

Innovation: on the horizon

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have often praised creativity, but the post-Blair era promises to see more pleas for innovation. In the past, too many designers were fooled by the false promise of Oasis in No 10. Now, whoever wins the next election, they don't need to be so credulous again

There are three trends to look out for.

First, on the gloomy note of the End of the World, innovation will primarily be conceived of in terms of 'sustainability'. The energy embodied in new products, the emissions surrounding their production and use, the costs of disposal, the eco-labeling of products, solutions to the problem of leaving devices on standby - all these are now the new religion in design.

Second, in a more euphoric register, experts will talk up the integration of products with services, and especially with what are held to be branded, meaningful, creative, playful, bottom-up, consumer-as-codesigner experiences.

Third, there will be a mixture of panic, sycophancy and condescension about China, India and possibly even Russia.

Fear about climate, a cult of experience, 'if you can't beat the East, join it': designers beware!

Ticking the boxes on climate change

The Eco-Establishment always repeats the same old points as new. In *Are We Changing Planet Earth?*, his widely watched two-part BBC TV series in May on climate change, the naturalist David Attenborough was told by a young, typically supercilious professional Green not to warm a teapot when preparing tea. Attenborough then found himself grimacing at the poor beverage he ended up with. Tough! Surprise, surprise, we must all change our behaviour all the time if each of us is to find salvation for the planet, and for ourselves.

Designers will not be immune from this boring cant. Already, rethinking the humble kettle in the light of corporate social responsibility is the project du jour in the design faculties at many universities. Never mind that total UK use of the kettle adds no more than 1.09 per cent of carbon to that emitted at power stations. Never mind that, Starbucks coffee experiences to the contrary, millions of Britons are unlikely to undo their historic love of tea (remember what trade with the East was all about for Blighty in the 19th century). No. The fact that Britons would be Better People if they thought of the greenhouse effect every time they boiled a cuppa is enough for our Green zealots.

Not just kettles, but very kind of product will be met with hysteria about the need for responsible design, and an eco-crat's tick-the-box checklist to go with that.

To avoid wasting time, as well as bad debts from Green clients that go bankrupt, designers need to get closer to science and scientists about how to respond rationally to climate change. Only science separates useful environmental projects from those that, at best, produce a feelgood factor and, at worst, depress living standards and create an authoritarian political atmosphere. If designers don't learn scientific discrimination in this matter, they can expect the very process of designing and innovating new products always to be subject to censure.

After all, even trade and industry minister Alasdair Darling has finally noticed that, on hot, still days like we had this summer, windmills won't be able to cope with demand for electricity. But will he call, though, for cheap, easy to install, efficient, well-designed air-conditioning

units in homes, workplaces and public buildings, so we can adapt to rather than just mitigate global warming? Don't count on it.

Affecting a radical pose, Greens insist that sustainable products demand creative, innovative thinking. But since the whole premise of sustainability is to minimise humanity's imprint on this Earth, the Green outlook can only be deeply conservative about product design and innovation.

Meaningful experiences as a barrier to innovation

Many mid-range British manufacturers of B2B products have survived the emergence of China through supplementing their factory work with a resort to the delivery of different kinds of services: consulting, maintenance and repair, custom design. That is one thing. But the trend to talk up products as meaningful experiences is another. It sounds innovative; but it only now attracts for the same reason that people seek spiritual relief around preparing a cold cup of tea.

As the East reinforces the West's loss of confidence and gradually takes the initiative for technological innovation away from it, so sages discover that technology, manufacturing and engineering are old hat. In fact, however, hardware design isn't old hat. Engineering should come before the user's experience of products.

Speaking of coffeeshops, two US management gurus first unearthed a new 'experience economy' back in 1997, and, on 17 February 2006, an editorial in *The Times* waxed lyrical about Starbucks as a representative of 'the new way money makes the world go round'. However, the most up-to-date treatment of experiences lies in a book by Darrel Rhea, Steve Diller and Nathan Shedroff. It's called *Making Meaning: How Successful Businesses Deliver Meaningful Customer Experiences* (New Riders, 2006).

