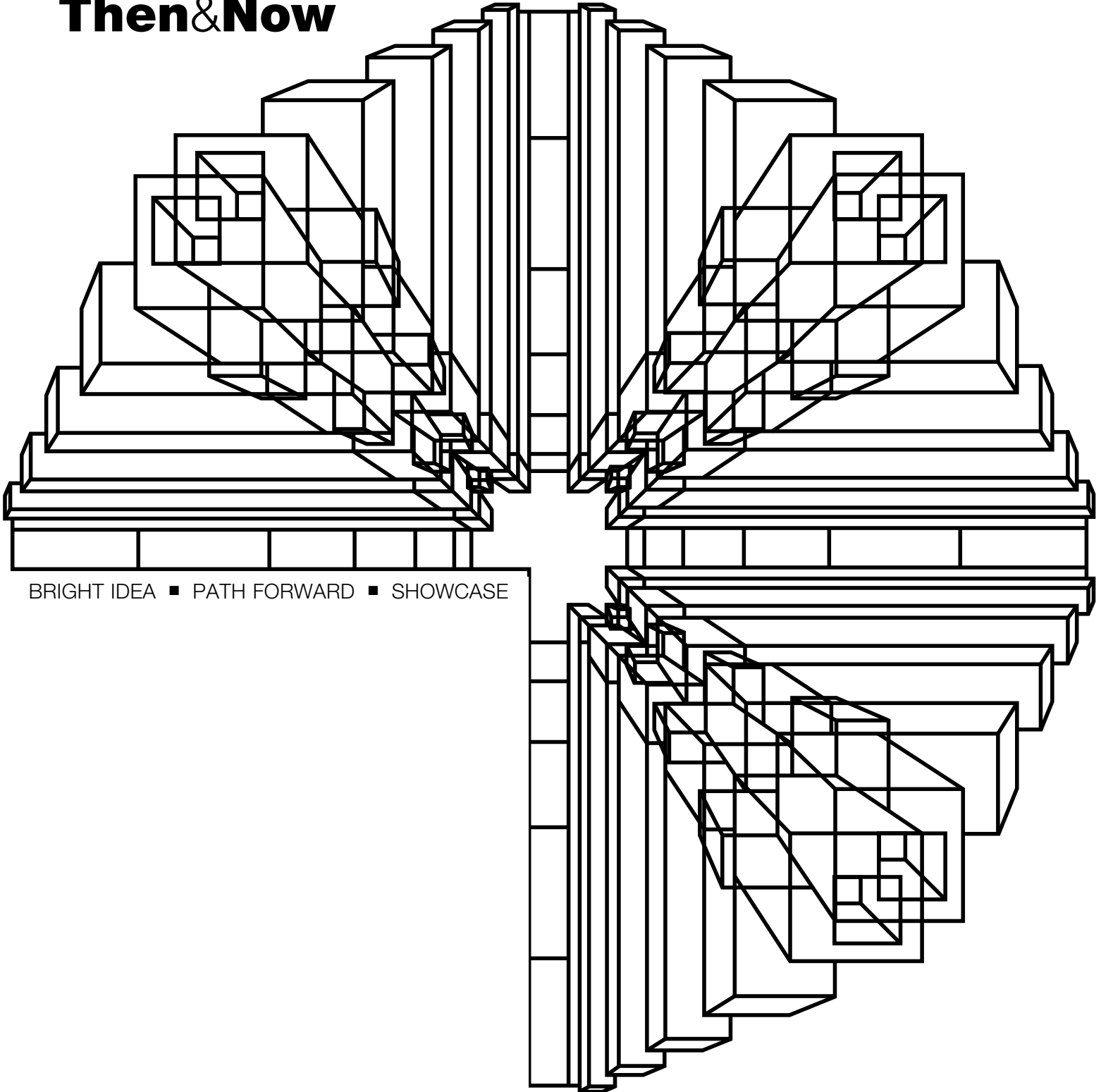


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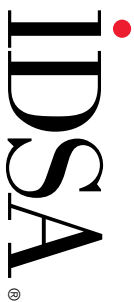
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THEN & NOW

