

“Right at Home: New Design Priorities”

Yves Béhar, Francesca Bettridge, Shashi Caan, Bill Dowell, Jane Langmuir, and Susan S. Szenasy

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In the twenty-first century, what needs to be done to ensure that homes are designed as healthy, accessible places for people of all ages? On February 17, 2005 Herman Miller and *Metropolis* hosted the panel discussion “Right at Home: New Design Priorities” at the New York Center for Architecture. Moderated by *Metropolis* editor in chief Susan S. Szenasy, the panel featured industrial designer Yves Béhar; lighting designer Francesca Bettridge; interior design educator and architect Shashi Caan; ergonomist Bill Dowell; and universal design specialist Jane Langmuir.

Susan Szenasy: I’ve been reading the papers and thought I’d share some things that may be appropriate to this evening’s conversation about design. Here’s a fact I found in Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies: In 2004, people in the United States spent \$127 billion remodeling homes.

And here’s something from *BusinessWeek* about marketing to the Boomer generation, which is about 80 million strong. Telemarketers are apparently reluctant to market to the Boomers because they wonder what these over-50 folks would want with marketing hype. But the Boomers say they want cool things—skiing equipment, speakers, and good stuff.

Here’s something from the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* that defines Baby Boomers: “They made hula-hoops a hit and Elvis a star. They popularized blue jeans, created casual Fridays, and were responsible for the sexual revolution and suburban sprawl.” And now they’re turning gray and their knees are creaking, but they still want cool stuff. A lot of what they’re demanding has to do with industrial design, interior design, and architecture.

On the environmental side, a study done at the University of Michigan estimated that the average American household could reduce its energy bills by 60 percent and save over \$52,000 in energy use over a home’s lifetime. The key to this is energy-efficient insulation, boilers, refrigerators, and air conditioners: products created by industrial designers.



[L-R] Bill Dowell, Francesca Bettridge, Jane Langmuir, Shashi Caan, and Yves Béhar.

Here's an article in the *L.A. Business Wire* that screams "Conservation. Conservation. Conservation"; it's about Governor Schwarzenegger's environmental program, which encourages improving California's energy efficiency by 20 percent. The program is very proud to report that the first from-the-ground-up condominium project since the 1980s will be built according to green standards.

From New Jersey, my home state, the *Asbury Park Press* reports on green homes under construction in Tewksbury, located in wealthy Hunterdon County. This development was initiated by a landscape architect who is betting that buyers of \$2.3 million dollar homes want to be eco-friendly.

From Alberta, Canada, there is news of construction going on using the region's abundant natural resource—wheat stalks. It is a great construction material, much of which is currently going to waste. Others have been talking about hay-bale construction for years; Canada is now strongly in favor of it. From Toronto comes news that designers are mimicking nature's curves and textures. This is a more stylistic understanding of the natural world, but increasingly designers are inspired by such things as biomorphic and neo-organic shapes. *Wired* magazine has dubbed this trend "Tech Nouveau."

Even Dilbert is getting into the act of redesigning the American home. Scott Adams, the comic strip's creator, told the *LA Times* that a majority of people who design houses hate the people who live in them. He says that he is painfully aware that designers are leaving useful things out of the home. What does Scott Adams think is useful? A litter box for his cat. He says there are 90 million cats, so we have got to design for them; it's a design challenge. Dilbert doesn't have a living room or a dining room, so Dilbert's new living room features a cat home and a Christmas tree on wheels.

Okay, designers, let's not get upset. This is what voters who went on Scott Adams's Web site told him. What they also say is that kids' bathrooms should be tiled with a drain in the middle, so you can wash the tile and wash the children at the same time.

This concludes my tour of the contemporary press about home design. We are about to have our own discussion about the design of our homes, so let's begin with our interior design educator, Shashi Caan. Shashi, tell us your idea about what our future holds.

Shashi Caan: I don't design homes, so this is a good question to ask someone who thinks about space, architecture, human beings, and science. I really had to think hard about this question and decided to share a general point of view.

The first shelter we called home was not built. Many thousands of years ago, we lived in caves, inside meta-structures we found. We had no amenities and used sand to wash our hands. Today, we live in cubes. We live inside man-made meta-structures we call apartments, which are getting smaller by the day. Today we wash our hands with Purell.

