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Art

of the

Interior

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Issue 82

The Great Indoors

Sep / Oct 2011



€19.95 EU - CHF 30 Switzerland - \$19.95 USA - \$29.50 Canada
£14 UK - \$28.99 Australia - ¥3,570 Japan - ₩40,000 Korea

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Modern design memes touch our brains, but do we want to know how?

Mind

Games

Words **Katya Tylevich**

The man I'm Skyping with is Professor Moshe Bar, principal investigator of the Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory at the Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital. Between the halts and breaks of our fuzzy video conference, Bar and I compare our working desks – clutter, clutter. Papers, pens, open notebooks, magazines, photographs, the occasional knick-knack. Skype technology isn't there yet, but if the reception were any better it would surely pick up on the sound of a million unhappy neurons firing in two brains – my brain in Los Angeles, Moshe Bar's in Boston – both made grouchy by the sight of visual disorder.

'You realize we're not just talking about pretty versus not, neat versus messy,' Bar tells me. 'Clutter may elicit a physiological response, and there are two reasons we might not like it. One has to do with our constant need for meaning and for being able to

interpret: clutter interferes with the brain's ability to interpret. The second reason has to do with certainty and uncertainty: the brain is proactive in the sense that it continuously generates predictions – you need to know what to expect. Clutter interferes with your ability to make predictions; it requires more mental effort from you and increases uncertainty about what to expect.'

Okay, punch line: Bar and I are not just talking about messy desks, of course, and we aren't getting at the evolutionary background of obsessive-compulsive disorder either. Rather, we are knee-deep in a conversation about design: what kinds of visual cues surround us in today's designed spaces? What are the signals that various modern design memes send to our brains? What emotions and what physiological responses do aspects of modern design trigger in us? And, finally, do we really want to know? Moshe Bar is



1 Le Lan restaurant in Beijing by Philippe Starck. Photo Patricia Bailer

one of several experts I contact in order to find out. For the moment, I begin by picking on Philippe Starck.

Does the brain read a 'signature' Starck interior as clutter, I wonder. Take The Bazaar Restaurant in Los Angeles or Le Lan (1) in Beijing: interiors dense with mismatched objects and references, horses, overstuffed seats – big and little – and high-end knick-knacks that the brain might interpret as 'messy' in comparison with clean minimalism. (According to Bar, minimalism is relatively 'simple' for the brain to digest, 'though there's a difference between simple and boring, even if it's

not quite quantitative'.) In short, I want to know about design that is purposely disorganized – systematically unsystematic, let's say. What does it do to us? If our brains dislike cluttered desks, does that mean they intuitively dislike cluttered restaurant interiors?

'No, the brain likes to be challenged,' says Bar. It likes a certain amount of effort, but we do want to be able to reach a conclusion in a reasonable amount of time. The real question is whether knowing the purpose of the designer supersedes the brain's mechanisms. And, as Bar explains, the brain does have an override mechanism. 'Think of it this way,' he says. 'We cannot tickle ourselves. When the brain understands that it's you who's doing the tickling, it dismisses its response to being tickled. So, it could be that when I know it was Philippe Starck's *intention* to create this clutter, my amygdala says to relax; this was Starck's idea. There's no real reason to feel anxiety. Let's just move on to other ways of examining our environment.'

Fight or Flight

If I had to summarize my discussion with Bar in two words, they would be 'amygdala' and 'anxiety'. The amygdala is that clump of neurons in the brain that plays lead in processing our emotional reactions and memory. As for anxiety, most of us have a pretty good idea of what that is (see: bottle of Valium in bathroom cabinet), and on some intuitive level we also know that our surroundings can contribute greatly to our feelings of anxiety (thanks, sensitive amygdala). Moshe Bar specializes in the relationship between external triggers and internal fears. In fact, I initially contact him after reading his study, 'Visual elements of subjective preference modulate amygdala activation'. One of Bar's hypotheses is that sharp contours are coded in our brains as potential threats, even when those contours belong to everyday, mundane objects – sharp couches, sharp clocks, sharp furniture.

Does that mean that a room outfitted with pointy Jean Prouvé desks has our amygdalae clawing at our skulls, demanding an immediate escape? Not quite, says Moshe Bar, reminding me of why a Starck-designed 'mess' doesn't (necessarily) have us checking into an outpatient facility for nervous disorders. Bar brings up George Nelson's Turbine clock (2): 'It looks like 12 knives, but I love it,' he says.

Apparently, our preferences do



2 George Nelson's Turbine clock for Vitra. Photo Andreas Sütterlin

not always correspond with our instincts. It is possible to like something aesthetically but to otherwise have a negative *instinctual* physiological response to it. In fact, I wonder whether a design that imparts some sense of danger or fear is all that much more thrilling for it. Perhaps we even get some satisfaction out of liking what we aren't supposed to. Fight or flight kicks in, but we contrarians tell our brains to take it easy, have a drink and admire those sharp edges. Interior design as exposure therapy. There's a thought. One that Bar doesn't categorically oppose.

