Innovation and Design

For more than 50 Years

USM

More than 50 Years of Innovation and Design

Rather than follow the fashion trends the Swiss firm USM has cultivated its own sense of rigour and timelessness, two inherent values dear to its practice. The USM Haller shelving system is made of sheet-steel panels joined together with chromed tubes and ball connectors that form a frame, which has enabled the brand since its launch in 1965 to offer an infinite range of configurations. Every day, more and more end clients, architects and designers are seduced by its basic aesthetic and ultra-functionality.

Fifty years later, USM's Haller furniture system has become a design classic and remains to inspire new interiors around the world. The product continues to perfect itself, with the strength of its 100% Swiss manufacturing processes and faultless adherence to its original concept, to better respond to the flexibility of our contemporary lives.

Introduction

USM takes its initials from its founder, Ulrich Schärer, and Münsingen, the Swiss village just outside of Bern where he was born. He founded USM in 1885 as a small, family-run, metal-working firm. In 1920, Ulrich Schärer's children took over the business and began to manufacture espagnolette window fittings. The company expanded rapidly and by the end of the 1940s, it specialised in manufacturing ornamental hinges for the construction industry and in machining sheet steel.

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1 From Architecture to Design, The Birth of a Cult Product

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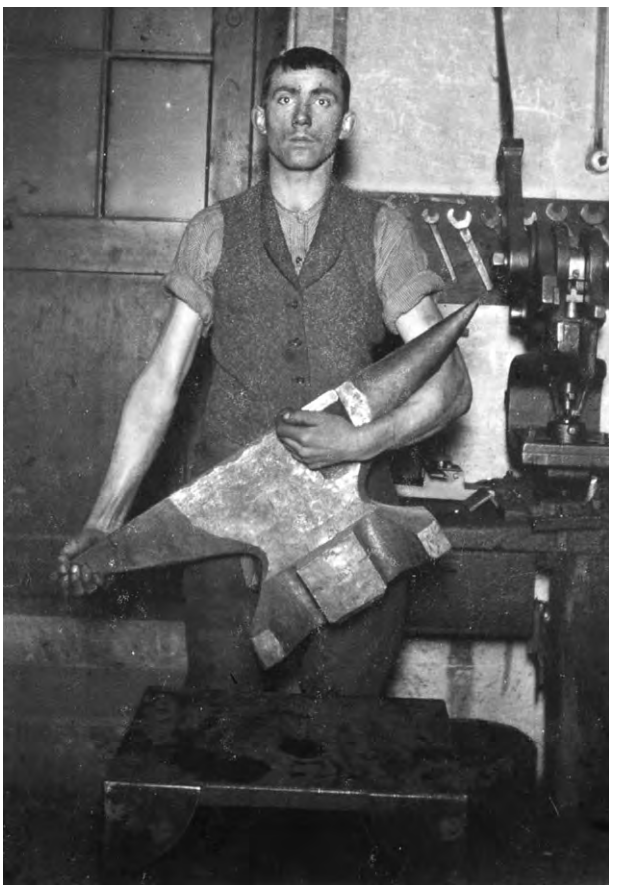

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1 Second USM catalogue, 1912
2–4 The espagnolette window fittings manufacturing workshop in Münsingen, circa 1920
5 Original letterhead for the ornamental hinges factory

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Paul Schärer, Jr.

It was Paul Schärer, Jr. (1933-2011), the grandson of the company's founder, who steered USM into the modern world. Having earned his degree in engineering from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (ETHZ), he joined the family business in 1961, determined to industrialise it. His passionate interest in architecture and design, as well as his great admiration for the work of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, led him to commission Fritz Haller, an innovative Swiss architect whose designs he also admired, to design a new type of flexible factory that could be adapted to various manufacturing processes. Haller perfected a modular, metal-framed construction system that coincided precisely with Paul Schärer, Jr.'s ambitions. The new USM factory opened in 1965 in the countryside near Münsingen. Next to the factory, an office building called The Pavilion was built using the same construction principles, but on a smaller scale. A few years later, Schärer commissioned Haller to design and build him a new house, just a few metres from the factory. Raised on columns and named Buechli, the metal-and-glass house was completed in 1969 and still stands today.

