THE
INTERNATIONAL
DESIGN
YEARBOOK

1992 Edited by Andrée Putman

FURNITURE

LIGHTING

TABLEWARE

TEXTILES

PRODUCTS

GENERAL EDITOR RICK POYNOR

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T & H

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As I worked on this edition of *The International Design Yearbook* I began to have misgivings about taking on such a project when my thoughts on the subject were becoming much less positive than before. When I came to express my doubts to young designers and artists, however, I realised I was not alone in my views. They seemed to be thinking along similar lines, and told me that the things I wanted to say needed to be said.

Design has turned into a tool of fame; designers have become world stars and gurus. A kettle for boiling your water in the morning cannot simply be designed in the old, anonymous way—the kettle's owner wants to know about the designer's lifestyle, what he or she looks like, how much money he or she makes, what he or she wears. Fashion, hype and meaningless trends have invaded the design worlds, and chairs now date more quickly than hemlines. High Tech, for example, became a trend and trends by definition are always short-lived; High Tech died of self-sabotage. Yet the idea behind it—the glorification of the industrial environment—was fine. New York painters invented High Tech out of necessity—they wanted huge, beautiful, industrial spaces, sparsely furnished, in which to work and live. Now I have been told about a businessman who *re*designed a Park Avenue apartment into a 'loft' space, adding pipes to the ceiling! Designers themselves have fallen into that trap. What gets into the news is constant change, the creation of new trends. What is so painful about this fashion cycle is the way in which ideas are at first scorned, then adored, then misused and finally rejected, whatever their value. I believe design is the material aspect of a message or a feeling; it is a way of expression, not a trend or a product of consumption.

Personally, I am interested in things which have a continuity, a fundamental strength in themselves which allows them not to fall into limbo. In the same showroom where I introduce people like Eileen Gray (who pushed Le Corbusier to design furniture), Mallet Stevens and Pierre Chareau, I also produce the work of young designers such as Sylvain Dubuisson, Paul Mathieu, Michael Ray and Patrick Naggar, the New York-based Egyptian architect. Nobody has ever asked when any of these designers was born, if they were dead, if they were young. Is it important to know whether a chair has been designed recently? Clients do not come to me with the intention of ignoring re-editions; nobody says, 'I want only the brand new, the real thing, the sign of today.' This is what I want to prove in my own collections.

Recently, I was with a young designer who lived on a boat. He had absolutely no money. He went to the Swedish furniture chain Ikea for many things, but he modified each piece, giving to the objects his personal perception, his vision of their existence in his own world. He was an 'artisan designer'. It seemed to me so important, this freedom to go back to basics, to be truly individual. If he is successful, I am afraid he will be designated just a 'designer'. Handcraft has little prestige now, although it is how the design activity started. Often, artisans fear humiliation in front of designers, because unless designers are unusually sympathetic they treat artisans like tools. Despite this, there are still many young people who want to be artisans,

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craftspeople, woodworkers. It is the parents, rather than their children, who object to the idea of apprenticeship: it reminds them of poverty! In this way, the values of the 1980s have certainly started to imprison us. Design consumers have appeared, design stars are born. In some circles, design has become a kind of addiction.

In my case, encouragement to start my own company came from a few interior design jobs I had done in a rather clandestine way for friends. I did not take myself too seriously. I started with a kind of doubt; I needed a frame, a calmer way of looking at things, and it opened a field. It revealed an obsession in my work for continuity, permanence, eternity. These are the elements that I have always looked for in the pieces that have impressed me most in my life: the Katsura garden in Tokyo, Chinese art, Egyptian art, Matisse. A house in Saint Tropez which I designed in 1962 (for a friend who later became French Minister of Culture) remained for years as a place that did not age, something so simple and so classic that for a small group of people this quality of 'agelessness' became my hallmark. People said later, 'After ten years it looks as if it had been done yesterday. You should go on!' And so I did.

The name 'Ecart' means out of the main stream; marginal; apart; on the side. Its mirrored image, its anagram, reads 'Trace', which speaks for itself. In my re-editions I realised that my choice was dictated by pieces that would never date. I like restraint, reticence in details, so that an effect almost disappears. I do not mind if it takes, as I was once told, three days to see a detail in my work. This quality does not come across particularly well in photographs, but I like effects that are very simple, almost 'anti-design', something with a mystery which reveals itself only slowly.

