The beauty of function and as a function

The phrase «beauty from and as function» from Bill’s legendary talk became a key statement. He opened up the rigid notion of function by putting the forms of everyday products into a larger context with the forms of both nature and the arts and by outsourcing industrially produced everyday products with craft-based and technical objects. His major achievement was his call for a “new beauty ideal” - harking back to Henry van de Velde’s concept of ‘natural beauty’, which referred to combining the rationalism of engineering with constructive beauty.” Bill wanted things to not only function but also look beautiful. The idea of an order immanent in form was, throughout his entire life, the hypothesis on which his work was based.

The max bill collection is characterised by clarity, simplicity and mathematical precision. For max bill, industrial design was of particular importance in the economic upturn during the post-war years and...
Bill described his approach as one of responsibility and of small steps. He was an advocate for a better world, for the material, intellectual and societal coherence of the designed environment and for a social order that would allow a humane world.

His biography and work are so comprehensive that only books can do justice to his oeuvre. The following lines are aspects of his knowledge as a product designer.

max bill was born on 22 December 1908 in Winterthur, Switzerland. From 1924 to 1927, he trained as a silversmith at the Zurich School of Applied Arts. He admired Le Corbusier's work and, after attending a talk by Le Corbusier, Bill decided to become an architect. In 1927/1928, he studied at the Bauhaus in Dessau. His teachers included Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy (preparatory course), as well as Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. Back in Zurich, his main source of income was the design of advertising under the brand names of «bill – reklame» and «bill – zürich». In 1930, he joined the Swiss Werkbund (SWB). In the same year, Theo von Drehsberg was the first to provide a definition of «concrete art», which was later rewritten by Bill.

wohnbedarf was founded in 1931. From the beginning, Bill was responsible for the design of the company's logo, which is still used today, and for the design of brochures, advertisements and stationery. Using furniture from wohnbedarf, Bill also designed the «Home and Studio for a Painter and Illustrator» in the Neubühl residential estate, which had just been completed, as well as the respective advertising material.

In 1932, Bill became a member of the «abstraction – creation artists» group in Paris, participating in the group's exhibitions and meetings, among others. Jean Arp, Piet Mondrian and Georges Vantongerloo, in 1932/33, he built his own studio-house in Zurich-Höngg, working from then onwards, as an architect, painter, sculptor, graphic designer and publicist. In 1936, he designed the Swiss contribution to the Milan Triennial, for which he received the Gran Premio award and much international acclaim. It was also the first time that the original form of the «infinite loop» was shown in a public exhibition. With his designs for industry, Bill belonged, together with Hans Bollmann and Wilhelm-Kraus, to the new generation of Swiss «industrial designers».

In 1944, he redesigned the patria typewriter, followed by various everyday objects such as the Dreibeinstuhl (Three Leg Chair), the Kreuzzargenstuhl (Cross-frame Chair), the Dreirundtisch (Three-Round Table) and the Quadratrundtisch (Square-Round Table). As co-founder and first rector of the Ulm School, in 1954, he created a stool with two different seat heights as part of the school's furniture, which has since become known as Ulmer Hocker (Ulm Stool). Starting in 1957, he designed various clocks and watches for the Junghans company, based in Schramberg.

For the 1949 Schweizer Mustermesse (muba) in Basel, the SWB commissioned Bill to design «die gute form (the good form)» exhibition, which was the first exhibition to introduce the topic of industrial design to a large audience. The exhibition was subsequently also shown to great acclaim in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.

Following a proposal by Bill, from 1931 to 1968, the SWB recognised good industrial design with the «die gute form – forme utile label». 1952 saw the publication of «Form: A Balance Sheet of Mid-Twentieth Century Trends in Design», a book edited by Bill. The book included an international selection of products and furniture that met Bill's theoretical definition of «constructive, logical, economical = beautiful».

Bill was a member of various associations and commissions and was the recipient of many prizes and honours. Many of his designs are still, or are again, sought-after pieces today. max bill died on 9 December 1994 during a visit to Berlin.