

Imagine...

The media is currently painting a pretty bleak picture but from Adrian Stokes' designer eye view we have to look beyond the problems and take advantage of the opportunities to create a new, promising land just over the horizon

Hands up who's sick of the daily diet of negatively presented, negative news on the subject of the dreadful mess some very clever people have got us into. My hands are up. In fact, under the title "bloodyf-edup", I relieve the daily tension writing to the BBC in general and Robert Peston and Feed Back in particular; a one man attempt to stop them squeezing the last spark of hope from my once positively positive approach to life and business. It's not working. Early in 2008 I heard former head of the US Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan talking about the "fragility of confidence"; how right he was, assisted by an irresponsible media, the cookie's crumbled. Certain truths travel well - one such is from an 18th Century writer Tobias Smollett: "We should always consider the liberty of the press as a national evil, while it enabled the vilest reptile to soil the lustre of the most shining

merit and furnished the most infamous incendiary [I think he means Robert Peston] with the means of disturbing the peace and the good order of the community." He was obviously having a bad day, but has a point...

For some years, as the "very clever people" wound up manufacturing (and created a future importing unfeasibly cheap products from Asia, made by an exploited labour force, from behind a wall of restrictions preventing us from returning the favour) I would wonder aloud (my poor wife) how the equation could possibly stack up. I would lament the de-skilling of a once proud manufacturing nation as we became a "nation of shelf stackers" selling someone else's goods, to a labour force working either in the service sector, finance, retail or one of the "new industries" like education, property speculation, or distribution. Was I missing the point as the world queued at

Sangatte to fill jobs cleaning, gardening and plumbing for our nouveau riche?!

I have no illusions about the life led by most in a manufacturing economy. My family were engineers and we lived in the South Derbyshire coalfields; but it is true to say that once conditions improved post war, there was a brief period when we were in danger of getting the balance more right than wrong. Well within my living memory we had a UK transport industry/ a shipbuilding industry/ steel industry/ coal industry/ gas industry/ weaving and woollen industry/ furniture industry/ consumer goods manufacturing industry/ a huge general engineering industry/ pottery industry/ etc, etc, all mass employers of people with incredible skills exporting to the rest of the world. These individuals were educated and trained in one of the world's great educational systems and yet... and yet our political, busi-

ness, union and public sector leaders contrived to bring us to this unhappy state of affairs; a society based on selfish greed and waste. But why be surprised, wasn't it ever thus?

Well Tobias?

"He affirmed, the nature of commerce was such that it could not be fixed or perpetuated, but having flowed to a certain height would immediately begin to ebb and so continue 'til the channels should be left almost dry; but there was no instance of the tide's rising a second time to any considerable influx in the same nation. Meanwhile the sudden affluence occasioned by trade, forced open the sluices of luxury and over-flowed the land with every species of profligacy and corruption; a total pravity of manners would ensue and this must be attended with bankruptcy and ruin". A trifle flowery but alarming nonetheless.

Back to the mental maths; I've often tried to balance what it is we as a nation actually produce, that creates sufficient *real* wealth for us all to pay for the imported "stuff" filling our stores. Invariably I give up, assuming the "very clever people" know what they are up to, after all they've learnt the lessons from the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's cycle of "boom and bust". Oh dear, I now find that even the really clever ones didn't understand the financial systems they were creating and were in fact more short-sighted than the average sea slug and totally blind to the implications of the financial bubble they'd blown.

An interesting statistic I was discussing recently with a flabbergasted German friend: in spite of funding a reunification process, Germany

has arrived at this global crisis earning 50 per cent of its GDP from manufacturing. In the UK the figure is 20 per cent and shrinking; or in other words they have a chance and we're in trouble. Just how much is evidenced by the policy of our leaders whose solution to the banker, speculator and media led collapse of confidence, is to encourage its citizens to go shopping.

So put it all together and what do we have; a nation and to a large extent a northern hemisphere, great swathes of which have burnt their boats in the belief that their "brand" led futures would protect them from the meteoric rise of competition from a hungry southern hemisphere and now the game's up. If Tobias S is to be believed, the process of decline is inevitable and irreversible.

But I'm a designer and whilst I love, really love, to moan I can't help being optimistic and like a surprising number of commentators can see clearly that this unholy mess does actually offer some golden opportunities. But before we discuss; so much of what I do relies heavily on instinct/ feel/ intuition backed by a learned vocabulary of background knowledge, that helps shape my views. So, I instinctively felt that founding a future making branded products in Asia and selling them in the West was rather like trying to eat candy floss in a headwind - it could only end in disaster. What is required from here on is a diet of big ideas offered up to give us all some hope that we are working towards goals that will ultimately provide us all with a more sustainable and worthwhile future and one that puts a re-skilled workforce back to work, (particularly in manufacturing) on developments

which have huge commercial potential but take account of the long list of factors that are now threatening our planet and likely to make the UK/Europe second rate and socially unstable.

