

Design Etude #1

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Music 256A

Part 1 & 2

LEGO Chrysanthemum Flower Décor



When searching for objects in my life that fall into the “functional aesthetics” paradigm, the first thing I thought of was the LEGO flower set placed on my shoe storage cabinet by the front door. There is really no need for me to buy fake flower decor that I have to construct myself other than that it was *fun to build*. There is a sense of satisfaction seeing it come together, taking the form shown on the box (“Oh cool, I made that!”). There is also a feeling of nostalgia building with LEGO that brings me back to being a curious and carefree child (I think this is an intentional outcome from LEGO as they have been releasing these LEGO art/decor sets that are marketed towards adults). A much simpler solution to fill that space would have been to buy real (or even fake) flowers. So why LEGO? On one hand, I really just needed something pleasing to fill the space and add a bit of color and personality to the blank white walls of the entryway (means-to-an-end). On the other hand, isn’t it fun to play with LEGOs? Usually, the process of building with LEGOs is more interesting than the final result—similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle—the building *is* the experience (end-in-itself). With these LEGO sets, there is still the functional aspect of having a pleasant decoration to be put on display (more so than just a giant box of random LEGO pieces where the goal is playing just for play’s sake). However, that play element is not lost, and that is where our humanistic elements are satisfied. Additionally, being made with LEGOs, with its recognizable pieces and its bumps and grooves, the decor has character and personality (aesthetics). It’s not a random assortment of blocks (it has a purpose), but still embodies the fun and playful approach that we associate with building with LEGOs.

Cocktail Garnishes (i.e. lemon/orange twist, Luxardo cherry, mint bouquet, etc.)



There is a common expression in bartending that goes, “You drink with your eyes first.” Although we will forgive a poorly presented drink if it is exceptionally delicious, the aesthetics of a cocktail still heavily influence our perception of how the drink will be before we’ve even had our first sip. An immaculate-looking drink with clear ice, a proper washline, and a well-trimmed peel *looks* like a well-crafted drink, which positively influences our expectations of its taste. Conversely, a cocktail with cheap ice, no garnish, and served in improper glassware can turn a “passing” cocktail into a regretted purchase. There *is* a functional element to many (if not most) cocktail garnishes: a citrus peel is spritzed into the drink and rubbed around the rim to imbue its essence into the “initial contact” with the drink (what is tasted in the front palette). A mint bouquet is lightly crushed and slapped to release its aroma and nestled next to a straw so as the imbiber drinks, the smell of mint enhances the botanicals of the drink. Aesthetically, there is an elegance and a sense of completeness by including the garnish. It is also there for show, to add an extra element of flash, to convince you that you are participating in a “drinking experience”. Not every cocktail calls for (or needs) a garnish, but the ones that do have done so intentionally. For a drink like a Martini (which consists of only 2 or 3 ingredients not including the garnish), a lemon twist or olive is essential to its completion. Both offer an acidic quality that meshes well with the botanical flavors of gin and the subtle floral flavors of dry vermouth and adds an extra layer of complexity to a drink that is fairly simple in its ingredients (functional, means-to-an-end). The garnishes also cement the perception of a Martini as being a “classy” drink and add a visual element that pops out of an otherwise understated drink in terms of appearance (aesthetic, end-in-itself). When I’m lazy and leave off a garnish for a drink I make at home, I can’t help but feel the drink is incomplete.

