

Designing for Utopia

The first [London Design Biennale](#), held in September, had the theme of 'Utopia by Design', to mark the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's book. Designers from countries around the world contributed work on the theme. In this section of *Compass* Nick Price, Huw Williams and Tanja Hichert contribute thoughts and notes.

Nick Price writes:

The London Design Biennale had a series of rooms each themed around different countries and a piece expressing a view on Utopia from its own perspective. There were one or two major pieces in each room.

My impression was that more were art (statement) than design (replicable value that can be put in the hands of many). Some looked forward (e.g. Germany and LEDs), some critically (e.g. Saudi Arabia and water vending

machine, The Netherlands and polystyrene house interior) and some backward (e.g. UAE and ancient systems of countryside water distribution, Russia and State design archive and Indonesia and its founding values and how they express themselves in the country's state based future projects like satellites).

Looking across the

rooms was more interesting in that they reflected that different countries have or anticipate different future pressure points. For example, water availability is a strong theme, past, present, and future, from the Middle East that wasn't seen elsewhere.

My favourite was a piece on the past rather than the future, the "Discovering Utopia: Lost

Images: Above, Poland, photo by Bradley Lloyd Barnes. Left, The Netherlands, right, Saudi Arabia, both by Ed Reeve. Used with the permission of the London Design Biennale.



"Archives of Soviet Design" exhibit.

"Discovering Utopia" offers a glimpse into an idealised world created by

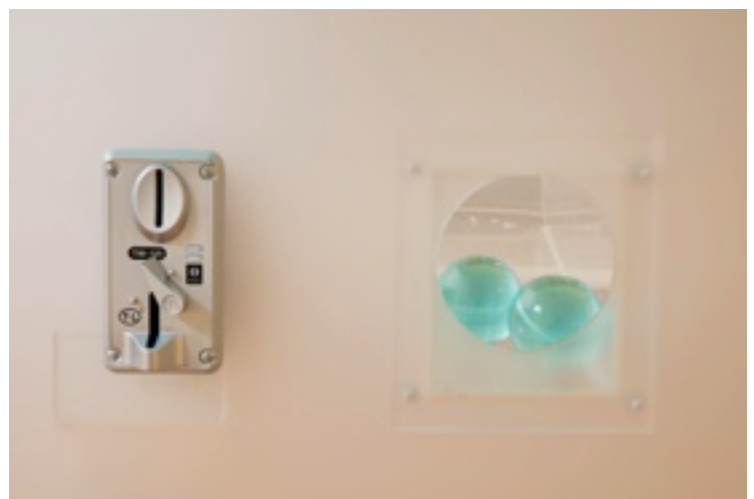
working at the forefront of design theory and research.

They even had a "Home of the Future" prototyped back in the 1980s using radio

transmission for component-to-component communication as it predated the popularisation of the Internet.

I found the Soviet Design exhibit interesting for its clean, simple and utilitarian design ideas intended for mass adoption. These ideas matched a lot of the values espoused by [Dieter Rams](#).

Why is physical design interesting when today informational design is the object of most comment? Because refining our material world, enabled by informational complexity,



better manages the planetary impact.

People who think about the future need to be aware of a bias when engaging with future oriented design. We can be too easily distracted by the visual stimulation or experience of manifested speculative works in digital or physical forms.

It is not enough that these works exist, they need no less a critical eye than our future constructions of the mind. For example, a mock-up of an autonomous car acting as a meeting space complete with table might excite. But it ignores the social value of tea sharing and practical challenges of momentum.

Below: "Discovering Utopia", the Russian exhibit, photo by Bradley Lloyd Barnes. Used with the permission of the London Design Biennale.

Huw Williams writes:

As well as installations by 37 countries worldwide, the Design Biennale featured a series of talks on design and the future by a wide range of speakers—I went to three.

The first was a conversation with Ian Callum, Director of Design at Jaguar Cars. Billed as "A Life in Design", the discussion began with Ian's early history, sending a portfolio of drawings to Jaguar aged 14, before working at Ford, Aston Martin (where he was responsible for 007's car in "Die Another Day") and back to Jaguar.

