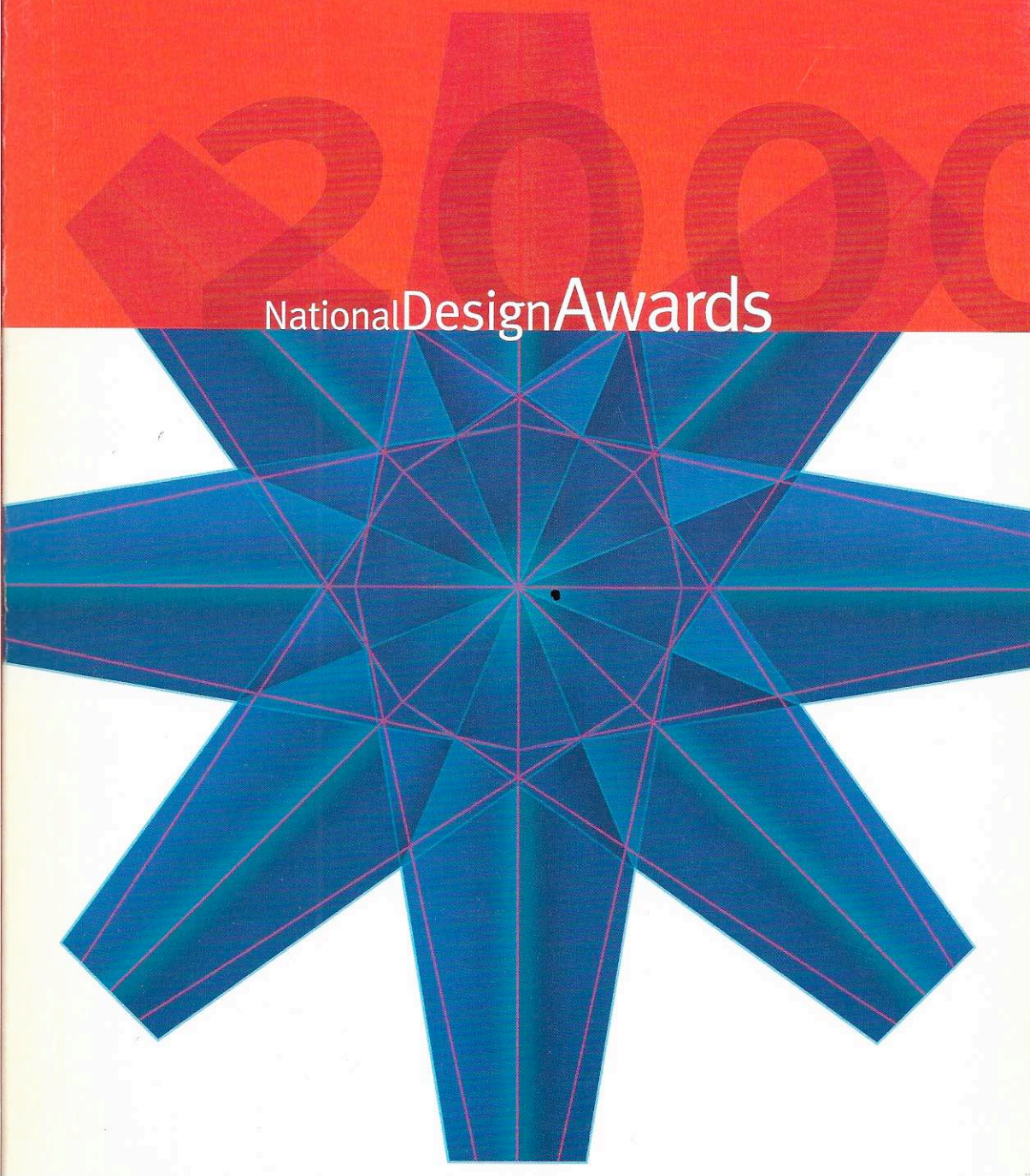# NationalDesignAwards

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DESIGN IN AMERICA

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AN AMERICAN
IS A COMPLEX OF OCCASIONS,
THEMSELVES A GEOMETRY
OF SPATIAL NATURE.

—CHARLES OLSON, THE MAXIMUS POEMS [1]

We live in a country that prizes individualism, invention, success, and the pursuit of happiness.

At the same time, we live in a nation governed by popular consensus, in which everyone is guaranteed equal opportunity to a basic standard of living, materially and spiritually, where "Divine Conscience has long since been replaced by Public Conscience."[2] Quality of life and equality in life are equally cherished in the United States of America.

