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Better by design?

It is hard to underestimate the importance of design in shaping our contemporary lives. Design is a young profession that came of age with the mass production of consumer goods. In the 19th century, manufacture, though assisted by steam and water power, was labour intensive and driven by the division of the complex processes of artisanal production into repetitive sequences of operations carried out either by hand or with the assistance of machines. It was this division of labour that Marx, Ruskin and Morris objected to on the basis that it alienated the producer from the product of his or her labour, and that it did away with integrity of traditional ways of making. What was produced under this system did not differ radically from what had been previously made in the shops of individual artisans and craftworkers, and design remained something given by tradition. It was only with the modern movement of the early 20th century, that the idea arose that new forms of buildings and the products within them, could change the way we live: that life could be better by design.

The intention of the pioneers of modern design was essentially egalitarian, driven by a belief that industrial production could deliver quality goods to the masses, and thereby improve quality of life, not simply in a material sense, but also aesthetically. By the late 1920s, architects and designers like Rietveld, Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Corbusier and Lubetkin had reinvented the house and its contents in ways that represented a dramatic break with the past and, at first sight, a break with nature, for modernism was rooted in a geometrical purity and simplicity that had little to do with the cursive richness and colourful use of materials that preceded it. In retrospect what we see is not a break with nature *per se*, but a change in style and aesthetic that exploited and celebrated the potential of machine production, that sharpened the distinction between designer and maker, and that heralded a shift in focus from production to consumption.

We live in a world shaped by human beings, and have done so for many years. The landscape of Constable bears little more relation to the 'natural' treescape of pre-agricultural Europe, than does the modern landscape of factory

farming, but it took the 20th century rise of design and the designer to focus attention on the extent to which we shape the world we live in. We do this so completely now, that one of our biggest fears is for the consequences of that shaping process. Out of the designing of consumer goods and fashionable items, of houses and shopping centres, of cars and roads and transport and telecommunications systems, has arisen a level of congestion and stress and pollution that threatens our lives. The challenge for design is no longer to satisfy our material needs and desires, but to reconcile them with the natural forces we previously ignored. It is also to take heed of the new realities that have resulted from technological advances.

In 1959, *The Measure of Man*, by the American industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss, established anthropometrics - the dimensions of 'human scale', including arm and leg reach - as an essential tool for designers. It calculated average types and supported the mass production doctrine 'one size fits all'. For the next 40 years, the goal of industry was not just to supply goods and services for the 'average' consumer, but to do so more efficiently and more profitably than its competitors, and increasingly on a global scale. To such an extent that international brands are now more important and valuable than the products they promote. However, in recent years, the idea that this trend represented progress has been increasingly challenged. Today we are beginning to realise just how damaging and excluding the 'universal types' of much 20th century design have been for those on the margins of society,

and just how destructive of our environment and cultural distinctiveness has been the growth of consumerism.

A key group, marginalised by many of the design developments of the 20th century, is older people. The complaints from members of U3A are robust and pointed: packaging is difficult, if not impossible, to open, labels are hard to read, as are texts in galleries and museums. Public transport is not readily accessible, older passengers get thrown around on buses because drivers are not adequately trained. Cars are not easy to get in and out of, and high boots make luggage and shopping hard to handle. Public announcements are difficult to hear, instructions on medical products are effectively illegible, videos and mobile phones are excessively fiddly to use, and instruction manuals singularly incomprehensible. Correcting these flaws would improve life for everybody, not just older people.

For the past 8 years, the Royal College of Art and U3A have conducted a unique collaboration, beginning in 1993 with an exhibition entitled '*The Creative Powers of Age*'. This was followed by '*user forums*' at the RCA, which brought together young designers and U3A members in a format where ideas could be discussed, prototypes evaluated, trials and test carried out and market potential evaluated. These meetings were not just practical, but enjoyable, and offered an environment where young and old could collectively challenge stereotypes of age and youth. They also supported an annual competition at the RCA, inaugurated in 1993. Its purpose was to encourage young designers to take into account the needs and aspirations of older people. This was an important step, because the RCA is the leading post-graduate university of art and design in the world. Over 90% of its graduates go on to professional practice in their field of study. For example, every Pacific-rim car manufacturer has at least one RCA graduate in their design team.

The challenge was to develop designs that would integrate older people into the mainstream of society, rather than separate them out from it. What we needed to encourage this was an identity for the competition that would remind young designers that older people are not a separate species, but simply themselves further on in the life-course. The concept of '*design for our future selves*' became not just the title for the competition, but caught the imagination of designers and design schools around the world.

