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The great communicator

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A retrospective of the works of **GEORGE NELSON** (1908-1986) at HKDI Gallery from March through June shows that a great designer should be an original thinker as well as a master of words and images. *DAISY ZHONG reports.*

COMMUNICATOR

THE GREAT

U.S. President Richard Nixon's "kitchen debate" with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow was an iconic encounter, but it was the domestic setting where the debate took place that captured the imagination of three million Russian visitors and subverted perceptions on both sides of the ideological divide.

The "kitchen" was an installation within an 80,000-square-foot showcase for the American way of life at the height of the Cold War, and the architect behind it was George Nelson, a visionary proponent of the American Modernism movement as a designer, writer, social critic and impresario.

These labels are unable to fully capture Nelson's impact on design. With an architectural degree from Yale, his ambitions were universal and aimed at creating a new world order in design that would have a profound impact on the way people lived their lives.

A widely respected writer, lecturer, photographer and curator, Nelson knew instinctively that Americans were ready for a new way of looking at their everyday surroundings – and themselves. His appointment as design director at Herman Miller in 1947 was certainly not a safe choice – Nelson was still young and relatively inexperienced – but he proved himself a brilliant hire. A quarter of a century later, at the end of his tenure at Herman Miller, Nelson had transformed the company from a manufacturer of wooden furniture into the architect of the new American lifestyle, both at home and in the workplace.

But what Nelson was most passionate about was



June 2. The exhibition is the Hong Kong stop of an international tour that represents the first comprehensive retrospective devoted to Nelson. Organised by the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany and sponsored by Herman Miller, the tour was launched in 2008 to commemorate the centenary of George Nelson's birth.

In the retrospective, more than 300 pieces are organised according to the five main themes of Nelson's career: home furniture design; office furniture design; corporate design; exhibition design and communication design.

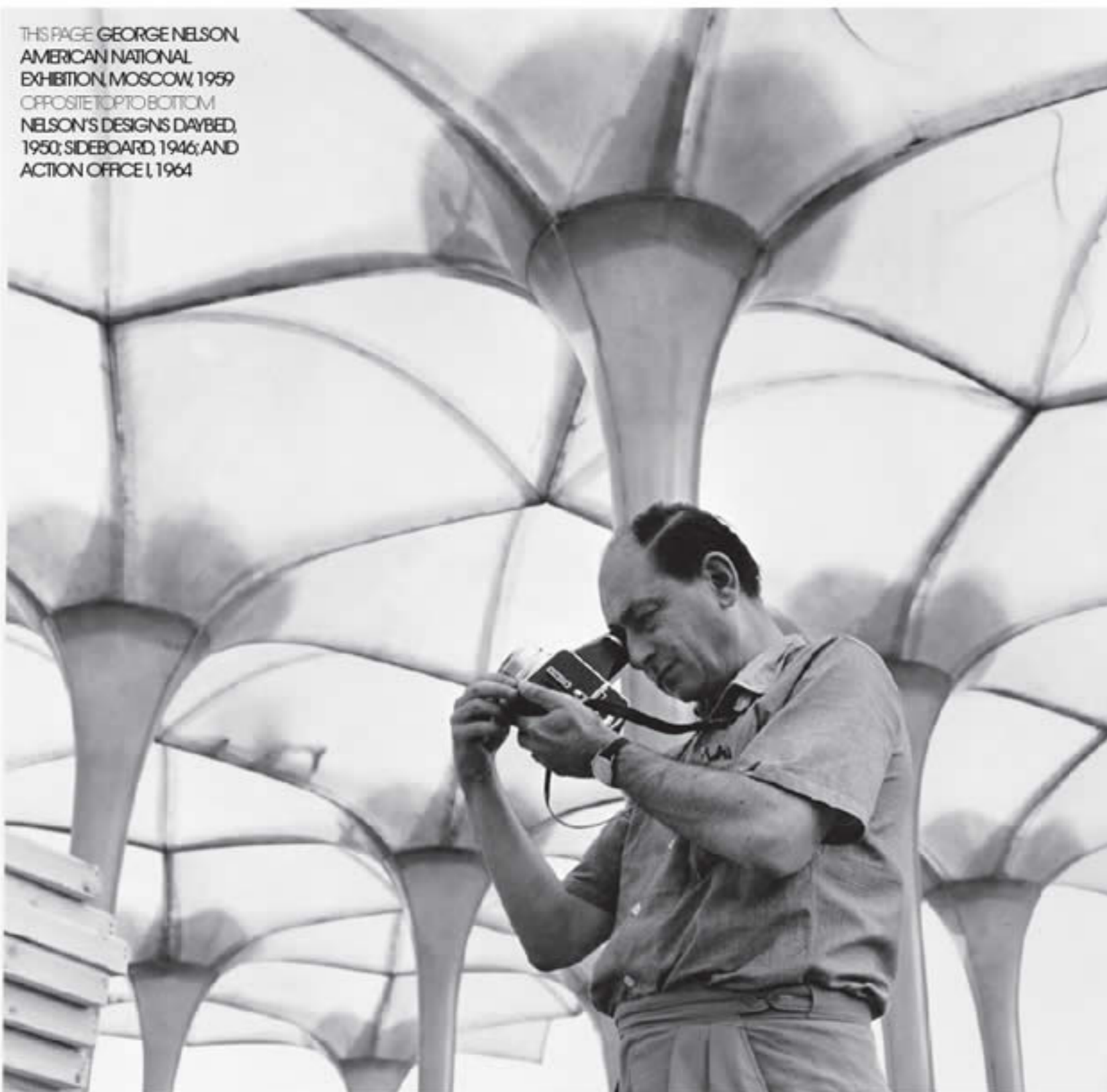
The exhibition includes many pieces that are regarded as Nelson classics such as the Platform Bench (1945), the Ball Clock (1947), Coconut Chair (1956), the Marshmallow Sofa (1956) and the Bubble Lamps (1952 onwards) – but

