger Zalaba.



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