

# DESIGNALIVE

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DOSSIER: #SENSORIALCARPENTRY

# HENRIK LINDBERG

– The key is simplicity and search for a perfect solution – that is how success in business is defined by the owner of Lindberg, Danish family-owned company, famous for its titanium eyewear



Henrik Lindberg in his hut placed inside his company. This is his office, designed by Mats Theselius who named the project „A Man's Need“. Inside there are only essentials: a bed, a chair and a table.

**We** meet on the premises of the company in Aarhus, second largest city in Denmark. One of the most state-of-the-art eyewear companies in the world operates out of historic factory halls resembling spacious lofts. – We are a luxury brand, however, luxury means comfort not frippery – Peter Warrer, the Sales & Marketing Director of Lindberg, explains. – We describe ourselves as explorers of new solutions in eyewear – Henrik Lindberg adds. All Lindberg frames are made of titanium, which makes them both light and solid. Additionally they do not collapse as there is no welding, no screws. The eyewear is unusual for one more reason: I do not know how they do this but I feel that every single model, no matter which one I try, fits me ideally. They all fit like a glove. No wonder everyone desires them, from Margrethe II of Denmark to Brad Pitt or Miuccia Prada and Giorgio Armani.

**I wondered if you have a secretary.**

– I mostly use assistance of the person who works at the reception. I also have a few people who write letters or do other office jobs for me, but I do not have my own secretary.

**You also do not have your own office?**

– I closed my office two years ago. I am getting older and I realise that, first of all, I should do things immediately – on the spot – and, secondly, I found that most of what I had in the office was something from the past and I am not interested in the past. I am interested in today, tomorrow and the future. So I closed my old office and moved into my little hut. It is a hut I tried to buy for many years. At first, it was not for sale, but then I got the opportunity to purchase it.

**Tell me more about the house. Is it just a small hut with a bed?**

– It is a very famous type of a hut. The hut may not have a typical Scandinavian look, but it was designed by a very famous Swedish architect and designer called Mats Theselius, primarily known for his furniture. I like his design philosophy because it is very material oriented. I also like the way he works with materials as well as his 'form language'. The hut itself is very clean and clear. I discovered that most furniture designs may look good but they are not necessarily comfortable. Here, in my hut, I appreciate what I have.

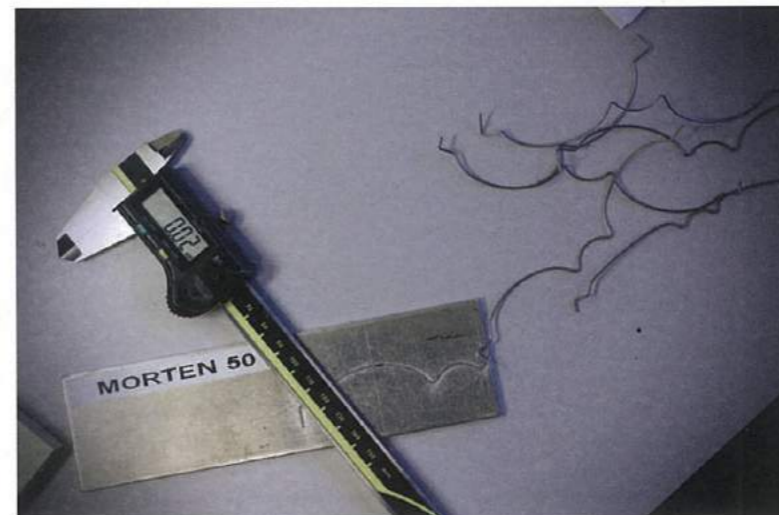
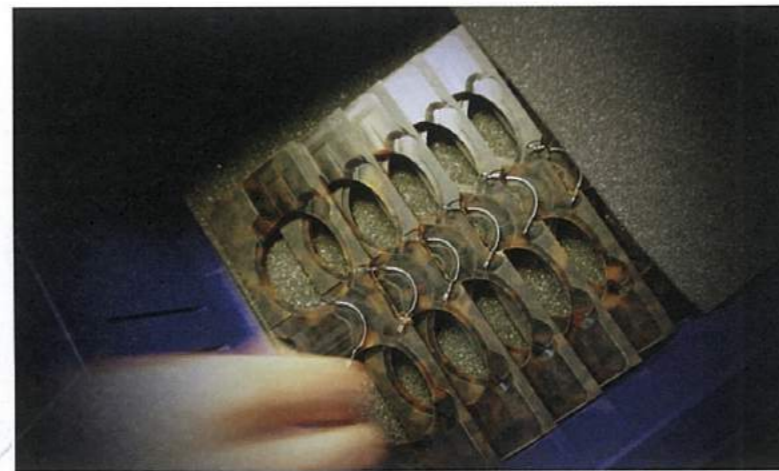
Anyway, I really admire what he is doing. He made this house more than ten years ago and called it „A Man's need“. It is simple and there are only few objects – a bed, a chair and a table.