communication. As evidenced by the kitchen debate, he aimed to convey new ideas and influence the world. Nelson's associate, designer Bruce Burdick once said, "George was a unique person who will be remembered for his thoughts and writings about design. His words were more important than the projects."

A full look at George Nelson's legacy will be on display at the HKDI Gallery from March 14 through

THIS PAGE: GEORGE NELSON POSING FOR A HERMAN MILLER ADVERT "TRAVELING MEN", CA. 1954. OPPOSITE: NELSON'S FREITZEL ARMCHAIR

THIS PAGE: GEORGE NELSON,
AMERICAN NATIONAL
EXHIBITION, MOSCOW, 1959
OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM:
NELSON'S DESIGNS DAYBED,
1950; SIDEBORD, 1946; AND
ACTION OFFICE I, 1964



«ART, LIKE EVERY
OTHER DISCIPLINE, IS
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INTIMATELY RELATED
TO EVERYTHING IN
CREATION.»

in fact Nelson was personally responsible for only the first of these and an early prototype of the last.

Christopher Pullman, a former graphic design project leader at the office of George Nelson and now a Senior Critic at Yale School of Art, says, "I would characterise George's leadership style as hands-off and casual. After defining the problem, he would more or less leave it to you to propose a solution, which was both scary and liberating. He did not nit-pick. If he had things to add in the design process, they would often be in the form of casual drop-bys with course corrections embedded in wry comments or amusing stories with a moral at the end."

Irving Harper, the principal associate for Nelson's office, described his design partner in the book *Compact Design Portfolio: George Nelson*, "George was heavily involved with the first group of furniture, but after that, his involvement was more minimal. He used to dream aloud about designs, and his ideas were mostly verbal... I would call him a Diaghilev of design."

Pullman also finds the comparison of Nelson with the legendary Russian ballet patron an apt one. "Like Diaghilev, George was sort of an impresario: he was an instigator and a collaborator, finding and directing talent towards a goal he could help articulate."

A good example was his role at Herman Miller, he added. In addition to designing his own pieces, Nelson was the design director for furniture and assembled a long list of peers with whom to collaborate on a range of products, including Jane Thompson, Buckminster Fuller, Alexander Girard and Charles and Ray Eames.

"In his own office he also depended on the skills of others to realise many products that bear his name," Pullman remarked. "George ran an eclectic office from the beginning. There were few others like it: Eames, and maybe Sutnar; later in the 60's, possibly an office like Chermayeff & Geismar's or Pentagram. This was (and still is) typical of offices built around the talents and charisma of one person."

This hands-off style freed Nelson to deliver lectures, organise new approaches to art education, conceptualise exhibitions, write and think. Apart from design objects, the exhibition at HKDI also features communication designs including *Art X* (1953), the first multimedia presentation ever produced, which is cited as an important milestone in the field of education.

The project began as an evaluation of college curriculum at the University of Georgia, which Nelson believed was guilty of an overemphasis on isolated facts and techniques. "The most important thing to communicate to undergraduates was an awareness of relationships," he said. "Education, like the thinking of the man in the street, was sealed off into too many compartments."

