

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
April 1988

DESIGNS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

An Exhibition of Products for the Elderly and Physically Disabled

April 16 - June 7, 1988

One of the first exhibitions to focus on products designed for the elderly and the physically disabled opens at The Museum of Modern Art on April 16, 1988. Organized by Cara McCarty, assistant curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, DESIGNS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING represents the recent change in attitude in designing products to meet the specific needs of a growing segment of our population. Selected for their excellence of design, these objects have been enhanced by an aesthetic quality not usually associated with adaptive technology.

On view through June 7, the exhibition has been made possible by generous grants from Volvo and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The exhibition features forty-five objects, ranging from mobility equipment and communication aids to clothing and household items. Examples include sculpted cane handles, brightly-colored support structures for children with motor disabilities, and tableware for people with arthritis or limited hand strength. The products are principally from Sweden, as well as from the United States, England, and Denmark.

Designing for people with physical limitations is an increasingly important aspect of today's design activity. Traditionally, adaptive equipment was developed by occupational therapists and medical technicians. While useful, most of these objects were extremely cumbersome in design, helping to foster the user's feelings of inadequacy and further contributing to society's

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stigmatization of people with disabilities. The recent involvement of industrial designers has had a significant impact on product development, deriving from a collaborative approach among designer, medical professional, and user. Whether for people with temporary or permanent disabilities, the objective is to develop products that help integrate people into the community and enable them to live as independent and normal a life as possible.

Ms. McCarty writes in the brochure accompanying the exhibition, "The importance of adaptive aids can be appreciated when we understand that a handicap is not a characteristic of a person with a disability, but rather describes a relationship between an individual and the environment. Thus someone may be handicapped in some situations but not in others."

What makes designing for specific needs challenging is that strict parameters and objective criteria dominate: the functional requirements of the user determine design constraints that must be met in the final product. The beauty of these objects derives in large measure from an economy of design and purity of form. The "Super Sport" hand prosthesis designed by Bob Radocy, for example, is both organic and minimal in form. It was developed especially for ball sports, gymnastics, and other rigorous recreation in which hand and wrist flexion is needed.

Advancements in technology have contributed to other innovative designs. Lightweight materials developed in the aerospace industry are now used to achieve more maneuverable and portable wheelchairs. Initially intended for racing wheelchairs, these recent innovations have transformed the traditional wheelchair into a tool to enhance mobility. Likewise, electronic aids offer enormous potential for people with impaired abilities. They are improving

methods of communication and are increasing employment and educational opportunities.

A brochure with an essay and exhibition checklist by Cara McCarty accompanies the exhibition. As a supplement to the exhibition there is a video and "hands on" display in the Edward John Noble Education Center.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750