Bruce Sterling

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A **VISIT** WITH THE **CHAIR MAN**

He said his place was easy to find. His mailbox was lettered in Helvetica.

Niels Diffrient and his Helvetica mailbox are in rural Ridgefield, CT, a time-honored Yankee hamlet. Diffrient escaped the roar of New York corporate life to work in his self-designed atelier. Since that time, he tells me ruefully, New York has followed him: quiet Ridgefield is a Big Apple commute, these days.

Above: Niels Diffrient, FIDSA, and Helena Hernmarck don't live in design; they live design.

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> It doesn't have to be.
> Very few people get it about that.
> A few designers.
> A vanishingly few clients.
> The consumers?
> Nobody talks to them."

The master's home has a similar story to tell: its locale, with stone walls and a duck pond, is Robert Frost material. Inside, it's Design as a Way of Life.

I write for shelter mags. "Modern design," as seen in glossy magazines, is a strange business: those model homes always look as if a swarm of housekeepers will eagerly sweep the instant the photographers leave. Rational minimalism is a hard way of life; "less is more work." You realize that as soon as you visit the offices of any shelter magazine. They sing the praises of the stark and simple life while they themselves are always a calamitous mess. The explosive flow of press releases and conference swag just overwhelms them; yes, even the pros.

Niels Diffrient and Helena Hernmarck don't live in design; they live design. What I witness at the Diffrient house is inhabitable Modernism. These two people who live that life in all sincerity. It's a rather artsy and self-invented Modernism, very personable: woolly wall-hangings, many eclectic books, a handsome house cat. Chez Diffrient has much of the placid Swedish watercolor clarity of a Carl Larsson house.

As I disgorge the chaotic contents of my overnight bag, I find that the drawers in the guest room (and lo, there are many) are empty. My jaw drops at this. I can't comprehend it. Niels Diffrient is in his mid-70s. He has had a particularly active and productive life. Helena Hernmarck is a globally known textile artist (hailing from Sweden) whose English is better than most Americans. She is the picture of bicontinental arts-and-crafts chic.

Where is their junk?

The bookshelves offer many edifying tomes to amuse the guest, but all these drawers are innocent of contents. How can you make it to your mid-70s and never fill up the drawers in your guest room? Where do they put the souvenirs, the keepsakes, the half-forgotten clutter of life?

It dawns on me, with a kind of awe, that there isn't any.

The dual workshop outside the house is of impressive dimensions, yet it's much the same story there. The weaving workshop that occupies the downstairs, with its unorthodox fan and its rainbow archive of yarn, is pretty enough for weddings. The upstairs workshop appears a bit cluttered—many a working prototype stands here, still under thoughtful study—but it's not the clutter of a frenzied labor. Basically, the Diffrient studio is overflowing with design awards. There are too many, and there seems to be a space-pinch to mount them on the walls. Perhaps a natural modesty militated against these awards being factored in.

This orderliness is not a barrack's starkness. It is not a persnickety rigorous neatness, either. It lacks the overly poised look of stage design. It's just, well, domestic order.

I just came out of a design school where the sweat of creation was everywhere. I know what design in progress is supposed to look like: collapsing budgets, haywire plans and ferocious deadline pressure. It's a minor maelstrom of hasty sketchbooks, tangled extension cords, blunted X-Acto knives and wrecked foam core.

None of that around here.

How do they do it?

I get a clue when I help Helena weave her Christmas decor. I don't help her much, mind you; I just hold her wreath up at an ergonomic angle while Helena, one of the world's foremost weavers, wraps her Christmas lights through the foliage. When we plug it in, some of the lights don't work. Methodical and unperturbed, she unweaves and reweaves them. They still don't work. So we do it a third time. Then it works.

She doesn't fret. She doesn't decry the waste of time. She doesn't junk the project or find something "more useful" to do. Helena can weave giant trompe l'oeil tapestries big enough for bank lobbies without misplacing a thread or dropping a stitch. If the priority is rightness, then the schedule gives way with grace. One doesn't hastily slam a tapestry into shape.

I've heard stories about people going to eat at the Eames home. The guests rather dreaded it, or so I hear. The food was fine, but no one could bear to disturb Ray's fanatical table assemblages. Nobody wanted to be the first yahoo to destroy the geometric precision of her fruit salads.

Diffrient knew Eames before Eames was "Eames." At the Diffrients', ease and informality reigns. Tasty sandwiches and some beer appear. We feast on them, and when it's done, the normal domestic entropy incumbent on lunching has somehow failed to occur. I see no breadcrumbs, no stains, no spills, no empty bottles or abandoned silverware in the sink. I didn't even hear them washing up. It was like a sans-serif version of lunch.

Diffrient, with a pardonable pride, shows me the "original sketch" for a chair he designed. He did it with his favorite six-millimeter mechanical pencil, a perfectly normal and everyday mechanical pencil; although I have never seen a mechanical pencil used so long and so methodically that it has human grip marks on its shaft. **The "sketch" is a spotless sheet of drafting paper the size of a flat-screen TV, and even a neophyte can tell that this is no mere sketch of a chair but an actual chair in some graphic larval form.** All the working parts are there, in proper proportions. There are dozens of them.

Skepticism seizes me. "Don't you have a napkin sketch of this thing, Niels?" I say. "I mean, where's your 'original' original sketch?"

There isn't any. He's a little reluctant to admit it, but Niels Diffrient no longer needs to "sketch" his chairs in any rough or approximate form. They are contained in his mind's eye. He can see every working piece while lying in bed staring at the ceiling in the dark. He just juggles them mentally. That must save a lot of mess.

The office is full of ongoing projects. The umbrella, always one of his favorites for vernacular design, has been radically readapted as a kind of privacy shield for the office cubicle. There's a remarkably inventive computer workstation in progress. There are neat stacks of patents in progress, though Diffrient dreads the idea of defending his intellectual property in the court system, when he might more easily invent something even newer and better yet.

There are deliberate experiments that have not yet panned out and may never pan out: for instance, clear plastic wheels for office chairs. One thinks of his friend Eero Saarinen, and his "slum of legs." The Saarinen tulip chair was meant to clear out that untidy mess of chair legs. Eero died young; Diffrient did not—which had led to another "problem." **He's full of ideas, and their clarity and usefulness have not dimmed. However, those ideas are outliving their material form.**

He shows me a mechanical engineering textbook from the 1960s: a comprehensive encyclopedia of moving parts. "They don't do it like this anymore," he says, and it's true. This book is stunningly thorough and comprehensive, but if it had been invented today, it would obviously be a searchable web site, not a book. Nobody, but nobody, would pore over the whole thing, cover to cover. I get the strong impression that Diffrient leafs through this book as one might gaze through a seashell collection, for the aesthetic joy of it.

Then there's his own book, *Humanscale*. It's a tour de force that made human ergonomic studies more humanly ergonomic. Diffrient assembled a mess of disparate data onto neat circular slide rules. Unfortunately, circular slide rules, cut-out windows in rotating plastic wheels, are analog computational devices now well past their digital sell-by date. He packed his knowledge into a physical form that's no longer manufacturable. What to do?

Obviously, he would much rather create new products than fight a rear-guard action against a slow loss of standards and values. Anyone can kick up an obstreperous fuss. **Very few people advance the craft of design because their conceptual approach resists and confounds obsolescence.**

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What if everybody just understood? ■

Right: The Liberty Chair designed by Niels Diffrient for Humanscale combines structural, multi-panel construction with the breathability and sustainability of mesh.