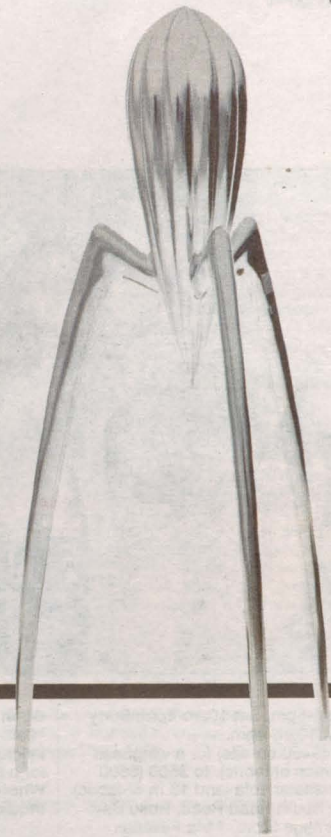
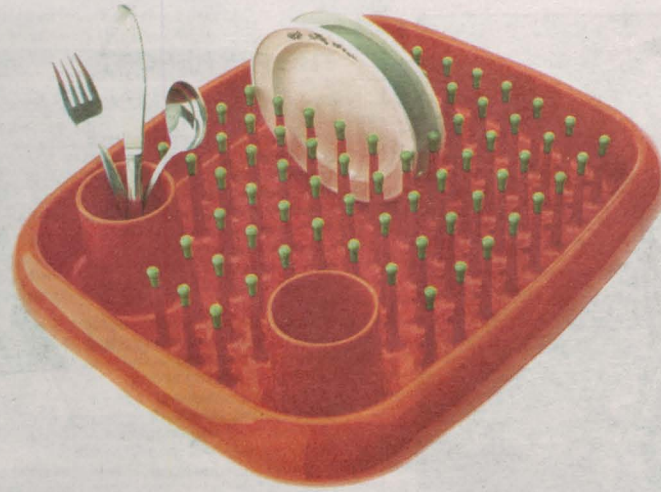


cover story | Andrew Bock



Dazzled by design

Good looks and style pedigree don't always guarantee good performance.

THE KETTLE designed for Alessi by Michael Graves has been one of the most popular designer products in Australia for a decade. But design stores also sell a lot of whistling birds for the kettle because, on a high gas flame, the little crimson bird melts. The stainless-steel kettle also tarnishes easily and, with little water, the angular base causes boiling water to suddenly gush out the spout. None of which stops people buying the \$255 kettle (or the \$12 birds).

Marc Newson's designer dish rack, the Dish Doctor, sells for about \$119. It looks fantastic - a cross between lurid science fiction and a hairbrush. But it does not solve that perennial problem of dish racks: some crockery - large bowls in this case - just won't stand up. (It's also tricky to clean).

Similarly the Philippe Starck lemon juicer, the Juicy Salif, won't juice oranges, has low ridges and tarnishes if you don't rinse it after use. It's also likely to break if you drop it.

The juicer is an icon of victory for aesthetics over functionality. It is apt that Starck had the idea for the juicer not while juicing, but while eating squid. And equally apt that Alessi recently brought out a gold-plated collectors' model designed exclusively for the shelf. Not that this will stop people buying it either.

The primary function of such design objects is not so much to boil, dry or squeeze as it is to serve as domestic sculpture. The objects only have to work a little because their greater appeal is not as objects but as "meta-objects" for consumers bored by average products.

But while such designs help to inspire designers, and help bring art into domestic life, they can prop up a perception of design as impractical and expensive. Most design products work superbly. But the perception of design as impractical, in Australia especially, can alienate manufacturers and consumers.

The problem of objects that look good and

don't work well is more widespread in the general marketplace. The ridged-dome on mass-produced plastic orange juicers, for example, is often too smooth and usually too small for Australian oranges.

In the mass marketplace, standards of functionality in design have suffered because of an obsession with "the look". The national manager of the Australian Design Awards, Brandon Gien, says consumers tend to be drawn to more glamorous-looking appliances. "But it's only when you take a toaster home and plug it in and put toast in it that you will know if it works well," he says.

Danielle Rich was given a top-brand imported toaster with every modern function. It has a defrost button, a re-warm button, an eject button, a thrust function and the browning control is sensitive. But the cosmetic, plastic outer casing is slowly melting.

Most products are increasingly sold via their image - usually featured in a publication or in a showroom. And in showrooms it's nearly impossible to test a product.

Customers at Object galleries in The Rocks are invited to test products before they buy. A local spokesman for Dyson vacuum cleaners says every stockist should encourage you to test the vacuum in-store. But this is more than some manufacturers do before they put products on the market.

Roger Hall, a lecturer in ergonomics and human-computer interaction at the University of NSW, says consumers considering buying a new product should do a "user walk-through" or "mentally go through the steps in using the product... will the kettle fit under the tap, will the water spurt back because the spout is too small?"

Deanne Koelmeyer, program director of industrial design at RMIT, says the average kettle has a built-in lifespan of about 18 months, and claims planned and negligent obsolescence is still common and often a product of fashion in the marketplace.

"There's often a surge of ill-conceived products that get reproduced to meet a certain decor or fashion or retro trend and many of them are copies that have a life cycle in the market of maybe six to eight months. They're almost disposable products at a design level."

