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Design, Everywhere

Design used to feel like a segregated pastime, the province of neurotic aesthetes and people with too much time or money on their hands. The rest of us got what we got and generally liked it -- a toaster was a toaster; blue jeans came one way; and if we got to choose the color of our car, well, we felt pretty good about it.

Today's objects are not necessarily any better designed (it's hard to beat a Corvette -- or a paper napkin, for that matter), but their design is more conspicuous: we have never been more aware of the power of the package. When we look at an Apple iPod, we know that a huge part of its appeal is its sleek design, a draw so powerful it is almost as if the company invented digitalized music. Several years ago, Volkswagen realized that its potency as a brand had a lot to do with the ghost of its oddly endearing Beetle. It brought the car back from the dead, smartly freshened its look and a new era for the car company was born. The Gap changed American fashion by showing us the simple sense of a T-shirt, Michael Graves (and a brilliant ad campaign) lifted Target ever upward and Martha Stewart's stuff still sells at Kmart, even as Stewart herself has become a tabloid punching bag. Japanese Bottle Gourd paint is good paint, after all, especially at Kmart prices.

The most telling indicator, though, of how awareness of good design has infiltrated our world may have come last summer when the preliminary plans for the World Trade Center site were released. The planners must have been shocked to discover that the general public had very sophisticated ideas about what should be built there, and more than that, it had very high expectations. Where did these expectations come from? Everywhere. From the aisles of Ikea to the dashboard of a BMW on a Chicago freeway, from the shoes on a woman's feet in Beverly Hills to the toylike cellphones plastered to the ears of pedestrians on the streets of Manhattan. You see design (or Design) everywhere you look. And how it got to some of those places -- who put it there and what they were thinking -- is the subject of this issue.

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