So in our ancient living configuration, we had the ability to support ourselves by relying on nature. We walked out of our cave, killed deer, and picked berries for survival, but the ratio of demand was such that the natural environment could fully sustain us. Looking forward, this ratio will continue to reverse. Humans will increase the need to sustain the natural environment, providing we don't self-destruct in the process.

Our population is rapidly increasing. We think about this all the time in the context of the Far East, China and India, but I read in the New York Times two weeks ago that the American population is predicted to increase by 33 percent by the year 2030. As we all know, this increase sits with the aging population. By the year 2030 it is predicted that the average life-span will be 125 years. Susan points out a Baby-Boomer generation that is demanding cool products. What does that look like? We think of creaking knees now, but what about when we reach 125?

Given the technological advancements and increase of population, it is probable we will live in virtual spaces, and probably in one room. We will have one room with the capacity to transform it into whatever kind of environment we want, using technologies to make the change. For instance, if we want a romantic dinner setting for two, a single room transforms to support that activity. Perhaps it has sensitized technological walls or images. Perhaps we will wear goggles and have surround-sound that will give us the ability to be in the Bahamas, so we may experience vacation in our single room. We are exploring all of this in experimental work in architecture and we are doing it through the guise of exploring new technologies and new materials. It is pretty cool-looking.

In some ways the technology and materials that astronauts live with are an impossibility we made possible by desiring to go to the moon. These astronauts live disconnected from earth in a world that is different from life as we understand it. We can be anywhere, literally, so the challenge for the designer is to stay grounded and begin to understand the realm of the emotional, perceptual, and experimental aspects of our being.

Today, we have a better understanding of our ergonomics, but we know very little about who we will become or who we are inside spaces, including our homes. The question of how we can design healthy places accessible for people of all ages is a fundamental, critical question. We have very little understanding of this. Bill Dowell will talk about sitting in a chair and feeling comfort. What does that mean?

We're not that different from our ancestors. We are human beings of the same bones, blood, and muscles regardless of where we come from. This is another interesting factor in all of our futures—the shrinking globe. So who are we?

Twelve of our students are experimenting with the change of color and light in a 9-by-9-by-9-foot environment. They found that when they became a group, they all sat down. They actually were much quieter, but they were much happier in a warmer, brighter, reddish room. We don't know much about this—we have a lot of hearsay, but this is the kind of knowledge

that we need, along with a lot of the other attributions dealing with sustainability and understanding our world.

Szenasy: Color theories have been around for years. But now we are able to document people's behavior through film and other technologies. So are we a better off in understanding physical environment as a result of the technologies that we are using?

Caan: Susan, I think it is a really interesting question. It has always been easy to perceive the phenomenon of color, which we know very little about. It is easy two-dimensionally to experiment with color. Now we have the ability to actually explore it three-dimensionally with movement and change. Therefore, we can begin to design differently.

Szenasy: Next up is Bill Dowell, our ergonomist.

Bill Dowell: A couple weeks ago, I got an E-mail from Susan that outlined tonight's events. She asked me to be intentionally provocative in my comments. This worried me because quite often I am provocative, but hardly ever is it intentional. So her note did prompt me into thinking: what would be provocative to talk about? This may not be provocative to you, but it is to an ergonomist.

I'd like to start with in-your-face ergonomics. [Bill shows a series of snow shovels.] Whenever I think of in-your-face ergonomics, I think of snow shovels. Many promote themselves as being ergonomic in some respect. But even the ergonomic communities can't agree on what angle the direction of the handle should be in order for it to be called ergonomic. The other side of the coin is products like cell phones that don't pay attention to the human interface. Unless you are three-years-old, the keys are not made for your fingers.

There are also civil ergonomics. Some examples are the OXO Good Grips handles. It's not in-your-face ergonomics. This is well-thought-out ergonomics and, in some cases, as Jane will probably tell us, it is called universal design.

I get inspiration from [the designer] Bill Stumpf, who is observant and provocative himself. I had the pleasure of working with Bill on the Aeron program; he was writing a book on the decline of civility as he was developing the Aeron chair. This is where I get much of my inspiration, [as well as] from Chris Alexander, the author of A Pattern Language.

I'd like to mention the front-porch bench and entry room where there are ergonomic components. Some of these components are built-in seats and waist-high shelves, but these items can be furniture as much as they can be architecture. This is important and has to do with back injury.