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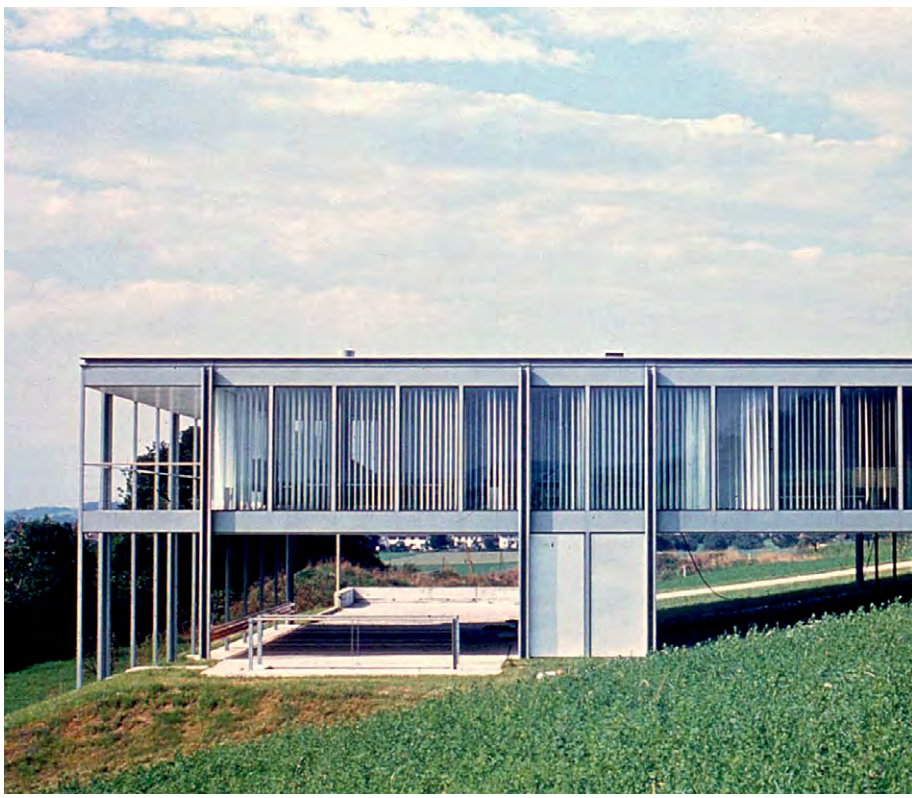

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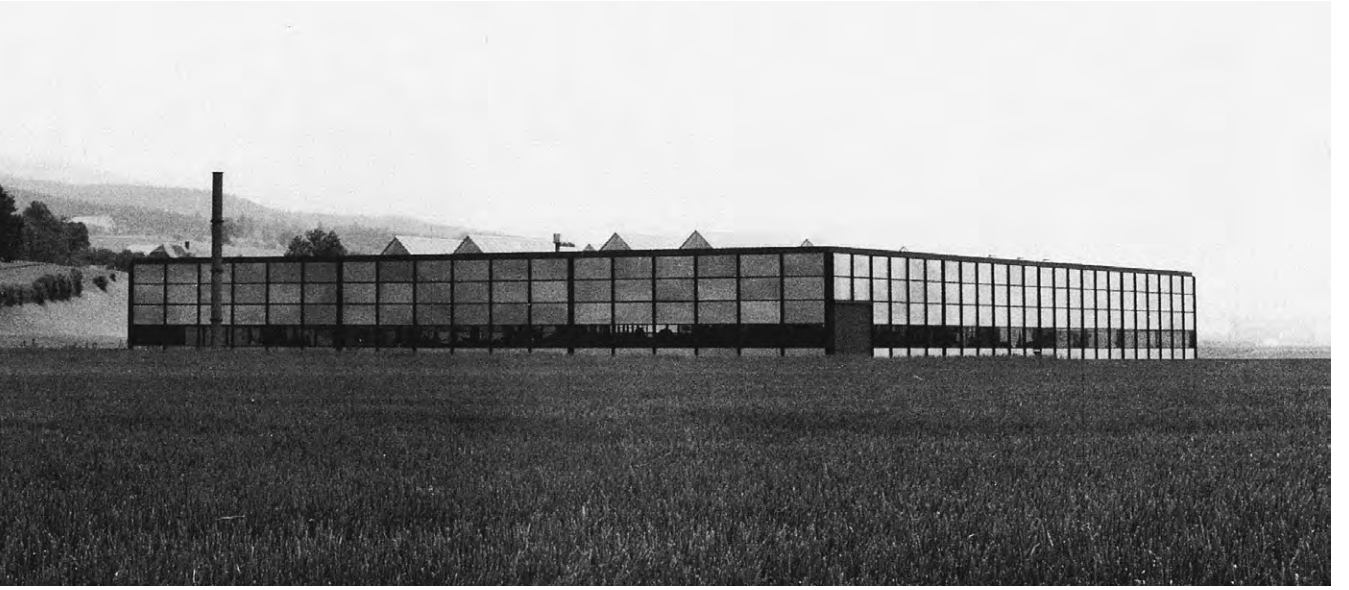

