

'To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.'

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), *An Ideal Husband*

Economic trends affecting design

The end of the first decade of the century brought a global recession, and economic uncertainty is now the New Normal. Future spending on design will remain constrained, and clients will be late to pay if their cash-flows allow them to pay at all.

However, life will not be all 'downs' for client sectors or consumer spending; there will be 'ups' as well. Things will not be completely bleak for manufacturing in the West, for instance. Firstly, labour costs are not the only factor in the cost of products, or China would have completely triumphed long ago. Secondly, China's currency will continue to appreciate and, with that, its own costs will rise. Perhaps more importantly, few UK manufacturers are purely in the manufacturing business any more. Services, including financial services, will continue to form a key part of every major manufacturing business. Rolls Royce, for example, has for some time sold 'power by the hour', charging customers a fee for every hour that its engines run. Naturally, each arrangement includes the sale of an engine; but it also includes a guarantee to monitor, maintain, and – if necessary – replace that engine should it break down. In other words, rather than simply sell a sophisticated assembly of metal and carbon fibre, Rolls sells the purpose of that assembly: reliable, efficient propulsion and time in the sky.

The shift to services will persist. What the UK Government defines as 'service industries' take no fewer than 21.56 million, or nearly 84 per cent, of the 25.7 million employee jobs in Great Britain.¹ However, they account for just 76 per cent of Gross Value Added (GVA), the measure of the value of goods and services produced.² It will remain hard, however, to raise productivity in services, especially in the public sector.

Persistent economic difficulties in the West will underline how important it will be for genuine innovation to triumph over new financial and business models. To the extent that it wins, innovation will encourage realism in design, and products and brands that deliver unimpeachable functional performance. Tough times will also produce design solutions that reduce costs, whether of production, operation, or disposal.

Design thinking will change

The design of services will be more important.³ So will what Tim Brown, head of the innovation consultancy IDEO, calls 'design thinking': not just designing an artefact to a brief, but involving staff and users in video-recording, brainstorming, role-playing and rapid prototyping around new processes, services, interactions, forms of entertainment and ways of communicating and collaborating.⁴ Both privately delivered and public sector services will be subject to more of this treatment.

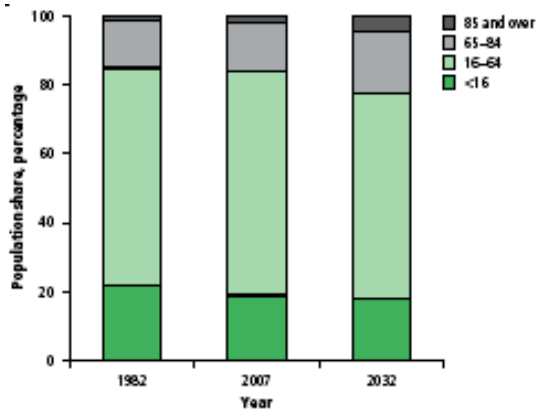
Additionally, designers will need to consider demographic changes in the population: the staff and the users consulted in design thinking will be older. The expansion of the over-65s group is particularly striking.

1 Office for National Statistics, *Monthly digest of statistics*, 765, September 2009, Table 3.3, p27, www.statistics.gov.uk

2 ONS, *Annual abstract of statistics*, No 145, 2009, Table 16.4, p254, www.statistics.gov.uk

3 See Laurie Young, *From products to services: insights and experience from companies which have embraced the service economy*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

4 Tim Brown, *Change by design*, HarperBusiness, 2009.



Population age structure, 1982–2032, UK ⁵

From West to East

Client work will not just shift further into services; it will shift further to the East. It will therefore be more orientated to technology than in the past, because technology is taken more seriously in the East than in the West. Design there will regain some of its historic role as the handmaiden of technological innovation.

Design will not always be sold as eco-friendly, as ‘conspicuous non-consumption’. For the wealthy East in particular, design will still be aspirational. With the big proviso that it works well, people will continue to want design to relieve them from drabness. That will put a premium on aesthetics and emotions in design.