For many years I have been criticising French self-satisfaction, the nostalgia for Versailles, the love of power and status signs. Everything I liked was regarded as inappropriate, even disgraceful—especially in art. This is why I so much dislike the conventional and dictatorial notion of good taste. In my opinion, real good taste is the conjunction of personality, self-confidence, the ability to discriminate and creation of a style—your own style, not an adopted one. The usual idea of good taste is a kind of imposture; it ruins spontaneity. Good taste is a bore because it does not really exist, except as a dark cloud obscuring one's personal judgement with the fear of what other people will think. Fear of choosing something in 'bad taste' inhibits people's approach to design. Will it match this? Will it work next to that? are questions that you hear constantly.

I remain optimistic, however, because I see examples of people who have forced themselves out of such constraints. I often come back to the example of artists: almost any artist's home is interesting, because the lack of inhibition makes for the liveliest possible interior and use of objects. Design has not only to do with beauty: it has to do with wit and charm, the humour or playfulness that animates an idea. I own a number of objects which appeared, when I acquired them, to be simply ugly. But I found myself liking them because they contain great charm and feeling. This is not a designer's

Entrance to the men's salon at the hairdressers CARITA, Paris, 1988.

attitude, I admit, but it is an attitude that allows me to have enormous fun and imagine all kinds of stories about furniture and objects. For example, I have a model of the Eiffel Tower, which unexpectedly contains a clock. To me it is fascinating, partly because I endow it with all sorts of things that have nothing to do with it, and partly because of the way in which it is displayed.

It is bourgeois and boring to believe that everything considered as 'design' has to be expensive. There is a moral beauty in objects like the Shaker furniture, which are related to a whole philosophy and a way of living; they retain their power and attraction even today. I want to convince people that almost anything can be beautiful, that it is possible to mix costly pieces with junk. It is almost an ethical principle. People should become more aware of what they put in their homes, because an interior is a kind of conversation, a form of self-description. Projects of my own, such as Morgan's Hotel in New York, might appear to represent the conventional idea of good taste, but this is only because they have achieved acceptance. Morgan's integrated new ideas of hotel hospitality: it broke every rule. It ignored all the standard ways of ensuring success; there was not even a name on the door. This approach extended to the staff, their appearance and the way they behaved. Too much politeness is unbearable; nobody wants that any more and, if they do, they will not find it at Morgan's. These things were such an assault on conventional notions of hotel manners that at one time they might have seemed to be in 'bad taste'!

My approach to design is built upon a few simple ideas. It does not have the unbelievably articulate thinking of, say, Mario Bellini. Most essential is the notion of seeing design as something unsystematic. I believe design kills itself by being too serious and thus conformist. It is quite important for me to address each design issue in a free, liberated and playful manner. I hope it is more humane and less intellectual than some other designers. When I enter a place I try to remain open-minded to let its spirit speak to me. One example is the CAPC Museum in Bordeaux, which had been used as a storage house for spices from the Antilles, India and elsewhere. The odour and the light, not to mention the spaces, were overwhelming, and stimulated me to dream of exotic places far away. This inspiration was translated into my design for the restaurant napkins which, instead of being a solid colour (standard design

Living room in a suite at the HOTEL IM WASSERTURM, Cologne, 1990.

response), were made of batik patterns (I could almost imagine having discovered them in a wooden crate tucked away in the recesses of the building, remnants from a time long past).

Humour is also important: sometimes I like to tease those who enter the spaces I create. In the hotel Le Lac in Japan, I tried to make fun of the traditional, European, manner of using a bathroom. I made the sink free-standing and put it in front of a full-height picture window. Instead of being an enclosed space in which to bathe, the bathroom opens up into the hotel room. Funnily enough, this treatment, almost against the good sense of hotel design, turned out to underline the importance of the bath in Japanese culture. Such contradictions are for me the fuel for design, as are accidents and restrictions, because of the way they push you. They force you to create. Difficulty is challenge, it helps you to surpass yourself. For instance, the lack of daylight in the Wasserturm hotel helped me use something I had not touched for a long time: colour.

It is my belief that designers should remain out of the 'star system', fame and public view. They should search for new directions that are more sincere, because without sincerity nothing can be achieved. The designers of the Bauhaus were, above all, committed.

Guest room and bath at the HOTEL LE LAC, near Tokyo, 1990.

They were visionaries, optimists, dreamers; they had a remarkable obsession with human needs and how life could be organised for the better. Surely it is no accident that now, at the beginning of the nineties, one result of the huge changes in eastern Europe is that the Bauhaus is being reborn in Dessau, with the precise intention that its original ideals should be revived. Now, groups of architects and designers from all over the world are arriving to study there, to design new social housing and to create a humane architecture for ordinary people and not, as some architects did, to build Versailles for the poor.

