

THE REAL WORLD SELDOM RESEMBLES THE future we predict. Yet the pioneering alternative visions each generation shares about how our world will – or should – look can reshape lives and expectations.

As a species, we seem to long for the visions of the future from the previous century, idealistic portrayals that swept away class and national distinctions and saw technology as a way to better the future of all mankind. Yet history hasn't been kind to such visions. Today's expectations for the future are more limited, practical to the point of cynicism.

For the 2016 London Design Biennale, we chose to address this head-on. Held at Somerset House, a palatial public building on the bank of the Thames, and curated by the leading museums and design organizations around the globe, the Biennale set out the theme of "Utopia by Design," deliberately opening the door for new approaches to the now faded ideal of utopian society.

TIME

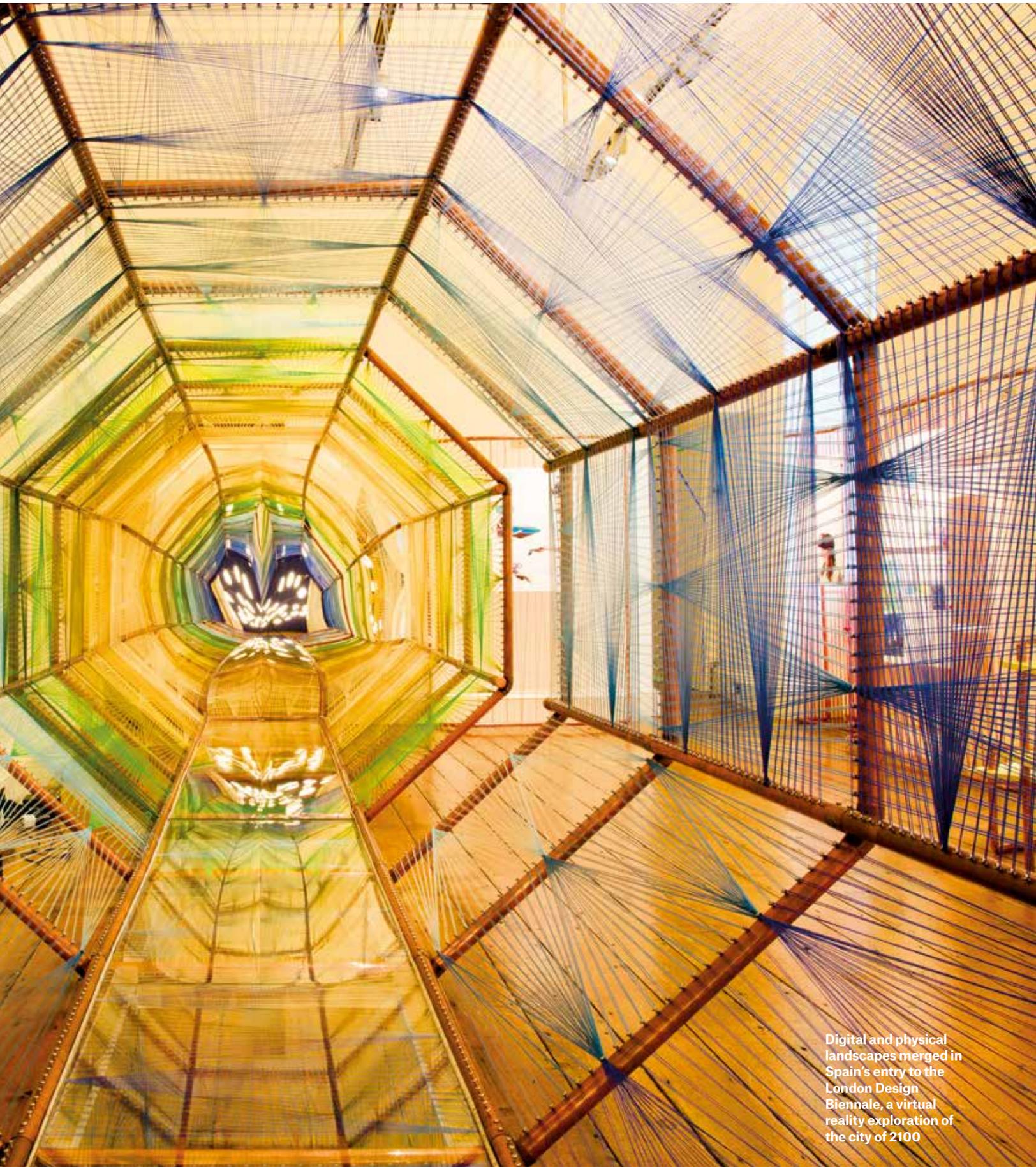
Ever since the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in London's Hyde Park, World's Fairs have been laboratories for futurology and utopianism – all that is exciting and modern. At these international pageants, countries and large corporations spend enormous sums promoting their values and aspirations through design and technology.

