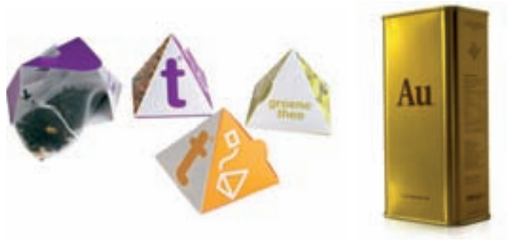
IN A NUTSHELL

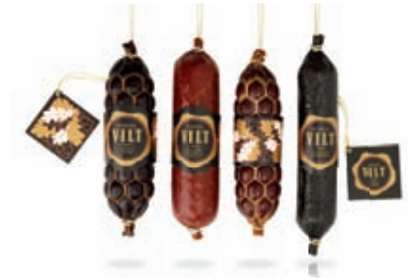
In the beginning, humans didn't need packaging. They had gourds, shells and leaves, hollow logs or bark, baskets, animal organs, wineskins and amphorae. But as they moved away from hunting and gathering to agriculture and mercantilism, traders needed to store and transport their merchandise; measure it out in equal amounts for comparable pricing; protect it from contamination and theft; and, as exports travelled beyond the region of manufacture, a way to make their products – and companies – appear recognisable and reliable. The solution? Packaging. The first trademark adorned a relatively simple glass jar of English cough drops in 1866; by the mid-20th century, however, the overdesign of packaging had become rampant. Products began to shout each other down across the aisles of supermarkets – and the cacophony of overconsumption had begun.



POWER TO THE PEOPLE

At the outset of the 21st century, the design of new commercial packaging is increasingly shaped by international and national trade decisions. The European Union, for example, decided to lift packaging regulations instead of trying to synchronise standards across its 27 member nations. This encourages competition and innovation in design certainly, but such a plethora of sizes, shapes and costs for similar products may also create confusion amongst shoppers. Fortunately, today's consumer is more educated and powerful than ever. With access to the Internet, shoppers can research products and tap into forums and discussions to compare notes. As Chris Zawada, founder of Canadian blog Lovely Packaging, puts it: "No longer is just having an eye-catching and compelling package enough to convince people to buy your product." And yet, design can have a massive impact on sales. "When we're doing a client's packaging, we're branding for them," explains Leif Steiner, owner of graphic design agency Moxie Sozo from Boulder, Colorado, which repackaged a fruit-and-nut-bar, increasing its baseline sales seven-fold. The client had to dump thousands bars in the old wrappers because they weren't selling anymore. "Every time we've done a client's packaging, it hasn't been: Can they afford to do a redesign?" says Steiner. "It's been: How can they afford to not do a redesign?"

WANT IT, DON'T WASTE IT



As climate change rocks the world, it is also rocking the design world. "At this point in the history of industry, those who integrate environmentally friendly solutions into their practice will be in demand," warns design professor Sylvain Allard of the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM). "Those who resist will simply be pushed out of the market."

The pressure on companies to go green comes not just from the consumers, but also from up and down the supply chain and, not least, from their own bookkeepers. Packaging has been an obvious place to begin. Germans now leave packaging at the supermarket to be recycled, which means that supermarkets, in turn, put pressure on producers to reduce their packaging. In the UK, shoppers can bring their own boxes to buy cereal, and almost everywhere, there is a move from bottled water to tap, not just in homes and restaurants, but hotels.

There are many shades of green, from "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" to making the best of what you've inherited and then passing it down to the next generation. "I think the biggest consumer misconception in this area is that for packaging to be sustainable, it has to be minimal," says Lovely Packaging's Chris Zawada. "But this isn't the case. The companies doing it right are sourcing local packaging facilities, using local production and dissecting every step in their process to see how to reduce their carbon footprint."

Another misconception? Although plastic has been widely vilified, most designers know that it is more important to decrease the amount of material used than to get rid of polymers altogether. Sure, the calculus – local plastic vs. imported paper – can get confusing. And because green has gone mainstream only recently, a lot of companies are "greenwashing" to sell more products, in much the same way that 17th-century English merchants sold inferior merchandise to a naïve public, inspiring the first officially trademarked product. "But we're also seeing a genuine shift," suggests Moxie Sozo's Steiner. "Whereas before companies said, 'Make this look green,' they are now actually trying to make it green because they understand that that will translate into sales." Steiner–, who runs a carbon-neutral, renewable-energy-powered, zero-waste studio, with a compost bin in the alley out the back – works with printers who use wind power, among other things and is sought out by clients precisely for this walk-the-talk approach. He has watched the transition toward less material (hang tags instead of boxes, for instance), bio-based, biodegradable and recyclable materials and packaging that serves multiple purposes. In part, the trend is being

deepened by global economic woes: "A lot of great products and innovation have come out of smaller budgets and economic downturns because clients demand more effective solutions," Steiner says. "When the economy slows down, it shakes a lot of fossils loose."

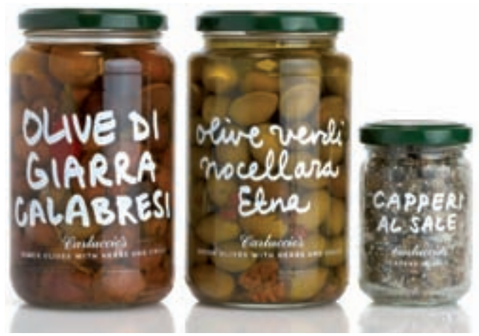
Sometimes, responsible packaging design is as simple as making a wrapper that the consumer wants to live with. Designers are building a second life into their packaging, giving an additional function to the container: an emptied wine box becomes a wine rack, a perfume bottle can be used as a travel case. A shoebox is used to store love letters or even the shoes, themselves. Sometimes this reuse is brief, but sometimes the box enjoys a longer "product" life than the product does. "In the near future, packaging may be re-purposed in different ways after it is used: converted into a game, a container, a message, furniture and so on," says Portland-based designer Chean Wei Law, aka undoboy, who has made game and music packaging. "People collect things, so beautiful, conceptual design generates enough extra value that people keep it and take pride in it."

BREAKING DOWN THE BOX

So what's the difference between packaging and prodigality? Designers'toolkits include a variety of three-dimensional (shape, material, construction) and two-dimensional elements (label, typography, illustration, colour, pattern) to soften the hard-sell, and to bridge the

advertising, shopping and post-purchase experiences of both products and brands. "Our job is to create a little voice on the shelf, when the consumer walks by, that winks at them to stand out among thousands of screaming voices," says Steiner. The most strategically packaged goods are gratuitous purchases, like chocolate or tea. Staple products, like eggs, are a more rational purchase; chocolate needs sex appeal. It doesn't need to speak to everyone walking by, but it needs to send out a siren call to a handful.

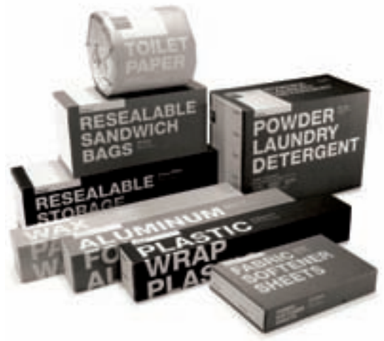
Standing in front of a shelf of the same product in different packing, a shopper will usually get a quick read (accurate or not) of which is the most or least valuable version. Packaging sometimes takes advantage of deeply held associations to hook buyers, using familiar wrappers that correspond with a particular but very different type of product – "candy cigarettes" are sticks of gum in a pack of smokes. This approach can be benign or manipulative, but it generates a sense of "gilt by association" that can spark the compulsive buy. Sometimes reverse psychology will do the trick, as well: even low-cost products boast more sophisticated package design today (like IKEA Food by Stockholm Design Lab), while some of the most expensive products (organic food, for instance) opt for a humble wrapper and handwritten labels to underscore the authenticity of the product.



