# Back to the Future
Recycling the Past through Retro-Design

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Introduction

According to the February issue of *Metropolis*, La-Z-Boy has "formally embraced the midcentury Modern aesthetic with the introduction of the Todd Oldham by La-Z-Boy Collection" (Pedersen, 2004). According to Larry Thomas, editor of *Furniture Today*, "they're definitely going after the under-40 crowd with Todd Oldham, maybe even the under-30 crowd, if that crowd has any money to spend on furniture" (Pedersen, 2004). Is this just another product launch aiming to cash in on the recent mid-century modern revival? Perhaps, but this one is ironic, as noted in the caption beneath an Alvar Aalto-inspired chair and ottoman: "The fifties (think Swanson TV dinners) meet the fifties[1] (think Denmark)[2] in Todd Oldham's midcentury Modern-influenced designs for La-Z-Boy." Both the old (stuffy) image often associated with La-Z-Boy and the new (hip) image currently being developed share the same origin: "the fifties." In order to capture younger buyers — and rejuvenate the La-Z-Boy brand — Oldham is looking not to the future, but to the past. Of course, La-Z-Boy is hardly the only manufacturer to realize the power of *Retro-Design*. From Eames knock-offs to DeLonghi toasters[3] to the Retrofuturism of car designer J Mays, it looks like the future of design may be (design) history.

But designers are not the only ones recycling the past with great enthusiasm; films, popular music, fashion, and advertising have, as of late, been turning more and more to the past for "new" material. Witness VH1's *I Love the 70s* and *I Love the 80s series*, or the return of *Starsky and Hutch* — to the big screen, no less. Just as La-Z-Boy is recycling the fifties, others have begun recycling the seventies and eighties. Can the nineties be far behind? According to an article that appeared in the satirical online "newspaper" *The Onion*, it may already to too late for the nineties.
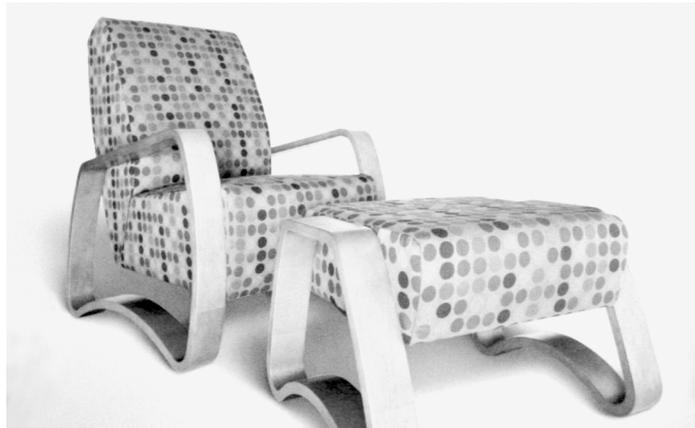
Aalto-inspired chair and ottoman — part of the new *Todd Oldham by La-Z-Boy* collection.

> WASHINGTON, DC — At a press conference Monday, U.S. Retro Secretary Anson Williams issued a strongly worded warning of an imminent "national retro crisis," cautioning that "if current levels of U.S. retro consumption are allowed to continue unchecked, we may run entirely out of past by as soon as 2005."
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> —*The Onion*, November 5, 1997

The year 2005 is now only a year away, and it seems we're a long way from running out of the past — but it's not due to any lack of "retro consumption." Indeed, designers — as well as film makers, advertisers, the music industry, etc. — are doing all they can to keep up with consumers' insatiable appetites for their own pasts. Ironically, one of the most common (and successful) subjects of retro consumerism is modern design from the middle of the twentieth century. To quote Jim Collins (1995), "A style that was once defined by the outright defiance of tradition is now being *recollected* as it is *re-collected*" (p. 158). Designers have taken notice of this modern revival, as can be seen in a number of recent products from housewares to cars. Rather than looking to the future for *inspiration*, it seems many designers today are looking to the past for *imitation*.

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[1] As opposed to the 1950s — see Frederic Jameson's Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.
[2] Actually, Aalto was not Danish at all, but Finnish.
[3] From a line of products actually called *Retro Line*.