His philosophy of design-led, rather than modelling-led, development was strong. Looking to the future, he was clear that Jaguar would be a leader in electric vehicles—having trialled one that did 120mph with dramatic acceleration—but called for

more government investment in supporting infrastructure.

He was more sceptical about autonomous vehicles, believing that fall-back driver intervention would be needed for many years, not expecting a radical re-design of cars into an office or sitting-room on wheels. His "design Utopia" was a collaborative team with diverse skills able to produce designs without interference from uninformed Board members.

The second event I went to was a conversation with Lord Richard Rogers, famous for the design of the Pompidou Centre, Lloyds of London, the "cheese-grater" and other iconic buildings. He argued that we needed to sustain the radical spirit of the sixties with a naïve self-belief.

His view of the city of the future was that it would be largely pedestrian, compact and sustainable, with rapid transport systems, and mainly

building models, rather than for buildings themselves. Given that it might be 15 years before a building is built from his design, and it needs to last for say 80 years, I asked how he worked out what the future needs of the occupants would be—he replied that one needed to look to flexibility of use.

Still on the Utopian theme, the last talk I went to was about the "Maker Movement", where Daniel Charny, Professor of Design at Kingston University, examined whether the noise about the trend was just hype. We usually study technological developments, but this is a cultural change with different dynamics.

Prof Charny described how the movement was based on principles of openness and sharing, with examples from the physical—sharing expertise and tools of various crafts—through to online "hackathons", via 3D-printing.

Wired was discussing "Big DIY" in 2011, and The Economist described Making as "More than just digital quilting". "MakerFaires" have been set up around the world to share expertise, and have even attracted visits from the Presidents of the US, China and Germany, and there are high street presences – e.g. Brit Kits Bar, Drink Shop Do.

He saw 3D-printing as mainly useful for

Daniel suggested that the Movement was associated with hipsters and geeks, and that



Makers had passed the peak of the Gartner Hype Curve and that MakerSpaces were facing financial difficulties, but the concepts were beginning to emerge from the sub-culture into the mainstream, with mass customisation through 3D-printing. Comments from the audience identified examples of MakerSpaces being used to overcome loneliness for old people through sewing circles, to help immigrants in Sweden assimilate, and even to provide

alternatives to violence for Farc guerillas following the peace deal in Colombia. The concept is as much about the community activity as it is the product itself.

The lessons for futurists? The first two talks illustrate that technological developments can take a long time to become reality, and that strategies based on adapting to change rather than trying to predict it may be more fruitful. The third shows that cultural change can

be as powerful as technological change – and probably more confusing.

Tanja Hichert adds:

I loved the Australia exhibit:

from the catalogue listing (my emphasis):

“Designer Brodie Neill’s Plastic Effects highlights an ugly problem: the estimated five trillion plastic items that pollute the world’s oceans. Fragmented particles of plastic—a material once considered utopian in itself—enter the food chain to devastate marine life of all kinds, and thousands of tonnes of debris are washed up on Australia’s coastline every year. Neill’s installation highlights this problem by harvesting and recycling marine micro-plastic to produce a

terrazzo-like composite, inlaid as a kaleidoscopic diagram, displayed here in the Gyro table.”

I found that table really beautiful.

I also loved Chile’s ‘Counterculture Room’ (like Russia’s, a piece from the past):

“A 1970s utopian project to give a socialist state a democratic electronic backbone is reconstructed in The Counterculture Room. The socialist government of Salvador Allende imagined giving the state a cybernetic spine, enabling ministers to view economic information in real time and make informed decisions from a futuristic hub that resembles a set from Kubrick’s 2001. This project was called ‘Cybersyn’ and it was a precursor to today’s ‘smart city’.” ◀

Nick Price: “futurist, pragmatist, informed by design realists”; Huw Williams is a Principal at SAMI Consulting in the UK; and Tanja Hichert is a futurist based in Cape Town.



Left above: Plastic Effects, the Australian exhibit, photo by Ed Reeve. Left below, Cybersyn rebuilt, photo by Bradley Lloyd Barnes. Used with the permission of the London Design Biennale.