Simplicity of design can be a merciful acknowledgement of today's widespread information overload or, conversely, an effort to generate more of it: "As computing power expanded in the last decade, we were faced with an onslaught of high-tech, 3D graphics," suggests Base Design New York partner Geoff Cook. "Now, perhaps in reaction to this trend, graphics are trending toward greater simplicity. With the web and various mobile devices becoming an increasingly important part of marketing and branding strategies, packaging design will be approached in an increasingly systematic way because its design elements must also be applied to motion graphics."

At other times, minimalism is used to express the pedigree or individuality of a product. Luxury packaging often differs from the mass-market by cultivating a covetous unapproachability. Berlin's Humeicki & Graef fragrances communicate their luxury through austerity. The naked rectangular bottles have an astringent but sensual economy. "The simplicity of the design should keep the focus on the most important thing, the fragrance," says H&G co-founder Sebastian Fischenich. "A perfume flacon is just packaging, a 'reliquiar' for a very exceptional creation. This should be celebrated and not obscured by unnecessary design."

But what about necessary design that proves distracting?
Usually considered the ugly duckling of packaging, barcodes – unavoidable, insipid, useful – are being transformed. Mexican Tecate beer features a barcode in the shape of a spread-winged eagle. In New Zealand,



Via, GS1 and Natcoll are turning the bars into flower stems topped with blossoms, or into oil paint oozing out of its tube. In Japan, barcodes depict anything from noodles draped over chopsticks, a waterfall or rain on an umbrella to a gun, a skyline or a surfer in the pipeline of a monster wave.

THE GLOBAL STORY IS LOCAL

Barcodes, like many products, are international, but the way designers treat them must function at the local level. Even Coca-Cola, which sells in every corner of the globe (to judge by the litter), prints regional versions of its cans. Packing must respond to local interpretations of colour and symbol, not just language. Cleaning liquids and washing powders in Europe are often boxed in vivid greens or lemon-yellow (signs of freshness) while in the US, they tend to feature brightly aggressive colours like Tide's safety orange (the sign of heavy-duty strength). Brands in the US, where weddings are white, must use the colour in considered ways in Japan, since white is associated with death there. Designers must honour and exploit these cultural differences in order to avoid international incidents.

TIME IS SUBJECTIVE

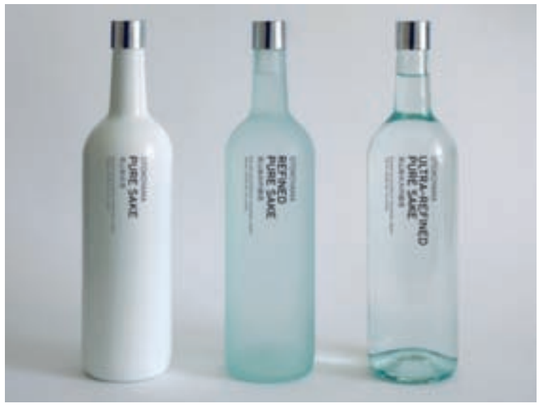
Like brand logos, packaging has evolved from the historical permanence of a single design to a medium that is often updated. Today, companies want specialized packaging and regular updates to be a part of the product design, as a whole. Once upon a time, all Nike sneakers left the shops in the same orange box; today, the company puts out regular small collections and special editions. Certainly, there are products that require a fresh label

periodically: wines must indicate a difference in content from year to year, fashions – colours, cuts, themes – change seasonally. Other products don't require such a frequent change of costume. In fact, some venerable old institutions, like fashion house Hermès, may change their products regularly but have hardly touched their historical packaging at all, letting this longevity declare the aristocracy of the product and brand. Other companies, laundry detergents or juices might not change their product at all over time, but need, nonetheless, to persuade the customer to choose their brand repeatedly by telling them a fresh story with relative frequency.

A (LESS AND LESS) MATERIAL WORLD

As the developing world booms, the volume of packaging will boom and the need for concrete solutions to waste will become, more than ever, a priority. "If recycling is now accepted as a key to environmental concerns, recycled material will need to be fully integrated in the production of new packaging for it to become a long-term sustainable solution," UQAM's Prof. Allard explains.

To expedite the recycling process, the one-material package may become standard even while the materials palette expands. In the next decade, bioplastics like palm and reed fibre and bamboo (PLAs) may begin to replace more profligate materials. Education will be crucial to making them sustainable, however, since they can pose a major problem if mixed with standard plastics during the recycling process. Bioplastics could prove particularly helpful where recycling is difficult (like the US) because biopolymers revert back to organic material when composted correctly. They are durable, easy to print on and have a pleasant texture and anti-static properties. Researchers are also looking into making thinner, multilayer barrier-PET, as well as chemical barriers that will eliminate the need for sealed plastic packages. Meanwhile, additives are being explored that could break down discarded plastics more quickly.



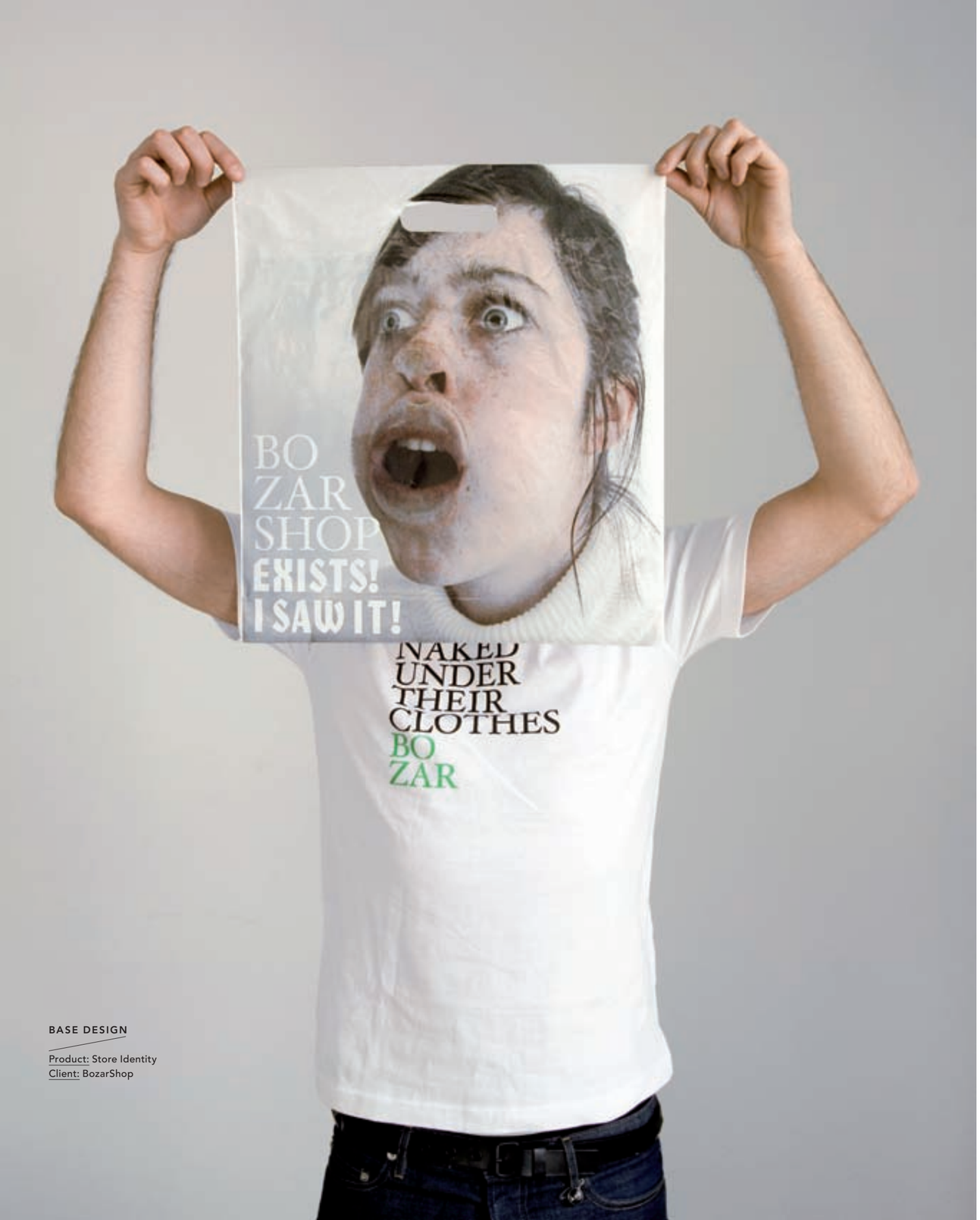
Because the cost of raw materials has increased globally, according to Simon Farrow of Progress Packaging in the UK, he is constantly on the lookout for more cost-effective solutions. Progress prefers vegetable-based inks, biodegradable laminates and traceably green raw materials. At the moment, these products cost a premium, but as demand increases, Farrow says, the price will fall precipitously.