1 The USM factory and The Pavilion office building at Münsingen, both built using the same principles by Fritz Haller in 1965
2 Buechli, the house Fritz Haller designed in 1969 as a home for Paul Schärer, Jr., and his family

Fritz Haller

Fritz Haller (1924-2012) was one of the most influential Swiss architects of the second half of the 20th century. He was a member of the Solothurn School group of architects and was an architectural theorist as well as adesigner of buildings. He taught architecture in both Switzerland and the United States. He designed many commercial buildings, houses, factories and schools.
He rapidly became well-known for his MINI, MIDI, MAXI construction system, which uses steel modules of various sizes to enable a building's surface area to be increased or decreased depending on its requirements. The USM factory is an example of the MAXI system, whereas the Buechli house was the prototype of the MINI system.
This system of industrialised architecture that Haller perfected in the early 1960s was part of a trend for inexpensive buildings that could be easily dismantled, first seen in postwar France with the engineer and architect Jean Prouvé's temporary housing, as well as in the United States in Charles & Ray Eames' iconic, prefabricated 'Case Study' Los Angeles home.

The Union of Two Visions

Once the new USM factory had opened for business, Paul Schärer, Jr., realised that the only furniture available for his offices were traditional wooden pieces, far from the Functionalist aesthetic of the glass-and-steel buildings. Fritz Haller therefore suggested the creation of a range of furniture based on his modular architecture.

The two men combined their talents and devotion to innovation in an industrial design project. Rather than furniture pieces, together they perfected a furniture system based on three key elements: chrome-plated steel tubes joined together by ingenious ball connectors, with metal panels of powder coated sheet steel. They created their first prototypes in 1963 and began to manufacture them at the USM factory in 1965 to furnish the factory's offices. Their Modernist vision for the furniture system was based on the ease of extending its height or width in order to adapt to any requirement.

Many photos of the new steel-furnished USM factory and offices were published in architectural magazines. The ingenious system caught the imagination of the management team at Rothschild Bank, which, in 1969, was the first customer to place an order: 600 workstations for its new Paris offices. Paul Schärer, Jr., having never intended to sell the furniture system commercially, had no idea how much to charge for it. In the end, he based his pricing on the price-per-kilo model of the Volkswagen Beetle! As more orders began to flood in, Schärer and Haller decided to put the furniture system into mass production and to call it 'USM Haller'.

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1 The patented ball connector, the keystone of the USM Haller system
2 The modular glass-and-steel factory building designed by Fritz Haller for USM
3 The new USM offices in Fritz Haller's Pavilion building in 1965, with the first prototypes of the USM Haller furniture system

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Alexander Schärer

Alexander Schärer, the son of Paul Schärer, Jr., became the fourth generation of the Schärer family to run USM. Born in 1965, the year in which the USM Haller system was launched, he grew up in the Buechli, the Fritz Haller-designed steel-and-glass house a stone's throw from the USM factory. Architecture, design and industry were integral parts of his day-to-day life. He followed in his father's footsteps and studied engineering, earning his degree from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne. He then studied management and worked at Procter & Gamble, but ultimately joined USM in 1993 and became Managing Director and Chairman of the Board in 2000. He is also currently a member of the Architecture and Design Committee of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.
Alexander Schärer built on the previous generations of his family's work by expanding USM while retaining its fundamental values of high quality and business strength. He likes to rise above the company's products to talk about 'the world of USM', brimming with new ideas and opportunities. To improve USM's brand visibility, he set up subsidiaries around the world. He has a keen interest in the latest technological developments and has invested in ever-improving production tools and machinery, while still guaranteeing that his company's products are 100% Swiss-manufactured, to the highest precision and quality standards.

"When a customer chooses to buy one of our furniture systems, he doesn't simply acquire some sheet steel and tubes, but also the knowledge and service."