The collaboration with U3A, and the idea of young designers working *with* older people is now well accepted in design education as a valuable spur to new thinking and innovation. The concept of '*design for our future selves*' proved to be powerful in other ways too. It allowed us to identify a range

of people who were 'excluded' from conventional design thinking: not just older people, but disabled people, and those marginalised by changing technologies and changing patterns of working and living. It allowed us to ask questions about the nature and extent of design 'exclusion', and to begin to think about ways of countering that. And we found that these ideas chimed with the concerns of industry about how to meet the challenges thrown up by a period of rapid social and technological change. How, for example, can the designers of the fifth terminal at Heathrow airport ensure it is welcoming and comprehensible to people arriving from around the globe, one third of whom will, according to current passenger trends, be aged over 60?

With increased support from our major sponsor and other industrial and voluntary sector partners, these new design developments are being explored at the RCA through the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre. The centre builds on the work of the original DesignAge programme, and has expanded its activities to focus on 'inclusive design', the intention being to ensure that in the future the design of products, services, environments and communication systems, takes into account the needs and aspirations of the widest possible range of potential users.

***Roger Coleman, Director
The Helen Hamlyn Research Centre,
The Royal College of Art***

Languages of the Scots

What is your mother tongue? For Scots this is a more complicated question than many might think. In the North and West of the country the answer might well be Gaelic but for the majority it is a mixture of Scots and English - and that does not just mean English spoken with a Scottish accent.

For several centuries Gaelic was indeed the language of the majority. Only the south east of the country spoke a version of English that came to Scotland with the expansion of the ancient kingdom of Bernicia from Northumberland into what is now the Borders and Lothians of Scotland. This language, eventually to be called "Scots", developed independently from English under the Normanising influence of the mediaeval kings. It developed an extensive vocabulary and distinctive pronunciation much of it

influenced by extensive trading links with the Low Countries and the Baltic states and by the contacts arising from the "Auld Alliance" between Scotland and France.

Today Gaelic is a minority language confined to parts of the West and the Islands though there is also a strong presence in Glasgow. Gaelic does not have the same force in Scottish national life as Welsh in Wales but it is still a very important part of modern Scotland. There are several Gaelic TV programmes (some with English sub-titles) and the National Mod is the annual focus for Gaelic culture. Gaelic is taught in many schools and in some it is the medium of teaching.

However, Scots began to lose ground to standard English at the time of the Reformation when an English translation of the Bible was used in church services. The process of anglicisation of Scots continued with the union of the crowns in 1606 when the Scottish court moved to London and even more so in 1707 with the union of the parliaments. At this time Scots was perceived to be coarse and provincial with courtiers and the nobility opting for "polite English". This attitude continued well into the 20th century when many schoolchildren were effectively bilingual, speaking playground and classroom English as required. In the 19th century it became fashionable to respect the speech forms of different parts of the country and by the 1930s there was a move to recover Scots as a legitimate language. This was particularly true in literature where Hugh MacDiarmid emerged as probably Scotland's greatest 20th century poet.

Whether Scots is really a language is a matter for continuing debate though there is evidence that there are greater differences between Scots and English than between, say, Danish and Norwegian. However, the long literary tradition, beginning with John Barbour's epic poem "The Brus," the story of Robert the Bruce and Sir James Douglas, is often cited as evidence of Scots as a language with its own powerful vocabulary and speech patterns. Robert Burns, of course, wrote extensively in Scots though he also used English and in some poems, e.g. Tam o'Shanter, both.

While traditional Scots may not be heard outside country areas today, the language is now being given more attention in schools. The Scottish National Dictionary Association has recently published "Grammar Broonie - A guide tae Scots grammar" for children. (Polygon SNDA 1999) The title recalls from Scots folklore the role of "broonies" as supernatural

helpers. The Association's website www.snda.org.uk opens an electronic

door to the subject for those who like to "stravaig the net".

The daily speech of many, possibly the majority, of Scots will easily and naturally include many Scots words: for example, the word "pinkie" (of Dutch origin) to describe the little finger or "dreich" to capture the misery of a dull, rainy day or "bairn" for child. So what does Scots actually look like? The following is an extract from a translation of Corinthians 13 in the New Testament by W.L.Lorimer in 1983 (Penguin Religion 1985).