This balancing act between public and private interests that we call democracy is mirrored in design. Unlike art—a private meditation, created for, but not driven by, its audience—design, at its best, is a fluent conversation between client, consumer, and designer. The design process is a negotiation, a debate that parallels the American social contract. In the most successful products of design, individualism strikes a populist chord.

As professionally taught and practiced today, design is, of course, a global enterprise. What is *American* about design in this country is the way in which it reflects the values of a highly developed capitalist economy checked and balanced by a populist vision of community. Even the hallmarks of what might be more properly called American vernacular historically align themselves on either side of these two powerful forces of promiscuity and probity. The frilly carpenter-gothic of the American

country cottage is offset by the utopian minimalism of the Shaker barn. The libertine lure of the Las Vegas strip emerged at the same time that the prim landscape of suburbia was planted. Even in the official culture of design today, the romance of the iMac tilts with the platonic personal computer for our affections. (The Biblical lineage of the Apple name should not be overlooked here.) These are less poles of taste than of sensibility—contrasting examples of American ingenuity.

Much is being made of the dawning of a new golden age of American design at the infancy of the new millennium. A quintessentially American assertion in its cheerful grandiosity, it presumes both the existence of something called American design and that a Renaissance is at hand, presumably technology driven. Global caveats aside, it is worth considering what drives American design to its new self-proclaimed distinction. There are stereotypes of entities called German design (clean and functional), Japanese design (smart and miniature), and Italian design (elegant and sensual). Does American design have a profile? (Tailfins and skyscrapers—the fruits of our first golden age—aside.)

We live in a national culture that has historically opposed and rejected the prospect of one dominant ideology. (This may, in part, account for our appetite for fads and enduring reputation as the land of the brave and the home of the free-to-play-with hula hoops, frisbees, and skateboards, depending on the generation.) One could argue that ours is a design culture without fixed features. Hybrid like the nation's citizenry, American design draws on an intricately sequenced DNA, with an international code of dominant and subdominant genes.

If a Genome Project for culture existed, it would, however, have to isolate certain permutations as peculiarly American on its double helix of social need and desire. Hollywood and jazz come to mind most

strongly—our entertainment and improvisation genes. The optimism of both endeavors, which are based on creating joy out of the complex circumstances of reality, distinguishes them further as truly American. Challenging design tends to meet with greater success when it embraces these attributes. The most iconic American designs of the twentieth century's first golden age derived their success and potency from these two traits. Industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss's Twentieth-Century Limited train starred in *North by Northwest*. Charles and Ray Eames understood that Americans respond best to the playful, the nonthreatening, and produced some of the most influential films about visual thinking using tops, toys, and trains. And where else would the primary legacy of one of the greatest designer-philosophers, George Nelson, be the Marshmallow sofa? Elitism goes against the American grain. No one should be left out of the conversation; everyone should have access to the good life.

Certainly, Frank Gehry's architecture owes its phenomenal success to the dominance of these two genes on the American chromosome. His Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is perhaps the most architecturally sophisticated building of its day, yet popular enough to steal the opening scene in the latest James Bond movie, *The World Is Not Enough*. The genuine affection that Gehry's work inspires can be accounted for only by understanding that it taps into deeply shared values. No matter that entertainment has its roots in Greece and improvisation may have been the first act of design in prehistory, or that Bilbao is in Spain and Gehry was born in Canada. The fact is that these ideas were conceived on California soil and delivered by the attending physician of American technological know-how. And make no mistake about it: design is about ideas—ideas about living made real.

The crowning achievement here, though, is the synthesis of flamboyance and rigor, romance and invention. Our apple pie is served up à la mode. The American public, often characterized as hopelessly homogenous in their bland, safe taste, have proved the marketers wrong. If there is a second coming of design it is due to the democratization of images and information via the electronic screen. Whether from exposure to, or saturation with, an ever-expanding universe of consumable options, we are experiencing a widespread attack of good taste, even risky taste—a phenomenon that can trace its origins to individual designers, indeed, teams of designers.

Their work is aided and abetted by forces to be found somewhere else on the DNA strand—the Franklin and Jefferson genes that strengthened the traits of invention and common sense in the American character. As with entertainment and improvisation, invention and common sense are a powerful pairing. The recognition that design's principal role in daily life is to socialize and humanize technology is a driving force behind design today.