The future will see a more eclectic approach to design. Offices will be installed in homes and more personality will be given to offices. Design will be less narcissistic, less intimidating, less invasive. It will be perceived, instead, as a sign of an individual's sensitivity, as a self-portrait, as a form of intellectual delicacy. In a troubled world, homes will increasingly be used as refuges, as places of consolation. Individuality is emerging very strongly; people seem to need to express themselves and to assert their differences. In Europe, we have rediscovered spirituality almost with relief, a new sense of

curiosity and an increased awareness of the world. In the eighties, everything had to be fast and to make money. It was the triumph of the image: 'I have an image, therefore I exist.' It was fashionable to be in a hurry, to telephone from a car, to fax from home. By the end of the decade, however, there was a flood of baroque or very nostalgic forms. I find it quite odd, this type of inconsistency: it is replete with hypocrisy.

I am hopeful that today there is an ever-growing number of individuals who, in their daily life, express simplicity and a return to basics—even though a glance at many homes reveals interiors decked out in the style of French chateaux. Fortunately, in the midst of this, we do have certain reassurances. Softness has reappeared. Silence, light, transparency, the balance between things pure and abstract, showing nature and health—they are all on the increase. The 'social worldliness' phenomenon has modified our attitude; culture has become an 'Esperanto'. I notice a certain movement towards a discretion in design, towards cleaning up and wiping out the excesses of the eighties. Designers should rely more on themselves, reflecting their own personality in their work. A good resolution could be to neglect aesthetic terrorism and return to this discretion, without falling into the 'déjà vu'. Innovation should not only be seen in the form of things. As Baudelaire remarked:

'Modernity applies to the manner but not the time.'

The seventh edition of *The International Design Yearbook* has been assembled at a time when design is by general consensus at a watershed. Pundits were pronouncing the 'design decade' over almost as soon as the clock struck midnight on 31 December 1989. But the real evidence that the bubble had finally burst was to come the following year as Britain and America went into recession. Design empires that were once the envy of colleagues around the world began to lay off staff by the dozen (and, in some cases, hundred); one or two broke up in spectacular crashes. Conran, Fitch, Michael Peters—even the most charmed names were rocked by a downturn in client spending and a growing feeling that design did not, contrary to the more optimistic assertions of the eighties, have all the answers. A British television quiz in which designers like Nigel Coates and Philippe Starck attempted to identify famous chairs and company logos for the doubtful benefit of the population at large struck a curiously misplaced note, as though someone had failed to tell the producers that the party was over, the music had come to an end, and most of the guests had gone home.

These are gloomy words with which to begin an introduction to the best designs of the last two years, but they reflect a change of mood and—for some designers—a change of heart that cannot be overlooked. Guest editor Andrée Putman makes exactly this point in her foreword. Design in the eighties became self-obsessed; it seemed to believe that it was an end in itself, and in the process lost contact with the other areas of culture and society that sustain it, shape it and give it meaning. Recognising this danger, the best designers have always looked outside design for inspiration and ideas. Putman herself studied musical composition with Nadia Boulanger and she makes no secret of finding other areas of culture, particularly painting and the visual arts, far more stimulating than design. Yet design, though it should hardly need repeating, *is* a cultural activity, as well as a commercial one—different from, but on a par with the other arts. One of the most depressing signs of design's fallen status in Britain is the way that newspapers rushed to introduce regular design columns, only to drop them when it was no longer the buzzword of the hour, or they published design stories under the neutral heading of 'style'—a sure sign that the editors, despite a decade of design, had failed to grasp what the subject was about. What chance the public?

So where does design go from here? In advertising-starved magazines that once wrote so feverishly about the latest shop opening, restaurant, or hand-sculpted one-off posing as art, there is bracing talk of new agendas and the emergence of a new, less extravagant aesthetic. After a decade in which design identified itself openly and enthusiastically with the consumerist causes of fashion, luxury, lifestyle and packaging, attention is switching—in theory at least, if not yet very often in practice—to design for social need and the public good. It is too early, however, to say where this sudden penitent embrace of social responsibility and 'green' values will lead, or whether many designers will be able to sustain the logic of such a position, however sincerely held, in the chill wind of commercial reality. To do so would mean

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reconciling themselves to smaller budgets, less glamorous projects and greatly reduced revenues. It would mean leaner offices and a much higher level of individual commitment. It would require a self-sacrificing reorientation of design as a profession that seems, in the late twentieth century, highly unlikely to occur.

