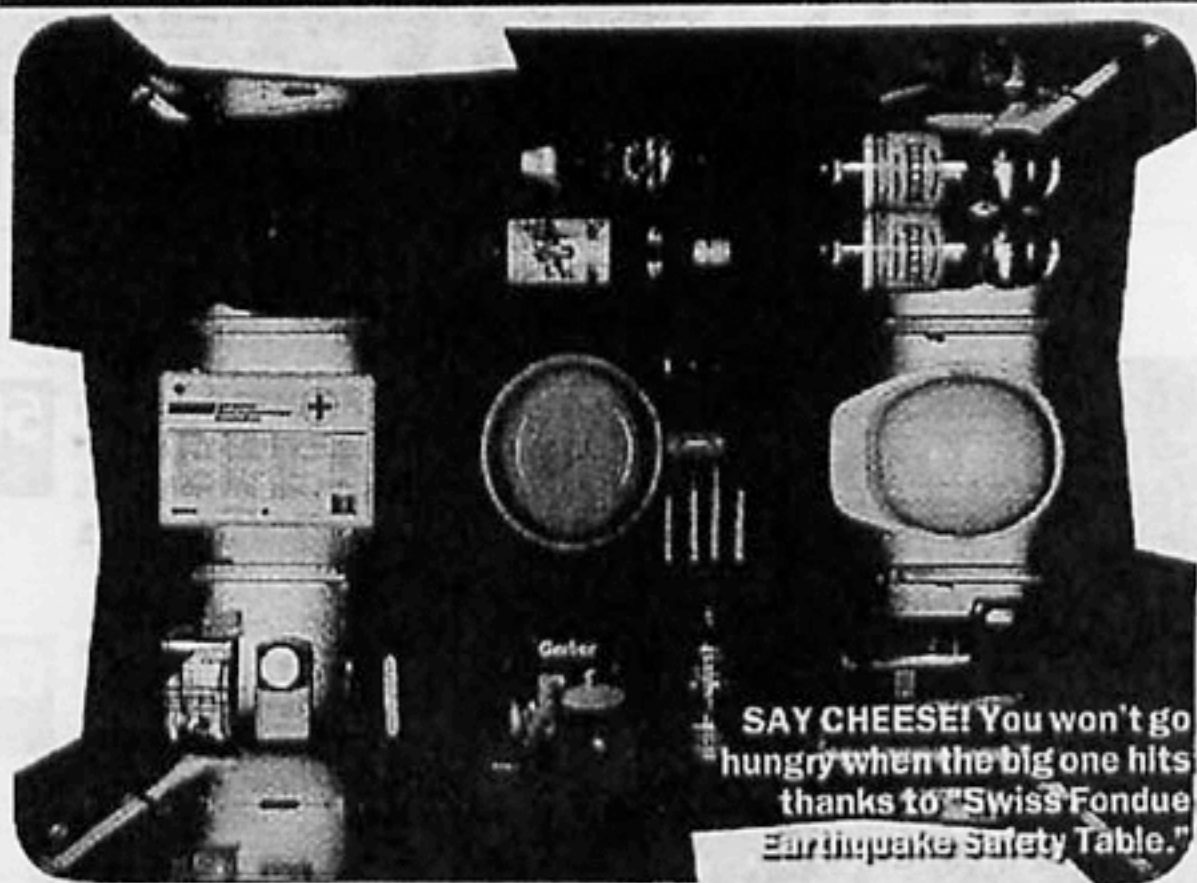


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AROUND TOWN

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Safe keeping

MoMA finds beauty—and humor—in objects designed to protect us

By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

Safety could hardly be a timelier topic during this current confluence of natural disasters and global and local threats—real and perceived, large-scale and personal. The ways design can protect us is the subject of “Safe: Design Takes on Risk,” a sprawling—and surprisingly amusing—show at the Museum of Modern Art that tackles the theme from every conceivable angle. But don’t expect a thoroughly dark reminder of the dangers of modern life: The entertainment value alone of the “Swiss Fondue Earthquake Safety Table”—a spiffy red metal table with a fire extinguisher, shovel, blanket, first-aid kit and all the ingredients needed to make a lovely fondue strapped underneath it—should help take the edge off the subway ride to the museum.

Displays of gas masks, land-mine detectors and intercoms for the New York City subway all address the clear and present dangers throughout the world. But seen en masse like this, the grouping can’t help but take on the slightly humorous appeal of Q’s laboratory of outlandish inventions for James Bond. This mix of more than 300 prototypes and objects in production—full-scale shelters cropping up around the space and various forms of body armor displayed on mannequins—

is truly a visual wonderland.

The bulletproof quilted duvet or the shoulder bag that screams at 138 decibels when yanked from its owner might seem over the top, but anyone who’s ever had a one-sided sunburn after a long drive would appreciate sheathing their arm in the “UPF 50+ Driving Sleeve.” Likewise, any woman who’s spent a meal double-checking that her bag is still at her feet would welcome the “Stop Thief! Ply Chair,” a version of a classic Arne Jacobsen chair with two slots cut out of the seat so the strap of your bag can slide onto it.

Without creating any hierarchy,

Review

“Safe: Design Takes on Risk”

Museum of Modern Art, through Jan 2 (see Museums).

the show integrates designs addressing such quotidian issues with those having far more dire consequences. Hurricanes, earthquakes, war and poverty have all focused attention on the need for temporary shelter. Olivier Peyricot’s “Vigilhome,” with walls made of brown matting that can fold up accordion-style, is fully equipped with survival material, including a chain saw, hockey mask and frying pan; and oversize drums are filled

with cereal, apple juice, and anxiolytic pills to fight stress. Far more tranquil is Shigeru Ban’s “Paper Log House,” assembled here from commonplace cardboard tubes and PVC, elevated from the ground on beer crates weighted with sand bags. The house has been used over the past ten years to shelter victims of earthquakes in Japan, Turkey and India.

Michael Rakowitz’s “paraSITE” is as much political statement as it is practical protection for the urban homeless. It’s a small domicile cobbled together from polyethylene and a hose that ingeniously affixes to the outtake duct of a building’s ventilation system. Its walls are inflated—like a miniature version of a children’s bounce house—and heated by the building’s exhaust. “paraSITE” provides safety to street people while also making very visible a social problem.

This kind of design activism recurs throughout the show. Ralph Borland’s “Suited for Subversion” is a red, padded heart-shaped suit with arm and face holes, and a speaker at the center that amplifies the wearer’s heartbeat. While it would protect a protester from being beaten with police batons, it seems designed more to call attention to the risks faced by agitators.

Environmentalists also use design to broadcast their message in inventive and comic ways. Dré Wapenaar’s “Treetent,” made for England’s Road Alert Group (which fought the destruction of forests for highways), literally hugs its host tree. A giant teardrop form made of canvas, plywood, and steel that clamps onto the trunk of the tree it guards, “Treetent” originally housed conservationists and now is being rented out at a camp site in the Netherlands. Perhaps the least functional design here is Bill Burns’s “Safety Gear for Small Animals.” The collection of tiny equipment includes a respirator, a florescent safety vest, and work gloves sized for frogs, prairie dogs and other animals threatened by deforestation and human expansion.

This show stretches the concept of safety in every direction imaginable. But rather than aggravate our jitters, the onslaught of potential risks helps put our daily worries in some perspective. Being equipped to make fondue in a crisis doesn’t actually seem like a bad idea. ■