

Nancy Skolos & Tom Wedell: "In Tandem" Interview By Elizabeth Resnick It is a dismal, rainy afternoon on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. As the windshield wipers go full blast, I dare to glance at the hastily-scribbled directions announcing the landmarks on an avenue that suddenly makes a transition from rundown, urban three-decker houses to suburban, country-style colonials. After driving a few more miles of bare, tree-lined streets, I take a right on Green Street and continue looking to the left until my destination comes into view. The house is set back from the road, a warm beacon of light emanating from its unique structural mix of Japanese minimalism and Bauhaus geometry. Oddly out of place in this suburban neighborhood, the building is the perfect manifestation of the union of two distinct yet complimentary artistic visions. The house, which is also a design studio, belongs to Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell, a dynamic husband-and-wife creative team who met at Cranbrook Art Academy in the mid-1970's. After receiving their degrees, they made the move from the Midwest to New England in 1980 and formally established their partnership and studio. During the early 1980's, I was engaged in developing my design curriculum while also absorbing the character of the local graphic design and advertising scene for inspiration. I noticed Skolos and Wedell's work immediately—I had not seen anything like it from any other studio in the area. Their work was unabashedly modernist, suggesting a notion of three-dimensional illusion and momentum within its two-dimensional surfaces. Their signature style materialized a few years later when they began to merge the vocabularies of design and photography to produce experimental, surreal images using collage, texturing and layering. Often referred to as "Techno-Cubist," their style has been inspired by many sources, including modern painting, architecture and the daily practice of teaching design on the college level at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Both Nancy and Tom are quick to admit that teaching informs their own creative work in terms of both its form and content. Over the years, Nancy, Tom and I have shared a love for teaching and design. The rain pelts the roof of the cavernous house, the sound echoes through the spare interiors, punctuating a conversation which has spanned the three decades we have known one another.



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"Tom and Nancy combine professional expertise in industrial and graphic design as well as photography. The boundaries blur between their visions, their disciplines, their media and their personal and professional life. They finish each other's sentences, literally and metaphorically," says Katherine McCoy, educator and early member of The Cranbrook Academy.
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Graphis: This house is amazing. Can you describe the process of designing and building the house and studio?

Nancy Skolos: The most critical part of the process was deciding to do it in the first place—to realize that it was okay to have our work and our lives completely intertwined.

Tom Wedell: It was such a long process, it would require a separate interview to describe. Being the client instead of the designer was the most difficult task. We were a little too hands-on. We knew what we wanted—even the materials.

Nancy Skolos: The architects were clients of ours, Jon McKee and Mark Hutker of the Lyceum Fellowship Committee. They took our requirements and really brought the idea to life. The way the house sits on the site and the massing of the structure to create high monitor windows to catch the light is so magical. Amazingly, many visitors to the house have picked up on the visual similarity between our home/studio and our work. When you are in the structure, there is a sense of surface, light and dimension that makes it seem as if you are walking through one of our posters. Essentially our work is the material evidence of our relationship. We must get along really well if we can make something this harmonious.

Graphis: Of all the work you made together, what is your favorite project?

Tom Wedell: The house of course! No actually, it isn't the house. Our favorite project of all time is our marriage. It's our life, it's what we do every day. Our greatest project is our relationship.

Graphis: What were the circumstances that brought the two of you together?

Nancy Skolos: That's our favorite story. We met on my first day at Cranbrook. Tom was a second-year graduate student in photography and I was one of a handful of undergraduate students. He spotted me walking toward the dorm, clutching my American Tourister luggage. Having just come from the University of Cincinnati with 30,000 students, I felt sure that if I put my bag down someone would steal it. I think he felt sorry for me, so he came up to me and said, "Cheer up, it will get worse." That was how we first met 27 years ago.

Graphis: Cranbrook Academy of Art is not widely known for its undergraduate graphic design program, or its graduate photography program. Did you find the program challenging?

