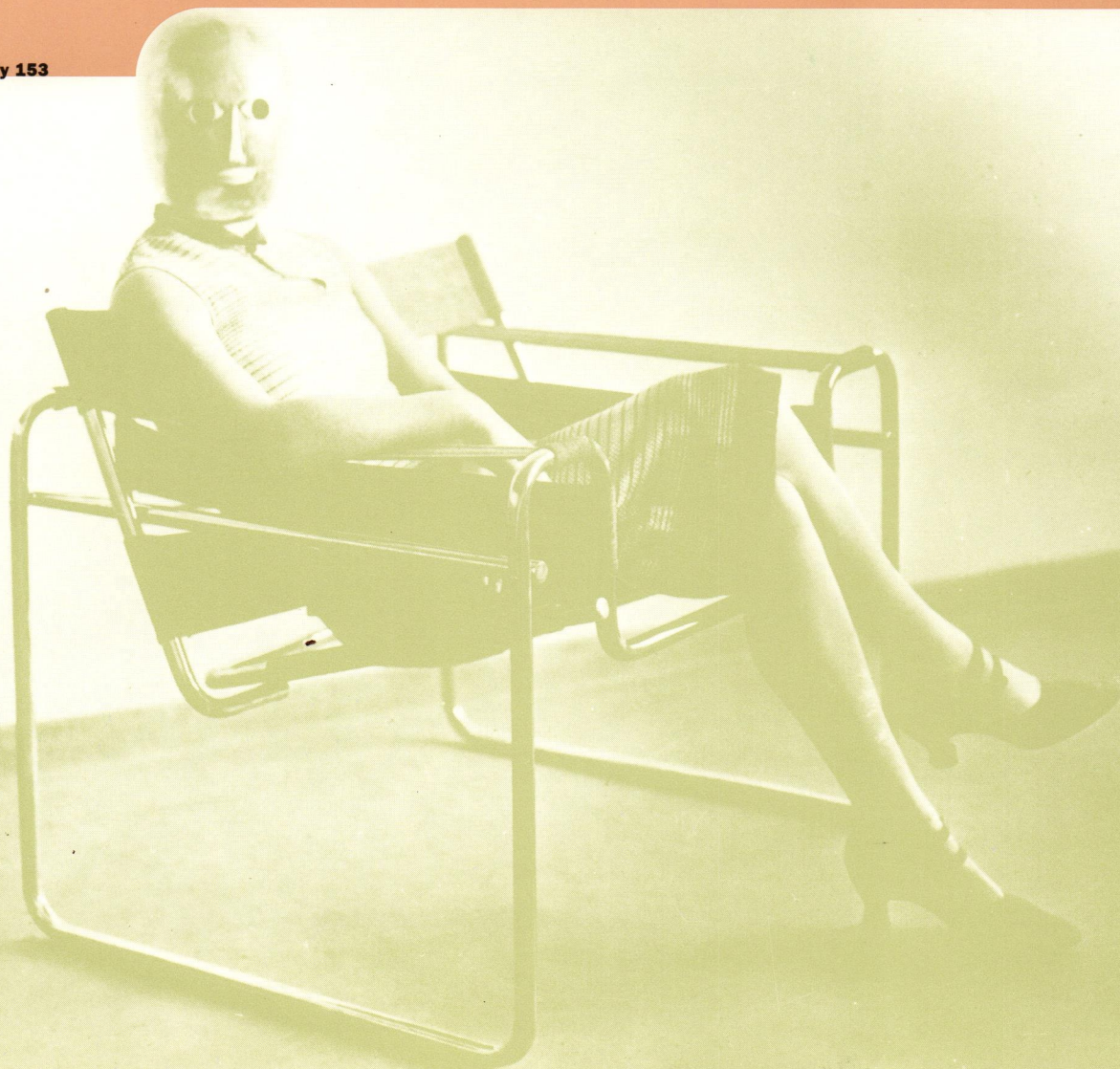


# Beyond Style

The Designer and Society

Design Quarterly 153





H O V S T O N  
18 JAN 1992

Beyond Style:

The Designer and Society

**Design Quarterly 153 / Fall 1991**

- 2 **Deborah Karasov**  
Editor's Notes
- 4 **Robert Campbell**  
From Playful to Ethical: Architecture of the 1990s
- 9 **Jane Holtz Kay**  
Earth-angst and Architecture:  
The Design Connection
- 13 **Robert Fishman**  
The Rise and Fall of Suburbia
- 17 **Ralph Caplan**  
Collision Course: New Design Constraints  
and Old Designer Myths
- 22 **William Stumpf**  
More Products Are Not Enough
- 27 **Adrian Forty**  
The Legacy of Modernism

### The essays presented here are based on a series of six lectures given at the Walker Art Center in February and March of 1991.

Entitled *Beyond Style: The Designer and Society*, the series explored ways in which design projects respond—and fail to respond—to living-style changes and to a reawakened environmental concern. Many in the general public have criticized design for being trivial, if not socially irresponsible, and this series provided an opportunity to raise that charge with some leading critics and authors. Each talk was followed by questions from the audience; in addition to presenting essays based on the *Beyond Style* lectures here, we include excerpts from two of the question-and-answer periods that were especially pertinent and compelling.

For the past decade, it has been argued, designers have conformed only too willingly to the norms of market-driven investment, production, and consumption; style has become less a form of personal expression and increasingly an official idiom of the marketplace. For example, in New York City a new kind of architecture, called the signature or “trophy” style, has emerged in which an architect is chosen solely for his star quality; the resulting building is marketed accordingly, like a brand-name product. This commodity-oriented use of architects has reached the consumer-goods field itself—as seen in architect-designed bird cages, wristwatches, coffeepots, and dinner plates. Needless to say, these constant stylistic changes in products and buildings cannot necessarily be called social improvements. On the contrary, as the critic John Thackara writes, “the prefix ‘designer’ has become in some cases a byword for unsympathetic, artificial, and overly controlled environments, or a marketing device used to sell poorly conceived, over-priced goods.”

Is the designer today in any position to move “beyond style”? How effective, in fact, can the designer be in making social issues part of the design agenda? Is not the cumulative decline in environmental and social quality too great a problem for a single profession to address?

Designers actually can be very effective, the authors here argue, but only if they redefine their role. **Robert Campbell** introduces the topic by outlining—through examples—some basic, commonly held concepts underlying a more ethically driven architecture. At the same time, he reminds us that architecture as an art form cannot survive without maintaining both ethical and playful perspectives. His connotation of *playful*, however, is only at a superficial glance the opposite of *ethical*. In fact, a spirit of playfulness and self-irony in design is essential at a time when those qualities have been banished from the workaday world. Above all, Campbell insists that architects take part in the politics of zoning and urban development, rather than bemoaning the fact that they are systematically prevented from creating “good architecture.”

**Jane Holtz Kay** also points to a larger political framework. She argues that designers themselves have allowed their environmental contributions to be trivialized by refusing to join in an alliance with the environmental movement. In this way, for instance, both groups have largely forfeited the opportunity to moderate a culture whose devotion to the automobile has become

the single most destructive force to act upon our climate, our air, and the quality of our communities. Change is possible but, once again, only through an old-fashioned kind of activism. In particular, landscape architects—while they do not have the unbridled freedom to transform whole districts that their 19th-century predecessors did—should nonetheless be working more aggressively with the fragmented, highly bureaucratized governing bodies that oversee regions today.

**Robert Fishman** calls attention to a very obvious social contribution that designers could make but have sidestepped by focusing all their vision on the central cities. Designers generally neither understand nor care about places such as Mt. Laurel, New Jersey, a Philadelphia suburb off Interstate Highway 295 around which one of the fastest-growing settlements in the region has sprung up. Only by grasping the historical forces that underlie Mt. Laurel, Fishman writes, can they distinguish between what can be altered and what cannot. Instead of snubbing Mt. Laurel-like phenomena, he adds, designers could use their skills to help shape suburbs for the next century; in so doing, they could have more impact than through almost any other type of project they might undertake.

**Ralph Caplan** turns to another group of design professionals, product designers, who, like architects and landscape architects, have been accused of being heedlessly self-indulgent in recent years. But they, too, may be led to take another tack in the 1990s. Certainly, new constraints and advances—such as nontoxic inks and finishes, recyclable materials, and less gratuitous packaging—have the potential to alter design. For Caplan, “beyond style” means that the designer must do more than simply deal with the exterior aspects of the trade and should indeed bear some responsibility for the essential character of products she or he designs.

**William Stumpf** also takes up the topic of product design—and delivers a ringing indictment. It is hard to justify the designer’s complaint that no one understands the importance of design, he says, when so many products make so little difference in people’s lives. “Everyone says America is a change-oriented country,” Stumpf comments, and yet, in his opinion, we move too slowly in dealing with the entrenched problems of affordable housing and waste management, among others.

**Adrian Forty** brings the series of essays to a close by proposing a reckoning with early 20th-century modernism—a theme that is sounded implicitly in each of the other essays. On the one hand, modernist design can be seen as the root of design alienation today; as a style, it emphasized standardization and grew to be calloused to local culture. On the other hand, many critics laud the early modernists for their social convictions; they are seen by some as artist-heroes who dared to imagine a future made better and more abundant by design. Translating their concept of social responsibility into real-world practice, however, is an extremely knotty business. Forty suggests some concrete ways to evaluate the social gains made possible by design.

These six authors have proposed an outline of how the design profession could begin changing. Only with such a larger vision of the designer’s role can specific projects attain a cumulative significance. It remains for design schools, journals, and organizations to fulfill the possibilities with concrete examples.

# From Playful to Ethical:

## Architecture of the 1990s

One way of looking at changes in architecture is based on a notion I have borrowed from Northrop Frye, the great literary critic. He proposed that literature can be looked at in two really different ways: as **playful** or as **ethical**. This pair of terms, playful and ethical, may be applied to architecture as well. One of the mistakes we make is to settle for one or the other and then sneer at the one we have not chosen. Architects who are very serious about the social purpose of their architecture tend to be offended by other architects who compare architecture to fashions in clothing, and who want to create a new look every year. Yet architecture cannot survive without both perspectives.

