



BRITISH DESIGN 1948–2012:

Innovation in the Modern Age

Exhibition Panel Texts

Introduction

In 1948 London hosted the first Olympic Games after the Second World War. The 'austerity games' (as they became known) took place at a time of economic crisis in a city devastated by bombing, but they provided a platform for reconciliation and reconstruction. In 2012 Britain welcomes the Olympics once more, and while the spirit remains, the context in which they are taking place has entirely changed.

British Design 1948-2012 traces those changes by exploring buildings, objects, images and ideas produced by designers and artists born, trained or based in Britain. The displays examine the shifting nature of British Design over sixty years: three galleries respectively explore the tension between tradition and modernity; the subversive impulse in British culture; and Britain's leadership in design innovation and creativity.

The exhibition reveals how British designers have responded to economic, political and cultural forces that have fundamentally shaped how we live today. They have created some of the most inventive and striking objects, technologies and buildings of the modern world.

Tradition and Modernity

The impact of the Second World War on the social, economic and physical fabric of Britain was immense. The task of reconstruction dominated the post-war years. In 1945 a Labour government swept to power, and its radical plan for a comprehensive Welfare State would be broadly supported by all governments for the next 30 years.

The drive for modernity in the rebuilding of Britain changed the nation forever. But a preoccupation with British traditions was often just below the surface. While Britain's cities faced the future, in the countryside the focus was more often on the past.

The Festival of Britain in 1951 and the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 exposed the tensions between tradition and modernisation. The Festival promoted a progressive and utopian vision, while the spectacle of the coronation reaffirmed traditional values and existing structures of power and taste.

Festival of Britain

The festival of Britain opened in May 1951. It was held in London and cities, towns and villages across the country. On the south bank of the Thames, displays celebrated a modern democratic Britain, where cultural policy was clearly allied with modernist aesthetics. The extraordinary structures of the Dome of Discovery, Skylon, Festival Hall and Sea and Ships pavilion introduced ideas of modern architecture and design to the heart of London.

The Festival experience was deliberately informal, from the layout of the site to the focus on pleasure and entertainment. Populism sat side by side with high art, and among the displays were over 80 works created by many of Britain's leading artists.

Coronation

On 2 June 1953 Elizabeth II was crowned in Westminster Abbey. An ancient ritual witnessed by a privileged audience inside the Abbey, the coronation was also a thoroughly modern event, seen by millions worldwide on the new medium of television.

The spectacle was carefully orchestrated from the street pageantry to the decoration of the Abbey. Many of those involved in its design had also contributed to the Festival of Britain. But this celebration brought to the fore ideas of stability and a renewed sense of luxury.

The impact of the coronation on the popular imagination was enormous, and the imagery of the monarchy played an important role in promoting a sense of tradition and continuity.

Coventry

A centre for munitions and aircraft manufacturing during the Second World War, Coventry was severely damaged by bombing. The worst raid on 14 November 1940 destroyed three quarters of the city's factories, more than 4000 homes and the medieval Cathedral Church of St Michael.

The scale of the damage and the loss of the Cathedral gave the city a symbolic status in post-war reconstruction. Architect Basil Spence won the competition to design a new cathedral in 1951. He gathered a team of artists and craftspeople that included both young innovators and well-established figures. The new Coventry Cathedral, consecrated in 1962, typified the decorative modernism of the 1950s.

Towers and New Towns

The regeneration of urban Britain witnessed the large-scale building of transport systems, public housing, civic centres, schools, universities, hospitals and New Towns.

In many cities high-density tower blocks were built to solve a chronic shortage of housing for all, the tower block later became a focus for much criticism of post-war modern architecture.

The first New Town, which included Harlow and Stevenage, adapted the ideas of the 19th-century garden city. They were designed to accommodate the large populations and industries moved from overcrowded and bomb-damaged cities. In the last New Town, Milton Keynes, planners avoided high-density building in favour of green space and a flexible grid system.

Education and Culture

Education for all was at the heart of the Welfare State. The 1950s and 1960s saw new schools and universities built across the country. Fuelled by the post-war baby boom, the need for expansion led to innovative design and construction solutions.