In this age of excess technology it is not hard to find products that look sleek but are difficult to use: new appliances with indecipherable

controls, designer furniture that wobbles under weight, handles that can't be handled, uncomfortable chairs and devices that break. Only electrical products, gas products and children's products are legally obliged to pass tests for safety (but not comfort, usability or durability). In furniture, for example, cots and bunk beds undergo mandatory testing but,

in all other cases it is up to the manufacturers (or clients).

In all product fields, some companies employ designers and test thoroughly for usability and comfort and others don't. First-generation products, such as the initial wave of cappuccino machines, often don't work too well. Some companies too readily design for a certain look and take short cuts in functionality.

When you consider the broad range of work that designers such as Starck and Newson produce, some products function very well and others are undoubtedly a triumph of style over utility, says Jonathan Talbot, the senior lecturer in industrial design at the University of NSW.

For such people, the value of these designs as objects outweighs any shortcomings.

- Jonathan Talbot

Above, left to right: Marc Newson's funky Dish Doctor; Philippe Starck's juicer, the Juicy Salif; form and function unite in Fink Design's water jug; the kettle designed for Alessi by Michael Graves is ever-popular.

"What these designers do well is consistently offer new insights. People who appreciate such new insights (or want to appear to appreciate them) can see value in owning products from these designers. For such people, the value of these designs as objects outweighs any shortcomings in utility."

Geoff Fitzpatrick, the manager of the furniture design company Source, and a former director of the Design Institute of Australia, says, "good designers never ignore function and the old maxim that attention to function leads to attractive form will always apply".

He says designers such as Starck and Newson are exceptions who help create a false perception of designers. Most Australian designers produce very functional products for economical, multiple-unit production. Problems with functionality derive more often from manufacturing processes that ignore good design, he says.

Robert Foster, of Fink Design, made three prototypes for his remarkable water jug and experimented with the manufacturing process as he went. Foster's anodised aluminium jug (pictured above) looks like something liquid. It is as streamlined as a dolphin and is a good local example of unity in form and function. The metal keeps water cool and is long-lasting. And if a fault emerges, Fink replaces or repairs the jugs.

Foster says too many objects are "over-designed aesthetically" and that it is vital to combine functionality, the manufacturing process and aesthetics. "They have to go hand in hand and

feed one another. The process of manufacture might discover a new aesthetic and, to fulfil an aesthetic desire, you might discover a new manufacturing process."

Some designers can, however, get too close to the function of their products.

Roger Hall says so-called intelligent products are often difficult to use because technical designers are too close to their products and do not test them enough on a range of users. [One exception is Oxo kitchenware products, which were conceived by a businessman to help his wife cope with arthritis.]

"Designers need to test their products, preferably mock-ups or prototypes on novice or first-time users, and not on themselves, their design team or anybody who works for them or in the associated industry," says Hall.

Australia has a history of very practical invention and design and many Australian designers have a knack for functionality. But the lingering distance between manufacturers and designers in this country is a bit like distance between functionality and form. Both gaps are likely to be sealed by objects that are as inspiring to use and produce as they are to behold.

"To achieve pure function and pure aesthetic (the Jacobsen series 7 chair, perhaps?) is the ideal we might demand of great designers," says Jonathan Talbot. "But perhaps the neglect of perfect function by a designer in pursuit of aesthetic delight is a lesser crime than the release of tons of cheap products into the rock-bottom end of consumer markets which fail to offer utility, durability or beauty."

POOR FORM

Control panels and switches

How often have you set the mood lighting only to fumble with stereo controls just when you wanted to feel as smooth as Barry White?

That happens because designers discovered about 10 years ago that a grey font on a black panel with black buttons of equal size all in a row was the best way to confuse a human.

Remote control units should be called remote helplessness units. It doesn't help that "instruction manuals are written by aliens", to quote the program director of industrial design at RMIT, Deanne Koelmeyer. Nor does it help that each model, brand and product has a different button layout. The key pad on telephones has the opposite layout from calculator key pads. Astonishing.

Chairs

Mark Watson, design lecturer and furniture judge for the Australian Design Awards, says the standard lounge chair offers the wrong support in every way. Low backs offer no support and vertical armrests crook necks when people lie down.

Geoff Fitzpatrick, general manager of furniture design company Source, says the most common flaws in table

chair design are flat, narrow or slippery seats and low backs.

Richard Daniell, production designer at Thonet, the company that designed the Bentwood chair, says there should also be space for the sitter to slide their bottom under the back rest.

Many modern chairs do the opposite. To keep people from sliding off, they tilt the seat up at the front which restricts circulation to the legs.

Daniell says slightly dished seats are desirable because humans, amazingly, still have round bottoms.

Baths

Bath design degenerated in the 20th century as the domestic bath became shallower with near vertical ends that bent backs, crooked necks and encouraged people to slip under the water and drown.

Deeper baths have become popular again but only recently have bathware manufacturers such as Rogerseller begun to experiment with angled ends that support the back in a more comfortable position. The result is baths that return to the design of the cast iron, claw footed bath - an archetype that manufacturers managed to ignore for some 40 years.

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