**Robert Campbell**

The author Mary Catherine Bateson, writing about the views of her mother, Margaret Mead, says “Human beings do not eat nutrients. They eat food. Food with symbolic meanings, flavors, colors and smells. Food in the form of traditional dishes, that fit the days of feast and fast and speak of the relationships of husband and wife, parent and child.” Food, in other words, is not simply so many grams of fat and protein but expresses all the rituals of society and those of the family, a connection with history and with traditions of ethnicity. So, too, with architecture. If we strip away all the fun, pleasure, and cultural reference, all the redundancy and all the resemblances, leaving something scientific and functional, architecture just disappears.

Every few decades, it seems, we swing back and forth between these two poles of playful and ethical. There was a period of great playfulness in the late Victorian age, with its thickly layered ornamental flourishes and cultural references. This caused a reaction in favor of something very serious and idealistic, an era we call the early modern movement. The modern movement was in turn succeeded by the postmodern era, which began in the 1960s and culminated in the 1980s. We see the change in architects such as Philip Johnson, who argue explicitly that architecture has no ethical value, that it is just play, irony, and free invention—a visual text commenting on other texts, without a basis in ethical reality.

But people have become tired of postmodern conceits, enjoyable as they are, and I think we are moving now toward the ethical pole. I hope that, as we do that, we will not start stripping away the playful side again. The question I want to ask is this: Is it possible to construct an ethic for architecture? In other words, is Philip Johnson wrong? It seems to me that,

yes, it is possible he is. I would suggest that a tentative ethic for architecture might build on three concepts: the community, the planet, and the sense of place.

Architecture can either bring us together as a community, or it can disperse us. I would argue that an ethical architecture is one that brings us together. The author Richard Sennett defines the city as “the place where we learn to know one another.” Community is one of the problems with the gerbil tubes (skyways) in Minneapolis, or especially in a place like Charlotte, North Carolina, where the middle-class shoppers are in the gerbil tubes and the less wealthy people are on the street level. The gerbil tubes become a class-divisive, and therefore unethical, urban design concept.

The question is whether a **democratic society** can survive when people are not encouraged to meet and interact with one another. Yet I would argue that this is happening in our country. Suppose one were to go to most of the recent suburban developments throughout the country and ask, “If this is the answer, what was the question?” One question surely was: How can we separate people one from another into homogeneous subcommunities to the greatest extent possible? How can we keep people from meeting one another? How can we make a place where people live only with other people of their own age, income, and set of interests?

Certainly, we all have the right and the need to withdraw from diverse community experience into more homogeneous neighborhoods, but only if there is also a public world where we can all come together and enrich one another. A main street. A ballpark. Anything. But not a backyard barbecue or a TV, or even a shopping mall.

This kind of recent **suburban development** also provides the answer to another question: How can we maximize the use and abuse of the earth’s resources? How can we devastate the greatest amount of agricultural land for the benefit for the fewest people possible? How can we increase consumption of oxygen and petroleum? And, while we’re at it, how can we maximize traffic jams?

How should architects respond to all this? In several ways. They can respond ethically to the possibility that the earth will die. They can concentrate settlements and mix up the uses, so a person could find places to live and recreate and shop and work that are all within walking distance of one another. Any older town is organized in that manner. A second way is through building products; as users, we are becoming sensitive to the dangers of certain products, such as formaldehyde and tropical hardwoods, that pollute the atmosphere or deplete the rain forests—although pinpointing the environmental effect is not always an unambiguous business.

Another element of an ethical architecture is the preservation of a sense of time and place—the things that enable us to orient ourselves within the universe. Architecture can be ethical by preserving meaning—which is difference—in a world that is becoming one gray soup of homogeneity.

Architecture can reflect, and promote, difference. Boston, for example, is a red city made primarily of warm-toned granite and brick, and these materials and colors are now essential to its character. Of course, if we build something out of brick in Boston today, we probably import the brick from Mississippi or Ohio. Or if we build it out of granite, the granite may, today, come from Argentina and be cut in Italy. So what makes brick and granite Bostonian?



Maximizing the abuse of the earth’s resources. A suburban commercial development in southern California.



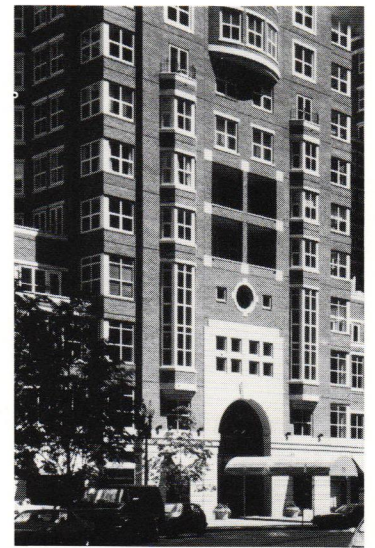
Spanishland persists as a theme in southern California architecture today. San Juan Capistrano Public Library, designed by Michael Graves, 1983.

Below: Southern California decided to become Spanishland early in this century. Santa Barbara County Courthouse, designed by the William Mooser Company, 1929.



The ethical stance, it seems to me, is to favor keeping the city brick for an artificial and purely artistic reason: to preserve its difference, its identity. That is precisely what Boston is doing. The Boston planning office no longer permits precast concrete buildings or mirror-glass buildings and strongly encourages warm-toned brick or granite buildings, in order to maintain the character of the city. Some may argue that this creates a kind of Bostonland, a Disneyland version of itself. But a self-imitation is to be preferred to the alternative of everything becoming the same. Bostonland is better than same-world.

Let us remember that, early in this century, the people of southern California made a choice like that. They chose to be Spanishland. There were not any Spanish left in Southern California when the early towns were created. The missions were falling apart. Yet there was a Spanish memory in literature and history, and the early settlers chose to create a kind of Spanish-

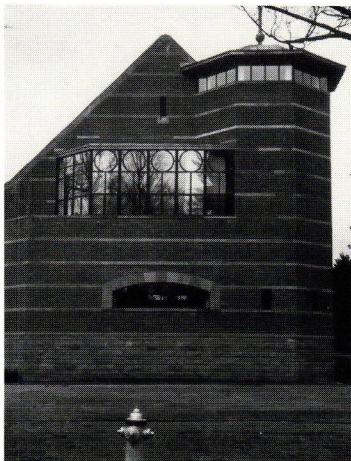


Bostonland, the red city, today. The Heritage, a mixed-use complex designed by The Architects Collaborative, 1987.

# land, chiefly in Santa Barbara and San Diego, a deliberately fictional architecture of stucco and Spanish motifs.

We are at a moment of change, moving from a time of interest in pure form to a time of interest in larger issues of architecture, the social and environmental issues. As a hireling in the chain of development, the architect must do his or her ethical best with the given budget, program, client, and situation. But the architect is also a citizen, and can act as a citizen independently of acting as a commissioned architect. Architects, one hopes, have a good understanding of the environment and ought to be demonstrating that through acts of democratic citizenship: agitating, lobbying, and leading preservation, neighborhood, and design-review groups.

Architects sometimes say they are powerless to affect the shape of development. That is nonsense. No one had heard of Le Corbusier in 1930, and yet, by 1950, the whole world was building his images. The power of a **compelling architectural idea** is overwhelming. We are not nearly so weak as we often think we are. But let us, this time, not get so dogmatic about it all. In other words, to revert to the distinction with which I began here, let us not lose our love of the **playful**—of formal invention, of the ways architecture expresses a culture as well as a function, of architecture's expression of landforms and the human figure and the social order and so many other kinds of resemblance—as we again move in a more ethical direction.



One architectural approach to balancing playful form with an ethical sense of place, however lacking in daring, is the Ohrstrom Library at St. Paul's School, New Haven, designed by Robert A. M. Stern, 1991.

# Earth-angst and Architecture: The Design Connection

**This is the era of earth-angst.** Architects, landscape architects, and urban designers drop the word *environment* at the rustle of a leaf, the flutter of a sheet of drafting paper. But the question that has plagued me since the 20th anniversary of Earth Day in 1990 is this: Will green be just one more trendy color in the designer's palette? Or will those who want to construct a rational built environment join with those who care to nurture a healthy planet? Will environmentalists and designers ally?

Unfortunately, signs of a real alliance are few. In the fall of 1990, I attended a conference on Los Angeles architecture that was dense with slides and speakers. We dissected the 1930s and the 1980s; we probed modernism and deconstructionism; we studied architects Irving Gill and Frank Gehry. Not once during the two days of sessions did our speakers step back to survey the environmental issues surrounding these buildings. Not a word on air or water. Not a syllable on the highway traffic at the core of the ills provoked by the way the city was designed.

Environmentalists, too, ignore the design connection. For all their whole earth advocacy, conservationists seem to want a world without a single artifact. Forget design, they seem to argue, adopting the perspective of the Infiniti television commercial that managed to show the landscape without a single shot of the automobile it was selling. Forget places for people. **Design for druids.**

In some ways, that attitude is understandable. Looking at the runaway architecture left by the age of affluence, it is clear why such developments and their designers are on the environmental hit list. In the city, monstrous, sealed-off buildings have altered the human scale of our streets and tampered with the precious historic fabric of our urban areas. Destroying neighborhoods, they have created nine-to-five places devoid of charm. In the countryside, building based on our addiction to the automobile has run pell-mell across the landscape, leaving unplanned sprawl and asphalt wastelands.

Based on a trash-and-burn style of consumption, the 1980s produced an architecture of excess and waste at every level: excess in size, excess in energy consumption, and excess in depletion of human and natural resources. We are the victims of this extravagance.

