

Catastrophe Chic: A Commentary

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Today's designers are grappling with a daunting task: how to create designs to help people combat a range of man-made and natural catastrophes including bioterrorism, nuclear holocaust, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, fires, and more. For many of these designers, their work has an added dimension: not only are they creating highly functional designs for dire situations, but also designs that are visually appealing and attractive—that have elegance of form as well as ease of use.

These designs raise a provocative question: what is the role of aesthetics in designing for disasters? At what point does concern for visual appeal run the risk of trumping or trivializing very real safety concerns?

The issue was highlighted at the Museum of Modern Art's seminal exhibit "SAFE: Design Takes on Risk" held in New York in 2005. Writing about the exhibit, its curator Paola Antonelli noted that the intention was to include objects not only because of their functionality and economy of materials, but also because they were "beautiful." Alluding to some of the exhibit's designs for protecting personal property, she wrote: "designers suggest we turn objects that we need because of our anxiety into something beautiful, sublime, uplifting, delightful." Well-designed objects for safety, she argued, catch our eye: "Whether they are injection-molded with advanced materials or assembled with found parts and powered by a hand crank, they are arresting."¹

The curator's language was startling. Gas masks, smoke hoods, and body armor that are "sublime" and "delightful"? The idea of balancing form and function is usually axiomatic in any discussion of design, but exhibits such as SAFE—with its range of historical examples—raised the central, though not often discussed, question: how to factor in formal considerations when looking at designs for protection and security?²

Some designs for safety are indeed arresting, such as Stephen Armellino's molded, bullet-resistant mask (1983) with its totemic look and the Stop Thief! Ply Chairs (prototype 2000) designed to keep women's handbags safe with their useful seat cutouts for holding handbag straps are witty riffs on Thonet and Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chair designs (Figure 1).

1 Paola Antonelli, "Grace Under Pressure," catalogue essay in *SAFE: Design Takes on Risk* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 96, 9.

2 The discussion of the aesthetics of safety has been underway for several years. Antonelli in MOMA's "SAFE" exhibit catalogue cites Eric Howler's "Anxious Architecture: The Aesthetics of Surveillance" in *Archis* 2:3 (2002): 9–23, which talks about "the awesome idea of 'Paranoid Chic' style." (Antonelli, "Grace Under Pressure," 15).



Figure 1

Jackie Piper, Marcus Willcocks, Lorraine Gamman, Design Against Crime Research Initiative, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. Stop Thief Ply Chair, Smart Antitheft Furniture Range. Prototype, 2000. Laminated plywood. Photo by Marcus Willcocks, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.

There are other designs, however, in which aesthetic considerations seem to top their functionality. The NoGo building barriers (2004) made of bronze, concrete, and steel look sculptural rather than effective for security or survival. They seem like apt examples of what could be called “Catastrophe Chic.” (The barriers, which were used in the financial district in Lower Manhattan, apparently also had other functions: in the MoMA exhibit’s SAFE catalogue, there was a photograph of a man in white shirtsleeves casually sitting on one of the barriers as he talks on his cell phone.)

In a discussion about the role of “beauty” in designing for safety, one might well wonder whether it might be inappropriate, superficial, and even frivolous to care a great deal about aesthetics when it comes to an exhibit of objects intended to help ease some of life’s more pressing dangers and fears. There is, for example, a big risk of detachment. As Antonelli herself wrote, “We may bristle at the exquisiteness of these morbidly attractive tools for emergency situations because we do not have any overpowering need to use them.”³

Two contrasting designs for heart defibrillators point to the problematic nature of “morbidly attractive” design. The Lifeline AED Semiautomatic External Defibrillator (2002) is described on the manufacturer’s Web site as “a blend of art and lifesaving technology in one box.” With its bright black and yellow curvilinear case and red, green, and yellow buttons, the lifesaver may be ergonomically easy to use, but also could pass for an old-fashioned, portable beach

3 Paola Antonelli, 9. Another kind of detachment was, inadvertently, found in the exhibit’s section of designs for everyday needs—needs that included helping with bad breath, breaking bones, car accidents, unsanitary conditions, diseases, and wasting water. The wall text noted that, “There is no end to this list of fascinating anxieties.” Here, the idea of anxieties being “fascinating” suggests an odd sense of detachment, as though visitors were being introduced to an ethnography of strange behaviors.

radio. On the other hand, the outer case of the Philips HeartStart OnSite Defibrillator (2002) is clearly meant for emergencies with its square, bright red shape, prominent 911 number, and prominent heart graphic (Figure 2).

