

Blinded by design

Designer items are among the most sought after, and expensive, you can buy. But how well do they work?

THE KETTLE designed for Alessi by Michael Graves has been one of the most popular designer products in Australia for a decade. But Melbourne design stores also sell a lot of whistling birds for the kettle because, on a high gas flame, the little crimson bird melts. The stainless-steel kettle also tarnishes constantly and, with little water, the angular base causes boiling water to suddenly gush out the spout. None of which stops people buying the \$255 kettle (or the \$12 birds).

Marc Newson's designer dish rack, the Dish Doctor, sells for around \$119. It looks fantastic — a cross between lurid science fiction and a hairbrush. But it does not solve that perennial problem of dish racks: the larger plates still won't stand up.

Similarly the Philippe Starck lemon juicer, the Juicy Salif, won't juice oranges, has low ridges and tarnishes if you don't rinse it after use. It also breaks if you drop it.

The juicer is actually an icon of victory for aesthetics over functionality. It is apt that Starck had the idea for the juicer not while juicing but while eating squid. And equally apt that Alessi recently brought out a gold-plated collectors' model that is designed exclusively for the shelf. Not that this will stop people buying it either.

The primary function of such design objects is not so much to boil, dry or squeeze as it is to serve as domestic sculpture. The objects only have to work a little because their greater appeal is not as objects but as "meta-objects" for consumers who are bored by average products. This is why the late British design historian, Peter Dormer, attributed the international success of the Graves kettle to its "knowing cuteness".

But while such designs help to inspire designers, and help bring art into domestic life, they can prop up a perception of design as impractical and expensive. Most design products work superbly and are better to

produce. But the perception of design as impractical, in Australia especially, can alienate manufacturers and consumers.

The problem of objects that look good and don't work well is actually more widespread in the general marketplace. The ridged dome on mass-produced plastic orange juicers, for example, is often too smooth and usually too small for Australian oranges.

In the mass marketplace, standards of functionality in design have also suffered because of an obsession with "the look". National manager of the Australian Design Awards Brandon Gien says consumers tend to be drawn to more glamorous-looking appliances. "But it's only when you take a toaster home and plug it in and put toast in it that you will know if it works well," he says.

Danielle Rich, of Elwood, was given a top brand imported toaster with every modern function. It has a defrost button, a re-warm button, an eject button, a thrust function and the

browning control is sensitive. But the cosmetic, plastic outer casing is slowly melting.

Most products are increasingly sold via their image — usually featured in a publication or in a showroom. Publications too often pay scant attention to the functionality of the products they present and, in showrooms, it is nearly impossible to test a product.

The staff at Kleen design, in Fitzroy, offer water to customers who want to test run jugs and vases before they buy. But this is more than some manufacturers do before they put products on the market.

Deanne Koelmeyer, program director of industrial design at RMIT, says planned and negligent obsolescence is still common and often a product of fashion in the marketplace.

"There's often a surge of ill-conceived products that get reproduced to meet a certain decor or fashion or retro trend and many of them are copies that have a life cycle in the market of maybe six to eight months. They're

almost disposable products at a design level." Koelmeyer says the average kettle has a built-in obsolescence level of about 18 months.

In this age of excess technology it is not hard to find products that look sleek but are difficult to use: new appliances with indecipherable controls, designer furniture that wobbles under weight, handles that can't be handled, uncomfortable chairs and devices that break.

Only electrical products, gas products and children's products are legally obliged to pass tests for safety (but not comfort, usability or durability). In furniture, for example, cots and bunk beds undergo mandatory testing but every other object only undergoes testing by the choice of manufacturers (and clients).

In all product fields, some companies employ designers and test thoroughly for usability and comfort and others don't. First-generation products, such as the first wave of cappuccino machines, are prone to weak function. Some companies

too readily design for a certain look and take short cuts in functionality.

Geoff Fitzpatrick, manager of furniture design company Source, and a former director of the Design Institute of Australia, says, "good designers never ignore function and the old maxim that attention to function leads to attractive form will always apply".

Designers such as Starck and Newson are exceptions that help create a false perception of designers, Fitzpatrick says. Most Australian designers produce very functional products for economical, multiple unit production. Problems with functionality derive more often from manufacturing processes that ignore good design, he says.

Robert Foster, of Fink Design, made three prototypes for his remarkable water jug and experimented with the manufacturing process as he went. "It was an evolutionary process," he says.

Foster's anodised aluminium jug looks like something liquid. It is as balanced as a dolphin

and is a good local example of unity in form and function. The metal keeps water cool and will last at least one lifetime.

Foster says too many objects are "overdesigned aesthetically" and that it is vital to combine functionality, the manufacturing process and aesthetics. "They have to go hand in hand and to, in a sense, feed one another. The process of manufacture might discover a new aesthetic and, to fulfil an aesthetic desire, you might discover a new manufacturing process."

Foster is angered by pretentiousness in design and by shapes that are divorced from function. He talks instead about "anti-design, where things are just what they are".

Some designers can, however, get too close to the function of their products.

Roger Hall, lecturer in ergonomics and human-computer interaction at the University of NSW, says so-called intelligent products are often difficult to use because technical designers are too close to their products and do not test

them enough on a range of users. One exception is Oxo kitchenware products, which were conceived by a businessman to help his wife with arthritis. Disabled and elderly users often require the highest standards of functionality.

Ross Madden, who has promoted objects such as the Fink water jug through his design stores for 15 years, says it is all too rare to find a product that "looks good when it is doing what it is supposed to do".

Australia has a history of very practical invention and design and many Australian designers have a knack for functionality. But the lingering distance between manufacturers and designers in this country is a bit like distance between functionality and form.

Both gaps are likely to be sealed by objects that are as inspiring to use and produce as they are to behold.

ILLUSTRATIONS: HOLY EVANS



The Alessi kettle: ever popular but users should watch its water level.



The Dish Doctor: looks fantastic but larger plates won't stand up.



The Juicy Salif: strictly for use with lemons.



The Fink jug: shows a unity of form and function.