Modern Design Revival

The 1990s saw an incredible revival of mid-century modern design. Collins (1995) uses the term *Retro-Modernism* "to describe the Modernist revival that is well underway in museum shows, interior design magazines, academic journals and architectural debates" (p. 158). No doubt museum exhibits did help fuel the revival — exhibits like *What Modern Was: Design 1935-1965*; *Great Design: 100 Masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum*; *The Work of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention*; and *Vital Forms: American Innovation in Art and Design, 1940-1960*. As important as the museum exhibits, however, was the exposure in popular culture and mass media.

The 1990s saw mid-century modern design showing up in television programming and advertising as well. And not just in the more obvious places like *That 70s Show* either; icons of modern design have been featured in shows like *Frasier*, *Will and Grace*, *Seinfeld*, and *Sex and the City*. Arne Jacobsen's *Swan Chair* and *Egg Chair* have been featured in ads for L'Oréal, as well as Target and Old Navy. In the movies, mid-century modern was used not only in such "period" pieces as *Austin Powers*, *Far From Heaven*, and *Down With Love*, but has been (and still is) used to exemplify hip contemporary interiors (*One Hour Photo* and *Toy Story 2*). Numerous shelter magazines included articles about the new trend in mid-century modern (Filler, 1996; Vining, 1985), and prices for vintage pieces soared. According to an article in *Newsweek*, George Nelson's famous Ball clocks[4], which once sold for $18-$30, were selling in the late 1990s for $600-$900 (Marin, 1998). Demand for mid-century modern design rose to such levels that furniture manufacturers Herman Miller and Knoll reissued some of their "classic" designs, such as George Nelson's *Coconut Chair*, Jens Risom's *Web Chair*, and Isamu Noguchi's famous biomorphic table (Henderson, 1994). And Modernica, a small company that started out selling vintage mid-century modern began selling reproductions of some famous designs, such as the Eames molded fiberglass chairs and George Nelson's famous bubble lamps. But Collins' Retro-Modernism goes beyond the "classics" of mid-century modern design too. Pottery Barn, Crate and Barrel, and others (including La-Z-Boy) have joined in with versions of their own "modern classics." Enter *Retro-Design*.

The New Sustainability: Recycling the Past

Whether we are talking about films, television, advertising, popular music—or design, recycling the past is big business. If it didn't work (sell), it wouldn't be so prevalent. Fred Davis explores the relationships between nostalgia and mass media in his book, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. Davis (1979) suggests that one of the reasons for extensive media recycling is that nostalgia has become so closely related to media products. Where homes, streets, and persons were once the subject of nostalgia, now media products have come to take their places. When we think of our childhoods, we think of popular music, television shows, or movies as much as — or more than — specific people and places. What's more, "because they are commercially produced *en masse*, the media images tend toward greater uniformity of meaning and constriction of evocative association. Their possibilities for subsequent recycling, manipulation, and symbolic control are, therefore, greatly enhanced" (Davis, 1979, p. 30). Clearly, the same is true of consumer products. Indeed, Davis (1979) compares the two: "as with consumer products generally, so with the mass media: the constant aim is to develop formats, characters, plots, images, allusions, genres, novelties, and celebrities of the greatest mass appeal (p. 128). Media products and consumer products trigger our collective nostalgia in similar ways too. Just as most of us remember *Leave It To Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*, we also remember the products of our youth — toys, furniture, appliances, cars, and so forth.[5] And, just as we all saw the same *Leave It To Beaver* and *Brady Bunch* episodes, we all had (or knew of) the same products. Think Etch-A-Sketch and Frisbee (or, for those who grew up in the late 1970s, Atari and Rubik's Cube). It's precisely this collective nostalgia that Retro-Design attempts to tap into; we all know about La-Z-Boy recliners. And if the rate of recycling seems to be increasing, it's no coincidence; here too we see strong links to the increase in both number and distribution of media products. As a recent article in *Newsweek* suggests, "if Gen X-ers turned nostalgic much earlier than the 30-year-olds of decades past, maybe it's because, inundated with video, musical and commercial messages from birth, they have lived more media lives in fewer years" (Poniewozik, 2004, p. 65). Gen X-ers have lived more *product* lives in fewer years too.

