

eye



# Fritz Gottschalk and the Swiss- Canadian connection

Gottschalk+Ash International spans more than five decades, a Swiss design studio with Modernist roots in Northern Europe and North America. Eye went to Zürich to meet the people behind the practice. Words: Simon Esterson and John L. Walters. Portraits: Philip Sayer



**Fritz Gottschalk was born in Zürich in 1937 and studied and worked in Europe before emigrating to Canada in the early 1960s, where he founded Gottschalk + Ash (G+A) with Canadian designer Stuart Ash. In 1979 he returned to Zürich, where he still lives and works as founding partner of G+A.**

**Design Canada director Greg Durrell says: 'It was people like Fritz Gottschalk who inspired me to take an interest in design and ultimately become a designer. Fritz and his colleagues brought the International Style to Canada at a time when the country was trying to redefine itself. I believe his identity work (based on simple and timeless**

**principles) allowed Canadians to think of themselves as an independent nation. His legacy and work can still be felt across the country from banks to museums to transportation systems.'**

**Carbone Smolan Agency (CSA) founder Ken Carbone was recruited by Gottschalk to work on the 1976 Montréal Olympics. Carbone says: 'I got a lot of first-hand training from Fritz. The atmosphere at Gottschalk + Ash was warm, welcoming and bi-lingual. He was a demanding boss, ran a tight ship and would only accept my best work. Fritz was a great teacher and very different from my previous bosses at the quintessentially**

**American Chermayeff & Geismar. His sense of clarity, simplicity, visual power and "Swiss" order became part of my design DNA. G+A ran the Design Quality Control Bureau for the Olympic Committee, the "design police" for the 1976 games. Fritz was uncompromising in his demand for adherence to graphic standards, sending corporations and ad agencies back to the drawing boards to get it right. I cherish those early experiences with Fritz and still put many of the design fundamentals I learned from him into practice today.'**

**This conversation, with Eye's Esterson and Walters, took place in January 2019 in the Zürich studios of G+A.**

*Simon Esterson: How did you become a designer?*

Fritz Gottschalk: When school came to an end. I said, 'I would like to go to art school.' My dad was a bookbinder. My grandad was a bookbinder. During the war, a number of designers applied for work in bookbinding, so in my dad's mind, being a designer was difficult, artsy. He said, 'Okay, if you want to do that, okay. But I would suggest to you that you learn a proper profession first.'

I went to Institut Orell Füssli AG in Zürich, the guys who still print the Swiss money. Fantastic outfit. As apprentices we worked for a short time in all the departments, including hand composition, printing, lithography, cartography, proofreading and design.

*John L. Walters: Very hands-on?*

FG: Very practical. And I did not enjoy that. I went to my dad and said, 'Look, I've done two years, this is not for me.' And my dad, who was a very quiet man, said, 'Okay, well, if you want to do that, I go to your boss tomorrow and I'll tell him. However, I would suggest finishing.'

And I did finish. In the third year, I got very involved in the design aspect of it, and that gave me a very, very solid base. But it also had to do with putting your mind to something, and not giving up at the first whiff of cold air. This methodical learning, putting things together and changing things – you know – you set the type and then one, two picas bigger or smaller. That not only helped me in terms of design; it helped me in terms of defending design. Because I knew every detail: look at this face here, and the thickness of this line versus the weight of the type, et cetera. And that helped me with clients. I could explain everything. I know how things are made. Whether it's analogue or digital, the principle is always the same. And for me, it's still a great joy today to figure out the details.

*JLW: Did you have a sense of what a designer was? Did you have a mentor you admired?*

FG: Yes, a number. During apprenticeship we

went to art school [Schule für Gestaltung Zürich]. I had wonderful teachers: Willy Riegert and Karl Sternbauerin in Zürich and later Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder in Basel. [After Swiss military service, Gottschalk went to Atelier Typographique in Paris.]

#### **Paris and London**

FG: We had no work permit in Paris. And we were scared stiff every day. My boss M. Louis de Hauteclouque said, 'Don't you worry about it. I know Charles de Gaulle himself.' We then got the work permit and that was an amazing time, mainly when it came to food. After a year and a half I figured, 'Okay, now I've got to go back to Basel.' And Ruder and Hofmann at that time, they only took two students. They were very tough in selecting. They accepted me, but the condition was that you have to have a proper professional education, and two years of experience. They said, 'Keep on doing what you're doing, and within a year you can come back.'

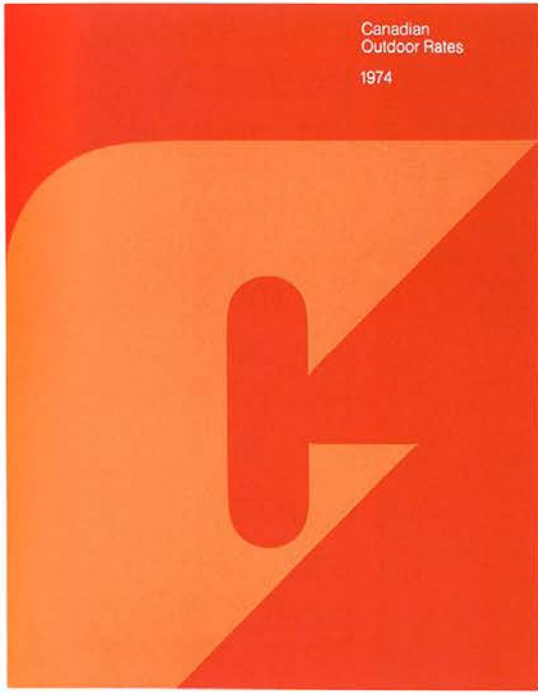
So I went to London, and I worked at London Typographic Designers. It couldn't have been more English. But then I couldn't get a job, so I figured, 'Okay, I'm going to go enrol in a business school for a half year.' And during that time the guys at Banks & Miles hired me. And I had an absolutely wonderful time there, although I had to fight for sans serif type like crazy, because I was on the track of Swiss design minimalism. London was just the cat's meow.

