

PREFACE

There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second. Never before in history have grown men sat down and seriously designed electric hairbrushes, rhinestone-covered file boxes, and mink carpeting for bathrooms, and then drawn up elaborate plans to make and sell these gadgets to millions of people. Before (in the "good old days"), if a person liked killing people, he had to become a general, purchase a coal mine, or else study nuclear physics. Today, industrial design has put murder on a mass production basis. By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed. And the skills needed in these activities are taught carefully to young people.

In an age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself). This demands high social and moral responsibility from the designer. It also demands greater understanding of the people by those who practice design and more insight into the design process by the public. Not a single volume on the responsibility of the designer, no book on design that considers the public in this way, has ever been published anywhere.

In February of 1968, *Fortune* magazine published

an article that foretold the end of the industrial design profession. Predictably, designers reacted with scorn and alarm. But I feel that the main arguments of the *Fortune* article are valid. It is about time that industrial design, *as we have come to know it*, should cease to exist. As long as design concerns itself with confecting trivial "toys for adults," killing machines with gleaming tailfins, and "sexed-up" shrouds for typewriters, toasters, telephones, and computers, it has lost all reason to exist.

Design must be an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of men. It must be more research-oriented, and we must stop defiling the earth itself with poorly-designed objects and structures.

For the last ten years or so, I have worked with designers and student design teams in many parts of the world. Whether on an island in Finland, in a village school in Indonesia, an air-conditioned office overlooking Tokyo, a small fishing village in Norway, or where I teach in the United States, I have tried to give a clear picture of what it means to design within a social context. But there is only so much one can say and do, and even in Marshall McLuhan's electronic era, sooner or later one must fall back on the printed word.

Included in the enormous amount of literature we have about design are hundreds of "how-to-do-it" books that address themselves exclusively to an audience of other designers or (with the gleam of textbook sales in the author's eye) to students. The social context of design, as well as the public and lay reader, is damned by omission.

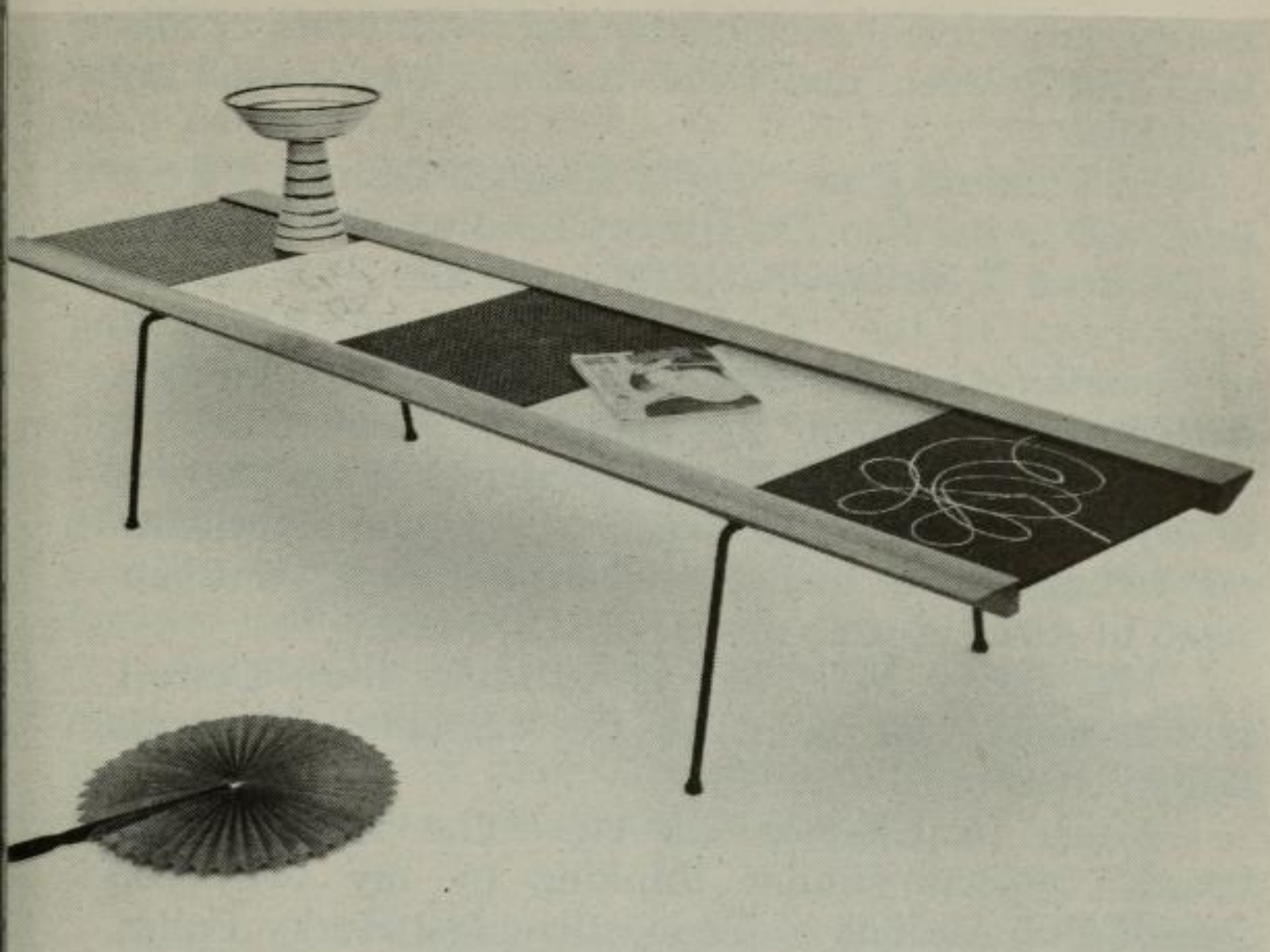
Looking at the books on design in seven languages, covering the walls of my home, I realized that the one book I wanted to read, the one book I most wanted to hand to my fellow students and designers, was missing. Because our society makes it crucial for designers to understand clearly the social, economic, and political background of what they do, my problem was