Luve is patientfu; luve is couthie¹ an kind, luve is nane jailous; nane sprosie²; nane bowdent³ wi pride; nane mislaired⁴; nane hamedrauchtit⁵; nane toustie⁶. Luve keeps nae nickstick⁷ o the wrangs it drees⁸; finnds nae pleisur i the ill wark o ithers; is ey liftit up whan truth dings⁹ lies; kens ey tae keep a caum souch¹⁰; is ey sweire¹¹ tae misdout¹² ; ey howps¹³ the best; ey bides¹⁴ the warst¹⁵.....

¹friendly ⁹beats

²boastful ¹⁰keep calm

³puffed up ¹¹reluctant

⁴rude ¹²distrust

⁵selfish ¹³believes

⁶testy, irascible ¹⁴tolerates

⁷reckoning ¹⁵the worst

⁸suffers

In Perth U3A there is a thriving group Mither (Scots for mother) Tongue which provides a regular forum for discussion on the language as it was used in the past and as it is today. However, the group does not confine itself to Scots. The mother tongue of other parts of the UK are of equal interest. The main objective is to give members a chance to consider their heritage and perhaps rescue words and phrases that are in danger of disappearing under the influences of a largely anglicised (and americanised) media.

Bruce Cannon, Perth U3A

Great Art Galleries of the World

A group of about a dozen of us decided to follow in Sister Wendy's footsteps. We meet as an Art History group twice a month to look at paintings afresh. As our name implies, we are touring the national galleries of the world, learning not only about the history of these institutions, but more especially about some of the painters represented in them and examples of their works. Sessions include talks, art books, videos, individual project work, plus a few lively questions.

So far we have looked at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and the National Gallery in London. Future visits will take in the Prado (Madrid), Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna), Hermitage (St. Petersburg), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), Louvre (Paris), Alte Pinakothek (Munich), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the National Gallery in Washington.

We started with early pre-Renaissance altarpieces by Cimabue and Giotto di Bondone, going on to the introduction of perspective in art as seen in the paintings of Piero della Francesca. A video film took us through the towns where this painter was active and examined the influence of mathematics and geometry in his paintings.

In another film Neil McGregor, Director of the National Gallery in London, conducted us around the gallery's Sainsbury Wing, explaining how its pre-1510 paintings illustrate the medieval world in which the Christian faith and everyday existence were inextricable.

In another session members gave short talks on Renaissance painters of their choice such as Botticelli, Tintoretto, and Caravaggio. From Renaissance times we shall go on to include Dutch and Flemish painting of the 17th century, Spanish masters like El Greco, and the lesser known sphere of American art.

As the coordinator of the group I had the very good fortune to be accepted on the U3A's first online educational course, "Italian Painting 1400 –

1600". This proved not only to be a most exciting learning experience for me personally, but also an invaluable asset in the development of our local study group. My thanks and congratulations are due to Audrey Loraine and Paul Baron for the excellent planning and presentation of this course, which I would heartily recommend to all who might consider applying to take part next year.

Roy Walker, Buckingham and District U3A

U3A online Courses

Design for your life

I have added a new dimension after taking part in the U3A project, Design/Age. In conjunction with the Royal College of Art I have been running a local U3A group and attending meetings since its beginning in 1992.

I happened to be visiting Australia when the new idea of U3A online courses for isolated older people was first conceived. U3A tutor/writers were needed and it struck me that the Design/Age project would make ideal material. I volunteered to write a course.

As I am not a professional designer I asked for support from the RCA. Roger Coleman, the Director of Design/Age, was enthusiastic about using this medium to extend the project and promptly agreed to set up a U3A forum on his website so that our members could discuss design matters. This is still running and is open to all U3A members.

My course was edited and entitled "Design in your Life" to emphasise its practical and accessible nature. The first course went online to Australian U3A students in 1999 and was well received. For the second run of the course in 2000, I was allowed to experiment by opening it to overseas students, including the UK. This course had students from six other countries, UK, USA, Finland, Germany, Holland and Italy. In addition, I experimented with U3A Design/Age groups. All this experience was useful when devising our own online courses. All twelve Australian U3A online courses are now available to our U3A members for a small fee (as reported in the last edition). Apply to www.u3aonline.edna.edu.au or www.u3aonline.org.au

In addition, "Design in your Life" and also the new UK online course "Art History: the Italian Renaissance" will be presented to our own U3A members in September 2001.

To develop our own online courses we need more volunteer tutor/writers. There is scope for another online course on a design topic, perhaps architecture or industrial design. Volunteers will receive support and encouragement.

