

**Fritz Haller's legendary modular furniture system has changed office landscapes.**

**1885**  
Ulrich Schärer founds a hardware store and locksmith business near Berne (Switzerland)

**1920**  
Manufacture of window locks starts

**1946**  
Metal construction and sheet metal processing starts

Photos: Helke Rodemeier, Köln, USM Modular Furniture Systems



## CUSTOMER PROFILE

# Raster men

**A world, a sphere, a ball made of metal with a diameter of 25 millimeters, and six holes. For furniture manufacturer USM, this is the center of the universe. The story of a design classic that has revolutionized offices.** Text: Elmar Brümmer

Who would have thought of that! Basing the company furniture on the factory building construction plans, and then turning that idea into a raster system to organize the whole world. Well, the office world at least ... No, it's not science fiction. It's a story that began in the Swiss canton of Berne around 50 years ago.

In 1961, Paul Schärer Jr. joins the family business that was founded in 1885, with the goal of transforming a traditional manufacturing company into a modern industrial enterprise. As a metal working company, they are obliged to build with steel. Architect Fritz Haller is charged with designing the skeleton. The logical development of the concept leads to an aesthetically

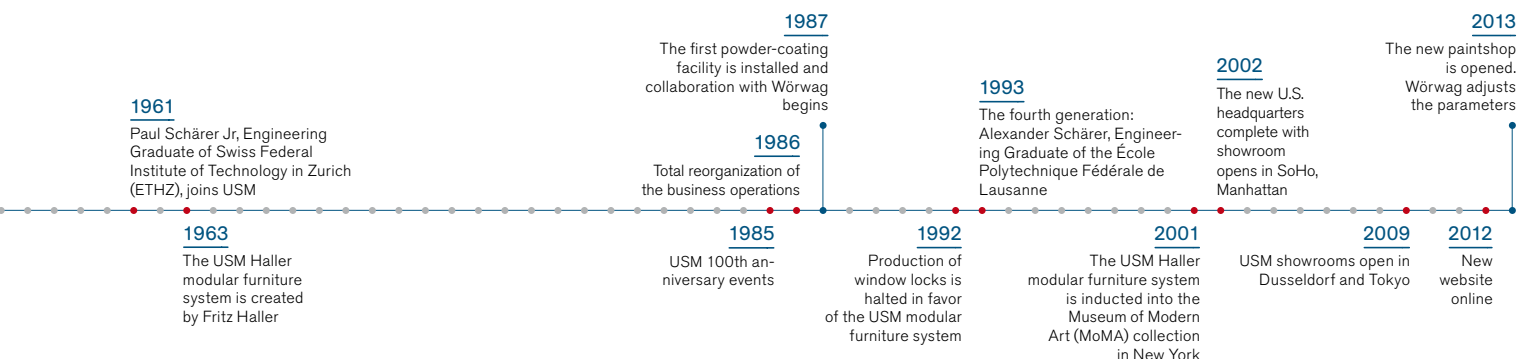
perfect and flexible industrial architectural system. It is modular, extendable and adaptable: Schärer and Haller go on to apply the concept to the interior design of the USM (Ulrich Schärer Münsingen) building. The tubular steel prototypes being used in their own office furniture so impress visitors that it is not long before mass production of the furniture begins.

### A spot in the Museum of Modern Art

The words "raster" or "grid" sound limiting if you misunderstand them. According to USM Haller the raster or grid is a support framework or system that is liberating and not limiting because creativity naturally emerges when

individuals develop their ideas systematically. The rigorous grid thinking of Schärer und Haller led to a new and influential interplay of buildings, rooms and furniture designs. And this led to the grid furniture system being given a place in the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

From point to line to surface; the most important elements have not changed – metal ball joints, chrome-plated 19-millimeter tubes, and rectangular, powder-coated sheet metal panels. The ball joint has six threaded holes through which the tubes can be elegantly attached with the help of a clever tool. It is the ingenious mechanical secret behind the USM Haller →



“Everyone can create works of art. I chose construction as a path to understanding myself and everything that happens.” Fritz Haller

**A vision with foresight:  
well-established  
furniture design classics.**



→ modular furniture. The panel elements in 14 colors and the additional options of glass and perforated metal produce a virtually unlimited number of possible combinations. All product innovations are developed with “backward compatibility” in mind, ensuring that each new system component can be integrated into existing structures.

But timeless design depends on the materials and processing being durable. To this end, high-precision processing and very robust raw materials are used. From earliest days, paints for the sheet steel used by USM were mainly supplied by Wörwag. It was the meeting of two companies that were equally

committed to making no compromises on material or product quality.

Wörwag is dedicated to long-term relationships. Now the Wörwag subsidiary in Switzerland, All-Chemie, is USM's supportive partner. USM remains loyal to its location in Switzerland and continuously invests in efficient manufacturing processes, because consistency depends on renewal, and continuity depends on innovation. For instance, this year a new powder-coating facility was built at the USM site. Now the parameters are being fine-tuned. It is a technical gem linked to existing shop floors but located underground, which is beneficial for reducing temperature fluctuations and manag-

ing dust. Of course, USM wouldn't be USM without added value. So, employee parking spaces were included in the development, and the space freed up by the old powder-coating facility can now be used for expansion of the manufacturing facilities.

Does furniture reflect a person's character? The clarity of the USM modular furniture system allows the unobtrusive and timeless combination with any other style or interior design concept. And it adapts to suit changing habits and workflows.

Having become a workplace classic, USM has also managed to establish a presence in people's homes. “Reduce to the max” has be-



Furniture as style elements of modern interior design.



come a global philosophy. People say we can do without 80 percent of the things we own, and still manage just fine, provided the other 20 percent are well considered. In other words, to become classic, furniture needs to combine quality and utility, form and function.

The Porsche 911, born the same year as the USM concept, is an example of the celebrated notion that form follows function. But classic doesn't mean static. Part of Fritz Haller's legacy was the maxim, "Everyone can create works of art." He also said, "I chose construction as a path to understanding myself and everything that happens." His discovery seems to be that ultimately, it's all a question of principle. ■



REGINA NEUBAUER

*enjoys the direct customer contact that she has as Head of Customer Laboratory for Powder Coating. She says, "The company's family atmosphere played a decisive role in my decision to join Wörwag in 1997."*