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New IDEAs: Leaner, Greener

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Industrial design is a many-splendored business, even when the global economy is tanking.

Take this year's Industrial Design Excellence Awards, which were announced yesterday. Top honors from the Industrial Designers Society of America -- known as gold IDEAs -- went to 38 new and innovative products.

Among popular favorites, BMW launched a revved-up Mini Cooper S, which is even cuter than BMW's original. The people at Palm offered a more affordable personal data organizer, called Zire, which is not only smaller and lighter than earlier versions but promises to last a month on a single battery charge. And Logitech managed to strip a digital camera down to the size of a pack of business cards, so there should be absolutely no excuse for missing that photo op of a lifetime.

But those fun feats pale beside another innovation, called the Watercone. This low-tech device combines modern materials with a welcome new development: concern for humanity. Here's hoping that becomes the Next New Trend.

The Watercone is a portable, solar-powered water distiller. It is made by the Zeltec Engineering company of Germany, which hopes to bring potable water within reach of more than a billion deprived people around the globe.

"It is one of the most compelling examples of design I have seen," said Duncan Paul, a Procter and Gamble designer and IDSA jury spokesman. "It's beautifully simple, functional and intuitive."

Industrial designers often point out that their ambition is not only to pump up sales through the use of fantastic shapes and eye-catching colors. But for the past decade, those shapes and colors have been driving design. The welcome shift is actually a return to roots. The fundamental goal of industrial design has always been to solve problems and enhance the lives of people.

This year, in a contest co-sponsored by BusinessWeek magazine, jurors singled out 121 products and concepts that conveyed those ideals. Some were flashier than others, among them -- surprise! -- Birkenstock's updated Footprint shoes known as "The Architect Collection." But even there, designer Yves Behar won plaudits for using environmentally responsible materials. And when Logitech spruced up the essential mobile phone headset, designers made sure it was more ergonomically correct.

"The mood in industry worldwide is one of caution," said jury chairwoman Naomi Gornick. "We are beginning to see some tentative design thought being given to ecological issues and the sustainable use of materials."

The Watercone is described in detail at [Watercone.com](#). The design, by Stephan Augustin, is remarkably simple. It consists of a clear, thermo-molded polycarbonate cone with a twist-off cap at the peak and a turned rim at the bottom. When the cone is placed wide side down over a pan of brackish water or even seawater, droplets of pure water condense on the inside as the foul liquid

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evaporates. Those droplets trickle down the cone and collect in the trough at the rim. For retrieval, the cone can be turned upside down and the cap loosened to expose a spout.

Designers figure a Watercone will distill a liter a day on average. Field hospitals equipped with phalanxes of cones could produce far more, the company suggests. The cone should last three to five years, after which it can be recycled. Zeltec has priced them at \$50. The United Nations has figured that 1.3 billion workers earn less than a dollar a day. Thus, without subsidy a Watercone could be out of reach of many who need cleaner water. Even in countries where market vendors are the prime source of potable water, the company acknowledges, the device could take six months or more of regular use to pay for itself.

Still, the design is a marvel of smart thinking. IDSA judged it "a highly innovative solution to one of the most basic needs in developing countries." It is also timely. UNESCO has declared 2003 to be the International Year of Freshwater. On June 5, those who celebrated World Environment Day were drawing attention to the fact that 1.1 billion people lack access to potable water.

IDSA also salutes ideas that are not quite ready for production. A winning concept in the category of "design explorations" came from a group of graduates from the Savannah College of Art and Design. They dreamed up a bright orange Survival Pod that fits right into the zeitgeist of homeland security and Code Orange alerts.

The designers, who set up shop just eight months ago as Euforia Design, were motivated not by Sept. 11, 2001, but by a study of the devastating impact of biennial floods in Mozambique. They envision a hard plastic shell that would store a tent, water purification and first aid kits and food. In a disaster, the plastic case could also serve as a lifeboat. With the help of investors, they would like to turn drawings into a prototype for development by governments, aid groups or even the military.

"A lot of people view product design as greedy, materialistic, and wonder why do we need another chair," says Joseph Molinaro, a partner in the group. The Survival Pod shows "where we can go as a positive thing."

The pod, like the Watercone, also shows just how industrial designers are striving to improve daily life, not only in the consumer-driven world of high-tech toys, but in the neediest corners of the globe.

That's an IDEA worth its weight in gold.

The full range of industrial designs is viewable online at

">www.idsa.org

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