

# INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

MONDAY, MAY 26, 2008

By Albert R. Hunt  
A senator's biggest battle

PAGE TWO



Coming to showrooms soon:  
The new pessimism

ALICE RAWSTHORN ON DESIGN 21



Splashing to victory at  
the Monaco Grand Prix

SPORTS 24



iht.com

## DESIGN

### The future in raw, fractured forms

By Alice Rawsthorn

LONDON

Dystopia. Apocalypse. Pandemic. Annihilation. Predictions of doom have darkened our vision of the future for centuries. Think of the grisly horrors threatened in the Book of Revelations, or by Savonarola in late 15th century Italy, and the bleak picture painted by Mary Shelley in her 1826 novel, "The Last Man." (The title said it all: everyone else had been wiped out by plague.)

Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," George Orwell's "1984" and Andrei Tarkovsky's "Solaris" were all equally forbidding. It's easier to find grim depictions of the future, than optimistic ones in 20th century culture, with one exception — design. From the utopian ideals of 1920s and 1930s modernists, to the 1960s sci-fi fantasies of Verner Panton and Joe Colombo, designers have portrayed the future as a dazzlingly seductive place. Even contemporary figures, like Marc Newson, have adopted the visually luscious vision of the future dreamt up in the 1960s — at least they did until recently.

At the Milan Furniture Fair last month, lots of designers — especially the young, experimental ones, whose ideas will soon trickle through to the mass market — seemed very pessimistic. They were preparing for a grueling future of dwindling resources by making objects in muted colors and staccato shapes, often from found materials. The Spanish designer Nacho Carbonell recycled old newspapers into craggy Evolution seats, shaped like cocoons, where you can literally seek refuge from the stress of daily life. The dominant influence over the more adventurous industrial products in Milan was the angular aesthetic of the German designer Konstantin Grcic, who uses advanced technology to create raw, fractured forms, rather than neo-1960s curves.

It's easy to see why design has caught a bad case of dystopia. What has nearly a century of modernism achieved? Environmental crisis? A world where 10 percent of us (should) worry about having too much stuff, but the other 90 percent lack the basics? "Young designers realize that the world is in a mess," explained the designer Tony Dunne, who teaches at the Royal College of Art in London. "They also realize that design can't save the world, but some don't like the idea of fiddling while Rome burns. Although many designers are embracing dystopia as a style, others are using dark, dystopian design to work through complex and contradictory ideas."

None of the bad news is new, so why did designers cling to optimism for so long? One reason is that the fantasies of 1960s futurists like Colombo and Panton were so compelling. Panton's eponymous S-shaped chair sums up the optimism of the early 1960s, and who wouldn't want to live in one of Colombo's dreamy interiors with their trippy swirls of colors and curves? Chilling though the plots of Stanley Kubrick's 1960s sci-fi movies, "Dr. Strangelove" and "2001: A Space Odyssey" may have been, they made the future look great in Ken Adam's gorgeous sets and Olivier Morgue's sinuous furniture. Newson fell for Kubrick's celluloid futurism as a kid in 1970s Australia, and his reinterpretation of its seductive qualities is a big part of his appeal to "design-art" collectors today.

Another factor is that design is inherently optimistic. Intellectually and commercially, it has been driven by the belief that every problem has a solution, and new usually equals better. "Designers



are trained to think about good things, nice ideas, positive outcomes," said Dunne. "Too much positive thinking can be a bad thing, and the urge to only look at the bright side can become a form of denial when things really are going wrong." So wrong that even 1960s futurism has palled. "It's an old, unrealistic vision of a world where humans don't belong, made by us, not for us," Carbonell explained.

What is design's new, realistic view of the future? Carbonell's recycled seat-cum-cocoon is an extreme example, but not the only one. Other young designers have adopted his "survivalist" style of futurism too. The German designer Julia Lohmann spent the Milan fair in a makeshift seaweed laboratory making lampshades from kelp. "I'm exploring its potential as a sustainable design material," she said. "It can replace plastics in a range of applications. If we constantly want new things, we should make them from environmentally friendly materials." At the Design Miami-Basel fair in Switzerland opening on June 2, Lohmann plans to make a brutally futuristic table from a slab of concrete. The same nihilism is visible in the fractured silhouettes of the concrete Slip stools, made by the young French-born designer Nicolas Le Moigne, and now exhibited at Gallery Libby Sellers in London.

