

KARIM RASHID MAY BE AN ECCENTRIC FUTURIST,

TECHNI-COLOR

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COLOR ME
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BUT WHO SAYS THAT'S NECESSARILY A BAD THING?

BY SHONQUIS MORENO.
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FEW DESIGNERS CAN PRODUCE enough work in a lifetime to keep a small shop brimming, but Karim Rashid has stocked his eponymous Chelsea design studio with everything from wall-coverings to shoes, baby bottles to shampoo bottles. (Rashid produced the final item on that list for the Athens Semiramis Hotel, which he designed top to bottom, from the slippers and sherbet-colored swimming pool to the digital headboards.) He's even got a glossy DJ booth; he moonlights as DJ Kreemy. This is undoubtedly the studio of a designer who might, as Rashid in fact did, title a book *I Want to Change the World*.

Rashid continues on his mission with the lushly illustrated *KarimSpace: The Interior Design and Architecture of Karim Rashid* (Rizzoli). Born in Cairo but raised in the U.K. and Canada, where he earned his first industrial-design degree, Rashid later studied in Italy under Ettore Sottsass, opening his own firm in Manhattan in 1993. The designer has been known to stir controversy; in some quarters, his pop aesthetic and a gushingly utopian—and made-up—language (featuring vocabulary nuggets like *nutopia* and *digipop*) have exhausted even his fans. Rashid's intelligence and his impossibly prolific output, however, have allowed him to work at every scale and across the globe: Last year, he designed Belgrade's Café Majik, a cacophony of translucent color, amorphous apertures, and embedded technology. February saw the launch of his third hotel, the budget Prizeotel in Bremen, along with products in 38 countries and counting. And recently, the designer was the subject of a lavish solo exhibition in São Paulo. Framed in the storefront of his studio, dressed in his signature pink T-shirt and white jeans, with violet Alain Mikli bubble glasses and a metallic-purple skinny belt, Rashid is as much one of his own designs as anything else in the room. He spoke with us about Spock, *KarimSpace*, the coming of what he refers to as the "casual age," and the joy of traveling lightly through life.

In your new book, you say that you approach the design of each object the same way, whether it's a watch or a building. I philosophically approach each project the same way. There are three inspiring things for me. One is to address contemporary human behavior. What are our needs, desires? And within that, I believe in "casualization" or "casualism," a sort of post-WWII, subversive American agenda to be more casual about the way we live, the lifestyle of living in jeans. I just read that 77 percent of the world's shoe market is running shoes, so it's obviously the "casual age" we're living in. The other parts of casualization are softer furniture, rubbery materials, more relaxed chairs. We sit back more. We eat in front of the TV. We sit closer to the floor. When I did the Oh chair [for Umbra] in 1999, my agenda was to make a chair that was more reclined, flexible, and lightweight.

Second, I'm inspired to try to create something that's original. I can't sleep at night if I'm just repeating history. The tricky part of design is that we're perpetually revisiting the archetype. Sometimes we need to do away with the archetype. Or ask, "Do we really need to add to that product category?" Originality is also a way to change the product landscape, to become the catalyst for change and inspire. I've decided I'm not on this earth to design a good product

or a good interior. I think I'm only on this earth to inspire. I'm better at that, in a way.

The third thing that inspires me is: If I'm going to shape the future, I have to be prescient. Designers don't see the future, but we see how life is changing. So my agenda is technology. Technology is a form of inspiration.

What do you mean when you describe a product as "technorganic?" *Technorganic* is [about] using technology to create some sense of human language. Take my wallpaper, Digital Nature for Wolf-Gordon: You couldn't do that pattern without a computer, but at the same time, it doesn't really look like technology; it looks more like a forest or bones.

Other than a quick little sketch—I sketch constantly, still—everything is moved to data right away. I've had a rapid prototyping machine in the studio for 12 years, so I can create form that I know is mass-producible because the data is transferred directly to tooling.

The word *technorganic* is a little loose. You could argue that it's a casualization of the language. But to live in a casual condition is to really be alive; you make personal choices. When things were formal, you were following guidelines. Living in the "casual age," I eat when I want to eat, and I work when I want to work. I work from anywhere. I like being seamless.

I'm into not carrying anything with me. It's because I run around the world a lot. I never check a bag. It's amazing how little I have: I have the Air [laptop]; I have a phone. I never carry cash; I carry one credit card. So I have no wallet—I just put the card in my pocket. I do these things to challenge myself: This is the way I would like to live.

