

Steampunk hits home

by Cheryl Fenton | March 21, 2011



Credit: STEAMPUNKWORKSHOP.COM

It's enough to make time travel look possible: a modern Nokia outfitted with antique typewriter keys, a Victorian pipe organ turned computer desk, a leather aviation helmet that blares your favorite iPod tunes. You might say steampunk is a trend that looks forward by looking back.

Part digital age, part Victorian era, steampunk is a subculture that has been picking up steam - and infiltrating the mainstream - for years now. Inspired in large part by the futuristic visions of yesteryear's thinkers, like H.G. Wells, Mary Shelley, and Jules Verne (known to many as the father of steampunk), the movement has spread from literature to fashion, music, film, and, you guessed it, design. And in the Boston area, the last is having a bit of a moment right now.

"Steampunk is an alternate reality where the Victorian period or industrial age (late 1800s and early 1900s) happened at the same time as the computer or information age, and [it explores] what would have been produced in inventions and gadgetry," says Bruce Rosenbaum, who transformed his 1901 Victorian house in Sharon into the world's first "Steampunk House," which will be featured in an upcoming episode of *MTV Cribs*. Rosenbaum and his wife own **ModVic** (modvic.com), a Victorian home restoration company, and **SteamPuffin** (steampuffin.com), which creates steampunk-inspired designs.



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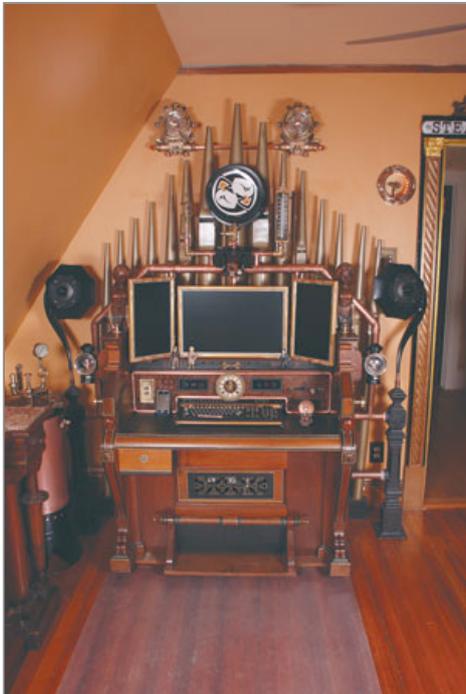
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As a tour through Rosenbaum's home proves, steampunk's modern-meets-antique aesthetic often melds ominous-looking machinery with a whimsical sense of play - a balance that can make for attention-grabbing design.

"Behind the soul of the steampunk community lurks an ageless need for adventure and high romance, infused with scientific exploration, heavy industry, and, of course, modern technology," says Eln Hagney, executive director of the **Charles River Museum of Industry & Innovation** (154 Moody Street, Waltham, 781.893.5410). Through May 10, CRMII is hosting "Steampunk: Form & Function," the first exhibit of its kind to be featured in a major American museum. "It's imaginative and tongue in cheek. It allows you to unplug, laugh, and play - something that Americans, as a whole, have forgotten how to do," Hagney adds.



That's a sentiment shared by Chris Osborne, owner of **City Lights Antique Lighting** (2226 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, 617.547.1490). "I hope that the anachronisms and absurdity [of steampunk] will help some people to loosen up. Most are insecure about their décors - will these go together? Will it clash? Is it over the top?" Osborne has recently delved into steampunk, creating lamps that seemed plucked from the sets of *Brazil* or *Blade Runner*. The Lab Rat Ronny was created from old lab equipment. One can imagine Dr. Frankenstein working by the glow of Osborne's Diabolical

Boxes. And the Backbone incorporates machinery eerily reminiscent of vertebrae. "For me, it's the opportunity to dream up crazy-looking things with superfluous embellishment," he explains.

In addition to liberating our inner mad scientists, steampunk also offers opportunities to give new life, even new purpose, to old objects in disrepair. Just think: your grandma's Singer sewing machine might make a fab computer workstation.

"Steampunk can go two ways - authentic Victorian items modernized for today's use or modern items 'Victorianized' to appear from the period. At its essence, it's DIY," says Rosenbaum. "It's about re-imagination and repurposing. You can literally pick up found objects at the dump or junkyard and think of creative ways to repurpose them into art or functional appliances."

Steampunk plays with modern notions of form and function, giving a more interesting look to everyday items like clocks or even coffeemakers.

"Form and function no longer intersect today. Designers hide

mechanisms," Osborne observes. "With many old machines, you saw how they worked just by looking at them. The static quality of contemporary mechanisms leaves some people hungry for a few interlocking gears going through their motions." Steampunk almost creates exoskeletons, revealing unexpected peeks inside working machines.

"Our homes are filled to the brim with TVs, computers, sound systems. Mass-produced plastic black boxes fill our homes and wear on us both physically and emotionally," says Hagney. "Steampunk is a backlash against the black box."



Credit: STEAMPUNKWORKSHOP.COM

There are plenty of places around Boston to get your steampunk on. CRMII hosts a monthly steampunk meet-up. Through May 30, Nemo's Steampunk Art & Invention Gallery at **Patriot Place** (2 Patriot Place, Foxborough, 508.203.2100) will showcase the creations of steampunk aficionados from across the country. And from May 6 through May 8, the **International Steampunk City** (internationalsteampunkcity.com) will bring the worlds envisioned by Verne and William Gibson to life on the streets of Waltham, complete with a life-size dirigible, high-wheel bike demos, and a steampunk New Orleans-style funeral procession. Happy time traveling.

Cheryl Fenton is a freelance writer who also blogs at EasyPeasyBlog.com.

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