



A Designer's Perspective

The balancing act between business and fashion shapes today's products.

Residential Lighting:

Do you believe now is a special time for design?

Kenneth Hirst: In the history of design and the shift from decorative arts to functional modern style, each decade has brought something new. The '40s developed the idea of streamlining. The '60s became an era of disposable design. The '70s fostered hip living. The '80s saw the beginning of the computer age. The "Decade of Design" right now is all about heightened public awareness. With more design stories being covered by the media, people have a stronger sense of quality. They are demanding quality design.

RL: How has the design business been changing?

KH: More designers are moving into a greater range of categories. Designers used to be specialists. Now you see architects such as Michael Graves no longer designing just buildings, but also home appliances and lighting products. I'm in that same boat, designing products and retail environments. So there's been a shift in the design business, and competition

has become fierce because of it. Some corporations are even developing strategies, which I am totally opposed to, that put designers in competition with each other, with the winner going on to complete the project. Companies are reducing budgets and splitting them between design teams. I know of examples of up to five different design groups competing to get a single job.

RL: What are some overall design trends right now?

KH: In terms of style, there's the Asian decorative thing happening. It may be because we're more intimate with China, since much production is being done there and its economy is rapidly developing. The whole retro look continues. Ralph Lauren Home continues to produce a retro, warm, family, home kind of vibe. We're also seeing a pop contemporary look—bold fabrics, with circles in a square in black and white—in retail design and in home furnishings.

RL: What's happening with product styling and functionality?



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KH: In styling, the word is minimal, but it's very hard to achieve that in design. As for function, I see simple yet multifunctional as the trend. More products are offering more functions, but how we use them is getting simplified. It used to be you'd buy a product, such as a video recorder, and of its 50 features, you'd use only the play button. Now, through computer technology, it's becoming easier to use multifunctional products, such as the iPod, which is a lovely piece of design.

RL: What do you see for color, materials and finishes?

KH: In color, I see everything—bright, earthy, black-and-white and neutral. I see designer off-tones giving a

fashion edge. In materials, the story is combinations: wood and steel, rubber and fabric, leather and metal. From my personal standpoint, natural is important. In finishes, look for balances between matte and gloss. A product could have a high-gloss finish with accents in matte. Or the other way—highly matte accented with shiny touches. Chrome is definitely out, but not polished stainless steel.

Native Australian Kenneth Hirst is President of Hirst Pacific Ltd., a New York City-based product and retail design firm with global experience ranging from high-end fragrances to lighting and furniture design.