Exhibits such as SAFE offered several rationales for factoring in attractiveness and beauty when designing for danger and safety. One was suggested by the title Antonelli gave to her SAFE catalogue essay: "Grace Under Pressure." In a world fraught with risk, anxiety, and stress, why not make our designs for safety good-looking as well?

Another rationale presented by the SAFE exhibit was that attractive, sometimes witty designs help us "embrace our fears."⁴ Nuclear cataclysm is surely one of the world's most profound fears, and one way to embrace our fear of this catastrophe is to make light of it—to cloak it in the cute and cuddly. The large, red, stuffed "Priscila Huggable Atomic Mushroom," a prototype created in 2004 by Design for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times Project, is one such example. This whimsical, oversized, mushroom-shaped bomb cloud could easily be a bit of pop art or a child's toy, but in a world confronting unimaginable and frightening dangers, this warm and fuzzy approach is cute but hardly comforting.

The use of aesthetically-attractive designs and ornamentation to reduce anxieties about safety, however, actually is nothing new. In the nineteenth century, new developments in technology were often seen as dangerous and in need of camouflaging. In an era of steam boiler explosions and what seemed like fast-moving machines, ornament was used to ease people's fears. In England and America, industrial steam engines were sometimes designed as classical temples of antiquity, their cast-iron frames in the form of fluted classical columns and elaborate entablatures. Early sewing machines and typewriters were at times decorated with colorful stenciled flow-

4 Paola Antonelli,
"Grace Under Pressure," 9.

Figure 2
HeartStart OnSite Defibrillator case, 2002.
Philips Medical Systems. Photo courtesy of
Philips Medical Systems.





Figure 3
Southern Pacific Railway Disaster, January 19,
1883, in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*
(February 3, 1883).

ers and ornamented frames. By camouflaging new machines with ornamental motifs, manufacturers not only drew on the love of ornament during the period, but also helped ease public anxieties about unfamiliar new technologies. Industrial steam engines designed as classical temples evoked an aura of stasis and calm in an era of rapid technological change.⁵

There is also nothing new about turning anxieties about disasters and safety into works of art. In the nineteenth century, American and European newspapers were filled with stories about train wrecks and steamboat explosions. Capitalizing on the public's interest in these sensationalized catastrophe stories, periodicals including *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in America illustrated their stories with large engraved images of disasters, and Currier & Ives produced lithographed color prints of catastrophic fires and explosions as wall decorations for comfortable American middle-class homes (Figure 3).

Turning disaster into display is still with us today. In the months after 9/11, several New York galleries exhibited large-scale digital photographs of the World Trade Center disaster that obviously had been manipulated and made self-consciously artful, including moving buildings closer together or enhancing the color of the explosions to lurid lavenders and orange. Here, the introduction of art and artifice into this world of disaster seemed deeply

5 See chapters on nineteenth-century industrial design in Julie Wosk, *Breaking Frame: Technology and the Visual Arts in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

out of place. Five years later, Michel Gondry's surrealistic film *The Science of Sleep* (2006) spoofed the young graphic artist's exhibit of "disasterology" prints (an exploding plane and a tsunami) to admiring visitors.

Artful designs such as those seen at MoMA's SAFE exhibit in many ways reflect this culture of catastrophe, with the urge to create beautiful or attractive objects addressing the dangers and safety concerns of our age. These latest manifestations of Catastrophe Chic leave us with important paradoxes and questions. In a world with life-or-death survival issues at stake, what role does art play in helping us cope with danger? Can artful designs help us dwell in a world of risk without themselves running the risk of seeming effete and detached?

Perhaps "Grace Under Pressure" does offer the best rationale after all. The phrase comes from Ernest Hemingway who, in a 1929 conversation with the writer Dorothy Parker, defined "guts" or courage as "grace under pressure."⁶ Today, in a world of ever more lethal risks, designers can take heed of the characters in Hemingway's novels and stories who confront danger not only with courage, but also with elegance and style. The nature of that style—and its role—is still ours to debate.

6 Dorothy Parker asked Hemingway: "Exactly what do you mean by 'guts'?" Hemingway replied: "I mean, grace under pressure." "The Artist's Reward," *New Yorker* 5 (November 30, 1929): 28–31.