

# How to stay safe - and eat fondue — in an earthquake



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NEW YORK DIARY

My experience with street demonstrations is limited, so this should be taken with a grain of salt, but I always thought the point of protesting is to get beaten up. Exactly how beaten up is irrelevant, but without jarring visuals of vicious cops assaulting vulnerable protesters with nightsticks, TV producers usually have trouble working up much enthusiasm for demonstrations. Which would seem to make Suited For Subversion sort of self-defeating.

A nylon-reinforced padded PVC shroud that includes a wireless video camera and a speaker that projects the sound of the wearer's heartbeat, Suited For Subversion, by the South African designer Ralph Borland, is intended to protect demonstrators against battery from billy clubs. It will not, however, protect them from the humiliation of being laughed at for looking like human-sized pigs-in-blankets.

The suit is one of more than 300 products or prototypes on display at the Museum of Modern Art as part of SAFE: Design Takes on Risk, which opened yesterday and runs to Jan. 2. The show includes products created to protect people — and animals, and pieces of fruit — from both physical and emotional stress. They range from the ridiculous to the deadly serious, from a remote-controlled electronic box installed in Japanese toilet stalls that emits a loud flushing sound to cover the delicate tinkles that embarrass Japanese women; to the

Stop Thief! plywood chair equipped with two slots at the front on which to hang a bag; to a Drink Safe bar coaster, on which someone can splash a drop of their drink to make sure it hasn't been spiked; to the Spider Boot Antipersonnel Mine Foot Protection System, manufactured by the Canadian company Med-Eng Systems, which provides a measure of protection from exploding shrapnel. There are innovative condom designs and plastic fruit holders and easy-to-use pill dispensers and collapsible water containers designed by the United Nations.

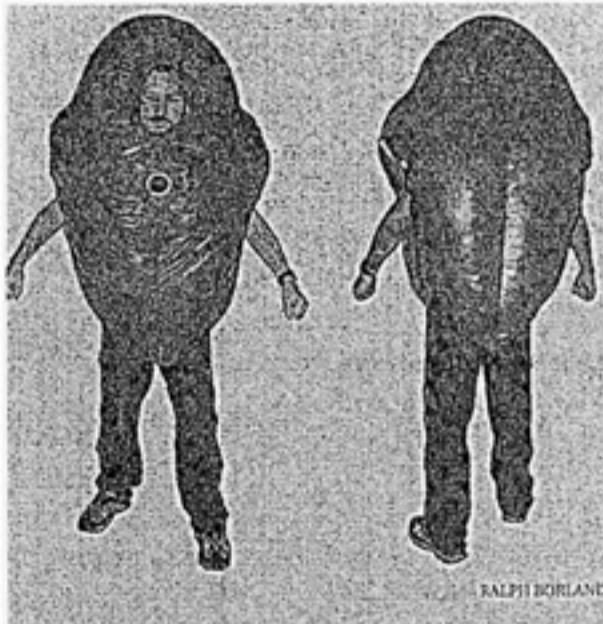
The curator Paola Antonelli divides the show into six sections: shelter, armour, property, everyday, emergency and awareness; she also takes a catholic approach to the discussion of risk and safety.

To that end, the show's catalogue includes a thoughtful interview

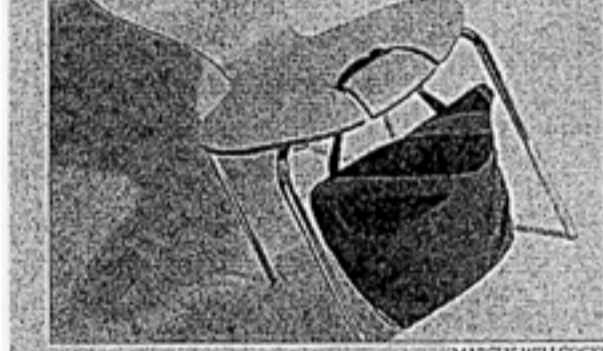
**The objects in MoMA's show on products created to protect range from the deadly serious to the ridiculous and include, clockwise from above: Spider Boot Antipersonnel Mine Foot Protection System, Suited for Subversion, Stop Thief! plywood chair, and Swiss Fondue Earthquake Safety Table.**

with Cameron Sinclair, the founder of Architecture for Humanity, who points out that people housed in a refugee camp crave a semblance of normalcy, which will prompt them to make choices that might seem strange to those who have never been in such dire circumstances. "Pop culture," — say, a T-shirt bearing the logo of the internationally known soccer club Real Madrid — "becomes important, as it signifies normalcy," he says.