At the close of the Great Depression and on the brink of World War II, for example, the 1939 "World of Tomorrow" fair in New York reflected an unwavering technological optimism. Exhibits for Chrysler and General Motors presented panoramic visions of the city of the future and its avant-garde transport systems. The GM pavilion was a roller coaster ride over a kinetic vision of the atomic US of the 1960s – a monumental landscape punctuated by glass domes, revolving airports and, in tune with its sponsor, seven-lane superhighways. On exiting, visitors were given a badge that read: "I Have Seen the Future."



TRAVEL

The present can learn from the past's utopian visions for the future, says London Design Biennale Director **CHRISTOPHER TURNER**



Digital and physical landscapes merged in Spain's entry to the London Design Biennale, a virtual reality exploration of the city of 2100



In 1964, with Futurama II, GM updated the exhibition to describe future cities underwater, in Antarctica, and on the Moon.

These sci-fi fantasies promised visitors that utopia was the new frontier, just around the corner. Fifty years ago, the 1967 World's Fair, better known as Expo 67, was held in Montreal. It had the theme "Man and his World," a phrase borrowed from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the novelist famous for *The Little Prince*. The Expo opened during the "Summer of Love" with 62 national pavilions, and is often described as the "last of the great World's Fairs." In six months, an astounding 50 million visitors came to see its radical pavilions, filled with the latest gadgets and fashions, making it the most visited exhibition of all time.

DOWN TO EARTH

Unlike those historic fairs that celebrated modernism with an unblinking faith in progress, contemporary fairs have chosen to focus more on the ecological issues facing our planet. No longer

END OF THE FUTURE?
A 1976 fire that damaged Buckminster Fuller's giant geodesic dome, built for the Montreal Expo 67, seemed to symbolize the death of utopian ideals. The blaze burned away the structure's transparent sheath. The dome, operated by Canada as a museum dedicated to the environment, remained closed for over 15 years. It reopened in 1995 and has regained its reputation as a popular attraction

are we promised grand visions of "The World of Tomorrow," "Peace Through Understanding," or the "Dawn of a New Day" – today's visions of the future, still presented in a nationalistic format of discrete pavilions, are far more pragmatic.

Expo 2015 in Milan, for example, chose to focus on "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life," and the theme for the 2017 Expo in oil-rich Astana, Kazakhstan is "Future Energy." The latter poses the important question, "How do we ensure safe and sustainable access to energy for all while reducing CO₂ emissions?" While noble in intention, it is hard to imagine a spectacle of wonder and aspiration emerging in response. Indeed, with its references to World's Fairs of the past, the Astana Expo tells us little about the kind of world future generations want. Instead it seems calculated in its nostalgia; a trade fair for the energy sector disguised as Disney's Epcot theme park.

What happened to the grand, ambitious visions of the future that once so captured the imagination? Visitors to Expo 67 were greeted

by hostesses in sky-blue miniskirts and white go-go boots (feminism was only just on the ascendency) and given a “passport” to the future. This document could be stamped in each of the pavilions visited. The Expo created a miniature and idealized portrait of a unified, utopian planetary community, where visitors circulated as “citizens of the world” – a bubble insulated from the traumas of the civil-rights movement, women’s lib and the war raging in Vietnam.