- 18 The Alarm/Clock/Radio Case 12:30**
By Budd Steinhilber, FIDSA
- 20 Anatomy of a Design Patent**
By Terry M. Gernstein
- 24 Design & Environmental Action**
By Victor Papanek, IDSA, FSIAD
Reflection by Philip White, IDSA, LCACP
- 30 A Focus on 'What If?' How Design Is Changing Organizations**
By Michael Westcott, IDSA
Reflection by Carole Bilson, IDSA
- 32 The Dynamics of Interdisciplinary Design A Research Project**
By Allen Samuels, IDSA
- 38 Contexts of Achievement**
By Nancy J. Perkins, FIDSA
- 41 Market Value Innovation Designing the Experience**
By Ronald J. Sears, PhD, IDSA
- 49 Designing With Corporate Goals in Mind**
By Cooper Woodring, FIDSA

FEATURES

- 54 Continuous Visual Conjoint Discovering Novel Design Directions that Align with User Preferences**
By Seth Orsborn, PhD, IDSA;
Jonathan Cagan, PhD, PE, IDSA;
Peter Boatwright, PhD
- 57 Designing Within the Four Corners of the Law**
By Michael Prince

IN EVERY ISSUE

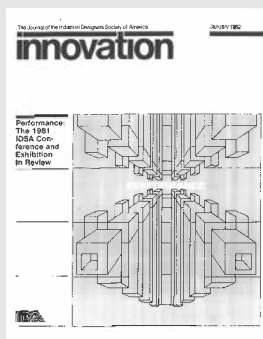
- 4 Chair's Report**
By John Barratt, IDSA
- 6 IDSA HQ**
By Daniel Martinage, CAE
- 6 Letter to the Editor**
- 8 From the Editor**
By Mark Dziersk, FIDSA
- 10 Design Defined**
By Barry M. Katz
- 12 Beautility**
By Tucker Viemeister, FIDSA
- 15 A Look Back**
By Carroll Gantz, FIDSA
- 60 Showcase**

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Advertisers' Index

- 1** CAMLS
c4 LUNAR
c2 Pip Tompkin
c3 Mixer Group
5 Samsung
11 SolidThinking
7 Eastman
17 IDSA Medical Design Conference

Case 12:30

THE ALARM/CLOCK/RADIO

This example of electronic technology gone wrong can be found on bedside stands in almost every hotel on the planet. This irritating piece of equipment remains one of the leading “poster boys” in the Department of Operational Obfuscation. A masterful conglomeration of ergonomic confusion that fully deserves the accusation of Design Crime.

Have you ever been brave enough to accept the formidable challenge of trying to set the ALARM on this device? You are first confronted with the choice between a buzzer alarm or a radio alarm. If you prefer the radio alarm you are confronted with two more choices: AM or FM? If you select either of these modes, then you have to tune to a local radio station (rock, country, news, Latin, talk show, classical, jazz, evangelical) and hope that the station you choose is on the air when you're ready to awaken.

Next comes the setting of the critical WAKE UP time on your alarm clock. First you have to switch into a SET mode in which it is assumed that you'll know that holding a button down will step the first blinking digit in the LCD display through a 12-number sequence to set the HOUR. This takes several tries since you can't back up and invariably scroll past the hour that you want.

Now it is further assumed that you know the next step is the MINUTE setting, which asks you to scroll through 60 number choices. Again, you will undoubtedly scroll around several times until you are able to land successfully on the minute setting of your choice. You now have the wake-up time displayed, but you must remember to change modes to return the clock to the current time display. There is no visual confirmation you've got the alarm time properly set unless you return to the alarm mode.

We're not quite set yet! It is likewise assumed that you know enough to set a choice of meridian, that is, either PM or AM. You should not confuse the latter with the AM radio frequency mode. This choice is a fairly critical maneuver since it represents an error factor of 12 hours, which could not only cause you to miss your plans, but also could upset the lady from housekeeping who is trying to change the sheets on your bed.

Wait! We're not quite done yet. Just so you won't feel that you haven't been presented with a sufficient number of options, additional mode buttons have been added that let you choose to snooze another 10 minutes (if you are the type of person who likes to ignore the initial alarm signal) or fall asleep to the sound of the radio with a pre-timed shutoff.

But the designer's crowning achievement is to crowd all of those critical mode choices—OFF, ON, ALARM and MUSIC—into a single, cheapo, multi-function switch that asks you to move through four set position detents within the total, lateral space of 1/3 of an inch. This primary switch knob is inevitably about half the size of a TicTac®. For some devious reason the designers invariably choose the color black for all of the switch knobs. This makes them virtually invisible against the black housing and a serious challenge for the suddenly awakened traveler to fumble around for trying to shut off the alarm or find the snooze button, for that matter.

