



## Can the Centre Hold?

By John Heskett

***In being asked to write an article for the INDEX: Design to Improve Life® anthology I find myself reflecting on the fact that my next birthday will be my 75<sup>th</sup> and as I grow older my conviction that the world needs radical change becomes more intense.***

It seems to me a matter of urgency that we, and by that I mean every living, conscious human being on the planet, recognize that we are engulfed in a huge, growing crisis on multiple levels that will not be easily resolved. In addition to a series of recent natural disasters of uncommon destructiveness, we have to cope, among other things, with widespread economic collapse, a distrust of politicians and political systems, insurrections and riots, civil wars and fundamentalism of many varieties, a flood of weaponry swilling around the world, and dwindling resources to meet the needs of an ageing population. By any standards, these are troubling times.

Surrounded by the bombardment of bad news that is the staple fare of the media, I think often of some frequently quoted lines from a poem, *The Second Coming*, by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats that remain powerfully appropriate to our situation:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

It is difficult to maintain a positive stance in the face of all the daunting obstacles that lie ahead, but perhaps the worst dangers are those of feeling helpless and negative about our capacity, not just to survive, but to achieve a life for a greater number of people of sustainable well-being – a phrase coined by colleagues at the TU Delft.

After a lifetime working in the field of design, I am still convinced of its enormous power to beneficially reshape the world of artifice we have created and inhabit. I've written elsewhere of my belief that design is a unique characteristic of what defines us as human beings, enabling us to create a world of artifice to meet our needs and give meaning to our lives. It therefore has a long evolution, going deep into the prehistory of humanity, but gradually emerging with an enhanced capacity to create tools and weapons, shelter and apparel, items for storage and transportation. Design, defined in these general terms has moved through many stages since the emergence of *homo sapiens*, but has been integral to the major stages through which modern life has emerged, such as: nomadism, rural settlement, early urbanization and craft industry, mercantile economies, mechanical industry, electrical industry, and, in our time, electronic industry. In each phase a new paradigm for design has emerged and, I would argue, a new phase is emerging now. Throughout all these phases, the levels of creative genius apparent in objects and structures of all kinds should be a continuing source of profound inspiration for us in the tasks that lie ahead.

This power of design, however, is neither unconditional nor universal. In suggesting that design is one of the major instruments available to us, I do not want to suggest that it is some kind of absolute or universal fix for all the difficulties confronting us. Entangled in the beliefs and practices of design are many convenient assumptions that need to be questioned and redefined. In much of design education, the educators who should be pioneering new models for their students' future are locked into mind-sets that suggest they have still to come to terms with the nature of the dramatic shifts underway in our time.

Emphasizing the evolution of a personal style, of the individualistic emphasis on “the designer” and suggesting that all problems can be solve through the singular emphasis of “the design process”, are all still frequently to be found in the teaching studios around the world that are still based on a master-apprentice relationship. The emphasis on design as a minor form of art that is still found in education, practice, business and the media acts as a barrier to

the generation and acceptance of a body of knowledge and methodology that is vital to the contemporary development of new applications, such as systems work in teams; designs that rather than emphasizing “the designer”, empower generations of users; and service design emphasizing interactivity, multiple technique and methods to solve a myriad problems.

A further obstacle to design lacking the capacity to fulfill its potential in the modern world is that the overwhelming majority of designers work in business or commercial contexts, most of them in middle-level posts where they carry out the orders of executives who are frequently from other disciplines. The predominance of commercial values and, in particular, the proposition that greed is good, that it is what fuels the working processes of markets, has left designers, and many others, without a voice to challenge this pigs-in-the-trough approach to how the business affairs of nations and companies should be conducted.

We are living in an age in which the dominance of mass-production is no longer total, but, instead, is being superseded by flexible, information technology that is accessible to ever-growing numbers of people around the planet and gives not only access, but, increasingly, a new and remarkable degree of control. It is this point that needs to be clearly understood in terms of its potential.

Mass production and all the other manifestations of the age of mass, such as mass media, mass communications, mass transport, mass education, mass marketing, mass advertising and mass consumption, were in effect controlled by producers, who sought to shape markets, with users as a passive constituency to be targeted for producers’ benefit. The result of this can be seen in the way many parts of the world in under-developed and developing economies are still bereft of the basic necessities for a decent life.

It is into this gulf between the contrasting arenas of commercial control and poverty-stricken backwardness that INDEX: Design to Improve Life® is seeking to develop a niche in which the best design ideas of our time are dedicated to the poor, the stricken, the oppressed and deprived of our world, who number still in hundreds of millions. Giving them not just relief from poverty and sickness, but using appropriate technology to give them a voice in decisions affecting their life and ensuring they are heard, giving them recognition and dignity for their achievements, and above all giving them a vision of a better life for their children. INDEX: Design to Improve Life® rejects the tawdry banalities of celebrity design and its manipulative cycles of unnecessary change to focus instead on remedies for the wastage of crucial abilities that constitute a vital constituent of our future human capital. INDEX: Design to Improve Life® does not pretend to have all the answers, but it does seek to ask some pertinent questions and it can support appropriate solutions. To work with INDEX: Design to Improve Life® as I have the honour to do, is to feel hope and a sense of values and the conviction that no problem is insuperable. It brings together committed people on a basis of common endeavours that have compassion at their core, rather than greed, and so generates a

conviction that something must be done and can be done to improve the lives of those who, through no fault of their own, are trapped in deprivation.

W. B. Yeats wrote that “the centre cannot hold.” The old centres of power and influence are indeed increasingly under pressure. All is not decay and crumbling ruin, however, organisations such as INDEX: Design to Improve Life® represent new centres of ideas and practice, vigorously asserting a focus on people and articulating values appropriate to how the new design of our time can serve their needs.