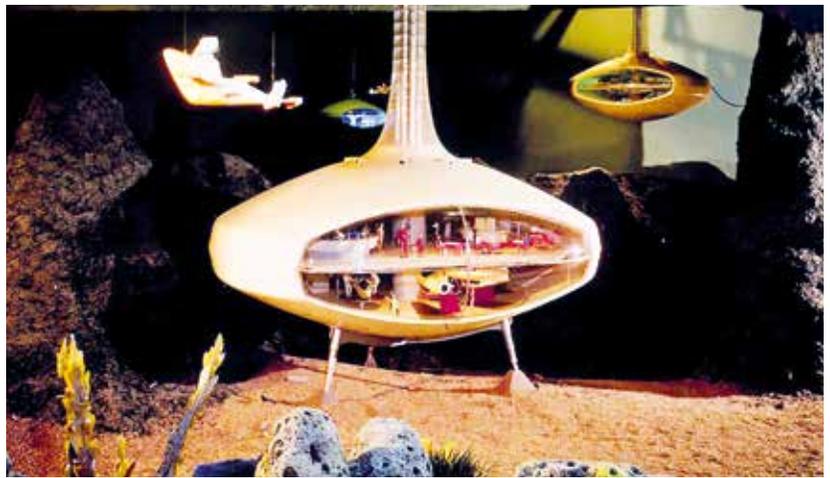
The Expo 67 centerpiece was a huge geodesic dome by the architect, environmentalist, author and visionary Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller, who described himself as a “comprehensive, anticipatory design scientist.” Hundreds of his spherical structures sprang up like mushrooms in the late 1950s and ’60s, serving practical and inspirational roles as homes, museums and even military facilities. Fuller proposed covering mid-town Manhattan, claiming the project would pay for itself in a decade by the money saved from not having to shovel snow. In 1959, a Fuller dome at the American National Exhibition in Moscow was the backdrop for the famous “kitchen debate” between US Vice President Richard Nixon and USSR premier Nikita Khrushchev.

The 62-meter dome at Expo 67, which Fuller described as his “Taj Mahal,” served as the US pavilion and housed paintings by contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol, as well as an artificial moonscape and model of an Apollo space capsule.

The dome was like a thought bubble encapsulating the fragile, utopian dream of modernity. Fuller saw ingenious technology as a way to save humanity from itself. His book, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, accurately described growing pressures to preserve the planet’s finite resources, long before “sustainability” became a catchword.

After the Expo, the US gifted the pavilion to the Canadian government, which maintained it as a tourist attraction. But utopianism was dying, a decline seemingly symbolized in 1976 when the dome was destroyed in a fire during repairs – its transparent acrylic bubble burned away, leaving the metal skeleton, like a half-forgotten dream.

“Utopian” slowly became a term of derision, shorthand for “hopelessly idealistic.” The right-wing philosopher Roger Scruton saw it as a fallacy, “rooted not in intellect, but in emotional needs, which leads to the acceptance of absurdities.” Apocalyptic visions of anti-utopias or dystopias seemed more engaged with the real world. By



SUBMARINE LIFE An exhibit at the World’s Fair in 1964 imagines an underwater Atlantis hotel (top), part of a futuristic General Motors exhibit that also included colonies on the Moon and in space

HUMAN TOUCH was the title of Israel’s exhibit at the London Design Biennale. Bottom, Yaniv Kadosh’s “AIDrop” is a simple system for first-aid distribution of parcels up to 3 kilograms

2005, Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, was calling for an “anti-anti-utopianism,” saying it had become “easier to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism.”

UTOPIA BY DESIGN

When we agreed on the theme for the inaugural 2016 London Design Biennale, a cornerstone of Somerset House’s yearlong Utopia program, we looked back at the heyday of World’s Fairs and wondered if something might be salvaged from utopian thinking. The utopian impulse allows us to escape the blinkers of the present and dream, telling stories about alternative futures that raise important questions about the world in which we live. Designers applying themselves to seemingly impossible problems deserve space to field critical and optimistic solutions. Such creative interventions inevitably foster a sense of social expectation that can promote positive results.