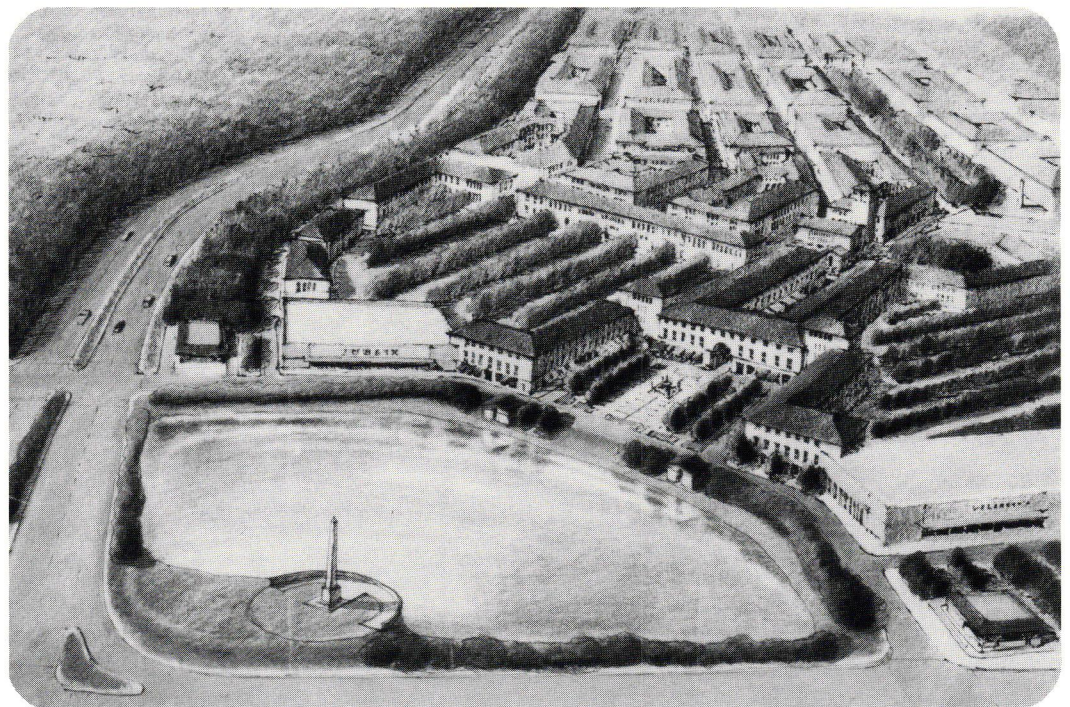
**Jane Holtz Kay**

What we lost, however, was not just singular buildings torn down to make way for lifeless glass boxes and the ennui of asphalt. We lost a way of making cities in a historic context, of shaping suburban or rural environments that are in harmony with nature. In 1960 the planner Kevin Lynch published his classic text *The Image of the City*. His image of Boston—my hometown—was quite different from the photo-opportunity image presented by the architecture of the 1980s. Lynch's notion of image was not a Madison Avenue advertisement; it was a city one could picture as a whole, a visible, identifiable place built slowly, over time, by the dictates of a plan. Framed by greenery and water, such cities were walkable, beautiful, complex yet clear—a far cry from their heirs today.

Architects and landscape architects respond to such comparisons defensively, I know. The litany I hear most frequently from those charged with failing to live up to a social or an environmental mandate is that they are not to blame for bad buildings and worse landscapes because they have to work with their clients. Clients, in turn, retort that they have to live up to their obligations to their bankers. Bankers, no slouches in the days before the savings-and-loan scandals, argue that they are responsible to their shareholding public. Meanwhile, that amorphous “public” disowns any blame for bad buildings because they are at the mercy of politicians . . . who, of course, cannot be faulted because they have to deal with their constituents, who . . . And so this catch-22 revolves on through the Reagan-Bush era of private greed and public desecration.

Whereupon we come finally to the 1990s—the cusp of the new century—and find ourselves in a pretty grim place. And yet, for all the apocalyptic statistics on the planet as a whole, and the lack of architectural values in our nation, one can look at the issues raised by the present series of talks more positively. For it still seems to me that the way we build can, in the end, only be made liveable through an alliance between the designer and an environmentally conscientious society.

A return to pedestrian values. This drawing shows a retail center that is part of the regional plan for Avalon Park, Orlando, Florida, drawn up in 1989 by architect-town planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, of Seaside fame. The center is a variation on the strip-mall shopping center motif. Though located near a highway (as strip malls typically are), the main focus of this center is on a green park rather than on parking lots. In addition, one can walk into the center from the surrounding neighborhood.



Granted, architects, landscape architects, and planners of all sorts have avoided that alliance. They have done it especially, it seems to me, by relegating our surroundings to the automobile, partly through myopia, partly by “following orders.” The statistics are alarming: while Americans constitute only five percent of the world’s population, our automania causes us to travel as many miles a year as the rest of the world. We have designed our landscape so that it is necessary to make 80 percent of our trips by car (versus 50 percent in densely settled, mass-transitized Western Europe); we have organized our built world so that 63 percent of the oil that we consume (paid for by costly military imperialism) goes toward transportation. Motoring across a fragmented landscape, each of our cars contributes seven tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere each year and figures mightily in global warming and environmental desecration.

The visual and social toll exacted by our car-bound condition is equally distressing. The degradation of the landscape, the alienation of Americans from their surroundings and their neighbors: these are the problems of a society shaped by a cloverleaf culture.

Line by line, if you will, architects and landscape architects have played connect-the-dots according to the dictates of this culture. In suburbia, the entrances to residential and corporate buildings alike are dominated by driveways and parking lots that deaden their surroundings; in the urban environment, underground and surface parking dictate routes of entrance to buildings. But in a larger sense, this badly built world fosters a loss of community and intimacy as pubs and coffee shops close, neighborhood grocery stores shut down, and schools, libraries, and post offices move out of walking distance.

Landscape architects—the natural advocates of the larger, greener, view—

**share the blame.** They are more likely to excavate swimming pools and roll boulders on sumptuous estates than to look after the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted and his followers, who shaped and founded whole communities. In private, they will bemoan a design that requires them to expend more energy on the parking lot than on the park. In professional circles, they will decry the Tysons Corners of concrete where any notion of genuine open space is forsaken in favor of a concrete wasteland. In public, though, they, like architects and planners, remain passive and impotent.

Fortunately, there are ways to have it otherwise. Architects and landscape architects have planned and built truer communities in the past, and, given the impetus and dedication, they can provide them again. “A long memory is the most radical idea in America,” a California feminist put it. In some quarters, looking backward has inspired that radicalism. Throughout the country, there is a drive to return to denser ways of living, to revive Main Street, to fashion true communities with pedestrian values—to shape spaces for the young, the elderly, and all the rest of us, as they were before the federally funded highway sent us out to the federally mortgaged homes of an Ozzie and Harriet life-style.

Seaside represents the much-publicized, even over-publicized, attempt by architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to update the traditional model to a “neo-traditional” one. This planned community in the Florida panhandle, paralleled on the West Coast by Peter Calthorpe’s and Daniel Solomon’s “pedestrian pockets,” has inspired designs for many small, pedestrian-oriented towns elsewhere. These designs replicate the compact, pedestrian-oriented, mass transit-serviced environments of pre-auto America. Such projects involve design by numbers, in a way, but they are the humane numbers on which human movement is based: the width for sidewalks (ample) and streets (narrower); the distance to the corner store, post office, town center, or subway stop; the angle of curbing; the geometry of setbacks, vistas, and axes.

As often as not, it is communities and citizen advocates who activate such places. In this, they, too, recall the past, when public enthusiasm for parks and civic monuments inspired the turn-of-the-century City Beautiful movement. The pedestrian movement afoot in America today has parallels. Its members call for reforms ranging from public transportation to pedestrian-friendly buildings. Bearing names like Ottawalk, Walk Boston, Auto-free New York, Transportation Alternatives, or the Paving Moratorium of Virginia, these crusading pedestrians, bicyclists, and mass transit enthusiasts are multiplying. They deal not just with details (stoplights and wider sidewalks); they push for a wider, walkable world. At their first meeting, an Auto-free America conference at New York University in May 1991, these new urban activists staked out a large environmental claim: to reform our hardtopped landscape, a landscape forfeited by designers.

The work of these zealots may be the exception in a decade when true planning has been only peripheral. But they are an inspiration and a model for the global village of the year 2000. It is here that designers—the men and women trained to use their eyes, minds, and ears in concert; the professionals schooled in converting aspirations into plans—can translate environmental activism into visible form. The issue in this era of earth-angst is less these designers’ capacity than their dedication and their mandate from a larger community. And, in the end, the critical questions remain: Will the design profession and the guardians of the public landscape join with the environmental movement to create a rational and humane landscape? Can we connect design to the Whole Earth crusade?

# The Rise and Fall of Suburbia

For many designers, suburbia is that great beyond into which they dare not venture. It is that world from which they can only avert their eyes. While designers have been fascinated by the possibilities for our city centers, they have missed the overwhelming fact that these areas have become increasingly marginal to our society. It is the suburbs that have garnered the majority of our population, industrial production, retail sales, and even office employment. Indeed, what we call suburbs are no longer suburbs in the traditional sense of middle-class bedroom communities that are satellites of large cities. What I mean by the fall of suburbia, however, is not some vision of the wind rustling through empty shopping malls or grass growing on the beltways of America. The problem with suburbia is that it succeeded too well. It has become something that it was never designed or intended to be: a new kind of decentralized city. For better or for worse, these seemingly peripheral areas we call suburbs have become the **real centers** of our civilization.

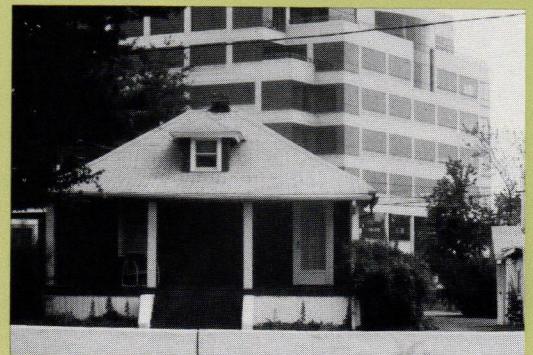
Of course, some of the trappings of traditional suburbia still exist. For one thing, the American **dream house** survives, seemingly intact. But something has obviously changed; a new scale and new functions have been introduced. Even though the dream house remains with us, it has new neighbors, complexes with names like Woodlands Corporate Center.

What are we to make of these strange juxtapositions? How are we to understand this new kind of city?

From a historical point of view, this new city is the product of two urban revolutions that have happened on the city's periphery. The first one created the traditional bedroom suburb, which we sometimes think of as a 20th-century, or even post-World War II, phenomenon. (In fact, it originated perhaps 200 years ago in London.) The second is the urban change that we are living through now.

Two hundred to 250 years ago, in virtually all European and North American cities, the best place to live was at the center. Only the poorest and most disreputable people were pushed outside the city walls to the wretched and crime-ridden shantytowns called suburbs. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides one of the earliest definitions of a **suburb**: "a place of inferior, debased and especially licentious habits of life."

