

# Symphony of Shades

WHAT ROLE DOES COLOUR PLAY IN AN INTERIOR? PRODUCT DESIGNER *Hella Jongerius* IS OPENING HER COLOUR LAB IN BERLIN TO ANSWER JUST THAT QUESTION.

WORDS *Femke de Wild*  
PORTRAIT PHOTO *Louise Bilgert*



## TODAY'S COLOUR EXPERTS THE PRODUCT DESIGNER

### **You've built up a reputation as a colour specialist. When did you start working with colour?**

It's always been an important aspect of my work, but colour gained even more significance while I was designing the Polder sofa for Vitra. I developed a palette of five coordinated colours in a range of fabrics for that sofa, and colour has intrigued me ever since. After creating three new shades of white for the Lounge Chair, also part of the Vitra collection, I was asked to continue developing new colours for future collections.

### **What was your point of departure?**

We - Edith van Berkel and I - started with the Eames plastic and aluminium chairs. I look at what's been done in the past for nearly all my work, and here too I based the new palette on original colours from the company's archive. The vintage plastic chairs had a two-tone effect created by the plastic fibres. Because manufacturing methods have advanced so much in the meantime, today's plastic chairs have a uniform colour. I wanted to get those original nuances back again. For the Home Collection, I began by compiling a modest palette that's suitable for everyone involved - the people at Vitra, as well as the customer. Currently, I'm working on a new, larger-scale project that I can't say much about at the moment.

### **Why is a palette of colours so important?**

One colour is nothing. A piece of music is also made up of different notes. A palette

is an ensemble of colour, material and size. Whether a surface is shiny or matte, large or small - and whether an object has this shape or that one - such factors determine how hard something shouts or how softly it whispers. Every day my children ask what my favourite colour is, and every day I think up something new, but I really don't have a favourite colour. All colours are interconnected, and finding the right palette is like going on a treasure hunt.

### **You also developed new colours for Camper shoes. Was the process very different from the way you approached the Vitra Home and Office Collections?**

Women shop for home furnishings; office furniture is often the responsibility of men. And rather than selecting items solely for themselves, men buy for an entire company. That's why 80 per cent of the office furniture sold by Vitra is 'safe black'. For the Vitra Office Collection, I started by developing dark colours that represented a slight shift away from pure black. Fashion is faster, lighter - and you buy shoes for yourself. Crazy colours are seen far more often in footwear. Now I could offer fresh colours to Camper's young, alternative target group, and that meant singing a totally different tune. But the colours for both Vitra and Camper have the same sort of grey blur that clouds the colours of many of my designs. It's my way of letting the customer experience colours within colours. Although the research I'd done on colour in the interior

wasn't really relevant to the process, it's nice to have experienced both the tranquil pace of interior design and the speed of fashion.

### **What's the difference between your approach to colour and a more conventional approach?**

I don't approach it as a stylist. I consider all aspects of colour. What you're seeing nowadays in interiors are industrial colours that have emerged from trend-forecasting. The 'in' colours are determined for us. You no longer hear anyone asking, What do I like? What suits me? Only series of system colours are available. There's no connoisseurship involved, no artistic hands-on experimenting while relying entirely on intuition, no language of colour, no knowledge and little experience. It's all exceedingly flat.

### **Why do you think colour isn't taken very seriously?**

The modernists saw colour as decoration. Architects and designers had to express themselves through their materials. Besides the natural colours of materials, only grey, black and white were permitted.

### **What is it that aroused your fascination for colour?**

I think it's a very important topic, because everything you see has colour. Even when you look at one of Mies van der Rohe's steel buildings, you see it in colour. Colour is still approached as decoration, though. All other aspects of an object are designed first; only in the final phase is colour added. If you study colour and handle it well, however, >>>



