

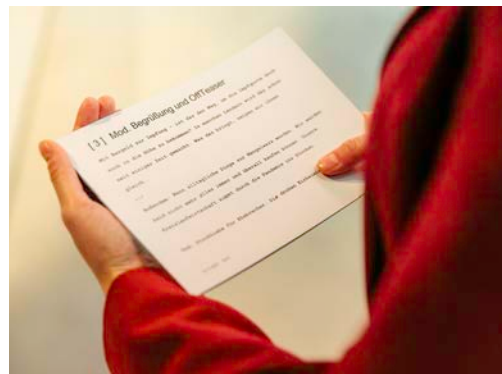
2 CULTURE: Broadcasting

Setting the scene *Austria & Germany*

In news bulletins, the background matters. We meet the Vienna-based designers whose television studios are the stars of the show.

WRITER
Carolina Abbott Galvão

PHOTOGRAPHY
Felix Brüggemann



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When Renzo Piano designed The Shard in London, he didn't intend for the city's tallest skyscraper to house a state-of-the-art television studio. Between the tower's glass windows and numerous building regulations, putting together a functioning news set seemed like a big ask when Al Jazeera first entertained the idea. Luckily, Stuart Veech and Mascha Veech-Kosmatschof were eager to take up the challenge: the couple, who designed the broadcaster's new UK outpost on the tower's 16th floor, have never shied away from difficult proposals. "That project was tricky in a number of fundamental ways," says Veech.

Over the past 20 years, their Vienna-based practice Veech × Veech has planned and built complex news studios around the world, from Prague to Doha. Every project is a fresh challenge, which is why the couple like to refer to their work not as simple set building but as broadcast architecture – a discipline bringing together insights from design, light engineering and psychology.

Every TV show needs a set but the demands associated with a news bulletin are unique: the space must be functional while conveying trustworthiness, neutrality and a future-forward attitude. Certain set-ups, such as the current fashion for curved, glowing desks surrounded by a wrap-around screen, have ended up becoming the industry standard. But as one of the few companies operating in this field, Veech × Veech has a fundamental role in shaping what the next trend will be.



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1. Anchor Mariella Gittler holding cue cards during the taping of 'Hallo Österreich' at ORF studios in Vienna
2. Gittler recording the evening news show

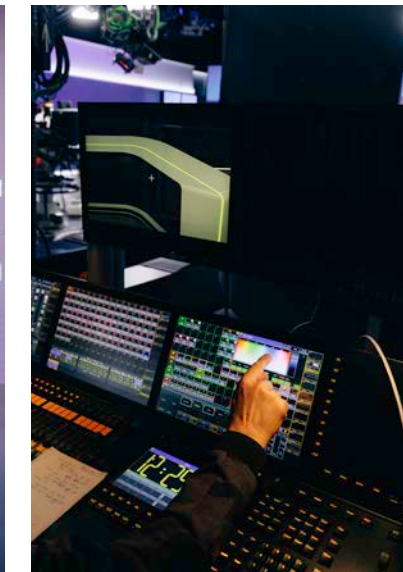


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“Some people say the studios look too spacey. But when they actually experience being there, they realise that they’re really comfortable places to be”

“Broadcast projects are more complex than any typical gallery, conference room or office,” says Veech from the couple’s studio – a bright, sleek space that looks at odds with the dimly lit, old-world Viennese building it sits in. “Newsrooms are different: every day you have different scenarios taking place but every day they also have to perform the same function.”

That’s why the design duo bring a variety of influences to the task: Veech-Kosmatschhof, the daughter of a sculptor and a painter, was born in Moscow and remains inspired by the Russian avant garde, its clean geometric lines and colours. Even her haircut – an angular blonde bob – is razor-sharp. “My parents’ pragmatic approach [to art] was always fascinating to me,” she says. Chicago-born Veech – a straight-talking man who has dropped his American accent in favour of a German twang – draws on his background in urban design. His understanding of what makes big cities tick informs the couple’s knack for creating designs that combine many functions in a simple whole.

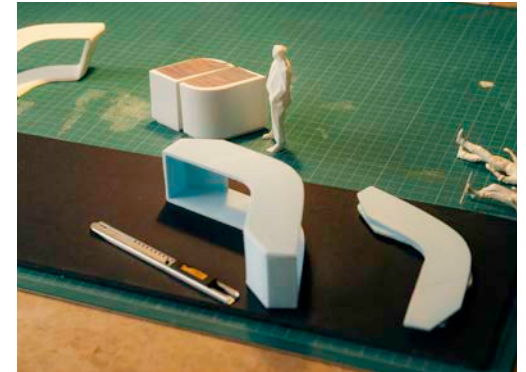


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1. Anchors Tarek Leitner and Nadja Bernhard in the studio during the broadcast of ORF’s main news programme ‘Zib 1’
2. Director Jost Niemann at RTL news studio in Köln
3. Adjusting the LEDs for the anchor desk at RTL
4. Detail of the ‘Nachtjournal’ set-up at RTL News in Köln
5. Designers Stuart Veech and Mascha Veech-Kosmatschhof
6. Model broadcast



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Veech and Veech-Kosmatschhof met while studying at the Architectural Association in London, where they were brought together by an appreciation of streamlined design. “Our work is grounded in aerodynamics,” says Veech. Automotive design was a key influence: the pair believe that news desks should be sculptural, much like 1930s cars. “Everything should fit perfectly; every line should be set in a certain way.” After Veech-Kosmatschhof graduated, the couple thought that they might settle down in London, where she studied with Zaha Hadid, but instead they opted for Vienna. There, Veech started working with broadcaster ORF and graphic designer Neville Brody on a series of current-affairs programmes. “We were fresh out of school so it was a huge responsibility,” says Veech-Kosmatschhof.