Nancy Skolos: Yes. At the time, I was one of two undergraduate students in graphic design. In nine departments combined, there were 150 students at Cranbrook. Out of the 150 I think there were about five undergraduates. The undergraduate program no longer exists. They eliminated the program soon after I graduated.

Graphis: Why did they accept so few undergraduates?

Nancy Skolos: Undergraduate students could apply after finishing their freshman and sophomore year at a reputable design school and transfer to Cranbrook to do their junior and senior year—in the two-year graduate program. We did the same projects as the grad students, so it put me on a fast-track, which was very fortunate. All of the other students were more educated and more experienced so they were wonderful teachers. I learned the most from the other students because they didn't worry about being diplomatic. At Cranbrook the critiques were brutal. At the first crit, I was told that I had the most god-awful sense of color they had ever seen, and my friend who was also an undergraduate was told that her project looked like "something you would collage together in junior high." The two of us used to spend a lot of time after the crits at Baskin-Robbins putting down one ice cream cone after another—as if we were at a bar.

Tom Wedell: The photography program was brand new in 1975.

Everything was in its formative stage. We built the darkrooms and the spaces. In my second week at Cranbrook, I ran into Kathy McCoy who needed some photos taken. That's how I started working in the design department taking photos, first for Kathy and Mike McCoy, and then for everyone else. I became very involved in the design department. After I received my master's degree in photography, I decided to stay an additional year and work in graphic design. The school was so fluid and flexible that it would allow these things to happen. I didn't feel like a photographer or like a designer: I felt I was a hybrid.

Nancy Skolos: The design department itself was completely interdisciplinary. Students could participate in 2-D and 3-D assignments and the cross-fertilization among the interior, product and graphic design students led to mutual understanding of design problems. The best part about it was that the McCoy's constantly reinvented the theoretical constructs. They never stopped searching and thinking. They created an environment and attitude that has stayed with most of us throughout our entire careers and lives.

Graphis: When did you begin to collaborate?

Nancy Skolos: We were together for a couple of years before we ever tried to work together. We didn't begin working together until I graduated from Cranbrook and went to graduate school at Yale where I got a commission to design the Yale Symphony posters. Every few weeks I'd have to make a poster. If Tom wanted to spend time with me, we would have to work together. After we began working together on the posters, we realized it was really fun.

Graphis: Nancy, why did you choose Yale for graduate school? Why not continue on studying at Cranbrook?

Nancy Skolos: Because I had come to Cranbrook with a background in industrial design and had had such freedom to study various design disciplines at Cranbrook, I decided to go to Yale to get a hardcore education in graphic design.

Graphis: Tom, how did you end up at Swain School of Design in New Bedford?

Tom Wedell: I wanted to teach photography. But back then it was extremely difficult to find a teaching job in the fine arts. There were 300 to 400 applicants for every teaching position—it was just absurd. My lucky break came when a first year graduate design student at Cranbrook, from Swain School of Design in New Bedford, suggested I talk to Tom Corey, one of his teachers. It was close to New Haven so I took the job.

Graphis: After graduate school, what factored into your decision to open a design studio in Boston?

Tom Wedell: Nancy and I really wanted to stay on the East Coast. We considered moving to New York, but we had some friends from Cranbrook who were here in Boston and Boston seemed more accessible to us since we were transplanted Midwesterners.

Graphis: I recall the name of your studio then was Skolos, Wedell + Raynor? Who was Raynor?

Tom Wedell: Ken Raynor is still a very good friend of ours and a person I grew up with from about eighth grade on. He was at the University of Michigan when I was an undergraduate, and we always hung around together. He came to Cranbrook our last year and when we moved to Boston I invited him to come and assist on photo shoots. After he graduated, he became a partner and stayed until 1989. He and his wife Laura decided to move back to Michigan to be closer to both of their families.

Graphis: Who were your early clients?

Tom Wedell: Our first client was Boston Acoustics. One of our friends from Cranbrook, their product designer, helped us make that connection. We were fortunate to work with them for 10 years.

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"I've always loved the fact that design brings the ideals of high art into everyday things—and very subversively," says Skolos.