Jean Thompson

e-mail: jean.thompson@pop3.hiway.co.uk

A different way to learn Art History

When first I was introduced to Art History it was as a year's preparation for the School Certificate examination. It was war time. In common with many families then, we were not all together and my sister and I were at school far from home. The languid art mistress, a frustrated artist, lectured the class from her dais and passed round post cards of paintings. The subject was "Renaissance Art." This was the beginning of what has become a major interest in my life but the possibility of seeing the paintings that were illustrated on the cards seemed remote in the extreme.

Indeed, it was not until just over twenty years ago that the riches in the Vatican Museum and the Uffizi in Florence were revealed to me. Since then several other great cities have added their treasures to my memory. These later ones have been enhanced by a store of information about the works, which has often been acquired by researching for U3A Art Appreciation courses. My growing collection of art books is a precious part of the resources.

Both travelling to the places where the works are housed and buying beautifully illustrated books are expensive indulgences, of course. Now, with the wider ownership of computers and modestly priced modems, an almost limitless store of paintings, sculptures and architecture is available to anyone interested who has the hardware. If you do not know it yet, go to www.artcyclopedia.com to start.

It was the richness of the collection of images, along with my background

knowledge, which encouraged me to venture into the relatively unknown area of writing an on-line course, when the proposition was put to me. It required guidelines from U3A Australia, the pioneer of on-line courses for isolated third age learners, Jean Thompson's experience and encouragement, and some concentrated thinking before the eight units were produced.

This is the moment when the first run is over; the "pilots" have tried the course and evaluated it; the period of revision is starting; the plans for repeating it are being made. Tutoring even a small number of students is time-consuming but enormously rewarding and fascinating. However the task will need to be shared in the future for the wider distribution of the course.

The aim of the U3A is that there will be a number of such courses, directed towards both individual learners, especially those unable to attend normal U3A meetings, and group leaders seeking support materials. There is a plan for training and supporting new writers. All that is required is for the volunteers to appear.

Audrey Loraine, Arts Network Co-ordinator

Design Groups

Design Age Network

Since September 1999, I have sent out six newsletters to all those who were part of the Design Age Network, or have since joined. There were twenty correspondents on my original list and I am pleased to say there are now forty.

Last year at the U3A Conference, our Design Research Project was launched under the guidance of the Royal College of Art, to examine domestic doorway design. This was a large undertaking. First of all we had to compile the questionnaire, then collect and analyse the findings, a copy of which was sent to each participating U3A. We have since, again under

the guidance of the RCA, looked at the findings and come to some conclusions. We will shortly be making this information available to the building industry, in the hope that they will take note of the difficulties experienced with thresholds, especially high ones. A copy of these conclusions will be sent to members of the Design Age Network with the next Newsletter.

I am pleased so many U3As now have their own Design Group, some of which include Architecture under the same umbrella. I hope that another project will be forthcoming in the not too distant future, but Bromley U3A and I will not be undertaking the analysis this time. Please can we have some volunteers!

Thelma Wade, Co-ordinator U3A Design Age Network

Modern Design – Sheffield U3A

During the last four years the group has met monthly to look at a history of design from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. We have been especially interested in architecture but also relate this to changes in the urban scene, interiors including furnishings and kitchen equipment and also the needs of an older population.

We took 1890 as a starting point with Art Nouveau and the English Arts and Crafts

Domestic Door Design

The aim of the research was to establish the proportion of domestic main entrance doorways with a level threshold, the number reporting an accident on entering or leaving, whether the door and the letterbox conformed to published standards and whether more original or replacement doors had a level threshold.

Twenty-two U3As took part and returned 201 questionnaires. Only 27% of doors had a level threshold; most were made of wood and were up to 20

years old. Most replacement doors did not have a level threshold and only about 40% had letterboxes conforming to Post Office standards. 63% of doors inspected had a handle, 73% a window, 19% a spyhole and 60% a security chain.

movement. Recordings from television enabled us to take a look at Art Deco, Frank Lloyd Wright and Edward Lutyens. We found U3A resources particularly useful with a loan of videos on the Bauhaus, Aalto and Norman Foster. One of our members with a Fine Arts degree related developments in modern art to changes in design styles. In general all members were encouraged to find a special topic of interest, perhaps the modern kitchen and garden or changes in transport and to include talks in the programme. We have visited local manufacturers and enjoyed a long weekend in Glasgow to study the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

There has been a growing friendship with Sheffield Hallam University which

provides courses on product design, packaging and metalwork. Visits by the group to their workshops have brought us into regular contact with students who are keen to learn about the needs of older people. In turn, they have been very welcome in our homes.