And then came a hard blow. I thought, 'Okay. Next spring I go to Basel.' And the sons of bitches wrote to me, and said, 'Well, we can't take you. You have to wait for another year.' I was really upset. But in hindsight, very good. You had Carnaby Street, and the Beatles, and we used to go to Richmond, where Mick Jagger and the boys were playing.

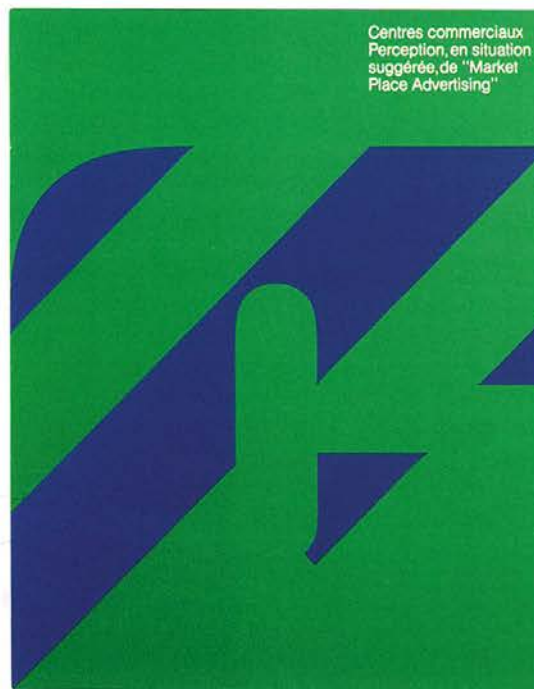
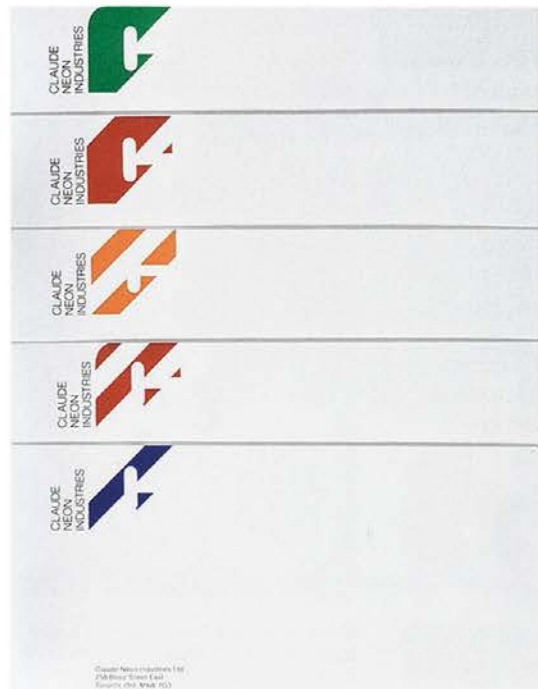
Then I went to Basel for a year. And that, of course, was very radical – over 50 hours a week. And I had a key to the school, so we could go

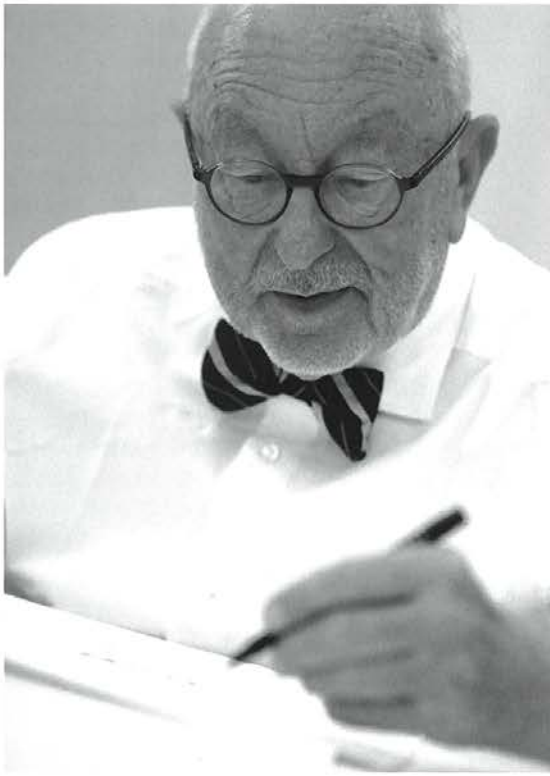


**Royal Bank of Canada, identity design, 1970.**



**Identity and marketing material for outdoor advertising contractor Claude Neon, 1973, designed by Gottschalk + Ash in collaboration with Freddy Jaggi.**





there and work day and night. The guys who put the cherry on top in my education were Emil Ruder in typography, and Armin Hofmann and Kurt Hauert in design. Ruder was radical, but in a positive sense. He had a very clear vision and it was totally new at that time. Hofmann probably influenced me more than anybody else. He had a clear approach. Hofmann's philosophy is take the onion and peel it, peel it, peel it, peel it. And Hauert just kept on peeling it. He was incredible – he made us draw an 'A' for at least three months. And that, I am really extremely grateful for. Because the joy of our profession is there.

