



TOYING WITH DANGER

Furniture you can hide inside, 9/11 models and mini atomic mushrooms - can design help us overcome our fears?

It's no surprise that as the idea of a secure homeland fades, there is a greater focus on the secure home. According to the American Census Bureau, gated communities are no longer just for the rich, they now cater for all income groups. In California, over 40 per cent of new developments are surrounded by high walls or protected by 'private urban governance' as it's now called (although guard boxes often stand empty when communities dispute the running costs). There's a similar story emerging in southern England where gated communities have become the developers' latest big idea, prompting apocalyptic visions of a nation riven by social schism. But beyond knee-jerk reactions, has this culture of fear provoked considered design responses?

'Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times' by Michael Anastassiades, Anthony »



ART ATTACK
Acknowledging tragic events of importance, Boym Partners Inc has recreated casts of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon



Dunne and Fiona Raby is a series of 'prescription products' that address fears of domestic invasion and abduction. This is 'hideaway' furniture - blocky shapes slightly reminiscent of Richard Artschwager's sculptures but made out of parquet so that they blend in with domestic surroundings and featuring a secret panel to access a one-person hiding place (without disturbing the ornaments). One is shaped to accommodate a reclining figure, a la Goya's *Maja*, in another, the paranoid incumbent lies with their hands behind their head and feet in the air (a position the designers claim gives the user a feeling of control). The third is roughly coffin-shaped - wasn't it Sarah Bernhardt who travelled with a coffin to accustom herself to the final resting place?

A companion series of 'Huggable Atomic Mushrooms' are soft toys shaped like nuclear explosions; presumably the toys work like aversion therapy in reverse - a touchy feely 'embrace your fears' path to recovery.

Perhaps 'Huggable Atomic Mushrooms' and hideaway furniture seem like quaintly naive, not to say flippant, responses to an increasingly widespread desire to retreat into a domestic comfort zone. But maybe providing the ridiculous is the correct response. And could it be that the ridiculous is rational? As the designers say: 'What if we engaged with fear and anxiety in a rational way, even if those fears are irrational?'

In fact, the designers aren't concerned so much with making products as starting conversations and prompting us to question how we live, by exposing the deeper implications of current security issues and emerging technologies. Dunne and Raby have previously tackled subjects that are way off the radar of most designers, such as the way electronic information seeps through our environment or the effect of electromagnetic fields on mental wellbeing. By making the intangible slightly more tangible, they alert us to some of the more questionable aspects of contemporary life.

New York-based designers Constantin and Laurene Leon Boym, of Boym Partners Inc, also use design to initiate a subversive dialogue about fear, tragedy and death. Their 'Buildings of Disaster' are models of famous edifices but instead of the architecturally important or culturally significant monuments commemorated by, say, Grand Tour souvenirs, these are places where terrible and tragic events have taken place. It began as a series of 'Souvenirs for the End of the Century' to mark the end of the tumultuous 20th century but has taken on a more apocalyptic dimension with the crop of disasters that heralded the new millennium. Early models included the Texas schoolbook depository, the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, the Oklahoma City Federal building, the

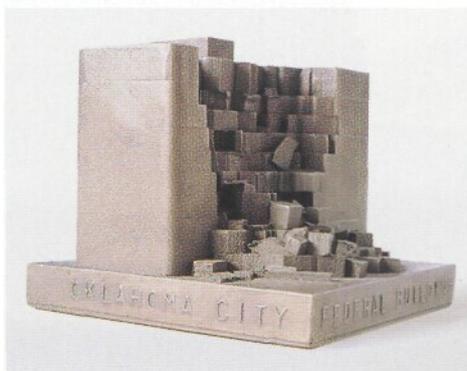


SAFE AS HOUSES

Furniture with a cavity for hiding in, from Raby, Anastassiades and Dunne

Below, Boym Partners Inc's Oklahoma City building cast

Below right, a 'Huggable Atomic Mushroom' soft toy



Unabomber's cabin, the Dakota (John Lennon's New York home and the scene of his murder), and Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear power plants. Now the model series has been expanded to include the Pentagon and World Trade Center, both reflecting their state minutes after the planes hit them on 11 September 2001. One edge of the Pentagon building is crumpled, while the upper floors of the Twin Towers are gouged and at the point of collapse. Unlike

conventional souvenirs, which acknowledge aesthetic or cultural importance, these offer a more populist history of the events of recent decades that reflects the way emotion becomes invested in such sites. At the same time it reclaims the cultural and political significance of the souvenir at just the time when it seemed to have sunk, beyond rescue, into the tawdry quicksand of commercialism. ✱
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