

DESIGN directions

The design industry has crashed into recession. One of the most dynamic industries of the 80s is now becoming a symbol of uncertainty in the 90s. But it's not just an economic crisis. There are also new intellectual challenges. In our special survey **Alice Rawsthorn** explores future directions for the industry. **Neville Brody**, **John Thackara** and other design experts outline their own views of the situation. **Rick Poynor**, editor of the newly-launched quarterly *Eye*, *The International Review Of Graphic Design*, investigates the impact of new technology on graphic design. Finally, in a story written specially for *Marxism Today*, **Chris Savage King** presents a vision of a Britain where new ideas are thin on the ground.



One by one, the go-go industries of the 1980s have turned into casualties since the start of this year. One of the biggest casualties of all has been the design industry. The design industry flourished in the 1980s. It started the decade as a tiny cottage industry composed of small companies generally owned and run by the same entrepreneur. It ended the 1980s as a larger, more sophisticated industry. Some design consultancies had floated on the stock market. Others had expanded into other countries. The 1980s was not dubbed the 'design decade' for nothing.

But in 1990, as the economy has slowed down, the design industry has crashed into recession. Most of the larger consultancies have been forced to cut costs by shedding staff. Some smaller consultancies have been forced out of business. This summer a Shockwave went through the whole industry when the Michael Peters Group, once one of Britain's biggest and most successful design consultancies, was forced to call in the receivers.

But the economic recession is not the only source of concern for the design community. If anything it has tended to distract attention from the longer term, more complex problem of adjusting to the new intellectual and cultural agenda of the 1990s.

Nevertheless it would be naive to underestimate the industry's economic problems. The combination of sluggish consumer spending and intense pressure on corporate profits has forced the same companies that lavished money on post-modernist shop-fronts and candy-coloured packaging in the 1980s to slice their design budgets in the early 1990s.

In simple terms these companies have been forced to find more money to cover the interest on their debts and have hence had less left over to spend on design. This problem has been especially severe in some sectors, such as retailing, which invested heavily in design in the 1980s, where many major companies, such as Next and

Storehouse (which owns Habitat and BHS) are now in serious financial difficulty.

Other service sector industries have also been affected by the economic recession, but the design industry seems to have suffered more than most, with the possible exception of advertising. This is largely because, despite its growth in the 1980s, design still retains some of the characteristics of a cottage industry.

Some consultancies, like Fitch and Wolff Olins, may have grown larger and more internationalised, but the industry is still dominated by small, entrepreneurial firms. Weak management and poor financial controls are commonplace. Michael Peters did not go under because its designs were weak. Its consultancies were still winning awards and new projects until the bitter end. Peters failed because the same management team that had created a dynamic London design consultancy was simply not capable of running a publicly quoted international group of companies.

The structural weaknesses of companies like Peters could be contained in the days when the design market was buoyant. But when the economy lurched into recession - and the design market dived down to the doldrums - these weaknesses became serious problems.

But the industry's economic problems have been aggravated by its intellectual crisis: by the challenge of adapting to the new cultural climate. The intellectual agenda for design in the 1980s, as well as for the related disciplines of art and architecture, was dominated by post-modernism: by the abandonment of the modernist ideal.

In many ways the 1980s was an era of intellectual sterility for design. The modernist movement had provided an empathetic environment for the design community, which was, after all, dealing with a discipline involved with function and closely linked to industry, both important tenets of modernism. As design theorists, like John Thackara, have noted, de-

sign never really found a role for itself in the post-modernist era.