SMART PACKAGING: THE FUTURE?

Today, college kids have got their self-cooling beer kegs while office workers have their self-heating coffee cups, but smart packaging – once pie in the sky – is nearly ready for retail. "In the next ten years," anticipates Allard, "packaging design will include nanotechnology in many applications: for tamper evidence and pack integrity, safety and quality, traceability and product authenticity."

Indeed, in the near future, packaging may be nanomechanical, biogenetic, audible (in fact nearly cinematic) and capable of responding to environmental stressors like pH value, temperature or pressure – even breaches of security. According to British trend forecasters The Future Laboratory, scientists are developing lightweight and invisible coatings or embedded particles, nanomaterials, nanotubes and nanofillers, that could detect pathogens or delay food spoilage by putting up oxygen barriers or catalysing chemical reactions. Bizerba has developed a sticker for food labels that changes colour with changes in temperature: If a product requiring refrigeration during shipping arrives at its destination above a certain temperature, the supplier, merchant or consumer would be immediately aware of the fact. Radio-Frequency Identification chips could tell homeowners when items in their refrigerator approach or pass their expiration dates. Integrated into packaging, RFID and near field communications could even interface with mobile phones, creating new efficiency in shopping. Forget the movie theatre: consumers can look forward to a time when – using moving on-pack graphics, small, flexible OLED displays that play video clips and animation, and printed electronics that can communicate with point-of-purchase displays – products on the shelves will be just as vociferous as ever, but among them there will be those that giggle, others that hum, and even a growing handful that will sing.

