

Design enthusiasts blog to test boundaries and stay a step ahead The Boston Globe

By Jason Damas, Globe Correspondent | September 1, 2005

You've always needed a good eye if you wanted to make a splash in design. You also had to be in New York, Paris, Berlin, or some other design capital to feel the vibe, let alone add to it.

But nowadays, you can blog and be in the middle of things, no matter where you are.

Lillian and Joe Pikus are in Buffalo Grove, Ill., for example. But their website, www.Trendir.com, has established itself as a must-see source for modern furnishings such as the Placentero chair, designed and manufactured in Argentina, and cool devices like the single-bladed Fanimation Enigma ceiling fan.

"Ten years ago, I would say it wouldn't even have been possible," says Joe Pikus, who primarily handles the site's technical needs while his wife, an interior designer, scans the landscape for the new and unique. "All that consumers, designers, contractors, and remodelers had access to was magazines that they could store. They came out maybe once a month, and it takes them time to publish or write about all the products that are actually submitted to them. So what's possible now is to do a quick search and find new companies with new products, quickly write about them, and post it the same day."

Josh Rubin, the fellow behind www.Coolhunting.com, actually does live in New York, which retains its design-capital status even in the blogger age. He agrees with Pikus that a central effect of the design blogosphere has been to organize more information than was ever before possible.

"Prior to creating my website, any of these references were either bookmarked in my browser or torn out of magazines or kept in a large folder or were pictures taken on a street. . . . It was all very disorganized. I originally created the site as a way to keep it all together, create a database, and have a personal reference. I never promoted it; it kind of grew as a word of mouth."

Most of these blogs are run by individuals with voracious appetites for innovation, motivated by just a tinge of competitiveness to be the first to feature new products. While some are more hermitlike than others, the bloggers are generally social and have helped foster their community by linking to one another's pages while they carve out their niches. Not only do many accept advertising for one another's sites, most bloggers acknowledge the source when publishing a tip from someone else's site.

"There's a silent etiquette, I think, where most people in the community look for individual content because there's probably a huge overlap between readership," says Josh Spear, 21, of Boulder, Colo., who runs www.JoshSpear.com. "I always give credit and it brings reciprocal traffic. Our sites attract different people."

For many, like the Pikuses, the site is an extension of a real-life profession in interior design. "Lillian really has an eye to pick cool things," Joe Pikus says. "As a professional interior designer and decorator, she gets ideas from the buyers and the contractors. She researches the market as well, which I help with. We scan hundreds of websites weekly or daily, and pick out by category. We constantly scan them, plus we get some input from contractors who would be up-to-date also. We may have a list of things that we found that just came new to the market this week. Out of this list Lillian selects something she really likes."

Most of the blogs seek to not just scour for interesting stuff, but also to solve problems. www.ApartmentTherapy.com focuses on sprucing up small spaces, IDFuel.com keeps an eye on longer-term industrial design and engineering trends, and www.Treehugger.com focuses on eco-friendly design and sustainable materials.

"I call myself a designpreneur," says Treehugger.com proprietor Graham Hill, a Canadian currently running his site from Bangkok. "I'm a combination entrepreneur and designer. I've studied architecture and industrial design. I've done a bunch of construction; I had a small clothing company. I worked in clothing design and production management."

"There's a massive green revolution happening," says Hill, "We love the hippies. The hippies have done a tremendous job and have been the backbone of the environmental movement for 40 years. But they have a certain aesthetic, and that aesthetic has been served. If we're going to get that to go mainstream, then we need to try to appeal to a large market, try to make it easy, and try to make it sexy. We try to be a filter for the world to find environmental stuff that's sleek and modern. People are way more into change if they don't have to change much."

Taken as a group, the sites can be viewed as a compendium of home improvement ideas, and offer opportunities for anyone embarking on a home project to bounce ideas off of others. Many of the sites have interactive content, such as message board forums, and resources to accommodate a range of styles of home projects.

"Community is what ApartmentTherapy.com is about," says proprietor Maxwell Gillingham-Ryan. "Our site is extremely interactive with comments and commentary from readers. The thing that's surprised me the most about our site has been that house tours, where people send in photos of bathrooms, bedrooms, flower boxes, etc., has been the biggest thing. That discovery that people like to share, and people like to learn from what other people have done, has been the biggest thing, which wasn't my plan at all."

"I tend to focus more on the do-it-yourself because that's always been my approach," says Gillingham-Ryan. "That's what I try to get people to do. I think it's empowering to do it yourself, even if it just means finding the resources and hiring someone to do the manual labor. It's empowering for someone to make the home themselves."

The products featured on most of the sites are intriguing enough to entertain even those who aren't about to begin a decorating project. There is the KWC Eve Faucet, whose spout illuminates the stream of water (Trendir.com), or a voodoo knife holder that's in the shape of a man being stabbed (Gizmodo.com), but eco-friendly chicken coops (Treehugger.com) and bicycle cargo extensions (IDFuel.com) are also options.

While the sites focus on an array of design topics, there are a few common themes. Most predict an increased reliance on environmentally friendly materials and production techniques, as well as renewed attention to contemporary design.

"Contemporary home decor products are coming back," adds Pikus. "Starting, I would say, from the beginning of this year, a lot of new stuff has been coming out from Europe. What I see that's different about this time is that contemporary is coming back, but it's not just Europe, because American-based companies have picked up some European style and are coming out with some of their own products. I think the gap between Europe and the US has really decreased in the last 10 years."

"Globally, I think the trend is toward elegance, intelligence, and beauty, but on a smaller scale," says Harry Wakefield, whose contemporary furnishings site www.MoCoLoco.com was identified as a favorite by nearly all of the other bloggers. "A lot of this was ghettoized, and for the rich and famous, and now it's coming down to all of us. I'm really happy about that because it should be acceptable to more people." ■