Listening to Peter Day on BBC Radio Four recently, he related the story of BYD (Build Your Dream) a Chinese car company and maker of hybrid cars that has decided to be the most successful car company in the world by 2025. It will be the largest in China in six years time and has just completed the world's largest car factory that "didn't exist 15 months ago." Clearly China will be feeling a bit queasy too as a result of our ailments, but this story demonstrates that having become the workshop of the world inside a generation and made us dependant, they are poised to employ product strategies that, had this crisis not occurred would have/ could still, turn China and Asia from the worlds workshop into the world's leader and the West into a post industrial, post consumer, uncivilised dump.

Now for a bit of gross simplification; clearly the current haemorrhage will require more than finger pressure to stem and wallowing in bad news in order to sell news - papers or attract viewers - is like giving the patient warfarin and wondering why they seem anaemic. No, from my designer's eye the stars are aligned and to make the dreadful pain-to-come bearable, Western leaders have to look unblinkingly at the problems of energy, waste, resources, greed and corruption and frame a view that takes advantage of the opportunities and creates a new and promising land just over the horizon. Now should they ask for my view here's the first ten things that came to

mind in bed early on Saturday 6 December 2008. In no particular order:

1. Leadership - Barack Obama, an intelligent, young and visionary leader, behind which, the rest will naturally line up; "cometh the moment cometh the man"; and he has the language skills to articulate the scale of the problem and the nature of the solution. I hope he stays alive.

2. Energy - Renewable energy is the only long term future and we are ludicrously late in facing up to the fact. Without the global downturn the price of energy/commodities would have created a different but no less serious crisis. The West should be the *design and manufacturing hub* of renewable energy technology and every business and household should be required to conform. So sharpen your pencils - a huge opportunity.

3. Personal transport - BYD has stolen a march but it's time we grew up and acknowledged the negative effects of the car on our environment and create whole new vehicles, no less aspirational, but which conform to an entirely different set of criteria for speed/ energy consumption/ emissions etc; that are fully recyclable by *the manufacturers* and can be worked on by their owners. Top Gear might be a little different but they need a change anyway.

4. Mass transport - Along the same lines it makes no sense to expand an aircraft industry that entirely ignores the future reality. Forty years ago we put a man on the moon and created Concorde, 40 years on we must be able to fly people around without leaving carbon boot marks all over the planet. In

doing so another worthwhile design challenge would be to improve upon the "passenger experience" for the vast majority of travellers.

5. Slightly controversial this and not really design related, but in my life time the population of the world has gone from 2.5 to 6.5 billion; the root of so many of our problems and it has to stop, there is no choice, only education will do it.

6. We have phenomenal natural resources which we have wisely been ferreting away for the last 40 years and all we need is the means to extract them. These new machines, when finished, will sit atop landfill sites guzzling and sorting the contents into reusable raw materials. I read somewhere that someone's built a small one, so it's a simple question of up-scaling.

7. Waste - Sorry no more plastic packaging; and if it isn't recycled it must degrade 100 per cent in one year. Another design challenge and together with the need to design products for upgrade and repair rather than wholesale replacement, is one that presents huge opportunities for the West.

8. Education - One more bubble about to burst. Which genius thought it was a good idea to encourage young people into a higher education that they were neither suited for, nor could afford; it's a criminal con. Whilst the issue is too complex to consider here, an opportunity exists to remodel the system so that everyone receives the education and training they have an *aptitude* for and which serves the needs of an economy that we have to rebuild and sustain. Please no more music technologists!

9. Protection - Globalisation has created

economic and social mayhem and in the West, stripped much of our working population of their dignity making them insecure, indolent victims, fed a daily diet of corrupting, low level twaddle, delivered, wherever they are, via pieces of pure genius. This reminds me of an early application of optical fibres which were made up into drunken table lights. So as we create new industries to put people back to work, raise their sights and restore some self worth, these new industries have to be protected, supported and nurtured into world-beating shape. Leaving everything to market forces is an idea that worked for a lucky few for a short time but we have to relearn that anything worthwhile requires time, dedication and hard work to succeed.

10. Realism - In the 250,000 or so years man has been on earth, it's been a tough old life for the vast majority. For the last 50 or so years a select minority in the world have enjoyed incredible benefits. I'm afraid to say that a prerequisite of our long term prosperity is likely to be acceptance of a much less profligate but potentially more much more rewarding and sustainable future.

And so, if like me you don't believe in the stars, but read them in hope nonetheless; then a renaissance of values that will give our disenfranchised majority the chance to imagine and participate in the creation of a more inclusive future, might just help to create the happy ending, which at this moment in time seems as likely as George Bush receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace. Over to you Barack... !

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