### Moving to Canada

FG: And then, after that year, I figured, 'I only want to go to one place. That's New York.' But I couldn't go to the States. I would have been conscripted, because of the [Vietnam] war. So I figured, 'I have to find a job in Canada.' I came across three names: Ernst Roch, Allan Fleming and Paul Arthur. Fleming wrote back, 'Fritz, you're welcome. However, you have to realise this is a freewheeling society.' Roch, said 'Fritz, once you're here, come and see me.' Arthur, who worked for *Graphis* magazine, must have written to Walter Herdeg [founder of *Graphis*] asking, 'Who is this guy Gottschalk?' (I always had a good relationship with Herdeg.)

One day I'm sitting in a restaurant and I hear from a colleague of mine that Herdeg is looking for somebody to go to Canada. Within a month, I moved to Ottawa to work with Arthur. I said goodbye to my parents, I said goodbye to my country, and I thought I would never come back.

Paul Arthur was the pioneer in terms of doing graphic design for the government, the National Gallery and so on. I was holding Tutankhamun in my hands. Then I did a catalogue for Canadian Art for a biennale in Brazil – it's the first job I did.

And Paul always put in, 'Design: Paul Arthur and Associates.' So I went to Paul and I said, 'Paul, how about letting me put my name in brackets after you?' Paul went for it, and I got started.

Within a couple of years, we went from four people to twelve people. That's why Stuart Ash wanted to work for Paul. He came for an interview ... That's how I got to know him, though we never worked together before we started the company. And then I had a fight with Paul and I started working on my own, in my apartment. Day and night for a year and a half.

Helmut Schmid worked for me. He was my very first freelancer. We knew each other from Basel. And then Stu came along. And I said, 'Stu, come on, why don't we get going together?' That was a watershed decision, because at that time there was Rolf Harder and Ernst Roch practising in Montréal. Doing wonderful work. But whenever we were together, I was with Europeans. And I thought, 'No, that's not what I'm going to do. If I get together with somebody, she or he has to be Canadian.' Stu came along, and it was perfect.

The studio was founded in Montréal by Stu and me and I tell you, we had nothing but blue-chip clients. We had from the Royal Bank of Canada to Syntex Pharmaceuticals to Hoffmann-La Roche to Canadian National to the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts.

JLW: Was there a big culture shock, setting up in a new country?

FG: No. Canadians, the clients, were very open towards our work. And very accommodating. I mean, if a printer was printing anything for us, he knew from the beginning, 'Oh, these guys ...' Because we went to check everything. In terms of culture shock, I could only be excited about and grateful for Canadians. It's a young country, and they are open. And we, of course, were the radicals.

SE: That idea that it's a country that's growing and developing, that matches with the idea of changing typography and changing design, doesn't it? It's a new design for a new country ...

FG: I don't think we were aware of what was going on. We worked on the flag, and then international programmes for the government and so on and so on. But we were not conscious of the magnitude of what was going on. We just looked at it from a pure design point of view. The same with Expo and the Olympics and so on. [In the late 1970s, Gottschalk decided to leave Canada and set up a branch of G+A in New York.]

### Starting again in New York and Zürich

FG: We finished the Olympic assignment in 1976 and opened the New York office in 1977, with Ken Carbone, and then Leslie Smolan joined. New York was broke and filthy. And I was 40. And I had a chance of doing very exciting things. But I figured that at 40, it's going to take me ten years to put something together. So I said I'm going to get the hell out of here. I'm going to move back to Switzerland.

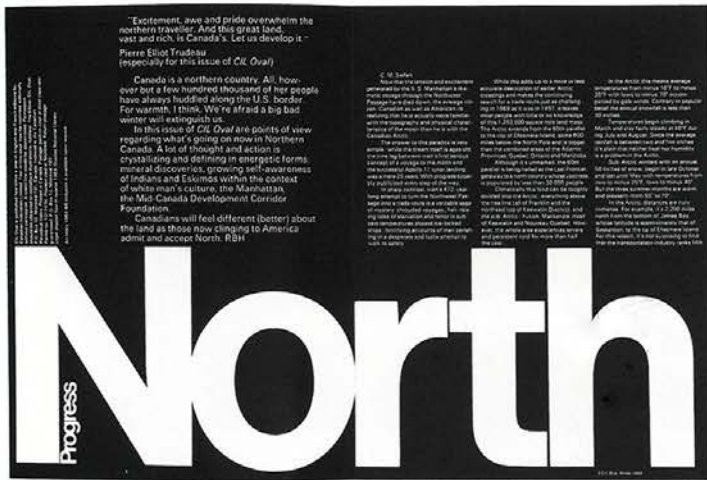
I said to Stu, 'I don't want to have anything to do with it anymore. You run your own show.'

'Hofmann probably influenced me more than anybody else. He had a clear approach. His philosophy is take the onion, and peel it, peel it, peel it, peel it!'



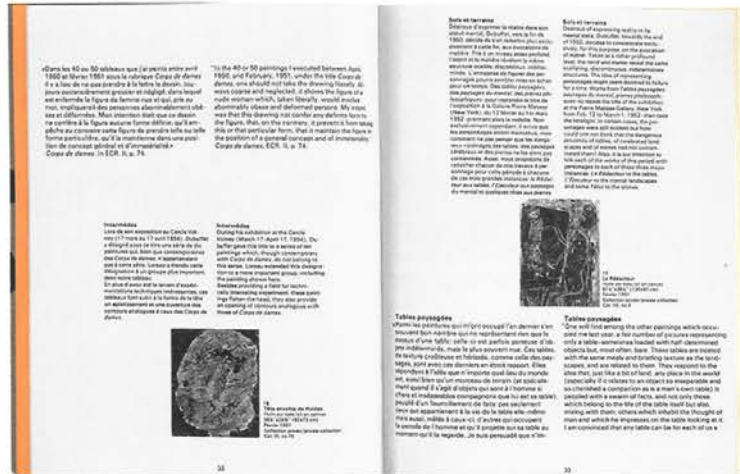
Cover from *CIL OVAL* no. 4 vol. 38, Winter 1969 a magazine of industrial chemistry published four times a year in English and French editions by Canadian Industries Limited, Winter 1969.

