

# DESIGN MUSEUM

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## **Designing Modern Britain**

Design has transformed British life since the 1930s. Many of the most gifted designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have worked in Britain and their achievements have changed the lives of millions of people by making them more efficient, enjoyable, sustainable, and fun. This exhibition illustrates how designers have responded to social, cultural, economic and technological changes to modernise Britain.

It was not always so. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain was noted for its achievements in science and engineering, and progressive initiatives such as the Garden City Movement. Yet in the early 1900s when France, Germany and the Netherlands were in the vanguard of modernism, Britain was steeped in the rustic nostalgia of arts and crafts traditionalism. When the Russian-born architect Berthold Lubetkin arrived in London in 1931, he described the British as being “lost in a deep provincial sleep”.

The arrival of Lubetkin and fellow European émigré designers, such as Marcel Breuer, Ernő Goldfinger, Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy, prompted the British to embrace modernism during the 1930s. Designing Modern Britain traces their influence on Britain from Marcel Breuer’s work in one of the flats designed by Lubetkin at Highpoint in north London to the visionary design programme implemented by London Transport in the 1930s. It illustrates how design helped the war effort in the early 1940s and to rebuild Britain after World War II. The exhibition ends by exploring how the regeneration of the Thames Gateway in the approach to the London 2012 Olympic Games will define a new way of life for the Britain of the future.

## **1920s - 1930s**

### **Designing Modern Transport**

As Britain’s cities sprawled into newly built suburbs throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, efficient public transport networks were needed to take people on long journeys from their homes to offices, shops, factories and schools. One of the world’s most progressive public transport systems was established in London during the 1930s after the 1933 merger of five underground railway companies, seventeen tramways and sixty-six bus companies into the London Passenger Transport Board.

Each of the old companies had its own signage, maps and vehicle liveries. As trips across London often involved taking one company's bus and another's train, navigating the city could be confusing. Having developed a visionary design policy as commercial manager of the London Underground, Frank Pick, the newly appointed vice-chairman of the LPTB, was charged with doing the same for London Transport.

Evangelical in his belief that every element of a transport system should be clear, coherent and an exemplar of design excellence, Pick implemented a comprehensive design policy embracing station architecture and furniture, signage, posters and maps. He worked closely with the draughtsman Harry Beck on the design of the new London Underground map and with the typographer Edward Johnston on the adaptation of his London Underground roundel symbol for London Transport. Paul Nash designed upholstery fabric, while Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Graham Sutherland and Hans Schleger created posters. The diligent Pick patrolled the labyrinthine network until the early hours of the morning to ensure that it met with his specifications. The result was an efficient and inspiring model of modern public transport.

## **1930s**

### **Designing Modern Homes**

By the early 1930s, advances in construction technology had created a new style of housing which we still associate with the "modern home" today. The availability of electricity enabled homes to be decorated in pale colours, not the dark tones once needed to disguise the grime of gaslight. Windows were enlarged because buildings could be supported by new steel structures, rather than exterior walls. Fixtures and furniture were made from newly developed types of industrial materials, such as aluminium, steel and glass.

These "modern homes" were designed by progressive architects for wealthy clients in France and Germany throughout the 1920s, but British housing remained staunchly traditional until the 1930s when the modernist style was popularised by the émigré designers who arrived from continental Europe. Compelled by the government to practise with British architects, these émigrés – such as Marcel Breuer, Serge Chermayeff, Ernő Goldfinger, Walter Gropius and Erich Mendelsohn – inspired a new generation of modernist British architects and designers. The battle of Trads v. Rads began.

Among the émigrés was the Russian-born Berthold Lubetkin, who arrived in London in 1931 and co-founded the radical architectural group Tecton. In 1935, he was commissioned to design Highpoint, a luxurious apartment complex in north London. Working with the Danish-born structural engineer Ove Arup, Goldfinger applied the latest technologies to a design that conformed to Le Corbusier's principles of housing construction, with communal resources, such as heating and refrigeration, in a new ideal of high-rise modern living.

