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WIRED

The Rise of Silicon Modern

BY CLIFF KUANG

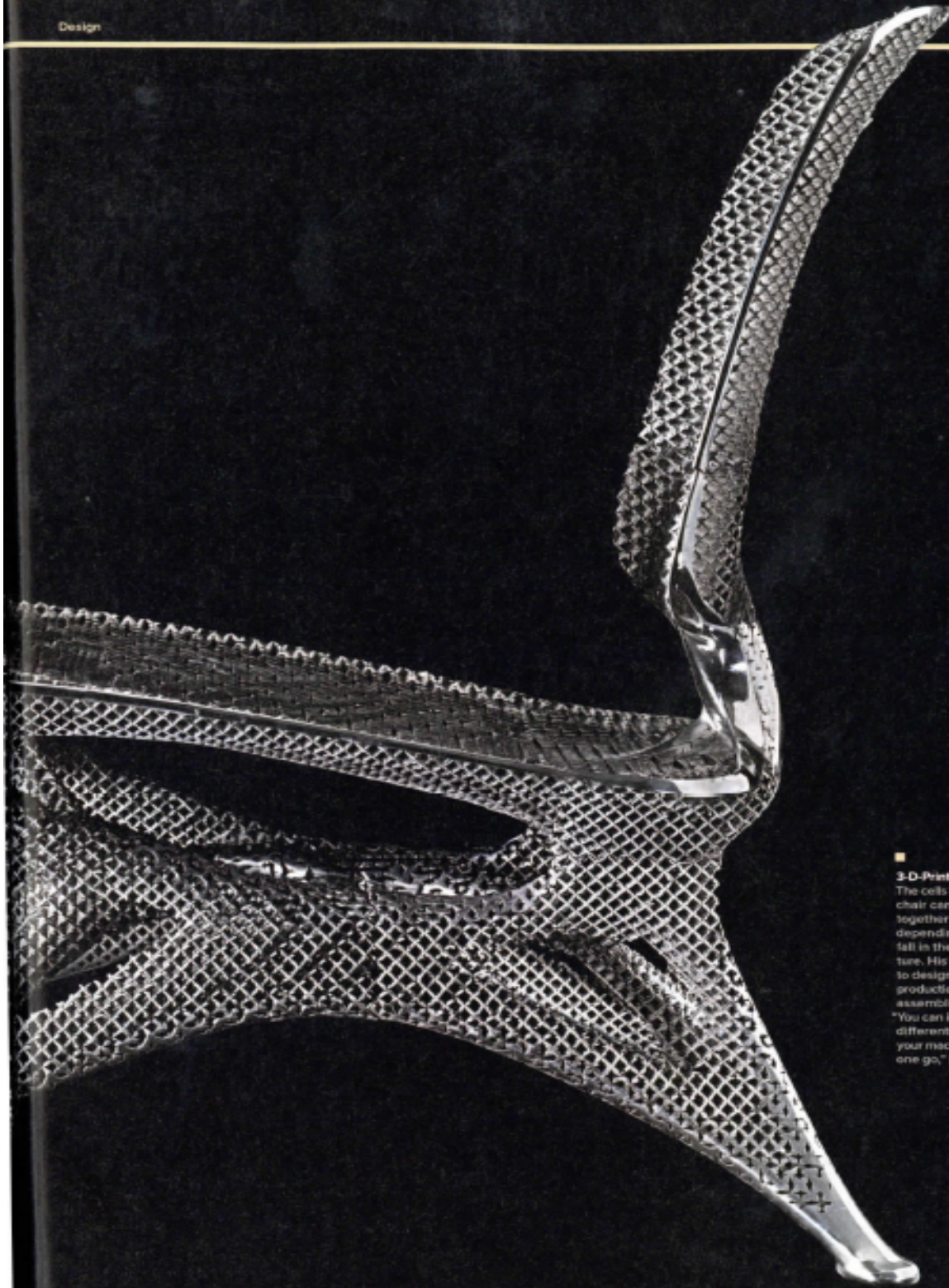
IN 1941, Charles and Ray Eames began chasing a radical vision: mass-produced plywood furniture that curved like a flowing sand dune. In an extra bedroom, the husband-and-wife team rigged up a system to bind together thin layers of wood veneer, which they'd stack into a curvy mold studded with clamps. But the glue required hours to set, making the process unworkable. ¶ And then a friend who knew of the Eameses' experiments told them about a problem facing injured GIs: Their metal splints didn't fit well, causing them to crack. So the Eameses pitched the idea of a curvy wooden splint to the Navy and won a contract. The deal gave them access to top-secret materials, including a new fast-drying glue. The splints were a success, and when the Army declassified the glue after the war ended, the Eameses finally had what they needed. Their LCW and DCW—Lounge Chair Wood and Dining Chair Wood—became instant classics, heralding the start of what people now refer to as midcentury modern. ¶ In fact, many of the signature products of that school were made possible by a postwar technological bounty. When the Eameses wanted to make fiberglass chairs, they scrounged their prototype materials from military surplus stores and contracted with a manufacturer that had been making radar domes. Designers George Nelson and Harry Bertola adapted once-obscure manufacturing techniques to create, respectively, their Swag Leg table and Diamond Chair. The conditions that allowed midcentury modern to flourish arose from surplus tech innovations that took on new life in a designer's hands. ¶ We're living in an eerily similar time. Thanks to 40 years of increasingly cheap and tiny processors, new software, cheap sensors, and digital manufacturing, people can build products that would have seemed impossible a decade ago. The iPod—arguably the Eames chair of this new era—became feasible only when Apple's head of hardware engineering, Jon Rubinstein, found a hard drive so tiny and capacious that its own inventors didn't know what to do with it. Sensor technology created to track cattle and nuclear materials now enhance experiences like Disney World, where new MagicBands guide wearers through the park. Joris Laarman let algorithms make crucial design decisions for his 3-D-printed chair (right). It is, in fact, another golden age: the era of Silicon Modern. ¶ This new age will only get more exciting. When technical wizardry becomes commonplace, design becomes a competitive advantage. Yet design is so easy to copy that designers must constantly improve upon their work. The result is a fevered pace of innovation. As companies compete to retain their edge, they create a virtuous circle that produces better and better products. ¶ In the following pages, we've collected 10 great exemplars of the current movement. They encompass big ideas, inspiring projects, and new forms of expression. Silicon Modern is here, and it's only going to get better.



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3-D-Printed Chair

The cells in Joris Laarman's chair can be packed closer together or farther apart depending on where they fall in the 3-D-printed structure. His cellular approach to design upends traditional production, which relies on assembling premade parts. "You can introduce all these different variables, and your machine can do that in one go," Laarman says.

ERIK AND PETRA HESMERG

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