The changing conceptions of pleasure

London

Creations that surprise, amuse and heighten a sense of responsibility

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

One of the most entertaining accounts of a designer's career is "Industrial Design," the memoirs of Raymond Loewy, who arrived in the United States as a French army veteran with $10 in 1919 and became the first industrial designer to appear on the cover of Time magazine. In the book, he identifies the purpose of design as being to keep "the customer happy, his clients in the black and the designer busy."

Times change. Not that there is anything wrong with designers being busy or helping their clients to turn a profit, but what about their social and environmental responsibilities? Or design's importance in interpreting advances in science and technology to our advantage? Nor is it acceptable to assume, as Loewy clearly did, that a designer's clients will be "tits;" when they are equally likely to be "burrs."

But Loewy's first assertion still rings true: design's role in making us "happy." He meant it in the old-fashioned sense of designing things that give people pleasure, by being appealing to look at, or fun to use, but the word is versatile enough to encompass other interpretations, too. How can design make anyone happy if it damages the environment, or translates a thrilling scientific breakthrough into something destruc- tive?

Here are some of my favorite examples of recent design projects that achieve Loewy's goal by making us happy in both the old and the new.

PLEASING US

Let's start with a couple of familiar objects whose design is pleasurable in a traditional way. First, the book of drawings by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, which accompanies the retrospective of their work in product design running through Sept. 1 at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Both Bouroullecs draw compulsively, filling sketchbooks with everything from playful scribbles to detailed studies of specific products. They gave the Swiss graphic designer Corinna Windlin carte blanche to turn them into a book. The result looks and feels delightful, from the upplumb with which each drawing is positioned on its respective page, to the sequencing of the images and the silky texture of the paper.

The same can be said of the wooden and leather armchair developed by the Dutch designer Dick Van Hoff for Thomas Eyck, which was introduced at the Milan Furniture Fair last month. At first glance, it appears clumsy, almost ugly, but the longer you look, the subtler and more refined it seems. Crimitally, the chair is so comfortable to sit in, you feel calm and contemplative. "When we're under pressure, our natural reaction is to speed up, but sometimes it's better to slow down," Mr. Van Hoff said. "We all need moments to reflect, and that's what this is for."

SURPRISING US

A time honored way for design to make us happy is by reinterpreting things in unexpectedly pleasing forms. Take the seed packets designed by Masaii Miwa and Ahkeke for an East London community group, the Friends of Arnold Circus. Sold to raise money to maintain the Arnold Circus garden, the packets contain seeds gathered from the hollyhocks that grow there. The first surprise is their octagonal shape, and the second that it is made by using an origami technique to fold a large piece of paper, bearing a print of the seeds made for the Friends by a local artist, Rachel Whiteread.

A great example is "Where have all the wildings gone?" (www.wherehaveallthewildingsgone.com) a Web site devoted to the deliciously silly television series "Game of Thrones." Devised by the graphic designer Nigel Evan Dennis as a personal tribute to the show, the site uses color coding and symbolism to trace the complex allegiances between the characters so ingeniously that declaring it is nearly as much fun as watching the Starks and their wolves battle their foes on the screen.

ENTERTAINING US

Now for a new area of design: data visualization, which helps us to make sense of huge quantities of complex information by distilling it into clear, compelling digital images. Typically visualizations are used to explain complex economic or political changes, but they can also entertain us. A great example is "Where have all the wildings gone?" web site created by Nigel Evan Dennis.

Designs for living and for having fun, check out from left: Phases, a series of vases produced by the Dutch designer Jeroen Wand; hollyhock seed packets designed by Masaii Miwa and Ahkeke; a Collagene mask developed by Do the Motion; a book of drawings by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec; and a screen grab of all the "Where have all the wildings gone?" Web site, created by Nigel Evan Dennis.