

## Douglas Durkin on the legacy of modernism

Bertrand Pellegrin

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One need only watch an episode of "Mad Men" to understand that even in the early 1960s, most Americans continued to seek out furniture that vaguely referenced French or English "good taste." It was only in the halls of commerce (namely the offices of Sterling Cooper) that we see the beginnings of postwar modernism.

The chair of SF20 is Douglas Durkin, founder of Douglas Durkin Design in San Francisco and recognized as one of Architectural Digest's 100 most influential interior designers. His approach to interior design is decidedly modern - although that doesn't necessarily mean modern furniture. Durkin's interiors, whether a romantic home on the island of Bali, a graceful San Francisco pied-a-terre, or a rustic retreat in the Rocky Mountains, are about bringing together the textures and craftsmanship which speak of a life well-lived. "My own work," admits the designer, "has been leaning more and more toward contemporary design over the years, and I continue to seek out unusual forms, whether made in the 1960s or during the Han Dynasty."

Durkin took time out to speak with us on the legacy of modernism and why now more than ever, there is increasingly democracy in great design and that modernism is as much a philosophy as an aesthetic.

**Q: For many, "modernism" means minimalist, Space Age or an overly intellectual approach to design. Has that changed?**

**A:** In essence, modernism concerns itself with the enormous shifts in cultural tendencies and movements that arose from far-reaching and large-scale changes to Western society at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. In that context, the term "modernism" describes a vast array of ideas in art, design, architecture, graphic design, materiality, music and dance. It not only describes the last 100-plus years, but also what we face in our contemporary world.

**Q: Would you agree that great design has become more accessible?**

**A:** Think of the personal computer and the Internet and how the world as a result is more accessible to more and more people, of all economic realities. Ideas and imagery are being shared on a vast scale, and commerce has been right there beside this enormous movement in our culture. Discussions about art and design that were held in an elite place for so long are now open to all, and there are designers creating

things that are functionally beneficial to all, not just a privileged class, on a very large scale.

**Q: SF20 presents some of the country's top vendors and designers all in one place. As an interior designer, what will you be looking for?**

**A:** SF20 will be a marvelous occasion to experience the arts of the 20th century all under one roof. The fact that SFMOMA continues as this year's benefactor of the opening gala points to the importance of this show in the Bay Area. There will be major established dealers as well as a group of younger, emerging dealers to the scene. I will be looking for furniture and objects and art that will support the taste of my clients, many of whom are contemporary and modern art collectors.

**Q: What are the key trends now in modern design and decoration?**

**A:** I think the largest trend that we will see in modern design and decoration is the development and use of sustainable materials. I think that given the choice, people will ultimately choose things that have a lesser impact to the environment, but only when the design is great. The designers and manufacturers that create sustainable design fueled by renewable energy will win the prize and we will all buy it. I think that people are going to continue to explore contemporary culture and its interplay with the arts of the 20th century but incorporating this idea of mixing one's collection with things from the past that are not necessarily modern, but have a clean, iconic feel.

**Q: Some of the most remarkable designs of the 20th century were actually quite commercial and industrial. What are some examples of remarkable objects we might see at this year's SF20?**

**A:** Hedge Gallery of San Francisco, who had one of the most beautifully designed stands last year, will be back with an engaging offering of contemporary and vintage arts. Hostler Burrows of New York will return with their incredible eye for Scandinavian design of the 20th century to include furniture, textiles, and of course their specialty, ceramics. Monument of San Francisco returns with pure vintage selections. The Silver Fund of London will return with its superb offering of Georg Jensen silver and an array of other fine objects, and Patrick Dragonette will return with his offerings of glamorous vintage furnishings drawn mostly from the Hollywood of the mid-century.

**Third annual san francisco 20th century art and design show and sale**

Sept. 16-19

Festival Pavilion, Fort Mason, San Francisco.

Preview benefit gala, 6-9 p.m., tickets, \$150-\$5,000, [sf20.net](http://sf20.net)

Friday-Saturday: 11 a.m.-7 p.m.

Sunday: Noon-5 p.m.

Tickets: \$15

Panel discussion on 20th century design, 1 p.m., Sept. 17, sponsored by Bonhams and Butterfields.

Bertrand Pellegrin is a retail and image consultant, and author of *Branding the Man: Why Men Are the Next Frontier in Fashion Retail* (Allworth Press/Random House). Read his blog at [www.brandingtheman.com](http://www.brandingtheman.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/09/01/SBP81ERBEN.DTL>

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