Alexander Schärer, USM Chairman of the Board

The present-day USM offices at the Münsingen factory

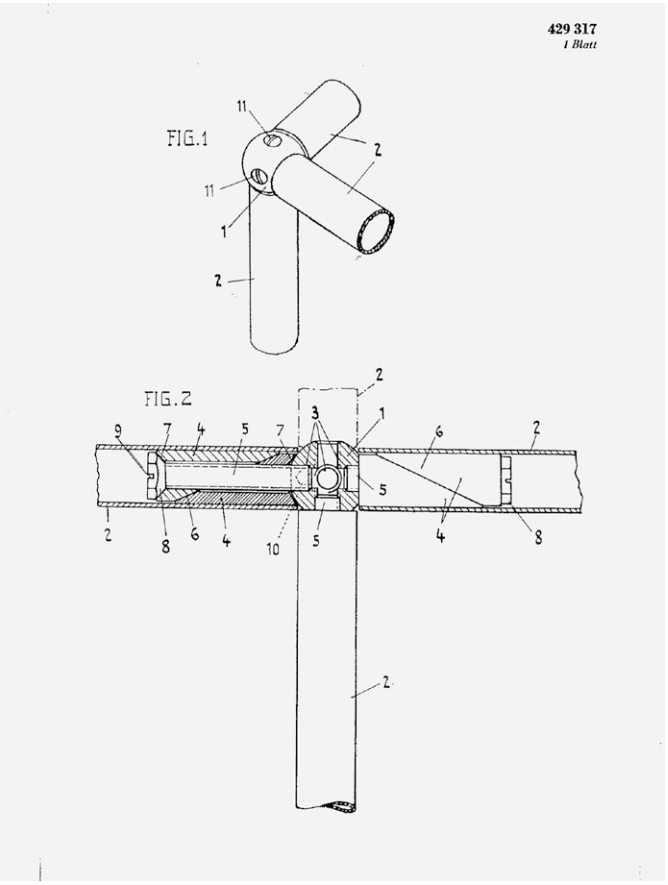
The manufacturing facility at the USM factory in Münsingen

An Essential Design

Paul Schärer, Jr., and Fritz Haller's invention is based on the highest level of functionality. The tubes of chrome-plated steel, the sheet-steel panels and the ball connectors that join them together are all visible components of the furniture system and integral parts of its design. 'Form follows function', proclaimed American architect Louis Sullivan as the 20th century began, affirming his belief in a Functionalist aesthetic with no florid decorations. His saying was later taken up by the leading members of the Bauhaus, and influenced several generations of distinguished architects with a penchant for clean lines, including Fritz Haller.

Haller's idea was to perfect furniture in the Modernist aesthetic that could adapt to different requirements and many changes, just like his buildings. The basic design of his furniture system entirely coincides with this modular concept.
The USM Haller system remains unique and unparalleled in its field, as much in the quality of its manufacture as in its functionality. Since 2001, it has been part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, alongside other icons in the history of industrial design.

2 The USM Haller System: A World in Movement



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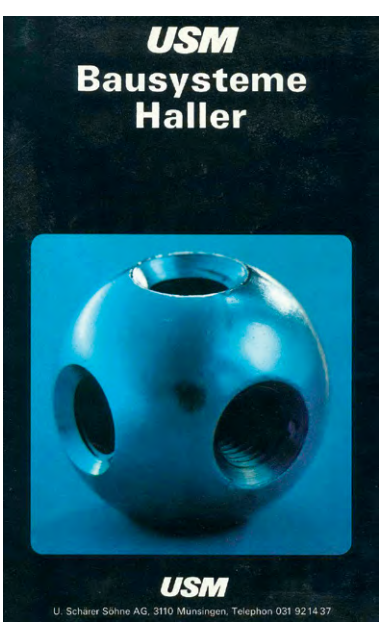

