

Bye-bye beige: PC designers see sophistication in darker, silvery shades

by Tamara Chuang
The Orange County Register (KRT)

When International Business Machines Corp. introduced the personal computer 20 years ago, it chose what one designer called "the most innocuous color that fit in with the button-down world of IBM."

"Everything was beige back then," said Steve Montgomery, who teaches advanced product design at the prestigious Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif. "It fit in with the office. It also hides dirt somewhat." Bland, but practical.

Time to say bye-bye.

This month, eMachines Inc. and Gateway Inc. become the last of the major PC sellers to convert their lines to darker, metallic color schemes and sleeker appearances. Dell Computer Corp. switched in late 2000, while Hewlett-Packard Co. and Compaq Computer Corp., which flirted with color, have settled on different shades of gray. Even IBM no longer carries anything in the ho-hum hue.

Design has become an integral part of the computer industry, helping to sell products, or at least ensure an initial ooh-aah before consumers realize the product needs work. Design helped propel Apple Computer, a stagnating brand in the mid-1990s, back to mainstream after the launch of the first iMac in 1998. Orders for the latest iMac, which debuted in January, are reportedly backlogged for four months.

"Corporations and businesses have realized that design is the differentiator to product success," said Lance Hussey, vice president and design director of RKS Design in Thousand Oaks, Calif. "The point is, how does one computer company differentiate itself from another computer company if, basically, they're selling the same thing? Design is that element."

Bright iMac colors are getting stale, designers say. The trend of translucence is being replaced by metal, or plastic that looks like metal. Silver is hot.

But tomorrow, it could be black. And then white. With color sprinkled in between.

"There's probably an eight-year product cycle. It goes from black to silver and then black again," said Richard Jung, co-founder of Irvine, Calif.-based Ciro Design, which designed two touch-screen computers that Microsoft Corp. founder Bill Gates demonstrated onstage at past high-tech trade shows.

"Right now, all high-end TVs are silver. All high-end digital cameras are silver," Jung said. "Before, they were black."

The computer industry got one its first makeovers six years ago, when Frog Design in Sunnyvale, Calif., added snazzy colors to Packard Bell and Acer's Aspire line of computers.

"They used some really interesting greens and charcoals

for computer colors," Hussey said. "But inside, it wasn't a quality product. The design on the outside sold it."

The most recent color spurt to hit mainstream was Apple's first iMac in 1998. Blueberry and tangerine computers began popping up in popular TV shows and interior-design magazines, not to mention that the design appealed to a whole new group of users. Sales soared, leading analysts to declare the rebirth of Apple.

PC makers followed suit by offering colorful all-in-one PCs, from laptops with snap-on panels to complete iMac knockoffs (eMachines stopped after Apple sued).

But by mid-2000, striking colors failed to be fashionable in the PC industry. Compaq quietly pulled its metallic midnight-blue Presario 3500 line. Dell shelved its WebPCs, which came in Tahoe Blue and Sedona Orange. Meanwhile, cell phones, stereos, fax machines, printers and other office products were popping up in muted dark grays and silver sheens.

By January 2001, perhaps even Apple was tired of blueberry. That's when it came out with the completely silver Titanium notebook. This year, the pure-white iMac went on sale.

"There's more focus on materials and finishes, rather than very complex forms and surfaces," Jung said. "Stuff coming out of Japan, like the tiny Elph digital camera, is a simple silver rectangle; there's not much color."

