A cooler planet by design

Many of us get frustrated with the slow pace of international action on climate change. But powerless as we feel, we can still make a difference by rethinking the way we design our lives.

Design is rarely considered when talking about climate change, yet is a significant factor in the economic activities and political decisions that are driving emissions higher.

The World Bank's Turn Down the Heat report warns of the consequences of global temperatures rising by an average of four degrees Celsius by the end of this century.

Let us be clear about one thing - the prospect of a four-degree rise is a conservative prediction.

Many equally reasonable scientists believe it is likely we will face more dangerous changes than that, sooner than we think.

This is where designers and their employers, as well as consumers, have to share responsibility for dealing with climate change.

From handmade to mass production

For most of the past two centuries, design has been the handmaiden to industry.

Whether design has been framed as an applied art, an artisan craft guild tradition, or an industrial art, the purpose of design in an industrial context has been to encourage consumer choice and purchasing.

Public policy and education policy embraced this tradition in 1837 in the United Kingdom, when what is now the Royal College of Art was established as the Government School of Design.

This concept entered the public mind with the Great Exhibition of 1851. In Germany, the birth of the Bauhaus in 1919 was a key moment. In the United States, industrial design education began at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in the 1930s.

In all these places, the role of design was to encourage better-designed products for increased sales.

More people wanting more

Between 1900 and 1950, world population grew from just over one and a half billion people to nearly two and a half billion. In the next half century the population more than doubled, and today it stands at nearly seven billion.

Along the way, something else happened: the world’s wealthy economies shifted from production to consumption, and much of the world’s productive capacity shifted to meet demand.

The design profession had a key role in making products desirable.

At a time when production was the key to prosperity and growth - and while economic growth was seen as the road out of poverty, this made sense.

Back then, the world had enough environmental resources, or “carrying capacity”, to cope with our extra demand to permit growth.

In 1950, 70% of the world’s people lived in rural areas, and it wasn’t until 2008 that more people lived in cities than in rural areas.
A wealthy and growing middle class in North America and Europe powered global economic growth, while much of the world got by on far less.

**Growing pains**

Today, the problem is that the world economy is growing, and many of the seven billion people now alive want the lifestyle that was possible for half a billion in 1950.

By the 1960s, a handful of future-oriented designers understood the problem.

Buckminster Fuller studied the balance between global resources, population and opportunities. He came to the view that the world could support the full population of the time at a high level of comfort, based on comprehensive recycling and reuse of materials in an economy oriented toward values other than consumption.

At the same time, Victor Papanek began to ask why designers were making so many shabby products, focusing on style while wasting resources.

Designers such as Ezio Manzini, Anna Meroni, Tony Fry, and Jurgen Faust now continue the tradition, with encouragement from economists such as Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Lab, while economists such as Jeffrey Sachs look for solutions to sustainable development.

**Built to last**

The answer is simple. While we live in a world that requires economic growth, we do not recognise that economic growth requires sustainable development.

Rather than sell new products repeatedly to the same few wealthy consumers, we could achieve a different kind of growth by selling better and more durable products to larger groups of people.

The world requires a return to a productive ethos for economic growth linked to the reduced resource consumption that will make the world sustainable.

This may be a challenge, but designers can play their part in change by accepting their responsibilities for ethical engagement.

If the World Bank predictions are correct, we have less than half a century left and every year remaining in this half century counts.

I would like to believe that designers are prepared to move from consumption to sustainable development. The alternative is unimaginably worse.