

Designer Alfredo Häberli on improving the unimprovable

Alfredo Häberli on hotel design & reinventing the door handle

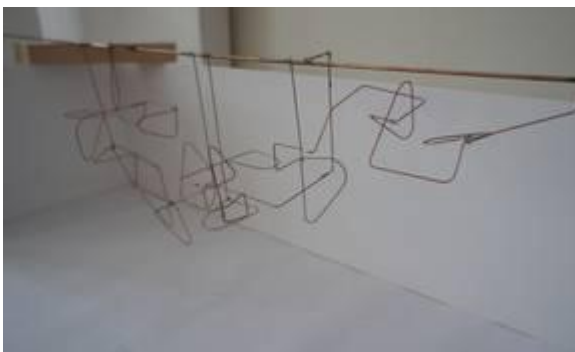
by [Fiona Brutscher](#) | November 27th 2012 | 01:24 pm



Argentinean-born Alfredo Häberli was not a hotel designer before he started working on the 25hours hotel Zurich West. He was a product designer, an interior designer, even a one-off shoe designer and a curator. But once he accepted the challenge of becoming a hotel designer, he really went the whole hog. Häberli and his team designed the entire hotel, from floor to ceiling, from lobby to top-storey suite, from the carpets to the cartoon animals that adorn the walls.



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As part of the small 25hours group, well known for its quirky, design-focused hotels targeted at young urban travellers in cities across Germany and Austria, the aim was to create a hotel like Zurich had never seen before – after all, the 25hours motto is "If you've seen one, you've seen none."

The minute guests step into the lobby, it becomes clear that Häberli has succeeded – the open space is a riot of colours, sumptuous textures, tongue-in-cheek slogans and hidden references to Zurich landmarks. Design aficionados will recognise some of his better-known pieces, such as the Origo and Essence series by iittala or the Vitra 'Jill' chair, but there is a plethora of products to be discovered that were designed specifically for the hotel, such as the Tai Ping carpets, door handles by FSB and felt Kvadrat curtains.

When we visit Häberli in his studio, a mere week before the official grand opening of the 25hours Zurich West, he is obviously happy with the result of his work, proud of his achievement, but even more clearly, he is

exhausted. Nonetheless, once he begins to speak of his many projects, especially this latest and most ambitious one, he comes alive with enthusiasm.

DEPARTURES: In Interviews you always speak about your studio in very personal terms.

Alfredo Häberli: Yes, it's quite hard to keep the private and the studio separate. Sometimes I envy my accountant, because he can just end work and go home, then return to the numbers the next day. Of course, an accountant may think about work after hours, but in our job, it's a constant alertness. My children have taught me to switch off, and that I need phases to do nothing. I don't keep checking my iPhone while travelling, I want to be in the place where I am, to take the time to look at an art gallery, go for a meal and be conscious of my surroundings. It's a conscious decision. I always have a book for sketches, and I find that I am more open for visual input; I see much more of a city if I don't have distractions. The first time I was in New York, I took the bus that goes all the way from the Bronx right through Manhattan and I kept noting down the things that I saw, without expectations.

At home, the connection between home and studio is quite pronounced. I have a second studio at home where I can work at weekends or in the evening when the children have gone to bed. I used to be a workaholic, but my family has helped put an end to long hours.



Can you remember the first time you explained your job to your children?

Yes, when my son Luc was about 4 or 5 there was an article – or maybe I

was on TV – and he asked me "are you famous?" because the other kids in school were talking, and then he asked me "what do you actually do?" I explained that I draw a lot and that those drawings are turned into objects that can be used. I showed him a glass and told him to draw his own idea of a glass, and we compared what my design and his design looked like. It probably took a while to sink in, but at a later point I also took him to view production, and then it clicked: "Ah, you deliver the idea and someone else makes it!"