Eurorack Modules

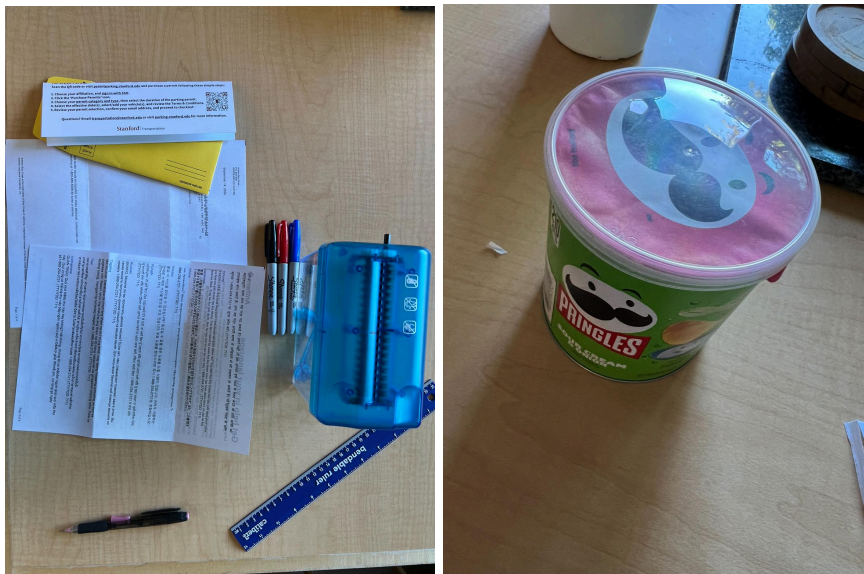


This might seem like an obvious choice, but I get occasionally asked why I even bother with modular synthesis / Eurorack (“Can’t software just emulate all of this?”). This is an excellent question and can be answered pretty effectively through the concepts presented in the first chapter of *Artful Design*. Of course, before the digital age, analog electronics existed because *that was the only option* for creating electronic music. But with virtual instruments so readily available and of high quality, and with the convenience (and likely cost-savings) of digital emulation, why continue to use Eurorack? After all, there’s even *free* software (VCV Rack) that emulates a Eurorack environment, and you can add as many modules as your computer can handle and swap them around with ease! One can always try and make the argument that analog just sounds better than digital, but can we *really* hear the difference? And not everything is analog, what about digital modules? And what about when software truly catches up and that difference is no longer distinguishable even to a professional? The answer I keep coming back to is that there is just so much joy in working with physical devices that just isn’t there when working with software on your laptop: so many knobs and buttons and switches and lights. So many cables to patch in and patch out. It’s just so fun, so expressive. You feel much more connected (literally physically) to the system when you turn a knob and are greeted with immediate feedback from the evolving soundscape. It is always exciting when plugging in a new module’s ribbon cable into the power supply, screwing the module into place, flicking on the power switch, and seeing the system come alive with lights. It is so satisfying to feel the resistance and weight of a well-made knob; to physically tweak a parameter and hear its results. Functionally, we want to make electronic music with flexibility and endless possibilities. But aesthetically, we want the character of our device to reflect something meaningful, whether it be our own personality or the personality of the music we are making. Module developers know this too, which is why there is so much diversity in the looks of many modules on the market. If the only concern when crafting a new module was functionality, all modules would emulate Doepfer, devoid of color and blandly named things like “A-106-5” and “A138p” (no offense to Doepfer as their modules are actually great). But some modules have fancy colors, fun lights, and eye-catching symbols and patterns. Patch cables, which come in a wide array of

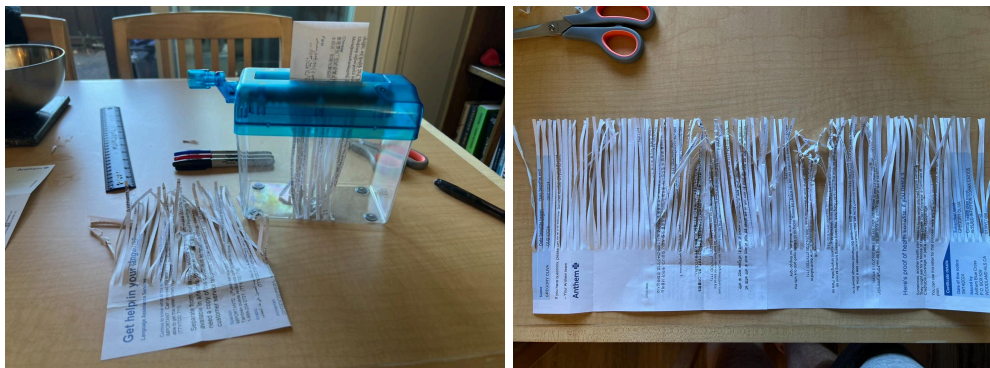
colors, are also a good example of this. The colors *can* be used functionally by assigning a color to a specific use case (red for audio, blue for CV modulation, etc.). Much of the time, however, the colors are just there to look pretty and add character. Sometimes they are carefully selected by the artist to achieve a specific aesthetic, like using all of the same color or achieving a gradient of similar colors. There are many “ends-in-itself” in modular synthesis: wacky designs and cool colors, the concepts of playing and building, modules that have strange or even hidden features (Makenoise likes to do this) meant to be explored. But there are also elements of means-to-an-end: this modular is a plain ol’ lowpass filter because you need a lowpass filter. No frills, to the point. Eurorack is a beautiful amalgamation of aesthetics and functionality, and I think really embodies the core principles of artful design.

Part 3

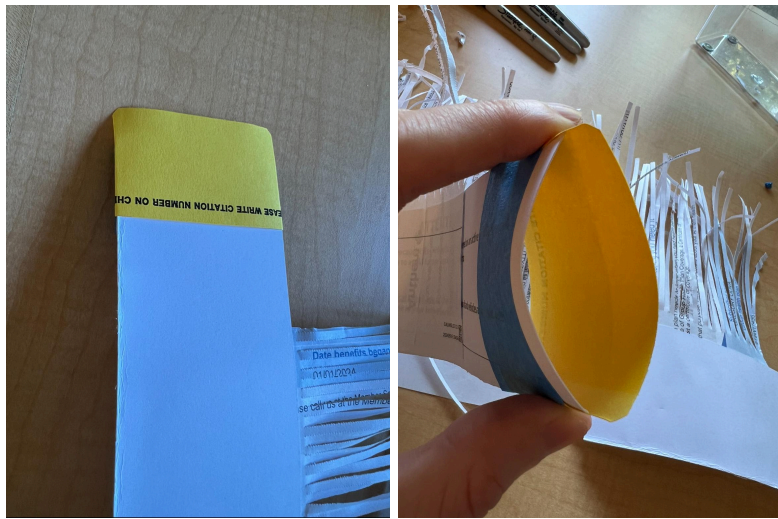
I get a lot of mail that has random bits of personal information on them that I end up shredding with a cheap manual-crank paper shredder. I had a small pile of some financial papers and a parking ticket (quite annoyed by this one actually) and as I sat down to shred them, I thought “Why not make this into an arts and crafts project?” This is what I started with:



I was still going to shred the important parts, so I thought I could try and turn it into a hat with some frills (the shredded parts):



So far... looking bad. Right now I'm wondering if this is going to be remotely passable. But I keep going, let's add a "clasp" to it (made out of the parking ticket envelope) so it can be adjustable.



Glueing on a Pringles logo (taken from the chips I was eating while making this) to give it some character, I put it all together to get the finished hat:



Which can be worn in multiple ways:



This was... very silly to say the least. But it actually came together a bit nicer than I was expecting, I think the Pringles logo really ties it all together. I accomplished two things: 1) still shredding the bits of personal information and 2) instead of just throwing it away, turning it into a fun hat.