

SUPER BAD

Mountain culture design
that turned up the wicked
and cranked on the weird

By Darren Davidson

Subtly mangled by a barstool prophet, it's a proverb nonetheless true: beauty is in the eye of the beer-holder. The same can be said, or maybe slurred, for design: inventions that to some seem downright discombobulated, are to others brilliant in their unforgettably peculiar trend or improbable vision. So *KMC* has plumbed the ex-files of archetypical anomaly and where-aren't-they-now for a look at design in whacked gear, transport, fashion and architecture that defy what seems like common sense and sound style. But what do we know? Say, how 'bout another round?



Gnarly by Neon

Your high school chemistry teacher would have taught you that neon was one of the cosmos' 118 elements, commonplace in the universe but quite rare on earth—unless you happened to be queuing for any ski lift in the western world, circa 1985.

It was the colour-coded calling card of a decade known for pure excess. Aesthetically gaudy and gluttonous, neon, in all its creepy palettes, was as much an 1980s-era assault on our natural world as Chernobyl, acid rain or Cyndi Lauper.

Maybe it was a breakthrough in Technicolour technology, but somewhere between Boy George and the Material Girl, the family of fluorescent colours went, like, totally mental. In mountain culture particularly, neon was suddenly splattered ad nauseam across skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking—even mountaineering—fashion, on everything from sunglasses to top sheets. Check out 1980s ski flicks like France's *Apocalypse Ski* or *Fire and Ice*, with hot doggers John Eaves and Suzy "Chapstick" Chaffee, for reference. Thankfully hot pinks, yellows and limes are dead. Wait. No, they're not.

In May 2007, *The New York Times* took note that neon was popping up on high-couture runways that spring. And according to Nelson, BC-based adventure sportswear designer Scarlet Kux-Kardos, the horrific highlighter hues are crawling back to a mountain near you. There were plenty of "retro colors" at the Las Vegas Snow Industries Association show this year, Kux-Kardos reports. "We've been seeing a bit of that for a few years. But the trend seems almost as strong as when snowboarding started." Rather than a brand having one style with a dab of retro colour here and there, you're seeing neon all over some of next year's garments. "My thought was that two seasons ago it would be enough and then fade away," says Kux-Kardos, "but in fact it's growing."



The Suzuki Samurai

First produced in 1982 in Hamamatsu, Japan, the Suzuki Samurai was basically the world's first mini-SUV, marketed to hipsters and granolas with a yen for the beach, ski hill or off-road hinterland.

Despite the fact its initial three-cylinder motor could barely break 100 clicks, it was considered a beauty beginner four-wheel drive, and when the first fleet pattered into the North American market in 1985, 47,000 sold at around \$6,200 each. Then disaster struck.

In 1988, the hugely influential publication *Consumer Report* wrote that the Samurai "easily rolled over in turns." Poor press for a supposedly rowdy little off-road rig. Within seven years, the Samurai was axed in the US due to low sales. Suzuki said *Consumer Report* was to blame and sued for \$60 million. Eight years later, the two sides settled out of court. *Consumer Report* recanted their charge, but the damage was done. Suzuki's ambitious effort went unfairly down in history as a stinker. Meek retribution came 20 years later, however, when in 2007, a modified Suzuki Samurai set a new record for the highest altitude attained by a four-wheeled vehicle—6,688 metres—previously held by Jeep.



The Burt Binding

While modern shredders might bust a gut at the sight of this bad boy, the Burt Binding once had a mountain of merit, only to be felled by The Man, say some ski industry chroniclers.

Named after its inventor, Burt Weinstein, the rig was one of a number of plate bindings that basked in relative glory from 1965 to 1970. Like Spademans (who can't recall hassles with those ubiquitous rental models?), Burt relied on a plate attached to the bottom of the boot, which then attached to another plate affixed to the ski. But the Burt took the whole plate thing one more step into the mystic. It featured 10-inch-long retractable cables that released the boot from the ski during a wipeout, then automatically returned the ski to the boot and latched it back into place.

But with the advent of plastic boots came the need for friction plates and all sorts of new doodads, and the plate binding flopped. "Like Sony's video cassette format and Apple's operating system," wrote John Fry, in his book *The History of Modern Skiing*, "the plate binding eventually lost out to an inferior technology promoted by superior distribution and funding." Urban legend didn't buoy the Burt's reputation either. The most gruesome myth involved a particularly unfortunate bump skier who'd snapped his leg bone clean in half in a vicious crash. His Burt recoiled so heartily that his busted peg reattached—with his foot facing the wrong way.