Like Davis, Andrew Wernick sees media and consumer products as attractive subjects for recycling, easily manipulated to tap into our collective nostalgia. In his essay, *Resort to Nostalgia: Mountains, Memories and Myths of Time*, Wernick (1997) compares an automobile ad from the 1950s to a contemporary ad for a vacation resort, and concludes, "where the car ad looked forward, the resort ad looks back. The Good identified as the essence of *its* product is located in the past, not in the future… The arrow of time has been reversed" (p. 210). This, of course,

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[4] The Ball clocks were actually designed by Irving Harper for the Nelson office.
[5] It's quite likely that we remember the toys, furniture, and appliances of the Bradys and the Cleavers too.

goes right to the heart of Retro-Design: in recycling the past, "the Good identified as its essence" can't help but be located in the past. What makes Todd Oldham's recliner for La-Z-Boy so attractive? The fifties. Regardless of whether you think of Swanson's or Denmark (or both), its "good" is found in the past, not the future — or even the present. For Wernick (1997) the reason to look to the past for "the Good" is clear: "the view forward has become bleak and not just blank… this is not a time of great hope" (p. 211). If there was any truth to this in 1997, when his essay was written, then it's only become more so in a post-September 11th America. Just as we crave comfort food in times of crisis, we also crave products — media and consumer alike — that are familiar to us.

Nostlagia Ain't What It Used to Be[6]
In trying to understand what's behind the popularity of Retro-Design, one cannot discount the power of nostalgia. Donna Bassin (1994), for example, sees "retro consumption" as the result of "the current nostalgia among baby boomers for their fifties childhood". However, I fail to see how the nostalgia of baby boomers accounts for the totality of "retro consumption." After all, Baby Boomers aren't the only one snapping up vintage Eames chairs on eBay. Further evidence can be found in "the bible of this retro renaissance" (Marin, 1998), a magazine called *Wallpaper* (launched in 1997). According to the magazine's founder an creative director, Tyler Brûlé, *Wallpaper* is aimed at "a hip, global reader, 25 to 30" (quoted in Marin, 1998). Clearly, this is an audience that — in general — does not remember *what Modern was*.

This is not to say that nostalgia plays no role in Retro-Design, only that nostalgia's role is rather more complex than is often considered. Grainge (2000), in his study of "recycling in American culture", suggests:

> The aestheticization of nostalgia has emerged in a cultural moment able to access, circulate, and reconfigure the textual traces of the past in a new and dynamic ways, that has taken up nostalgia in particular representational and taste regimes, and that has generally disjoined nostalgia from any specific meaning located in the past (p. 32).

The "aestheticization of nostalgia" may be a useful way to think about Retro-Design. Certainly some of its success must be attributed to our unprecedented access to, and recirculation of the past. Just as VCRs and DVD players allow us virtually unlimited access to media products of the past, the Internet — and specifically, eBay — has given us virtually unlimited access to *consumer* products of the past. And Retro-Design, in its own way, is a form of recirculating the past (albeit in a contrived manner). The very fact that Retro-Design has been — and continues to be — successful with young consumers is evidence of nostalgia "disjoined from any specific meaning located in the past." For Granige, there is no call for alarm: "Retro America need not describe a culture in crisis, but may rather suggest a moment distinguished by its re-evaluation and re-presentation of the forms, contexts, and values of the past" (p. 32).

What Grainge does not explain, however, is how long this "moment" will last. And when we, as a culture, will get back to the business of producing forms, contexts, and values that are *new* (At the very least, this is important so that we have something for which we can be nostalgic in the future). Frederic Jameson (1991) is holding out little hope, linking what he calls the *nostalgia mode* to a Postmodern amnesia: "For with the collapse of the high-modernist ideology of style… *the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past*: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a new global culture" (pp 17-18).

But, as "producers of culture," do designers really have "nowhere to turn but to the past?" This was precisely what Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. warned against when, in 1950, he wrote, "Designs made now in mimicry of past periods or remote ways of life… cannot be considered as anything more than embarrassing indications of a lack of faith in our own values" (Kaufmann, 1950). Retro-Design as a response to Baby Boomers' longing for designs of their past is one thing; Retro-Design as an "embarrassing indication of a lack of faith in our own values" is another thing altogether.

