

Adrian Stokes is feeling disillusioned by the decline of our current visual landscape and argues that there is now a need more than ever to educate public taste

Losing the art of good design

How is it, despite the clear benefits to body and soul of an object, building, or environment that is easy on the eye, we live in a world that feels more like a poke in it? Isn't it depressing to see so many houses, streets, villages, towns, cities, so much countryside and miles of retail shelving, polluted by such poor quality ugliness? If I am even remotely typical, then there are a lot of poor souls that feel equally lost living amongst the visual pandemonium.

A walk down any suburban street reveals front gardens paved over, with cars gawping through the front windows; windows replaced without any consideration for the house itself, the near neighbours, the street, or bizarrely, the property's value. The roof is likely to boast a loft conversion; (what is the opposite of lipstick on a donkey?) transforming a well meaning, if unremarkable place to live, into the building equivalent of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.

A little farther afield and witness the scale of apartment building; even leafy Kingston, where I live, is scarred beyond surgery. If I drive into London through Wandsworth there are acres of high rise apartment blocks representing the very worst of design and built tat, with no consideration for anything other than the pockets of the developers who dumped them there. Someone

said 'yes' to this woeful mish mash; actually on that particular journey the biscuit has to be taken by St Georges Wharf alongside Vauxhall Bridge. There used to be a cold store on the site; a large featureless, concrete lump. Looking back I think it was a masterpiece using the cur-

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rent yardstick that someone with six years training was presumably proud of; how could this be? I have an idea...

In the 1930s, English poet, writer and broadcaster John Betjeman linked "the devastation of townscapes to the planning decisions of elected councillors, accusing them of incompetence, apathy, corruption, and self interest and charging the speculative builders who kept them busy with bribery and aesthetic ignorance." Strong stuff. I imagine if he was writing today his views wouldn't get past the censors, that is if he hadn't

keeled over with the 'shock of the new'.

What is clear is that nothing's changed, only the effects, which are so much worse and more widespread.

During the early 20th century and the inter-war period there was at least some attempt at using reliable references both in terms of planning and detail design. There were also movements devoted to furthering a diverse range of views from the tail end of the arts and crafts and garden city movements, to the modernists, all of whom at least had a philosophy, or approach informing their particular views and how they were expressed; some guidelines.

Post World War Two the Council for Industrial Design was an organisation dedicated to raising awareness of the advantages of 'Good Design' and ran many campaigns from the Festival of Britain, aimed at giving the public at large a peek at the benefits of a more considered view of the world. How can it be that well intentioned and often visionary individuals and movements have left us so bereft of consistent thought or action - where are the campaigning Betjemans or Gordon Russells today?

I can't help thinking that if a cosmetic surgeon was to do to a patient's face what architects and planners do to the face of our environment they'd be struck off. You may look

Perfect pitch: wonderful examples of collaboration between great talent and visionary management. (From top to bottom)

Jonathan Ive and team for Apple. Without doubt the most coveted computer on the earth today.

Shigeru Ban: Nomadic Museum; innovation and sustainability of the highest order.

Naoto Fukasawa for Muji: sublime and inventive. A design which creates its own reference and reverence.



ugly, but I finished within budget'. Why are our professional organisations and representative bodies so dumbstruck?

As an industrial designer, my day to day concerns are of a somewhat smaller scale and I would like to be able to report that the picture is brighter at this end of design continuum.

Once there was a place where anyone if they had a mind to, could go for a glimpse of something better. It wasn't perfect, but its remit was to select, inform and educate industry and the general public's views on design; not surprisingly it was called the Design Centre. It was a shop window for the activities of a Design Council and a hub for the Design Profession in this country; with its own international and really quite stringent awards system, celebrating and promoting the benefits of good design, with a generally available Design Magazine communicating its activities.

Where is our Council for Industrial Design (Design Council) now? Does anyone outside professional insiders know that it exists at all? Of those that do know, what access have they to its activities? What does it believe? It is invisible as

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far as the vast majority of the public is concerned at a time when it should be lobbying precision guided pronouncements into the public arena. How about issues such as the ludicrous unsustainability of so many products and industries that promote year on year replacement rather than repair; or the need to educate our public taste so we are less likely to mess up our own back yards; or some personal favourites - the need for wholesale re-evaluation of the basis for new product designs; or the frightening deskilling which has been allowed to take place and the consequent loss of our manufacturing know how to countries that exploit their own labour force in order to provide our markets with impossibly cheap products (for example, jug kettles in Tescos all the way from China for £4).

I was recently with the owner of Vitsoe. At their superb Wigmore Street showroom is a collection of early audio products designed by Dieter Rams for Braun. I had not seen most of them in the round, only in books. The experience was rather humbling. I would love to have designed any one of them - they were so consistently good and each contained some truly inspired and inventive touches that could only make you grin with appreciation. They all worked and looked as relevant today as they must have looked when they first appeared in the early 1960s. Rams' tenure at Braun ended in 1995, after which one of his assistants assumed the mantle and, if I'm any judge, immediately dropped it in the dirt; the subsequent output of the Braun Studio is resolutely mediocre.

The reason for this tale of woe is another one worth reflecting on. Just concentrate if you will and then list your top ten product designs. Okay, what do you have? Charles Eames maybe, Richard Sapper, Phillippe Stark possibly, or Naoto Fukasawa if you've just left college. How many are from global, corporate design studios? Depressing, isn't it? The only global design studio worth a bean is at Apple and it's not difficult to imagine what will happen when its head of design departs.

The very best design is most often the result of a close collaboration between a talented individual and an equally proficient manager or mentor. The outcome should be capable of inspiring the rest of us over time. Of course teams bring products to market, but they are orchestrated by visionary leadership facilitated by an artist or designer able to see the whole picture clearly and unambiguously creating an apparently simple, functional end result, which belies the worry that went into its creation.

Is there a theme here? Well, yes there is. Individuals do make a big difference and collectively the effects can be catastrophic. We must all be anxious about the near future; peak oil, climate change and the accelerating destruction of resources are enough to send the most hardened sceptic scuttling to the men's room. In Ian McEwan's book *Saturday* *Theo*, the musical son says, "When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer

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in- you know, a girl I've just met, or this song we're going to do with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto - think small."

Think small; don't overcomplicate or conceal the simple truth in word clouds. The facts are simple and here are some that I know:

- Don't pave over your front garden
- Replace your windows if you must, but not the design of them
- Complain; to your council about the mess their officials are making of your town, or manufacturers who are selling you rubbish too cheaply... use your imagination.

- If you don't have talent leave the floor for those that have; find another course or get another job - you're too costly.

- If you're head of a design organisation stop attending conferences and start CAMPAIGNING; to government, local authorities, educators and the general public about the impact lazy decision making is having on the lives and futures of those who pay your wages.

- Be inspired; buy *Shigeru Ban* by Matilda Mcquaid, visit the West Dean College Summer

Perfect pitch (continued from top to bottom)

Dieter Rams for Braun: The designers designer on form. I'd buy one today.

Charles and Ray Eames for Herman Miller: An extraordinary and comfortable chair; now there's an idea!



show, go to the Vitsoe showroom in Wigmore Street.

No excuses: the reality is staring us all in the face and I for one can hardly bear to look anymore; still a couple of times a year it does no end of good to get it off my chest. Now where's the kettle? ■

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