Nancy Skolos: Another one of our friends who had been a painter at Cranbrook ended up being an art director at Houghton Mifflin. She also helped connect us to Little Brown and as a result we ended up designing a lot of textbook covers and promotional brochures for marketing. Another friend of mine from the University of Cincinnati helped us get work from Digital Equipment Corporation and eventually we also worked for Wang, Prime Computer and others.

Graphis: It sounds primarily high tech?

Nancy Skolos: Yes, that's why our work started looking really high tech because it grew naturally, organically from the subject material that we were dealing with.

Graphis: In the design press your style has been referred to as "Techno-Cubist." What does that mean?

Nancy Skolos: That term was coined by Mike Hicks, who wrote an article on us for *Eye* magazine. I thought it was cool to be called a Techno-Cubist because I have always looked to the Cubists for inspiration to create really dynamic two-dimensional spaces.

Graphis: What cubist artists in particular do you look to for this inspiration?

Nancy Skolos: Primarily Picasso and Braque and also Naum Gabo who was more associated with the Constructivists.

Tom Wedell: The term "Techno-Cubist" also refers to fragmentation, which is a 20th-century development. We tend to fragment the concept, present it from different points of view; multiple viewpoints are represented, if not literally then conceptually.

Graphis: How large did your business grow before the recession in 1990?

Nancy Skolos: We had nine people. Tom, Ken, myself, three designers, a production manager, a receptionist, an office manager, and a bookkeeper who would come in once a week. We just got bigger and bigger because that's what we thought back then—just growth, growth, growth! We were making a lot of money, but we just kept putting it back into the business to create a better facility—buying more and more equipment and hiring more people.

Graphis: What led to your decision to downsize your studio?

Tom Wedell: Well, the recession helped.

Graphis: You were quoted in Hugh Aldersey-Williams' book *New American Design: Products and Graphics* (Rizzoli 1988) that one important key to your partnership is that "we do unfinished works and combine them." How do you communicate with one another?

Tom Wedell: Almost by telepathy. Sometimes when we lecture together, people comment on how hard we must have rehearsed in order to present the lecture together—even though we haven't. This describes the way we work together. We don't rehearse, we just start working. I have the peculiar ability to draw upside-down, which sort of helps when Nancy is sitting across from me. I tend to work in real-time, i.e., what's happening this second, whereas Nancy

tends to plan ahead and work in another time zone.

Nancy Skolos: You know, a designer has to plan.

Graphis: So you're not spontaneous?

Tom Wedell: Nancy is not really spontaneous, but as a photographer, I am. However, that is the perfect combination—half and half. The rule is that Nancy has the final say on design and typography issues, and sometimes color, and I make the final decision on photo issues, film emulsions and lighting.

Graphis: How about image generation, the concept behind the image?

Nancy Skolos: That can go either way, although most of the time it's Tom's idea. He's Mr. Concept. As a designer, I tend to think in bits and pieces and then rearrange them into ideas. Whereas Tom thinks in real time, sequentially, like a narrative.

Tom Wedell: I like storytelling, and Nancy is very good at forming those elements into a system that is clear and accessible. Into this structure, I can add narrative elements that I think are necessary symbols.

Nancy Skolos: If you look at any of our pieces, each seems to have a different balance of power. We just talked back and forth, asking each other what we thought about each idea. We often use collage to generate ideas. We are also very inspired by the process of making our work. It started early on when I would be cutting up little waxed pieces of type to make mechanicals. Tom would come by, and I'd ask him if he liked what I was working on and he'd always be more interested in the little waxed strips of paper piled up at the side of my drawing board. That made us start to pay attention to accidents and watch for things to just happen. I know there are many other influences. We have always been influenced by architecture.

Tom Wedell: One of the advantages of being at Cranbrook was experiencing the architecture.