The Log Home and Other Suspect Forms of Mountain-Style Shelter

For millennia, mankind relied on the hearty and well-sustained resources around him for shelter, especially trees. In 2008, however, is there any particular reason to live in a place that looks like it was general contracted by Grizzly Adams?

Stereotypical log homes, Pan-Abode manufactured lumber homes, the prow roofline and brightly coloured metal roofs are all suspect building styles that rile a guy like John Gower. A self-admitted cantankerous architectural curmudgeon, Gower and his company, BC Mountain Homes, have built nearly 400 houses from the Purcells to the Appalachians since 1990.

"A mountain landscape is a *very* sensitive place," says Gower. And for starters, he says, the archetype log home—the floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall, every log's glazed-like-a-Timmy Ho's donut variety—simply isn't respectful of the environment, resourcefully nor aesthetically. "The log home is an anachronism that we can't afford," says Gower. An average-sized log home leaves in its wake a small cut block of formerly mighty big-timber stumps, requiring a few tonnes more wood than a standard stud-framed abode. Aside from wasted forests, says Gower, everyday-style log homes don't handle seasonal changes in temperature or humidity, they're tough to seal and they're often cave-dark inside because it's hard to place windows.

No surprise then that mountain-home contemporaries don't care much for the Pan-Abode either, a highly manufactured home with tongue-and-groove lumber made to look like logs. And they're not crazy about "the prow," which is named after the bow of a ship and famous for its two-story gabled roofline and often huge-windowed fronts. Gower says the design is "a ubiquitous look that speaks far more to a lack of imagination than to any consideration of the site. It's the architectural equivalent of the strip mall. They're everywhere and they have this totally bland mass appeal to them." He adds that all that glass fries you in the summer and costs you a fortune in wintertime utility bills.

One more thing: ditch the green, blue and red metal roofs, says Gower. Shining Crayola-colours will clash gruesomely with the earth-tone you paid a half million bucks for, and "you're telegraphing your presence to outer space."



Kayaking's Madman and His Savage Fury

Back in the 1990s, when kayaking's technological learning curve was as steep as a Class VI rapid, the Savage Fury boat reigned. Well, maybe "reigned" isn't exactly the right word. The Fury went to market in 1996 and was designed by the infamous Corran Addison, a South African super-paddler and Olympian dubiously dubbed, "the Dennis Rodman of Kayaking."

While it was likely the first boat to perform a true flat spin—today a fundamental stunt in any play-boating eddy—many paddlers revile the Fury. California whitewater website boof.com quotes bloggers calling the Fury "the crappiest boat ever." Rated 3.5 out of 10 by kayaknews.ca, the Fury was built out of plastic, with a weird dimpled bottom, an earnestly bizarre shape and specifically designed to fit short and squat dudes like Addison. It was ugly looking and few could paddle it well.

Even though the Fury has been a common target amongst paddling pundits for the past decade, the boat hasn't made nearly as many waves as its inventor. Addison's notoriety stems from a litany of media-savvy stunts and unorthodox marketing ploys. He once jumped a 75-foot-waterfall into five feet of water—wearing a Batman suit and compressing a stack of vertebrae in the process. Along with more than a few ill-advised antics, the daredevil designer had his detractors. "Corran has asserted in public that he's been responsible for every innovation in paddling technique and design in the last five or 10 years," long-time expedition kayaker Doug Ammons once told *Outside* magazine. "That's bullshit. If he believes he's the Leonardo da Vinci of kayaking, he's deluding himself."



Nothing's Shocking: Early 90s Full-Suspension Mountain Bikes

More than a little lame-looking, in retrospect bicycles like the Cannondale Delta V 1000 and Trek 9000 were the earnest ancestors of one of the 21st century's most rapidly popularized and progressive outdoor adventure sports—freeride mountain biking. Freeriding's first suspension bikes were more dud than stud, according to one of North America's premier pedalling pundits. "There was some amazingly bad shit out there," says veteran *BIKE Magazine* columnist Mike Ferrentino. "And that'd include almost all full suspension bikes before '92."

The 1992 Delta V 1000 was Cannondale's first real dual suspension ride, offering a whopping two inches of travel, front and back. The front shock was housed in a fat head tube and covered in a suspicious-looking corrugated rubber sock, perhaps meant to lure a prospective buyer's gaze away from the rigid forks below and the nut-bashing headset above.

Also released in 1992, Trek's 9000 series of full suspension bikes used a simple swing arm attached to a rear shock—cleverly dubbed the A.B. Zorb—that resembled a stack of rubber donuts in front of the seat tube. Like Cannondale, Trek's pioneer freeride technology offered the prototypical two inches of rear squish.