**Robert Fishman**



Contemporary suburbia with land-use juxtaposition. Bungalow with office tower behind it, along Route 38, Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

How were urban values so reversed that the outskirts became a place to aspire to and not a place to shun? In 18th-century London, one place where the modern suburb originated, we find that there was a strong antiurban ideology among the upper middle-class that was closely connected with the rise of evangelical Protestantism. This philosophy taught that city pleasures were evil, especially for women and children. Men are necessarily mixed up in the evils of the city, the evangelicals believed, but women and children should be removed from them so they could play their respective roles as defined by their religion. Inevitably, the alternative to dwelling in the sinful atmosphere of the city was to live in the countryside, which was already associated with health and morality.

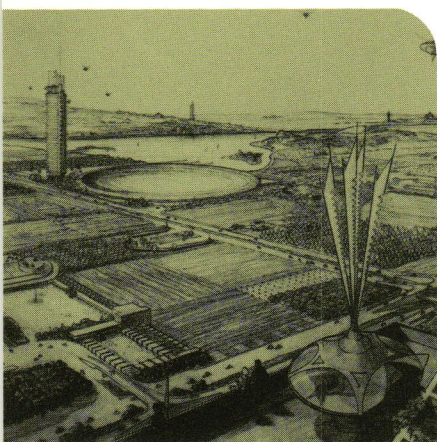
These upper middle-class families established suburban residences in the picturesque agricultural villages outside London, with men commuting into the city every day by private carriage. These were the first suburbanites in our modern sense. Even at this early stage, suburbanites tried to create that marriage of town and country which is the hallmark of suburban design. One example is **John Nash's plan** for a small development in Regents Park, just north of the settled area of London. This 1823 plan contained all the features of what we now consider contemporary suburban design: the curving road, the plantings, the separate houses, and the conscious historicism and eclecticism.

This suburban ideal had very important implications for the city as a whole. As early as the 1840s, the industrial city of Manchester, England, had become a new kind of city, where the rich and middle class had fled the center for the outer suburban belt. Left behind were the central business district—for business only—and, surrounding that, a dense factory zone where the real work of Manchester was done. For more than 100 years, this urban model, with its hierarchy of central business district, factory zone, and suburban belt, was thought to be the inevitable form of the modern city.

In the 1920s there emerged the first sign of a new revolution in urban form. The original, centralized industrial city was based on the immense advantages of the city for manufacturing, administration, and culture. It was the place where rail and water transportation converged, creating the large population, efficient transportation, and close contact that modern life seemed to require. In contrast, the newer networks of communication that emerged in the 1920s—made possible by the automobile, the electrical grid, and the radio—did not privilege the central city. They served everyone in the region equally and offered no advantage to those at the center.

Perhaps the first architect really to grasp this new situation was Frank Lloyd Wright. As early as 1924 he proclaimed that **“the big city is no longer modern.”** He devoted much of the rest of his life to planning an ideal city, called Broadacre City. Wright was the first to imagine a modern region without a central city, skyscraper core, factory district, and, above all, suburbs—because there was nothing for them to be suburbs of. Instead, his **Broadacre City** was a complex landscape in which houses, factories, and schools—all the elements of a modern civilization—were interspersed with farmland and open space.

Though Broadacre City was utopian in origin, it was nevertheless prophetic of the actual direction that urban change would take. Important economic and social forces were working in favor of the radical decentralization that Wright believed was inevitable. After the Great Depression, for instance, an entire financial and industrial system—starting with the resurrection of the savings-and-loan industry—revolved around the construction of the single-family detached suburban house. Perhaps even more crucial was the suburbanization of industry and



Frank Lloyd Wright's never-realized Broadacre City prefigured the contemporary decentralized city. Aerial view from a presentation drawing.

commerce allowed by the highway grid, a process that in many places progressed faster and in a more radical way than the suburbanization of population.

What has been the result? Take the example of **Mt. Laurel** in southern New Jersey, 12 miles from Philadelphia. Mt. Laurel was, just 20 years ago, simply an agricultural area where three new roads happened to converge. One of the roads has a convenient exit ramp off Interstate Highway 295, around which a new settlement has grown. In fact, this settlement is now one of the fastest-growing areas in the whole region. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, while Philadelphia proper lost three percent of its population and the region as a whole gained three percent, Mt. Laurel grew by 115 percent. What is striking about Mt. Laurel is the way in which, unconsciously, its developers have created a Broadacre City landscape—or something very similar to it. Buildings of the **Laurel Corporate Center** rise in the distance from the **bean fields**, just as Wright intended. New houses and factories stand in the middle of open fields.

How are we to understand places such as Mt. Laurel, which typifies the fastest-growing kind of settlement in the country? I would turn back to Frank Lloyd Wright, who said: “**The true center, the only centralization allowable in American democracy, is the individual American home.**” This idea that our true centers are not located in our cities’ downtowns but rather in each American house, is a very revealing one. A place such as Mt. Laurel is a city defined by time rather than space. Every resident creates his or her own city, starting from the family house. The city is simply all the places one can reach by automobile within a reasonable amount of time.

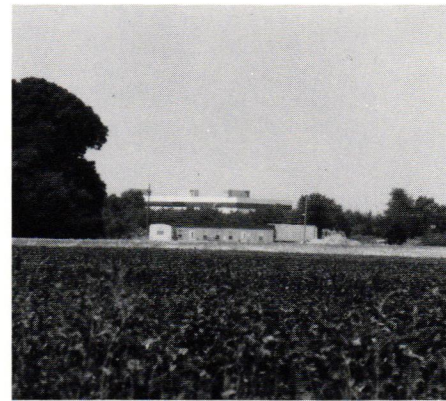
Different destinations never converge into a single center but become part of overlapping networks. These include the household network for basic living and educational needs, the consumption network for luxury goods and entertainment, and the production network linking employment and industrial centers.

In a place such as Mt. Laurel, there is no tendency to centralize. Instead, one finds odd juxtapositions of tract houses next to a large mall next to open farmland next to a factory next to other houses and so on. We perceive this collage as undifferentiated sprawl, but, in fact, a kind of order and efficiency underlies it. Areas such as Mt. Laurel have created a true metropolitan economy with all its complexities but without a city center.

This new form of settlement, however, is inherently unstable. Growth necessarily leads to further development, which leads in turn to the destruction of precisely those non-urban qualities that inspired growth in the first place. The causes that lead to such patterns of decentralized settlement are complex, and Mt. Laurel is an extreme example. The challenge now is to build a more sensible and workable model.

My first idea is that we must save the centrality of the central city. Experience has shown that regions without a center—such as Wright’s Broadacre City—have environmental drawbacks. There can be no solution to congestion without a viable core, around which the whole region can be organized. A center for mass transportation, for example, enables passengers to combine trips and creates a kind of efficiency. In addition, the region cannot have a workable identity without a strong central city. There, in the center, is the city’s architectural heritage, its history, and its uniqueness.

My second idea is that we must reintegrate the household network. People inevitably will continue to live on a regional scale. We cannot go back to the village or the



Office development built to resemble cluster housing. Mt. Laurel, New Jersey.

Wright’s vision realized. The Laurel Corporate Center in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey, rises from a bean field.



# Collision Course: New Design Constraints and Old Designer Myths

In most disciplines, as in life generally, we acknowledge the relative importance of the inside of things and the relative unimportance of the outside. All our folk wisdom instructs us in the same values: don't judge a book by its cover; give me the inside story; laughing on the outside, crying on the inside; beauty is only skin deep; appearances are deceiving.

In architecture and design we reverse the order. When architects talk about the quality of office buildings, for example, they are not talking about the quality of employee life inside but about the visual impact on the streets and on the landscape outside.

**Ralph Caplan**

This series of talks, therefore, suggests a bold departure from the norm. "Beyond Style" conjures up a program of penetrating visions that go farther than design intelligence is normally expected to venture. However, the term *beyond style* ought to be taken for granted; it is not far out, except perhaps in fashion design. If you are designing a hospital, a bridge, a wheelchair, an access ramp, or a missile, the point at which you begin thinking about design is already beyond style.

Imagine a series of advanced medical revelations entitled "Beyond Symptomatic Relief." Of course, much of the design we have is superficial, just as much of the medical practice we have merely relieves symptoms—if it even does that. I do not wish to suggest that these are not valid achievements. When I have a toothache, I am very grateful for symptomatic relief. Getting rid of a headache is better than having one, unless the relief keeps you from noticing a brain tumor. Similarly, style is part of life. If *life-style* means anything (as most of the time it does not), it means that style and character are inextricably entwined. In the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, the brilliant homicidal psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter, played by Anthony Hopkins, stunningly assesses FBI agent-in-training Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) by noticing her fragrance and her shoes.

The trouble begins when, instead of taking style as the expression of character, we assume that it is character. In a commercial for the Nutri/System weight-loss program we see a bouncing young woman and hear a voice saying, "This is the person I've always wanted to be." What person did she want to be? What we see is not a transformed person but a thinner body—life-styles are not lives.

Recently, I was looking across the Connecticut lake where I spend my weekends. Although it was frozen, I remembered a day the preceding summer when swans had glided softly by as if they heard the sound of silence. If they had, the scene would have been as idyllic as it appeared. What they actually heard is what I heard, which was an earsplitting, motor-driven chain of echoing explosions blowing up our Sunday morning. Through the window I could see my high-tech neighbor with his leaf blower, power pack on his back, hose in hand, looking like a Marine clearing out a cave with a flamethrower. Yet, I do not find him entirely at fault. I tend to blame the gadget as much as the gadgeteer, the designer as much as the user. If the members of the National Rifle Association had a stand on this problem, they would blame my neighbor. "Leaf blowers don't make noise," they would say. "People make noise." They would be as wrong about that as they are about handguns. Yet this was more than a product

problem; it was a designer problem. *Beyond style* must mean that the designer has some responsibility for the character of the products he or she designs and not just for the exterior expression of that character.

Years ago I sat in the Chicago industrial design office of my friend Richard Latham. Between us stood an award-winning snowblower that his firm had just designed. I was not impressed with it and told him so. He became defensive and said, “Look, nobody’s going to get his pant leg caught in this.” But then he went on to say, “Even so, I know, it’s just more styling. But that is not what bothers me. The point is that it has nothing to do with a real solution. What happens to the peace and quiet of a winter morning when you have six of these in one block? I think mashing your senses on a bright sunny morning is worse than mashing your leg.” He is right. Mashed senses do not distinguish between snowblowers and leaf blowers; they both blow an ill wind, and they have nothing to do with a real solution.