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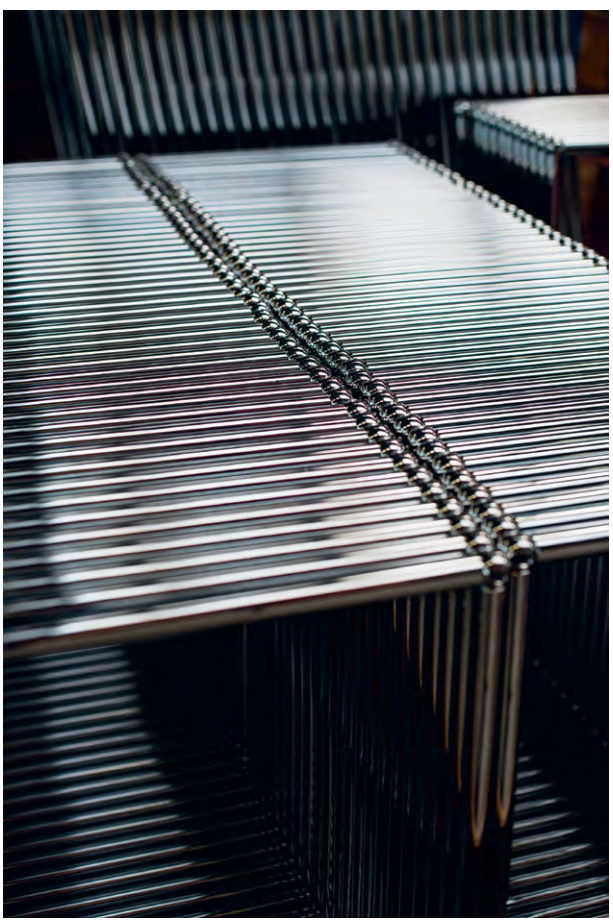
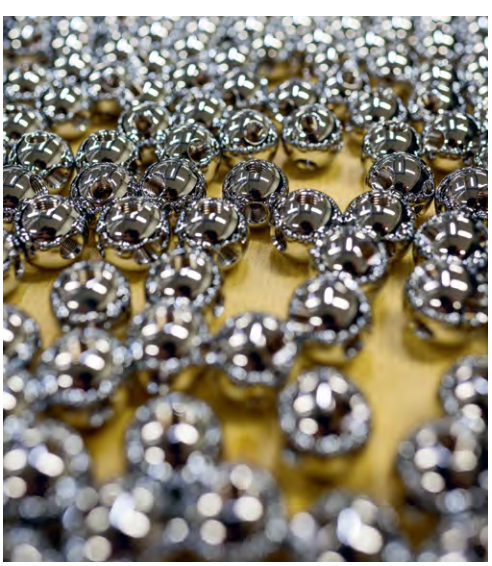
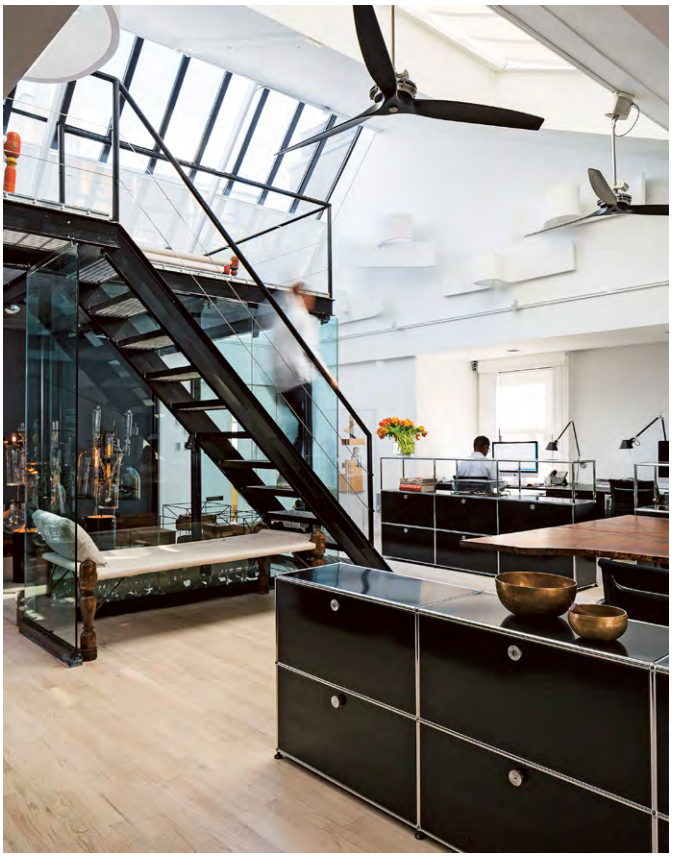
1 Manufacturing drawing of the USM ball connector, 1967
2 1970 USM catalogue

“The USM Haller system:
excellence for architects!
It bears witness to history.
It bears witness to intelligence.
It bears witness to beauty.
It bears witness to functionality”

Mario Botta, Architect







“USM Haller system inspires our design and we’ve used it for years in our residential as well as commercial projects.
It represents a superb intersection of form and function. Its presence infuses a space with a calm solidity... USM is simultaneously modern, utilitarian and elegant.”