Poster for a J. W. Morrice exhibition at Montréal Museum of Fine Arts, 1965, the first piece of work produced by Gottschalk's studio.



Above. Spread from CIL Oval no. 4 vol. 38, Winter 1969. Right. Hoardings for Place Bonaventure, an international trade centre and hotel in Montréal, 1965.





Cover and spread from **The Common Man: Works by Jean Dubuffet, 1969**, the bi-lingual catalogue, typeset in Univers, for the **Montréal Museum of Fine Arts**.

I go to Switzerland, I become a Samurai.' Well, Stu always did very well. And Ken and Leslie built quite a sizeable outfit in New York [Carbone Smolan Agency]. And I landed here in Zürich.

I was once up in Bar Harbour, it was fall in Maine. And it was cold. And there was a swimming pool, and there were leaves. The leaves were already starting to fall. And there were these leaves on the surface. And we jumped into that swimming pool, and the swimming pool probably was ten or eleven degrees. My body went ccchh. And that's how I felt when I landed here. And I started from zero again.

I rented a corner in an office supply store, close to my parents' house. Where I lived again at the beginning. And I got work.

**JLW:** Were you working under your own name?

**FG:** I always kept the name Gottschalk + Ash. I'm very proud to have Stu's name in the company name. And from a pure business point of view ... Why is there an English name? It sets us apart right away from everybody else.

**JLW:** When type and production technology began to change quite rapidly in the 1980s, what was your reaction?

**FG:** I'm very spoiled. My wife does everything at home when it comes to IT. You can look at my office, all the emails are there, printed out. I don't do anything. My emails, I write longhand. And Manuela [Bächli, administrator] types it, and I read it, and I change it. But I haven't got a clue. Zilch. Now I'm too old to even try it. I love the technology. I love what it can do. But my job is to aim for the quality of the aesthetics. I don't need to know what kind of program they used, or how complicated it is. Show it to me, and I'll tell you whether it's great, or no good. Hopefully I can help you. And that's what I hope I can and will fight for until I'm in the wooden box.

That's what gets me excited, and that's what I love to do. That's what we're doing here. That's the only thing we are selling. The quality of the design above all the stuff that you have to do. There are a lot of people that are technically, probably, much better and quicker. I don't know. But that's not the future. The future, I believe, is quality, quality, quality.

**JLW:** Have the client relationships changed much over the years?

**FG:** The relationships are always the same. I take a lot of time and pleasure to explain to clients why there should be a hairline or a thin line or whatever. And I love to help people walk down the garden path, opening their eyes. To make them aware of how great a lot of things are. And as the Swiss are different today, as they were before, I think we have a great chance to stand out in the future. And I'm a lucky guy with the people here. Because Mattia [Conconi] and Sascha [Lötscher] – we are like I was with Stu. We are brothers in arms. We don't have to discuss a lot of things.

**JLW:** What do you look for when you hire a designer?

**FG:** Knowledge and typography. Talent you can spot very quickly, okay?

**JLW:** Talking about the importance of defending what you do, is that something that came naturally?

**FG:** I love fighting for what we do. If you don't like it, that's okay. However if you don't understand it I'll be happy to explain. I'm not going to go to the baker and tell him how to make his croissants. And Stu and I ... I'm very grateful to him because Stu is a very smooth Anglophone Waspy Canadian. And here comes this little bit aggressive Swiss guy who doesn't take no for an answer. Together we were really good. For years we did everything together. We went skiing, and sailing, and this, and that.