Back injuries account for 40 percent of the lost-work-time injuries in the United States. Back injuries can happen in a variety of ways—strains, tears, or pulls. They're cumulative in nature and, quite often, they happen from bending over to pick up something on the floor. Doing this over and

over again, twisting, and turning the torso cumulatively stress your body and add up in back injuries.

If you think about an entryway where you don't have to stoop over to pick up the things you are bringing into the house, or stoop over to put on your shoes as you are leaving the house, you are keeping with the patterns that Chris Alexander advocates as good ergonomics. Some examples of entryways that adhere to patterns of civil ergonomics include a bench built into the side of the house and side entryway. [Bill shows a series of entryways, some with benches and other seating, many empty of anything where packages, coats, etc. might be placed.] If you have something in your hand and you need to get keys to open the door, even if you were using biometrics, or a key pad of some sort, you still need a free hand or a place to put your packages.

A simple bench or a chair can be used to put your shoes on or place your goods on, to reduce the risk of back injuries. The place where I come and go from work adheres to a number of the patterns. To start, it's an alcove. It has a nice bench. It has nice art work that is best viewed from a short distance, so I can enjoy the art as I am putting down my brief case and my laptop. I can put my coat away in that closet. There's only one problem. It says it's for customers only. We reserve the best places at Herman Miller for our customers. Since there are a couple of Herman Miller people here tonight, I am probably busted.

Modern architecture doesn't pay a lot of attention to ergonomic patterns. Some beautiful houses have no place to put down the packages or what's in your arms. Things like levers are good: you don't have to have both your hands free to open the door.

I've got a theory: most houses seem to be designed for people who aren't burdened by pedestrian belongings. They are people who have one bag at the most and have their other hand free. Common folk like myself—people who are often carrying way too much—need a bench. We need a place to unload.

Back injury can come in two ways. If you are unloading a case of beer or if you are loading airplanes, you may be at high risk, but just as high risk are those who sit for long periods of time. In our homes we spend long periods of time sitting with our computers—often beautiful computers in beautiful rooms. [Bill shows a series of glamour shots from magazines, including ads where the laptop is front and center, where the interior design shows a lack of understanding of ergonomics.] But the way magazines show these homes, you would probably have to stand to use the computer and bend at the waist. If you pulled up a stool, you wouldn't have room for your legs or a place for your arms.

A person's work-surface height may be dictated by the files he has underneath him. When your elbows are below your work surface height, you are doing a lot of risky work with your shoulders and back. With laptop computers, we're tempted to put them down anywhere and twist our bodies around to use them. Sometimes we stay in these postures for long periods of time without knowing we're doing so. A British ergonomist in the late

'80s coined the term “yuppie hump.” It refers to spending long periods of time with your laptops in places that were not designed for laptops.

If you are going to use your computers at home, have a place where you can sit down, spread out your work, and have a good viewing angle of the monitor. You can choose the postures in which you sit. Winston Churchill was the one to say, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” It’s that way with technology. Technology is starting to shape us. So I am promoting a good place to work.

TV is almost as big of a culprit. If you put a TV high in the wall, which is really popular these days, you run the risk of clinical spine injuries. Even if the TV is at a normal height, a lot of times we put ourselves in a position that only bird watchers should be adhering to.

The last point is about putting loads up too high. Any load above the shoulder level shouldn’t be over seven pounds. When the arm is 90 degrees, we have the most strength. This usually means keeping the load close to the body because you can’t get the 90-degree arm strength when the load’s above the shoulder.

And last of all, I have a point about shaking your booty. A couple of weeks ago there was a study released about a number of Mayo Clinic researchers who chose 20 people—ten of them obese and ten not—and measured each of their subjects’ movements every half second for two weeks. They did this for several hours at a time.

I know how difficult it is to reduce data like that, but these researchers did it, and came to interesting conclusions. They measured what is called Non-Exercised Activity Thermogenesis, or NEAT. It is a contrived acronym for the movements, which they measured in time because people were performing certain activities.

The obese people moved on average two-and-a-half hours less a day than the non-obese people did. They burned 350 calories less a day than non-obese people did. And what the researchers concluded is that these NEAT activities—cooking (how ironic), playing games, playing instruments—are activities that people do who are not obese. They can burn off calories and keep activity levels up in the home. So I would even promote having a party as a NEAT activity. So try not to be tempted by your technology at home. Get a place to put your stuff down on the bench.

