

By Alice Rawsthorn

LONDON

There's no point in arguing with Philippe Starck, because it generally goes like this: 1. The world's most famous designer makes a well-meaning and sincere, but slightly preposterous claim. 2. You feel obliged to question the preposterous bit. 3. He comes across all hurt and boyish. 4. You feel mean.

Take Starck's claim to have "invented a concept called Democratic Design," which, he says, gives everyone high quality products at affordable prices. Sounds great, but didn't the modern movement try to do that for most of the 20th century? And how can he claim to have "won the battle" by designing "a chair that sells for less than €100," or \$157, when that's still too expensive for most people? Let alone the 90 percent of the world's population who are too poor to afford the basics? What has Democratic Design done for them? "Oh please, I'm not God," he pleaded. "I'm just a designer, and I'm doing my best."

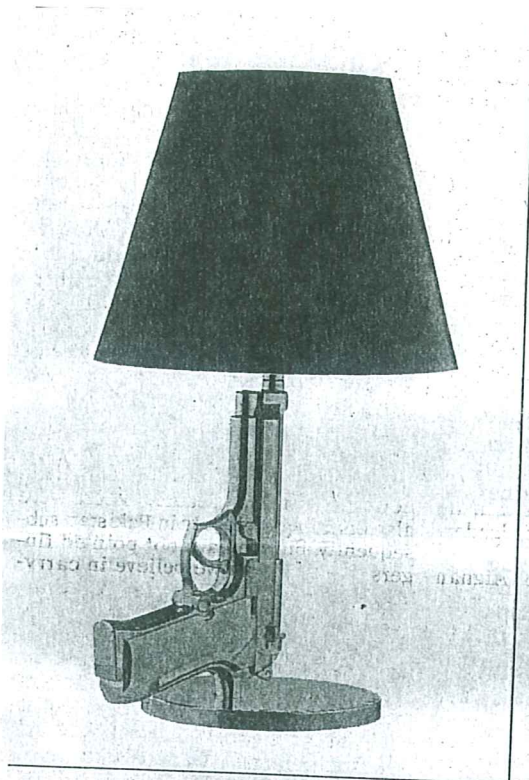
Luckily for the underprivileged 90 percent, other designers are trying to help them. Starck is battling on another front — developing cheap, attractive, energy-saving products to "introduce everybody to ecology." The first of his Democratic Ecology products is to be launched this fall, a miniature roof-top windmill, priced between €500 and €800, which will produce up to 80 percent of a home's energy. "Imagine a Saturday afternoon, and a guy going stupidly to the supermarket to buy a useless gadget," enthused Starck. "He sees a really sexy object. 'Oh my God, it's beautiful. How much does it cost? €500? That's almost what I'd spend on a useless gadget.' He brings the windmill home, goes to his roof and 15 minutes later he sees it turning and producing energy. Wow!"

Starck's windmill is one of dozens of alternative energy sources to be coming on to the market, but there are sound reasons for taking his product seriously. One is that it's deftly designed, not least because the blades are made of transparent plastic, which will be virtually invisible up on the roof. Another is that it's designed by him, and Starck has been so successful at persuading people to buy visually seductive, but often pointless objects — plastic