Nancy Skolos: The Art Academy and also Cranbrook School for Boys, where we would go for lunch, was a very eclectic complex of buildings designed by Saarinen. Every time you walked through an interior space like the dining hall or an exterior space like the courtyard, you would see something you hadn't noticed before. The leaded-glass windows were laid out so rationally that you assumed they were identical, but after a while you would notice that each had a slightly different design within it. I'm sure this was one of the biggest influences on the so-called "Cranbrook aesthetics" because as students we realized there was no limit to the amount of involvement you could have with a piece of design.

Graphis: When you two choose your clients do you consider the quality of their product or what their companies represent?

Tom Wedell: That is assuming we chose them!

Nancy Skolos: Right. We were never that choosy actually. A couple of times we went after clients that we wanted, and we succeeded. But almost all of our jobs seemed to come from word-of-mouth.



have also worked for the entertainment business with clients such as EMI music, Boston Acoustics and Bose speakers.

Graphis: The "First Things First Manifesto 2000" has stimulated a much-needed dialogue within the design community. People have been arguing both sides. For designers and advertising people, it could suggest cutting off the hand that feeds you.

Tom Wedell: It's not bad to have a stated consciousness about what you are doing. It seems to me that the Manifesto contained all the right buzz words but there was something inherently wrong with it.

Nancy Skolos: For me, the most obvious problem is the title: First Things First. The first thing is creativity. Yesterday they were playing Mozart's 41st Symphony on the classical station, and the radio announcer noted that by the time Mozart wrote it, he wasn't getting commissions—there wasn't much call for another Mozart symphony. The radio announcer went on to speculate that Mozart wrote the symphony for himself. And I imagine that's who he did all of his work for. One of the things I've always liked best about design is how it brings the ideals of high art into everyday things. Commissions are just the vehicles to infiltrate the everyday with the otherworldly. Design is very subversive in that way.

Graphis: Do you think it is a designer's social and ethical responsibility to create meaningful forms?

Nancy Skolos: In a recent lecture, Stefan Sagmeister quoted Kathy McCoy as saying, "Design never rises above its content." I completely agree with that. I think you only cheat yourself if you do work that's really superficial. This semester I was putting together a slide tray of my favorite posters from around the world to show my poster-design students at R.I.S.D. As I was looking through this selection of seemingly beautiful posters, I began to see them in a more critical way. Most of them were just about nothing—a design show, a department store, a printing company—they were just really easy subjects, nothing challenging. That led me to a serious reevaluation of our own work. We really do need to value and include a higher level of content in our work.

Tom Wedell: You can say you want to put in more content, but my interest is to put more meaning into things we make—to create and direct relationships among the various symbols within a piece in order to have a richer experience with the content. It means more thought is given to the material presented, its sequence and how we put that together.

Graphis: How has the profession of graphic design changed since you opened your practice in 1980?

Nancy Skolos: Way more than I would have thought. I never thought 'communication' would become such a hot commodity. The skills we have as graphic designers to shape and direct communication put us in a very powerful position, one I never would have anticipated. That is the biggest surprise, but I'm disappointed that technology hasn't changed our work that much. I hope someday it will. Perhaps we will come up with a visual language to express our time much like the Cubists did. As much as I would like to come up with a new vision based on technology, I have found that aesthetic changes have to come from within. You have to just wait until your mind senses something new. Another thing that has changed since 1980 is that there is much less hero-worship than when we were in school. The world is so big, it is hard for students to imagine having a single-handed impact on things, and they also realize that a lot of the really innovative work is being done now by teams.

Graphis: Nancy, I recall a conversation we had in the '90s when you seemed ambivalent about your teaching part-time. What influenced you to make a full-time teaching commitment at R.I.S.D.?

Nancy Skolos: I'm not really a natural-born teacher. I never feel

that I know enough. I don't feel like I'm a real authority on anything. It's just not my nature to expound on things. I think that's probably why I felt ambivalent. The class I always taught at R.I.S.D. was an elective course in poster design for seniors and grad students. One year I was asked to fill in for a sophomore course. The more teaching I did, the more rewarding it was because I could see the students progress from sophomores to seniors; I really enjoyed the whole nurturing aspect of the job. Since I took the full-time position, I've learned more than I experienced in my whole college education. I almost feel guilty that they are paying me. My mind hasn't been this happy in a long time. It's fun at my age to try something so new and see that you can grow. I now get an almost bigger thrill out of designing a really successful assignment for my students than I do from designing a project of my own.