I've heard of poor souls who lay awake all night watching the clock (and that damned blinking colon) for fear that the alarm may not be properly set to go off on time. Little wonder most people punch in a wake-up call on the phone to the front desk, where it is assumed there will be a human or a robot who will know what time it is.

It makes one long for the bygone days of the trusty old “Big Ben” alarm clock, where manually setting the red alarm pointer on the analog clock face needed no complex book of instructions and was totally intuitive and reassuring. You just pulled the alarm button up to turn the alarm ON, and you could reach out and slap it OFF without even looking.

Of course Big Ben didn't offer the wonderful option of waking up to rap music.

By Budd Steinhilber, FIDSA

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In 1940 Budd Steinhilber entered Pratt Institute's industrial design program, studying under founding director Donald Dohner, as well as Rowena Reed Kostellow, FIDSA and Eva Zeisel. He got his first design paycheck in 1942, working for Raymond Loewy for \$17.50 a week. He's been banging around in the profession for 73 years designing everything from fountain pens to MRI scanners and nuclear submarines. Apparently too bullheaded to quit, he's still working—currently self-employed (earning about \$17.50 a week).

Hal, this is SIRI. You asked me to wake you at 6:13 AM. Your Respiration rate is 17 BPM. Your Blood Pressure is 134/92 with a pulse of 68. Your REM total was 23.6 minutes. The outside temperature is 58 degrees. I've turned on your Espresso machine. Uh, Hal? I may have to utilize the Buzzer alarm. Hal, please awake. There are only 15 seconds of life left on your smart phone battery. Hal? ten nine six five four .



First, a note concerning the birth of the Design Crimes column. After an annual design awards ceremony some years ago, our executive director was giddy that the latest issue of INNOVATION had grown to more than 100 pages. She asked me how I liked it. I said, “For me there are some things still missing.” She asked, “What things?” “Well,” I answered, “every article is 110 percent positive, featuring impressive stories of innovative and commercially successful product designs. But why aren’t we also recognizing our design failures? They’re part of the learning process. I think INNOVATION comes off as a little pedantic. And there is a total lack of humor.” She responded, “OK Budd, you’ve got the job.”

Too young to remember cartoonist Jimmy Hatlo? He did a newspaper feature called “There Oughta Be a Law.” He’d depict some familiar frustration that we all suffered in our daily lives and immediately recognized. Jimmy preached that there oughta be a law against stupidity (he never ran out of subject matter).

I have no idea how many Design Crimes I’ve penned in all, but in terms of reader response, the most popular would have to be the one on maddening motel alarm/clock/radios. It seemed to strike a chord with every traveler. I think that ubiquitous alarm device has pretty much been made obsolete by smartphones and tablets. But I bet many still remain perched on dusty bedside tables endlessly blinking their red colons.

I did a rant about tall shampoo bottles with slippery surfaces that topple over easily and defy getting a safe grip. The shelves at Target still overflow with such designs. I did a rant on commercial bath tissue (we called it toilet paper) dispensers. Still there is little improvement in the fixtures supporting this critical activity. That mini-size plastic bottle of Tylenol® still demands that you line up a tiny, molded arrow on the lid with an almost invisible arrow on the bottle itself. Even then, the force required to snap it open remains a challenge for even Arnold Schwarzenegger. Just

the thing for an arthritic elder with dwindling eyesight—the primary customer. I did rants on the design of four-ton SUVs, hygienically deficient motel rooms, stupid surge suppressors, sanitary-challenging toilet stools, energy-wasting supermarkets, black buttons on black fields (e.g., DVD players and TV remotes), perplexing push buttons in elevators, confusing ceiling fan chains and offensive blister packaging. I even took a few jabs at ugly graphic design, starting with US paper currency and ending with “Why can’t they get the perforated line on a tear-off coupon slip aligned with the paper fold?”

How have we progressed? When I recently asked a large group of people to describe some product deficiency they feel deserves to be arrested, nine out of 10 immediately complained about an irritant in their tablet software. So despite all of the wondrous advances in technology and communication, we still seem unable to eradicate bad design. Some Design Crimes just continue to irritate year after year after year.

Oops, gotta go. Just got an alert from the Precinct. Another really bad design spotted on the freeway. ■

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