As we approach our fifth year there is a need to take a break, reflect on the many design topics we included in our programme, but increase our contact with a generation of new designers. If any U3A groups would like to exchange ideas, especially those emerging in the North and Midlands, please give me a call.

Peter Barclay, 0114 230 4327

Design for all Ages – U3A in London

Our group has been active for about five years and has tried to tackle the issues of independent living from several angles.

We discuss examples of "bad" design and their impact on active life. Among the issues we have tackled are public transport, product design, print and packaging. The group discusses these and invites experts from

each of these fields to talk to us about the way in which they make design decisions. On several occasions we have offered our help as a user forum.

We have produced a leaflet on museum signage and design and have distributed it to curators of some of the major museums and galleries in London. Although we have not been credited with the success, improvements have been noted. We have also tackled concert and theatre programme design. The National Theatre, among others, has begun to take notice!

Collaboration with the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art has been very fruitful. We meet the students and assess their designs and suggest improvements. One member of our group has been on the jury of the Students' Exhibition for several years. This collaboration continues.

Other initiatives have included spending a whole day, with cameras, at the Barbican. We produced a refurbishing project which would make the Barbican more user-friendly. It included photographs of unsatisfactory aspects and suggestions for changes.

A similar exercise was undertaken with three groups visiting three London hospitals and coming up with a plan for improved signposting and direction finding. These were submitted to the appropriate departments of each hospital for consideration.

We have had lectures and discussions with experts from Arriva Bus Co., and a private chair designer. We have also visited several design studios. The group has built up a close relationship with the London University Institute of Gerontology which has a team developing new engineering products for independent living. These have included an electronic direction finder for hospitals and a prototype of a stair-aid which assists the climbing and descent of stairs.

There are many ways of running a "design for all ages" group. No design experience is required. It offers an opportunity for using ones eyes, for innovative thinking and, who knows, it may help to change our lives. It is also fun!

A valuable policy paper on the subject of "Living Longer - the new context for design" has just been published and is useful for U3A groups interested in the subject. It is available from the Design Council, 34 Bow Street, London WC2E 7DL. You can also consult the Design Council website

www.designcouncil.org.uk.

Marion Bieber

Design for us – Maidstone U3A

Most of us go into a shop several times a week so if opening shop doors is difficult it has quite an effect on our lives. While automatic doors are increasingly used in larger, and a handful of smaller, shops, frequently they are installed at only one entrance with more conventional doors at others. Shops in air-conditioned malls do not need doors during the hours of business but still account for only a minority of shops. So most of the shops we need to enter still have ordinary, conventional doors, of which there is quite a variety!

As part of our Maidstone U3A Design Group's study of access to buildings, we started looking at "ease of opening shop doors" and have continued to do so for some three years.

First of all, we discovered that some of our U3A members found appreciable difficulty in opening the door(s) to some Maidstone shops. In isolated cases it was severe enough to deter the person concerned from ever entering one particular shop again. Faced with such observations, the group decided to find out whether, or not, the problem encountered was widespread.

Members of the group (equal numbers of men and women) examined a sample of 50 different premises in central Maidstone, looking at how easily the customer access door(s) could be opened. Out of the 50 premises assessed, 12 had doors sufficiently hard to open as to cause some concern, while 4 were very hard to open. It should be added that none of the assessors was disabled in any way; they were simply able-bodied, active and of retirement age.

Recognizing that our door assessments were necessarily subjective, we set about relating them to the forces and torques involved when the doors were opened. Doors were selected so as to cover the range from 'easy' to 'very hard' and re-assessed to check that their characteristics had not changed since the first assessment. The force and torque required to open each of the selected doors was then measured. Force measurements were

made using a spring-based kitchen scales, giving adequate accuracy. Distances (to obtain the torque) were measured using an ordinary tape-measure.

As expected, there was broad agreement between the subjective assessments, on the one hand, and the force and torque measurements, on the other. Of more practical significance, we found that the doors we considered to have a satisfactorily low opening force (and opening torque as well) complied with the opening moment requirements of the current British and European Standard for door closers, BS EN 1154: 1997, 'Building hardware – Controlled door closing devices - Requirements and test methods', whereas doors that we considered had an unsatisfactorily high opening force (and opening torque) did not comply.

Put the other way round, doors meeting the British and European Standard should be satisfactory for older, active, able-bodied people to open. We believe this is an important conclusion that needs to be impressed on all those concerned with the building or the renovation of business premises, and perhaps some residential ones as well.

We shall be pleased to hear from any other U3A that has looked into the ease of opening of shop doors, or is thinking of doing so.

