STUDIO GORM'S ANXIOUS UTOPIANISM

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Understood in its most expansive sense, to design is to forge a possibility. Whether one sketches a preliminary study for a painting or sculpture, or draws a plan for a building or a piece of furniture – or outlines a draft for an essay – the act of design entails the projection of a desired future outcome from a present moment. As the social scientist Herbert Simon has observed, "Everyone designs who devises a course of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred situations."[1] As this quotation suggests, design does not simply attempt to modify a present situation but to improve it. Accordingly, the history of modern design (which is to say the design of objects for the last 100 years or so) has been closely aligned with the concepts of social reform and even utopia. Motivating such landmark examples of modern design as Wilhelm Wagenfeld's sleek and streamlined chrome and glass lamp (1924, upper right) or the biomorphically-shaped molded fiberglass chairs of Charles and Ray Eames from the late 1950s (lower right), is the promise of a better life – not only for the individuals using the items but for society at large. This utopian potential is conveyed both through the objects' mass production, which could make them broadly accessible, and through their formal rhetoric of functional integrity, material authenticity, and purposeful austerity, which could serve as a model for an ideal social organization predicated on equality, honesty, and reason.

But as the history of the twentieth century has all too frequently demonstrated, just around the corner from utopia may be waiting apocalypse. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted, "the most inspiring mass utopian projects [of the twentieth century] – mass sovereignty, mass production, mass culture – have left a history of disasters in their wake."[2] It is precisely this suspicion of utopian projects, bore out most traumatically in the political and social horrors revealed during and after the Second World War, and perhaps manifested most clearly in the fall of Communism at the end of the

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[1] Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981 [1969]), 129.

[2] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), xi.

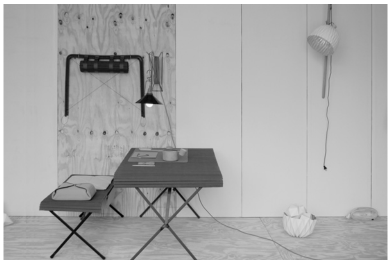
1980s, that has determined a great deal of cultural production in the last forty years, a period conventionally considered 'postmodern' because of its repudiation of the totalizing and oftentimes utopian ideals of the preceding modernism. Within the realm of design, postmodernism brought about a new interest in stylistic eclecticism and non-functional ornament, as evident in Michael Graves' Portland Building (1982, left). Here, various historic architectural styles and non-functional decorative passages playfully conjoin to suggest what could be considered a new (and notably paradoxical) model of authenticity, one whose ironic acknowledgement of the inevitable complexity and socially-constructed aspect of any statement strongly opposes the sober purity and functionalism of modernist aesthetics.

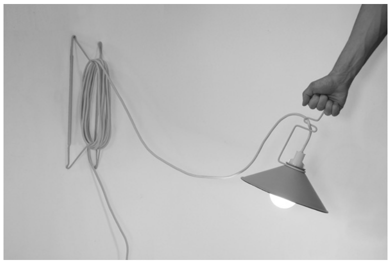
Yet as demonstrated by the remarkably ingenious and socially-conscious body of work produced by Studio Gorm (a design office consisting of John Arndt and Wonhee Jeong, both professors in the Product Design Program at the University of Oregon), reports of the death of modernism have been grossly exaggerated. Or perhaps to state the situation more clearly, Studio Gorm's output since their founding only a few years ago exemplifies a broader resurgence of the formal simplicity and concurrent reformist principles of modernist design in the twenty-first century, albeit substituting the earlier movement's idealistic rhetoric of political and social transformation with a more moderate pragmatism based on environmental necessities rather than theoretical principles. Despite this crucial difference, Studio Gorm's pieces are, like earlier manifestations of modern design, first and foremost prototypes, not only because the office has yet to find a manufacturer to mass-produce their objects (even though they have been regularly approached by interested merchants), but more significantly because they are models for a projected and notably improved social existence and organization.

