

Calendar

Clean Gadgets

Gad Shaanan Design

Trolleys tend to have long lives — 40, 50 years,” says Gad Shaanan, founder and principal designer of the firm that has redesigned San Diego’s trolleys. “So one thing you don’t want is a very futuristic design that five years later is going to look like an old Star Trek movie. You have to make it look fresh but not dated.”

A new exhibit at the downtown space of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego gives visitors a chance to preview that design. Curator Rachel Teagle said she thought it was a natural for the museum because the new cars will eventually roll right through the

America Plaza station adjacent to the gallery. Although she has been unable

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to elicit a promise from the Metropolitan Transit System, she expects the rollout will happen during the exhibit’s duration.

On display with the trolley design will be examples of other, smaller products the Shaanan firm has developed for clients. They include an aircraft seat for Weber, a video game controller for MadCatz, a cheese grater for Copco, several cell phones for Kyocera, and an anti-landmine boot for Med-Eng Systems.

One idea that comes through this exhibit is that the firm’s creative process stays unchanged no matter what the project may be. Its four steps go from hand-drawn sketches, to computer models, to models made of foam, then finally a handmade working prototype. “We’ve had to label things very carefully,” said Teagle, “because some models are actually pretty difficult to differentiate from the finished product.”

About two-thirds of a 20th scale model of the trolley was made during the trolley design process. It’s about four feet long. What is it about miniatures that is so alluring? Shaanan said: “Usually the clients like to keep them. We begged Siemens [electronic and engineering company] to return this one to us for the show, but they want it right back afterwards.”

Gad Shaanan Design was founded in 1981 in Montreal. Shaanan spoke to us last week by phone from the Solana Beach office, which opened in 2001. He was asked what special elements were incorporated into San Diego’s trolley design that might not have gone into one designed for another system. “Every time we design a trolley, we try to reflect

the image of the city itself,” he said.

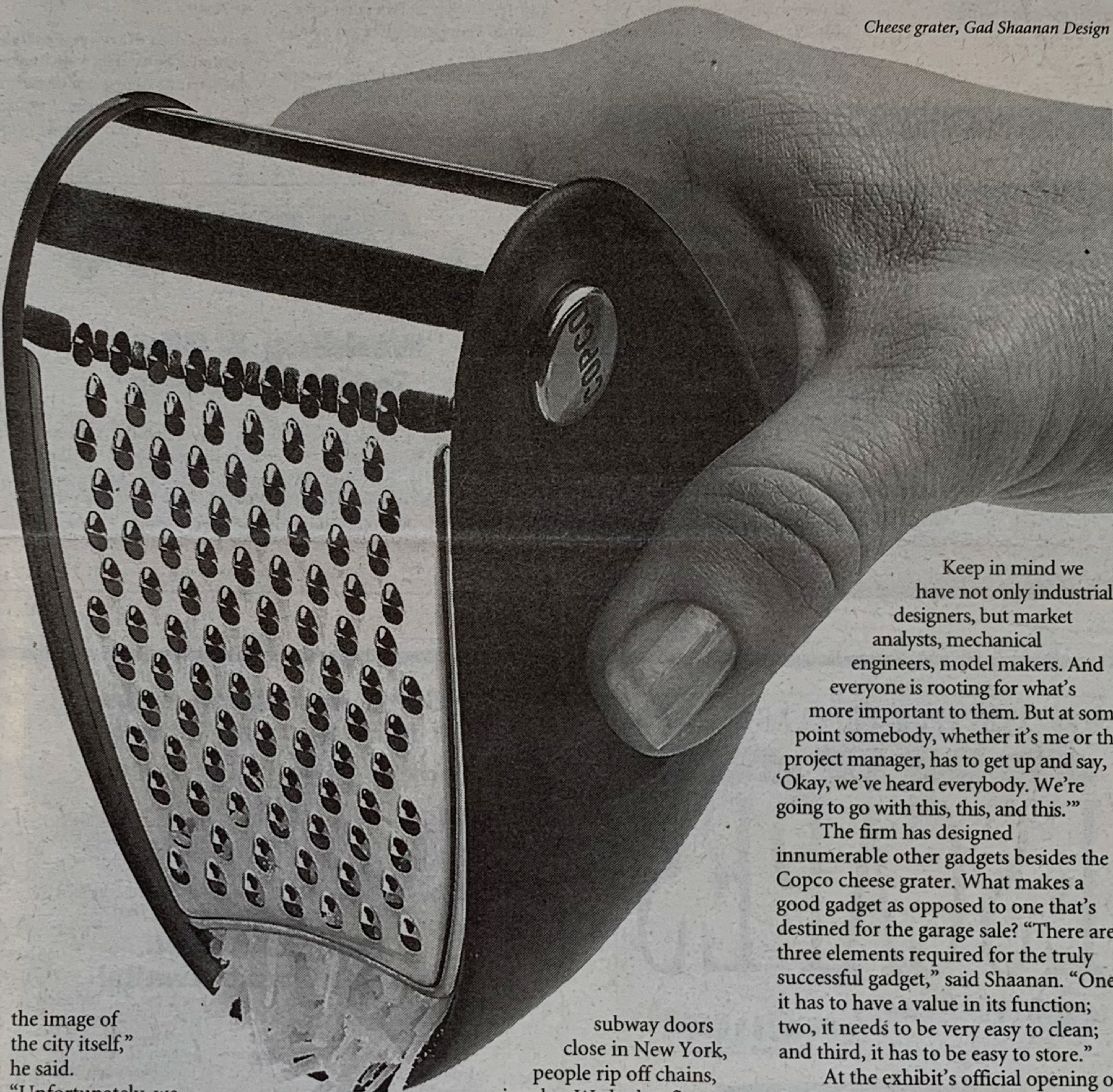
“Unfortunately, we couldn’t do much about the red of the trolley. We proposed a combination of silver and red, but that wasn’t accepted, so we stayed red. The overall look is modern, but it has a very soft feel. It sounds corny maybe, but we picked up a little bit on the panda bear, to make it very inviting, very warm.” He said he also wanted the design to convey that San Diego is a young city.