The idea that design *might* have anything to do with a real solution historically has been a difficult idea to get across. This is partly because design so often does not address real problems. If it is going to address them in the 1990s, we have to stop believing in the old designer myths of the 1950s and 1960s, such as that design is magic, that designers are solitary heroes—the *Fountainhead* myth—and that design is styling.

Raymond Loewy is a case in point. He was perhaps the only truly famous industrial designer we have ever had. One of the many things he was renowned for was the redesign of the Lucky Strike cigarette package in the early 1940s. His official description of how he was assigned the task is as follows: George Washington Hill, chairman of the board of the American Tobacco Company, had asked Loewy whether he could improve the package. Loewy said he would like to. “When will I get it?” Hill asked. “Oh, some nice spring day, I’ll feel like doing it,” Loewy replied. “And you’ll get it then.” It is not likely that any project was handled in quite that way, even in the 1940s. Today, nobody would even fantasize about it. The design of something as seemingly simple as the cigarette package has been made much more complex, not only because of new material constraints, packaging technology, marketing patterns, or ecological concerns, but also because of the medical and social implications of smoking itself. Yet the myth persists that design is done by solitary romantics.

It occurs to me that my title here—“Collision Course: New Design Constraints and Old Designer Myths”—is all wrong. The real danger is that there is no such collision course. Indeed, instead of colliding with reality, the myths of the 1950s threaten to become the myths of the 1990s. We believe them at our peril, because a society that does not insist on design that goes beyond style is going to be in big trouble. And it will serve us right!

**Here is an excerpt from the question-and-answer period that followed Caplan's talk.**

**Q:** *In your gentle disparagement of the title of the series, you talked about style and design. Could you define those two words?*

**RC:** By design, I mean something fairly simple. I mean, first, identifying an objective and exploring what one can do to achieve it. This includes investigating the constraints of size, budget, and time. The resources of art are then used to create a form that one can model. If the designer doesn't model it, he or she can't refine and correct it. That's essentially what I mean by the design process, and it is not a process that is unique to designers. Style is something more personal. It is something that depends more on talent, having to do with the designer's ability to express in form something about the character of the product, the service, the corporation, or the school. I distinguish between *style*, which is not an evil thing—we all have it—and *styling*, which is the attempt to impose an arbitrary style on something for which it may or may not be right.

**Q:** *Don't you think styling is the heart and soul of consumer society, though? In America we can have five different coffeepots, and each one looks different. One evokes a memory or the suggestion of a different culture, perhaps, and we can take our choice. Without styling, where would our consumer society be? It would be like the Soviet Union, where everything is the same.*

**RC:** That is an argument that has been used. But what is really wrong in the Soviet Union is not that they don't have a choice among five coffeepots that all do the same thing. What is wrong in the Soviet Union is that they don't have the choice to buy quality goods. If the goods are even available, they are of poor quality.

**Q:** *Is there any case where styling is not wrong? What about hair?*

**RC:** I once made an appointment in a classy hair salon that had been designed by someone I know. The interior was covered with photomurals of very good-looking men and women, all with different kinds of hair. The hair designer said, "Is there anything you would like to tell me before we start? Do you have anything in mind?" I pointed to one of the photographs—a sort of modified Prince Valiant—and I said, "Yes, that one." And he said, "Are you kidding? No way." And I said, pointing to the murals, "I thought those were the styles you did here. I thought that was inventory." "I can do any one of those styles," he said, "but not on you." So, even hair design has something to do with the substance of what there is to work with. One question I didn't address completely is whether it is fine to style some things. I believe that one should take some things more seriously than others. There is no question that if you are designing a cockpit of a plane or operating-room equipment, it is more important in many ways than if you are Michael Graves designing a teapot for Swid/Powell. It's not that there aren't surprises in designing operating-room equipment—or that there isn't experimentation and intuition. But one had better know what one is doing.

**Q:** *Do you have any observations on how difficult it is to convince clients of the importance of good design in the workplace?*

**RC:** I don't know how much longer companies can take the attitude that it is anything but crucial. Labor is expensive. It should become clear that having a desirable workplace is not a luxury. It affects worker effectiveness, absenteeism, and so forth. There are reams of statistical documentation for this. I am always surprised that people have to be convinced that they ought to have good design. If they understood design, they would see why they must have it. We hear so-called enlightened clients say, "We believe in good design." They never say they believe in good

engineering or good accounting. Nobody wants bad anything. Sex. Food. You never hear anyone say, “You know, bad design is really what we need.”

**Q:** *How much headway do you think industrial design has made in addressing environmental problems?*

**RC:** Clearly, not enough. Designers came very late to environmental problems as a concern. The trouble is this: now that everybody wants to do the right thing, it is very hard to know what the right thing is—or when you are making headway. Somebody from the *New York Times* called me a couple of months ago and said, “We need an instant opinion on McDonalds’ decision to get rid of the foam burger package.” So I gave them an instant opinion: the foam package was very neat from a design point of view. It was handy, it sealed in juices and a certain amount of heat, but it really was a terrible thing to make. Nobody had a way of knowing this in advance, possibly, but it was good we were stopping its use. Since then, however, some things I have read indicate that the answer is not so clear. They might, indeed, be better off with paper. The question is: Would they be better off not packaging at all? Would they be better off with less takeout? We do more wrapping of everything than any other country.

**Q:** *You have just described the design process as one of researching and modeling. That’s the way I’ve been taught it, and that’s the way I teach it now. I just read an interview with a Parisian producer who described this process as distinctly American and implied it was somewhat provincial and rigid. Have you encountered this viewpoint outside the U.S., and how do you feel about that?*

**RC:** When we describe a process, it sounds more organized than it really is. We are breaking it down into a kind of algorithm that doesn’t describe the way things really work. Design is a messy business. I do not doubt that there are certain places where designers have an edge on American designers because they are more intuitive, freer, less hung up, less tied up with research. Italy is a perfectly good example. It is very hard to find American designers who have the flair, fluidity, and eloquence of [Achille] Castiglioni, [Ettore] Sottsass, or [Mario] Bellini. However, I do think we have the same process.

**Q:** *Isn’t the European mystique of style just a myth? Aren’t the so-called great Italian automotive designers little more than stylists? The vast majority of their designs never make it to market. The only ones that do make it to market satisfy the very same needs that anybody else’s designs would satisfy.*

**RC:** Yes, sometimes. In the case of someone like [Giorgio] Giugiaro, the styling is at such a high level that it is almost transcendent. The design becomes a kind of sculpture, although in itself it doesn’t do much for transportation. In general, though, I do not think their reputation is a myth. We don’t have many designers who can work that way, just as we don’t have their restaurants or their streetlife.

## More Products Are Not Enough

Arguing for the primacy of design is becoming more and more difficult. I believe that what people in other countries perceive as the American way of life is linked directly to the role design once played here. Now, for various reasons, this perception is harder to justify. Design should be “beyond style.” It should make a real difference in people’s lives, but often that is not the case. I was trained, essentially, to be a stylist in the Raymond Loewy tradition, which advocated making things pretty that were presumed to be ugly or not marketable.

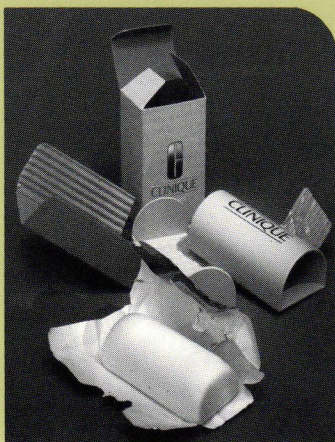
**William Stumpf**

One reason why design is losing its legitimacy in America is that it is exclusive. Designers tend to claim that design touches everyone’s life, no matter what his or her background. But in fact, well-designed products are not commonly available. I make my living designing expensive furniture that appears in elitist places such as contract showrooms or museum catalogues. When people I know want a chair I have designed they have to call me; they cannot go to Target—or any other retail store where furniture is available—and buy one themselves.

This exclusivity is disturbing in a democratic society. I have always been intrigued by the ideal of industrial design, namely making things useful and beautiful for a large number of people. Obtaining well-designed objects should be as easy as buying the latest book, going to the latest film, or seeing the latest play. But to get the latest in design one must employ a decorator or an architect. One must have a connection somewhere to avoid paying the list price.

Design exclusivity is exacerbated by packaging excess. Clinique, for example, sells an elaborately designed box, with layers of elegant tissue wrapping, that contains a tiny bar of soap taking up less than half the volume of the package itself. It costs \$12. There are athletic shoes that today cost \$130 a pair that are no more sophisticated than the tennis shoes I wore in high school. In fact, in terms of the actual materials involved and the new techniques of production, these very athletic shoes probably cost even less to make than the tennis shoes did.

This window-dressing of products is only one indication that our culture does not approach industrial design the way, say, Japan and Germany do. For one thing, we are 20 years behind these and other developed countries in that we spend little on civilian research and development, devoting most such dollars to military hardware. A recent *New York Times* article rightly asked why it is we can make intricate, effective Patriot missiles when we cannot make VCRs.



The Clinique soap box is a prime example of gratuitous packaging.

George Nelson—a mentor of mine, a wonderful designer, and a

thoughtful man—developed a chart of product categories based on the goals they seek to achieve. Working from the highest priority down, he designated master goods as those that relate to life-and-death issues. If Americans are worried about their freedom or their health, they will open their pockets and just let the money flow out. For any warfare tools or medical devices one finds big budgets, open pockets, and highly trained engineers. One Patriot missile, for example, costs the equivalent of a well-stocked public library in a major American city.

