



# Forward THINKING

The global pandemic has given the design community a golden opportunity to recharge and recalibrate. The notion that designers need to act now to create a brighter and more respectful future is on the rise.

By Stephen Todd

**THIS PAGE** A still from the film *Seeing the Wood for the Trees* (2020), part of the *Formafantasma: Cambio* exhibition. Cambio is an ongoing research project investigating sustainability in the timber industry, commissioned by the Serpentine Galleries.

The coronavirus pandemic is not only a health disaster of global proportions — it could also be the circuit-breaker the world requires to kickstart a radical reset. A report from Macquarie University published at the end of April, just as infection rates in Australia began to recede, points to seven positive outcomes from the virus crisis.

Firstly, the environment. Carbon emissions dropped drastically as manufacturing and air travel came to a standstill. Notoriously polluted China reported an 85 per cent increase in days of good air quality; biodiversity increased; Venetians reported seeing fish in their newly clean canals for the first time in decades. (But, despite a lot of memes, no dolphins.)

Connectedness — of common experience but also of digital communication that allowed the majority of those in the architecture and design sectors to keep working — is another plus; innovative business responses one more. The report even posits

the possibility of increased world peace as the United Nations called for an end to war in the face of a common enemy.

Design, of course, thrives in a crisis since finding solutions to problems is the industry's very *raison d'être*. Only weeks after a pandemic was declared on March 11, a small London 3D-printing studio worked out a way to quickly print face shields. It shared the code on an open-source platform and almost immediately design firms worldwide were producing personal protective equipment (PPE) with their prototyping hardware.

Italian architect Carlo Ratti repurposed 6.1-metre-long shipping containers to create intensive-care pods designed to increase hospitals' capacity. In France, designers have refitted some of the nation's TGV trains as mobile hospitals to treat patients as they were moved to regions with more resources.

"Designers work best when there is a unity of mission, a kind of imposed need," Paola Antonelli, senior curator of Architecture >>



<< and Design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, told me just before Easter, from lockdown in Manhattan.

Anne-Laure Pingreoun, the global curator of the A/D/O by Mini design hub in Brooklyn until it was shuttered as a result of COVID-19, recently launched the Alternative Thinkers collective to reimagine how design can proactively create change.

"As governments and traditional systems fail us, we need alternative thinkers to help generate a more inclusive and mindful future," says Pingreoun, who is French. "It is time that designers are recognised as having as critical a role as decision-makers. This platform has been designed to do just that at a moment when we are standing on the brink of change like we have never seen before."

The 20-member group includes British curator and strategist Jane Withers, Italian designers Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin of Formafantasma, American interdisciplinary designer and materials researcher Charlotte McCurdy, LA-based Australian science-fiction artist and "body architect" Lucy McRae, as well as technology/wellness designer Steve Lastro, who is based between New York and Sydney. (Disclosure: I am also a founding member of Alternative Thinkers, which is based in London.)

"With the current ecological, economic and social pressures, we are in need of positive change through the launch of new creative communities and new platforms for designers to share ideas and tackle bigger projects together, which will help shape a more conscious world," says Pingreoun.

As an example of the power of alternative thinking, Lastro is collaborating with Tom Williams (director of Juicy Design in Sydney) on a system of modular kit houses initially for those left homeless after the bushfires that ravaged east-coast Australia this past summer.

**"As governments and traditional systems fail us, we need alternative thinkers to help generate a more inclusive and mindful future"** ANNE-LAURE PINGREOUN

"My focus is to work with the AT (Alternative Thinkers) community, people like Jane Withers on water supply, and Marjan Van Aubel on solar energy," says Lastro. "The goal is to rethink homes from the ground up, incorporating sustainable materials and wellness technology, and also to look at how we can design a flat-pack home in production to be placed on a truck and shipped to site to be assembled based on simple instructions."

Aesthetically, Shedlife shelters are simple and slick, starting at 48 square metres in a combined living-kitchen-dining-bedroom configuration with separate bathroom and laundry.

While the pandemic is symptomatic of the encroachment of humans onto the animal world and the zoonotic diseases (which account for 70 per cent of all human pathogens) that will in all likelihood become more frequent and enduring, Lastro's project is a reminder that the virus is part of a matrix of human malfeasance that includes runaway climate change, rising racial tensions, unbridled consumption and some eight million tonnes of marine plastic pollution every year, choking our oceans.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP A Shed Studio from Shedlife with a combined living, kitchen, dining and bedroom space and separate bathroom and laundry. Shedlife's 86-square-metre Shed 2 includes a bedroom, bathroom, living area, dining area, kitchen and laundry.



In the past few months, China's levels of air pollutants have risen back to pre-lockdown levels, the coronavirus crisis continues in America, Brazil and Russia (authoritarian regimes have proven distinctly inept at coping with pandemics) and despite the UN's best intentions, a battle ceasefire is not an end to war. Warning enough that if we don't leverage the current slowdown, things may simply return to an aberrant pre-crisis "normal".

When I asked designer Marc Newson his reaction to the postponement then ultimate cancellation of this year's Milan Furniture Fair, he responded: "My instant reaction was, 'So what?' Everyone had lost sight of what was good about it in the first place and it had become a feeding frenzy. I think they should cancel it for three years, spend that time really thinking about what the world's most important furniture fair should be in the 21st century, and begin all over again. We don't have to worry that the Milan Furniture Fair won't resurface. We only need to worry that it not simply restart as it was."

That urge for respite in advance of renewal is being felt across the design community; the feeling that if we act right now, the future will be a brighter, cleaner, more respectful and humane place.

"We need to innovate a lot more and not be afraid to voice what we believe in, in order to disrupt the status quo," says Pingreoun.

"We are stronger together!" VL