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American Design Makes a Comeback

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October 2011

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It's not often that you you'll find Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan on the same side of an issue, but ask either one and he'll tell you he's all for buying American. But to buy American we have to make American. Though we're not the manufacturing powerhouse we were at mid-century, there's still plenty of good design rolling off our assembly lines and out of our workshops.

First the bad news: According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, American manufacturing hit its postwar peak in 1951, when it accounted for 27.9 percent of the gross domestic product. By 2010 that percentage was down to just 11.7 percent—a small tick above the 2009 nadir of 11.2 percent—and the production of furniture and related products as a percentage of GDP accounted for just half of what it did in 1977. As a percentage of GDP, similar declines have hit the manufacturing of textiles, electronics, and appliances with loads of middle class jobs disappearing, too. They wouldn't call it the Rust Belt if all its cogs were turning.

Competition from low-wage countries, manipulated foreign currencies, and a penchant for off-shoring production has put the American factory in dire straits. Yet, when we rounded up the best of American-made design, we were pleasantly surprised at the breadth of goods still made on our shores.

A flashlight made in California, a fly swatter in Ohio Amish country, nail clippers in Idaho, eco-savvy furniture in Philly, and stoves in small-town Mississippi are just a few of the designs that roundly refute the notion that America doesn't make anything anymore. Even more impressive is the constellation of major cities and tiny townships that host the still-chugging American industrial machine.

Granted, some everyday objects (we're looking at you, MacBook) will likely never be made domestically. The odds of ever talking, texting, or becoming the mayor of anything on an American-made mobile phone are slim, but the following pages offer a rousing guide not only to the designs dreamed up here in the United States but to the designers (sung and unsung) who have ensured they are made here too.

So whether your political predilections run toward assuring high wages for workers or robust protectionism (or maybe both), take a page from your old pals Ralph and Pat and look again for the sweetest words in American design lexicon: Made in the USA.



Story by Aaron Britt
Illustrations by Steven Noble

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Racer Rocker by Eric Pfeiffer for Loll

Made in Duluth, Minnesota

Made using 288 recycled plastic milk jugs, the Racer rocker zips down the fast lane of sustainable design. Reuse is a big part of Loll's production ethos: All its products are made at the Hawks Boots Sustainable Manufacturing Facility, which for nearly 80 years prior to Loll's purchase was a concrete plant that made culverts, burial vaults, pilings, and the like. lolldesigns.com



Henrybuilt Kitchen

Made in Seattle, Washington

Simple lines, rich materials, and elegant craftsmanship are the hallmarks of Seattle's premier custom kitchen shop, Henrybuilt. Made with FSC-certified wood by the 20 craftspeople in the company's downtown workshop, these eye-catching islands and comely counters keep the kitchen at the center of the home. henrybuilt.com



Sei Duvet Cover by Matteo

Made in Los Angeles, California

Made to order in the heart of Los Angeles from luxurious foreign fabrics, the 600-thread-count Sei duvet cover is cut and sewn at Matteo's factory, which is adjacent to its design studio. From there the finished product is garment dyed (a rarity among bed linens because it produces slight variations in color between batches) just miles away in downtown L.A. matteohome.com



Icon Wall System by Ali Tayar for Lerival

Made in Farmingdale, New Jersey

Expert metal fabricators construct the modular Icon Wall System. One or more covers a process that includes laser cutting, precision bends (made using tools more common in military and automotive work), and finishing while another handles the final assembly. Each box in the system takes a little over an hour to complete, which means the southern New Jersey factory can make just six per day. lerival.com



Wooden Spoons
by Fort Remington
Oxford, Florida
fortremington.com



GI Green Ink
by Noodler's Ink
Dartmouth, Massachusetts
noodlersink.com



MT10 Turntable
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