

The Organic Way of Death

Introducing the first oval coffin.

Andreas Spiegel's father was a born aesthete, the kind of person who fussed over every detail of his environment. That such a man couldn't die an aesthete, too, became a sore point when Spiegel's father passed away four years ago: The son discovered that every coffin on the market was a boxy, brass-laden atrocity. Spiegel, a businessman based in Berlin, took a crack at a new design and came up with Cocoon, the first oval-shaped coffin, which he has just launched in Europe.

"It seems trendy," Spiegel admits. But his aim is to give consumers more choice than is offered by funeral homes in what has always been a sellers' market. (Mourners tend not to have the time or drive to comparison shop.) Instead of traditional wood,

the Cocoon is made of a proprietary jute and natural resin composite that can be formed into an oval and yet still withstand the pressure of being buried.

Spiegel chose the egg shape not only because of its superior stability, but also because of its associations: "The cocoon symbolizes security and care, as well as a transcendental experience of crossing into another state," he says. The Cocoon's tagline, "Perfect Shelter," also hints at environmental benefits. The composite is a renewable resource, taking the place of exotic or tropical woods, and the high-gloss varnish that coats the outside is water-based and ecologically harmless. At around \$3,500, the Cocoon is priced just above the average casket.

Spiegel hopes that if his design proves too forward-thinking for the conglomerated distributors that rule the American coffin market—to which he plans to introduce Cocoon by next year—then it will at least be picked up in the growing niche movement of eco-friendly burials. That is, if the fashionistas don't get there first. "I'm trying to market it not as I would a coffin, but as furniture with a high design standard," says Spiegel. "The last piece of furniture you'll ever buy." www.uono.de MONICA KHEMSUROV



Night Moves

A new book decodes how lovers lie.

According to a recent British study, most of us sleep curled up like a fetus, which means we're deceptively tough or shy when we first meet a potential lover. But it's what happens once we go to bed with them that interests McSweeney's editor Evany Thomas. In her new book, *The Secret Language of Sleep: A Couple's Guide to the Thirty-Nine Poses*, Thomas maps the positions of repose, detailing the meaning of different alignments. "Our culture is obsessed with exploring these types of things about ourselves," she says.

Harnessing a camera to the ceiling of the bedroom she shares with her boyfriend, Thomas conducted research by inviting friends in relationships to demonstrate favorite positions and explain what each might mean. The couples' answers revealed telling misperceptions about their lovers' night-

time behavior. "When your partner is sleeping facing the wall, you might interpret it as spurning you," Thomas offers. "But that's not necessarily true. If both members of a couple equally enjoy a pose that others consider awkward or violent, it can actually be a sign of compatibility."

Next Thomas diagrammed 39 different poses and assigned each a name, such as The Bubble Blower (back to back with legs bent) or Starfish and Conch (one person spread out and the other curled up). In McSweeney's signature faux-earnest style, she deconstructed the poses' relevance to each partner's emotional needs. The circle formed by the bent legs and touching feet of The Bubble Blower, for instance, is a sign of transformation, of two lives that are constantly in flux yet perfectly balanced with one another.

For lovers whose positions are out of harmony, Thomas suggests using *The Secret Language of Sleep* to work out a compromise. She even finds her own kind of solace in the book: "The cover is based on a picture of me and my boyfriend," she says. "It has a grotesque sweetness. I hope we stick it out."

www.mcsweeneys.net SARA CARDACE



The Great Communicator

Assistive technology takes a leap forward.

Three years ago, Richard Ellenson was doodling on a napkin at a business conference, sketching a design for a better speech-generation device. A former ad executive, Ellenson had no design experience, but his son, who has cerebral palsy, had just reached school age, and Ellenson was finding out that the technologies available to help him navigate the world of human interaction were Rube Goldbergian in complexity. "No one was going to do this if I didn't," he insists.

Working with Frog Design, Flextronics, and three speech experts, Ellenson developed the tango!, an alternative and augmentative (AAC) device for people with cerebral palsy, autism, and ALS who have lost the ability to speak. Its interface is miraculously simple, based on a hierarchical navigational structure built around 90 core words that can produce 2,100 phrases within five hits. Where some of its predecessors use dozens of buttons whose keystroke combinations have to be memorized to express a rich lexicon, the tango! has only eight buttons and a touch screen divided into six sections. Thus, the most essential "headlines" of basic communication—such as *eat*, *play*, and *school*—sit at the surface, while a vast number of options for more complex conversation stretches below.

The tango! lends humanity to its capabilities by borrowing from consumer electronics. It has "a distinct soul," says Frog's Mick Malisic. Voice filters allow users nuances of tone (they can whine, yell, or whisper), and phrases like "You're being mean!" give children freedom to express themselves as volubly as their peers. A built-in digital camera provides for nonverbal communication, while an indoor/outdoor screen and ergonomic cradle ensure the device will remain functional under all conditions.

Perhaps most important, the tango!, which looks like an overgrown PSP, offers something no AAC device has before—style. "The sensibility that has infiltrated the toothbrush section of Target has not yet reached assistive technology," Ellenson says, "and there is no world where first impressions are more important."

www.frogdesign.com JESSE ASHLOCK