



FUTURE NOW

Architect Graeme Burgess looks at the egalitarian vision of the mid-century futurists, the broken dreams of post-war architects, and where we might head to next.

Above: Case Study House No. 22: Stahl House by architect Pierre Koenig in the Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles, California. Photo by 'mbtrama' from Upland, CA. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the United States of America.



As a child, I was thrilled by the idea of moon cities occupied by demi-god astronauts wearing space suits, growing cabbages or just looking brainy in front of laboratory benches. We were collectively seduced by sci-fi movie sets of the interiors of spaceships filled with beautiful surfaces, heading towards the unknown. The places looked amazing, so smooth and impossible; science conquering nature.

It is worth revisiting that heroic era of future thinking, exemplified by the Arts & Architecture magazine Case Study House Program (1945–62) and, in the mainstream, The Jetsons cartoons. Back then, the real explorations were taking place on Earth. The future was not really about colonies on the moon: it was about changing society as a whole, a recalibration of lifestyle, technologies and aesthetics. Visionary architects and designers were blasting off to new territories in the world of ideas, leaving chintziness behind.

There was a firm belief that science, technology and sculptural mastery would create a new egalitarian international society. Architects ached to create places that represented that future. Joining them on the journey were film-makers,

manufacturers, and, unbelievably, politicians and decision-makers, ready after the shocks and destruction of the Second World War to pull it all down and start again. Progress was the mantra, imagination the territory. It was a bit of a rush.

And the social promise of this post-war world took material form: mass housing, motorways, airports, giant hospitals, shopping malls, schools for all! Whole new towns, such as Milton Keynes in England, sprang up out of nowhere. The new buildings that concentrated people together were intended to create conditions for happy lives in comfort for everyone. The mass housing typology was also appropriated to create luxury accommodation for the privileged. Amazingly, these places, often shockingly new in their form and material finishes, and off the planet in terms of their design, got funded, supported and built! What was in the water back then?

The ideals of that period went a little wonky for a while. It takes time to allow for a proper understanding of people's needs and desires; perceptions shift and change. All design depends on a balance, an open equation, which we often get 'almost right', while falling a little short of the ideals of the post-war visionaries.

And the application of this new thinking came at a cost. Communities, forced to abandon their old lives in cramped inner cities, had a real connection with those older places, which had been formed over generations. In the 1950s and 1960s these places were painted by the zealous advocates of the future as Victorian slums – unhygienic, crime-infested and broken-down. These same places – the areas of London,

Above: Milton Keynes in England. The new town was designated in 1967, with spectacular mass housing projects.
Photo Paul White / Alamy.



Images clockwise from top:
The Unité d'habitation, Berlin, designed by Le Corbusier, was built in 1959 to help remedy the post-war Europe housing shortage. Photo Manfred Brückels, Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 3.0.

A detail of the Barbican Estate, London. Designed by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon in the 1960s, the complex houses over 4000 residents in 2014 flats, and includes an arts centre, museum, music school, girls' school and public library. Photo Ziko van Dijk.

John Lautner's Chemosphere House – also known as the Malin Residence – built in 1960 in Los Angeles, California. Photo evdropkick, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

Allison Brooks Architects' conceived Ely Court in South Kilburn, London as a medium density, mixed-tenure scheme of 43 dwellings with four building types. It re-establishes the block, street and mews pattern of the archetypal 19th century London suburb. Photo Paul Riddle.

New York, Manchester, Sydney, Melbourne, etc., that still survive – have flourished and are now regarded as picturesque and desirable 'character homes'.

The tower blocks and slab apartments built as social housing, on the other hand, turned out to be high-maintenance, and often less than ideal social environments. The materials used, particularly to finish these buildings, were untested and often outright dangerous. Exploring new ideas was the driver, not taking care of the end users' health and well-being. The designers and builders failed to consider people's social needs, and succeeded in creating high-rise slums. And yet the tower blocks of the 1950s and 1960s, those that have not been torn down, are enjoying a renaissance: they have become retro-future chic, desirable places to live in, celebrated for their hard-out modernist design.

The colonies on the moon have not happened, but the visions created then still thrill, even through their egocentric wackiness; try the architecture of John Lautner in Los Angeles, a master of space-age sculptural form; or the muscular Brutalism of the Barbican, an architecturally designed mass living/working/entertainment complex in urban London. Both are seriously cool, relevant, game-changing designs full of ideas that still inspire.

The boundlessness of the 1960s and 1970s, that sense of all things being possible, was nevertheless a fantasy. We are now more fully aware of the need to responsibly manage the precious resources of our places and the planet. Back then everything was there to be used, but there were often great social ideas underpinning those designs. One of the greatest drivers of social thinking of that time, the post-war ideal of a society that provides support and opportunity for all, is a generous and important concept that needs rehabilitation.

Apartments and other forms of intensive housing will be the future for most people on the planet. The challenge is how to do this well, applying excellent design and planning, and how to make sure that intensive developments can function well as social environments and help uplift our whole society.

We need the enthusiasm of that Space Age generation, and to keep applying the good concepts, to revive the ones that have dropped away, and to do it better. 'Good design for all' should be considered a prerequisite for our world into the future – uplifting us all, as well as creating spectacular spaces for the lucky few who get to commission playful pieces of sculptural architecture. ■