Such a prototypical paradigm is perhaps most evident in their *shed/shelf* (2007, on view), essentially a tripartite household cabinet on wheels. In its schematic rendering of a house, complete with stairs, attic, and individual rooms (resembling the sort of 'cut-away' depictions of buildings characteristic in childrens' books), the piece presents itself as a microcosmic model of domestic existence. Besides a bed and perhaps a few basic appliances, *shed/shelf* offers the dweller all the basic necessities of domestic living: a kitchen area with a small surface for food preparation and cupboards and hooks for storage of food and utensils; a desk and a bureau, with a bench and movable lamp; and a small wardrobe whose series of rectangular cubbyholes visually allude to the geometric simplicity of minimal sculpture and International Style architecture. By coupling such modernist efficiency and simplicity with a dollhouse-like small scale *shed/shelf* suggests that austerity needn't be ascetic. As such it can be seen as a material argument for creatively and even cheerfully getting by with less both in terms of possessions and accommodation. (Its ideal audience would be an individual living in a studio apartment and, moreover, someone with only six shirts and jackets). Transforming the comfortable bourgeois home into a comforting encasement for a socially-progressive if Spartan existence, *shed/shelf* presents an ethics of moderation whose ludic invocation of a traditional house tempers the more immoderate utopianism of earlier modernisms.

Similarly Studio Gorm's *flow and the kitchen of terrestrial mechanics (*2005–6, on view) presents a model of living that is efficient not only ergonomically (like such earlier modernist kitchens designs like Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's

Frankfurt Kitchen of 1926, right), but also environmentally. Employing a rubber-coated steel rod scaffolding as a simultaneously light and spacious means to store utensils and flatware, and an ecologically low-impact hydration system for a small indoor herb garden, *flow and the kitchen of terrestrial mechanics* reveals the organic link between modernist simplicity and environmentalist conservationism. By situating the dish and utensil racks between the basin on one side, and a small receptacle for table scraps on the other, the physical flow of the body from cutting to washing to disposing is doubled by the flow of water – off of the drying dishes, onto the herb and vegetable garden – and the transformation of kitchen waste into usable compost. Like its modernist predecessors *flow and the kitchen of terrestrial mechanics* is not merely a better and more effective design for an everyday item, but as the designers themselves note, "an environment that gives a better understanding of how natural processes work."[3] *shed/shelf,* like *flow and the kitchen of terrestrial mechanics*, at once aims to make life better for the individual using the object and the society in which the newly enlightened individual resides.





As noted by some recent writers (and perhaps evinced most clearly in Al Gore's best-selling book and 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*), the reformist rhetoric of the contemporary environmental movement has replaced a modernist utopianism based as ideals with a "politics of fear," in which socially progressive actions are performed out of urgent necessity rather than idealistic convictions.[4] Responding to the by now undeniable ecological perils and challenges of the twenty-first century, the designs of Studio Gorm understandably bear the traces of this complex and contradictory manifestation of postmodern utopianism, whether it is the doll-like house that haunts the moderate lifestyle embodied in the *shed/shelf,* the do-it-yourself self-reliance contained in *flow and the kitchen of terrestrial mechanics*, or, to cite two other recent Studio Gorm designs: the *camp/desk* (2006, upper left), which alludes to military campaigns; and the construction-site utilitarianism of the nonetheless inescapably graceful *plug/lamp* (2006, lower left). In each of these designs, hints of a more stringent if not inhospitable future accompany the manifest rhetoric of simplicity, elegance, and social improvement. If the future posited in such objects is one of a heightened ecological awareness, it is also undoubtedly a future that may reasonably frighten those of us who have grown accustomed to the comforts of modern world, a fear that is at once figured and assuaged in the designs themselves.

Yet one could argue that many of the great utopian projects of twentieth century modernism were themselves responses to what were seen as pressing social and political crises and fears. Just as the aforementioned plainness of Wilhelm Wagenfeld's Bauhaus-inspired lamp can be considered as a response to what were seen as the emerging danger of a dissimulating and manipulative mass culture, so can the use of modern materials like fiberglass and aluminum in the Eames's stacking chair be seen as an effort to incorporate and rationalize an expanding (and possible unmanageable) middle class following the Second World War. Studio Gorm's postmodern return to modernist ideals represents the reappraisal not only of a certain degree of social and political conviction that was fundamentally questioned during the past two decades (when it seems the only crisis was a lack of crisis), but moreover a return to a 'crisis mentality' that was by and large dormant during the rise of global capitalism and the fall of communism during the 1980s and 1990s. While many of us might long for the days before global warming, terrorism, and all the other impending threats of this new century, we should ask ourselves if is it only *because* of the impending perils of our current moment (all of which find their origins during the reign of modernism), that we have begun to act upon them. Take away the pending apocalypse and the possible utopia disappears as well.

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[3] Author interview with artists, 2009.

[4] See, for instance, Alex Gourevitch's short essay on the "politics of fear" motivating the contemporary environmental movement published in a "Forum: War on Global Warming/War on Terror," in *N+1 6* (Winter 2008), 20–23.