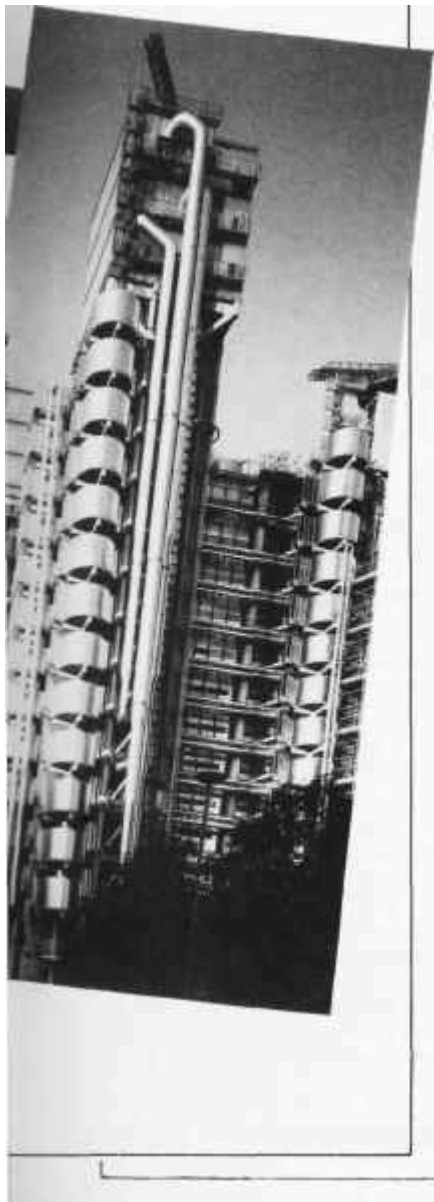
Design, like art and architecture, tended to deteriorate into jokiness in the 1980s. The cultural images of the decade were generally about jokes. For art, there were Julian Schnabel's broken plates and Jeff Koons' stainless steel bunny; and for architecture, Quinlan Terry's 18th-century clone on the banks of the Thames and Philip Johnson's broken pediment atop the AT&T Tower in New York. The dominant design images were jokey too. The 1980s began with primary coloured furniture blown up into burlesque proportions by Ettore Sottsass' Memphis School in Milan and ended with the three-legged chair devised by Phillipe Starck, the French designer.

Some of the jokes were funny. Others fell flat. But the visual quips and quirks provided a thin disguise for the intellectual emptiness of the era. The emphasis of design had changed from function, towards ornament and eventually deteriorated into playing with surfaces.

This may have pauperised design as an intellectual discipline, but it was an extraordinarily favourable cultural climate for the design industry. After all, the type of design projects executed by the external consultancies that make up the industry, tend to concentrate on the superficial styling, or surface, of a product, not to be enmeshed in the whole cycle of product development.

There are, for example, relatively few product design consultancies in Britain. Instead the industry is dominated by retail consultancies, such as Fitch and McColl; packaging consultancies, like Michael Peters and Lewis Moberly; and corporate identity consultancies; such as Wolff Olins and Lloyd Northover.

These consultancies deal with the type of designs that can be produced from outside, rather than inside, a client company. And, with the possible exception of corporate identity, they tend



to emphasise the superficial aspects of design. In short they deal with the type of design which was quite comfortable with postmodernism.

But the intellectual agenda has changed. Artists and architects are as jaded by the japes of postmodernism - the visual cliches of broken plates and pediments - as they were with the monotonous modernism that preceded it. Similarly designers are now disillusioned with superficial styling, or the 'bells and whistles approach', as James Woodhuysen, head of Fitch's Experimental Design Laboratory, calls it.

'designer' no longer suggests that a product is such a status symbol that it can command a premium price, but is now bandied about as pejorative. It is also the design community's response to the new concerns of the 1990s: the cult of authenticity and the growth of environmental awareness.

The cult of authenticity is part of the anti-fashion backlash against the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s. It is already apparent in the fashion arena. On one level there is the sportswear cult of ball caps and trainers that has swept aside the old shoulder-padded styles. On another there is the craze for the classic designs of the old established fashion houses: for Pucci prints and Gucci loafers.

Anti-fashion and authenticity are all to do with form and function - with the quality of materials and the skill of construction - not with the old lust for novelty and self-conscious styling on which the design industry thrived.

Environmentalism is more complex. The new definition of environmental awareness goes further than the old cliché of bio-degradable products in green packaging. It involves an holistic approach of assessing the environmental implications of every aspect of a product's life cycle: from the sourcing of raw materials, to the production process and its eventual disposal or destruction.

It also goes further than the physicality of the product. It considers the condition that Ezio Manzini, the Italian design theorist, has called 'semiological pollution': the cultural chaos of a society dominated by mass media and technological tyranny.

Addressing these issues will be much more difficult for the design industry than dreaming up yet another visual pun as a sop to postmodernism. Such issues are not only intellectually more challenging, but are also less compatible with the concept of an external design consultancy. Severe though its economic problems may be, this is the real crisis facing today's design industry.©

This disillusion is already apparent in the rhetoric of the design industry. A few years ago design consultancies tended to talk like advertising agencies. Nowadays they hark back to the artisanal era of the arts and craft movement in the 1920s and 1930s with an emphasis on environmental and social responsibility.

The new rhetoric is partly a reaction to the swing in public sentiment against the design dogma of the 1980s: to the fact that the adjective