**JLW:** Are you still in touch with Stuart Ash?

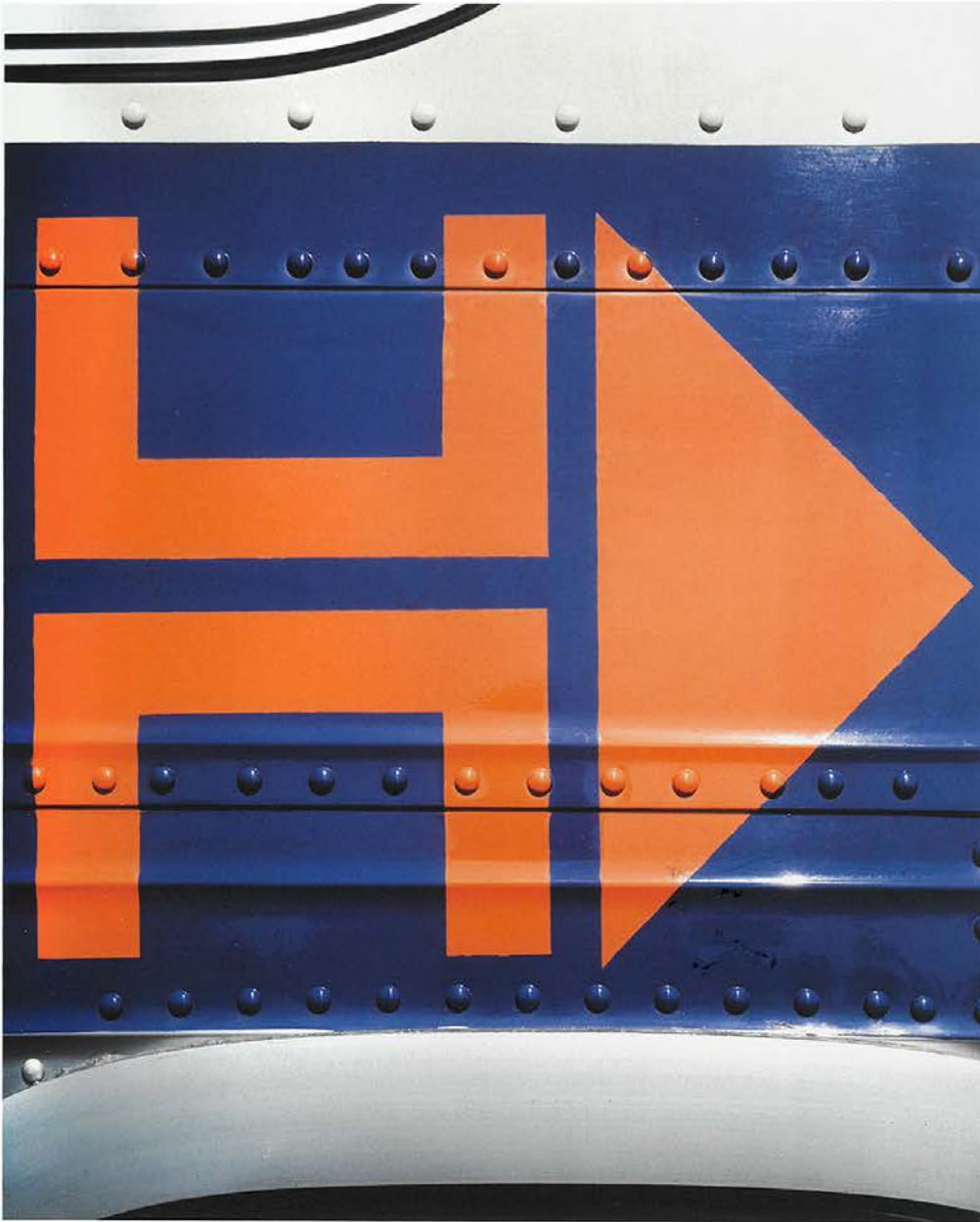
**FG:** No. He retired. He sold the company. And that's his right. [The Toronto arm of G+A is now part of Entro.]

**SE:** Whereas you clearly have no intention of retiring.

**FG:** No. Hopefully I'm here until my last day. That's the big difference between us ... Stu's dad was one of the bigwigs – a banker – Bank of Nova Scotia. That's where he got it from. And he adored his father. And actually Stu would have loved to be a banker. And I'm a craftsman. That's the difference. Even so, Stu has hands. He can turn the winches whereas I can't move them an eighth of an inch. Amazing. To me Stu is a wonderful person as well as a wonderful designer.

'There are people that are technically much better and quicker. But that's not the future. The future is quality, quality, quality.'

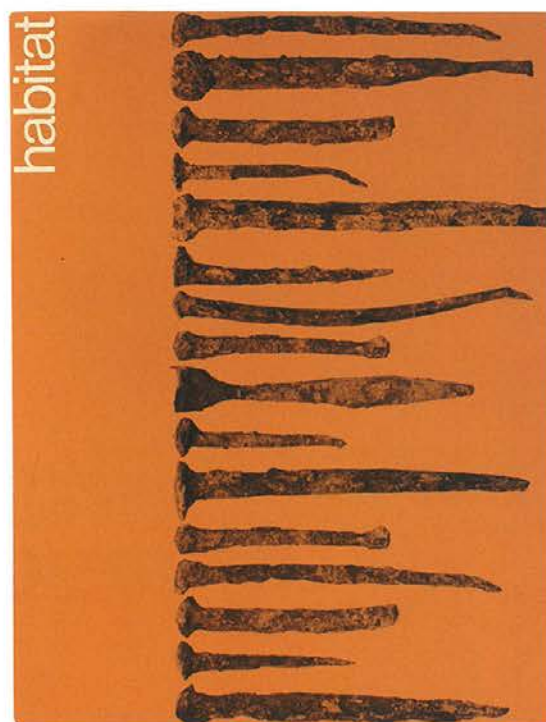




**Left and below.**  
Identity design for  
Halifax Transit, a bus  
network in Halifax,  
Nova Scotia, ca. 1970.



**Right.** *Habitat*  
magazine, no. 1  
vol. 15, a bi-monthly  
publication produced  
by the Central  
Mortgage and Housing  
Corporation, 1972.



# Business at the centre

**Gottschalk + Ash International (G+A) occupies a spacious, detached property in the pleasant *Englisch Viertel* neighbourhood in the Hottingen district of south east Zürich, where the small team works under the leadership of managing partner Sascha Löttscher, who joined in 2003 and became a partner in 2004. Founding partner Fritz Gottschalk, now 82, comes to work for several hours each day, and has a role in every project. Löttscher is also a board member of the Swiss Graphic Design Foundation, which he and Gottschalk helped to found in 2006. (The Foundation aims to classify and document the 'entire lifeworks' of Swiss graphic designers now retired or deceased.)**

**G+A's client list is wide-ranging, embracing big companies such as multinational banking group Pictet, pharmaceutical multinational Novartis, as well as medical start-ups, a ski brand and publishing house Weissbooks. Late last year the company was approached by Austrian architect Dietmar Eberle to help create the 28th 'artistic annual report' for Austrian lighting company Zumtobel. G+A's portfolio also includes many wayfinding projects such as Zürich's Europaallee, the new urban quarter near the railway station in Zürich. Europaallee is the home of the Kosmos cinema, which last January screened Greg Durrell's film *Design Canada*, in which Fritz Gottschalk features prominently.**