In Hertfordshire, the county council initiated a programme of school design which had a huge impact across Britain. architects David and Mary Medd developed a comprehensive system which for the first time addressed the needs of the child, designing every aspect of the buildings from bathrooms to furniture and fittings.

Denys Lasdun, the architect of the National Theatre, created a new model for a campus university at East Anglia. His matrix of raised walkways ensured close links between all the buildings. Lasdun's brutalist aesthetic influenced the design of other early 'plate-glass' universities, including Essex.

Transport

Modern transport networks were essential to the regeneration of Britain after the war. Publicly owned road, rail freight and air systems were modernised to meet the needs of a more mobile population. Developments ranged from large-scale projects such as Gatwick Airport in 1958 and the first stretch of the M1 motorway in 1959 to the design of new trains and road signs. High-speed links brought Britain's cities closer together.

The emerging breed of British design consultancies, led by the Design Research Unit, promoted a modern, efficient and aesthetically conscious image of public transport. They applied their skills to the design of every aspect of the transport experience - from rail liveries and signage to menu cards and napkins.

Land

As cities underwent tremendous change, the countryside became a refuge for many. The heart of British heritage was seen to reside in the countryside and many artists and designers explored Romantic themes that celebrated rural life. From children's book illustration to photography and film, the depiction of the landscape often focused on the mythologies and magic of place.

Relationships with the land were often fraught with anxiety over loss of buildings, scenery and local customs. Those who desired to preserve heritage at all costs were accused of reactionism, but at the same time the reinvention of traditions, exemplified by the Country House style and the revival of craft skills, became one of the richest veins in post-war design.

Country House Style

Britain's great country houses influenced taste and spawned a style that spread from aristocratic homes to high street shops. Led by John Fowler, interior designers looked to the late Georgian and early Regency styles for inspiration. Rather than slavish revival, they borrowed inventively, drawing authentic details from texts and objects of the period.

Fowler successfully combined antiques from different periods with modern fabrics based on historical patterns. He adapted the scale or colour of a pattern to suit contemporary tastes and became famous for his extravagant, swagged curtains and sophisticated detailing. His Country House style was immensely influential.

Craft and the Land

The disposable culture created by growing consumerism in the 1950s and 1960s provoked a strong reaction. By the 1970s concerns over ethical living, self-sufficiency and sustainability increasingly informed political debates and led to the foundation of the Green Movement.

The countryside, as a source of inspiration and place of work, drew many artists and designers out of metropolitan centres. The crafts revival of the 1970s embraced many of the utopian ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement of a century before. It celebrated in particular the unique qualities of natural materials and the processes of making things by hand.

Home

Britain's economic recovery after the war paved the way for a new consumerism which transformed British homes. An affluent middle class embraced modern design. Houses became more flexible and informal, as kitchens, dining rooms and sitting rooms dissolved into a free flow of space and use. New living spaces required innovative furnishings and many British companies responded, often looking to Scandinavian design for inspiration.

The rise of lifestyle publishing and retailing had an enormous impact of what people thought and bought. Magazines such as *House & Garden* kept readers abreast of the latest trends. Habitat opened its first store on the Fulham Road in London in 1964. The shop brought a whole universe of fashionable goods within reach of a younger, more confident generation.

The Fifties

European modernism influenced not just the architecture and planning of the 1950s, but also the design of the home. Open-plan living and fitted kitchens featured in the smaller flats and houses built after the war, as did new types of furniture such as room dividers and sideboards.

British companies such as Hille, Ercol, G-Plan and Archie Shine began to mass-produce stylish modern furniture. Britain also excelled at textile design. Tibor Reich, Lucienne Day, Jacqueline Groag and Althea McNish created some of the best designs of the period. Textile companies like Hull Traders and Edinburgh Weavers experimented with new production techniques and developed creative partnerships with fine artists.

The Sixties

In the 1960s a new generation embraced the greater freedom and individualism of the wider cultural movement that became known as Pop. Designers such as Max Clendinning, Peter Murdoch, Bernard Holdaway and Nicholas Frewing explored new concepts in furniture such as 'knock-down', 'inflate', 'flat-pack' and 'throwaway', which added to the informality of the 1960s home.