**Did your wife banish you from your house?**

– Yes... exactly (laugh). The creator of the house is a very interesting person and I visited him two weeks ago, the day after his 60th birthday. I like to see the way he thinks, he is amazing.

**Do you like to stay close to your employees and work together?**

– Yes, I do. This is the essence of what we do at Lindberg, and this is what the design



## DESIGN IS EVERYTHING

The brand was created 28 years ago by Poul-Jorn Lindberg, the optometrist. He could not find the right, light glasses that he would like, so he decided to start designing and making the eyewear from nothing but a titanium wire. Today the Lindberg company, led by the founder's son Henrik Lindberg (an architect by profession), is a world leading independent manufacturer of original eyewear, known for its Scandinavian minimalism and good design. – I spend 24 hours a day designing. For me, design is not only a creation of a new pattern of an eyewear. It is much about how you lead your company. A good product is not enough if you do not distribute rightly or cannot manage people. For me this is design, in a sense – points out Henrik Lindberg. [www.lindberg.com](http://www.lindberg.com)

is about. We have a lot of extraordinary artefacts here that have been created in a unique process of the production. It is wonderful.

The basic idea for the first Lindberg frame was just an experiment and we figured out, at that time it was my father and me, that we needed an element of success, at least just to get some return on investment by selling a few pieces from our existing optical store. We knew that was necessary and we actually succeeded from the beginning. Then we knew we needed a machine to expand the production in order to sell in a traditional way to distributors.

Unfortunately, the machine we were dreaming about did not exist. Machines available on the market at that time did not meet our requirements as they left scratches and marks. Basically we had to start from scratch. First person who I employed was... a tool maker. The next step was to invent our own tools, small and able to bend wire without scratching. It was the beginning. We also realised that to be successful we needed to contact opticians directly, regardless of their location. We observed the market in order to have everything under control. There were many opportunities, however, we did not have anything – no brand, no reputation. And then, halfway between the new idea and the tool-making, the titanium came in.

## We are a luxury brand, however, luxury means comfort not frippery

When using the titanium you realise how difficult it is. You move by one millimeter and try to bend the wire, then you move forward and try to press with the same strength. You have to make two identical bendings, which is impossible. That is the character of the titanium – it is a fantastic material, both solid and extremely light, but only if you know how to master it. We realized that what we needed to do was impossible even with a machine. So we decided to put off the larger scale production and start from scratch.

Most importantly, we wanted to create a building system for the opticians so they could fill more tailor-made orders. At that time it meant use of many different components as the lenses were not very advanced. It required a lot of wire to fit the lenses which had the diopter of 3, 4, 5 or 6. Today the technology is much better, which means there is no difference in thickness of lenses with diopter of 4 or 6. It is only a matter of how the lenses are made. The next stage was to make the tools ourselves, manufacture the end product and

find a seller. Getting to the first customer seemed to be a long and expensive way. It required money and banks did not trust me as I wanted to make everything myself. Bank clerks may have trusted me a little bit more if they had any products to sell by auction in case we went bankrupt. Eventually, our only available capital were the earnings from the little optical shop.

It took what felt like a lifetime before we were able to ship our products for the first time. It was not complete at that time but at least we did not have to close down. We were also lucky enough to have a lot of friends in the optical business who had their shops in Denmark. They agreed to take our glasses, although they admitted they did not understand our idea.

Just after that we had an opportunity to appear on television and talk to a very famous designer and artist called Per Arnoldi. He is quite famous in foreign countries and at that time also hosted a prime time tv-show. His focus was the use of these completely new materials, as we were first in the world to use titanium wire and we of course

explained about the rimless system, too. Breakthrough came the day after the broadcast – people rushed to the optical shops asking about the new eyeglasses, everyone wanted them. Our system was beyond anything known so far.

In the meantime I hired Peter Warrer, who is our Sales & Marketing Director still to this day, and also an opportunity to enter foreign markets appeared. It was by pure coincidence – a few foreign customers being on vacation in Denmark came into an optician and were taken aback by our eyewear. They bought the glasses and took them to their own country.

**Luck is a part of the business, then?**

– Yes, it is a big part of it. Our luck was coincidence of different occasions. First, titanium came in and we figured out how to use it to our advantage. Then we got the opportunity to be on television and our idea started to be internationally recognised. Additionally, a lot of small events happened that helped us enter the market such as improvements in the international communication. Calling abroad became much easier through toll-free numbers and nobody was afraid anymore. The open market came in and became the foundation of our success.

**Today you are in 200 countries?**

– 138.

**You are a global company, then.**

– Actually, the first country after Germany

that we entered was Japan, which was a coincidence. There was an interest from some Japanese who saw our eyewear at the German optician and showed big interest in it. And so we went to Japan. This was 25 years ago. We say – our market is the world.