Common to all transportation system designs are concerns about safety. In San Diego’s case, Shaanan said it was most critical to assure the driver ample visibility. Shaanan said they didn’t need to worry as much about violent-crime prevention as they did when the firm got involved a few years back with redesigning New York City’s subway cars. “For example, just as the

subway doors close in New York, people rip off chains, jewelry. We had to figure out how to protect people from that. Also, we needed to protect the driver from somebody who might have a gun. People in San Diego don’t appreciate that those issues are nonexistent here.”

Shaanan resists revealing biographical information because he insists the designs are the result of teamwork. How, then, does he get truly creative work out of a team? Why is a team not a committee, which is notoriously bad at creating anything? “The way this company works is as a ‘democratic dictatorship,’” he said. “You have a lot of very creative people around the table, people who are very opinionated. And when you go through a brainstorm session you go through fairly heated debates during which people have the chance to sell the team on their ideas.

Cheese grater, Gad Shaanan Design



Keep in mind we have not only industrial designers, but market analysts, mechanical engineers, model makers. And everyone is rooting for what’s more important to them. But at some point somebody, whether it’s me or the project manager, has to get up and say, ‘Okay, we’ve heard everybody. We’re going to go with this, this, and this.’”

The firm has designed innumerable other gadgets besides the Copco cheese grater. What makes a good gadget as opposed to one that’s destined for the garage sale? “There are three elements required for the truly successful gadget,” said Shaanan. “One, it has to have a value in its function; two, it needs to be very easy to clean; and third, it has to be easy to store.”

At the exhibit’s official opening on September 2, the public will have the chance to ask Shaanan questions of their own.

— Jeanne Schinto

Exhibit: “Cerca Series: Gad Shaanan Design”
Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
1001 Kettner Boulevard (at Broadway)
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
August 15 through September 26 (every day except Wednesday)
Free
Opening: “TNT (Thursday Night Thing) Celebrates Gad Shaanan Design”
Thursday, September 2
7 p.m.
Free (\$3 suggested donation)
Info: 619-234-1001

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