Szenasy: Bill, why is it that the home is so neglected in terms of ergonomics? You are always studying the office and office ergonomics. There are so many interesting things being done and home design seems to be lacking in so much.

Dowell: In the office-furniture industry, we have the luxury of there being only three or four major players who have the power to broadcast information about ergonomics. A couple of years ago we went to an ergonomics show with an addition to the Aeron chair, called the PostureFit, and won the show’s grand prize. This is a pretty good deal, but the

runner-up was the guy with the ergonomic shovel. There are plenty of good ideas out there, beyond the office-furniture industry.

Szenasy: We would like the lighting designer, Francesca Bettridge, to come up and speak.

Francesca Bettridge: In the field of lighting design, the innovations often start in the commercial sector and then find their way to the residential. Our company has a wide range of clients—from parks and museums to libraries and performing art centers—but we also do residences. I have to say that the residences that we get involved with tend to be high-end and not your typical users' home. And over the years of being in business, we have found that there are different trends that happen in the lighting and design industries. These are political or economic reasons and our design has to adjust to them.

Right now, all of our designs, whether they are residential or commercial, have to take into account energy-efficient sources: light sources that can be maintained environmentally. You want florescent lamps that you can throw away and that have low mercury content. There is much more of awareness of energy efficiency and the environmental impact of lighting than there was 20 years ago.

People want spaces that look good and that have the right quantity, quality, and color of light. Our approach to lighting design, whether it is a commercial or residential project, is really the same. We begin by asking, "What are we lighting?" and "How can we make people look and feel good in their spaces?"

We often use the same lighting sources. For example, in the Presidential Center, we used a lot of incandescent sources and MR16s that we will also use in residents' spaces, whether it is wall-washing or accent lighting. It is important to use well-designed fixtures—the ones where you can use the same lamp but you can get a very different effect just by the reflectors or lenses that are in the fixtures themselves.

Energy requirements are driving projects right now, so many projects want to go for a LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a rating system used by the U.S. Green Building Council to determine the relative environmental friendliness of a project] certification. A building now going up on Sixth Avenue and W. 42nd Street is going for a platinum LEED certification, which is quite extraordinary for a building that size.

To achieve a LEED rating, we have to try to get the quantity and quality of light we want burning the least amount of watts. That pushes us to use the latest technology as part of our design process. To be honest, if I didn't have any requirements and could use incandescent wherever I wanted to, I would be a happy camper because there are a lot of things that we can control with those sources.

You are given these new challenges, and what they do is push you to come up with creative solutions that have to do with sources that can be maintained, that don't use a lot of energy, and that mimic the quality and

colors of incandescent lighting. There are projects that combine both commercial and residential sources.

So, if you walk through New York's Time Warner Center, you may notice a lot of MR16s providing ambient light through the public spaces, but that the tall surfaces are lit with metal halide and color-corrected sources. Those are the sources that have not made their way to the residential market because you can't control them as easily. They're more expensive. And that is one of the ironies of energy efficient design—it costs more, at least initially.

Sometimes on projects where they value engineering, you find yourself falling back on less-efficient sources because they can be approved more easily. There are performing arts centers and theaters whose lighting shares much with residential lighting; in theaters, you are more likely to have incandescent lighting that can be dimmed. Up at Jazz at Lincoln Center, a lot of those spaces are lit with halogen A-lamps, which have a regular light bulb. You can go into Duane Reade, Home Depot, or Bed Bath and Beyond and get those sources that actually put out a wider light that lasts longer and has a higher lumen output, which is what we are also using in commercial applications.

LEDs [light emitting diodes] have low energy use and extremely long life—we are talking about 50,000 to 100,000 hours—depending on the quality and color of the LED. There is a lot less heat with LEDs. The heat actually comes out of the back of the light source. This is the source of the future.

As do all light sources, LEDs start off as commercial and eventually went residential. One reason for this is price, another is the kinds of fixtures that are available using these light sources.

At the World Trade Center, we are actually using the whole base of the building as an art installation. Now you have technology where you have the ability to use light for architecture as well as art. You can control lights and mix intensities and colors.