Shonquis Moreno



BASE DESIGN

Product: Store Identity
Client: BozarShop

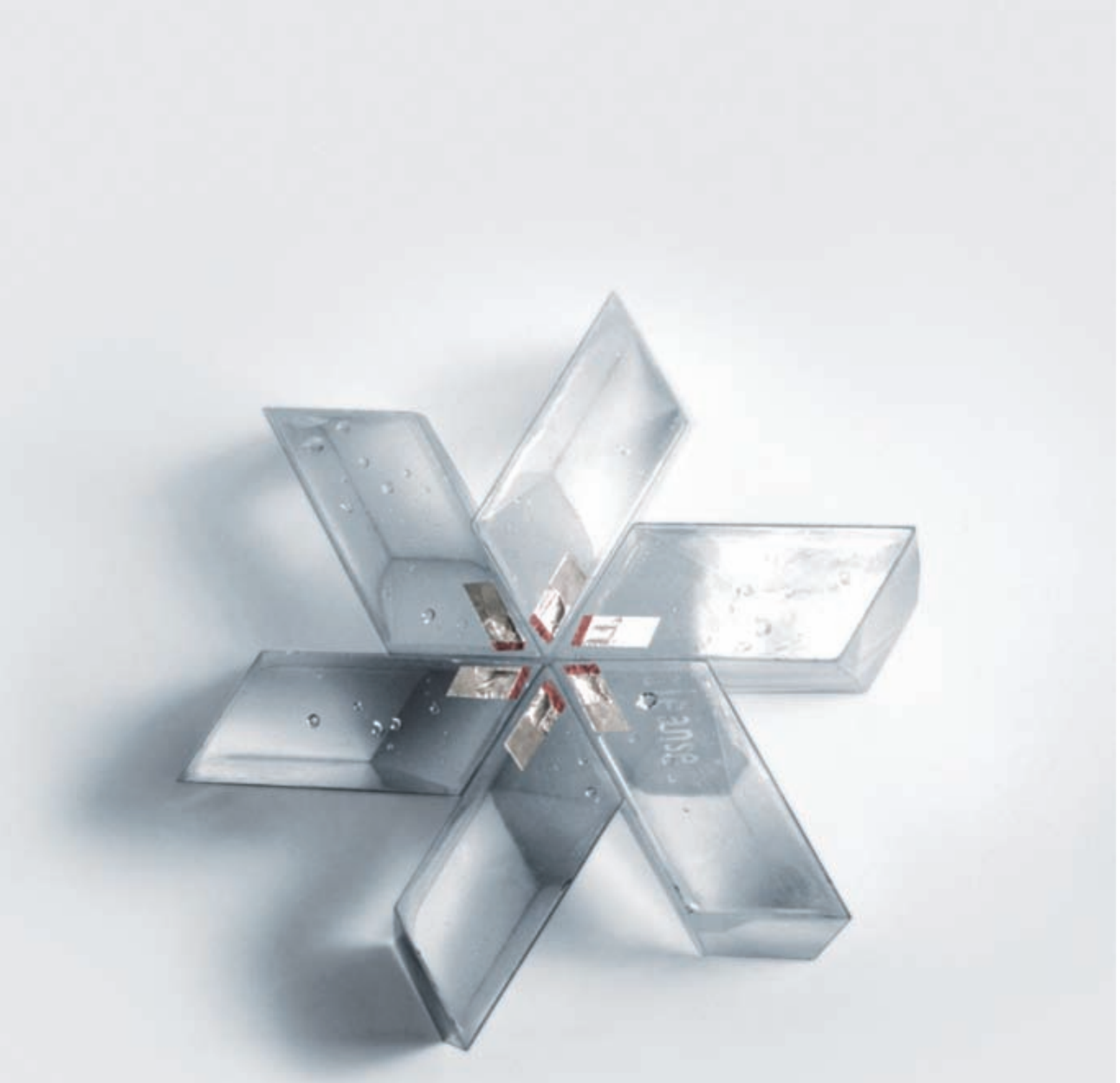
STRIP TEASE
SWEET & SEDUCTIVE

PLAYFUL PACKAGING can be bright, pop and chock full of colour, loaded with texture, illustration, characters and animal motifs – without being freighted with nostalgia. Fluorescent shades attract young shoppers, especially to candy, energy drinks and snacks. Graphic patterns, unusual shapes and humorous imagery emphasise the novelty of the package contents, and sometimes go so far as to make the packaging itself a coveted object: Naoto Fukasawa made juice boxes with textural fruit-like skins: furry brown kiwi boxes, dimpled, seeded strawberry boxes, and rubbery banana boxes. TK COMPANY's Orange Drop Drink designed by Firm A is a puddle of coloured liquid flattened in a plastic sleeve and sipped through a straw. Designers are using fantasy illustration or forms to suggest escape and to draw buyers out of the real world and into a fantasy world – drink your juice from an oversized piece of fruit or sip it from a neon puddle of sugar water that has fallen straight from the skies of Candyland. In this approach, amorphous, un-conventional shapes, evocatively moulded plastics and even stuffed-animal plush, may be used along with eye-popping colour schemes and type that is suggestive of anything from fairyland to an imagined but very real world of wealth and opulence: The point is to make the opening of the box an experience that leaves the banal behind or below – a game, a (reusable) toy, a journey to the centre of the … wrapper. Whatever the style (and fantasy takes many forms), the journey is the destination.
At times this journey can be as puerile, sweet and superficially fantastical as Candyland; at others, it comes closer to Willy Wonka: seductively dark, irreverent, life-affirmingly morbid – even foul-mouthed. A subculture of winemakers, in particular, have been playfully transforming their labels to reach an older "child." "One of the reasons for this is that the wine market has become so oversaturated with look-a-like brands," says Chris Zawada, the Canadian founder and editor of the Lovely Package blog. "Typically these brands have a very serious, almost stagnant look and as wine appeals more and more to a younger audience, the 'old school' designs haven't retained their old appeal."

Since 2005, Australia's R Wines co-founder, Dan Philips, has been selecting designers and illustrators outside the wine industry – Alan Aldridge, Jonathan Barnbrook, Jeff Keedy and many others – to make his labels. Although buying wine is all about choice, industry pressure to conform to packaging conventions is extreme. "In general, 95% of wine packaging is a black capsule and a white label with text," laments Philips. "You can succeed in the wine business by knowing the rules and breaking them, but you need to understand the rules."

Philips believes that geometry, type and detail are crucial to bottle design. His designers play with surreal, spidery illustrations, and are unafraid to mix sky blues with bloody-nose red, print type upside down or swear gratuitously. Jeff Keedy designed a typeface for R's Bitch wine on spec. Now it's their most popular label. "If you have popular type, you're 90% of the way to a strong label," says Philips, who drafted Keedy to also do the Bitch Bubbly, Evil, Pure Evil and Evil Incarnate labels as well.

"A great package has drama," insists Philips. "We're storytellers because we're tying to convince the consumer that we're worth the price." The company's Luchador labels, featuring Mexican wrestling masks, were created by the Morning Breath studio for anyone wanting a wine to drink while watching sports. Punk Bubbles wines feature names like Stench, No Future and Rotten, that quote from that 70s subculture and go, Philips says, "directly against what champagne multinational conglomerates say it's all about: purity and luxury." Where's the fun in purity? There's got to be a little sediment in it.



ANNA DABROWSKI

Product: Sweet 2009
Client: Concept/Prototype

FROM CONTAINER TO CONTENT

REUSE, REUSE, REUSE

IN THE PAST, packaging was waste waiting to happen, surface instead of substance. What remained after opening the box was a byproduct with no practical function – wrapping paper and unknotted bows scattered across the living room floor, reminding us of the anticipation lost in the very act of opening our gifts. Today this situation is being very occasionally remedied by the creation of wrappers that become as valuable as the product that is protected and promoted within – the elevation of packaging from container to content.

Consumers' concerns about packaging usually centre on ease of use and ease of storage, greater convenience and less waste – function, not aesthetics. No doubt for equally pragmatic reasons, typography and copy-driven packaging have also come into focus recently, championed by consumers who are willing to spend more time on, and put more thought into, their purchases. But the recent practical approaches to packaging design take functionality to a whole new level, transmuting packing materials into products in their own right.

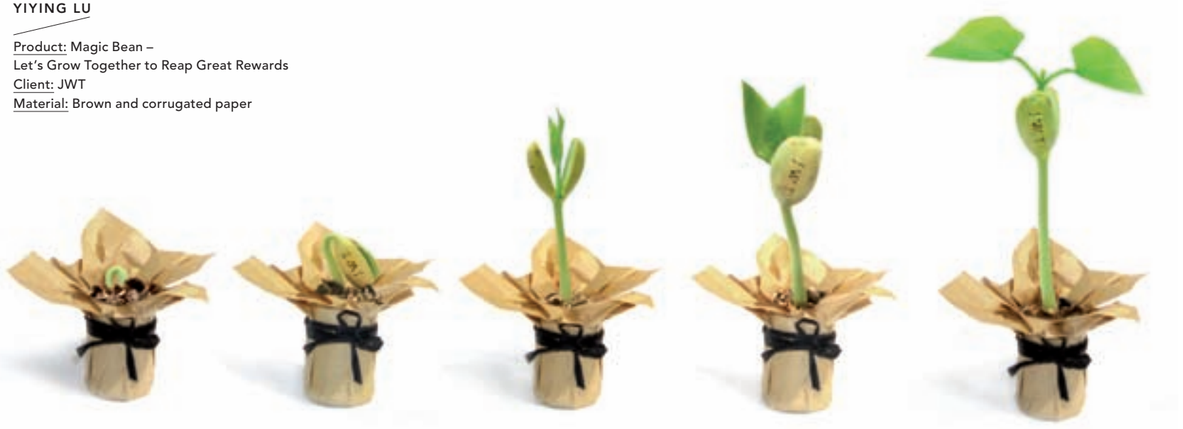
By generating an alternate function for the cast-offs, designers give each a second life as something that may last even longer that the product it once guarded. The Y Water bottle for a children's beverage by Yves Béhar of San Francisco's fuseproject, a jack-shaped plastic bottle filled with a candy-coloured liquid that is reusable as a building-block toy, like large-scale Lego, if the kids collect (and drink) them. German designer Anna Dabrowski's Cleanse water bottle doubles as a carafe. The raucously tilted recyclable PET vessel holds approximately eight glasses of water and can be resealed via a foil closure.

Folding is a mechanism crucial to some of the cleverest hybrid packing-products: The Hanger Pak by Steve Haslip arrives in a corset-shaped raw cardboard packet, but when opened can be cut apart and folded into a clothes hanger. Anni Nykänen's Pop-Up Popcorn Bowl concept for Packlab at Finland's Lahti Institute of Design takes folding further. Like a Chinese fortune-telling game, the kernels are sold in a flat, square package that folds open into triangular "petals" to become a four-legged bowl after the popped corn is removed from the microwave.

The multiple personalities of these packaging designs encourage an appreciation of banal objects, and add not just value but surprise to the experience of our everyday belongings. Progress Packaging in the UK champions the use of some oil-based materials such as nonwoven polypropylene, according to founder Simon Farrow, for this very reason. "We promote the reusability of the material rather than the recycled argument," he explains. "We genuinely believe that reusable items are the answer where possible, because even many recycling processes generate a huge carbon footprint, which must be taken into account as well."

