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Intelligent design

"A creation, whatever form it takes, must improve the lives of as many people as possible." So says Philippe Starck, the French design superstar whose 10,000 or so creations have encompassed everything from homewares to hotels, electronics to motorcycles.

It could be argued that Starck's more conspicuous works—a table lamp shaped like an assault rifle, a sculptural lemon squeezer that isn't very good at squeezing lemons—don't so much improve life as embellish it.

"Design is an action with a naïve aim, trying to make obligatory objects bearable," he says. "The question is, why make objects more pleasant, more acceptable, more bearable? Is it to live better with them? Is it to sell them better, or to better show your ego and your talent?"

This seems a very Philippe Starck thing to say, but after 50 years in the business, he is still pushing ideas in all sorts of interesting and unexpected directions. For him, squabbles over form-versus-function have given way to questions about whether the very concept of design is on the way out.

"In 20 years, almost all the pretty products designed today will have disappeared," he says. "Lamps will be replaced by electroluminescent paint, heaters by heating paint, curtains by liquid crystals, and loudspeakers by vibrating walls. Even our bodies will integrate new technologies."

This is the idea at the heart of Bionism, a term Starck uses to describe design that marries biology and technology, which in turn is meant to create highly functional, intuitive, and (yes) appealing products using as little material as possible.

Examples of this approach include

Starck Eyes, a range of eyewear introduced 25 years ago, which look to the mechanics of nature for inspiration. The latest models, produced with Luxottica and dubbed Starck Biotech Paris, combine high-tech materials with newfangled techniques—such as a so-called "Biolink articulation," which mimics human skeletal joints to improve freedom of movement.

One of Starck's more recent innovations, the smart ring Aeklys by Starck, may be his simplest design yet—at least in visual terms. A plain black-and-white band, Aeklys promises to replace payment cards, transportation tickets, business cards, and contactless identification devices. While references to "augmented humanity" might be a bit of a stretch right now, Starck insists that the ring's capabilities will continue to expand ("the only limit is our imagination").

Starck is also highly invested in sustainability, a cause he believes his Bionist philosophy—with its emphasis on "democratic ecology"—will benefit. "Life will be much more enjoyable if we consume less, be more human, honest, visionary, and responsible," he says. "There is no future for design as we know it. We shall become naked in front of ourselves—having nothing, or only what we really need, not what is useless."

For Starck, the development of artificial intelligence represents a kind of evolutionary imperative—as inevitable as the human urge to explore the physical world, or to express itself through art. "We are the only known species that has taken control of its evolution by creating intelligence in an exponential way," he says. "We are creators; we are producers."

To many, Philippe Starck is the guy who devised assault rifle table lamps and non-squeezing lemon squeezers. His current ideas—ranging from biotechnical design to the relationship between AI and imagination—are taking us in more interesting directions.

By Karine Monie



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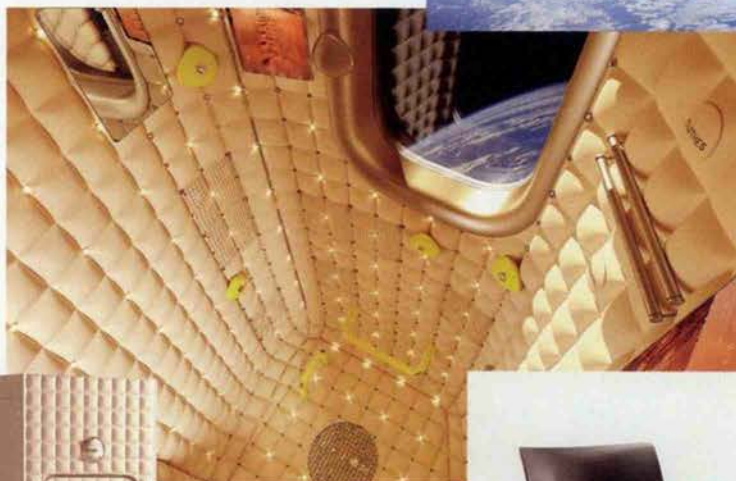


This means we have to solve the paradox of creating more while producing less."

There's a very in-the-moment feel to all this, but Starck's interest in such ideas predate the Ted-talking, Twitter-using proponents of today. "Forty years ago, people called me Frankenstein when I spoke about Bionism," he says. "Today, science constantly integrates technology with our body—into our bones, heart, ears, eyes." In terms of design, he adds, biotechnology opens up a world of possibilities. "The closer you get to the human body, the less you can lie, the less matter we use. Bionism is the only way to continue growing, evolving. It is not a choice; it is our future."

The future is very much on Starck's mind at the moment, particularly with regard to space travel. Almost four decades after he was commissioned to refurbish the private apartments of the Élysée Palace in Paris—his first big gig—Starck is working with the American aerospace manufacturer Axiom Space to create the interiors for what is being billed as the world's first tourist space station.

Slated to dock with the International Space Station in 2024, the project will feature Starck designs throughout its habitation spaces, including the crew quarters, dining area, and galley. "My vision is to create a comfortable, inviting egg, with soft walls and a design perfectly in harmony with movements of the human body in zero gravity," he says. A defining feature will be hundreds of multicolored nano-LED lights studding the walls, meant to evoke the stars outside.



Starck's Aeklys band, AI Chair, and Axiom Space Station habitation module.

No exploration of Starck's Bionist philosophy would be complete without a mention of his AI Chair for Kartell, unveiled in 2019 and billed as the world's first chair created by artificial intelligence (though it is clear, looking at the object's sinuous lines, that Starck had a hand in the design). The big question put to AI during the planning phase, he says, was: "how can we rest our bodies using the least amount of material—without culture, without memories, without influence?"

Finding a way to maximize comfort using minimal materials, however, was only part of the motivation for Starck. As ever, he was driven by the urge to push the boundaries of design, to make something new.

"I had the idea to use artificial intelligence when I was bored with myself, and with everyone else," he says. "Some beautiful chairs have been created, but always out of the same brain, the same culture and collective memory. I needed another brain."

At this point, Starck retreats into a more conventional line of thinking, that which says only humans can be truly creative, that machines—when it comes to producing art—can only follow our lead.

"Computers are incredibly powerful for development, gaining time, aligning with the industry, but they shall never replace imagination," he says. "Creativity comes from somewhere else—a mystery that is the magic of, and the only reason for, human existence." ■