Another light source is fiber optics, which also crosses over between home and commercial use, such as lighting a glass collection with very small points of light and keeping the heat away from the glass. Or it can be used in the decorative sense, such as a constellation on a ceiling in the home of some very rich people. The point I'm making is that there are new light sources that do make their way eventually to the home. And consumer demand is what helps manufacturers develop new technologies and fixtures.

Szenasy: You can't really shove LEDs into light bulbs, can you?

Bettridge: Well, they are doing that: they are putting LED into different shapes of light bulbs. LEDs are now used for Christmas tree lights. All the neon signs will go by the wayside and become LED, because the bulbs are

low voltage. You can change colors. They have a much easier installation and last longer.

Szenasy: Jane Langmuir has done a great deal of research in universal design, and that mean design for every age and stage of one's life.

Jane Langmuir: I was a bit overwhelmed when I saw the task set before us: redefine the American home. This is an amazing challenge. Maybe redefine means to redesign. Our challenge transcends the course description because what we really need to do is step back from the labels: the terminology of “universal” and “sustainable” design makes our eyes gloss over, especially the eyes of our clients.

We need to embrace our fundamental challenge and charge as designers. We are responsible for creating a better, more functional, and more aesthetically pleasing world for all people; “all people” is key here. It has been proven over and over again that when designers design for the extreme, the results are good design for the mean. For example, when you think about design, you might think about a car, an elevator, a bridge, a table, a bed, a watch, a suit—all of these things are good design in the universal context for all people. Perhaps it's just the size that changes.

When I was at RISD, I was involved in a major project—the universal kitchen project—which made us think about redesigning the kitchen for the twenty-first century. In fact, we didn't even call it the kitchen. We considered it a place for all in the extended family to work and nourish themselves on a daily basis and, perhaps, several times a day. Water, fire, surface, and storage are the basic elements that we studied when we set about the task of researching a functional and working kitchen that would be a beautiful retreat for a lifetime.

Akiko Busch, who is a writer for *Metropolis* magazine, wrote a stunning piece on the conference “Universal Design: Access to Daily Living,” which took place in New York in 1992. In it, she was searching for an understanding of this new language used to describe design: universal access. She defined access as one thing leading to another, where all things come together, as if in a work of art. This was as close to barrier-free as she could get. She wrote that her father, at the age of 78 and suffering from pulmonary fibrosis, took a trip across the country, traveling in his Pontiac with an adjustable seat. He headed south where even in January he could keep the windows down. Everyday for lunch, he would pull up at the drive-thru window at McDonalds and, afterwards, pull over on the side of the road, recline his seat, and take a rest. At the end of the day he would stop at a motel where he would take a ground-floor room to use as his place of rest.

For me, this story is a metaphor for the four things critical to our thinking about the new American home. 1) A car on the road: we must think of movement free of obstacles; 2) the adjustable seat in the car: we need to be thinking about furniture that supports multiple tasks and users; 3) the drive-thru window: that is a place where we meet the common ground, the comfort zone, as all things can happen within a comfortable place;

and 4) the motel: an on-grade access, which is really a substitute for stairs. So, imagine stripping all of the walls and rooms as we know them today. What do we have left? The act of living. Our job is to redesign and redefine what supports that experience.

In the movie [*Real Voices*, screened before the panel discussion], Bill Stumpf made a wonderful comment: What designers need to do is to make people comfortable. And it's not about naming or using this idea of "universal" or "accessible" design, because these words have no meaning yet. What we need to do is have something so deeply rooted in our understanding about design that we can bring a sense of comfort to all people. What we really need to do as designers is to create good design.

Szenasy: Jane, every designer says that they are designing for comfort. What is the missing link here?

Langmuir: Possibly it is our perception about comfort. Making people comfortable is the ability to provide a design solution that becomes a seamless solution for the user, so that he or she is not conscious of something being uncomfortable or difficult. As Bill Stumpf was saying, comfort is not something that needs to be defined; it is understood. It exists. And the way to achieve this is to do informed analysis, deal with ergonomics, and do time-motion studies. But the ultimate result needs to be seamless. The result needs to provide the user with comfort without awareness.

Szenasy: You had a very strong experience at RISD when you were working on the Universal Kitchen. Generations of people worked together really well, and the 20-year-olds weren't afraid of thinking about getting older. How do we begin to get generations to talk to one another instead of being afraid that "I am going to grow old and I am going to look like my grandfather and, heaven forbid, I am going to kill myself before that happens"?