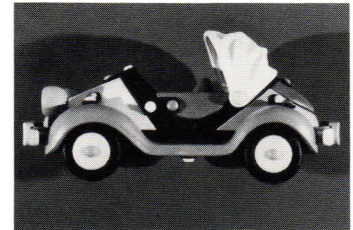
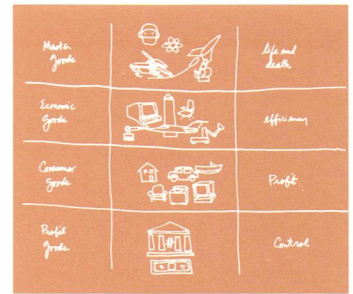
Nelson characterized the next product group as economic goods whose objective is efficiency; that is the group I work in. It includes office furniture, Lear jets, office buildings, computers, moving equipment, and machine tools. The design budget is still generous in these areas. The third and lowest group down is consumer goods, those we use daily. Because, from a manufacturing standpoint, the primary motivation behind the design of these products is profit, they are the least fun to work on as a designer. I have added a fourth group to Nelson's chart, one I call profit goods. Since the 1980s we have been witnessing the sheer exchange of money—no tangible products involved—as a means of creating wealth. As we know, this trend has been a dangerous one for the manufacturing sector.

After World War II Japan and Germany lost their mandate to operate in the master goods, or war tools, area. As a result, I think, they turned all their designers and engineers to the consumer-goods and, to some degree, the efficiency-goods categories. The high quality of products such as the Honda or ABS brakes suggest that they are designed by people who have been close to master goods. ABS brakes were developed from those on high-speed aircraft. Thus, these two industrial giants are concentrating their best and brightest in the consumer sphere, while America's best and brightest go straight into designing military machines. Which of them would not, given the comparative financial rewards? Would a graduate of, say, the University of Minnesota Technical School start out as an engineer at Herman Miller at \$35,000 per year, or would he or she work for Boeing for \$70,000?

But say American businesses did favor civilian R-and-D. What would that mean? In my mind, civilian R-and-D would entail more than merely the development of additional products for us to consume. It would have to present a challenge to our consumptive way of life.

There is a difference between consumption for consumption's sake and the notion of proprietorship as it was alluded to in our Constitution. Taking care of a plot of land or a small business was, originally, in the nature of the American experiment. Now, however, most of our lives and homes are defined by patterns of sheer consumption and complete dependence on a market economy. My Swiss grandfather, who lived to be 94, used only two straight razors his whole life. A man today, from age 13 to 73, can be expected to use 12,000 disposable razors. The idea of proprietorship is not to keep the traditional straight razor but is, perhaps, to design one that could be sharpened a dozen times. BMW and other German car companies are bringing out a new car that they will take back after a period of use. After the car is worn out, the companies will completely reconstitute it or recycle its parts. American trucks and buses last a million miles, so it is possible to design a car, or even a television set, that could be owned for a lifetime. With this orientation toward longevity, the user would have a different kind of relationship with a product, a relationship that is not terminal.

The idea of proprietorship is contained in the ingenious thinking behind the design of toys. The structure of a toy car, for instance, is so simple that a child can



Consumer goods have a low priority in the realm of design research. Seen above is the author's rendering of designer George Nelson's chart of product categories.

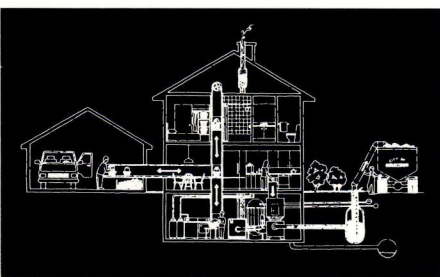
Why can't adult products be as understandable and ingenious as some well-designed children's toys? Pictured is the Mic-o-mic toy car.

understand how to take it apart and put it back together. As an adult, I have a fear of taking anything apart. I would not touch my VCR, for example. This fear, I believe, relates to a fundamental estrangement between object and user. Our war tools are the most exquisitely designed objects because their operators cannot afford any down time. Well, what about we civilians? Can we afford down time? Why doesn't this accessibility and efficiency of design come to us in our daily lives?

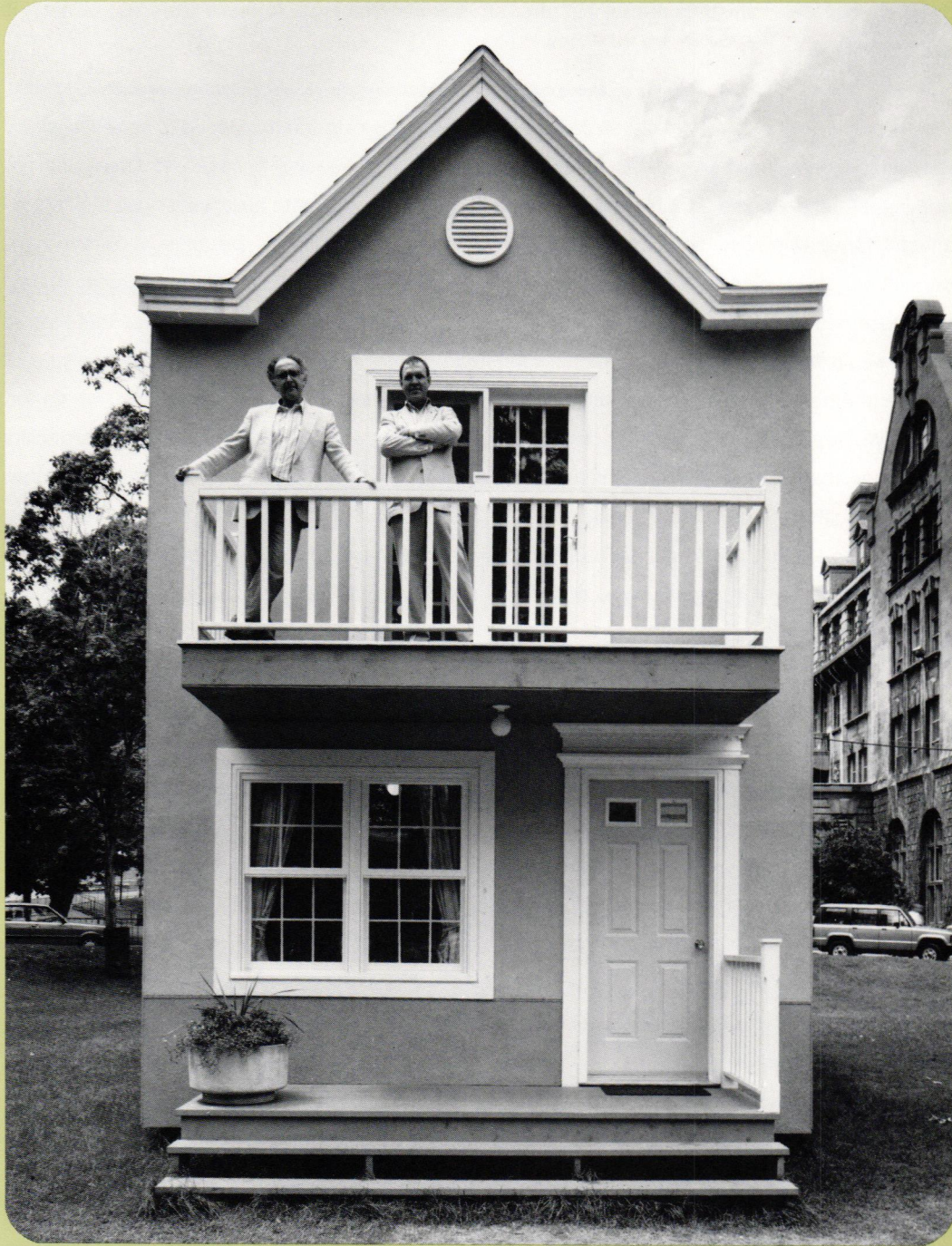
Another aspect of proprietorship could be practiced in the house. The *New York Times* once asked me to think about home design as it relates to recycling, a project that led me to come up with an idea for what I call the "metabolic house." I began to wonder why the house could not have some digestive system of its own instead of relying on expensive landfills and garbage-disposal plants. In factories, for instance, granular material is chopped up, pulverized, and packaged, and biomass materials are mixed with fuel for heating. Why doesn't the house have more functional capability? Le Corbusier called the house a machine for living, but that was simply a visual metaphor. In this age of high technology, it is quaint that we still hand-sort and deliver our garbage to the curb or recycling centers. We neither transform nor metabolize the enormous amount of materials that flow in, around, and through the house.

And speaking of material flow, the average family carries between 170 and 300 pounds of material per week in and out of the house: mail, newspapers, laundry, luggage, groceries, and so on. Homeowners never question whether the processing and handling of all this bulk is necessary, whereas, in the average modern factory, no one picks up anything heavier than a piece of paper.

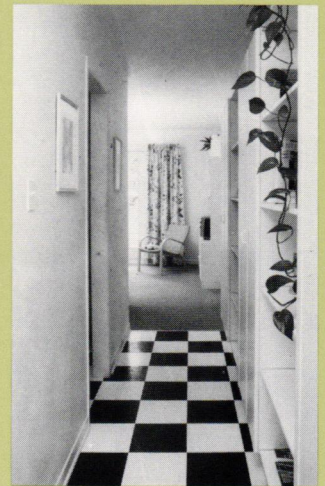
I think that in the next century the house will have to assume broader responsibility for waste management and recycling. Paying attention to the "metabolism" of a house is one example of what I mean by civilian design research. Companies like General Electric should be addressing these issues, not just new ways to make fighter planes. At the moment, though, the American design community lacks any kind of integrated R-and-D apparatus. It is time we designed a new material reality based on quality of life, not level of consumption.



The house as a machine for living could be more than a visual metaphor. The Metabolic House, designed by William Stumpf, includes a recycling chute, mulch processor, water-recycling system, conveyors, and pollution-control filters.



Civilian R-and-D as applied to affordable housing. The Grow House, developed by architects at McGill University, is small (1,000 square feet), has unpartitioned interior space, is adaptable to different households, uses high-quality finishes and materials, and has a construction cost of \$35,000.



It is ironic that England, which started the Industrial Revolution, hit rock-bottom industrially in the 1960s. Today the British government, recognizing that there is no other way to generate wealth, is giving stipends to young designers and inventors to reconstitute England's industrial process. Government and business in America might do well to examine the direction their own industries are taking. After all, it is human nature to make tools and objects; it is part of life.