For Rhea and his coauthors, marketing has transcended promotion, product development and brands. Instead, it's about confirming the value of people's lives – reinforcing their identity with opportunities for meaningful consumption. Starbucks (yes!), Harley-Davidson and Apple, *Making Meaning* says, have made good money from the co-creation of meaningful experiences with consumers.

Lars Engman, design director of Ikea, concurs. Citing the unread but oft-quoted US Cold War psychologist Abraham Maslow, Engman holds that the 21st century is not about fulfilling basic customer needs, but rather helping shoppers happily fulfill themselves, or engage in what Maslow called self-actualisation.

Checking the IKEA UK website, I'm aghast to find that this is also the company's official view. There is plenty about the IKEA 'concept', or about how to create the right mood in the bedroom ('don't be afraid to experiment', it advises). But instruction manuals, the widely hated but functional items that are also vital to, er, the IKEA brand experience? They are nowhere online.

Kevin Clark, director of brand and client experience design at IBM, has what amounts to an excellent riposte to the Engman doctrine. For an extra 30¢, he notes, Big Blue added a little lamp to the ThinkPad laptop, so making its screen much easier to use.

Naturally, this breakthrough was partly inspired by watching users in action – by ethnography, as the more pompous kind of designer has liked to go on about for the past 20 years (always, once more, as if the idea was brand new). Yet without some cheap but effective engineering, the experience of using a ThinkPad would not now be what it is.

In IT as elsewhere, product design must still have functional, engineering-based aspects. Yet just when product design skills have begun to migrate to China, we hear a new Western descant of meaning added to the familiar chorus of storytelling, 'narratives' and customer delight.

It's true that Western designers today know more about technology than their forebears. But since the keyboard for my Apple G4 gathers dirt like a miner's fingernails, I still fly a flag for function, not fantasy, in design.

Once more, we need to strengthen – in practice, not in rhetoric – our technical ingenuity. Once more, too, we need to banish ideas that are actually hostile to innovation.

It is all very well to represent Starbucks as a meaningful experience: as conviviality, a 'third space' between home and work, a chance to 'design' your own magic potion. But isn't the Starbucks offer also based around something more instinctual than innovative – humanity's centuries-old fondness for a caffeine fix? To big up such experiences as creative, new and profound is to erect intellectual barriers against genuine innovation.

The East and the future of product design

All of a sudden, British policymakers such as Lord Sainsbury have concluded that the only way to fight hideous competition from low-cost producers in the East is to ally with them. Implicitly, the doctrine is that there should be a cosy division of labour: Britain should do the world's designing, while the East should manufacture to our specifications.

I'm sure the Chinese, for instance, will love this novel, egalitarian celebration of Britain's uniquely creative powers! Obviously, scores of Chinese design schools will never be able even to copy our design sensibilities, still less improve upon them...

In fact, of course, they will – for they take science and technology a lot more seriously than the West does. While Exeter university has closed its chemistry course and Sussex has nearly done the same, China and India today lead humanity's return to the Moon. While London has the Oyster card just for public transport, Hong Kong's Octopus card gives access to a whole variety of services.

In near-field communications, mobile telephony, batteries, voice operation, new materials, miniaturisation, RFID tags and most of the key technologies of the future, we can expect the East to make much of the running. A decadent West will scrabble around for eco-kettles and Me-Me-Meaning; meanwhile, progress in product design will get a big technological boost from the East.

What should British designers do about this? Once more they need to master the language of science and technology – for that way they might win some respect. They might also care to learn something of the languages of the East, and something of its geography and history, too.

A glance at history will show that there is nothing innovative about trying to cuddle up to the East. Indeed, China and India have for decades been quick to spot Western attempts at ingratiation. There is no creative mileage either in patronising the East, or in being humble before it.

Instead, product designers need to rise above their country of origin, their subjective experiences and their discipline, and to approach international collaboration in a thoroughly professional and worldly manner. Now that really would be innovative! It's a tough challenge, but it's the only way to give product design the future it deserves.

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