Langmuir: This won't happen until you have a profound "Ah ha!" experience. My experience of working with over 100 students at RISD was that at the end of each studio, there was that "Ah ha!" because you cannot go through the process of evaluating and studying the movements and activities of people time and time again without realizing what they need.

We videotaped people's movements, looked at where the key decision points were, and ultimately created something that was so profoundly right. As designers we need to continue to spread this opportunity to get engaged in the teaching process. When an idea comes to your mind, it is not something that you hold in isolation, but something you give out and beyond yourself.

Szenasy: Yves Béhar is our industrial designer.

Yves Béhar: I don't have many examples of homes that work. Basically mine doesn't work and it's mostly because I can't build everything fast enough. And if it doesn't work in my home, then I suspect it doesn't

work in your home, either. This is essentially what we need to look at in the home. There is this amazing new technology: Wi-Fi. We are finally liberated from the wire, no longer tethered to the wall or plug. We are going to be able to work with power in different ways.

Thanks to laptop computers, work is in the home. Entertainment is also moving into the home in ways that are very significant, such as home theaters in living rooms. The home is a very different place from what it used to be. There are new sets of activities and functional needs that have come into the home and have absolutely nothing to do with tea at four in the afternoon and the formality of the way homes are designed. The formality of the couch, table, and two chairs on the other side has little place in our everyday life today. If we really look at the way we live, it's obvious that we need to be thinking beyond that.

Ergonomics in the home are not really looked at; not in furniture or in structural design. People break their toes when stepping out of the shower because of the water retainers. In my house I created a wave instead. Everyone is blown away and that is the main thing they remember about my house: that there is a wave between the main portion of the bathroom and the shower. It's such a simple solution.

Somebody suggested I should have a sling coming down from the ceiling to support my head, and that certainly would be more comfortable than what I am doing right here. [Yves showed a picture of himself hanging from his chair, over his laptop]. In such positions every single one of us is guaranteed a serious back ache within five to 15 minutes.

We have all this intelligence from the big commercial furniture companies, which spend a lot of time and energy convincing us that their chair is more ergonomic than another. Why isn't anyone looking into this in the home? At the end of the day, we spend more time at home than at work, and the amount of attention that it is starting to come out of these issues is extremely low. I can't explain why that is the case.

Another element is style. There is a lot of conversation about in which style this home is designed, or the ways that something fits a certain current style. At the same time, the way we live today is a lot more casual and informal; it's a lot more eclectic. People are making their own choices about what they think works and doesn't work from a stylistic standpoint. So designers really need to go beyond style, because it makes for a really boring conversation. I am always amazed by how much more personal things can be when people have the courage and confidence to make their own choices in the home.

Finally, the conversation about sustainability and clean materials is by and large absent from the catalogues, brochures, showrooms, and stores from where we pick our furniture and home environment. There is an amazing interest in organic foods. The organic markets in San Francisco and New York are doing great. At the same time, we don't even think for a second about the kind of materials we bring into the home, the kind of foams, plastics, and fabrics that are probably more toxic than walking into McDonalds.

We need to look for corporate responsibility from the companies from which we purchase our products. While the public has an amazing awareness for corporate responsibility in the way that our sneakers and clothes are made, we should be ready as consumers to question that piece of furniture that we bring into the home, whether it is celebrated as good design or not.

I think that all of the work is in front of us. A lot of research into ergonomics and materials has been done, but nobody has put it together into a comprehensive strategy for the home. What we need to do is continue to look for physical and emotional fulfillment. I would like to mention one interesting statistic. In 1993, people were asked to name the things they mostly wanted and needed in their lives. “Owning things” was number four, while “new experiences” was number nine. Well, that statistic has been entirely reversed in 2004. Today new experiences are more important than owning things. This is what we will be looking for—new experiences, not new products that tend to do the same things they have done in the past.

Szenasy: Yves, talk a little bit more about those new experiences.

Béhar: If you look at what people are purchasing for their homes today—home theaters, Wi-Fi systems, replicators, products that give you the ability to watch media in many different places—a lot of that is being purchased by a broad range of consumers.

Next up was a Q&A session with the panelists that confirmed that in the twenty-first century, we will need the expertise of all design disciplines, as well as that of sociologists, psychologists, and an enlightened public.