John L. Walters interviews Sascha Löttscher, managing partner of Gottschalk + Ash. Discuss graphic design with G+A managing partner Sascha Löttscher and you realise that he is on a mission to advocate design's importance within business and industry. He frets that too many designers no longer take such work seriously, preferring to work solely within the cultural sector. 'When design is business-oriented, it's really at its best,' says Löttscher. 'That's what graphic design is for – to make things understandable in a business environment.' Löttscher readily appreciates the importance of design for culture – indeed G+A takes on many cultural projects, including identity design for the Department of Architecture at ETH Zürich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology), and wayfinding for the Kulturhaus Helferei in Zürich's Old Town. But he despairs at the way design and typography for commerce have become marginalised.

'There was an exhibition [at Zürich's Design Museum in 2015] about 100 years of Swiss graphic design and they showed 100 posters. You could see that for 80 years these posters were mainly for business.

'But for the past twenty years, these great Swiss posters were only in the field of cultural design. And that shocked me. I think it is the responsibility of graphic designers to do great work in the business world. But you cannot do this with the attitude that many designers have.'

For Löttscher, in theory and in practice, the core of graphic design is in its usefulness to the economy at large. Design for business, he declares, 'is in the middle of graphic design and not on the borders.'

This is the territory that G+A founder Fritz Gottschalk and

his contemporaries established half a century ago. Its stability depends on finding and keeping good clients, and developing a relationship in which clients value design.

Löttscher studied at the St Gallen School of Design in the 1990s, during which time he spent a year as an exchange student at Ohio State University. He first met Gottschalk shortly after graduating in 1999, when applying for jobs. 'I wanted to work in his office,' says Löttscher. And then I met him. And I wanted to work for him even more because he was so energetic and I caught fire.'

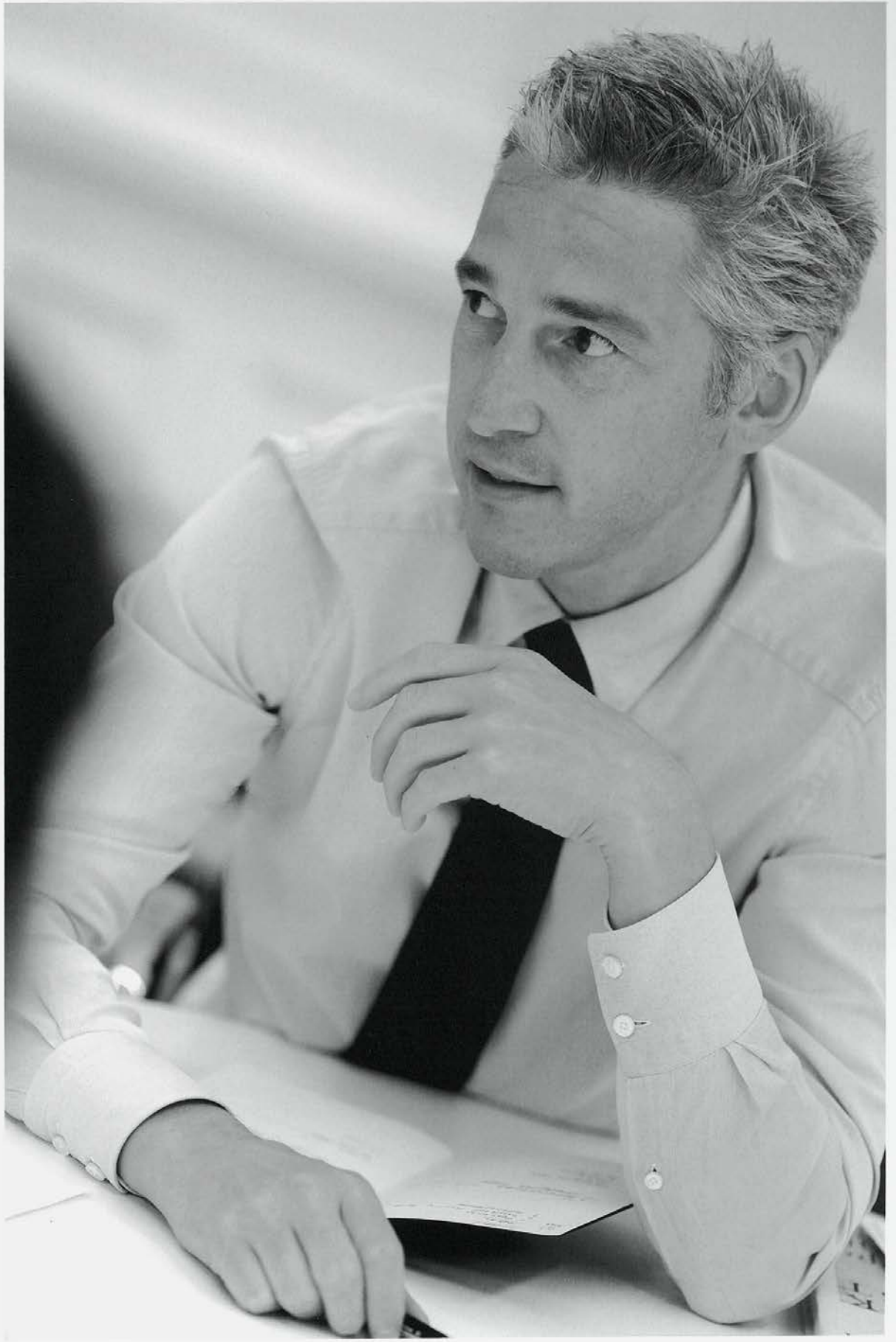
Löttscher liked the way the studio was both 'business-oriented' and 'quality-oriented'. But Gottschalk turned him down, saying he was 'too fresh out of school'. Löttscher was very disappointed. Two weeks later, however, he received a call from Gottschalk recommending him for a job at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Department of Architecture.

