

# Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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## HISTORIES AND UTOPIAS

### Learning from 'les modernistes'

#### Abstract

This paper considers the value of historical design utopias to the emergent field of sustainable design. All students and academics of design are exposed to art and design historical teachings and many focus on debates about modernism within that context. Modernism is seen as the antidote for the age; progressive; socially democratic and wedded to the capabilities of technology to prevail over all ills.

However, as we know, design history isn't only about styles, but about forming a critique. Indeed, the emergence of a postmodern sensibility is in itself evidence that design history has been central to the evolution of the design profession. Now that sustainability is core to the way the design and service professions are proposed to move, the time is ripe for design historians and commentators to engage with the sustainable debate as they did with modernism in the 1970s. They must ask themselves whether the pursuit of sustainability is tantamount to the pursuit of a utopia. And if this is the case, what then are the pitfalls and the potentialities that may follow? If the fundamental problem with modernism was that it was hierarchical, bourgeois and an intellectual pursuit, is the objective of sustainability similarly flawed? Likewise, if the success of modernism was in its over-arching social ambition, can sustainable design be equally triumphant? These are questions well worth asking as we reach the tipping point of sustainable development.

The method this paper will use is to consider the certain key texts and objects of modernism and to compare them with postmodern critiques and objects, and subsequently with sustainable texts and artifacts. This triple comparison will reveal those characteristics which, arguably, were at the heart of modernism's demise. It will then reveal how the language of postmodernism and its pluralistic sensitivities, accustomed designers to more expressive and consumer-led manufacture. The sustainable texts and objects will provide similar examples of the ways in which sustainability has been described and those objects which are seen as shining beacons of its success.

The problems of such a paper as this, is that much of the comparison depends upon which texts are selected and how they are deployed within the argument. In order to avoid some the obvious bias within this experiment, research will focus on words and phrases which appear across a significant number of English language texts. The cross-comparisons will therefore bear a degree of objectivity

The results of this paper and the research it presents are intended to provoke some analysis of the vision that sustainability provides. It is appropriate that historical context is applied to this debate, no matter how youthful it appears. When Papanek first suggested that the *Real World* was not the world in which the design profession was engaged and that industrial designers were in fact deadly as soldiers fighting a war, he was seen as an extremist. Hindsight helped him to modify and adapt his ideas whilst

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still remaining firm in what he wanted to achieve. The aim here is to allow a similar reflection as a means to achieving a vision, if that is what is desired.