"It was the beginning of a lot of experimentation," says Ferrentino. "And usually they'd end up with a bike that was heavy, weak, flexy and didn't work well at absorbing bumps. There wasn't much control. It was like, 'throw it against the wall and see if it sticks' kind of thinking."

All-Terrain Roller Blades

Not to be confused with the ever-popular quad roller skate, these roller blades come with hand-activated hydraulic drum brakes and are advertised as being ideal for hard cores who want to experience mountain biking, skiing, and inline skating all together. Also known as the triad of trauma.

Bio Pace Chain Rings

Renown for being egg-shaped, the idea was to give cross-country mountain bikers more pushing power. The consequence was a really lumpy pedal stroke.

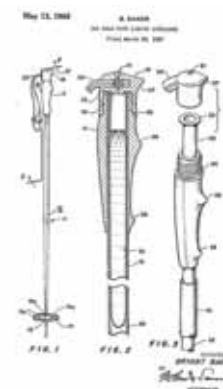


The Nava

"Garage Sale" Frank Salter knows weird when he sees it—or skis it. And the Nava was one of the weirdest. "Oh certainly," acknowledges Salter, of the Italian moon boot-and-binding contraption that defied convention, "it was goofy." One of Canadian ski culture's most venerable curators, Salter, who lives in Whistler, BC, has pilfered away over 800 pairs of skis, boots and poles in his basement over the last few decades. A well-preserved specimen of the Nava is amongst his archives.

Designed and manufactured by an Italian motorcycle helmet manufacturer, the Nava, first sold in North America in 1987 for around \$500, integrated both binding and boot with a wacky s-shaped mechanical arm that reached out from the binding to support the back of the leg. A piston in the Nava's base controlled the arm and allowed it to move with the leg as the skier shredded. Its inventors claimed the binding's leg support made it easier for the skier to carve a turn. When the skier packed it in, the binding released and the arm flipped down to become a ski brake.

But the boots were super-soft, like Sorels, says the 50-year-old Salter. And they were flat out ugly. To its credit, though, the Nava was popular amongst a cultish crowd, some of whom ride them to this day. "You still see 'em in Whistler. Some of the old guys say they saved their knees," he says. Salter, a ripper since the age of eight, believes the Nava may have been ahead of its time. "It might even translate better to one of today's shaped skis. I'm gonna try it!"



Allsop Shock Absorber Ski Poles and Poles with Booze Flasks

Hey Hammer Time, lighten up on the pole plants, eh. The flasks? With all those cops on the hills these days, maybe it's not such a bad idea.



Glenn Plake and the 'Hawk That Soared

Let's be honest. If you had the wherewithal to successfully shred in Glenn Plake's wake, you could wear your hair any way you wanted. But a 16 inch-high, multicoloured mohawk? For the past quarter century?

"It was who I was and still am," laughs the ski world's most amiable anti-establishment ambassador, on the horn from his place in Chamonix, France. At 43, Plake is a demigod of down, considered a founder of big mountain skiing and most recently revered in the extreme skiing documentary *Steep*, along with the likes of Doug Coombs and Scott Schmidt. His 'do—which has been almost every colour—is his timeless trademark. A punker who moshed at the earliest tours of DOA, Seven Seconds and Social Distortion, the Lake Tahoe-raised skier started sporting his mohawk in 1981.

"We were trying to scare the neighbours, and I wanted to get my hair to stand up," he recalls. "My buddy's mom gave me a box of Knox gelatin—the same stuff as Jell-O. She'd used it for her beehive in the '60s." A few years later, Plake cracked the US ski team as a mogul specialist, mohawk and anarchist attitude in tow.

"I was supposed to be the quintessential clean-cut American boy with Olympic dreams and all this crap. The reality was I was a skateboarding skier who hung around the punk scene living with five other guys and growing up in a gambling town." Preferring to keep the 'hawk grounded most days now, he still sets it free for public appearances.

And he still rocks it like he talks it. Plake recently climbed and skied a 22,000-foot peak in India that hadn't been scaled since 1968 and shortly afterwards left a 20-year contract with K2 when the manufacturer showed a lack of interest in kids' racing and mogul skiing, then started making skis in China. He's now developing a new bump ski for Elan—the Bloodline—and a backcountry touring boot for Dalbello called the Virus. Evidently, Plake's sickness is still spreading.



The Mountain Board

All right, so there's an International Mountain Board Association, and back in 1998, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that one million people around the world were doing it. Where are all these folks? Extreme liquor store parking lots? Skating with the Sasquatch? Snowboarding without snow plus trees and rocks equals shoulder separations. Why not wait for winter?

