

# WILL · VISIONS · INITIATIVE

Fearless and unimpressed. Today, Bodil Kjær's furniture is considered iconic, a status in which the internationally oriented architect and professor takes little interest. For she has always only been passionate about the design process, the interaction with others and a focus on people's need for well-designed furniture.

Words: Susanne Holte

I would like to emphasise that I have not had a career – I have had a life! This is how Bodil Kjær, professor and architect MAA, starts a conversation about her incredible life. And a work life that has taken her around the world for years of stay abroad. Always in her constant quest to learn and gain insight into methods and materials that she can use to realise her ideas for functional furniture systems and functional working environments.

Her name is often linked to an elegant and stringent work desk which she designed in 1959 and which now sells for astronomical sums at auctions, a fact she finds almost surreal and a bit absurd. In Bodil Kjær's universe, it makes no sense that a desk that initially could be acquired for approx. DKK 5,000 now sells for DKK 150,000.

– Except for the fact that I am obviously glad that my furniture withstands the test of time, it has absolutely nothing to do with me, explains Bodil Kjær, who has never sought wealth or fame. As one of the few women architects and designers of her generation that managed to create an international name, she has not had an actual career plan.

– I have created things and pursued ideas, and along the way been asked to take on assignments, tackle specific challenges and apply for positions. Opportunities to develop her talent have cropped up continually, explains Bodil Kjær, who has never considered promotion as a goal. She has always been driven by the technical aspects, the desire to set new standards and the drive to perfect her work, research and teach.

The users' ambassador: Furniture, which she prefers to call elements of architecture, has only been a parenthesis in her work.

– I designed furniture for a short period from 1955 to 1963, none of which was conceived as a sculptural statement, but rather as a solution to functional, monetary and aesthetical issues, explains Bodil Kjær. She has never allowed herself to be dictated by form, in contrast to some of the masters she studied under, including Finn Juhl. Her role model was more Kaare Klint, who like Bodil Kjær had an almost scientific approach to design, where form, function and mathematics

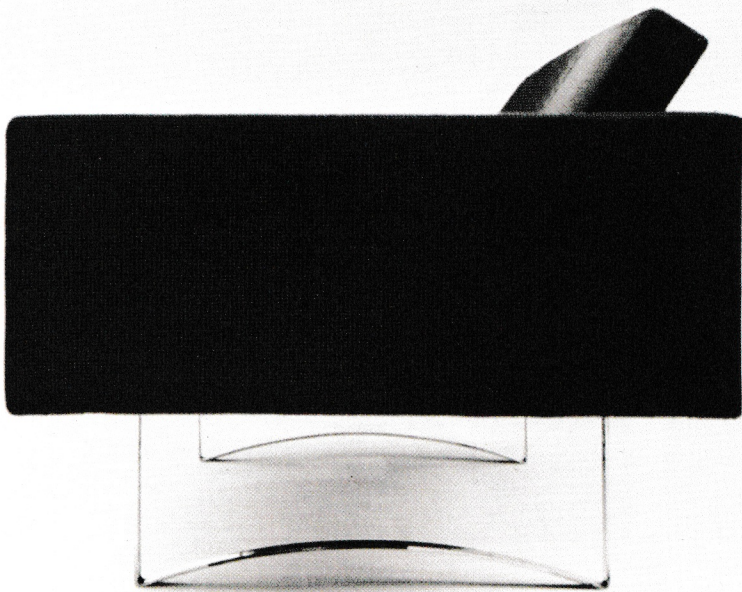
merge to create a synthesis. On the international scene, her role models included Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe.

– Although our idioms were different, I learnt a lot from Finn Juhl, and I consider him one of our most important furniture designers. In fact, I am certain that history will remember him as the best. He could see my potential, and today I can thank him for giving me the best recommendation of my life. To me, design has always been in a dialogue with modern architecture, but my greatest preoccupation has been making furniture for people and optimising space, explains Bodil Kjær, who went her own way at a time when most of her colleagues were designing free-standing objects that claimed to have sculptural value. Although her famous work desk is now sold for its sculptural value, it was conceived as an integral element of an office-system.

Bodil Kjær tried to do more than create an alternative to the heavy office furniture of the time. At the beginning of her working life, she also designed sofas, armchairs, lamps and glass vases as well as an extremely functional serving cart, which, as is symptomatic for Bodil Kjær, was carefully designed in every detail and created a sensation when it appeared in the New York Times in 1964.

