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Design Shows Take On the Future. And It's Not Pretty.

Museum curators and mindful millennials seek visions of a “clean,” sustainable future. In Philadelphia, designers offer ideas to provoke.

By Arlene Hirst
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Designers posit that buildings in the future will adapt to their surroundings. Air- and water-filled spheres by Lundén Architecture Company and others react to subtle shifts in an environment. Credit...Eero Lundén, Ron Aasholm, and Carmen Lee; via Philadelphia Museum of Art; Joseph Hu

PHILADELPHIA — Design isn't what it used to be in the museum world. Just a few years back, exhibitions about the future were typically filled with bright and shiny

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objects, presented as new ideas to make life better. The unspoken theme pervading those shows was consumerism — a tacit endorsement of shopping and acquiring.

Today, museum curators are promoting the view that conspicuous consumption is bad for the planet, that luxury items exclude those who can't afford them, and that designers need to acknowledge differently shaped and differently abled bodies. Current shows are meant to provoke conversation, not admiration.

Tables and chairs that once delighted viewers with their technical virtuosity and sleek good looks “are about the past,” said Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art. “As representatives of life, objects are not the way to go.”

Ms. Antonelli's show, [“Broken Nature,”](#) a major statement about climate change and the disasters that await humanity, starred at the Milan Triennale last spring. It offered not a single object chosen for its visual power, but rather for the possibilities they represented. New Yorkers will have a chance to see a portion of the exhibition at MoMA in June. [Cooper Hewitt's recent Triennial](#), “Nature,” followed a similar path, also focusing more on science and technology than beauty.

Now comes the equally thought-provoking and process driven [“Designs for Different Futures,”](#) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, filled with prototypes and products said to be sustainably, or ethically, cultivated. It tackles issues from housing to food, privacy to health, and expands the world of design to include many visions of the future. It took five curators to organize, and they all see the future differently. In some galleries, an anti-beauty aesthetic reigns.



"Ouroboros Steak" (2019), vitamin-like discs produced from human cells, designed by Andrew Pelling, Grace Knight and Orkan Telhan. Credit...via Philadelphia Museum of Art; Joseph Hu



"Stranger Visions" (2012-13) by Heather Dewey-Hagborg offers 3-D facial portraits made from DNA recovered from sidewalk trash. Credit...Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Fridman Gallery; via Philadelphia Museum of Art; Joseph Hu

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“The show is about world building as much as about design,” said Emmet Byrne, the design director at the Walker Art Center, and a member of the curatorial team here.

While the exhibition professes to be about the future, in many ways it’s about the present — even the recent past — dealing with our current obsessions, worries and hopes, from medical science to the fate of the earth. Beginning work on the project in 2014, Kathryn B. Hiesinger, Philadelphia’s senior curator, planned to focus on visually engaging products, the same approach she used in 1981, in her groundbreaking exhibition “Design Since 1945.” That encyclopedic presentation and catalog introduced work by midcentury modernists including the Eameses, Dieter Rams and Hans Wegner, and George Nelson to a new generation of home buyers and design cognoscenti.

But her current collaborators pushed the show in a different direction. “It’s issue driven, not design driven,” explains Ms. Hiesinger. “It’s what this generation is interested in.”

The installation showcases 11 different categories, a dizzying variety of disciplines and practices. Visitors at the entrance are greeted with a towering mass of inflated white plastic spheres filled with water and air, created by a group of Finnish architects [led by Eero Lundén](#) for the 2018 Venice Architectural Biennial. They are constantly moving, burping like giant bubbles, reacting to subtle shifts in the environment. The designers posit that in the future, buildings will not be static but will be able to change and adapt to their surroundings — becoming symbiotic, not anthropocentric. You’ll need to read the wall text to get the point.

Similarly, a section devoted to food — packed with ideas from [Orkan Telhan](#), an associate professor of emerging design practices at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design — offers projects that demand more information. Meat grown from human cells, with the help of engineered microbes taken from expired blood cells, is elegantly arrayed on a plate, ready for a photo shoot. Two fish are encased in plastic frames; one has been freshly caught; the other, larger and healthier looking, has been genetically modified, underscoring Mr. Telhan’s argument that G.M.O. food has been unfairly stigmatized. He writes in the show’s catalog that fear-mongering media campaigns, supported by various interest groups, have swayed the argument. Unfortunately the explanatory captions are at some remove on a wall filled with dense type.