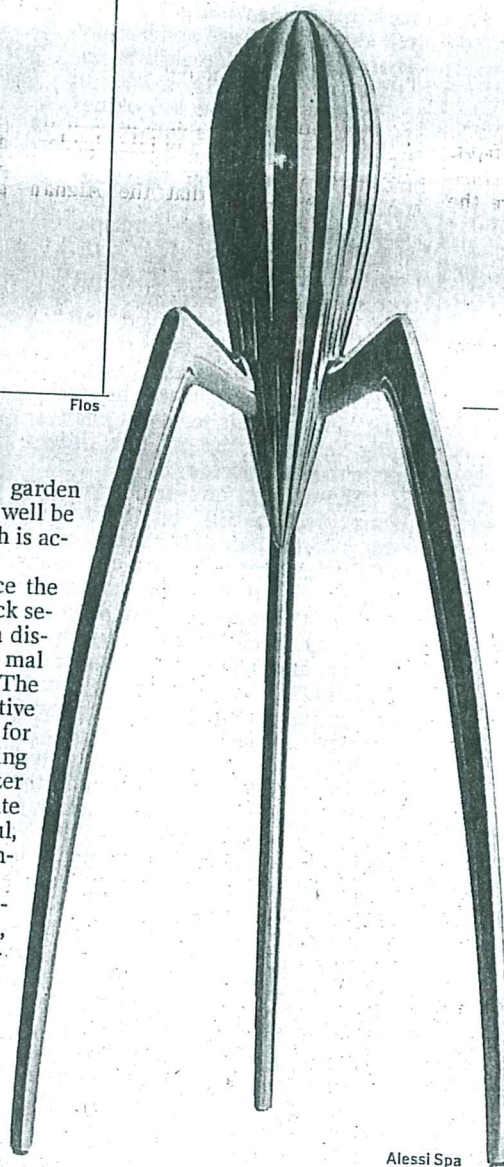


Philippe
Starck
makes
a tilt
toward
windmills

Starck's miniature roof-top windmill, above, priced between €500 and €800. It will produce up to 80 percent of a home's energy, the designer said. The blades are made of transparent plastic, which is virtually invisible up on a roof.



Flos



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Louis XV chairs, gun-shaped lamps, garden gnome stools and so on — that he may well be able to do the same for something which is actually useful.

That said, it's been a long time since the design world felt that it had to take Starck seriously. He's a gentle giant, who bears a distinct resemblance to Desperate Dan, the malbarbu cowboy in the British comic "The Dandy." Now 59, he rose to fame in his native France during the 1980s, when his flair for reinventing everyday objects by casting them as something else — a lemon squeezer as a lobster, and plastic chairs as ornate Louis XV ones — was hailed as a playful, and very commercial take on then-fashionable postmodernism.

Starck has since sold hundreds of thousands of his lobster-like lemon squeezers, and nearly a million of just one of his "antique" plastic chairs, Louis Ghost. For better or worse, he has also given us the designer hotel — aided and abetted by the New York hotelier Ian Schrager — and the showstopping restrooms that now pop up in every other bar. Starck cast himself as a media star by spouting his

design philosophy in "franglais" sound-bites, and bragging about being able to design a chair in the time it took for an aircraft seatbelt sign to go on and off. No other designer could beat him for chutzpah and bankability, but by the mid-1990s Starck was grouching about being bored by design.

Commercially, he's still a colossus, who bags plum jobs, like the creative directorship of Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic space venture, and is shooting a reality TV show for the BBC. But at times he seems like design's equivalent of a dinosaur rocker. Starck's confession this year that he was "ashamed" that "everything I designed is unnecessary" drew derisory roars in the blogosphere. Does he still feel like that? "I regret that my job is design," he admitted. "Design stupidly produces more things, and for years I've spoken about the importance of living with fewer things. But my position is a little ambiguous."

Indeed it is. To his credit, Starck was advocating environmentalism long before it became fashionable, but he hasn't embraced it fully in his work. Nor does he seem to see the irony in rattling off a list of eco-responsible activities — organic diet, solar-powered oyster farm and so forth — ending with "the least polluting plane on the market," his private jet. Now he's hoping to redress the balance with

Democratic Ecology.

The windmill is an encouraging start. Made from the same transparent plastic as his best-selling Louis Ghost chairs, Starck developed it and the other Democratic Ecology products in collaboration with Pramac, the Italian industrial group. The timing is propitious with oil prices rocketing and everyone from General Electric to the veteran oilman T. Boone Pickens investing in alternative energy. Lots of homes already sport metal wind turbines on their roofs, so why not transparent plastic ones?

Next up is a solar panel, a film that covers existing windows. Starck is also designing a prefabricated eco-house with glass walls that can be changed from clear or opaque at the push of a button. The prototype is being built for him and his family on the plot of their old home outside Paris.

An electric car is under development too, and an eco-moped. Starck has nearly finished work on a solar and hydrogen-powered boat, the first of which is to be delivered to Hotel Bauer in Venice next spring. "We're seizing every opportunity to create affordable, high-technology ecology products," he said. "It's very, very important that they're beautiful, because ecology should be a pleasure, not a punishment. One of the most beautiful boats in the world is the Venetian taxi, and our boat will be even more beautiful."



The French designer Philippe Starck, left, has long been known for his sense of whimsy, as in the gnome stools he created for Kartell, below. He has become a commercial colossus, too. But he confessed this year that he was "ashamed" that "everything I designed is unnecessary." Now he's hoping to redress the balance with what he calls Democratic Ecology.

