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Challenges for the Design Industry in 2012

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LONDON — If only they had retreated gracefully. When the visual identity of the London 2012 Olympic Games was introduced in 2007, it was accused of looking: a) ugly, b) illegible, c) like a swastika and d) like Lisa Simpson performing an obscene act. And several people with epilepsy reported suffering seizures after seeing the animated version on television.

Did the London 2012 organizers reconsider their choice? If only. Instead, they claimed to have deliberately commissioned an iconoclastic logo, which was ahead of its time, and insisted that the rest of us would appreciate it eventually. Fair enough, you might say, except that I for one have not warmed to it. I said so in one of these columns two years ago and, with only a few months to go before the start of the games, the more often I see that demented swastika (and, infuriatingly, it is very hard to avoid in London these days), the angrier I feel that one of the most visible design projects of 2012 is so disappointing.

Thankfully, there are things to look forward to in design during the new year. Among them is a more promising London icon: the bus designed by Thomas Heatherwick to replace the hated “bendy buses” that have clogged the streets in recent years. Stylistically it is a nod to the beloved Routemaster double-decker bus, which was made from 1956 to 1968. The new bus shares the same red livery and open platform, but will be powered by energy-efficient hybrid technology. The first ones are to go into service next month on Route 38 from Victoria to Hackney.

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Another treat should be the opening in the autumn of the new Delegate's Lounge, financed by the Dutch government, at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Originally completed in 1952 as an informal meeting place for delegates from every U.N. member state, the lounge has been redesigned by a "super group" that includes the product designer Hella Jongerius, the architect Rem Koolhaas, the graphic designer Irma Boom and the design theorist Louise Schouwenberg.

Also in the autumn, E-1027, the beautiful modernist house designed by the early 20th-century Irish architect Eileen Gray on a cliff near Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in southern France, will reopen after years of restoration. And one of the most exciting design exhibitions of the year should be the retrospective of the work of the Hungarian-born designer and theorist György Kepes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. It will explore his pioneering role in the development of the digital images we now see on our computer and phone screens.

Kepes is perfectly cast as a design-history poster boy for 2012 because his zest for experimentation, lateral thinking and technological ingenuity is just what design needs right now. Tantalizing though the U.N. lounge and E-1027 promise to be, the design agenda is dominated by complex long-term issues. There have been few moments in history when design has faced so many challenges and opportunities, and when the rest of the world has been as amenable to allowing designers to tackle them.

The challenges have been around for some time. What can designers do to defuse the environmental crisis by helping us to live more sustainably? Are initiatives like London's hybrid double-decker bus likely to be helpful? Hopefully. Will they be sufficient? No. So, what needs to be done to enable designers to develop more ambitious solutions to our environmental problems, say by reinventing the traffic management system of a big city like London, rather than simply reducing the ecological impact of individual vehicles?

How can designers translate scientific advances into things that can make life easier and more enjoyable? We will see more results of their experiments with nanotechnology, sensors and promising new materials such as organic light emitting diodes in new products due to emerge during 2012. And how will designers respond to future breakthroughs made by the scientists working on the Large Hadron Collider at Cern near Geneva and the Very Large Telescope in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile?

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The same challenges apply to design's role in interpreting leaps in technology. One of Kepes's achievements was to anticipate the growing importance of computers and to try to turn them to our advantage. Many of the most exciting design feats of recent years have done the same, by using digital technology to produce smart devices like the iPad, or the enthralling artificial world of immersive video games, such as Call of Duty.

Yet designers also need to deal with the adverse effects of technology. There have been some advances, such as the development of data visualizations, the dynamic digital images, which help us make sense of huge quantities of highly complex, rapidly changing information. But designers have made little progress with other threats, including inadequate data security, the adverse environmental impact of servers and the flood of personal data produced by social media sites.

Designers must also accelerate their efforts to address social problems at a time of economic turbulence when unemployment is rising and communities are fragmenting. Volunteer groups such as Architecture for Humanity and Project H have made a positive impact, as have the social design projects that have helped to tackle urgent issues like poverty, aging, crime and long-term unemployment. Sadly, many of those programs are now imperiled by public-sector spending cuts.

The practice of design needs to change, too. The continuing debate over the changing definition of design has been constructive, not least by celebrating previously unsung acts of design ingenuity and by encouraging designers to diversify beyond their conventional roles, and to collaborate with different disciplines. But the design community still needs to become more inclusive, less male, less white, less Western, and less focused on the wealthy minority of the global population and more on the people who really need its help.

And let's hope that it learns from the mistakes of the London 2012 design debacle, by listening to what those people have to say.