This new disposable consumer landscape went hand in hand with an increasingly youth-focused concept of 'lifestyle'. As design consultant Michael Wolff remarked in 1965, 'It will be a great day when furniture and cutlery design ... swing like the Supremes.'

Subversion

From the 1950s a new generation of Britons challenged the values of their parents. The focus of design moved from reconstruction to revolution. In the 1960s and 1970s, fashion, music, shopping, interiors and film enjoyed a fresh prominence as expressions of identity or radical intent. To adapt a common phrase of the time, the personal became political – and visible.

In Britain's cities the shift was particularly powerful. From 'swinging London' in the 1960s, through the nihilism of Punk in the 1970s, to the sharp presentation of 'Cool Britannia' in the 1990s, artists and designers pioneered and irreverent approach that marked the cultural landscape forever.

In the studio and on the street, this subversive spirit has come to define British creativity for the past 50 years. Its sources are wide-ranging, from art students demanding reforms in the 1960s to Britain's unique urban culture and social mix.

Art School

A new Diploma in Art and Design was one of several innovations aimed at professionalizing the training of artists and designers in the 1950s and 1960s. Some welcomed the changes, but others protested. In 1968 students at Hornsey College of Art and beyond objected to the socially divisive separation of academic and vocational subjects and an imposition of structures that stifled creativity.

Despite the controversy, British art schools in London, Newcastle and elsewhere thrived. The Royal College of Art became the epicentre of British Pop in the mid-60s. Inspired by the iconoclastic ideas of artists in the Independent Group, art students pioneered a popular style that informed the look and feel of images and products beyond the studio. It is a trend that continues to this day.

Studio and Street

Since the 1960s, art school graduates have had a significant influence on British consumer culture. From shop interiors through fashionable clothes, magazines, record covers and films, the subversive style of British designers can be discerned in all areas of daily life.

This edgy design approach took on a particular prominence during times of economic recession in the 1970s. It created a cultish, underground identity for British design that caught the imagination of international critics and journalists. The style emerged from the blurred boundaries between the cool attitude of professional art and design studios and the gritty diversity of British street culture.

Boutique

A new fashion scene emerged in Britain in 1955, when Mary Quant launched her first boutique on the King's Road and Bill Green opened the men's store Vince in Carnaby Street.

The merchandise offered in Chelsea and Soho was characterised by its vibrant Pop sensibility and contemporary feel. As one commentator remarked in 1965, 'It is their zing, their zest ...which should be one of the main contributions of designers to modern society ... Ordinary people and the designer are moving towards one another - it is a rapprochement based on a reawakening delight in gaiety, vulgarity and humour.'

By the end of the 1960s the mood became darker, but the sultry allure of Biba and Ossie Clark was no less provocative.

Photography Studio

Michelangelo Antonioni's 1967 film *Blow-Up* captured the atmosphere of the 1960s. The story centred on the torrid experiences of a young English fashion photographer and evoked the lifestyles of the rising stars of British photography: David Bailey, Terry O'Neill, Ronald Traeger, Brian Duffy and Terence Donovan.

These young men were united by their working-class backgrounds and their candid, highly sexualised approach to image-making. Their photographs reached a wide public - in the new British fashion magazines *Queen*, *Town* and *Nova* and in Sunday newspaper colour supplements.

As influential as the photographers were the young models Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. Combining vulnerability and assertiveness, their style would set a precedent for British fashion photography for years to come.

Recording Studio

British art school graduates made a huge impact on the look of an expanding music industry. In the 1960s it was graduates of the Royal College of Art and former members of the Independent Group who created conceptual album covers such as *Sergeant Pepper* or *The White Album* for the Beatles.

Many British musicians, including members of Roxy Music and David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, had trained at art school. The bands' sophisticated imagery also benefited from collaborations with artists and design studios associated with the avant-garde.

From record sleeves to posters to stage costumes, British rock music by the mid-1970s was characterised by a knowingly 'camp' attitude that marked it out from its competitors in the USA and Europe.

Punk

The Punk movement offered a radical response to what many young people saw as the complacency and conservatism of British mainstream culture. It took many forms and strongly influenced the fields of fashion, music and graphics.