More large-scale projects followed but much of their creative process has stayed the same. A tall pile of black notebooks lies on the side of Veech’s desk, full of his drawings. As he flicks through the pages, Veech-Kosmatschhof explains that the couple’s work always begins on paper before moving on to modelling software. “We work with sketches a lot,” she says. Despite their projects’ signature futuristic, minimalist look, tactility is fundamental to their work. In another room, production designer Michel Mathis is creating models using a 3D printer. These make it easier for Veech × Veech to show both commissioners and engineers what their vision for a design is. But they also help get people excited. “It doesn’t matter how old they are; if you give someone a model they’ll love it,” says Mathis, as he picks up a miniature desk.

Veech × Veech may have developed its own ultra-sleek aesthetic but as they work with a range of broadcasters around the globe, they have to adapt to each brief’s particular needs. Some projects, such as Al Jazeera’s two studios, in London and Doha, force the couple to think more critically about lighting; others require them to choose colours and details that reflect the anchor’s personality. But despite all these differences, their designs always make sure that people feel at ease in the space. “If an anchor is uncomfortable, that will come across on TV,” says Veech-Kosmatschhof. Ensuring that these studios feel timeless is another key concern: when it comes to investing in new spaces, companies want to know that they will last. Veech × Veech’s pared-back designs have a neutral, futuristic look that shouldn’t age quickly. “Some people say they look too spacey,” says Veech. “But when they actually experience being there, they realise that they’re really comfortable places to be.”

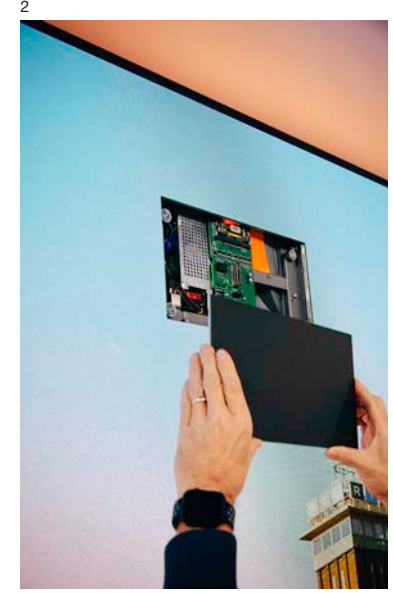


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How they did it: Over the course of its 29-year career, Veech × Veech has completed more than 100 projects. But its work on RTL's Köln studio features some of its most cutting-edge designs. The four hanging LED screens cover a surface area of 20 sq m; they have been mounted on a central spine truss and suspended from the ceiling using bespoke steel supports. All screens are fully automated so they can transform from one set-up to another and interlock with absolute precision to become one larger screen. As for the desks and other set furniture, Veech × Veech's designs are made from a solid, non-porous surfacing material using a 3D thermoforming vacuum process. This ensures that all objects have a "seamless sculptural form".

1. Ready to present the news at midday
2. Josef Jumpers, project leader at RTL
3. Adding the finishing touches to the studio
4. RTL News anchor Peter Kloeppe



"Broadcast projects are more complex than any typical gallery, conference room or office. Every day you have different scenarios taking place but every day they also have to perform the same function"

Luxembourg-based media group RTL is one of the clients that has recently opted for a spruce-up. When MONOCLE visits the broadcaster's new Veech × Veech-designed studio in Köln, Veech is still adding the finishing touches to the set. But there's already an air of anticipation among RTL's anchors and producers. "The large, open design will give presenters more scope to convey the complex information we deliver in an even more vivid way," says Peter Kloeppe, who presents the broadcaster's flagship daily news programme, *RTL Aktuell*. "That means that we're able to offer a fresher, more attractive and more varied news experience for viewers." Drawing inspiration from Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, the open-plan studio's rotating screens create spaces within spaces, adding depth to the location's modern, multi-purpose design. "It means that our viewers can get the sense that there's a foreground, middle ground and background," he says.

Veech × Veech believe that this location represents the way in which their field is evolving. Most studios nowadays are "killing the black box": for years, broadcasters favoured dark, windowless studios because their lighting and sound technology could not cope with anything else. These days, however, the best architects are going for open-plan, light-filled environments. "It's not about sealing off a studio anymore," says Veech. "The new designs are fluid spaces, where you can have people walking around." It's a way of improving journalists' working environments as well as fostering transparency in the newsroom.

Creating enjoyable studios also helps anchors to convey messages in a clearer, more dynamic way. "Our credibility is our greatest asset and that's also partly down to design," says Stephan Schmitter, head of RTL News, who helped to steer the studio's refresh. Before this new set was built, presenters used to stand in front of a green screen: Schmitter and his team soon realised that an investment in a physical space would bring returns in trustworthiness. "We knew it was time to start presenting all news formats from a real studio set," he says. "The new project creates a flexible communication space where presenters take viewers with them as they physically move together through the topics covered on the show."

As more media companies – including newspapers, radio and technology companies that don't have a TV background – consider experimenting with broadcast, the demand for well-appointed studios is only set to grow. These companies know that in order to establish authority in the sector, they need to look the part. For Veech × Veech, this is, of course, good news and not just because it means more business. It's a promising sign that people still see the value of investing in physical spaces. The duo are bracing for a busy period ahead but that doesn't scare Veech-Kosmatschof. "Luckyly," she says, "we've always liked challenges." — ©