Question: There are so many buzz words today. As a designer I’m really unclear how to navigate in this area.

Szenasy: That is true. But I think we need these buzzwords right now because we have gotten so far away from human needs, nature, and those things that give us life. How are you navigating, Yves?

Béhar: The main thing about ergonomics is, how does a chair, for instance, feel to you?

Langmuir: What you ultimately want to do is to deepen the clients’ program, so that it’s a program made specifically for them. There’s a fundamental thing that we designers think about: it is the things that make living better. This might be the entrance and how you do the steps.

So rather than saying, “Well, you know, you really can’t have steps,” we need to build standards that address the entry that is on-grade and steps. We need to find a language of solutions for the home that are natural and fundamental. So we have entry issues, we have kitchen issues, we have bathroom issues, we have laundry issues, and we have stair issues. What do we do about the elderly grandmother who is going to come home and live with you? We need to think about such things.

One way to think about it is to consider the home as having a transitional space, one where the family plays or your study room that may become a room for you when you're older—a space in transition.

Szenasy: But we move on in America. It's like we are having trouble staying in the same place and adapting to it. We don't have a culture that says maybe we'll move into this house and grow old there. That is the old way. The new way is that you are always trading up and your house is a piece of real estate; it's not your home. Is that why the American house is such a mess?

Béhar: In Europe, we don't leave our house every five years: we look at things on a longer time scale. But what I do see is that it's fundamentally improper and foolish to think about buying things for essentially cosmetic reasons, be they a cereal box, a medicine bottle, or a home.

Dowell: When people hear a product is “ergonomic,” they are going to believe that it is. And that's not necessarily so, especially in the ways we use our computers at home. We have a lot of technology in our homes that wasn't there before.

Szenasy: You say people know what's good for them, and yet designers seem to be a bit out of touch with these people when they design products or interiors. There seems to be missing information between the people who use things and the people who design them.

Béhar: I think designers are quite sensitive. I don't think the designers are missing the mark as much as they might get stuck in styles.

Langmuir: I have to speak to this issue. We get many products that are very uncomfortable. And we adjust our bodies to them. We take risks in doing that because we are not working efficiently. The kitchen is a prime example of this because it was designed some 65 years ago. And so we have a 36-inch counter for everybody and we have upper cabinets that are 18 inches above the countertop. And we have refrigerators that you have to get down and break your back to get into. So people think that that's the way it's supposed to be.

Szenasy: It seems to me that no matter what interior designers or architects do, they will have a tough time remedying the misfit between products—the work of industrial designers. Is this a symptom of the design professions not talking to one another? I have yet to hear a dialogue between an interior designer and an architect. One of them is always beating up the other. How do we get this dialogue going?


Caan: You have posed a really difficult question to us, to think about making healthy homes for everyone in the twenty-first century. The twenty-first century defined by what? The home is the most intimate environment. And designers know about style, about ergonomics, about buzz words—we have a kind of specialized knowledge. So for me the designer, the problem is to create balance.

For me, design is almost less about the function than about individuals. They love their fridge and that's what they want and you've got to work with it. For years we had these talks about the refrigerator being much deeper than the kitchen cabinets; the designer of one clearly hasn't consulted with the designer of the other. And it all comes together in an area we call home.

When I think about home, it's where I get to dream, it's where I get to relax, and it's where I get to play. I have found a ritual of living that allows me to be home. To regroup myself, to get prepared for a world out there that can be hostile and challenging. So what is the thing called home, this sanctuary?

I'm very provoked by these questions, but they're not easy. But I can't accept that it is simply about setting standards on how I walk in and out of my home. I think as much as our world is about standardization, it's also about cutting corners. There is an actual desire for us not to be tied to standardization.

Langmuir: Standards are supposed to be used to set a baseline, so maybe the word standard is inappropriate. Maybe it's really about the goals, the base of which you put into creating this personal environment. It's where we express ourselves with our families, so our home should be comfortable in all ways, for everyone there.

Bettridge: I see our role as asking the right questions. If you give people choice and find out what kind of design they want to invest in, then you have to explain each option. Just in terms of lighting, we go through the process of asking our clients if they like a lot of light or a little, how does your wife feel about it, how do your kids feel? So our job as designers is a combination of being a teacher and student. And it's about being a very good listener. 

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