Punk's anarchic approach could be identified through various elements: its interest in deconstruction, bricolage, fetishism and a deliberately unpolished do-it-yourself ethic.

It reached its zenith in the summer of the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977. Though its surface forms sometimes descended into stereotype in future years, the underlying ideas of protagonists such as Jamie Reid and Malcolm McLaren had a profound impact on later subcultures.

Design Studio

During the late 1970s and 1980s, Punk's rough aesthetic extended into the design of furniture and interiors. Tom Dixon, Nick Jones, Mark Brazier-Jones and later André Dubreuil turned welding into performance. Their one-off pieces made from scrap metal gave a radical edge to smart hotels, boutiques, clubs and salons in London and beyond.

Punk's fascination with ruins and decay showed up in the fabrics of Timney Fowler and English Eccentrics, and in Nigel Coates' architecture. His Caffè Bongo in Tokyo featured an aircraft fuselage smashed through the façade. Such visually extravagant projects were a blend of many things – youthful discontent, frustration at the economic recession and the entrepreneurial spirit of Thatcherism.

Tailoring

British tailoring is traditionally associated with a sense of 'classic' style. But from the late 1960s, tailored menswear began to incorporate iconoclastic elements.

Tommy Nutter and Edward Sexton founded Nutters of Savile Row in 1969. It was renowned for its louche ambience, the extravagant cut of its suits and its glamorous client list. In the 1980s Paul Smith engineered a similar revolution from his Covent Garden shop. Combining traditional making skills with eclectic fabrics, Smith had a significant impact on the design of men's clothes generally and found an enthusiastic market in Japan.

In the 1990s Ozwald Boateng and Richard James renewed the challenge to traditionalists in Savile Row. Their bold use of colour, unusual fabrics such as camouflage and denim, and inventive marketing still influences tailoring today.

Graphics

Graphic design in Britain reinvented itself in the late 1970s. In Manchester Tony Wilson and Peter Saville founded Factory Records in 1978. Their slick post-industrial aesthetic had a powerful influence on graphic designers worldwide.

When the Hacienda club opened in 1982, it offered a concrete manifestation of Factory's philosophy in a former industrial space. Designer Ben Kelly adopted a particularly British version of hi-tech. What the club lost in money, it gained in cultural impact, contributing significantly to the renewal of Manchester itself.

In the early 1980s, designers in London were also pioneering a radical style language. Street-aware fashion magazines such as *The Face* and *i-D* combined provocative journalism and photography with experimental typefaces and layouts.

Fashion Studio

In the 1980s and 1990s London's fashion courses, especially those at Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design and the Royal College of Art, were hothouses for a generation of exceptional talent. Pioneering graduates have developed a highly personal vision and been appointed to some of the most senior creative roles in the fashion industry around the world.

Their style has been marked as much by controversy as creativity. Despite the shock tactics, London has produced some of the world's most spectacular, technically brilliant and media-aware collections of any fashion city to date.

Pharmacy

The restaurant Pharmacy opened in London's Notting Hill in 1998, a joint venture between artist Damien Hirst and public relations guru Matthew Freud. Hirst was one of a group of ambitious Young British Artists (or YBAs, as the media soon styled them) who had attended Goldsmith's College of Art and contributed to the exhibition *Freeze* a decade earlier.

Pharmacy showcased Hirst's artworks and bespoke furniture. Its fame coincided with a particular moment in British culture in the 1990s, when the worlds of contemporary art, pop music, design, food, money and politics collided. The restaurant closed in 2003 and its contents were sold at Sotheby's.

Innovation and Creativity

Britain has long been a pioneer of new ideas, particularly in the areas of industrial design and technology.

Innovation has characterised British design from the introduction of spinning machines in the 1780s and the engineering of ships and bridges in the 1840s to the development of computer codes after the Second World War and the invention of the worldwide web in the 1980s.

Over the last half century, design culture has moved firmly away from traditional manufacturing towards innovative financial, retail and creative services. This radical shift has been accompanied by new attitudes towards commodities and global communication, which have fundamentally altered the way design is produced, consumed and understood.

British designers have stood at the forefront of change. In so doing, they have created some of the most iconic objects, technologies and buildings of the last 60 years.

