

The Vignellis, Benevolent Dictators of Design

By [STEVEN KURUTZ](#) OCT. 17, 2012

Massimo Vignelli isn't interested in designing a penthouse for a corporate titan. "We like to do design that affects millions of people," he said, referring to [Vignelli Associates](#), the firm he and his wife, Lella, founded more than four decades ago.

The Vignellis, Italians who moved to New York in 1965, have succeeded wildly in that regard. Their corporate logos for American Airlines, Bloomingdales and Ford are still among the most recognizable in the business world. The signs directing New York's subway riders also bear the Vignellis' imprint (and Mr. Vignelli's signature typeface, Helvetica). Then there are dishes, office interiors, books, furniture and countless other products the couple have designed for Knoll, Heller and other companies, all carrying their clean-lined aesthetic.

A new [documentary](#), "Design Is One: Lella and Massimo Vignelli," directed by Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, traces the couple's influential partnership. The film premieres tonight to kick off this year's Architecture and Design Film Festival in Manhattan.



While design students will come away quoting Mr. Vignelli's stiff-necked pronouncements ("From a bad client you get a worse client"), the film is all the more poignant because since its completion Mrs. Vignelli, 78, has grown increasingly ill with aphasia and is no longer able to work.

On a recent afternoon in the couple's chic, black-and-white East Side apartment, Mr. Vignelli, 81, schooled a visitor on bad clients and what makes good design and talked about how the partnership has changed since his wife's illness.

You tell design students not to work for a bad client. What in your view is a bad client?

A bad client is a client that doesn't understand the role of the designer. Designers are like doctors. When you go to the doctor, you don't tell the doctor what you want — you ask the doctor to give you what you need.

Shouldn't the client have a say in the design they're paying for?



Sometimes you might have alternatives. But we usually do not give alternatives. Period. We go through the alternatives ourselves. Because then the client is going to say, "We like this top and that bottom."

The film really showcases your long working partnership with Lella.

I was the guy with the pencil most of the time. Lella had a very good critical sense. So she would come and say: "It's good. It's bad." Or it would be an interior job and she would take over and take care of the whole thing.

It was a great partnership because she had a very great sense of criticism, up until a couple of years ago.

How has your approach changed since you no longer have that counterbalance?



I don't have it. I just don't have it. But we've lived all our life together. There is a symbiosis that happens after a while, so now I perceive her in a symbiotic way. Whatever I do reflects, somehow, both aspects.

Does a well-designed product need to be functional or attractive?

Both. There are many ways of making a knife, and more or less all knives cut. But some knives cut better, and some knives not only cut better but are beautiful objects. Integrity is beautiful.

Things that are ugly, it's because they have no integrity. And this is true in people and it's true in design. A beautiful girl could be terrific, but her eye will show her shallowness, let's say. And if you get her, you made a mistake. Which is exactly like buying an object that has function but not integrity. That is the way it goes, you see.

Is every object in your home well-designed?

I wouldn't have it if it wasn't well-designed. I wouldn't spend the money.

Is there anything you would like to design that you haven't?

The corporate identity for the Vatican. I would go to the pope and say: "Your holiness. The logo is O.K., but everything else has to go." Not that I haven't tried. I've tried, but unsuccessfully.
