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## Problems, solutions and the design process

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The only person who is an artist is the one that can make a puzzle out of the solution.

Karl Kraus, *Nachts*

Everything that is absorbed and registered in your mind adds to the collection of ideas stored in the memory: a sort of library that you can consult whenever a problem arises. So, essentially the more you have seen, experienced and absorbed, the more points of reference you will have to help you decide which direction to take: your frame of reference expands.

Herman Hertzberger, *Lessons for Students of Architecture*

### Now and when

The designer has a prescriptive rather than descriptive job. Unlike scientists who describe how the world is, designers suggest how it might be. Designers are therefore all 'futurologists' to some extent. The very essence of their job is to create the future, or at least some features of it. This is obviously a rather hazardous business, and it carries with it at least two ways of being unpopular. First, the new often seems strange and therefore to some people at least unsettling and threatening. Second, of course, the designer can turn out to be wrong about the future. It is very easy with that wonderful benefit of hindsight to see design failures. The high-rise housing which was built in Britain after the Second World War now seems to be so obviously unsatisfactory, we wonder how the designers could have been so stupid!

But even on a much shorter time-scale the designer has worries and uncertainties about the future. Will the client like the design and give the final go ahead? Will it gain approval from legislators and regulators? Will it turn out to be too expensive? Will it be popular

with the users? These and other similar crucial questions can only be answered by the passage of time, and the designers must hold their nerve during the process, complete the work, subject it to the test of time and wait patiently for the verdict. Such doubts and worries must have plagued the minds of many generations of designers, but now there are new and even more unsettling uncertainties facing contemporary designers.

The advanced technocratic society for which the contemporary designer works is itself changing rapidly. Unlike previous generations we live in a world with comparatively little tradition and cultural stability. The vast majority of our everyday environment has been designed and, even, invented within our own generation. The motor car and the television profoundly influence our daily lives to an extent that would probably have astonished their inventors. My father saw virtually the whole of the revolution created by the motor car and I have lived through the revolution created by the computer. My father, however, had little understanding of the implications the computer has for changing our lives. But this rate of change is now so great that it is impacting on a single lifetime. Many writers have argued that designed technology is now one of the most significant aspects of contemporary social order.

Marshall McLuhan (1967) has famously commented on the importance of the information explosion caused by printing, television and computers, and concluded that the only certainty in modern life is change. Dickson (1974) sees technology as the major determinant of the structure of society, and argued that the negative societal effects of high technology suggest we should seek alternative, less harmful forms of technology. Toffler (1970) has warned that if technology continues to advance in the present manner we shall all suffer from a cultural disorientation which he calls 'Futureshock'.

Polemical though some of these popularist writers may be there is no doubt that such rapid change does result in a world which is increasingly difficult to understand and predict, so that we are simultaneously excited and fearful about the future. Perhaps we do indeed live in what Leach called a 'Runaway World':

Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid.

(Leach 1968)

All of this makes life even more difficult for the designer who now has not just got uncertainties about the design but is even unsure of the nature of the world into which it must fit. Often in recent years we have seen the design process actually outpaced by social,