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Lighting Universe

Michael Graves works hard to design household products that will do a good job, but they have got to look good doing it, too

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BY MARNI JAMESON

Special to the Star-Telegram

Some people get all gaga over movie stars and sports celebrities. Not me. The fact that someone has a fetching charm or can hurl a ball through a hoop from 50 feet away does not impress me in the least. Genius, however, gets me every time.



View photos

Given a choice of dinner with Lance Armstrong, George Clooney or Stephen Hawking, the decision wouldn't even be close. Thus, talking to Michael Graves this week ranked up there with the time I got my driver's license and a puppy on the same day.

Have more to add? News tip? Tell us

The world-renowned architect and Princeton professor has not only graced the world with more than 350 landmark buildings, from Egypt to the Netherlands, but he's also designed more than 2,500 household products -- many available at a Target near you, and as of this month on the Home Shopping Network.

What I like about Graves is that he's humble and grand. Who else has designed a federal courthouse and a toilet plunger?

"People didn't like to have their plungers out in the open, so I designed one with a little keeper," Graves told me over the phone from his Princeton studio, as if he needed to explain why he designed a toilet plunger with a caddy, which, incidentally, landed in a modern art museum.

The plunger is one example of the hundreds of household peeves Graves has resolved by creative thinking. His signature teakettle, first created for Alessi in 1985, puts the base of the kettle -- and not the handle -- over the flame, and has a handle made of material that stays cool to the touch. Alessi still sells 70,000 of these teakettles a year.

I first spoke to Graves 10 years ago when Target launched his household product line, part of his mission to make good design available to the masses. The line included a less-expensive version of the teakettle, a toaster, a clock and utensils.

This spring, he introduced a crop of brooms, dustpans and mops. I got one of each, curious to see how could he improve on these fundamentals.

The dustpan has foot pedals you step on while you sweep, so you can sweep with two hands and avoid getting a face full of dust. Makes you wonder why we've had hands-free telecommunications for years, yet only now a hands-free dustpan.

His twist mop is made of micro-fibers (which grab dirt better than cotton) and has a built-in scrubber at the tip, which lets you rub out a floor stain without getting on your knees.

"I wish I could try them," said Graves, who turns 77 this month. Graves has been in a wheelchair for eight years because of a spinal infection.

I thought of Graves recently when I was in Target buying a colander. I saw one for \$3.99, plastic and uninspiring; another of heavy-gauge metal for \$8.99, and one by Graves of lighter metal in a happy shade of purple for \$4.99. The choice was easy. It boiled down to which one I'd rather have dinner with.

I decided it was time to check in with Graves again to learn what was on his masterful mind these days.

How can the average person know good design when he sees it?

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If you like the way something looks, its color and texture; if it feels good in your hand, and if, when you get it home, it does the job, that's the acid test.

When you design something, what are you striving for?

The intersection of function and aesthetics. I want it to be highly useful and have a little wit. Generally, the better it looks, the better it works.

I have this old-fashioned Pyrex juicer. It's got a ridged dome in the center of a cup that catches the juice and a little spout. It works perfectly. I've seen fancy electric ones that cost 20 times more. Are they better?

I've seen the fancy ones, too. They get juice all over the counter. Clients often ask me to remake something that works perfectly well just to give customers something fresh. I'm always perplexed. I don't see a reason to change. If an item works well, don't replace it.

Of all your products, which are your favorites?

I like my set of kitchen gadgets, including the gadget that holds the gadgets. I'm fond of my toaster, which looks like half an egg, and of some canisters, and of my dustpan.

How is America doing on the design front?

One Italian designer told me that, in terms of design, "America doesn't get it at all." He wasn't talking about squeegee mops, but about our houses, our decorating, our cars and how we dress ourselves. I think he's in part right. Italians don't have Barcaloungers.

Ten years ago, you told me the best thing ever designed was the egg. You said, "It's smooth enough to easily slip out of the mom, sturdy enough for her to sit on, self-contained, beautiful and fits perfectly in your hand." Are you still working that shape into your designs?

Yes. It's a good shape to put your hand on, and hard to improve on. It makes a good handle, and an especially good knob.

Anything you'd like to add?

Don't wait 10 years to call me next time. Maybe next time we'll have dinner.

Syndicated columnist and speaker Marni Jameson is the author of "House of Havoc" and "The House Always Wins" (Da Capo Press). Contact her through www.marnijameson.com.

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