As a result, he and Charles Eames offered to present a sample lesson for an imaginary course in "communication" to explore relationships, which they labelled "*Art X*". The clip that is on display at the HKDI exhibition is a nine-minute show of three-screen slide projections using film and other automated tools from the course.

"*Art X* was not offered as an invention, but as a statement," Nelson said. "As a statement it said that there is no longer room in the world for barriers – political, economic, temporal, intellectual, scientific, racial, or any other kind. It said that art, like every other discipline, is not an isolated thing but intimately related to everything in creation."

"He was an omnivore, a generalist, and at heart, an educator," Pullman said. As *Art X* and other items in the exhibition show, Nelson was involved in projects with much broader implications than individual pieces of furniture. He gave particular attention to educating society about values and ideas, famously saying, "The biggest single problem in the design field today revolves around the question of values. In relation to





BELOW TWO OF NELSON'S OFFICE TEAM WITH A MODEL OF HIS MIXED USE SPACE CONCEPT KNOWN AS JUNGLE GYM THAT WAS SHOWN AT THE AMERICAN NATIONAL EXHIBITION IN MOSCOW, 1959


« HE WAS AN OMNIVORE, A GENERALIST, AND AT HEART, AN EDUCATOR. »

this question, all other problems, while interesting, are superficial.”

As a keen observer, Nelson was known for articulating his insights into design and of his demand that projects must be centred within a “triangular tug of war” between function, technology, and social values, regardless of whether the subject is as big as a city or as small as a chair.

In the book *George Nelson on Design* (1979), Nelson wrote, “Traditionally we (designers) are not intellectual people and we do not go in much for speculation or introspection... (But now) the forces of the darkness are those pressing for the further dehumanisation of mankind and their power is that of the great industrial societies.”

He further argued that the modern designer should become sensitised to the issues of the environment, morality, and the new social configuration through a “generalist” approach, to become a “person who sees them as a whole” and an “urgently needed clarifier and intellectual leader”.

Put another way, a great designer should be an original thinker. Little wonder that it was Nelson who had “framed” the kitchen debate. 



LANGUAGE: THE CRITICAL DESIGN COMPONENT

BY CHRISTOPHER FULLMAN

A key project I worked on in George’s office (1968-72) was for the Social Security Administration of the United States.

Field offices throughout the country were drowning in administrative costs. Huge error rates when claimants filled out forms were resulting in hours of repeat visits to correct incorrect or missing information. Our client wanted a complete review of the hundreds of Social Security forms, form letters and informational pamphlets, with the goal of reducing the error rate and improving the user experience.

In our research, we discovered that most individuals who go to the field offices to seek benefits are over 65, often with sight impairments, usually during a time of stress (retiring, injured, death of a spouse, etc), and many spoke English as a second language and had an average reading aptitude of a 5th grade student.

The key form these applicants were required to fill out was called SSA1. Printed in black on darkish green paper, the form had low contrast between paper and ink. It was also densely packed with information and, to save paper, the contents were compressed and type size was reduced. Information was sequentially confusing in that several responses were to be entered into a single box, resulting in missed data. Furthermore, its appearance and language was extremely bureaucratic and even threatening. Given the user profile, in almost every detail, the tone, appearance and functionality of SSA1 form predicted a poor experience and a poor outcome.

In the first-phase report that I wrote and designed, we shared these research observations with Social Security:

- *Your services affect people of every social, educational and age group.*
- *You don't have to compete for members.*
- *You don't have to sell anything.*
- *Social Security is the trustee of a person's legitimate earnings.*
- *It has nothing to do with welfare.*
- *Most contacts are made during a period of emotional stress.*
- *Your principal problem is simply to give the quality of service your members deserve.*
- *All of which adds up to a fundamental demand for humane, considerate, and direct communication materials.*

These basic, common-sense, relatively reductive and user-based objectives drove the design process and seemed to come naturally, both to George and to me. While it was clear that a basic formal re-organisation of the layout would help, our most important observation was that the language of the form was complex, legalistic and even hostile. The text was re-written in plain English, at a 5th grade level, and with a friendly tone. In other words, language turned out to be the critical design component in solving the Social Security log-jam. We both understood this and the success of the Social Security project turned on this observation.

I have carried the lessons learned from this collaboration throughout my career, which I have spent almost entirely in public service and teaching, thanks in large measure to this project. Language was a major tool in George’s role as a designer and communicator. It enabled him to be a great writer, collaborator, persuader and storyteller.