**Is this the philosophy of the Lindberg company?**

– The philosophy is one thing and the reality is another (laugh). The key is to be as simple as possible. An idea has to be so simple that everybody can understand it. If you look at the single product, you will see pure simplicity – 5 components and nothing but a wire. There is no welding, there is only properly bent wire. But if you look at the outcome, you will see the most complicated system with billions of combinations. It is the contradiction. We describe ourselves as the explorers of new solutions in eyewear. We offer a huge amount of combinations and colours to choose from, incomparable to others in this branch.

Basically the philosophy of Lindberg is to steer away from what everyone else is doing and just go with our own feeling of what simply fits. Our philosophy is slightly stuck in tradition, but it is not purely Scandinavian. To say it is Scandinavian is a simplification of the idea. The Scandinavian design philosophy is basically different. I admit, I am into Danish philosophy as for the materials, the way you use them

and the desire to simplify. Take for instance the architecture and decor of buildings here, there are not many ornaments, it is about the basics. In my opinion it could be weather related. In Denmark the weather is rough, more than in Poland.

Look at our collection today and you will see our desire to minimise things, to approach the problem from different angles and to combine the materials suitably. We always seek the perfect solution.

**How do you manage to be so successful in Denmark where there are so many known international brands?**

– It might be related to the fact that Denmark is a small country. Although we do not have many design schools, we had very good teachers, to be honest even famous ones. On the other hand, I have to admit that from the end of the 60s until 8 to 5 years ago nothing important happened. It seems that manufacturers were satisfied with what they already achieved. They were satisfied with their good sales and anybody who tried to bring something new soon realised they had to make way for the bigger winner – Ikea. No effort was put into studying new designs or new solutions.

**It seems that to be innovative you cannot stop working on new design and functionality.**

– At present the greatest problem for young designers is lack of capital or infrastructure



## Wearing glasses is not like wearing shoes - shoes can hurt a little as long as they look good. An eyewear must be perfect

to take off. Manufacturers do not trust them, they are only able to develop a small local business.

### What is the future of brands and of Lindberg company in this globalised world?

- I do not know, it is difficult to say. The world is big and Lindberg has a limited number of goods manufactured every year. So far we are satisfied with what we have. It makes us flexible as far as the sales are concerned and also it enables us to move without losing our customers.

Anyway, we do not have a board to pressure us, nobody tells us what sales targets must be achieved this year. It is only me and the system.

### You do not have any investors?

- No. We do not need any investors as we do not have a professional board apart from a panel meeting once a year. And the panel is me, my sister and my parents.

What can I say more about the future? The best things are changing. The old school opticians are disappearing and the next generation do not want to take over. At present, some of our old customers have been sold to big players such as Ray-Ban or Prada. We notice the market changes and challenges and face them by having what they do not have, namely titanium frames, rimless frames, new contact lenses technology and precious frame materials. We

fit in the market quite well as long as we do not lose our flexibility. Competitors are of course aware of our presence. It is a bit of a shame that they are controlling many brands and shops at once, both individual and chains. It is sometimes difficult to find out who is behind.

### As far as I know your love is both racing and sailing?

- I have been sailing a lot since I was 1 year old.

### Did it help you somehow in your business?

- For many years it was sailing. At 7 years old both Peter and I went into the sport and competed for many years on the same team. At some point I realised that it was just the same at work - it was all about team work and I wanted to do something different, I wanted to do something on my own. I am too old to run, I do not like golf so I had to find something else. And then I discovered racing go-karts - just me against the others. My only problem is to find the time as I am travelling a lot for business. The races require travelling as well - UK, France, Korea.

### Do you travel to meet your customers?

- Yes, I meet my customers anywhere and everywhere from Taipei to Milan to New York and many other places. It never ends. But I enjoy it and I am going to travel as long as needed.

### What exactly is your job today at Lindberg?

- I contribute with the big ideas and set the overall direction for the company as well as for our designs. I continuously have ideas and I am also a member of the Lindberg design group. There are seven of us now. We sit and discuss on every single millimeter of the eyewear. I also like to call myself „the helicopter”. I talk to people a lot but I do not want to be the one taking decisions on behalf of the managers. However, we, as designers, do a lot of things we are not allowed to, we cross borders (laugh).

### Are you workaholic like most of the owners of companies?

- I work 24/7. The company is my life. Sometimes I take a vacation but I am not the one to lie on the beach. In my spare time I get in my car and race.

### How old are you?

- I am 60 but I still like to be a part of the team, create the products and sell them. We need to take a stand against those selling two for the price of one or buy one, get one free for your neighbour. We believe that what is placed in the center of your face is very important. It has to feel comfortable and look good at the same time. Wearing glasses is not like wearing shoes - shoes can hurt a little as long as they look good. An eyewear must be perfect. ■

Interviewer: Wojciech Trzcionka