To outwit surveillance, the “ZXX Typeface,” center, cannot be read by artificial intelligence. A cloaking costume is included from “The Handmaid’s Tale.” Right, “CV Dazzle” (2017) breaks up the features of a face to evade facial-recognition algorithms. Credit...via Philadelphia Museum of Art; Juan Arce

Many of the projects in a section called “Powers” are deliberately unsettling, and address the dark side of the future. The information artist [Heather Dewey-Hagborg](#) offers “[Stranger Visions](#),” a series of 3-D printed facial portraits created from DNA she recovered from discarded items, such as hair, cigarette butts and chewed gum collected from New York City sidewalks — without their owners’ knowledge or consent. Ms. Dewey-Hagborg tacitly raises the point that attention must be paid to the emerging field of forensic DNA technology. (The project dates to 2012-2013.)

To help outwit Big Brother-style surveillance, this section also includes the “[ZXX Typeface](#)” designed by Sang Mun, which cannot be read by artificial intelligence. A costume is included from “The Handmaid’s Tale,” an almost de rigueur inclusion in museum shows these days. “CV Dazzle,” by Adam Harvey, employs extreme hair styling and makeup to break apart the features of a face to trick facial recognition algorithms.

Chairs finally make an appearance in a section about the future of materials. “[Voxelchair V 1.0](#)” is a robotically printed 3-D chair. This assemblage of small

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tinted blue plastic cubes was created by Manuel Jimenez Garcia and Gilles Retsin, co-founders of the [Design Computation Lab at the Bartlett School of Architecture](#), who created a program that gives designers greater control of the 3-D printing process (voxels are three-dimensional pixels). The chair, produced in collaboration with Nagami Design, may represent a technical feat, but sadly doesn't look like an inviting place to sit.

Joris Laarman's "Makerchair Polygon" is downloadable, built from digitally fabricated 3-D parts that fit together like an elaborate jigsaw puzzle. Mr. Laarman reduced the design to manageable components to enable production on a home 3-D printer. Coincidentally, both of the seats were modeled on [Verner Panton's](#) S-shaped stacking chair designed in 1960 — which is probably much more comfortable (no test sitting was allowed).



Installation view of the section on new materials, with blue pixel "Voxelchair V 1.0" and "Makerchair Polygon," both at left. Credit...via Philadelphia Museum of Art; Joseph Hu

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A video still from “Housewives Making Drugs” (2017). Credit...Mary Maggic

For a future which some suggest will be dominated by artificial intelligence and robots, there are, surprisingly, many do-it-yourself projects in this exhibition. The artist and bio-hacker Mary Maggic imagines a time when estrogen will be freely available for personal use with both her conceptual “Estrofem Lab,” a pair of suitcases packed with chemical equipment meant for home use and “Housewives Making Drugs,” a simulated TV show, where women concoct their own hormone supplements easily as Martha Stewart makes cookies.

To call “Designs for Different Futures” ambitious, is an understatement. There are so many ideas on view that it’s hard to take everything in with one visit. By the time the show reaches the Chicago Art Institute a year from now, the curator Zoe Ryan said, some of the current objects might be supplanted by newer ideas. “We’ll be in a different place but the issues will be the same.”

Many of the solutions seen here are hopeful; children’s clothing that grows with the wearer would save parents money and reduce landfill; textiles woven from seaweed provide a renewable planet-friendly material for designers. Others, such as “Raising Robotic Natives,” are speculative projects designed to raise eyebrows. This industrial robot arm to feed the baby is meant to save parents’ time — but would anyone want this menacing factory-like object in a nursery? (The designers are raising this very question.)

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To give visitors time to decompress and absorb what they've just seen, the show ends at a Future Therapies Lab, a space to sit down, read and even make art. Books are arrayed along one wall providing follow-up information and ideas. Curling up with an old-fashioned good read may be the best way to cope with what lies ahead.

Designs for Different Futures

Through March 8 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway; 215-763-8100, philamuseum.org. The show travels to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Art Institute of Chicago.