**Here is an excerpt from the question-and-answer period that followed Stumpf's talk.**

**Q:** *Will you describe some more objects you think need to be redesigned?*

**WS:** Certainly. We need to redress the house completely. Increasing numbers of Americans are working at home—some 21 million of us—so that the house begins to have what I call the “studio effect.” Those who know artists or writers may notice that their houses are unusual. Before now, working at home meant that dad had a shop in the basement or an office up in a bedroom. Today, the house has to be designed so that there is space devoted specifically to projects. This kind of house would be more like the traditional farmstead. Often, I become impatient with the rate of change in America. Everyone says America is a change-oriented country. In my opinion, we go too slowly. We're amazingly far behind in balanced transportation approaches, for instance. Affordability is another absolutely fundamental issue. By now, we should have 800-square-foot houses that people can afford to buy. Basic housing for everyone was one of the premises of this country. The list of things I would like to change is long. I don't understand why we must take our children to Disneyland, where it is clean, safe, organized, and fun, and then go back home to uninspired places like the suburbs.

**Q:** *Do you think that the overblown enthusiasm about the technology used in the Gulf War suggests that the great emphasis on our military achievements will never change?*

**WS:** Yes, I'm very worried about that. In an article I wrote for *ID* magazine last year, I called Gorbachev the patron saint of design, because with the end of the Cold War, I thought we could finally apply our resources to the civilian improvements we need so badly. The Gulf War, however, seemed to prove that the only way we can raise our self-esteem is through military adventures. While I don't want to look down on that esteem, I also don't want to adopt a blind attitude that constantly denies our problems. Many of the problems of unemployment are inextricably linked with the fact that we have lost our preeminence in industrial design. When 39,000 people get laid off at General Motors and every third car on the road is a Honda, we have to admit that our country is doing something wrong.

**Q:** *Could you comment on the design of malls, in particular, the megamall, here in Bloomington, Minnesota, which is scheduled to open in 1992?*

**WS:** I do have a bias against the Bloomington Mall. This kind of place undermines the quality not only of the shopping experience but also of the goods we are dealing with. We are bored to death with what we have. There is a perfume shop in London that has a pillow at the counter; the salespeople put the change on the pillow because ladies would never take change from a clerk. There are 100 other examples like this, places where shopping is a form of entertainment. On a few of the streets in Milan they change the shop window displays every morning. It is like theater art in the streets. Gregory Bateson once said, “Art is the frustration of integration.” The challenge is to have artful things integrated into our lives.

## The Legacy Of Modernism

In order to design, designers must have ideas about what makes one object better than another. They need some sort of belief system. Of course, their judgments may be wrong, but it is nonetheless necessary to have a system. It was just such a system that modernism provided, and that postmodernism and post-structuralism have denied and refused.

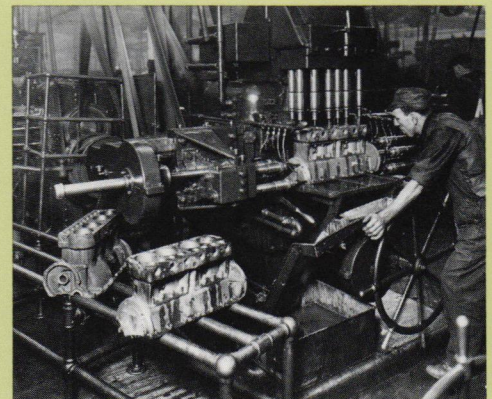
Historically, modernism, a movement of the early 20th-century known variously as Machine Age or International Style design, was a unique attempt to create a system of values independent of the vagaries of fashion and taste. This system defined quality in relation to the way the object was produced. Of course, the effort was a failure, but this does not mean that the intention was not worthwhile. Why did the modernist designers bother to try? Once a product is made in large quantities for unknown people, we have to make some judgments about the quality of the object before it reaches the market. The matter cannot be simply left to the tastes of consumers, because the consumers do not exist until after the object has entered the market.

What are the legacies of modernism today? Does it still provide any criteria for judging quality? Or has the deluge of critical theory destroyed everything in modernism? By examining four key aspects of this movement, I would like to propose a reckoning of modernism, to see whether it is still in credit against the objections made against it.

Probably the most general complaint against modernist design has been that it has made everything look the same; it has suppressed *difference*. As I suggested, modernist designers rigidly pursued this uniformity in order to eliminate fashion and taste as bases for aesthetic judgments; they also sought a new aesthetic principle based upon the machine method of production. One aspect of this new principle lay in eliminating ornament, and another lay in reducing the variety of products down to a few or to just one design. Here, without doubt, the icon was the **Model T Ford**, which was widely interpreted as a perfect representation of machine production.

Today the production process has changed yet again, and there is no reason why designs should replicate the earlier process of production. The Fordist system of production increasingly has been replaced by alternative modes of production, sometimes called

**Adrian Forty**

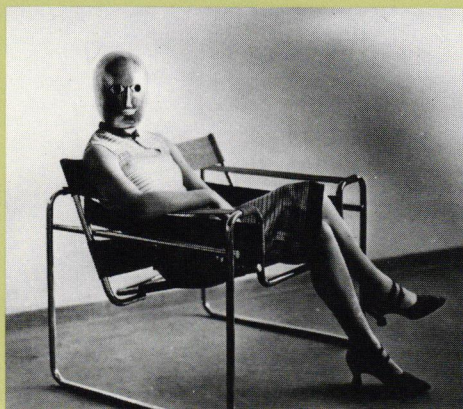


The Model T Ford was an icon of modernist design as conditioned by machine production. Seen here is the multiple spindle drilling-and-reaming machine on a Model T production line.



Above: An extreme example of modernist decor. Notice the absence of ornament, except for the gilded bookcovers. Living room of Walter Gropius' house in Dessau.

Below: For many modernists, the appearance of things was trivial; what mattered were the differences behind the mask. Woman with mask by Oscar Schlemmer, seated in tubular steel chair by Marcel Breuer.



flexible accumulation or flexible production. It offers the freedom to produce objects in much wider numbers of designs at no extra cost.

If we follow the logic of modernist argument, therefore, it would be quite consistent to see the abandonment of design standardization and its replacement by a greater degree of design variation. After all, the modernists were not saying that every product should have a single design but, rather, that every design should represent the process of production. Only under Fordism, which is no longer the mode of production today, did this mean standardization.

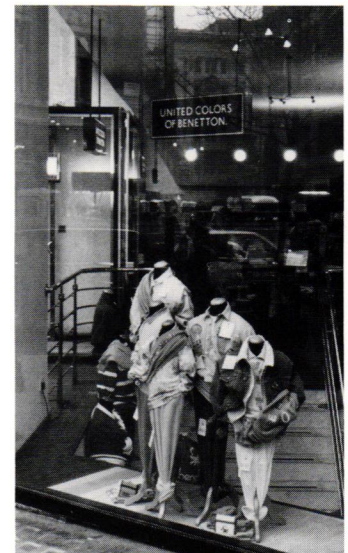
Taken in this way, modernist design theory is not a hindrance but instead quite a help in suggesting where quality might lie. Consider the example of the Italian firm **Benetton**, which sells ready-made clothing over most of Western Europe and has often been cited as the model of flexible production. In fact, Benetton is not strictly a producer; it is more a combination distributor-design agency for clothes that are produced by numerous semi-independent workshops in northern Italy. Benetton holds virtually no stocks of its clothing but instead relies on an extremely rapid line of communication between the point of sale and the workshops. These workshops are equipped with tools that are programmable to produce any of the different designs in that year's range: demand for any particular sweater immediately sets off an order for its production. The system is therefore, in theory, extremely demand-responsive, unlike orthodox Fordist production, where the manufacturer projected what consumers might want to buy and produced that product until it was no longer possible to sell it. Both systems, however, are consistent with modernist design aesthetics.

If standardization was the most distinctive way of achieving a new aesthetic value in modernist design, and the most despised, there are two other related ideas we should examine: the avoidance of ornament; and the idea that the design of the object must in some sense be true to the nature of the thing.

The objections to this approach to design are well known; it assumes that, for any given article, there is a perfect design solution. Virtually every postmodernist or post-structuralist who has had anything to say about design has leapt on this assumption and torn it to bits. The very idea that there can be a universal solution to anything sends post-structuralists into convulsions. There is no question that this is a particularly shaky bit of the modernist value system. What I do not accept, though, is that the failure of this bit of modernist aesthetics invalidates all the rest.

What of the modernists' rejection of ornament, which, in their mind, pandered to individualism? The major fault here was that it created a "pure," unornamented design as an elite culture. Was the considerable quantity of "impure" design made at the time really just kitsch, all equally contemptible? The creation of this division between high culture and mass culture was to be one of modernism's greatest embarrassments, and one that was to be exploited relentlessly by Pop artists and post-structuralist theorists alike. I would not like to defend the modernists' opposition to ornament, because the extreme form in which some of them made their case really makes it indefensible. I would suggest, though, that the absence of ornament was not such an important part of modernism as it has been commonly thought to be. Rather than being an end in itself, absence of ornament was a way of drawing attention to the Fordist mode of production. Also, in practice, people seem to be quite content to have many things non-ornamented—for instance, road signs, photocopiers, or cameras.

The fourth and last aspect of modernist design to examine as a legacy is the social responsibility of the designer. What does this mean? Broadly, it means that design is



A model of design conditioned by flexible production. Benetton storefront, London.

to be judged by moral values rather than aesthetic criteria. The quality of, say, the **Maclaren buggy** lies not in its formal or visual properties but in its effects upon society.

When assessing what the moral properties of design might be, we find many different interpretations. To someone like the Swiss designer Max Bill, who studied at the Bauhaus in 1927 and 1928, the moral obligation of the designer is to resist ugliness and ornamentation. The trivial embellishment of pure form would, he believed, lead ultimately to the collapse of civilization. As he put it, “We know that ugliness in small things leads to ugliness in large ones.” On the other hand, to someone like Victor Papanek, who has suggested that 90 percent of design is downright dangerous, the moral obligation of the designer may in fact be not to design the thing at all but to leave it alone. Alternatively, to Norman Potter, who is the most moral designer I have ever come across, the very condition of being a designer is charged with moral responsibility toward those who might use the objects. As far as Potter is concerned, the notions of aesthetics simply do not enter in, for the whole practice of design is about making moral judgments. He believes, for example, that the designer is obligated to examine every conceivable relationship that the object in question has with everything else in the world; only when it emerges “clean,” so to speak, should it be launched into the world.

Other interpretations of what is meant by the social responsibility of the designer emerge in so-called green design, which evaluates design according to how well it conserves natural resources. Or we have another dimension of the social responsibility of the designer—one that has had quite a lot of attention lately—the obligation to respect the local or regional culture of the people for whom he or she is designing. The two dimensions have been summed up by Victor Papanek in the slogan “Think Global, Act Local.”