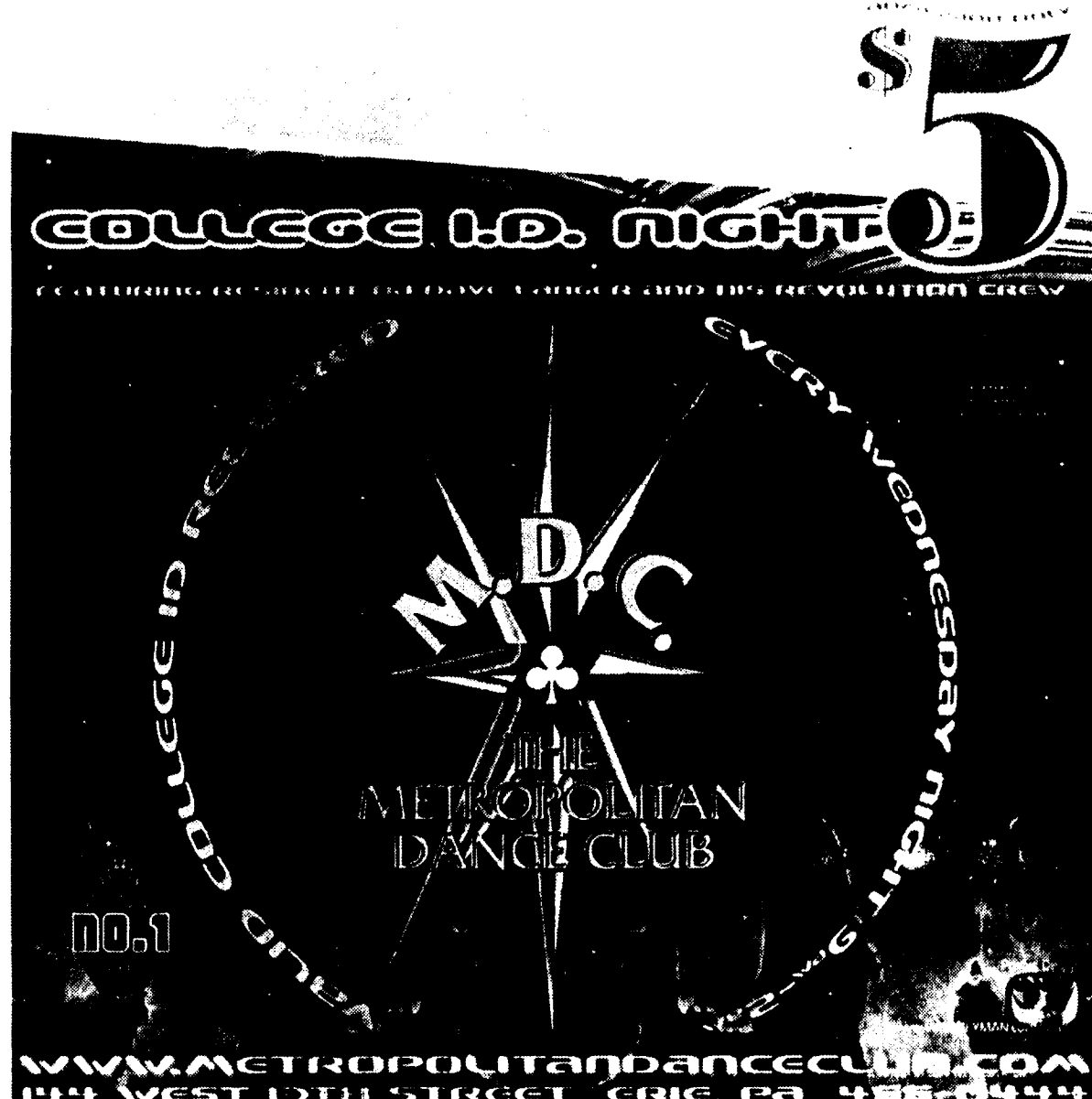
Technology and the need to make products easier to use have prompted many good designs.

Advances in LCD technology have slimmed computer monitors, making them easier to tote around and, almost by default, more stylish. Optical mice, which use lasers instead of a ball to detect movement, were the impetus for designers to add flashing lights and a futuristic feel.

Not that every cool, award-winning design guarantees positive financial return. Remember Apple's much-maligned digital organizer, the Newton, which sold just 200,000 units in five years? Or 3Com's cute little Internet appliance dubbed Audrey? It lasted about eight months. Both products failed because of poor technology and low customer acceptance.

"The stuff that wins those (design) awards, the chances are high that you'll never see it become a commercial success," said Montgomery, whose firm, bioDesign in Pasadena, won awards on the new storage product it designed for CMS Peripherals in Costa Mesa, Calif. "It's not the kiss of death or anything, but a good design does not make a high-selling product. But I think that good design is likely to help."

And that keeps the design community motivated, Montgomery said. "It's our job. There are too many ugly things out there," he said. "Maybe it's a sense of duty. We are here to help the world have cool stuff."



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