The difference between the old and new takes on futurism is evident in the contrast between that totem of 1960s optimism, the Panton chair, and Grcic's new MYTO chair. Both are plastic cantilever chairs (without back legs), which defy the laws of physics by deploying the most sophisticated technology of their time. The Panton is smooth, sexy and curvaceous; whereas the MYTO taut, jagged and almost aggressive. A decisive factor in the MYTO's shape was Grcic's determination to use as little material as possible, not how it would look. "Designers have become more concerned with securing future life on the planet, and less with painting a picture of what it will look like," he said.

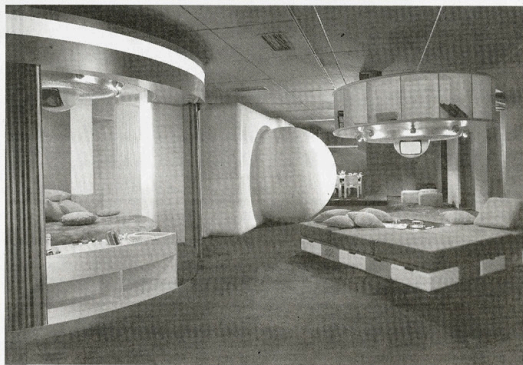
That's why many young designers are embracing the new school of "critical design" pioneered by Dunne and Fiona Raby, whereby they produce conceptual objects to critique design's role in our lives, and to foster debate about it, rather than to fulfill practical functions. Having explored how we'd cope with nuclear disasters and alien abduction in past projects, they're now assessing the pros and cons of nanotechnology and genetically modified crops.

"These technologies may or may not help us to design our way out of the current mess," said Dunne. "In order to find out, we need to imagine new possibilities — good and bad — to test out alternative futures before they happen and figure out which ones we want and which we don't want."



Gallery Libby Sellers

Above, Slip stools, by the French designer, Nicolas Le Moigne, exhibited at Gallery Libby Sellers. Right and top right, mobile units in the exhibition, "Joe Colombo: Inventing the Future," at the Kunsthaus Graz in Austria beginning June 6. Below, the Spanish designer, Nacho Carbonell, with his Evolution chair, made of recycled newspapers and shaped like cocoons, where you can seek refuge from the stress of daily life.

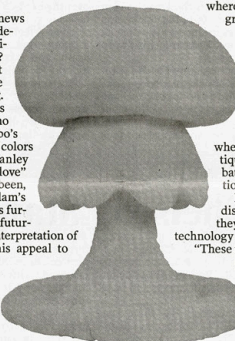


Vitra

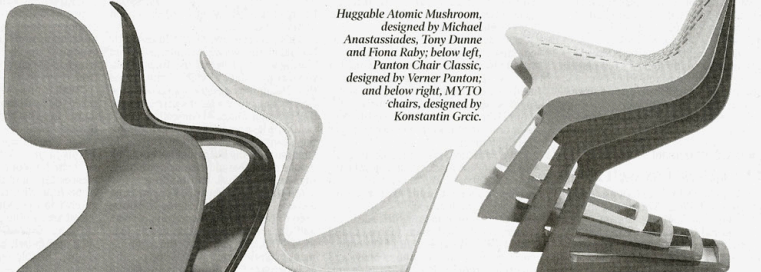
Young designers at the Milan fair seemed pessimistic, preparing for a grueling future of dwindling resources by making objects in muted colors and staccato shapes, often from found materials.



iht.com/design  
More images from the designers and more articles by Alice Rawsthorn.



Huggable Atomic Mushroom, designed by Michael Anastassiades, Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby; below left, Panton Chair Classic, designed by Verner Panton; and below right, MYTO chairs, designed by Konstantin Grcic.



Vitra

Plank