What is wrong with these ideas? What objection can there possibly be to saying that the proper end of design lies in its contribution to the social good? What reasonable person could possibly disagree? Unfortunately, it becomes a very complicated issue to define what is a real and tangible social benefit. Think of the Maclaren buggy: while it has not released women from the oppressions of childcare, or offered a true equality between the sexes, it has allowed parents to travel with small children a little bit more easily.

Another example of how difficult it is to define the social benefits of a given product might be seen in the **Citroën 2CV**. This cheap French car was originally designed in the 1940s. It is tinny, rides very high on the road, and bounces up and down when driving. The seats are made of canvas, rigged on a steel frame. Nevertheless, it has become a design classic. At the time it was introduced its design fit remarkably well the needs of the intended market, which consisted essentially of French peasant farmers. They could take the seats out and put straw or calves in the back—it was highly adaptable. It has an air-cooled engine so that it does not freeze up in the winter. Moreover, if the panels drop off or rust away, one only has to unbolt them and bolt on a new one; there is no welding involved. It has all sorts of qualities to commend itself, in particular to architects; it is a smartly designed, seemingly socially oriented object made from mass-produced, standard parts that can be fitted together and replaced at will.

On the other hand, the Citroën is not very socially responsible in terms of pollution and safety. It has a rather noisy engine. Its gasoline consumption is quite low, but in environmental terms, it would not meet any of today’s standards. It is rather dangerous; it does not have any of the safety features that one would assume today. And, if one were to have a crash in it, the car would just crumble. But it must be understood that any mass-produced product carries with



The goal of a socially perfect design is non-attainable. The Maclaren buggy is light and collapsible but uncomfortable for the child.

it drawbacks as well as benefits. The perfect is a nonattainable goal. One can only arrive at an object that is better in some terms than in others.

There is another sort of objection to the view of design as social benefit. This argument is that, in practice, **design creates illusions** what things are, and about the nature of the people who use the designed objects. This is very much the argument of my book *Objects of Desire*. A rather similar idea comes from the German philosopher W. F. Haug, who suggests that, in the modern world, objects are always made to appear more useful than they really are. Design is one of the means by which this gap between the real and the apparent is filled.

What then, one might ask, is left of social responsibility if the real end of design is to create myths and illusions whose ultimate purpose is to seduce the consumer into buying the object? Is the so-called social responsibility of the designer really just a state of delusion into which designers cast themselves, to make themselves feel that they are doing something worthwhile? No, I do not think we have to go that far.

We can accept that design can make *some* improvements in our lives. The mistake is to think that the result must be in all respects better—and better for everyone. The Maclaren buggy is not altogether better than the pushchairs that preceded it. It may be light and collapsible, but it is less comfortable for the child. There is no suspension and the wheels are small, so that the ride is quite bumpy. There is nothing to protect the child's feet from getting cold. Also, the child faces forward and cannot make eye contact with the person doing the pushing; so it can be lonely for the passenger. Moreover, the Maclaren buggy undoubtedly does create some illusions—it makes one think that traveling with a small child, getting on and off buses, will be much easier than it actually turns out to be. Still, we can say it offers some benefits, and for most people the benefits probably outweigh the disadvantages and the disappointment that sets in when the illusions are broken.

Therefore, if we insist on talking about social morality in an absolute sense, we will lead ourselves continually to all the criticisms that I have described. Instead, if we think of design as “reducing friction,” we can still retain some idea of design offering social gains. By reducing friction, I mean reducing the annoyance and aggravation between people and objects, between people and other people, and between people and organizations.

In conclusion, we have to accept that some modernist values are gone for good: the embargo on ornament has gone; and “pure form,” the notion that a design could be the most perfect representation of function, has been shown to be a useless idea. But on the other hand, the notion that design should represent the process of production has not been superseded by any alternative. As with early 20th-century production, this still seems to be a valid and an effective measure of value when the designer does not know who the user will be.

Should we disregard “social responsibility” as an essentially flawed idea because it does not, and cannot, deliver a perfect world? As I have suggested, to cast the question like that is to miss the point of this aspect of the modernist value system. One should not treat it as an absolute—its only significance is as a relative value.

Finally, we must remember that the values offered by modernism, like any other set of aesthetic values, are **mythical**. That is to say, they have no objective existence, and they are matters of belief rather than matters of fact. Modernism provided, and still provides, a belief system for designers to work within. The modernist value system has survived to the extent it has because, without such a system, designers would find it impossible to be designers.



The Citroën 2CV has become a design classic because of its flexible features, but it is environmentally objectionable.

## Contributors

**Robert Campbell**, architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*, is the author of *Artists and Architects Collaborate: Designing the Wiesner Building* (1985) and *An American City in Time* (forthcoming). Several of his articles are included in the collection *American Architecture of the 1980s* (1990). He has also served as a contributing editor of *Architecture* magazine.

**Jane Holtz Kay**, architecture critic for *The Nation* and author of *Lost Boston* (1982) and *Preserving New England* (1986), has written regularly for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and *Architecture* magazine, where she is a contributing editor. She is presently writing a book on the impact of the automobile for Crown Publishers.

**Robert Fishman**, the author of *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (1987) and *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (1977), is a professor of history at Rutgers University. He is one of this country's foremost scholars on suburbs.

Veteran design critic **Ralph Caplan** is the author of *By Design: Why There Are No Locks on the Bathroom Doors in the Hotel Louis XIV and Other Object Lessons* (1982), which is to serve as the basis for a forthcoming public television program produced by ETV South Carolina. Formerly editor-in-chief of and now a critic for *ID* magazine, he has worked for Herman Miller Inc., CBS, and IBM, among other organizations, as a design consultant.

Designer **William Stumpf**, founder of William Stumpf + Associates, is best known for developing the Ergon, Equa, and Ergon 2 chair designs for Herman Miller Inc. The Equa was named one of the best designs of the 1980s by *Time* magazine and was the subject of a 1984 Walker Art Center exhibition, *The Serious Chair*.

**Adrian Forty**, senior lecturer in architectural history at University College, London, is the author of *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM* (1986) as well as of highly original social histories of design objects ranging from the modern hospital to lofts and gardens.

### Colophon

This issue of *Design Quarterly* was designed and formatted in Quark XPress 3.0 using Franklin Gothic typefaces. It was printed at Meyers Printing Company, Minneapolis, on 80 lb. Centura cover and 80 lb. Centura text. The Beyond Style lecture series poster was designed by Kristen McDougall and Jan Jancourt.

## Design Quarterly

### Guest Editor

Deborah Karasov

### Copy Editors

Phil Freshman  
Susan Packard  
Liesa Stromberg

### Designer

Kristen McDougall

### Lecture Transcribers

Sondra Anderson  
Kristi Highum

*Design Quarterly* is made possible in part by a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in support of Walker publications. Additional support has come from Herman Miller Inc.

The lecture series *Beyond Style: The Designer and Society* and this accompanying publication were made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

*Design Quarterly* is published in the spring, summer, fall, and winter by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, for the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

### Photo credits

Cover: Woman with mask by Oscar Schlemmer, seated in tubular chair by Marcel Breuer. Courtesy Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin.

pp. 5–8 Robert Campbell.

p. 10 Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

p. 13 Robert Fishman.

p. 14 Courtesy Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Spring Green, Wisconsin.

p. 15 Robert Fishman (both photos).

p. 16 Courtesy Public Record Office, London.

p. 22 Glenn Halvorson.

pp. 23–24 William Stumpf.

p. 25 Courtesy Avi Friedman and Witold Rybczynski, McGill University, Montreal.

p. 27 Courtesy Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

p. 28 Courtesy Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin (both photos).

pp. 29–31 Adrian Forty.

### Copyright Information

The code below indicates the copyright owners' consent that copies of this issue may be made for personal or internal use or for personal or specific clients. The consent is given, however, on the condition that the copier pay the stated per-copy fee through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 21 Congress St., Pickering Wharf, Salem, Massachusetts 01970, for copying beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law. This consent does not extend to other kinds of copying, such as copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, or for resale.

0011-9415/91/\$10

© 1991 Walker Art Center and  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

ISSN 0011-9415

*Design Quarterly* is indexed in  
*ARTbibliographies* and *Art Index*.

### Business Offices

Subscriptions, address changes, and mailing list correspondence should be addressed to:  
Journals Department  
The MIT Press  
55 Hayward Street  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142

### Subscription Rates

\$25 for individuals and \$55 for institutions. Subscribers outside the United States add \$14 for postage and handling. Canadian subscribers also add seven percent GST. Single copies of current issues: \$8; special issues: \$10; back issues: \$15. To be honored free, claims for missing issues must be made immediately upon receipt of the next published issue.

Walker Art Center  
Board of Directors

### Chairman

Harriet S. Spencer

### President

Gary Capen

### Vice-Chairmen

E. Peter Gillette, Jr.  
Lawrence Perlman

### Secretary

Kathy Halbreich

### Treasurer

David M. Galligan

Barbara Armajani  
Steven L. Belton  
Ann Birks  
Ralph W. Burnet  
John Cowles, Jr.  
Thomas M. Crosby, Jr.  
Mrs. Julius E. Davis  
Julia W. Dayton  
Katherine Walker Griffith  
Andrew C. Grossman  
Esperanza Guerrero-Anderson  
Roger Hale  
Nils Hasselmo  
Ann Hatch  
Wellington S. Henderson, Jr.  
Erwin A. Kelen  
Richard M. Kovacevich  
Anita H. Kunin  
Jeanne Levitt  
Bruce A. Lilly  
Mrs. Malcolm A. McCannel  
Joan Mondale  
Caroline Hall Otis  
Thomas L. Owens  
Mrs. Michael Roeder  
Lucy Rogers  
Stephen G. Shank  
John G. Taft  
Philip Von Blon  
Adrian Walker  
Brooks Walker, Jr.  
Elaine B. Walker  
John C. Walker  
Stephen E. Watson  
W. Hall Wendel, Jr.  
Susan White  
David M. Winton  
Alice E. Wittenberg  
C. Angus Wurtele  
R. Walker Yeates

### Ex-Officio

Hon. Donald M. Fraser  
Hon. James Scheibel  
George Dahl  
Commissioner John Derus