Robert E. Gee

Design Group – Bromley U3A

A small group of people interested in design, started meeting in 1997. As is usual in U3A groups we come from different backgrounds and have different interests. Some have manufacturing, industrial or design educational experience but we are all interested in improving the quality of design in everyday life.

It has not been easy to maintain momentum within the group but we have now established successful links with the Royal College of Art, the University of East London and the Royal Society of Art. We work with the students from the inception of their designs through to the testing of full size test rigs. Projects we have helped with include domestic design; household items, kettles, irons, cutlery, crockery, furniture; transport, both

individual and community; clothing, communications, access to buildings, leisure activities, signage, packaging, printed material, etc. From September we will be working with students from the Royal Society of Art. This has been challenging but rewarding. We have all learned a lot and extended our knowledge of up to date technology, particularly in the field of computers. We enjoy working with the students and find that our contributions and ideas are welcomed and acted upon. We really feel that we are part of the design process and the students accept that good design should include everyone.

We have visited the Design Museum, the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture and shops selling items specifically for the less able. Our programme is very flexible although we have a regular monthly meeting with visits in between. Two of our members have been interviewed by I.D. E.O., an international design company doing research into human factors relating to design. A visit to their offices is planned for the whole group in the autumn.

We have worked on display work as participant in UEL's stand at the Innovate 2001 exhibition held at Earls Court in June. Last year we set up a display at Bromley's 10th anniversary celebrations showing what we were doing with the students and local groups. Our next project involves the Churchill Theatre, Bromley, our local U3A Art group and a local school. We hope to collaborate in the design of advertising and programme material and mount a display within the theatre.

At our meetings we share our thoughts about new items we have tried or seen and have watched videos about Design and Technology. We monitor aspects of design within the Borough e.g. commenting on signage, bus shelters, access to public buildings and facilities.

With support from the RCA we undertook a research study about entry into domestic doorways. The whole group participated in designing the questionnaire, not an easy task and the project was launched at last year's National Conference. The collation and interpretation of the results involved much time and effort but the complete report is now finished and we are hoping that it will be available to everyone on the RCA database. Our aim was to produce evidence that can be used by architects, builders, manufacturers and enable the public at large to be able to purchase replacement doors that do not add to the difficulties of accessing domestic housing.

Our target for next year is to further strengthen and develop our connections with local educational establishments and start working with the RSA. Design is a demanding and challenging in terms of time and effort but we think the rewards make it worthwhile.

Sylvia Owens

Resource Centre News

In this issue of SOURCES the focus is on design and its relevance to many of the subject areas studied by U3A members. The Resource Centre has numerous items that could be used by groups interested in design in art, architecture, engineering and technology. Much of our material is interdisciplinary in its coverage and could be used by groups studying very different subjects. We have just added two new videos to stock which illustrate this very well. They are about the Eden project in Cornwall and cover all aspects of the design, construction and planting of this centre. I am aware that many U3As have visits planned and some, I know, are going to look at the architecture and design of the futuristic domes, while others are science or environmental groups looking at the creation of an ecosystem. Gardening groups also are planning trips to see plants imported from all over the world. The videos are available for loan for three weeks. If there is very great demand for them I will purchase extra copies.

Genetics

I have mentioned before a series of six BBC videos we have on genetics. These are ideal as both an introduction and an overview of the subject. However they were made for a general audience and do not cover cell biology in very great detail. We have therefore purchased four scientific videos produced for sixth form and university use which explore DNA and genetics. They have been highly recommended by a retired biology teacher who has previewed them for us. If you would like a list of the material we have in stock on genetics, or the complete science list, please write to the Resource Centre with your request.

Geology

In the past few months we have added many new sets of slides to our collection of stock on geology. Two, in particular, have been recommended by Isabel Markham, the Geology Network Co-ordinator. They are "The Geology of Britain" and "The Geology of South Eastern England". One set comes with notes, the other with a large and well illustrated book. These and all our other slides and videos are included in the Geology Resource list.

Meditation and Religion

These two subjects do not necessarily go together but in fact there is an overlap between some new material we have on both subjects. Tending U3A have been studying world religions and acquired some interesting videos on Buddhism and Meditation from the Meridian Trust which promotes the serious study of the Buddhist way of life. They have now passed these on to the Resource Centre and they are available for loan. You may also remember an article on Meditation in a recent issue of SOURCES by a member who recommended it to improve both physical and mental health. She suggested we purchase a pack called "Learn to Meditate". It includes four sixty-minute audiotapes and an instruction manual. If you would like to start a meditation group these materials would be very useful.