Graphis: As students, you both experienced Cranbrook, a school with a rather distinctive personality. How would you describe the atmosphere in the graphic design program at R.I.S.D.?

Nancy Skolos: It's totally different than Cranbrook. At Cranbrook, you are so focused and isolated, it's almost like entering a monastery. R.I.S.D. seems to have a lot to offer. There is a tremendous wealth of knowledge and experience among the ten full-time graphic design faculty. When I have a crisis, like hating all of my favorite posters [laughter], I can go to them and get amazingly valuable insight and inspiration.

Tom Wedell: I would say that the R.I.S.D. graphic design program is unique in its emphasis on teaching the students to make meaningful work. We are training analytical designers with very sophisticated communication skills. Slickness and craft take a back seat to serious thinking.

Graphis: Do you feel you have a responsibility to teach traditional methods and values to your students, or should you engage in teaching new paradigms?

Nancy Skolos: As you know, this is always a balancing act. I tend to focus my energy on getting students excited about the possibilities of visual communication, and those come from everywhere: past, present and future. I find that after students are engaged in the potential of graphic design, they become much more interested in the history and traditions, such as the rules of typography. If you come down too hard with the rules and traditions at first, it becomes arbitrary and stifling.

Graphis: Do you find theory valuable in the teaching of graphic design to undergraduates?

Tom Wedell: We don't teach theory in a true academic sense, but use it as a way to evaluate the cause and effect of problem-solving. We construct assignments with variables that require decisions from the students about what type of communication will be effective for what audience and subject. Very often the students choose their own topics within the framework of an assignment. This encourages them to be more open to seeing the possibilities and to create visual solutions from the inside-out.

Graphis: To teach is to engage in a very giving activity. Has teaching broadened your perspective on your own design practice?

Nancy Skolos: For sure. It has made me better at listening and that has extended to listening to my clients. I always thought I was very attentive, but now I have an even stronger attention span.

Graphis: One of my favorite Kathy McCoy dictums is: "An educator's measure of success must ultimately be her graduates. I find enormous gratification in my students' career progress and achievements." Do you agree with this?

Nancy Skolos: Yes, I'm sure that is gratifying. I can't wait to see what some of our graduates will accomplish.

