BOOK LAUNCH OF ‘DESIGN RESEARCH UNIT 1942–72’
A RETROSPECTIVE OF WORK FROM THE INFLUENTIAL DESIGN STUDIO

Formed in London in 1942, the Design Research Unit was responsible for some of the most important design produced in post-war Britain. They pioneered a model for group practice, being the first consultancy in the country to bring together expertise in architecture, graphics and industrial design. By the 1970s they were one of the largest and most established design studios in Europe.

Initially under the charge of the poet and art critic Herbert Read and operating from offices shared with Mass Observation, the Design Research Unit was founded by advertising entrepreneur Marcus Brumwell with designers Misha Black and Milner Gray. Following Read’s essay, Art and Industry (1934) and the literature of International Constructivism the group outlined an intent to combine creative intelligence with technical research into materials and markets, seeking to bring ‘artists and designers into productive relation with scientists and technologists.’

This publication, designed by A Practice for Everyday Life, follows exhibitions at Cubitt Gallery, London; Norwich University College of the Arts Gallery; International Project Space, Bournville; Liverpool John Moores University; Bonington Gallery, Nottingham; the Cooper Gallery, Dundee and Tate St Ives. Based on original research it documents an approach that was shaped by inter-war developments in artistic discourse and post-war trends in industry and communication; in particular the accelerated demand for corporate design.

The seven chapters of the book cover some of the group’s most significant projects, charting their ambition to bring elegant and functional design to all sections of society including Naum Gabo’s designs for a Jowett car (1943–6), their work for the Festival of Britain (1951), Watneys brewery (1956–70), British Rail (1963–6), the London Transport network, photographic company Ilford and Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). The publication also features the Piano & Rogers extension for the company’s Aybrook Street offices (1972) that Richard and Su Rogers began working on whilst they were associates of the Design Research Unit (1967–71).

The headline typeface APFEL used on the front cover and chapters is Futura Schlagzeile, or Futura Display as it was marketed in the UK. First released in 1932 by Paul Renner, Futura Schlagzeile has a less geometric aesthetic than other cuts of Futura, with angular strokes which result in more rectangular letterforms. The book design and typography references various printed materials from the Design Research Unit and work they did just before the studio formed as DRU. Futura Schlagzeile was prominently used in an advertisement for the services of the Industrial Design Partnership (c.1935), an early collective of which Misha Black and Milner Gray were a part of, and that was a crucial context for the eventual formation of the Design Research Unit. The main body text is set in Monotype Grotesque (re-released in 1925), which was frequently used in earlier studio work before other sans serif typefaces like Univers took over in the 1950s.

The cover is a quotation taken from a leaflet (c.1943) that the studio supplied to prospective clients, along with artists and designers, to outline what they stood for and how their design process worked. The page layouts similarly hold a connection to the ‘identification manuals’ that were created for companies like Watneys and British Rail, which are brilliant engaging objects in their own right. Their designs are quite simple typographically, with comprehensive black and white photography sitting alongside drawn examples of how the brand should work.

The back matter explores the studio further by looking at the people who worked, interned and were associated with Design Research Unit through various ventures, including an illustrated group photograph of the practice in its later years. The publication closes with installation photographs of the touring exhibition at its various locations.
he designed displays for exhibitions such as For Liberty, which was mounted in John Lewis's wartime canteen. 25 Graham Sutherland and F. F. P. Walsh. It was disbanded at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

In 1964 Misha Black was appointed as a design consultant to the London Transport Executive, responsible for the modernisation and development of the London Underground. This was a major undertaking that involved the redesign of station interiors, signage, and furniture. The work was designed by designers such as Tom Eckersley and his daughter Julia Black. The mural at Euston is a Tom Eckersley design, c.1968.

The ICI trademark was modified from the original mark as part of the corporate identity design programme. The new design emphasised the company's focus on product innovation and quality. The new logo was designed by Abram Games. Bawden and the mural for Stockwell Victoria were designed by Edward Hale, Highbury and Islington, and Tottenham platforms. Murals for Tottenham were commissioned for station signage, with the aim of creating a more consistent and visually appealing environment. Ceramic tile murals referring to the station name or its locality were also commissioned.

The Design Research Unit followed a series of artistic groups and societies that emerged in the 1930s, including the Design Research Group. They were formed by a group of artists, architects, writers, and designers who were interested in exploring new forms of design and art. They were part of the Modernist movement, which aimed to create a new form of art that was tied to the modern age. The group's work was characterised by its use of geometric forms and its focus on modern materials and techniques. They were united by the idea that art was a way of expressing the modern age, and that it should be accessible to the public. The group's work was often characterised by its use of modern materials and techniques, such as the use of plastic and the use of new forms of typography.

We believe that there is no better way of selling your goods than that we design them.