'There is some overlap between pain and pleasure,' he says. 'It's the same way people are attracted to road accidents: they drive slowly and stare. You know that what you're about to see will be negative, but you turn your head and look at it anyway.'

Visual Spices

Ah, the premeditated tickle. Doesn't quite feel the same, but better than no tickle at all, and better still than the *undesired* tickle. Your brain, if prepared for the negative – for the sharp contours, for the designed mess and roadkill – will issue its override mechanism

What thrills us now may have thrilled us just as much decades ago



3 Snake chair by Roberto Lazzeroni for Poliform.

(step away from the Valium) while still perhaps recognizing the thrill of the fear response, the rush of nervous tension. To feel excited is to feel tense, to feel a bit agitated, isn't it? A designer's success might very well rest on the ability to reassure

the user that a space or product is no accident – that no matter how scary or uncomfortable the elements of a design may be, they are so *on purpose*. This applies to elements such as the angled glass used in some minimalist interiors (clear-glass steps should really get our proverbial hearts pumping, yet they are not an unpopular design meme). Even smooth, organic forms that imitate shapes which are otherwise frightening to many of us (a quite literal examples is Poliform's Snake Chair (3) by Roberto Lazzeroni) should give us the creeps, but as far I know they haven't been banned. ...



4 Jackson Pollock's *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, 1947, Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

... Bar calls such elements 'visual spices'; the chef in question has to use fear triggers knowingly and with control. Above all, it's ambiguity that the brain finds unpalatable, which means the designer needs to convey a viewpoint or a meaning that the user manages to grasp. That said, Bar reminds me that not everybody likes spicy food. There's a thin line between what we find repellent and what we find attractive – in design, in art, in general. In fact, this thin line may hold diagnostic clues to the second A-word I mentioned earlier. I've

been playing with the idea that one day we will be able to use abstract art as a diagnostic tool for anxiety,' says Bar. 'Why do some feel extremely comfortable with abstract art and others hate it?'

The potential answer goes back to our discussion about clutter: we feel uncomfortable with things we cannot make sense of. 'There are people who see a Kandinsky or a Pollock (4) and cannot find meaning in it,' he continues. 'In contrast, they see classical art – a man on a horse with a hat – and that makes sense.' Bar argues that, in theory, the degree to which a person likes the abstract may predict his or her susceptibility to anxiety. 'Are calmer, more relaxed people more likely to appreciate abstract art? Are nervous people less likely to do so because they see too much ambiguity and uncertainty in it?'

This is a particularly relevant question with regard to the use of the abstract in design. Abstract design is, after all, a different animal than abstract art, and by its nature probably cannot be used as the kind of diagnostic litmus test that Bar suggests. That is because, unlike abstract art, abstract design always has some 'practical' purpose (at least it should have, right?); design throws a bone called 'function' to its users, no matter how abstract, scary or uncomfortable it may be to hold that bone – whereas the purpose of abstract art can be to exist as abstract art, end of story, *finito*. So what to make of interior design in which art dominates space? How does the brain make sense of it, and how might it change our behaviour within a given space?

Kneejerk Reaction

Take Jean Nouvel's Hotel Sofitel Vienna Stephansdom, (see page 120) for example, in which patterned panels featuring the work of Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist (5) dictate the space from above (the ceilings).

My conversation with Bar about abstract art would suggest that the in-your-face use of Rist's work in Nouvel's design should have the amygdala going haywire. After all, the amygdala is the control centre for our *involuntary* responses to fear and arousal. Not only does the amygdala respond to fear triggers thrown at it in real time; it actively remembers previous scares as well. It is a key to understanding phobias and panic disorders. And Rist's video art, a giant 'clutter' signal to the brain, framed by other 'scare' alarms within the design – sharp edges, angles, a lot of



5 Jean Nouvel's Sofitel Vienna with art by Pipilotti Rist. Photo Roland Halbe

glass – should have the anxious hotel visitor battling heart palpitations and sweaty palms. Of course, it's not for everyone, as the saying goes, but it is precisely because of kneejerk reactions like physiological fear, coupled with the brain's ability to override and placate the amygdala's spaz-out, that an exuberant Nouvel fan might enter the hotel and shout: How exciting!

Better than no shout at all. Or a yawn, for that matter.