Today, I think my children have a pretty good idea of what my job entails. They have a good sensibility and ask a lot of questions, they even criticise my designs. Children are the best critics, because they don't think intellectually, but judge intuitively. It's a great experience for me to hear their criticism, and it has helped me become more intuitive and listen to my gut feeling. I think you can tell by looking at my work from the last 10 years, compared to the 10 years before.

Did your designs become better?

Yes, definitely. They have more soul, they have more charisma. When I was studying in Zurich, a lot was mental, theoretical. My German wasn't as good as it is now, so language was a weak point and I always thought I couldn't verbalise the reasons and explanations behind my designs.

Are there things you would like to redesign?

There are things I would do differently, but at the time I didn't have the experience and that's okay. There are products where the company didn't give me the option to make corrections, where they simply took my sketches and produced them, and when I saw the finished product – which I thought was a prototype – it was too late to make changes. I was frustrated and disappointed with that experience, but at the time I didn't know better. Today, my contracts stipulate a minimum of two prototypes, so I learned from those mistakes.





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But what if another person might have a better eye for the changes needed?

Well, we always work with a team, there are engineers and the companies, and we work together. Usually, when something comes from the operative side, I listen very carefully, because they have experience, too, and they know how to produce something and I respect that. I can learn from them.

Your designs are colourful, but the shapes are more European than Argentinian.

I am very Argentinian in my temperament, in interpersonal relationships, working with a lot of people. I love to party and bring people together. I also have a Swiss side: I try to express a lot with reduced means, to achieve functionality.

Is there a classic Swiss product you would love to design or redesign?

Of course, I would absolutely love to design a watch for a Swiss manufacturer, but I would also love to design a pencil for Caran d'Ache, something you hold in your hand every day. With the Origo series for iittala I achieved something similar: I meet people and they tell me they drink their morning coffee out of one of my mugs every day, and that the colours make them happy. I am always delighted to hear that. Some might say a pencil is impossible to improve, but Faber-Castell had the idea 10 years ago to create a triangular pencil. No one had ever thought of that, and I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it myself! It's a nice reminder that it's always possible to improve a great design.



Is there a product that can't be improved?

No. You see, there's a reason why a product looks the way it looks, and it can be hard to improve, but if I sit down and think about it, I can always find something to improve. But it's not like I go around finding fault in designs – I need that kick I get from a phone call asking me to design a certain product. I need the company to commission me. For example, the door handles in the 25hours hotel in Zürich were designed by me, produced by FSB, and everybody kept insisting that there was no way of improving a standard door handle design, but I think the result is pretty unique. Everyone who touches it notices the difference.

On the other hand, sometimes it's the people who change a product because they use it differently. For example, when designing for iittala, we did away with a lot of plates that would have been a standard part of a set of tableware in the past. My grandparents, for example, would never have served soup in a bowl, they would have used a soup plate. but we travel a lot, we see that 16 plates are not necessary. Things have become more casual, so we have new possibilities to design differently. Sometimes it can also be technology that makes it possible to optimise a perfect design. The chair I am sitting in only became possible because we discovered a new way of producing it.

Which of your senses is most important when designing?

When I first discuss a project, I immediately have several images in front of my inner eye. I document those images in sketches and explain them to my team. Then we try to group them intuitively. I then narrow down the ideas by elimination, and finally we are left with a final winning design.

What do all your designs have in common?

A few years ago my work was in an exhibition, and until then I hadn't thought of myself as a designer who has a clear signature style. I don't really like it when designers have such a specific look that their work is instantly recognisable. I prefer designers or architects like Herzog & de Meuron, where each project is distinct and completely new. But then I realised that my products often have long lines, silhouettes, a lot of expression with very little material. Everything has to be light, flexible, graphic, long lines, but never flat.

Now that your big hotel project is finished, what are your plans?

I need a holiday! So I will be taking the whole family to Argentina. It will be the first time we are all there together.

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<http://www.departures-international.com/sections/post/improving-the-unimprovable.html> (27. November 2012)