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS OF THE SUPER BAD CANON





Photo: Bob Allen

Lycra and Spandex Mountain Bike Clothing

It was the fashion foundation of a cycling age legendary for fingerless gloves, over-designed jerseys and stretchy bowl-shaped helmet covers. Lycra, and its crotch-defining cousin Spandex, made an unfortunate migration from road racing into the early days of mountain biking.

Those were days Mountain Bike Hall of Famer Hans Rey recalls with good humour. "People didn't feel weird about riding around in skin-tight stuff," says the 41-year-old trials and extreme mountain biking icon. "Guys would walk into a coffee shop in their red Lycra shorts and not realize everyone was staring at their package." Rey says well into the 1990s, stretchy fabrics were the apex of cyclewear technology. "You didn't know any better. You made it work." For a guy who began freeriding a few years before the term was coined, mounting then what were unimaginable climbs and descents alongside Hawaiian hot lava and Swiss glacial till, the dilemma of what to wear was formidable. "You felt really awkward riding around Machu Picchu in these Lycra outfits," says the German rider, who still rides professionally today and is based in Laguna Beach, California. "You'd look at photos after and say 'Shit, I need to do something about this.'" Borrowing from downhill, Rey began donning one-piece skin suits for his wild trials antics. "I thought it was cool because the motorcycle trials guys were wearing tight stuff too," laughs Rey, whose nickname is "No Way."

In his own defense, Rey points out that way back in the 1980s he raced in baggy shorts, even boxers, before his sponsorship with GT Bikes made tight uniforms mandatory. "Except they were neon beach volleyball shorts, along with a mullet and ponytail."

With the exception of today's speed-conscious cross-country set, Spandex and Lycra's inability to fend off adverse weather and nasty spills has sent both fabrics the way of the dodo—further proof that stuff that's tight just ain't right.



Guns and Poses: The Hummer

If the Samurai was the world's first mini SUV, the Hummer was its megalomaniac 21st century mutation. Nearly seven feet high and weighing more than 6,000 pounds, the Hummer's original military prototype—the Humvee or High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle—was designed for fighting chaos and wars in the burliest of zones.

With savvy marketing to a demographic living in fear of everything from fender-benders to apocalypse, today the behemoth rig is as adept at rushing millionaire soccer moms to the Botox clinic as it was at chauffeuring Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf to Operation Desert Storm photo ops back in 1990. Today, the Hummer and its smaller H2 and H3 models are likely the most vilified vehicles in history.

"In 20 years of testing we have never evaluated a vehicle that had so little going for it as the hulking, visibility-inhibiting H2 Hummer," says the grassroots US National Motorists Association. "The reason is simple; this is a road-hoggish, \$52,000 glorified pick-up truck that gets horrible gas mileage, offers extremely poor visibility, and despite its enormous girth, has little passenger and storage space. Worse, its safety record is under investigation." Even though there are year-long waiting lists for them in markets like Australia, some people flat out hate them. Just one example: in the summer of 2007, in a Washington, DC neighbourhood where Prius hybrids and Volvos are the norm, two masked men took a bat to every window of a resident's Hummer, a knife to each 38-inch tire and scratched into the body, "FOR THE ENVIRON."

The Browning Electronic Acu-Shift Transmission
 Otherwise known as The B.E.A.S.T, this contraption was a mountain bike transmission that relied on a battery-powered armature that shifted your chain for you. Heavy. Finicky. Lazy. And in a rainstorm, shocking.

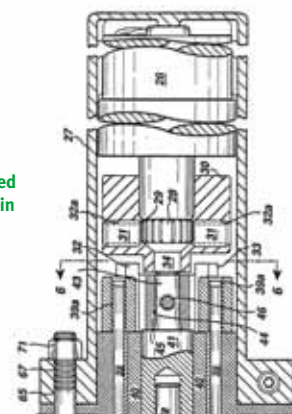


Figure 4



The Inflatable Kayak

Almost an oxymoron, these questionable vessels rank right up there with water wings and plywood coffins when it comes to structural integrity and navigational capabilities. Great for the pool and ... that's about it.



The All-Terrain Baby Stroller

There are patents pending on these things dating back to 1947. There's an all-terrain pet stroller too, featured in *Brilliant Magazine*. Pass the absinthe.

The Wooden Toddler's Mountain Bike

With the mountain pine beetle epidemic running rampant in many of the west's increasingly tinder-dry forests, can this be wise? Coming soon, just for the kids: cedar shake riding pants and bark helmets.



