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SUBVERTING ARTINESS, ELITISM

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ARCHITECTURE

The cardboard furniture by California architect Frank Gehry, now on display at the Marcus Gallery through April 27 ("Frank O. Gehry: Limited Edition Furniture"), has the shagginess of an old bearskin rug. This is furniture you feel you can collapse into or kick around without feeling self-conscious.

Most art furniture is designed not to be used but to be looked at. You tend to feel, in the presence of such pieces, that you will need an anonymous, comfortable second chair in which to sit while viewing the elegant designer original.

Gehry's chairs, tables and lounges have no such preciousness. They are made of ordinary corrugated paper, the material of packing cartons. Throughout his career as an architect -- today, probably, he is the most influential in this country -- Gehry has enjoyed exploring what can be done with the most mundane materials, including chain-link fencing, plywood, asphalt shingles and the like. He detests artiness and elitism and loves to subvert them, although like many such subversives in our culture he has been co-opted and is now himself an unwilling guru to the art elite.

The furniture is astonishingly inventive. Cardboard is put together in a fantastic variety of shapes, all of them seductive and many of them clearly recalling the overstuffed living-rooms of the premodern era.

This is the second line of cardboard furniture Gehry has designed. The first, known as "Easy Edges," was very different. It was crisp and sharply cut. In the newer line, called "Experimental Edges," Gehry achieves a sloppier quality by turning the cardboard 90 degrees, using the rough sides of the material rather than the crisper edges as the sitting surface. Unlikely as it may seem, pieces from both series have proved both sturdy and durable, some of them now in service for 10 years or more.

At MIT's Hayden Gallery in the List Visual Arts Center, the work of another artist who bridges the gap between architecture and furniture can be seen ("Siah Armajani: Communal Spaces," through April 17). Siah Armajani, a well-known Minneapolis artist, creates low-key groupings of kiosks and benches that seem unimpressive at first viewing but linger ineradicably in the memory.

The major piece at MIT is his "Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Room," a loosely knit cluster of benches, chairs and magazine stands crafted of green-painted steel channels and green-stained plywood. The overall greenness gives a sense of dreamworld, as if we were under sea. Books about the Sacco-Vanzetti trial of the 1920s are scattered about, as are racks of pencils and newspaper. We seem to be here to study the famous case. A statement, mounted on one wall, prejudices the issue by instructing us, in a hortatory tone, that the convictions of the two anarchists were a miscarriage of justice.

If the statement is too explicit, the art is everywhere ambiguous. Armajani likes to play with reversals of inside and outside. He plays, too, with a kind of architecture that seems to be in the process of either coming together or coming apart. His furnishings and kiosks are Cubist assemblages, recalling the work of the Dutch architects of De Stijl or the American Frank Lloyd Wright.

Besides the Sacco-Vanzetti room, Armajani shows equally ambiguous models of bridges. There is also a kiosk intended as a doughnut stand for MIT's main lobby under the Institute's dome on Massachusetts Avenue. A model of this and other furnishings for the lobby can be seen on display in the lobby itself. The ensemble looks promising.