We invited countries (37 nations on six continents participated) to create installations that

interrogated the history of the utopian idea and engaged with some of the fundamental issues faced by humanity, and to suggest solutions to them through design and engineering. Design teams were encouraged to imagine alternative futures, to provoke important questions about the world in which we live. Design isn't a panacea, but it has an innate power to strike up and inform debate, to act as a catalyst toward real change by suggesting inspiring or cautionary futures.

Many of the exhibits reflected on the future of human cities. Mexico, for example, represented by architect Fernando Romero, presented a large-scale model of a sustainable, car-free, utopian city built from scratch on the US-Mexico border, designed for emerging economies to accommodate rapid population growth. It seemed a timely and constructive response to US President-elect Donald Trump's proposed wall.

Santander, Spain, one of the EU's pioneering "smart cities," presented a virtual reality vision of life in 2100, transformed for the better by the data being harvested now. Shenzhen, China, one of the fastest growing cities in the world, proposed to address the problems of the megalopolis with a series of self-sufficient mega-towers that are cities in themselves. For Lebanon, Annabel Karim Kassir looked at the city not from the masterplan, but at street level, creating splinters of utopia that focus on the diverse needs and uses of social space.

CHRISTOPHER TURNER

Dr Christopher Turner is the Director of the London Design Biennale and Deputy Director of the London Design Festival. The former Editor of leading architecture and design journal, *Icon*, and Editor of *Cabinet* magazine, he writes about art, design and culture for the *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian* and the *Sunday Telegraph*.

The London Design Biennale invites nations from around the world to explore the role of design and innovation in our collective future. The second edition will be at Somerset House in September 2018.

Addressing migration, the French designer Benjamin Loyauté visited Syrian refugee camps to make a film about life there that reflected on what he calls "the geopolitics of design." And Israel looked at how to help deliver aid in conflict zones, with a distribution system inspired by the whirling blades of sycamore seeds.

There were also real opportunities to learn from past utopian designs. Russia brought previously unseen Soviet blueprints from the Moscow Design Museum to Somerset House that told of a communist utopia that was never built. Chile recreated a futuristic Operations Room dating from Salvador Allende's short-lived presidency of the early 1970s, a space reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, in which the economy was to be regulated and controlled in real time with the help of a mainframe computer.

These varied visions of utopia at the Biennale together represented a laboratory of ambitious ideas that might, in their way, contribute to making the world a better place. They serve as a firm message of hope and global cooperation, a rebuttal to a world busily embracing isolationist and declinist ideologies – a revival of that restless faith in technological and international progress.

Christopher Turner spoke with **ROSALEE RICH** of **BRUNSWICK ARTS**, Brunswick's advisory firm for the reputation and interests of arts, architecture and design organizations around the world. www.brunswickarts.com

IN A PERFECT WORLD: THOMAS MORE'S UTOPIA



THE PURSUIT OF AN IDEAL SOCIETY dates to ancient times, capturing the imaginations of thinkers from Plato to Arthur C. Clarke. But a 16th century Latin work of fiction and political philosophy was the first to define the idea with the word *utopia*. In it the author describes an island that he names Utopia where citizens shared their excess wealth with one another, dress in modest clothes and regard displays of wealth as vulgar and pathetic.

The book was written by Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), an English lawyer, philosopher and statesman.

Detail of a woodcut illustrated map of Utopia that appeared in the 1518 edition of Thomas More's book

He lays out in detail how his vision of the perfect society would operate, including a form of democracy in which "If any man aspires to any office, he is sure never to compass it." In More's system, groups of families elect a magistrate, and magistrates elect regional chiefs. The people and magistrates elect a Prince to lead each city. Policies for the state must be debated for at least three days and any discussion of these outside of a public sphere is punishable by death.

The society was communal, where entire communities gathered together to share meals twice a day.

More's vision was no utopia by modern standards however, as the freedom of women was limited and slaves were considered essential.