

CULTURE

Design's Long-Reigning Power Couple

A new film captures the dynamic that has kept the Vignellis influential for more than six decades.

STEVEN HELLER

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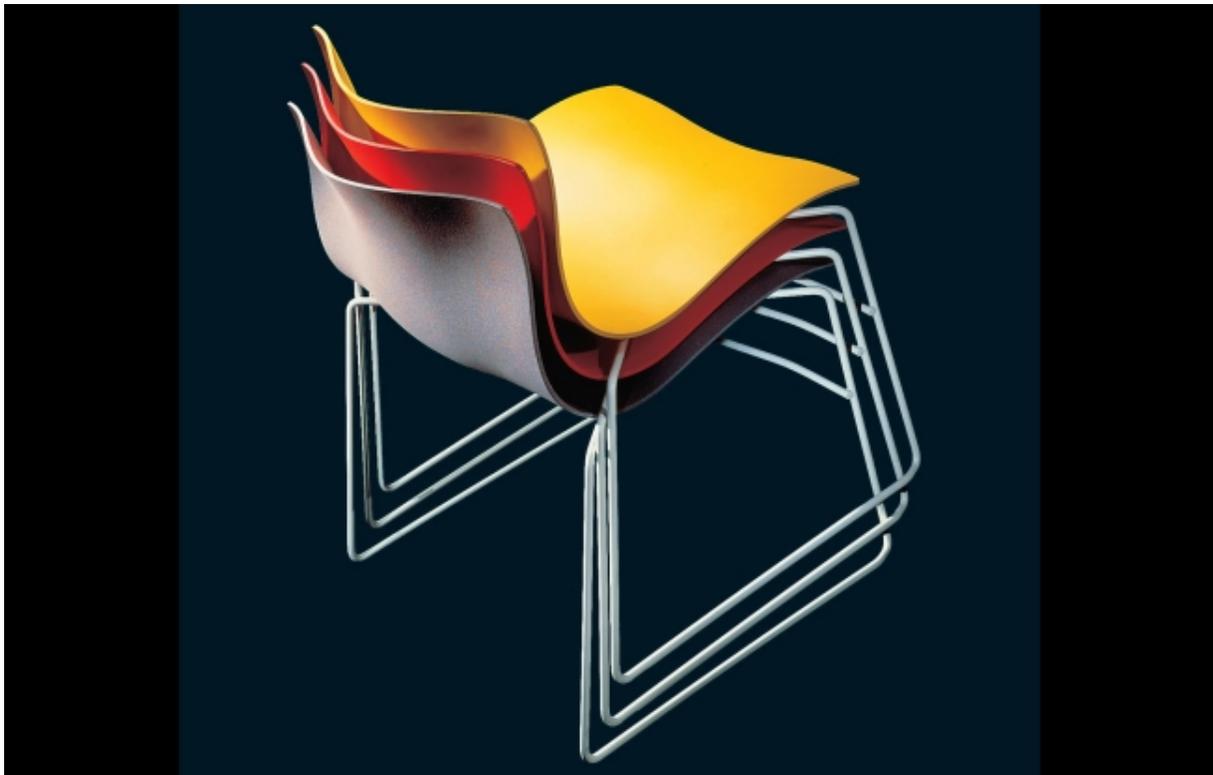


John Madere

One of the first and most dominant power couples of the design world is Lella and Massimo Vignelli, the influential creators of graphics, products, furniture, interiors, and jewelry for more than six decades. Lella and Massimo each have distinct creative voices and mediums, yet together both

represent the same name and brand: Vignelli. Today in their 80s, the two's CV includes a long list of iconic clients—Ford, Bloomingdale's, the New York City subway. Now comes a career-capping documentary by Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, *Design Is One*, which opened in New York's IFC Center on October 11 and will run from October 31 to November 8 in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Design Is One, a title that pinpoints where the Vignelli's individual lives converge, is an illuminating, if not entirely seamless, tribute and biography. There are the requisite testaments with analysis by a cast that includes Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Milton Glaser, Paola Antonelli, and others, including me. Yet the most interesting talking heads are the Vignellis themselves, who reveal the temperaments and tension that have kept their partnership operating for so long. Both have strict design doctrines regarding the rightness of form and the role that design must play in the world. But despite their dogmas, their humanity is on display here as well.