Ghiora Aharoni Design Studio,
New York

An Essential Design

The ball connector is the keystone of this evolving, ultra-ingenious system, which has been copyrighted as a work of applied art since 1988. Containing 47 grams of chrome-plated steel and six threaded holes into which six screws can be inserted, it has been nicknamed ‘the magic ball’ in Switzerland. It allows the furniture system to be extended upwards as well as sideways, almost infinitely, while ensuring it remains perfectly stable. One module can thus create a giant bookcase or a small, personalised storage unit. It is part of an open furniture system that can be adapted for many different scenarios.

“I began as a student at BDP in the late 70’s and USM has been present for my entire career! Over the years we have experimented with ‘Haller Towers’ and treated it as internal architecture. Our Haller system still gets compliments year on year and as a result it has been specified for many clients.”

Martin Cook,
Director and Chair of Design
BDP, London


UNIX
RUNNING
eFLYING


NEW YORK
THE POWER OF YOU
AUTHOR NAME
Inside your brain - discover secrets

USM Around the World

Over the last 50 years, sales of the USM Haller furniture system have continued to grow. Many countries, such as France, Japan and the United States have developed long-term loyalty to the brand. Today, there are USM subsidiaries in six countries around the world: Switzerland, Germany, France, Japan, the United States and since 2014, the United Kingdom. Since opening a showroom in the middle of SoHo in New York in 2002, USM opened its Paris showroom on Rue de Bourgogne in 2003. The most recent USM showroom opened in London's Clerkenwell Design District, coinciding with the establishment of the U.K. subsidiary. Today, there are nine USM showrooms around the world and a network of over 400 distributors in 40 countries.

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3 50 Years Old and Still Visionary

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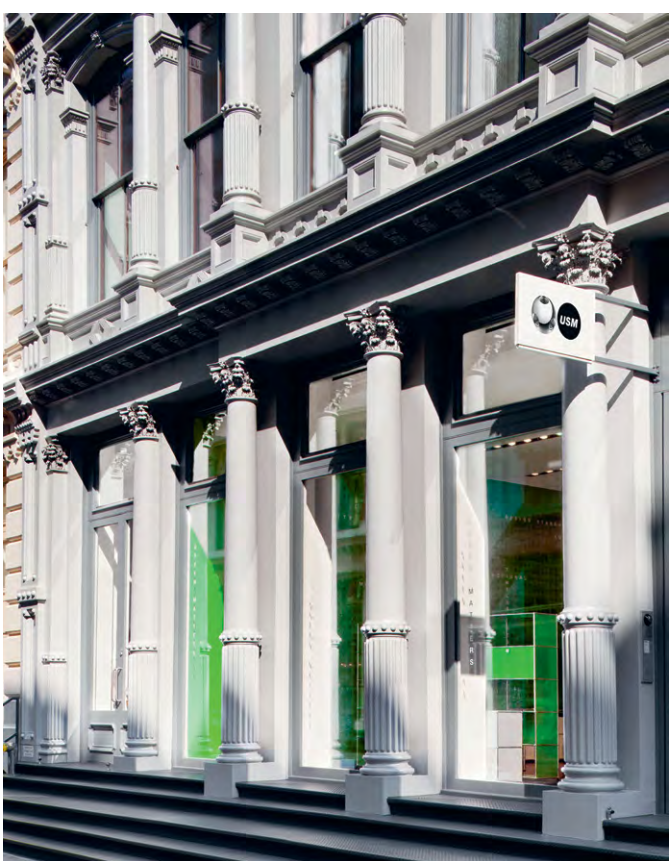

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“Relocating to Sea Containers was a wonderful opportunity to create a studio that truly reflected our strong culture of creativity and design integrity. The only furniture, that fitted this brief and relocated with the studio, was our existing USM storage. We reconfigured what we had and supplemented with more USM in a vibrant yellow, injecting vitality to an otherwise minimal and raw space”.