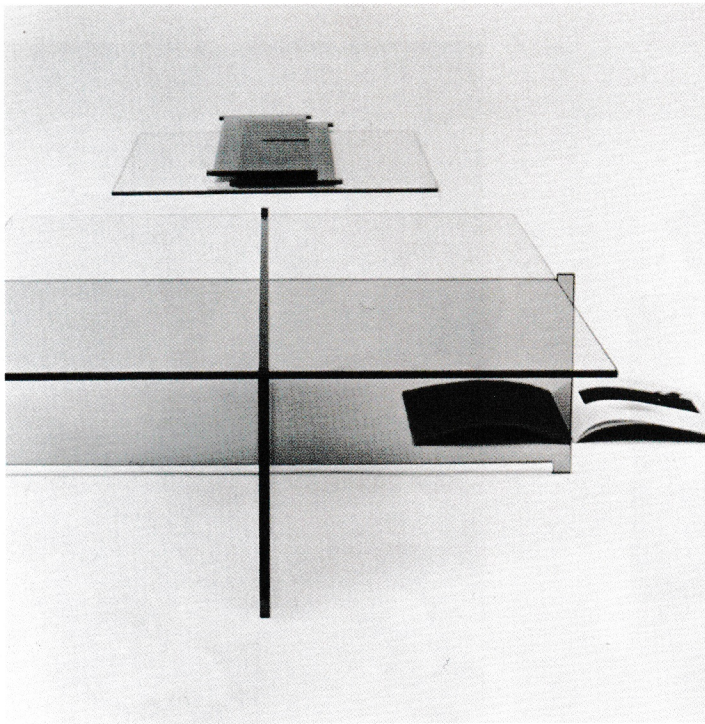
Even though Bodil Kjær tries to play down her furniture production, she earned much acclaim for her clean design. One person to become fascinated by her functionalistic idiom was Marcel Breuer, whom she herself holds in high regard. Consequently, she felt a sense of pride when he ordered 28 sofas for one of his buildings. Indeed, Bodil Kjær's furniture received most of its attention internationally, with a great many of her designs being produced in the USA. There, her furniture became integral elements of modern buildings, a spirit of design that keeps the furniture relatively neutral, which she prefers.

International career: It was never in the cards for Bodil Kjær to become a world-renowned architect, researcher and teacher. She was born on a farm near Horsens in 1932, and although her family wanted her to study, they hoped she would go for a university degree in history. However, she was attracted to architecture.



A POPULAR CLASSIC is Bodil Kjær's work desk, which she designed in 1959 as part of an office environment for an American company. With its light design, it offered a vast contrast to conventional heavy office furniture. S.C. THE 70 SERIES FROM 1959, which includes a stringent sofa and some armchairs originally intended for an institutional building.





THE CROSSPLEX-TABLE, 1959, combines glass and plexiglas. The delicate lightness is ahead of its time. The same can be said about the contours of the lounge chair.

- From the age of 12, I wanted to become an architect. I have always been preoccupied by design and after I graduated from the School of Interior Design, I received a two-year scholarship from the American Scandinavian Foundation in the US. Afterwards, I worked at various Danish drawing offices before starting my own in Copenhagen in 1960. After five years of experimenting and testing new knowledge, I went to London to study at the Royal College of Art and the Architectural Association School of Architecture. This was just when the British capital was bustling as the swinging London and was the centre of innovative thinking, explains Bodil Kjær who stayed in London until 1979, where she also set up a drawing office.

- Although I have never had an actual career plan, there were companies that I really wanted to work for, such as the engineering and architectural company Arup. There, I worked with alternative energy, user participation in planning and user-friendliness in physical settings. I did all this together with engineers, sociologists, economists and architects. We worked on designing office and factory buildings as well as university buildings all over Britain, explains Bodil Kjær, who developed her interest in building planning and workplace design through her work with clients like Oxford University, Cambridge, publishers Penguin and IBM.

Taking new avenues: Bodil Kjær has never been afraid of going down new avenues, and she has never let herself be stopped by her gender, even if many of her contemporary female colleagues were usually facilitators for men.

- I am self-contained and do not prescribe to any given

norm. At times, standing out in an industry dominated by men has worked to my advantage - not least in the research and teaching environment, which has been an important part of my working life, explains Bodil Kjær, who has guest lectured in Britain and Italy and in the USA at Harvard, Pratt Institute and the Smithsonian.

She has also been a visiting professor at the University of Texas in Austin and Indiana State University, and served as a tutor and counsellor for students at the Royal College of Art in London and the schools of architecture in Aarhus and Copenhagen.

Keeping track of her life's work: In a green oasis in central Aarhus, in a small flat in a defunct convent, Bodil Kjær is sorting through drawings, sketches, pictures and notes from a long professional working life. Some have been given to Designmuseum Danmark in Copenhagen, others are on loan to the Trapholt museum in Kolding. A little remains in her sparsely decorated home.

- I am cleaning up my life, and I believe getting rid of your belongings is a healthy exercise that prevents you from becoming enslaved to them, says Bodil Kjær, who has done this exercise all her life, having moved around the world and being unsentimental about worldly possessions. That is why none of her own furniture is to be found in her home. Only a few glass vases and a prototype of a lamp.

If you want to see Bodil Kjær's furniture, you will have to peruse auction catalogues or visit Harvard University, M.I.T and Boston University where her "elements of architecture" can still be found. ■