When we hear about the second golden age of design, it is shorthand for the new Volkswagen Beetle, the Oxo Good Grip utensils, Websites, and the deluge of hand-helds that link us to the Internet on the go. American business recentered itself around the consumer in the early 1990s, placing a new premium on ergonomics and human factors, both of which were pioneered by Henry Dreyfuss in the 1950s. Being truly an American story, user-centered design was given further impetus by a civil rights movement. The resulting American Disabilities Act of 1990 addressed the disparity between the physical abilities of people and the physical environment, and universal design emerged as a result. With typical utopian fervor, fueled by the more venal American desire for

comfort and convenience on demand, designers strive to create products, messages, and spaces that work as well for eight year olds as for eighty year olds. In the process, they have set themselves the larger problem of confronting the culture of youth—also synonymous with America— supporting historian Daniel Boorstin's claim that "in the United States, many of our most widely debated public issues are self-created."[3]

All four of these traits—entertainment, improvisation, invention, and common sense—hypertrophy in design's newest frontier, the realm of experience. An American invention, the World Wide Web, has engendered countless home pages, countless sites of individual improvisation. Designers—drawing on entertainment value and common sense—are reformulating the ways we read, sell, buy, and share our most public and private messages. The experience of these exchanges is faster, more ephemeral, and infinitely mutable. The idea of design as conversation between client, consumer, and designer is less a metaphor than a reality. To ward off the Babel effect, the designer is our translator, and therefore must be even more conversant with our local dialects, customs, and mores. (On a more literal note, Alta Vista has a Website called Babelfish that actually does translate between English, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, and French.)

Even physical artifacts are conceived, or reconceived, in light of their social and psychological ramifications, well beyond the circumstances of their actual use. Firms like IDEO analyze and "design" not just the train, but the experience of train travel—from seeing the ad to buying the ticket to arriving at the station and to taking the trip itself. The train becomes the vehicle for sleeping, flirting, working, and daydreaming. Getting from point to point is only a necessary byproduct. The iron horse meets the therapist's couch in this design brief.

The knowing reader may well ask here, are we still in America? Wasn't that just a whiff of Viennese mocha in the air? That bit about common sense—didn't Andrew Carnegie import it from Scotland? Everyone knows that the improvisation of jazz traces its lineage to Africa. And what of the Scandinavian origins of universal design? Even the Pottery Barns, Crate and Barrels, and Targets—those exemplars of affordable design for the masses—owe their successes to the social agenda of the Bauhaus.

America is only a couple of centuries old. Relative to world cultures, ours is still in adolescence, that phase of development when identity is still up for grabs, and grab we do. Moving out into the world is generally seen as a mark of maturity. The past century's world wars forced that right of passage, and the provincial character of America was changed forever. The irony is that the more we absorbed into our culture, the greater its influence became, ultimately unleashing a backlash against its pervasiveness today.

Design in America is not about creating American design. Design in America is richest when it taps into the DNA of ideas that resonate in different pockets of the collective unconscious and moves people to reexperience the familiar anew. The fluid theatricality of curvaceous forms made possible by today's sophisticated software has a relationship to the highly activated spaces of the baroque, just as the rigors of early modernism were informed by the geometries of classicism.

Designing in America is another matter. It does have a particular burden. Without clear cultural, aesthetic features, much of the character of American design has been determined by the arithmetic of the bottom line. Thinking designers base their work on deep reflection on their own

experience of daily life as individuals and as citizens, as well as on more scientific modes of observation. Designers no longer solve problems; they set them. They reformulate the questions posed by clients to participate more fully in the outcomes, sharing responsibility for behavioral, psychological, environmental, and social consequences. They are increasingly becoming shareholders in their work.

In this new chapter of history, designers are joining the entrepreneurial forces that define the U.S. economy, bringing beauty to the balance sheet. This is "beauty with a smile,"[4] a generous, inclusive beauty: beauty unconstrained by the corset of obsolete, nationalistic stereotypes, yet not indifferent to national ideals. Now that's an American story waiting to unfold.

Notes
1. Charles Olson, "Maximus to Goucester, Letter 27 [withheld]," Book 2, *The Maximus Poems* (1968; reprinted, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
2. Daniel J. Boorstin, *Cleopatra's Nose: Essays on the Unexpected* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 54.
3. Ibid.
4. I attribute this phrase to industrial designer Bill Moggridge who voiced it at the High Ground design conference in Buena Vista, Colorado, July 1999.