## **1940s-1950s**

### **Designing for a Crisis**

The Utility Scheme is an example of a design solution to national crisis. During World War II, all suitable materials were reserved for the military with little left for daily use in the home. Demand for new housing and furniture was unprecedented as tens of thousands of homes – and their contents – were destroyed in the Blitz, and wartime trauma prompted half a million couples to marry in each year of the war. The problem seemed set to worsen in peacetime when the armed forces would return hoping to set up new homes.

The government commissioned architects such as Ernő Goldfinger to plan the reconstruction of post-war Britain in a series of public exhibitions. It addressed the immediate problem of the dearth of furniture by establishing a Board of Trade Advisory Panel in 1942 to “produce specifications for furniture of good, sound construction in simple but agreeable designs for sale at reasonable prices”. Some twenty designs, simple in style, and devised for speedy production from minimal materials, were approved by the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee led by the manufacturer Gordon Russell.

The principal materials were wood, as plastic and metal were needed for the war effort. The Board of Trade regulated the allocation of materials and authorised production by some 700 manufacturers spread around the country to minimise petrol consumption during deliveries. Gordon Russell hoped the restrained aesthetic would “raise the whole standard of furniture for the mass of the people”, but the utility style proved too austere for the public. By 1952, materials were more readily available, and the Utility Scheme ended.

## **1950s**

### **Designing for Modern Consumers**

Billed by its director-general Gerald Barry as “a tonic for the nation”, the 1951 Festival of Britain was conceived to celebrate the centenary of the 1851 Great Exhibition and the end of post-war austerity. When the planning began in 1947, the Labour government had completed ambitious post-war reforms, such as nationalising the health service and key industries. Dogged by crises, Labour had exhausted its appetite for radicalism. A £12 million budget was allocated to the festival, enough to convince Labour’s critics that it was squandering public money, but not enough to mount an international exhibition akin to 1851.

The festival itself was similarly compromised. The dominant style of design was modern, but conservatively so compared to contemporary projects in North America and continental Europe. Even the most futuristic structures on the main festival site on London’s South Bank, such as Ralph Tubbs’ aluminium Dome of Discovery and the towering Skylon, designed by Michael Powell and Hidalgo Moya, were showy, rather than radical. Yet it offered an opportunity for a new generation of post-war designers, such as Ernest Race and Robin and Lucienne Day, to emerge and the public, weary of rationing, relished the festival as a glimpse of a colourful, plentiful future.

More than eight and a half million people visited the South Bank site alone. Millions more enjoyed the Industrial Power Exhibition in Glasgow, the Farm and Factory exhibition in Belfast, the roving Land Traveller exhibition, local celebrations in towns and villages, and the arrival of the festival ship, the Campania, at a nearby port.

## **1960s-1970s**

### **Designing Modern Flight**

While the US and the Soviet Union battled for supremacy in the space race in the 1960s, Britain and France pooled their resources in the quest to develop the world's first supersonic passenger aircraft. On 2 March 1969, Concorde 001 completed its first flight from Toulouse and on 14 October 1975 British Airways and Air France accepted bookings for the first commercial supersonic flights.

Aircraft production was one area of British industry which had flourished during World War II. During the late 1940s and 1950s many of the technologies originally developed for military use were adapted to make passenger aircraft faster and more powerful. The next logical step was to develop a supersonic aircraft, one which would fly faster than the speed of sound. In 1956, when flights from London to New York took up to 15 hours, the Supersonic Transport Aircraft Committee was established. Six years later Britain agreed to work on the project with France.

While the British engineers at Filton in Gloucestershire and their French peers in Toulouse struggled with technical challenges, the project was prey to constant political and economic pressure. Yet when Concorde finally took off, it was lauded technically – as the only commercial aircraft to fly faster than Mach 2, twice the speed of sound – and for its beauty. Throughout 27 years of commercial service from 1976 to 2003, Concorde seemed to belong less to the modern world, than the future.

