

Machine Beauty

A serious discussion about the beautiful machine began in earnest about 10 years ago with David Gelernter's small book *Machine Beauty: Elegance and the Heart of Technology*. The computer studies professor from Yale insists that "beauty is more important in computing than anywhere else in technology. . . because software is so complicated." He sees beauty as a defense against the daunting complexity of programs because elegance demands a simplicity and directness that eliminates the difficulties that often accompany complexity. "Complexity makes programs hard to build and potentially hard to use." Gelernter points out that the most successful systems are the ones "that are repeatedly praised for *elegance*. . . there is a connection between aesthetics and success."

Okay, so now we have the elegance of object-oriented programming and a beautifully simple scheme for integrating hundreds of pages of a website with Cascading Style Sheets, but what about the hardware side of computing—those black boxes, which are about as attractive as space heaters for chicken coops?

About the "graceless, lumpy objects" sprouting cables on and under our desks, Gelernter complains, "Almost every office in the country centers on an electronic Model T, an awkward shape that is cheap to build and enshrines permanently the first thing that came to mind." He reminds us of the invention of the radio and how that device fired the imaginations of countless designers who created cathedral-shaped models, floor consoles, bakelite boxes for kitchen shelves, and hundreds of other variations in wood, plastic, metal—rectangular, spherical, triangular, square. So what happened to the folks at IBM and Dell?

The box is sadly lagging behind the bits and bytes, and, 10 years ago, Gelernter called for a crash program. "We ought to start teaching Velázquez, Degas, and Matisse to young technologists right now on an emergency basis. Every technologist ought to study drawing, design, and art history."

So what do we do now to help the hardware catch up? Look at the two examples here—the Gateway One and the iMac. These are unusually elegant machines

because of their simplicity.

Look at what's missing. The chicken coop heater is gone, and so are most or all of the cables. Get rid of the wires, and then integrate the machine into its environment—most often, a desk. That would be a good start. And don't just screw the units into the wood of the desk, make them a part of the design of the desk itself—integrate.

Ten years ago we were put on notice by a guy who spent much of his time designing for parallel computing and something called a Mirror World database. And, today, most of us still have the same black or beige (some call it putty) boxes, bulky screens, and exposed wires snaking around our desks. What happened? Were those radio designers back in the 1930s so much more creative? Or has this particular machine made us all much more boring? ■

