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Can Design Prepare for Disaster?

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Sulan Kolatan, principal, Kolatan/MacDonald Studio: I am not sure if it's possible to be 100 percent safe with every potential catastrophe. But, for example, there are arguments that part of the reason why we have these huge hurricanes now has to do with the global warming. If we are contributing to the climate worsening, then we can think about different ways of addressing that. And I think politically, we can think about cause and effect and the larger implications of terrorism and why terrorism is happening and so on and so forth, and try to address those potential catastrophic events within a bigger framework.

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Q: If we can't be 100 percent safe, then as designers, to paraphrase Ed Koch, how are we doing?

Ms. Kolatan: The whole issue of safety, even in the broader sense that I'm trying to discuss, with the whole eco component, is a relatively young discussion. We just are scratching the surface. I think that only recently has a general consensus emerged in the populace that this is really the issue for our generation and for the ones to follow.

Q: One seemingly unanimous observation is a need for universal devices like cellphones that have emergency capabilities. The big cellphone news this week was the iPod cellphone - a music player, not an emergency device. Should companies and designers be more focused on safety in what they produce?

Mr. Udagawa: Let's say the government put money into an initiative that treated cellphones as a necessity for life-threatening situations. But the cellphone is not just a device, it's an infrastructure. So then you have to put a lot more antennas on the roof of Manhattan's buildings. Just a couple of months ago we had a condo meeting to decide whether we would install a Verizon antenna on the top of our building and the biggest issue was safety, not in a potential blackout, but the safety of radio microwave antennas, which may just be burning out our cells bit by bit. Design has always kind of dealt with contradicting situations.

Tobias Wong, artist: I think it's very frustrating for designers now. The Smart Car, for example, that was supposed to launch last year. They're no longer doing that, and the Smart Car's doing so well in Europe; in Canada they're doing so well they can't keep up with demand. We can't design something great because it's not going to be accepted, and yet we still want to be ethical.

Mr. Udagawa: A designer can take two hats. One as a professional problem solver, but we can step out of our profession and put on another hat, which is concerned citizen, and use our knowledge and skills for whatever the cause. However, the dangerous thing about that approach - the artistic approach, provocation - is that the alarmist voice will fade very quickly. If you just keep saying one thing over and over, then nobody will listen to you. I think the designer's power is through the artifact. We can change - maybe it's subtle change - but we can change people's attitude and we can influence how they conduct their daily lives, maybe bit by bit, without resorting to the alarmist approach.

Q: Let's say that a dirty bomb goes off in Times Square. Are we safer than we were four years

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Mr. Rakowitz: No. Isn't Times Square the most surveilled section of the city? It's kind of ridiculous, the Surveillance Camera Players would give tours on Sundays pointing out all the different things, like lamp posts, that are actually surveillance cameras. So you're talking about a breach of a system that was enhanced four years ago, that doesn't function and, you know, isn't going to make people running away from a bomb calmer.

Mr. Wong: How many of us actually have the Go Bag that the city was really trying to promote? I don't have one.

Mr. Rogers: Where's that roll of duct tape?

Mr. Wong: I had it, and I had my supplies. But it's all gone.

Ms. Antonelli: I know a company that has bio and biochemical suits for each employee, \$2,000 each.

Q: In New York?

Ms. Antonelli: Yes, I won't name names. But there's a company that has that. But, no, I don't have the Go Bag either.

Gregg Pasquarelli, partner, SHoP Architects: I was sitting in a design meeting one month ago at Tulane, where we're doing a building. And they were arguing with our choice of engineers because they were saying that they couldn't design in this area. And I was like, it's a delta foundation, you can calculate it. They kept saying, no, no, no, it's not the foundations, it's not the soil. It's hurricanes that we're afraid of. They said the first floor has to be 44 inches above the grade because that's the worst water that we've ever had. It's now about six and a half feet.

Mr. Rogers: It's also that safety is an investment. Are you going to purchase these biohazard suits for everybody? We laugh because it's this crazy investment - or is it?

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"Safe: Design Takes On Risk" will open at the Museum of Modern Art on Oct. 16 and runs through Jan. 2. For information: (212) 708-9400 or moma.org.

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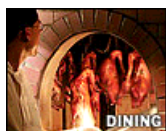


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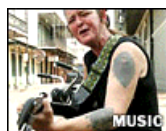
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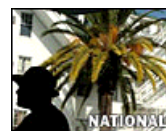
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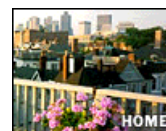
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