Colin Macgadie, Creative Director, BDG architecture + design, London

1 Facade of the USM showroom in Paris
2 Interior of the USM showroom in London
3 Facade of the USM showroom in New York

Innovation and Environmentalism

Although the unique USM Haller furniture system design remains unchanged for 50 years, its sophistication has continually developed. Its quality is constantly improving to conform to the brand's quality standards. This includes testing door hinges by opening and closing them 40,000 times without making the slightest noise. The USM factory's combination of high-tech robots and very highly qualified workforce means that its manufacturing process remains unequaled.

Sustainable development is very important to USM. In 2007, the company was certified by the Greenguard Environmental Institute. Additionally, USM's new powder coating workshop is a symbol of its commitment to environmentalism. To save energy, the 5,000-square-metre facility was built underground beneath the Münsingen factory, where it uses 35% less primary energy than a surface facility. The coloured powders are used inside the factory itself, which has a floor area of 50,000 square metres and a staff of 400 employees, are light-resistant and manufactured without the use of solvents or heavy metals such as lead, which means that the powder-spray operators can work without gloves or masks.

Steel is a highly recyclable material and is at the heart of the manufacturing process in the USM factory, giving the brand's products a highly environmentally friendly character. Their timeless design and ability to resist the stresses and strains of daily use gives them a longer-than-average lifespan. The intrinsic values and long lifespan of USM Haller furniture systems symbolise the brand's original philosophy of sustainable development.

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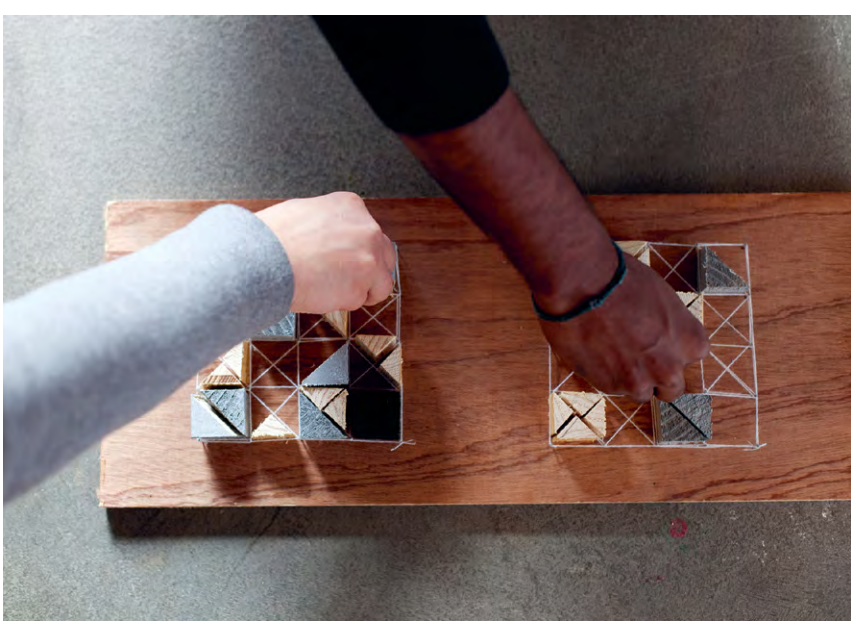
1 The USM structural assembly line in Münsingen
2 The USM assembly facility in Münsingen

2

The new underground thermo-powder coating unit
at the Münsingen factory

Rethink the Modular

To celebrate the golden jubilee of its cult product, USM organised ‘Project 50’, which included a workshop held in September 2014 at the Boisbuchet Manor in the Charente region of France. The brand invited the next generation of designers to reconsider modularity and come up with new designs. The workshop brought together around 50 students from seven schools of architecture and design around the world, including ECAL (Lausanne) and ENSCI (Paris). The participants were invited to express their visions of contemporary modularity in their respective specialised fields. A summary of the ideas developed in this workshop, called ‘Re-think the Modular’, will be presented by USM at the Milan Furniture Fair in April 2015. USM will also be organising an advertising campaign around the world in 2015 inspired by these young designers’ views of the USM Haller system.