not just one of personal frustration. So I decided to write the kind of book that I'd like to read.

This book is written from the viewpoint that there is something basically wrong with the whole concept of patents and copyrights. If I design a toy that provides therapeutic exercise for handicapped children, then I think it is unjust to delay the release of the design by a year and a half, going through a patent application. I feel that ideas are plentiful and cheap, and it is wrong to make money off the needs of others. I have been very lucky in persuading many of my students to accept this view. Much of what you will find as design examples throughout this book has never been patented. In fact, quite the opposite strategy prevails: in many cases students and I have made measured drawings of, say, a play environment for blind children, written a description of how to build it simply, and then mimeographed drawings and all. If any agency, anywhere, will write in, my students will send them all the instructions free of charge. I try to do the same myself. An actual case history may explain this principle better.

Shortly after leaving school nearly two decades ago, I designed a coffee table based on entirely new concepts of structure and assembly. I gave a photograph and drawings of the table to the magazine *Sunset*, which printed it as a do-it-yourself project in the February, 1953, issue. Almost at once a Southern California furniture firm, Modern Color, Inc., "ripped-off" the design and went into production. Admittedly they sold about eight thousand tables in 1953. But now it is 1970. Modern Color has long since gone bankrupt, but *Sunset* recently reprinted the design in their book *Furniture You Can Build*, so people are still building the table for themselves.

Thomas Jefferson himself entertained grave doubts as to the philosophy inherent in a patent grant. At the time of his invention of the hemp-break, he took positive steps to prevent being granted a patent and wrote to a friend: "Something of this kind has been



"Transite Table," author's design, courtesy: *Sunset* magazine.

so long wanted by cultivators of hemp that as soon as I can speak of its effect with certainty, I shall probably describe it anonymously in the public papers in order to forestall the prevention of its use by some interloping patentee."

I hope this book will bring new thinking to the design process and start an intelligent dialogue between designer and consumer. It is organized into two parts, each six chapters long. The first part, "Like It Is," attempts to define and criticize design as it is practiced and taught today. The six chapters of "How It Could Be" give the reader at least *one* newer way of looking at things in each chapter.

I have received inspiration and help in many parts of the world, over many years, in forming the ideas and ideals that made the writing of this book so necessary. I have spent large chunks of time living among Navahos, Eskimos, and Balinese, as well as spending

nearly one third of each of the last seven years in Finland and Sweden, and I feel that this has shaped my thoughts.

In Chapter Four, "Do-It-Yourself Murder," I am indebted to the late Dr. Robert Lindner of Baltimore, with whom I corresponded for a number of years, for his concept of the "Triad of Limitations." The idea of *kymmenykset* was first formulated by me during a design conference on the island of Suomenlinna in Finland in 1968. The word *Ujamaa*, as a simple way of saying "we work together and help each other without colonialism or neo-colonial exploitation," was supplied in Africa during my UNESCO work.

Mr. Harry M. Philo, an attorney from Detroit, is responsible for many of the examples of unsafe design cited in Chapter Five.

Much in Chapter Eleven, "The Neon Blackboard," reflects similar thinking by my two good friends Bob Malone of Connecticut and Bucky Fuller.

Four people are entitled to special thanks. Walter Muhonen of Costa Mesa, California, because the example set by his life has kept me going, even though my goals seemed unattainable. He taught me the real meaning of the Finnish word *sisu*. Patrick Decker of College Station, Texas, for persuading me to write this book. "Pelle" Olof Johansson of Halmstad and Stockholm, Sweden, for arguing the fine points of design with me, long into many nights; and for making the actual completion of this book's first Swedish edition possible. My wife, Harlanne, helped me to write what I wanted to say, instead of writing what seemed to sound good. Her searching questions, criticism, and encouragement often made all the difference.

The incisive thinking and the help of my editor, Verne Moberg, have made this revised edition sounder and more direct.

In an environment that is screwed up visually, physically, and chemically, the best and simplest thing that architects, industrial designers, planners, etc.,

could do for humanity would be *to stop working entirely*. In all pollution, designers are implicated at least partially. But in this book I take a more affirmative view: It seems to me that we can go beyond not working at all, and work positively. Design can and must become a way in which young people can participate in changing society.

Ever since the German Bauhaus first published its fourteen slender volumes around 1924, most books have merely repeated the methods evolved there or added frills to them. A philosophy more than half a century old is out of place in a field that must be as forward-looking as this.

As socially and morally involved designers, we must address ourselves to the needs of a world with its back to the wall while the hands on the clock point perpetually to one minute before twelve.

Helsinki—Singaradja (Bali)—Stockholm

1963–1971