Has Anybody Seen the Future?
During the 1990s, with the mid-century modern revival in full swing, *Retro-Design* became the popular design language of everything from honey jars (Heller, 1991) to espresso cups (Collins, 1995) to cars (Gibson, 2003; Goldberger, 2003). Eventually, however, some began to criticize those designers who, to use Cornelis Baljon's words, "see history as a pattern book to be plundered at will" (Baljon, 2002, p. 334). In his essay, "History of

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[6] To borrow a phrase from Fred Davis (p. 142).

History and Canons of Design," Baljon discusses design history and design theory, and how each informs current design issues. For example, Baljon (2002) contends that architects struggle with the "inevitable likeness" (p. 333) of their buildings with those found in the history of architecture. The same might be said of product designers; a contemporary chair will very likely bear a resemblance to historical chairs. This "inevitable likeness," according to Baljan (and Walter Gropius, to whom Baljan refers), is the result of the designer's unavoidable knowledge of history. However, Baljan (2002) makes the point that "an *observer* likewise knows too much history not to have his appreciation of a building colored by it" (p. 334). Similarly, observers of a chair (Todd Oldham's La-Z-Boy, for example) also "know too much history." But then, this is exactly what Retro-Design requires in order to work; at the very least, observers need to know *some* history in order to "get it" (and then to buy it).

This, of course, raises an interesting question: What is the difference between *inspiration* and *imitation*? Grant Gibson (2003) sees the current wave of retro design as an understandable result of a powerful nostalgia brought on by "these… uncertain times" (p. 98). However, he suggests that designers have exploited this nostalgia, putting out designs that are familiar (and safe), rather than innovative. Gibson (2003) argues that the public will not be satisfied with such designs for very much longer: "While the public still seems happy to go along with manufacturers' reliance on the past for their inspiration for new products, it won't last. It's time to create our own version of the future" (p. 98). In "Good History, Bad History," Tibor Kalman makes an argument similar to Gibson's, but directed at the graphic design profession. Kalman (Kalman, Miller, & Jacobs, 1991) uses the term *Jive Modern* to describe the "abuse" of graphic design's history: "Designers abuse history when they use it as a shortcut, a way of giving instant legitimacy to their work and making it commercially successful" (Kalman et al., 1991, p. 120). And, just as Gibson's argument is essentially about creating our own future, Kalman's argument is about looking to the future for inspiration. According to Kalman (1991), "jive Modernism is a denial of the essential point of Modernism, its faith in the power of the present, and the potential of the future" (p. 120).

Where Would You Like to Go Today?

Designers face a monumental challenge anticipating what consumers want. If tapping into the collective nostalgia of the American consumer has been successful, it's because — at least in part — that's what they want. But there is, in my view, a greater responsibility that we as designers share: *to offer experiences that people never new they wanted*. When the Eameses were struggling to mold plywood in their bathtub, it wasn't because of some great public outcry for molded plywood furniture. Indeed, they never could have anticipated the design icons that would be the fruits of their tireless labor. The Eameses' work was about new materials, new processes, and new ideas about what could be furniture. Charles and Ray Eames weren't looking back — they were looking forward.

J Mays has said of his car designs:

> In the entertainment industry if you don't have a story, you don't have a movie. The same is true in automotive design. No story, no car... To create a story it is necessary to create and emotional world where the story can take place. To create that world, you have two choices: Take your audience somewhere they've never been before, or take them somewhere they haven't been in a very long time (*Retrofuturism: The Car Design of J Mays*, 2003).

It used to be we opted for the former. Some still do, of course. Take Apple, for example. The iMac — and now the iPod — are examples of incredibly successful products that *look forward*. Their success is due in large part because they take their audiences "somewhere they've never been before." Maybe that's why — despite these uncertain times — users of these products are smiling.

Retrofuturistic 2003 Ford Mustang concept seen here with an original 1965 Mustang 2+2: Inspiration or imitation?

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