At your exhibition at the Ohtake Center in São Paulo, I loved the monodose cosmetics you designed for Prada. Along with the Karim Rashid mannequin... You saw my creepy avatar? [Laughs]

Yeah, I rounded a corner, and it scared me! But that Prada project has a really elegant Space Age modularity. When I met with Miuccia Prada in 2002, I was talking about this world that I'm talking about now: how we're all mobile and global, how Americans move every four years. So why do we still have to make a formal bottle? On the one hand, it's a really nice icon. But the reality is, with cosmetics, I'm taking product samples, and I travel with them. Instead, you can buy a box of ampules and use one every day or you take 10 when you're traveling for 10 days.

The other thing that struck me in São Paulo was your prolific sketching. If you're traveling all the time, where do you do the most, and best, design? I do the best work on an airplane because I'm in



kut table for tonelli,
italy, 2008



dish and hand soaps,
method, 2004



snap chair for feek,
belgium, 2008



KARIM RASHID
in his
apartment in
new york city

my own little cocoon. I put really good music on, and I have a little Wacom, so I draw on my laptop. And that's it. I also find I'm really creative when I'm with my staff. The other place that ideas come very, very fast is when the client is there, saying what they want.

You've had some radical ideas about retail design. Give an example of how you've envisioned reshaping the shopping experience.

I'm a little too ahead of the curve. In 1998, Giorgio Armani asked me to rebrand him for the 21st century in three small shops. I proposed a shop with no clothing in it. The idea was that you would go in and have your body scanned by hundreds of little cameras and see yourself in 3-D in big LCD "mirrors." I wanted to have the Armani archives come up, and you drag the clothes onto your body. It didn't get built because, at the time, technology was very costly, and Armani was also concerned that the idea was too radical.

Now, you can do these things very easily. It's no wonder retail is plummeting. I think retail is finished. I think bricks and mortar is finished. For the past three to four years now, anytime I want anything, I purchase it on the Internet. I rarely go into a physical store anymore. Why? The Internet is a global marketplace. If I want pink running shoes for men, size 45/12, I'll run around the city all day and exhaust myself trying to find them. But type in "pink men's sneakers," and—boom.

There was a big moment when I realized the shopping experience is futile. It's obvious that the world is going to dematerialize more and more because we're finding ourselves having greater experiences with less and less. I design things, and that's probably why I believe that things have to be fantastic and inspiring and functional and better—because we don't really need them anymore.

Your forms are biomorphic—in contrast, frequently, with their architectural surroundings. Is this an intervention of sorts?

We can make architecture relatively austere, and we can do that because we're not really interfacing with it. But as soon as we interface with it, we need to think about the human body. So my work is more amorphous and soft. It's not to set myself apart from architecture as much as it is to really engage the human scale.

You seem to have created a character that is Karim Rashid. What does the design of this character have to say about the character of your design?

The way I've designed myself is [from] the desire to be somewhat technological and somewhat plastic. I mean, of the plastic age, not physically plastic. It's also a desire to separate myself from the profession. I don't want to feel like I'm a part of a community. I want to really vocalize my individuality.

So you think of it as a genuine "design."

That came from childhood. I admired Spock and people who were more alien, cyber-like. I was obsessed with science fiction. I read everything that Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov did. That time was really a utopic period for thinking about future worlds and the cosmos and leaving this planet. When I was eight or nine years old, everybody had clear furniture; people were living in a more contemporary context than we are today.

We were reaching for the future then more than we are today? Yeah. In 1969, my family went to Vermont on vacation. We stopped at this bar with pick-ups out front and a Pabst Blue Ribbon sign hanging in the window. Neil Armstrong put his foot on the moon at the moment we walked into the bar, and he said, "One small step for man..." and it was almost like one step backwards for all mankind. Why? Because that was when the optimism and futurism came to a halt. It's coming back in different ways, but back then there was really a hope that we would be living on the moon and places beyond it. When we realized it was a dead rock, we realized we had nowhere to go. And we started to cocoon, to go back to the earth.

You were born in Cairo and raised in the U.K. and Canada, but have established an internationally successful studio in New York City. Do you think of yourself as an American designer? I think of myself as a global citizen and a global designer. I'm working in 38 countries right now.

When you work, are you primarily solving the problems at hand? Yeah. But I don't really call design problem-solving anymore because I think that we've solved all of the problems. It's beyond that. You could always argue that there are "problems." But if you make a chair that's uncomfortable, you should just be shut down. Ever since the advent of computer-aided machinery, we're not really making that many advances in the physical production world. There are no excuses to put out a bad product anymore.

What is the role of hard work and optimism in your success?

Any advice for a young designer today?

My favorite words are perseverance, diligence, and consistency.