Factory

In the 1950s and 1960s British manufacturers were known for the range of their products and their technical inventiveness. Their pragmatism often contrasted with the more obvious glamour of American, German and Italian competitors.

Alongside its established industries of textiles, motor manufacture and aeronautics, Britain began to specialise in products that used new technologies, including electronics and music equipment. The Design Council Awards - which featured all types of design from radios, calculators and amplifiers to the Topper dinghy - paid tribute to the success of forward-looking risk-takers.

By the late 1970s economic and political pressures were limiting Britain's manufacturing power. 'Made in Britain' was seen less frequently. Only in recent years has the highly skilled manufacture of specialist products returned to the UK.

Concorde

The Anglo-French supersonic airliner Concorde was one of the most important designs of the 20th century.

The project combined the manufacturing capabilities of Aérospatiale and the British Aircraft Corporation, and built on research into the triangular 'delta wing' and turbo-jet power. The interior design of the aircraft also brought together leading designers and manufacturers including Tibor Reich, Terence Conran and Royal Doulton.

At its maiden flight in 1969, Concorde seemed to capture all the futuristic aspirations of 'space age' travel. But only 20 were made, as orders for the planes collapsed in the economic crises of the 1970s. Though the project represented a financial loss, at its final flight in 2003 the sublime Concorde was mourned by its many admirers.

Laboratory

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 and the introduction of free-market policies saw the denationalisation of public utilities and the decline of the coal, steel, rail, textile and engineering sectors.

The move away from traditional production-line industry in the 1980s was accompanied by a huge expansion in the service sectors of banking, advertising, design consultancy, media, property and retail.

In response to growing competition from countries able to manufacture on a larger scale and at lower cost, a vibrant, highly skilled and technologically advanced design sector arose in Britain during the 1990s. Cities once associated with heavy manufacturing were now acclaimed as laboratories for ideas and experimentation.

Hardware to Software

In the 1980s, Britain developed a thriving computer hardware industry, with companies including Sinclair, Amstrad and Acorn producing personal computers for the global market. British consumers led the world in home computer ownership throughout the decade.

The success of hardware sales stimulated the software industry. Access to programming eventually moved beyond specialist engineers, and amateur coders started to create their own programmes and games. As American and Japanese manufacturers began to dominate the hardware market, the focus of British digital industries moved to software.

Over the last three decades, Britain has produced some of the world's most innovative and influential computer games. Many games studios are based in post-industrial cities, including Dundee, Sheffield and Liverpool.

Advertising and Design

British advertising and brand consultancies have been world-leaders since the 1960s. New attitudes towards commodity culture, the breakdown of established class and gender stereotypes and increasingly globalised communications have given agencies such as Pentagram, Saatchi & Saatchi and Bartle Bogle Hegarty a prominent arena in which to thrive.

Advertisers and design consultants have also profited from an increased 'design awareness' in Britain's metropolitan cultures. This has had an impact on everything from packaging to publishing, newspaper and web design to television and film production.

Technology and Craft

New technologies are changing the way objects are made in Britain. Even what we think of as an object is open to question. As techniques and materials migrate from one discipline to another, design boundaries keep shifting and the old silos of fashion, furniture, textiles and product design are breaking down.

At the same time, environmental concerns have allied themselves to a growing interest in the handmade. This too is having an impact on the look and feel of things.

It could be claimed that the new generation of designers in Britain has turned its back on modernist and postmodernist ideas. Many young designers are pursuing a completely new course in the spaces between art and science, concept and object, the amateur and the professional.

Architect's Practice

The most highly celebrated and fiercely debated field of British design is architecture. Whether creating new buildings around the globe or regenerating cities from Salford to Stratford, British architects continue to pioneer cutting-edge design in the 21st century.

The expansion of the wider architectural sector was initially driven by the deregulation of the London Stock Exchange and the rise of venture capitalism in the 1980s. New Labour's policies of regeneration led to the building of new schools and hospitals across Britain during the 1990s and early 2000s, while the Heritage Lottery Fund has enabled investment in grand cultural projects such as theatres and museums.

Some have criticised the social effects and aesthetic qualities of recent projects, but it is hard not to acknowledge the technical brilliance and boldness of the best examples of contemporary British architecture.