## **1970s**

### **Designing Modern Culture**

Everything seemed possible in the arts during the early 1970s. Radical groups emerged in every area of contemporary culture, from underground politics and feminism to gay rights. Even before the 1972 Watergate scandal exposed the corruption of the US political system, the establishment was on the defensive, haunted by the brutality of the Vietnam War, the violence in Northern Ireland and the economic instability of strikes, sit-ins and shortages.

In every area of contemporary culture artists rejected traditional hierarchies and claimed new freedoms. Just as Gilbert and George, Richard Long and Susan Hiller challenged the orthodoxies of the visual arts, so did radical playwrights, film makers, authors, architects and designers in their fields. The counter culture spirit spread beyond the avant garde to Britain's more enlightened cultural institutions, notably the National Theatre.

Then housed at the Old Vic behind Waterloo Station, the NT interpreted its role literally as the theatre of the nation with a mission to reflect the changing reality of modern life. By 1973, when Peter Hall succeeded its founder Sir Laurence Olivier as director, the NT was noted for its progressive approach to new writing and methods of interpretation, both in direction and design. When the Old Vic curtains opened in July on John Napier's macabre set for the National Theatre's production of Peter Shaffer's new play *Equus*, the audience saw a chilling depiction of the dark spirit of early 1970s Britain.

## **1980s**

### **Designing Modern Leisure**

A new generation of young consumers emerged in the 1980s. The children of the late 1950s and early 1960s baby boom, their taste was formed in the glam culture of the early 1970s and by the equally style-obsessed punk movement at the end of the decade. Fired by the do-it-yourself spirit of punk and buoyed by the economic recovery of the early 1980s, they expected to live life on their own terms.

Nicknamed "yuppies" by the media, these new consumers not only wanted to dress according to their own taste, but to spend their leisure time in bars, shops and clubs designed in the same style. During the 1960s youthquake, only a handful of wealthy young Londoners had been able to act out the fantasy of a pop lifestyle. By the early 1980s young consumers felt entitled to find it on their local high street. If it was not there, they set it up themselves.

The paradigm was the Hacienda, a nightclub opened in 1982 in a disused Manchester yacht showroom by the local band New Order and its independent record label, Factory Records. The label was already renowned for the beautifully stylised graphics of its creative director Peter Saville, who asked a friend, Ben Kelly, to design the club. Kelly stripped the building to iron pillars and girders, then accentuated its industrial character by adding checker plate flooring and road bollards. He created what Saville described as an "industrial entertainment zone" which became the blueprint for the warehouse parties of the late 1980s and for 1990s super clubs, such as Cream in Liverpool and London's Ministry of Sound.

## **2000s**

### **Designing Britain's Future**

To equip Britain for the future, we need to build nearly 150,000 new homes a year as well as over a hundred new schools, hundreds of children's centres and dozens of new hospitals. Every secondary school in the country is to be rebuilt or renovated, while new prisons, roads, bridges and public transport systems are to be constructed.

Few parts of Britain illustrate the opportunities – and problems – of this development more clearly than the Thames Gateway, which stretches 43 miles along the River Thames east of London to the Essex and Kent coasts. Long the despair of well-intentioned urban planners, the local economy has declined since the 1960s when containerisation killed London as a port and the Thames as a working river. Littered with abandoned warehouses and factories, the Thames Gateway houses pockets of natural beauty alongside some of Britain's most deprived communities. With fifteen local authorities laying claim to different parts of the area, it has had no one to champion it.

The challenge for the Thames Gateway and its 1.6 million residents over the next decade is to absorb 500,000 newcomers – the equivalent of the population of Sheffield – in 200,000 new homes. The construction of the London 2012 Olympic stadium in the Lower Lea Valley will be a powerful catalyst for economic recovery and a source of local pride. But if the area is to prevent a repetition of the problems that have plagued it since the 1960s, it must create sustainable communities where people can live, work and play, and strike a delicate balance between its history and future possibilities.

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## Designing Modern Britain

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