The Knoll Hankerchief Chair (1982) (Vignelli Associates)

So are some juicy anecdotes. Guerra cites this story as a favorite: While

having a meeting with a client in Venice, and being late with the concept, “Massimo came up with the idea for a design spontaneously while looking at the Salute dome in Venice, and instantly presented it to the client. Now the glassware is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection.”



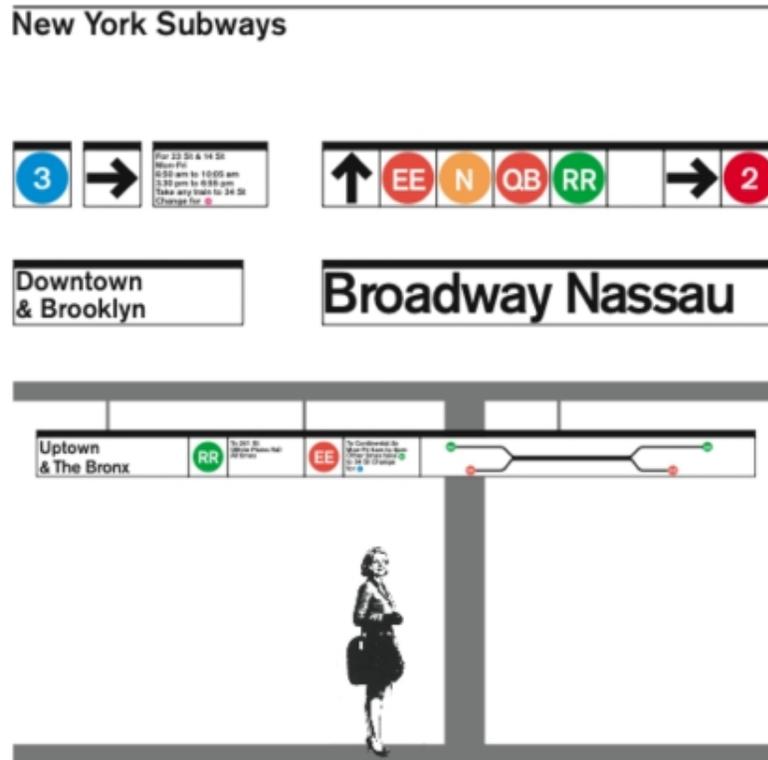
Poltrona Saratoga Furniture (1964) (Vignelli Associates)

"The Vignellis are known by everybody, even by people who don't know their name. They're surrounded by the things that they've conceived."

The overall goal of the documentary, though, was filming a seemingly unfilmable creative dynamic. “Their process is so internalized and often so immediate and spontaneous that it was hard to capture this,” Guerra says. “As Alan Heller notes, it starts with an idea but invariably Massimo often has drawn a solution out in a matter of seconds.” Nonetheless, the film does convey “how ubiquitous their work has been, how influential they have been on the entire field of design,” Guerra says.

Barry Bergdoll, curator of architecture and design at MoMA, notes in the film that “The Vignellis are known by everybody, even by people who don't know their name. They're

surrounded by the things that they've conceived." Take for example the famous New York City Subway map. It originally caused a stir for introducing radical simplicity—more a diagram than map—that was maligned and modified by the Transit Authority, but it's nonetheless today in the MoMA permanent collection.



New York City Subway signage (Vignelli Associates)

With intimate access, Brew and Guerra were able to get behind the Vignellis' rationalism into the a more ethereal realm: "We were able to see how they live, eat and breathe with their designs," Guerra says. "It's a total way of life for them, and was very inspiring to see throughout the filming process. The Vignellis are such interesting and charming people—with such elegance, a lightness of touch, a great sense of humor."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



STEVEN HELLER is a contributing writer for *The Atlantic*, the co-chair of the MFA Design program at the School of Visual Arts, and the co-founder of its MFA Design Criticism program.