What is more likely is that designers will learn new ways to present their services to clients and society. If the word 'design' has temporarily become an embarrassment, or lost its allure, then perhaps it could be changed for something less familiar and more seductive. Design consultants, particularly those with clients in Japan, are starting to use terms like 'cultural engineering' to suggest the complex role that design has to play in the way that corporations present themselves to the world. Naoki Sakai of Water Studio in Tokyo prefers to call himself a 'conceptor'. The conceptor does not wait for the manufacturer's marketing department to tell him what to design: he dreams up the product, on the basis of his understanding of the tastes, desires and emotions of the consumer, then talks the manufacturer into making it. The design work begins only when the client has been thoroughly persuaded of the validity of the 'concept'—almost invariably nostalgic in nature. Manufactured in limited editions and sold by advance order, Water Studio's retro-concepts include the Olympus *Ecru* and *O-product* cameras (*International Design Yearbook 1990/91*), the Suzuki *SW-1* motorbike and the *Pao* car for Nissan.

'Our work specifically involves remembering and researching the past,' says Sakai, 'investigating and observing the present, and dreaming about what might be, should be, could be. We have drawn up a complete map of people's desires—and now we can think about how to design those desires' (*Blueprint* No. 79, July/August 1991). In reality, of course, this is desire-creation in the time-honoured advertising sense, though given a technological boost by the techniques of just-in-time production. By playing on the consumer's desire for exclusivity, boredom with mass production and the standard ubiquitous model is defeated, and demand is provoked.

The extent to which such an approach could be applied in the west remains to be seen. While demand for Water Studio's concepts has been high, Japanese consumers accustomed to instant gratification have not reacted well to delays in supply. But the conceptor's conviction that the consumer longs to be different from the mass, though fraught with contradiction (these are editions of 20,000, after all), certainly coincides with Andrée Putman's observation that individuality has become a central issue in design. Putman's argument is precisely that design, however much it tries to tie up our desires with its concepts, cannot answer *all* our needs. Although she has designed apartments for other people, specifying all the furniture as a matter of course, she has come to feel that it is wrong for designers to attempt to impose their taste, and their system for living, on the domestic circumstances of their clients (the public spaces she continues to design are of necessity more structured). Designers can supply many of the tools that make for a rewarding life, but the way in which they are combined in the home should be a matter

for the individual to decide—a point implicitly made by Achille Castiglioni's infinitely adjustable shelf unit for Zanotta (page 83).

Such thoughts lead Andrée Putman to value a certain reticence in design. Examined overall, this is a quieter collection than any of its predecessors. Partly this reflects the kind of designs being produced. This is not a time for manifestos. There is less unchecked experiment. Furniture manufacturers are more cautious about producing wild and unsaleable designs, no matter how much impact they might make on the catwalks of Milan. Milan itself was postponed after 29 years in the autumn, from September 1990 to the following April, a telling indicator of the uncertainty which, in mid-1991, pervades the furniture business at all levels. This was a year in which even Ron Arad turned in a collection of accessible upholstered pieces (for Moroso) alongside his more uncompromising and expensive metal designs. Isolated pieces such as Nigel Coates's extravagant *Delfino* wardrobe and shelving system and, as always, the entire outlandish output of Bořek Šípek, stood out for daring to go against the pinched, recessionary mood of the fair. In product design, too, there are fewer surprises. The day of the post-modern refrigerator appears, for the time being at least, to be over. The deconstructed radios that the advance guard of the early eighties seemed to herald *en masse* have not materialized a decade later, although the products category as a whole looks strong.

While restraint might be one characteristic of the designs of the early nineties, it is a quality further emphasised in the editing of this *Yearbook*. Andrée Putman was not as rigorous as some past editors in excluding designs simply because they have yet to make it (or have no chance whatsoever of making it) into mass production. She *was* rigorous in excluding the convoluted, tortuous, pretentious and banal. Sometimes this meant over-emphatic one-off 'art' furniture and objects; sometimes it meant mass or batch production pieces that were pointlessly contrived in conception, needlessly complex in construction, or just clumsily resolved. The furniture, lighting, tableware, textiles and products Andrée Putman favours are united by the economy and elegance with which they resolve the problems they set out to address. They are rarely unassuming, yet with a handful of dramatic exceptions—Šípek, Arad, Starck, Gavoille—they avoid the loud, declamatory gestures and over-determined presence we have come to expect from experimental design in the last decade. Their reticent virtues are most aptly summed up by the British designer Jasper Morrison, creator of a remarkable range of simple plywood cupboards for Cappellini, whose only drawback is their inordinate cost. But Jasper Morrison pieces at Ikea prices: now that really would be a revolution in taste.

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