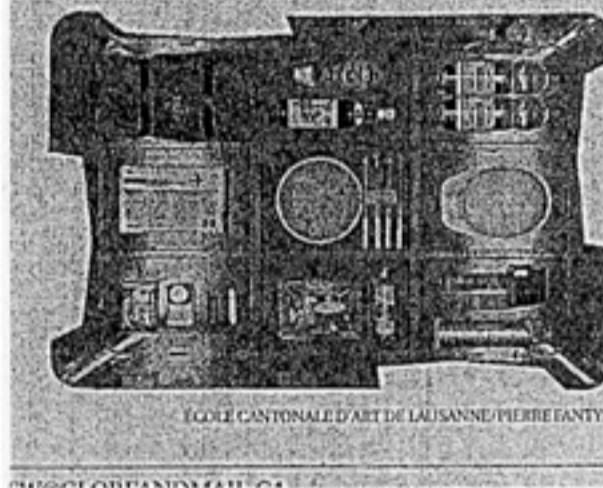
Many designers are represented by innovative examples of portable shelters, including architect Shigeru Ban's paper log house, which helped out earthquake victims in Turkey in 1999 and in India in 2001. Michael Rakowitz has a paraSITE homeless shelter, consisting of



RALPH BORLAND



MARCUS WILLOCOCK



PAOLA ANTONELLI/ART DE LASALLE, PIRELLA GÖTTSCHE LOWE



plastic pouches sewn together and then attached at one end to a building's outtake duct for heat.

My favourite piece is probably the Swiss Fondue Earthquake Safety Table, a red lacquered steel structure that can protect people from falling objects. A collection of supplies are strapped underneath, including all the necessary ingredients for a lovely fondue meal in the middle of a disaster. Who knew the Swiss had earthquakes?

The Canadian comic instinct is on full display in the designs of Tobias Wong, who offers a black bulletproof quilted duvet (perfect for snuggling with James Bond) and a ballistic rose brooch that can be worn to dull the impact of a bullet. Also drawing titters are the well known pieces of Bill Burns, whose whimsical Safety Gear for Small Animals includes a tiny hardhat, a respirator and an animal-sized bi-hazard tent. Even the Canadian government is making people chuckle: Health Canada's cigarette package warning, "Tobacco Use Can Make You Impotent," with its frank rendering of a flaccid cigarette, is included in the Awareness section.

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Antonelli's last large show at MoMA was *Workspaces*, which explored new frontiers in office design. Mounted in the innocent days of Feb. 2001, the greatest safety concerns of *Workspaces* were how to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome and the Dilbertian desire to deflect the interruptions of bothersome co-workers. Times, as they say, have changed, though Antoinette began working on SAFE about six months before Sept. 11, 2001.

Still, the show can't help but sit in the long shadow of that day.

In fact, some commentators have noted that SAFE might even stand as a fitting metaphor for New York itself, which used to be a daring and dangerous city but, especially since being attacked, has become timid and common in its aspirations. The floundering and delays and multiple failures at ground zero add up to only the most obvious example of a widespread unwillingness to take risks. Even the choice to put up a tall building down there is a safe nod to the past.

But then, it can be a scary world out there. If you spend a couple of hours wandering through the devices and displays in SAFE, you could begin to feel it's a miracle that any of us manages to get through the day, what with the violent muggers, rapists, infected sex partners, warlords, tsunamis, land-mines, rioting concertgoers and bruised bananas out there. Luckily, there's a handy cure if paranoia sets in.

Down at street level, in Danny Meyer's chic new restaurant *The Modern*, you can throw back a couple of large-pour, walloping cocktails and you won't give a damn about anything. The only thing you have to fear is the bill.