

Brave new world

Glasses that function as computer screens, clothing that's sold pre-torn—if you were alive before the 21st century, you might have scoffed at the notion that the future would look like this. Well, who's scoffing now? Not **Steven M. Johnson**, the Carmichael cartoonist who predicted and illustrated these ideas long before they appeared on the market. The author of 10 books and counting, including *Patent Depending:*

A Collection, and *Public Therapy Buses*, Johnson finds joy in the act of creation, even if the end result doesn't have much practical use. For more than 50 years, he's drawn everything from furniture that people can hide in, to a toilet that also functions as an exercise bicycle. His knack for imaginative inventing all started with an assignment he was given at *Sierra Magazine*. What was the assignment? SN&R sat down with Johnson to find out ...

What was the assignment?

I was doing cartoons for *Sierra Magazine*. I was their monthly cartoonist, and they said, "OK, next issue, we'd like you to do 16 future, imagined, ridiculous recreation vehicles." So I did 16, and about 90 more. I just started going, and I kind of found that I liked mixing and matching, and imagining how things could be different.

How does "lateral thinking" relate to your creative process?

The term was invented by Edward de Bono ... It means that you sort of put the brakes on between one thinking mode, and go to another one. And you sort of attack things from different angles. ...

I challenge myself to [draw] five objects and just keep changing them ... And I do this as fast as I can draw. I don't do any free thinking, free sketching, anything. The thinking method is kind of like a washer, dryer machine in my head, meaning I'm tossing things together—socks, bra, trousers—and they sort of get mixed up differently. In my mind



EXERTOILET

A new type of studio apartment is created that offers compactly organized, small living spaces with multiple-use, overlapping and fold-out furnishings as found in a well-designed motor home. An exercise bicycle, built into a bathroom, faces a combination television-medicine cabinet.

I'm combining things, churning, trying to think fast, faster than my normal type of thinking.

Who are some of your artistic inspirations?

I've tended to admire certain particular ones. Albrecht Dürer, from 16th century Germany—I mean, artists tend to keep up with art—so, Far Side, [B.] Kliban is an artist. He died. [Robert] Crumb is still alive—I met him and his wife three times ... [Boris Artybasheff] tended to draw inventions that he would imagine. He had beautiful line style, he was good at shading. I've been too lazy to master shading.

What are your thoughts on the future?

My son Alex is 53. He says I'm not really interested in products or cartooning or inventing, but I'm interested in social commentary. So he might be partly true. [Cartooning is] a medium I've found where I can call attention to myself a little bit, and have fun and just imagine stuff. ... So in terms of now, I tend to think like converging trend lines, and I think about this little girl, environmentalist girl Greta [Thunberg]? OK, she says we have eight years to clean up the global tendency to pollute, or it's too late. I've been thinking that way for years ... The time increment is getting shorter and shorter between inventions, the speed of inventions, the speed of technology, the danger of weapons, the rise of climate change—they're all—it's happening simultaneously. So, I like to worry. It's fun.

What advice would you give to budding young artists and creators?

The most impressive tool that I use and can share is this lateral thinking. The importance of trying a variety of ideas, letting your mind wander. You know, schools teach us to not have our mind wander, but there's some advantage to it. □

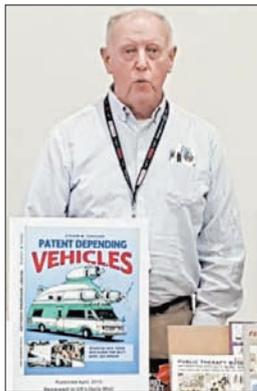


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Check out Steven M. Johnson's work at patentdepending.com.

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