Literature and Cinema

Over the past three years I have been slowly collecting the plays of Shakespeare on video. We now have thirty of them. Many of the lesser known plays were bought at the request of groups who have been unable to find copies in local libraries or video shops. We also have videos on the building of the Globe theatre, the life of Shakespeare and audiocassettes of talks and lectures on his work. All this material is on our new Shakespeare Resource List which we would be happy to send to anyone who is interested in the playwright for literary or historical study.

We do not purchase feature films for the Resource Centre (other than foreign films with subtitles for language groups) but we can purchase

material on the history of the cinema as this is not widely available elsewhere. At the request of a U3A group leader I have acquired a set of three videos entitled "The Other Hollywood", about the birth and development of cinema in Europe in the twentieth century. It includes rarely seen footage from early films and interviews with pioneers of the industry. I know that many U3As have members studying films. They would enjoy this rather unusual series.

Open University material

This is a reminder that the Resource Centre will be taking over responsibility for all OU material after the Manchester Conference. If you have sets you no longer require please feel free to return them to the National Office. You do not need to store them until another group requests them as you did under the Swap Shop scheme. We now have space to keep them until they are needed. I look forward to meeting as many people as possible at the National Conference, and if you wish to bring your OU material to Manchester we shall be able to bring it back to London by van, saving you the cost of postage.

Elizabeth Gibson

***Resource Centre Manager
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Who does not use the Resource Centre?

In April, 2001, I was involved with the production of a survey conducted by the Resource Centre to investigate usage and non-usage by U3A groups. I based my final dissertation for a Library Degree on this survey. A postal questionnaire was distributed to chairpersons of U3As whose groups had never used the Resource Centre. The intention was to discover whether local information sources were currently providing sufficient back-up services to subject groups. The results proved that subject groups usually

structure their meetings, use non-book resources and use the Resource Centre as a back-up for local information sources.

The objective of the survey was also to raise the profile of the Resource Centre and to provide user statistics and information about membership. The survey has already increased the membership of the Resource Centre by 4% to cover 66% of all U3A groups in the UK. This figure is predicted to rise steadily over the next few years as more U3As become aware of the free services the Resource Centre has to offer. The results compiled from the return of questionnaires have been quite comprehensive and have provided invaluable information about user needs, group structures and content of group study.

Thanks to all the chairpersons of U3As who took time to answer the questionnaires on which the survey was based. We are grateful for your help.

Lydia Pappas, Resource Centre Assistant

Organising a Science Course

Many U3A science groups cover a wide variety of topics over the year; it is easier to find a speaker for one meeting than a specialist to run a term's course, and sooner or later every member finds something of special interest to them. However, I recommend spending a few weeks looking at the very topical subject of genetics.

If you have no specialist among you, borrow some or all eight, of the videos "Cracking the Code" at the Resource Centre. Made by the University of British Columbia, they offer a fascinating layman's account of research projects all over the world. The Human Genome, DNA, the importance of genes in sex variations, evolution, cancer control, conquering parasites as well as genetic diseases, and using animals and plants to manufacture vital drugs, are all introduced to us by their Professor of Genetics. He visits each country to meet researchers, doctors and patients, including our own Professor Robert Winston in his fertility clinic, Dolly, the sheep in Scotland, plant enthusiasts from deserts to jungles and many others. Ask the Resource Centre for the Starter Pack on Genetics to guide you through.

Excellent free publications with up-to-date information on genetics may be obtained from

The Wellcome Trust on 020 7611 8500

and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBRSC) on 01793 413302. The latter allows free photocopying.

Phyllis Babb

Architecture

Bromley U3A

Architectural history always seems to be a subject of interest to retired people. In Bromley U3A this is no exception. In response to interest expressed in forming a group a retired architect member agreed to start regular monthly meetings at the beginning of 1996 with a broad overview of the main architectural periods and styles in this country. The material used comprised black and white overhead transparencies of examples taken from books. These were supplemented by his own graphic and text material which also formed the basis of handouts for members to keep.

With the basic knowledge we acquired from that "Foundation Course" we are now better able to appreciate our built heritage and enjoy our visits to buildings of interest in our region and our annual highlight is the residential tour when we go away for four days to visit buildings further afield. One of these has been to Norwich where there was much to see in the old city. By way of contrast we also visited the modern University of East Anglia campus which includes the Sainsbury Centre designed by Sir Norman Foster. We also took the opportunity to visit Holkham Hall, a fine 18th century Palladian house by William Kent and some interesting North Norfolk churches. The trip was a very

enjoyable architectural experience involving a number of styles from several centuries. Other residential tours have included visits to Bath, Bristol, Bradford-on-Avon, Hereford, Worcester, Ludlow and surrounding areas.

