

The New Nerd Mafia

Georgia Tech's brainy geek squad brings cutting-edge design to the masses | *By Felicia Feaster | Photography by Sarah Dorio* |



NERDS RULE!

From left: Ian Bogost, Clint Zeagler, Ellen Dunham-Jones, David VanArsdale. Top right: Thad Starner and Clint Zeagler's "smart garments."



In the high school of life, the nerds have dethroned the jocks and the Bush-era frat boys. Bill Gates, Barack Obama, Jon Stewart, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze and other brainy types now rule. "Alpha Geeks" are top dogs these days, crows *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. For some, the Georgia Institute of Technology may conjure visions of the protractor and anime-loving set, but no institution better represents Brooks' revenge of the nerds. At Tech an array of nationally recognized smarty-britches are wedding technology to design in radical new ways. "The computer people are nerds and the design people are design nerds and we're all just a bunch of geeks making science," says Tech instructor and noted fashion designer Clint Zeagler.

The Tech design mafia runs the gamut, but it has its share of milk-fed Young Turks like Zeagler and industrial designer David VanArsdale, 27. Though a 2005 Tech graduate, VanArsdale's YouTube-generation sensibility has often pitted him against the Tech establishment. His maverick teaching style (including a design field trip to New York City for his students financed via barbecues and PayPal donations) appears to have put some distance between VanArsdale and Tech since his first teaching gig. In response to an imposed sabbatical ("I always end up being the rogue force," he shrugs), he created the People of Resource design company this summer. Think: Georgia Tech post-grad brain trust, where the super enthusiastic, mile-a-minute VanArsdale works alongside two brand-new Tech grads, Steven Sloan and Stephen Kennedy. The group has made snarky Web promos featuring naked chicks on mopeds for alternative, Atlanta messenger bag company Malcolm Fontier. They have also created interior decor elements for buzzy Atlanta venues such as Luckie Food Lounge, Michael Gidewon's (formerly of Compound) new nightspot SPI Club, and a forthcoming music-driven eatery on Edgewood Avenue from the team behind Top Flr. Every third Thursday VanArsdale struts his design stuff in the CONTINUED...



users will be able to simply stroke their arm or touch their chest to answer their cell phone or jack up the volume on their iPod. The team's wearable smart garments will be featured this June in a Museum of Design Atlanta show *On You 2*.

And then there is Ian Bogost, the geekiest—and thus coolest—of them all. As a professor of video games, Bogost holds the dream job of every adolescent nerd in the nation. Bogost's radical approach to video game study and design has landed him a prominent place on the academy lecture circuit. But it's also allowed him to banter with nerd-boy superhero Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. "It is really important for me to get this stuff out so people know about it," he confesses. Appearing on TV is just part of what Bogost sees as a very populist Tech approach that encourages innovation beyond the ivory tower. It's a far cry from the academic cliché of the "Marxist on a \$300,000 endowed professorship," he says. Bogost's Persuasive Games company melds technology and cultural awareness to create intriguing games that operate somewhere at the border of conceptual art and social commentary. *Killer Flu* mocks the swine flu hysteria, while *Jet Set* centers on those pesky airport security rules. Bogost's recent book about the Atari game system, *Racing the Beam*, sent geek journalists at *Slate.com* and *The Boston Globe* into spasms of nerd ecstasy. Up next: He's organizing an Art History of Games symposium February 4-6 at the High Museum (in conjunction with SCAD Atlanta). The symposium will include an exhibit at Kai Lin Gallery devoted to video game art.

Young Turk or old guard, this quartet of Techies share a sense of palpable excitement about bringing vanguard design to the public. Georgia Tech has entered the world in a way few institutions can—and it is largely thanks to alpha geek designers like these. **A**

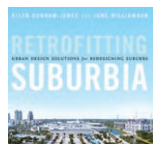
...CONTINUED Museum of Design-sponsored Avant! lecture series at The Shed at Glenwood, where design-freaks can eat pork belly while discussing the Bauhaus. "David is just a genius at motivating young designers," says Zeagler, who knew he would be the perfect host for Avant!

On the other end of the Tech design spectrum are ivory tower thinkers like Ellen Dunham-Jones. A kind of Helen Mirren of urban design, Dunham-Jones has brought a major cool factor to the establishment. With her sterling credentials (stints teaching at MIT and working with avant-garde architect Peter Eisenman), Dunham-Jones has found a special niche in the progressive idea-soup of Tech. "Atlanta is a great laboratory for me to both observe and hopefully influence," she says. "I feel like every possible urban design idea or trend, good or bad, they're all happening here." Her critically lauded book, *Retrofitting Suburbia* (coauthored with June Williamson), builds a case for

revivifying dead malls and isolated suburbs into more walkable, urban-like communities. This May, Dunham-Jones will chair a gathering of big thinkers (including Talking Head's David Byrne, author of the new green transport memoir *Bicycle Diaries*) for the Annual Congress of New Urbanism in Atlanta. At

the conference, issues of edible landscapes, the locavore food movement, healthy water and suburbia-as-health-threat will also be part of the hipster urban design dialogue.

"I kind of see Tech as a place that opens up opportunities to work in completely different disciplines that makes a little explosion of creativity," says Zeagler. The fashion designer typifies the Techie embrace of "interdisciplinarity" not just as a professorial buzzword, but a true example of genre-jumping and cross-pollination. Tech-alum Zeagler, who has been teaching for three years, is collaborating with College of Computing professor Thad Starner to create "smart garments." The futuristic frocks actually incorporate technology into their thread count. In Zeagler and Starner's very *Blade Runner* vision of life as we know it,



Clockwise from top left: The cheeky ad for Malcolm Fontier by the People of Resource; the Colorado community of Belmar transformed into a walkable downtown as detailed in *Retrofitting Suburbia* (inset); Bogost's *Killer Flu* game.