Chinese and Indian designers will become more self-confident; they will be the ones handling most of Asia’s tasks in design. Brands indigenous to that continent will grow, too. To be a global brand, says Melanie McShane of consultancy Wolff Olins, you ‘have to be number one in Asia’.⁶

Nevertheless, there will be a major market for Western design firms in Asia, if they build an Eastward-facing culture. It is notable that newspapers such as *China Daily* and *The Hindu* cover the West more than, say, *The Times* in the UK covers the East. Acquainting yourself fully with trends there will pay dividends.

The Green issue

The Green Economy and Green Jobs will be illusions more than real trends. In government, design and the wider culture, Green will arguably be the biggest game in town, until something radical changes that game. However, while the capitalist spirit is more than willing to go Green, the capitalist flesh finds it much more difficult. It is more likely that China and India will sell green technology to the West than countries like the UK will set an example to the world through their ‘Low Carbon Economies’.

The ability of designers to be discriminating in sustainable design will do much to persuade clients. For example, people impulsively object to the export, by air, of Kenyan horticulture to Europe. However, most Kenyan produce travelling this way is, in fact, put in the holds of

⁵ Karen Dunnell, ‘Ageing and mortality in the UK – National Statistician’s Annual Article on the Population’, Figure 5, p10, *Population Trends*, No 134, Winter 2008, www.statistics.gov.uk

⁶ McShane, quoted in Jenny Wiggins, ‘World’s next top brands set to rise in the east’, *Financial Times*, 19 July 2009.

planes taking European tourists home from Nairobi.⁷ Should Kenyan smallholders be penalised for this? Instead of fretting over different ways of calculating food miles and carbon footprints, it may be more worthwhile to design vehicles, receptacles, installation processes and educational materials to help Africa establish large-scale irrigation.

The impact of IT

IT will be more than simply 'virtual'. It will become more physical and controlling, as well as more visual. It will be about making sure that robots, wind turbines and solar panels run smoothly, and it will be about the projection of images in 3D. What the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes as sensors and displays⁸ will have a new prominence: sensor-based networks will facilitate the remote monitoring of patients, traffic, pollution and geological phenomena, while liquid crystal, 3D, wearable and holographic displays will multiply. More and more computers, too, will read faces, voices, gestures, and handwriting.

The use of Enterprise 2.0 – Web 2.0 techniques within organisations – will grow, with Asian players setting much of the pace in consumer versions. Mobile applications will determine much of the future of other applications. Yet design studios need to avoid dumbing down their practices: facility with a mobile phone is not the Alpha and Omega of the future. The idea that young people inherently know more about IT because they are 'digital natives' – as opposed to old people, who are 'digital immigrants' – is longstanding, but misguided. To be able to play around with social media on a mobile handset is not the same as having a degree in computer science, nor is it the same as reading a book from cover to cover. The successful design leaders of the future will acquire those skills, and will encourage younger people to acquire them.

Implications for designers

In new products and services, an orientation to realism and to engineering in its broadest sense will ensure that design's answers are substantive, not superficial. Designers will have to develop new skills in economics, business, services and technology, and this will mean understanding technologies relevant to:

- construction;
- cognitive science, medicine, biology, neuroscience;
- energy and adaptation to climate change;
- the environment (for example, agriculture, water, forests, pollution and waste).

In the future, good design will increasingly demonstrate effectiveness. A glance at the winners of the UK DBA (Design Business Association) awards for effectiveness shows that both the categories for awards and the criteria for giving them have changed over the years.

Finally, in this move to a more extensive, more advanced design offer, it will be vital not to confuse design with social engineering. To plan and develop better, more effective products or services or surroundings is one thing; to take on the politicians' responsibility for solving deep-rooted social problems, however, will inevitably lead to ill-feeling if, as is likely, design alone cannot solve those problems.

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7 James Gikunju Muuru, *Kenya's flying vegetables: small farmers and the food miles debate*, Africa Research Institute, 8 July 2009, www.africaresearchinstitute.org

8 OECD, *OECD Information Technology Outlook 2008*, 18 December 2008, www.oecd.org