Rollerskis

Laugh now. Another decade of global warming and we'll all be searching for roller lube and our old stretchies.

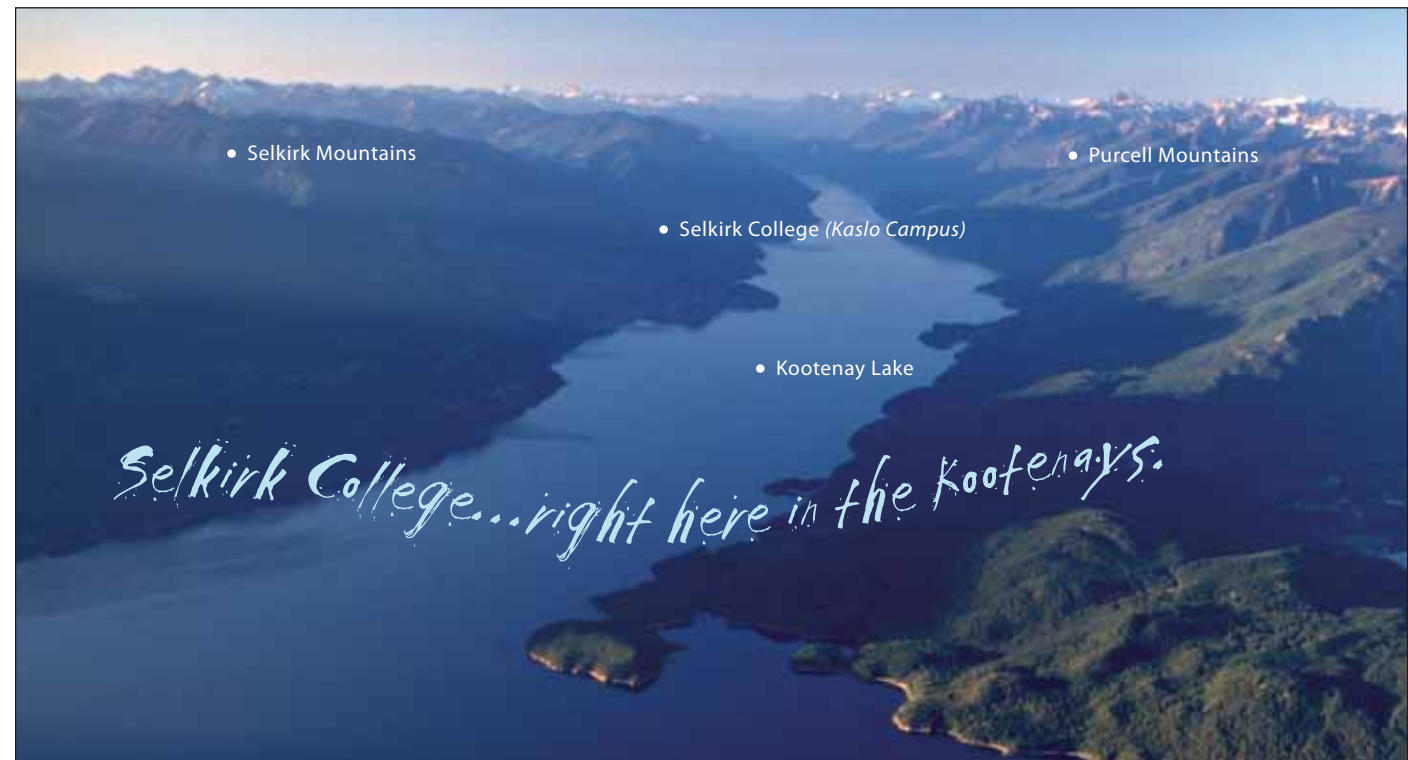
Knee-High Ski Boots

Dolomite, Nordica, Scott and Hansen all introduced them in the late 1970s, with everyone jumping on the bandwagon with far-flung techno-claims that boots towering up to kneecap-shearing heights would exponentially improve your wiggling and powder eights. Truth be told, the top five inches of almost every make provided about as much support as a fur collar. They were great at blowing out knees too.

Higher boots are here to stay... and you should understand why

Many commentators have noted that the Dolomite ski boot is the most advanced boot ever designed. It is a true revolution in ski boot design. The Dolomite ski boot is the only boot in the world that is designed to provide the skier with the most advanced level of control and support. The Dolomite ski boot is the only boot in the world that is designed to provide the skier with the most advanced level of control and support. The Dolomite ski boot is the only boot in the world that is designed to provide the skier with the most advanced level of control and support.

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