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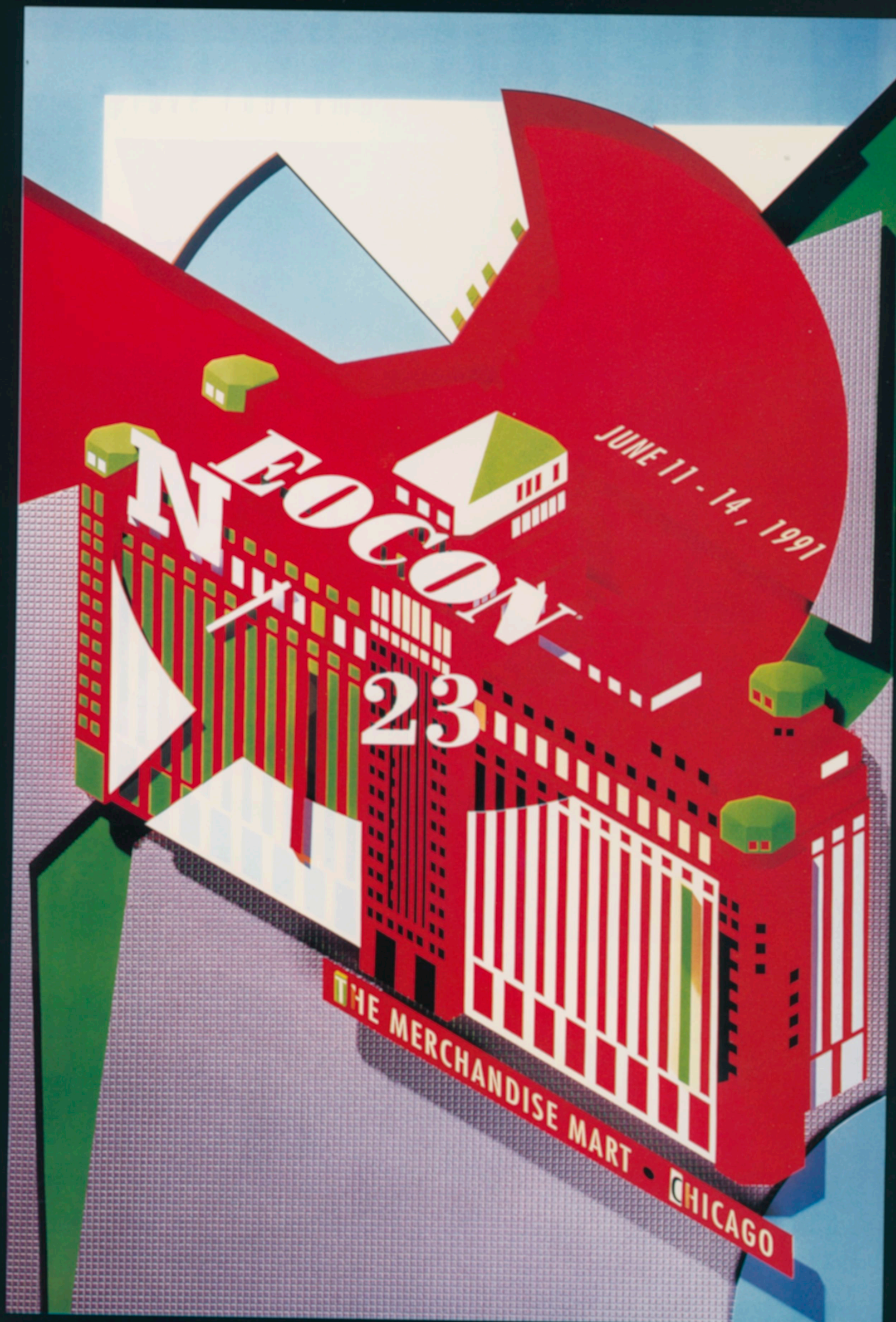
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Light was more important than view. The apertures suggest existing space beyond, although it's not necessarily visible.

Mark Hutker, architect of the Skolos-Wedell house comments:

The house and design studio was a joint venture with Mark Hutker and Associates, Architects and Jon McKee, AIA.

Seventeen years ago, Jon had started a traveling fellowship of architecture, and Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell designed the posters for their competition. That's how they met. Nancy and Tom have a very unique sense of design and order. They were highly receptive to our graphically potent and precise architectural drawings, not to our simple study models. Our awareness of the content of Skolos and Wedell's design informed our approach to the project: we knew that their rigorous aesthetics had to be manifested in their environment.

The space is meant to be both a work and a living environment. Accommodating the social mix and the lifestyle was a unique challenge for us. The dining room table is the joint between the public and the private areas. We created a dividing aluminum wall in the middle of the space that is both a metaphorical and a physical division between public and private space. Because Nancy and Tom were our friends before they were clients, we had to refocus our understanding of their lifestyle from a professional perspective. Their workspace is uncluttered; everything has to have a place to fit and be stored, for

example with their beautiful Howe table system designed by Niels Diffrient.

Nancy and Tom's approach to light is quite unusual and definitely a priority in the design. The house has few windows with a view onto the outside. Usually, from an architectural standpoint, each aperture in a wall is an opportunity for light, view and ventilation, although it can be tuned to only one of those three aspects. In many instances, light was more important than view to Nancy and Tom. The walls of light in their house (made from a material called Kalwall) began as "windows" but ended up being "walls of windows" at the conclusion of the design process. The house seems larger than its actual footprint because apertures suggest space beyond, although it's not necessarily visible.