YIYING LU

Product: Magic Bean –
Let's Grow Together to Reap Great Rewards
Client: JWT
Material: Brown and corrugated paper



SHADES OF GREEN
TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

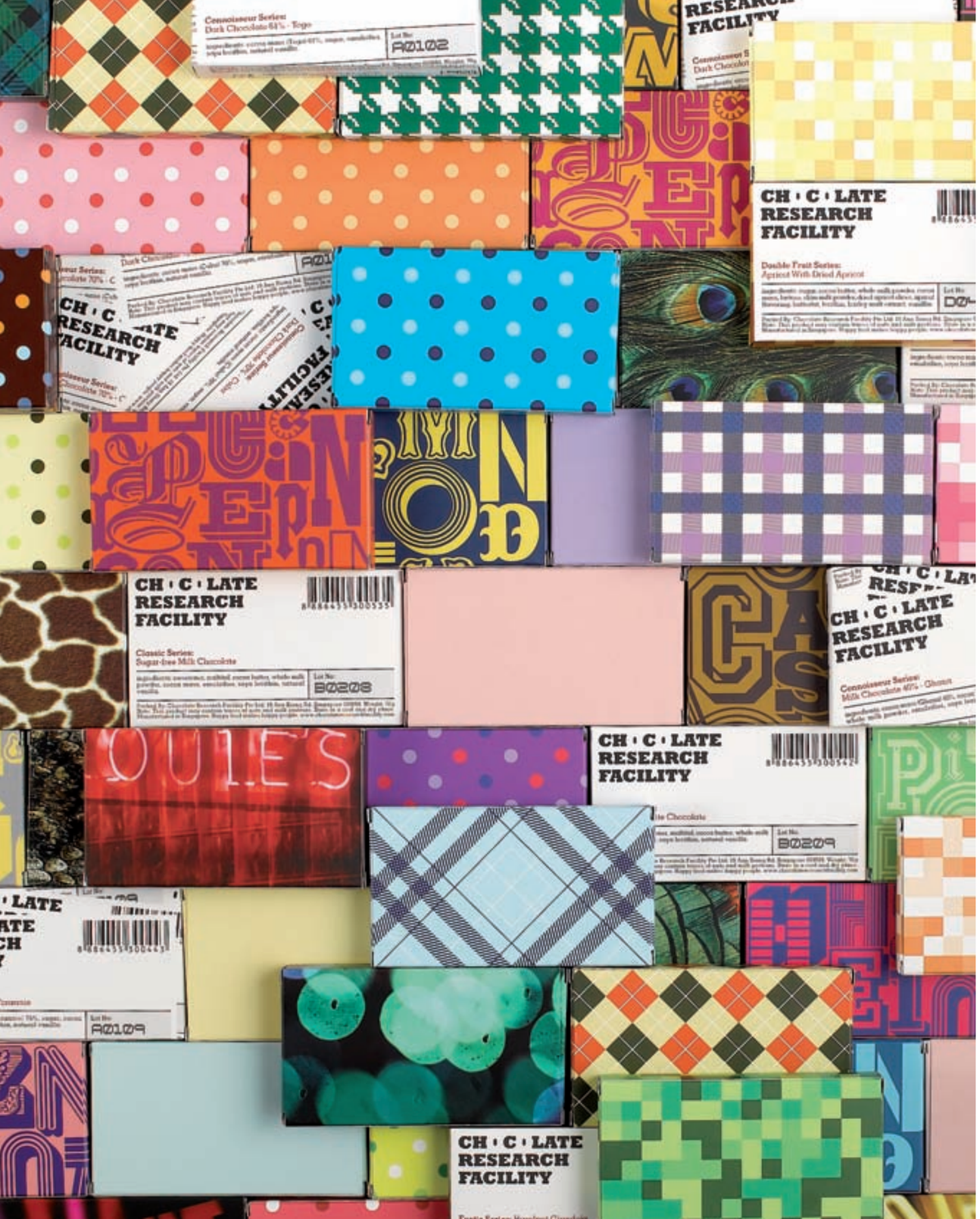
PERHAPS BECAUSE there are so many shades of sustainable "green", consumers have become the victims of "greenwashing", the trend to attribute ecofriendliness to earth-hostile products, processes and materials in order to make a greenback. Responsible packaging can take many forms: Sometimes it is recycled or recyclable, reduces waste or reduces the amount of material used in the first place. It cuts down or eliminates toxins from adhesives, bleach, inks and dyes. Simon Farrow of the UK's Progress Packaging, which has done catalogues for furniture manufacturer Established & Sons and boxes for the multidisciplinary design agency, Winkreative, uses sustainable inks and biodegradable materials that are now capable of matching the gloss and finish of older, more familiar, less sustainable methods. FSC-approved papers give his designers a broad range of choice in the creation of boxes, binders and printed pieces. For textile-based products – Progress has made tote bags for Art Basel Design Miami, Converse and Wallpaper – Farrow favours ethically sourced products like unbleached canvas. But there are a plethora of ways to go green, including extending the life of the package through reuse.

Responsible packaging may not even be sustainable per se, but it is nonetheless desirable so long as it protects and preserves responsible products like organic, local or fair trade food. In such a case, its design will increasingly reflect the all-natural, good-for-the-earth character of the contents through the use of unrefined packing materials, rustic typefaces, or the clear windows or glass that invoke the purity of the product within. It is worth noting that even responsible products – organic food, biological dishwashing liquid – in plastic bottles still produce waste. Sometimes, however, the use of plastic can redeem itself because it tends to reduce the amount of material consumed in the first place and diminish shipping weight – two important green goals. The moral of the story? Plastic, despite its bad-boy reputation, remains a lightweight, durable and therefore re-usable material.

There are, however, alternatives to the plastic bag (already outlawed in China, thank you very much). The now-ubiquitous "I Am Not A Plastic Bag" canvas tote forms a set with the (rather good reminder) "I Am a Plastic Bag And I Am 100% Recyclable" bag. But shopping bags are being developed from compostable materials today, as well. 60Bag.com bags biodegrade within 60 days after use and are as beautifully textural as chipboard. The inner linings of Magdalena Czarnecki's brown-paper bag-toys (This is a Monkey, This is a Bird and This is a Frog) are printed with the dotted-line pattern of origami animals that can be folded from the opened sack. Designed by TDA, Newton sneakers come in a raw, unbleached paper-pulp box moulded into the shape of the shoes it contains in order to reduce the amount of material used.

Celery Design Collaborative calls packaging a "necessary evil" and works to make it part of the product experience. The studio's Lemnis Lighting asks how to persuade consumers that they will save money by spending $25 on a mercury-free, LED-based bulb (that will last 35 years). The solution? Design the packaging so that buying a Lemnis feels different from buying an ordinary incandescent. Celery wrapped the light in a circular sheet of recycled paper that folds into a tapering flat-topped box on the retail shelf. When opened, however, its perforated inner lining can be used as the lampshade. The package looks as innovative as the product is, adds value to the purchase and accommodates the brand's green ethos by being re-usable.

