Thomas Steinbrück of Porsche Design: "We are a global brand with headquarters in Germany"

By Bruno Joly - 15 July 2014

Porsche Design, which just recently opened its store in Paris, launched its studio for fashion design in Berlin two and a half years ago. Thomas Steinbrück, product and veteran of the École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, Dior and Kenneth Cole, took over the artistic direction of Porsche Design in late 2011, just as the brand decided to bring back many products and segments in house that were previously being developing through licenses.

FashionMag: You have lived in Paris, New York and London. You have worked for Dior and Kenneth Cole. And since the end of 2011, you have been creative director of Porsche Design. How do you view Berlin?

Thomas Steinbrück: Berlin is very interesting for several reasons. Here the influences come from fashion, art, design, music and also things like start-ups and e-commerce. This mix makes the city so exciting, which is why we set up the Porsche Design studio in Berlin. I am very open to the art, the architecture. Look at the restaurants — another type of creativity. Many young chefs from all over the world have located to Berlin. It is such a mix that really works here and inspires us.

FM: Porsche is a global brand. You also could have chosen another location.

TS: Initially we talked a lot with our CEO. Munich, London, Milan, Paris — they all could have accommodated my team. But in the end, there are many reasons to be in Berlin. This is where we opened our first concept store, which is also a playground for experimenting with ideas about how to reach hip, urban consumers. London and Paris are nice cities but very established. We want to be trail blazing. And then, we are a global brand with headquarters in Germany. We are almost the only luxury lifestyle brand in the country that offers everything from shoes to clothing to pens. And finally, you can't forget that we travel a lot. Each week a member of the team is in
shoes to clothing to pens. And finally, you can't forget that we travel a lot. Each week a member of the team is in Italy. We attend the fashion weeks, we visit the stores around the world. These trips influence us, allow us to be up to date about the market and as a result, on how the brand is positioned. In this way, we have an overflow of information on what the market is asking for and our identity out there.

**FM:** How important do you think runway shows are in the German capital?

**TS:** Berlin Fashion Week takes place in a business atmosphere with trade shows, Premium, Bread & Butter. It is great for young designers who cannot afford an event in New York, Paris or London. If Hugo Boss, Escada or Jil Sander do not or no longer show here, it is because the international fashion press covers the four cities — New York, London, Milan and Paris. As a global brand, we show in New York. And it's easy in the U.S. because we can stage runway shows at the same time for both the women's and men's collections.

**FM:** Porsche Design, starting with the concept of lifestyle, doesn't that mainly involve licenses and a name?

**TS:** We have repatriated many product segments back into the company. (Following a test phase, fashion was brought back in house in 2010. Adidas is still the partner for Porsche Design's sports lines). Historically, we have been strong in design. Within the company, we have also developed skills for sourcing, purchasing, negotiations, all to develop the brand. So with a product like shoes, the first in-house footwear collection will be in spring 2015.

**FM:** How would you describe the brand positioning?

**TS:** We are not a label with useless items. We offer design with functionality. Each piece has a function, such as fabrics that combine leather and neoprene. In terms of quality, we watch labels such as Dior, Louis Vuitton. Moreover, we rely upon manufacturers that work for these brands or for Bally, too. And then, the price has to remain attractive. We are geared toward the "designer price" and not high-end luxury.

**FM:** What is the ideal brand environment in stores?

**TS:** That's hard to say. For leather, Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Bally. For clothing, I'd say spontaneously Jil Sander and Neil Barret.

**FM:** Porsche sounds masculine. Is it a mixed brand?

**TS:** In fact, initially we only designed products for men. But we had things like eye glasses for women or some women even bought men's watches. Today 30 percent of our sales are made with collections for women. The goal is 50 percent or even 60 percent. This is huge for a masculine brand. We would like to nurture a female customer base. Men, we already have them. Women, we need to win them over. They are much more critical than men. The man is easier to convince.

**FM:** Is it difficult to have a car brand as a name?

**TS:** One should not confuse Porsche Design, an across-the-board design studio, with Porsche AG, which produces cars. You could look for the brand's DNA in the car and in fact, we are proud of the name. Porsche Design has expertise in many domains — architecture, telephones, eyewear, etc. The creator of the Porsche 911 had this purist Bauhaus and functional side. We have it, too. Unlike Louis Vuitton with luggage and Burberry with trench coats, our starting point is design applied to a profusion of products.

**FM:** You just opened a store in Paris. That is quite a symbol.

**TS:** This was the last fashion capital that we were still missing. The store is not as big as in London. But it is located on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, across from Hermes. This is really the area we wanted. Next September during New York Fashion Week, we will open our new flagship on Madison Avenue, a 350-square-meter space. And our new minimalist, purist concept will also be rolled out there. The new concept lets us easily change the store layout for collections and events.

**FM:** Milan was the first address with the new concept.

**TS:** This flagship is just as I envisioned: modern, clean and luxurious. London and Milan were the first to show this new concept. By 2018, we want to have 300 units in the world, compared to the current some 150 locations, 90 of which are franchises, 30 subsidiary stores and 30 travel retail shops.

**FM:** And lastly, can one detect a German style in your brand?

**TS:** Our team is international, working on a global brand. We need to attract consumers from Beijing to Munich.
Everything is connected and we have a global viewpoint. Take New York, for example. Many designers there are not Americans. And in Paris, the couture labels have or had Raf Simons and Marc Jacobs. Such diversity is important for a global style.

**FM**: But Germany as a fashion country?
**TS**: The Germans are very impressed by function. And so, in the past, many designers left the country. In France, fashion is about being beautiful. In Germany, historically, fashion is about wearing clothing!

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