In addition to the house encompassing a public and private space, it had to accommodate an intergenerational component: Nancy's mother was going to be living in the house as well, so we had to consider how that would effect the daily use of the house and envision the private space as being shared with an extended family.

We consider Nancy and Tom to be trendsetters: using technology to work at home, bringing the public and private together in one space and opening the house to an extended member of the family are elements which, in all likelihood, will be more and more common in the years to come.



Credits & Comments

Pg.23 Portrait of Nancy Skolos and Tom Wedell by Tom Wedell and Donald Russell.

Pg.20,23,24-26 All photos of the house's interior and exterior by Tom Wedell. Architects: Mark Hutker & Associates Architects, Inc. and Jon McKee. Interior Design: Skolos-Wedell., 2000.

Pg.27 Poster for the annual Lyceum Fellowship Competition, 2002.

Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: Lyceum Fellowship Committee/Jon McKee; Chairmen and Founders: Mark A. Hutker, Peter Vincent Joseph Sziabowski; Printer: Serigraphie Uldry AG, Bern.

A traveling fellowship for undergraduate students in architecture. Each year the poster reflects the theme of the competition. Brief: Observation shelter for two in isolated natural setting.

Pg.28 All-in-1 Software Poster, 1983. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Copywriter: Marilyn Knight; Client: Digital Equipment Corporation; Printer: Acme Printing, Boston; Paper: Champion Kromekote

All-in-1 was an early office software that included word-processing, spread sheets and data entry as well as custom applications. Marilyn Knight, our contact from Digital, described the software as being so elegant and flexible that it reminded her of a chambered nautilus shell. We just ran with that image. At that time software was a very surreal concept to most people and we keep that feeling visually in the design.

Pg.29 Berkeley Typographers Poster, 1986. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: Berkeley Typographers; Printer: National Bickford Foremost; Paper: Champion Kromekote.

This was the second poster in a series of three designed in the 80's for a high-end Boston-based typesetting company. In each poster we explored the construction of the letter "B." In this poster we varied the theme with three-dimensional objects and layered polka-dot fabrics.

Pg.30 Berkeley Typographers Poster, 1989. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: Berkeley Typographers; Printer: National Bickford Foremost; Paper: Champion Kromekote.

This was the third poster in a series of three designed in the '80s for a high-end Boston-based typesetting company. This poster was created to advertise typesetting "in place" from desktop page-layout software.

Pg.31 Laserscan Poster, 1989. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell;

Client: Laserscan, Inc.; Printer: National Bickford Foremost; Paper: Champion Kromekote.

Laserscan is a high-end color separation company. In 1989 they purchased a Qantel paintbox that could assemble, retouch and layer high-resolution images much like Adobe Photoshop does today. Our charge was to show as much of the paintbox's potential as we could on one large page.

Pg.32 Documenting Marcel Poster 1996. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: Reinhold-Brown Gallery in Association with Virginia L. Green; Daniels Printing.

For an exhibition of posters and ephemera from Marcel Duchamp's exhibitions. The dates, names and places of all 84 of his known shows were set in individual blocks of text that moved over the surface of the poster. The chess pieces were modeled after one of Duchamp's chess sets designed by Man Ray.

Pg.33 Neocon 23 Poster 1991. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: The Merchandise Mart.

In 1991 we were selected to design the annual poster for Neocon, an international contract furniture show. In this piece, we used bright colors and abstract architectural forms to reflect the creative energy that would be gathering at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

Pg.34 2d-3d Fusion Poster 1996. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: G8 Gallery, Tokyo.

To announce a show of Skolos-Wedell's work. The theme of three-dimensional illusions on two-dimensional space was explored by the use of photograms, models, and cutouts.

Pg.35 Delphax Fonts Poster 1987. Designer: Nancy Skolos; Photographer: Thomas Wedell; Client: Delphax Systems; Printing: Daniels Printing; Paper: Champion Kromekote. Poster for ion page printing, a high-speed office printing technology that is less expensive than laser printing. The purpose of this poster was to promote the quality of the fonts that were redrawn for ion technology.

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