"Our product is simple: water in a box," says Boxed Water Is Better founder and designer Benjamin Gott. "Our package is simple, a rectangular box. The product itself is the logo. Our product is our brand and our brand is our product." Gott wanted to take a mass-market item and lower its environmental impact while funnelling some of his profits into worthwhile projects like world water relief and reforestation. He used the reassuringly familiar box as the canvas and container for his product. While the technology behind cartons has changed quite a bit over the past 50 years, including being made from almost 90% paper, it is still a classic object. Gott printed "Boxed Water Is Better" on the boxes in an obscure variation of Helvetica. "This reflects our brand's appreciation of simplicity but it also stands out beautifully on the shelf in the sea of blue-tinted and overdesigned bottled water brands," Gott explains. Plastic bottles have an indefinite shelf-life, which in a nuclear war might prove helpful, but is problematic environmentally. Cartons don't last as long – they have a"shelf-life"–which is precisely the point that Gott is trying to make.



ASYLUM

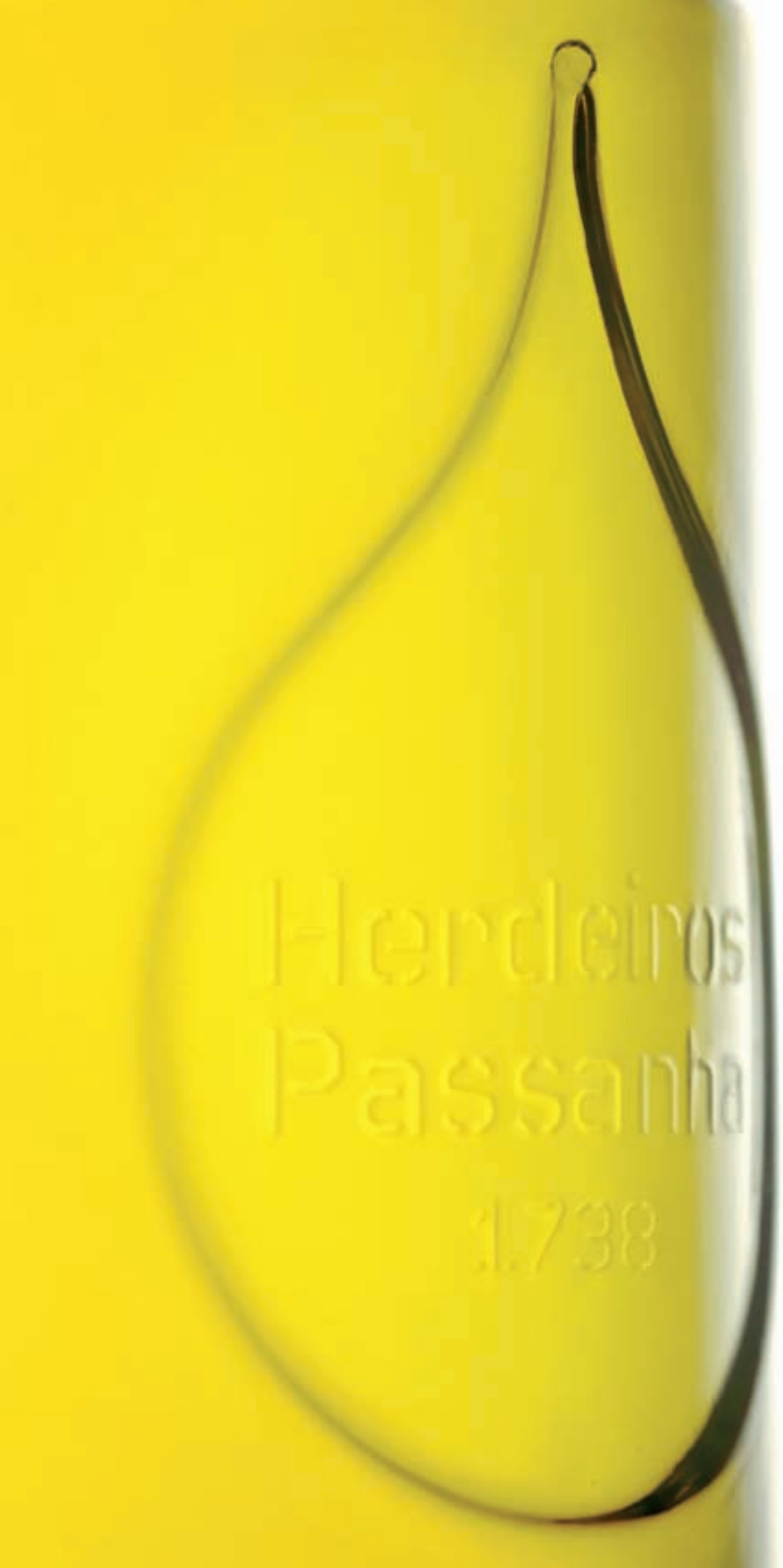
Product: Branding and Packaging Design
Client: Chocolate Research Facility

MODULARITY
BUILDING AN EXPERIENCE

CONSTRUCTED PACKAGING involves the accretion of patterns, geometry, layers and forms, and adds value to the product beyond its material or function. This type of wrapper may include modular designs or folding techniques in either two or three dimensions: Australia's Mor bath and beauty products are packaged in real wood dispensers, but it's the company's cardboard constructions that are most striking. A box for the Dala product line layers silver, scarlet, faux woodgrain and mauve spheres to create a sophisticated, nearly sartorial texture. Albers Winery's Cabernet repeats a colourful Escher-like pattern in blues, reds, yellow and green on the box, the bottle's label and its foil seal. Hatmon's Cowmilk carton uses clusters of black, grey and red X's to draw a gentle bovine muzzle on its face. The carton is folded upward into two triangles at its crown to represent the cow's ears, a simple and charming version of constructed packaging.

Beyond its visual charm, however, packaging like this constructs an experience in the opening of the product. Packaging that becomes a spectacle, a tactile adventure – an aesthetic experience, a moment of play or Jack-in-the-box-like surprise, echoing the unwrapping of a longed-for gift – can enrich any purchase. Opening an Apple product is an experience with multiple rewards; the placement of objects goes beyond convenience to build anticipation, while boxes with magnetic openings or secret slots make the (expensive) purchase feel like a present – even the Styrofoam is cut into an attractive filigree. Consumers have begun to post their "out-of-the-box" experiences with new gadgets online, so that this added-value experience has also become significant to the success of the brand. The greater the complexity of the constructions, the deeper the consumer's reaction to the discovery of the content within, which ultimately serves, and celebrates, the product, itself.

Today, folding and construction methods seem to be moving both forward and backward – for good reason, according to Simon Farrow of Progress Packaging. Advances in CAD sampling and prototyping give designers greater flexibility and encourage experimentation. "We have seen the influence of Oriental styles recently, where intricate folding and finishing combine to create simple lines and sharp edges on packs," says Farrow. "Conversely, the movement toward simplicity is seeing many packs going back to traditional methods of scoring and folding such as rhemus bending because these processes give an almost handmade, just-for-you finish." Made-to-measure design jumps from fashion into the shopping bag. Take it home.



SCANTILY CLAD
THE VIRTUES OF THE MINIMAL

BASE DESIGN / MICHAEL YOUNG

Product: Passanha Olive Oil
Client: Herdeiros Passanha
Material: Glass

MINIMAL PACKAGING communicates through understatement and clarity, no matter what the affordability or exclusivity of the market. Minimal labels feel subtle, true to their content and pared-down, if not stripped. Under Kenya Hara's direction, Japanese brand Muji has fashioned itself a paradigm of simplicity. The look and feel of its packaging is based, like its products, on the conviction that design should first communicate quality, function and value. Other minimal approaches make a virtue of the generic: The bare design of the Brand brand of plastic food storage products stands out from its overdesigned rivals by choosing to not stand out at all. "Resealable Sandwich Bags", the box reads. Nothing more, nothing less.