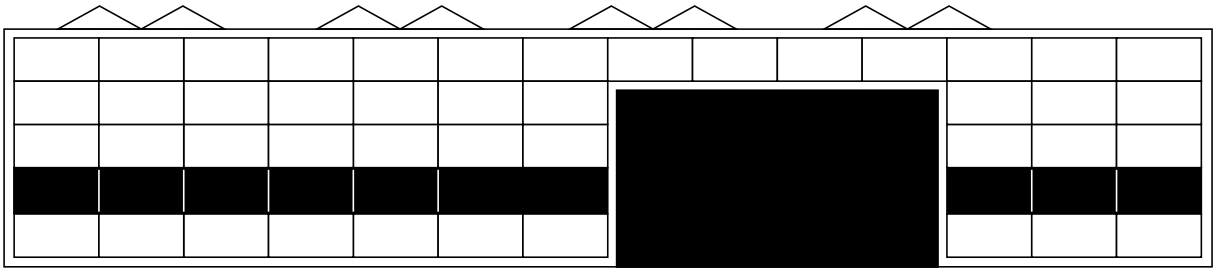
The student workshop project50 in Boisbuchet

“The USM furniture system has a beautiful elegance and simplicity which give it eternal life. These modules are not only utilitarian, they are a sort of sweet symphony of furniture”

Yabu Pushelberg Architects, Toronto


USM

USM Münsingen



50,000 square meters of factory floor area

400 staff members

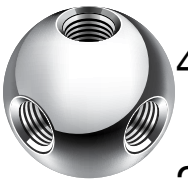
In 1 year, the factory uses…

2,200,000 ball connectors

2,600 tonnes of steel

1,500,000 square meters of sheet steel

The ball connector



47 grams of chrome-plated brass

2,5 centimeters in diameter

USM around the world

6 subsidiaries :

400 distributors in **40** countries

USM colours

14 USM Haller colours

USM Matte Silver, Gentian Blue, Steel Blue, USM Beige, Golden Yellow, Pure Orange, USM Ruby Red, USM Chestnut Brown, USM Green, Pure White, Light Grey, Mid Grey, Anthracite, Graphite Black.

Key Dates

1885
Ulrich Schärer sets up a metal-working workshop in the Swiss village of Münsingen, just outside Bern.

1919
The Bauhaus School opens in Weimar, Germany.

1920
The firm begins to manufacture espagnolette window fittings.

1925
Le Corbusier designs the New Spirit Pavilion in Paris.

1936
Volkswagen launches the Beetle car.

1946
The firm begins to manufacture ornamental hinges for the construction industry and to machine sheet steel.

1961
Paul Schärer, Jr., joins the firm as an engineer and commissions Fritz Haller to design a new factory.

1963
Paul Schärer, Jr., and Fritz Haller begin to develop the USM Haller furniture system for USM's offices.

1965-1968
Mies van der Rohe, who had emigrated to the United States in 1938, designs the glass-and-concrete Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin.

1965
The new USM factory opens in Münsingen. Following the completion of the USM Haller furniture system's final design using the ball connectors, manufacture of the prototypes begin.

1969
Mass-production of the USM Haller system begins. The Rothschild Bank in Paris places the first large order.

1988
The USM Haller system is declared a "work of applied art".

2000
Paul Schärer, Jr.'s son Alexander Schärer, who had joined the firm in 1993, becomes Managing Director and Chairman of the Board of USM.

2001
The USM Haller system becomes part of the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

2004
The Gherkin designed by Foster + Partners opens in London. USM supplies 15 floors of furniture for Swiss Re.

2007
USM installs 10 floors of furniture in the Bank of America Tower designed by CookFox Architects.

2008
The USM Haller and USM Kitos systems are awarded Greenguard Environmental Institute certificates.

2014
Frank Gehry's building for the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris's Bois de Boulogne opens

2015
The USM Haller system celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Information about USM

The current owners are Alexander Schärer and his sister Judith Stuber-Schärer. They are the children of Paul Schärer, Jr., and are the fourth generation of the family that founded USM.
Alexander Schärer is the current Managing Director and Chairman of the Board. He is 50 years old.
USM uses almost 2.2 million ball connectors and more than 2,600 tonnes of sheet steel each year.
USM has 400 distributors in 40 countries.
USM has subsidiaries in six countries: Switzerland, Germany, France, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.
The USM Haller ball connector is 2.5cm in diameter and is made of 47g of chrome-plated brass.
The USM Haller system is available in 14 different colours, from USM Green to Ruby Red.
USM manufactures 1.5 million square metres of sheet-steel panels each year, enough to cover 180 football pitches.
USM's factory at Münsingen in Switzerland employs 400 staff members and has a floor area of 50,000 square metres.

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