

# Sci-fi socialism and Soviet snowmobiles: the best of the London Design Biennale

Its presentation may seem hurried and chaotic, but the inaugural edition of this design gala brings eye-opening visions of utopia from all corners of the globe

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A battered orange pickup truck stands on the stately stone terrace of London's Somerset House, parked askew like a getaway car hastily abandoned. Behind it stretches a shanty village of shawarma-sellers and juice-squeezers, backgammon players and shisha smokers, along with a barber sharpening his cutthroat razor with alarming enthusiasm.

Swapping the Mediterranean for the Thames, this waterfront slice of Beirut street life is the Lebanese contribution to the inaugural London Design Biennale, a sprawling show of work from 37 countries, curated around the theme Utopia by Design, in a nod to the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's text.

"Utopia for me is found on the streets," says architect Annabel Karim Kassar, designer of swanky boutique hotels across the Arab world, who has exchanged her usual luxury materials for odds and ends scavenged from the skip. "It's this relaxed attitude of cooperation and community that comes from people socialising outside, where the city's streets become workshops of designing and making."

The scene is a far cry from the usual stuff on show at the London Design festival, an annual commercial bonanza where big brands descend on the capital to peddle their latest additions to the world of expensive furnishings. Sir John Sorrell, the 71-year-old design champion who began the LDF 13 years ago, thought it was time for something new. "The world is increasingly recognising the power of design to bring about social change and economic growth," he says, repeating a message he has spread on countless UKTI trade missions around the globe. "But I now understand why biennales happen every two years. We've tried to do this in one."

In places, the haste shows. The exhibition suffers from a common biennale syndrome, comprising an incoherent ragbag of bits and bobs with no sense of quality control or overarching curatorial idea. There is some wheat, but you have to wade through a good deal of chaff to find it.

Curated by Christopher Turner, former editor of *Modern Painters* and *Icon* magazine, the most compelling exhibits have a journalistic bent, picking on moments in a country's history that highlight unusual periods of optimism or change, when design (of a sort) played centre stage. The Chilean room tells one of the most intriguing stories, focusing on a bold utopian project in the 1970s when Salvador Allende's socialist government dreamed up a precursor to modern-day "smart city" technology. The Cybersyn system - which came complete with a sci-fi operations room (partly recreated here), equipped with Star Trek-style control pad chairs - would enable

ministers to view economic information in real time through a national network of Telex machines, and give Chilean workers access to decision-making in a form of electronic industrial democracy.

“It was the total opposite of how smart city ideas are being used now to track and control citizens,” says co-curator Andrés Briceño Gutiérrez. “It was a utopian project to empower the Chilean people and predict how global fluctuations would affect the country’s economy.” The unlikely brainchild of British maverick cyberneticist Stafford Beer and German industrial designer Gui Bonsiepe, the system only lasted 14 months, before Pinochet’s military coup put a halt to the dream.

Russia’s exhibition is equally eye-opening, providing a window on to an era of remarkable Soviet innovation, never before exhibited. Featuring Moscow metro train carriages, modular kitchens and even an experimental snowmobile, the exhibition showcases the recently rediscovered archive of the All-Union Soviet Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE), an organisation that brought together designers, sociologists, philosophers and art historians, working together at the forefront of design theory and research.

“Soviet designers were idealists who hoped to create perfect material environments,” says Alexandra Sankova, director of the Moscow Design Museum, responsible for the show. But their ideas were so utopian that it often proved beyond the capabilities of modern industry: many of these pioneering ideas (shown in a rather low-budget Soviet-era display of back-lit photographs) would never leave the drawing board.

A more dreamlike utopian speculation comes from the Japanese contribution to the biennale, one of the most poetic and playful exhibits. Designed as an inviting cabinet of curiosities in a big perspex vitrine, it features such wondrously weird inventions as a set of glass spoons to measure time, each punctured with a little hole like an egg-timer, and a set of two-tone pencils to draw horizons, with blue and green leads sandwiched to enable the perfect reproduction of the line where land meets sky.

They are all the work of Yasuhiro Suzuki, whose surreal descriptions and charming line drawings in the accompanying leaflet only add to its fairytale quality. Why a glass gun-shaped eyedropper, you might ask? Because “your hand shakes in hesitation applying eyedrops, like when you point a gun at yourself”. And a golf ball whose pits are modelled on the craters of the moon? Because, in Suzuki’s world, “golf balls are small satellites launched by golfers. They wax and wane as they fly through the air.”

Like souvenirs from an alternative universe, these objects reflect Suzuki’s take on utopia - “another place that isn’t here”. He says he wants visitors to “take back a sense of rediscovery regarding familiar things”, and it works. You leave his exhibition with an invigorated, sideways view of the world and a skip in your step. It’s the tonic you need after trudging through rooms that range from bemusing to banal.

Turkey asks you to put a wish in a capsule and watch it whizz around a tube. Saudi Arabia has installed a vending machine of blue plastic balls, in a strained metaphor for water scarcity. Tunisia has wound some string between burnt plastic stakes, while Spain invites you to walk through a tunnel of more coloured twine. If in doubt, wrap your space with string, appears to be the general thinking.

If you don't get tangled in these tedious webs, there are other highlights to be found. The contribution from the United Arab Emirates looks at the historic "al faraj" irrigation system in the Gulf, a network of manmade channels that brought water from the mountainous aquifers to villages in the desert valleys. As rabid development continues apace across the region and life retreats to the air-conditioned indoors, a series of models shows how these water channels could be revived and adapted for modern needs.

The Cuban offering focuses on a timely topic, too, looking at the recent introduction of WiFi hotspots to urban public spaces, although the proposed intervention - a modular system of clunky plastic boxes for people to sit in and use the internet - isn't the most elegant solution imaginable. And when you're sick of looking at design, you can retreat to one of South African designer Porky Hefer's dangling animal-shaped pods and rock yourself to sleep.

The jumbled format might make you long for a properly curated exhibition, rather than a motley Eurovision-style lineup, but the best bits remind you of the power of critical, speculative, truly utopian design. It can be a potent way to imagine other worlds, as More described his own work, "a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a little more pleasantly slide into men's minds".

London Design Biennale is at Somerset House, London, 7-27 September.

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