The Okotoyama Sake, Refined Sake and Ultra-Refined Sake bottles by British designer Jamie Conkleton articulate the sake-making process through the diminishing opacity of the three identically shaped bottles. To produce different grades of sake, proteins and oils are stripped from each rice grain so that the more the rice is polished, the finer the liquor produced; hence, Conkleton produced three bottles in opaque white, frosted and clear glass. Without the need to express quality grades, Passanha's Quinta da San Vicente olive oil bottles by Hong Kong-based Michael Young come in clear glass that allows the basic purity of the product to shine through the uncrowded block text printed directly on its surface. At the other extreme, Ode Oliva organic olive oil comes in a black jug; the name of the product serves as its only embellishment.

Minimalist packing often takes advantage of the legibility of classic typography, of which Helvetica is, perhaps, the reigning monarch. But minimal packaging doesn't waste its breath: text is limited to the essential. David Fung's milk cartons express the "staple" quality of milk by using bright planes of primary colours to outline the box – and very little verbiage.

As one might expect, the minimalist aesthetic is best applied to products that are their own best advertisements. Camille Lillieskjold's packaging for Habitat housewares (a towel, stacking racks, wine glasses) consists of simple neutral coloured paper strips that belt each product, leaving some, if not most, of the product exposed and allowing shoppers to both see and feel the item's texture and construction.

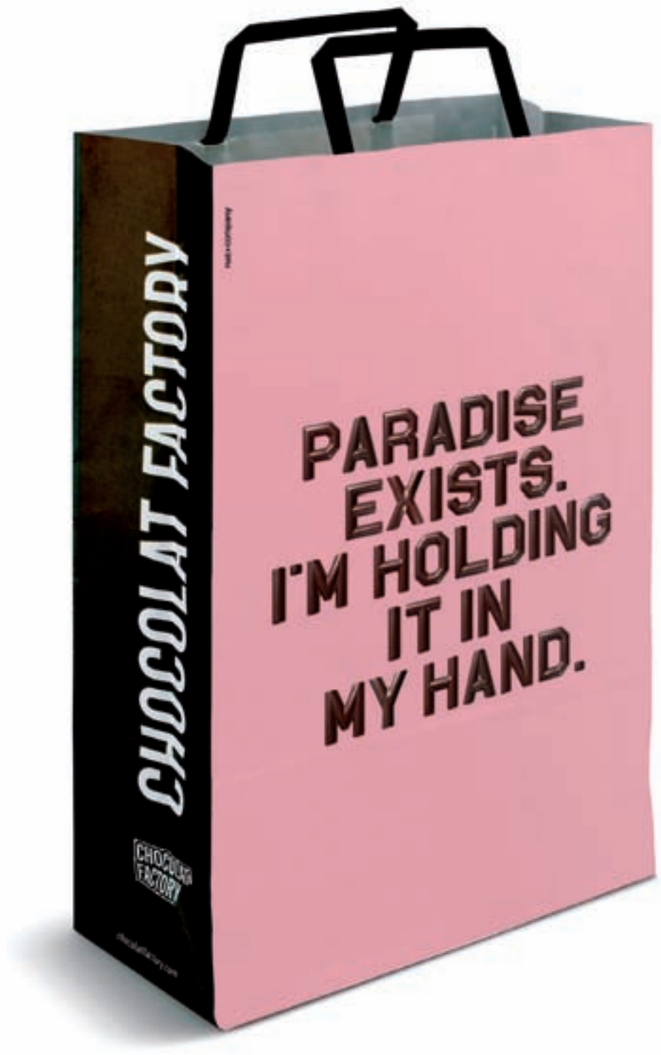
"Thought-driven design will always trump a pretty picture; the future of design is all about having a solid concept to build from," says Chris Zawada of Canada's Lovely Package. "Personally I find that our grocery stores aren't so much cluttered with boring designs as they are with overdesigned scream-at-you-from-the-shelf designs. Packaging needs to have shelf appeal and presence, but it doesn't have to scream at the consumer."

Little Fury's common first aid items – travel-size doses of plasters and painkillers – come in naked cardboard packs embossed with the life-size outline of their contents. The front of the package describes those contents in plain English with the tagline: "Help. I've cut myself." Or "Help. I have a headache." Indeed, the dematerialization of the packing is the direction that savvy companies and thoughtful designers will go – and not out of the goodness of their hearts. "Companies will always find a way to reduce the amount of material they use," Zawada admits. "I'd like to think that it's to become more sustainable, but really it comes down to cost savings." Nothing more, nothing less.

RUIZ+COMPANY

Product: Pleasure Experts Bags
Client: Chocolat Factory

This shopping bag is one of a three-part series, each with a different message about pleasure, which is the focus of the campaign.



THE GILDED CAGE
DESIRE WRAPPED UP

GLAMOROUS PACKAGING relies on strategic and alternating uses of transparency and opacity, opulence and discretion, invoking the impossible perfection and bittersweet fantasy of everything from the Hollywood ingénue to Tiffany jewels. Eyeshadows are dressed up with texture, faceted like gems or quilted like the lining of the jewel box of a Versailles courtesan. But the influence of glamour extends beyond gilded shopping bags, silk boxes and the marketing of eternal youth: it is key to gratuitous consumption in the liquor, fashion and jewellery industries as much as cosmetics, beauty and scents. Painting images of the lush life, this type of packaging exploits the aspirations, of those reaching beyond the status quo, as much as it exploits the wealth – of those striving to maintain their status.