Over the next year or so, Löttscher established the corporate identity for the department, working in-house while Gottschalk supervised as a consultant. After Löttscher did the first yearbook, Gottschalk asked him to join G+A, but the younger designer demurred. 'I said to him: "Let's work here for another two years together and then I'll come into your studio."' Löttscher joined G+A in 2003, and became a partner the following year. (He now has the majority shareholding in the business.)

When Löttscher started at G+A, the practice was focused upon annual reports, and the work was intense. 'We worked very closely with Fritz,' he says. 'Everyone in the office works closely. Sometimes, when you had your annual report and you went to Fritz's desk to show him the latest

**Identity for handmade skis by Core Skis, 2014-15.**

'When design is business-oriented, it's really at its best. That's what graphic design is for – to make things understandable.'



**Sascha Lötscher,**  
managing partner  
of Gottschalk + Ash.  
Photograph:  
Philip Sayer.



developments, people were queuing, because annual reports at a certain point are very time pressured.'

As business demands changed in the first decade of the millennium, G+A began to do fewer annual reports and more wayfinding projects, websites and identity design. For some of their branding work the practice collaborates with Stanley Moss, their 'brand guru and ambassador', who also writes the Global Brand Letter that G+A sends to its clients and partners.

'We were not the hot electronic or web agency here in Zürich, but we were the ones who could design sites,' says Löttscher. 'They were like the ones you design today for mobile, because we always said, "Keep it simple". We knew that you cannot do sophisticated typography for the web. When smartphones came along, that helped us. We are more involved in websites because people can see we have opinions. We always say the same thing: "Why don't you reduce the



**Above.** Covers for issues 52 (left) and 53 of *Gazzetta*, the magazine of long-term client ProLitteris, the Swiss copyright society, 2012 and 2013.

styles?" These are very basic design principles.'

In the past year G+A has seen an upturn in annual report work, partly because of changes in the law and partly because of the changing way that clients see the function of an annual report. In the summer of 2019, G+A was deeply involved in two annual reports. One was for Pictet, which is owned and managed by its seven partners. 'It's very concise,' says Löttscher. And they use it as their most important brochure. They hand it over to clients and say: "This is us". By contrast, the other report was for Austrian lighting group Zumtobel, which since 1992 has famously hired a different set of designers, artists and / or architects to make an 'artistic' annual report each year. The 2017-18 Zumtobel report was designed by Sagmeister & Walsh; previous years' commissions were taken on by individuals as diverse as Italo Lupi; Olafur Eliasson; David Chipperfield with John Morgan; and Anish Kapoor with Brighten the Corners.



**Top.** Wayfinding system for the Helferlei, 2014. Individual letters are crafted in bronze and mounted to the building's exterior by steel spacers.

The Pictet Group  
Annual Review  
31 December 2018



Kerry Stein    Bernard Demole    Boris Giffard    Nicolas Pictet    Laurent Kanny    Marc Tassin    Renaud de Foaix



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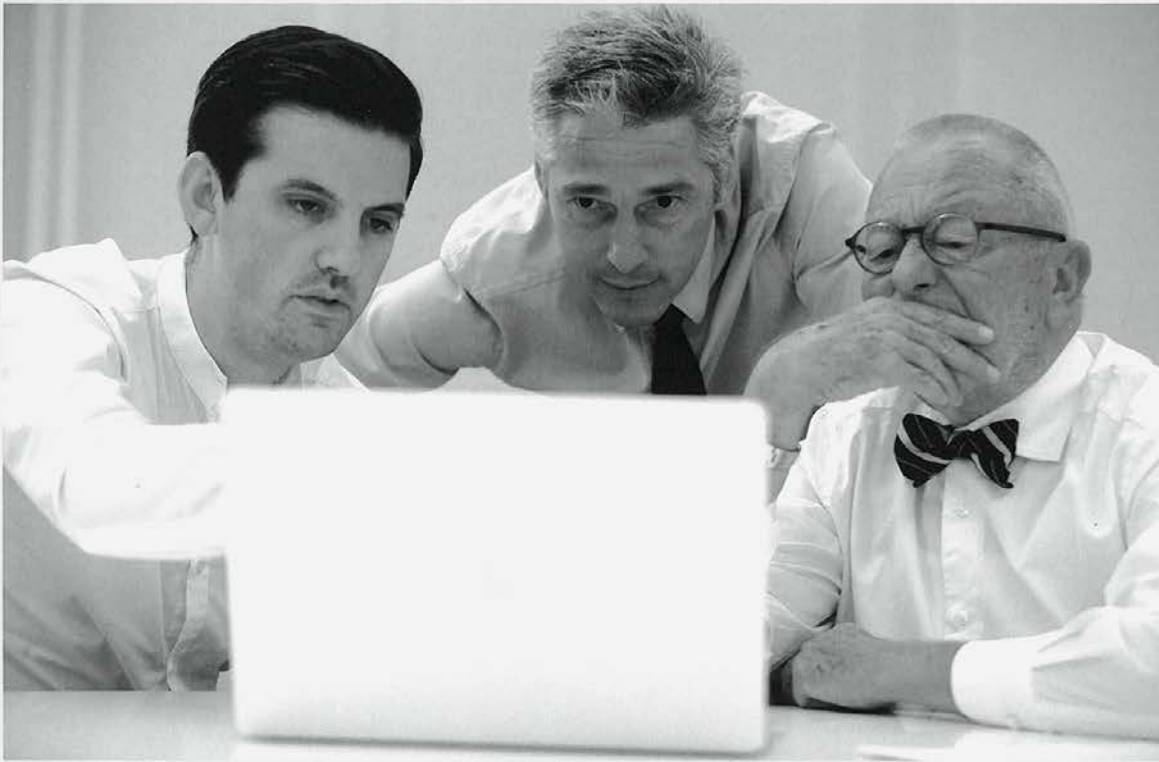
156  
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# PICTET