Is it worth mentioning how often the adjectives 'dangerous', 'cutting-edge' (a word that says it all), 'thrilling' or 'adventurous' preface the word 'design' in reviews, critiques and descriptions? This coupling of words is so familiar that we pay it the respect we would any other cliché – we glaze over it. But such adjectives clue us in to how we respond to certain elements of modern design: perhaps they are even euphemisms for the signals our amygdalae are actually sending us. ('Terrifying' is such an ugly word, the amygdala cautions. How about 'exhilarating' instead?)

Or maybe it's simply that we lack a proper terminology for talking about interior design. Jan Jennings, M.S. – professor of interior design at Cornell University – would probably agree with the latter.

Pipilotti Rist's ceiling art should give anxious hotel guests sweaty palms

Jennings is the founder and director of Cornell's Intypes project (intypes.cornell.edu), a study that seeks to identify and label recurring elements of interior design and 'provide names for unnamed practices' within the field. As Jennings tells me, speaking by phone from Ithaca, New York: 'Today's design discourse is problematic. We don't have a way of doing it well, and in part that's because we've never had a vocabulary to describe all the things that occur in an interior-design practice.'

Of course, the way we talk about design may also change the way we experience it. A tag-along result of Jennings' research is its revelation that 'many things we think of as trendy or current actually have very deep historical roots'. In other words, what thrills us now may have thrilled us just as much decades (or longer) ago: design proves itself cyclical in Jennings' studies. Now, if we are able to identify what it is we're looking at, and if we are able to place it in history – to 'recognize it' – we can interpret and predict more quickly what it is we're seeing. This sequence, in theory, keeps our amygdalae in check, but, in doing so, it also makes us more likely to roll our eyes than to freak out when we see yet another Intype, such as Mix

The success of a designer might rest in his ability to reassure the user

Match ('the appropriation and mixing together of cultural artefacts, aesthetic styles and/or time periods without regard for original meanings'); Naked ('a space in which one or more bathroom fixtures are visible through transparent partitions, or located out of the context of a private space, such as a bathtub located in a bedroom'); or White Box ('an undecorated space with white walls, white ceiling and a continuous neutral floor, originated in 1927 as "clean envelope", a bare white architecture').

This is symptomatic of what Moshe Bar might call 'tickling yourself' – the brain sees the tickle coming and can't feign excitement. The plus side, according to Jennings, is that 'when firms and designers more clearly identify their own practices as common, they're eager to say, I'm not going to do that the same way any more because everybody recognizes it. I'll try a different iteration.' As a result, bored amygdalae might beget new 'tickling' designs.

I Think, Therefore . . .

Artist and neuroscientist Bevil Conway would agree that understanding isn't a death sentence to the aesthetic thrill, though his reasoning is a bit different. Conway is an assistant professor of neuroscience at Wellesley College and a lecturer on neurobiology at Harvard Medical School; his research includes how the neural hardware of the artist's mind can help us understand the choices that artists make. In a series of e-mails, Conway says that applying his questions and studies to the brains of designers can help us discover our reactions to their work. To explain how our responses to our surroundings are contingent on an understanding of them, Conway offers opera as an example: 'Many people, naive to opera (6), do not like it,' he says. 'Some find it strange and foreign. When opera houses discovered this, they started putting in subtitles so people could follow along and could connect with the human stories being told. The results



6 Pictured here is Rafael Viñoly's opera set for a 2005 production of Shostakovich's *The Nose*.

were fascinating: people not only understood what was going on; many started to enjoy it – i.e., find it aesthetically pleasing. Understanding is probably an essential component of all aesthetic experience. Most neuroscientists would probably think this conclusion banal, because on



7 Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health by Frank Gehry. Photo Iwan Baan

some level experience has to be critical – without it, our sensory systems don't wire up appropriately.'

In some way, understanding the brain's response to various elements of design and defining those elements (stripping them of a certain *je ne sais quoi*) are the same as providing an opera with subtitles. Perhaps this is where Bar's abstract-art test for the anxious comes

in. The tightly wound Type-A personality might come to appreciate – or enjoy – the more frightening codes embedded in modern design when he or she can 'follow along' with them, depriving the amygdala of a nice, long panic attack, while the more easy-going Type-B individual will yearn for something the brain can't break down methodically because it likes reaching the brink of another kind of breakdown (psychological). As to my initial question – 'Do we really want to know?' – I pose it to Moshe Bar, who can't help but laugh before answering.

'I have a friend who is an expert in chocolate manufacturing, and it's terrible eating chocolate with him because he immediately analyses every overcooked cocoa bean,' says Bar. 'I do believe that everything starts and ends in the brain, and that ten, fifty, a hundred years from now we'll be able to take a Frank Gehry building (7) or a Saarinen chair and say: you like or dislike this design because these neurons were activated, and because these neurotransmitters are produced here – and are connected here – and here. But at the end of the day, that's boring, right?'

Right . . .

'So sometimes you just want to consume the gestalt without getting to the elements.' _