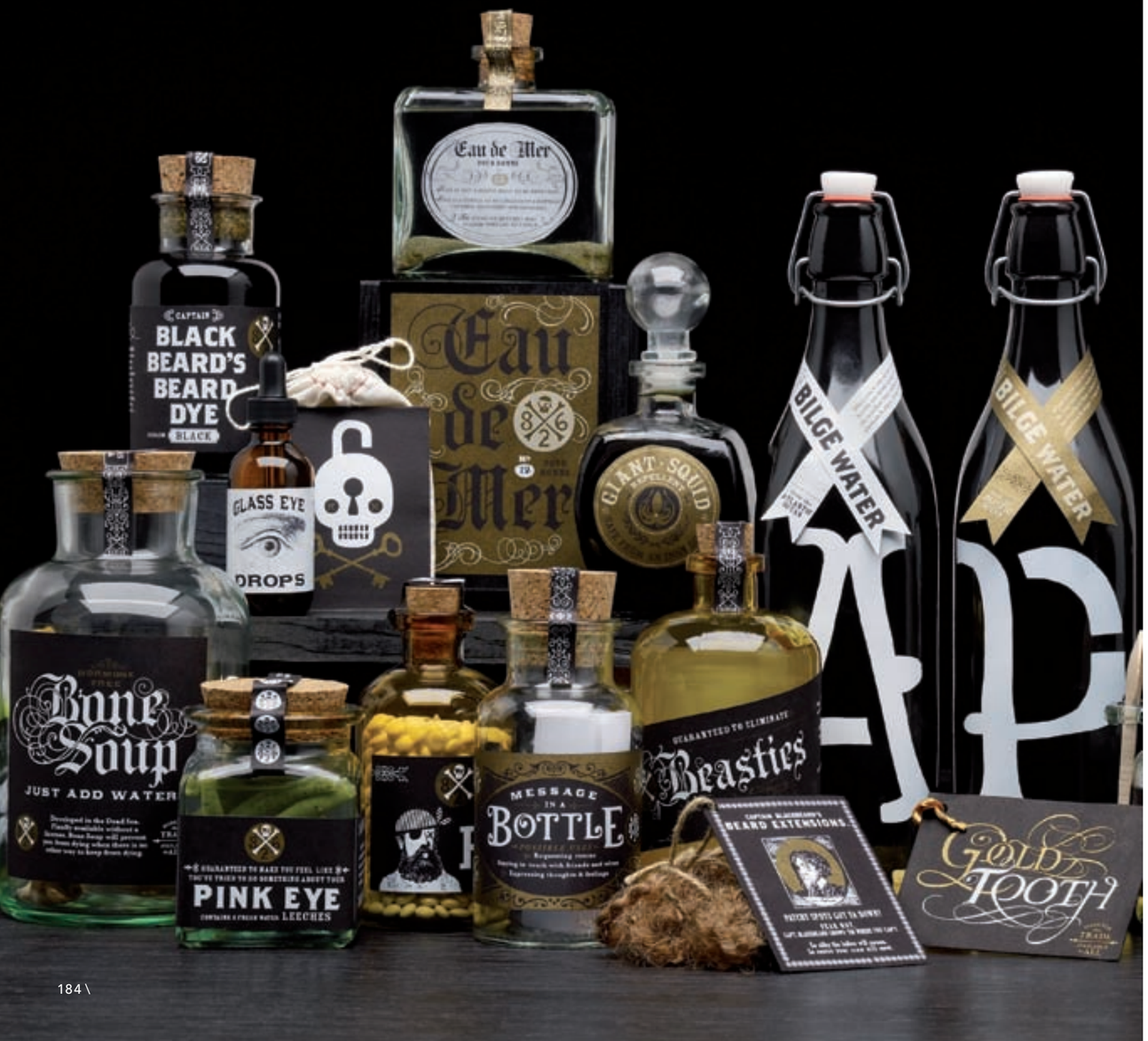
"People buy luxury products based on product and brand reputation and less on shelf presence," says Lovely Package founder and editor Chris Zawada. "But no one wants to buy a $200 bottle of perfume that comes in some generic off-the-shelf bottle and a raw cardboard box." Happily, big production budgets allow designers of luxe packaging to experiment extensively with unique solutions, materials and printing techniques. The Arnell Group's 1000 Acres vodka bottles are a tribute to bespoke glass manufacturing and simple materials: clear glass, white porcelain, cork – time-honoured materials unspoiled by text or logos. The sculptural shape of the four different bottles defines the product. Each is tall and slender with all but one made from glass: a rectangular glass box stoppered with a long cork set at a jaunty angle; a gently wasp-waisted cylinder with an exaggerated punt and a thermos-like lid; a refinement of the double-handle amphora; and finally an opaque porcelain bottle with willowy appendages.

Sometimes opulence is indicated energetically through type, metallic and jewel tones, lush colours and plush materials; at other times, austerity is the symbol of quality. For lingerie label Kiki de Montparnasse, TK Designer made shopping bags with sans serif logos on a matte black ground, as simple as a velvet rope, designed to stimulate, so to speak, the curiosity of a discriminating clientele. Packaging like this suggests that the product, beyond doubt an object of superior, even exclusive, quality, should remain the focus of the shopping experience (even if it sometimes piques interest precisely by not defining the character of the product).

In Berlin, Humiecki & Graef's Sebastian Fischenich and Tobias Mueksch have developed a fragrance line that achieves exactly this. Despite the obvious luxury of the scents, the bottles look ascetic, proud and reticent, rich without excess, soft spoken but expressive. "Our aim was to follow the design principle that big effects can be conjured even with small changes," says Fischenich. Individual flacons were created for each fragrance as if each bottle was a reliquary casket dedicated to the powerful persona of each partner's beloved grandmother – a vessel to safekeep emotions. The flasks' beribboned rectilinear shapes and caps echo the casket's right-angled form and the traditional cedulae stitched with the name of a saint. Colour and material play a crucial role in defining each fragrance: The cap for Geste, which evokes the love of an older woman for a younger man, is made of porcelain, a feminine material that is as fragile as it is strong since it is fired at very high temperatures. "The simplicity of the design should keep the focus on the most important thing, the fragrance," insists Fischenich. "A perfume flacon is just packaging, a 'reliquiar' for a very exceptional creation. This should be celebrated and not overcome by unnecessary design."

OFFICE

Product: Brand Identity and Packaging
Client: 826 Valencia Pirate Supply Store Products



THE NEW OLD-FASHIONED

REAL, HANDCRAFTED and unrefined, Retro packaging makes use of vintage illustration and typography, handwritten labels and shapes that recall anything from the post-war brands of the 50s, 60s and 70s to mid-19th century dry goods stores with sawdust on the floor and burlap flour sacks. These packages use unfussy materials: matte cardboards, unbleached papers or natural fibres and solid, traditional materials like glass that imply a certain degree of purity and wholesomeness. Australian cosmeceuticals retailer Aesop bottles its creams and potions with shapes and sober colours that resemble old-fashioned pharmacy packaging. Toothpaste brands from the British Euthymol to Muji's generic come in squeezable aluminium tubes that resemble artist's oil paints from the mid-1800s.

Retro packages also appear to have been made with the meticulous attention usually reserved for an artisanal product, something we associate with an era in which deep personal expertise coexisted with naivete, before the hard sell became commonplace. They suggest a return to pre-industrial virtue, to a time when there was no choice but to make things by hand – and we were better for it. It is an aesthetic that is approachable, human-scale, and made, jarred, canned or bottled by humans instead of machines.

Most often, Retro labels stand out in cacophonous retail space and on crowded shelves because they "speak" softly instead of shouting, especially in contrast to today's ubiquitous and vociferous "traffic-light" packaging. These wrappers and labels feature iconic illustrations, cheerful, warm pastels and mid-tones set against more earnest black, brown or cream backgrounds. Minimal or simple repeated patterns are enlivened and updated with limited – perhaps, one or two – colours. Embellished, robust type with simple flourishes and serif lettering or handwriting-declares that this is a longstanding heritage brand. Straight-talking and candid, it is a product of high quality and good value that is what it says it is and does precisely what it claims to do on the label.

Rick and Michael Mast of Mast Brothers Chocolate in Brooklyn originally wrapped their artisanal chocolate bars in butcher paper but switched to vintage patterned papers that they had either collected over time or discovered in New York Central Art Supply's second-floor paper room. "The traditional shape of the chocolate bar provides a nice foundation, allowing risks to be taken with the chocolate itself and with the wrapping concept," says Rick who recently commissioned graphic artist Mike Perry to design a label and curate a series of ten others by local artists. "We wanted every aspect of our bean-to-bar, artisan chocolate to be of the highest interest and integrity – while still having fun. Our techniques and philosophies are perhaps perceived as 'old-fashioned' but we are huge fans of new art and new ideas, particularly if they involve something done by hand, by someone we know."

BOXED AND LABELLED

NEW APPROACHES TO PACKAGING DESIGN

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