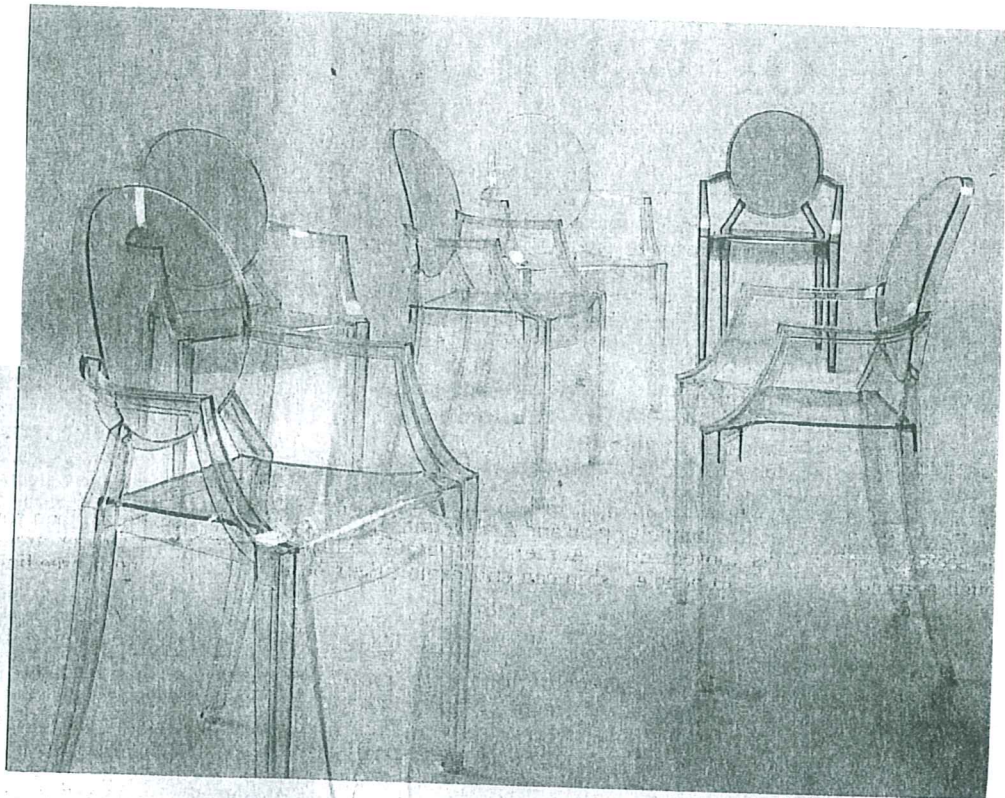
Jean-Baptiste Mondino



Kartell

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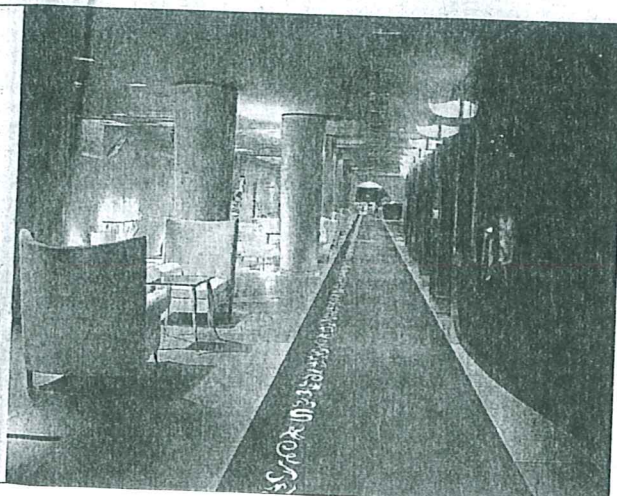
A slide show of additional designs by Philippe Starck, plus more columns by Alice Rawsthorn.



Kartell

Starck is battling on new front — developing cheap, attractive, energy-saving products to 'introduce everybody to ecology.'

Starck rose to fame in France during the '80s, when his flair for reinventing everyday objects by casting them as something else was hailed as a playful and commercial take on fashionable postmodernism. Counterclockwise from left, his Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, Bedside Gun lamp, clear-plastic Louis Ghost chairs, and the lobby of the Royalton Hotel in New York.



Nikolas Koenig