Identity and annual review for the Pictet Group, 2014 onwards. Gottschalk + Ash's redrawn signature simplified the rendering of the lion, and refined

the accompanying letterforms, increasing legibility in smaller sizes while retaining the original impression of the bank's wordmark.



‘When people talk about the Swiss passport, everyone references Fritz’s design.’

The latest commission came to G+A via Dietmar Eberle of architects Baumschlager Eberle, with whom G+A has had a long-term relationship. Lötscher was initially taken aback by the lack of constraints. ‘It’s easy when you have all these client needs driving the project. Here it was completely different. They give you *carte blanche*. You show them what you want to do and they say yes! But it’s kind of hard as well. Sometimes you miss the partner. It takes two to tango.’ Fortunately the concept behind the Zumtobel report was a collaboration with Eberle. ‘We sat together for no more than half an hour and we had the concept,’ says Lötscher. The finished report contains an arrangement of architectural photographs that change from dark to light; from the cover’s seductive ‘Z’, printed white out of dense black, to the final ‘A’ on the pure white back cover.

Despite the wide range of approaches required by G+A’s clients, there’s an unmistakable stamp of what many term ‘International Style’, whether

it is the hygienic minimalism of their packaging for Zeramex dental implants or the colourful stripes of Core Skis. Do clients come to G+A because of its 1960s, Modernist authenticity?

‘Clients don’t even know that we have these Canadian roots, but we get younger clients, maybe because of our “authenticity”,’ says Lötscher. Gottschalk’s 1980s passport design is something people still associate with G+A. ‘It is one of the most iconic projects we have in the office, which we still show,’ says Lötscher. ‘It is something that will always be central to the practice. When people talk about the Swiss passport, everyone references Fritz’s design; there are so many details.’

‘But we have a terribly bad pitching rate, to be honest. I think we go too far; in a way, we want to deliver beyond their comfort zone. People don’t even like this. When we can do great work it’s always because of collaboration, not because of a pitch.’ Lötscher believes that the best work is team work. He warms to the subject.

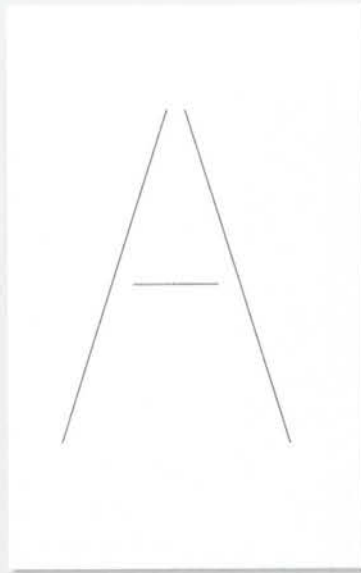
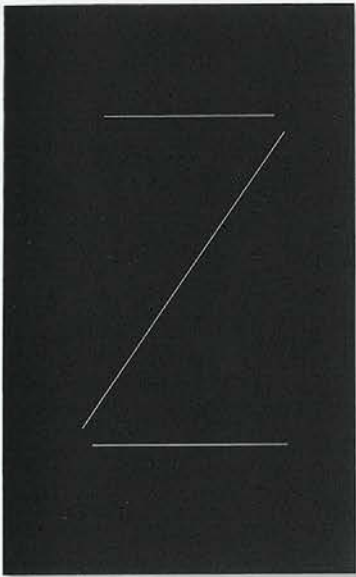


‘We admire our clients. The relationship with them is the most central and precious part of our work. When we get a client, it’s usually because of a recommendation.’

Lötscher explains that the work he values most comes through client relationships that grow over time. With Pictet, G+A started by designing a bank card. The initial designs were led by Mattia Conconi (who joined in 2013, and became a partner in 2019) together with Gottschalk. Then the company asked for a logo for its asset management division. ‘Step-by-step, we got deeper into the company,’ says Lötscher. Pictet then asked G+A to redesign its annual report. When one of the reports needed illustration, they used the in-house talents of designer Jacqueline John, who had joined in 2017. The evolving relationship with Pictet led naturally to identity design – a whole system, with guidelines – for the bank. ‘Ultimately, you cannot talk about the detail without talking about the whole thing,’ says Lötscher. @

**Left to right. New G+A partner Mattia Conconi with Sascha Lötscher and founder Fritz Gottschalk. Photograph: Philip Sayer.**

**Above. Swiss passport, 1985. Despite a redesign in 2003, Gottschalk + Ash’s original design is possibly the most memorable iteration.**



Annual review for the Zumtobel Group, 2018-19. Produced with architect Dietmar Eberle of Baumschlager Eberle, the design shifts in

gradient from black to white, with employees listed on contrasting yellow paper. Extra information is accessible via the microsite, above right.