This year we are visiting some of the notable buildings in and around Peterborough and Stamford.

Since our somewhat modest "black and white" start things have progressed considerably and now always in colour! We mainly use guest speakers and some of our own members who give talks on their own preferred subjects. Consequently we have necessarily moved away from "study" towards "appreciation". Subjects have included Kentish traditional farm buildings, the unusual works of the Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi and English castles. We shall shortly be looking at Georgian London and American skyscrapers.

Whilst we have not undertaken further structured study since the Foundation Course, recommended book lists and information on videos and television programmes are made available to members wanting to pursue further study independently. A regular News Sheet is also produced covering events and other items of architectural interest.

Architecture continues to be a popular subject at Bromley and until recently there has been a long waiting list of those wanting to join the group. Happily at the beginning of this year a second group was started to accommodate them.

Peter Luckens

Merton U3A

The Architecture Group has been running for over a year now. The organiser has followed his own inclinations and concentrated on new buildings and the people who make them. He has found a few practices willing to present aspects of their work, and has found quite a few eminent practitioners, not all retired, willing to talk to a small group, limited to 16 by the size of his front room.

As there are many new and good buildings in and around London, the fortnightly meetings are alternately held on a site. The problem of visual presentation, critical for architecture, is normally solved with slides and/or a domestic TV set wired to a cheap b/w security camera. The camera is poised above the speaker's table so that he can display magazine or book

illustrations. One speaker brought an impressive "power-point" computer system (lap-top plus LCD projector) but this level of equipment is beyond the means of this U3A.

Martin Funnell

Library Resources for the Lifelong Learner

Public libraries in the UK saw their 150th anniversary last year. Britain was in the forefront of public libraries from the start, and remained so until after the last war, when several countries in northern Europe - the Netherlands, and all the Nordic countries - began to overtake them. During the Thatcher years, in common with other public services, their income decreased sharply, at the same time as books and periodicals saw increases well above inflation.

More recently they have had far more support from the government - the Prime Minister himself stated their importance for lifelong learning and for Britain's future information society - and direct government money is funding a programme to network all public libraries within the next two or three years. Money for 'traditional' activities like the provision of books, and more recently sound and video recordings, still has to come through local authorities, which have been severely cash-strapped for some years, and rarely see libraries as a high priority compared with, say, housing, education, roads and policing. As a result expenditure on books has suffered a decline of 50% over the last 12 years.

The internet is a fantastic source of information. Nearly all public libraries now offer access to computers and the internet, usually by advance booking and for a limited time. Demand has often far outstripped the provision of terminals, even though much of the public is still unaware of these facilities. Not only can one tap vast quantities of information, but help (much needed in the early stages) in computer use is offered by library staff. The internet has to be used with care: the quality of websites ranges from the very good to the very bad, from authoritative information to propaganda for very unworthy causes; but guidance is often offered here too. The importance of this service cannot be overstressed: although more and more people have computers and online access at home, there are very many who do not, especially older people, and if we are to avoid a huge divide between the information haves and have-nots the public library is

the only means by which it is likely to be bridged. The dangers of information illiteracy must be avoided at all costs.

But the bread-and-butter business of public libraries is still book provision. Perhaps it will always be; for while various technological prophets keep telling us that 'print is dead', books keep being produced in ever-increasing quantities. The number of different titles produced in the UK was just over 110,000 in 1999, compared with 65,000 in 1990 and 48,000 in 1980. (One of the fastest-growing subject areas is, paradoxically, computers and their use.) It is to the credit of the government that targets have been set which public libraries are obliged to reach; these include the number of books in broad categories, for example 57 additions of adult non-fiction and 88 of adult fiction per year per 1,000 population. In many places provision would have to increase dramatically to meet these standards - in one county, for instance, the 55,000 items currently acquired per year would have to increase to 92,000, an increase of no less than 68%.

One result of the internet is that physical distance from sources of information does not matter so much to people who have access to the internet. This is not wholly true even for such people; by no means everything is available on the internet, and there is some material that may be accessible in this way but needs to be read in printed form. Novels are the most obvious examples, but not the only ones. Quite a few books (including novels) are now accessible electronically; they can be downloaded on to a personal computer, or may be available on a so-called 'e-book', a machine about the same size as a hardback novel (there are several of these machines on the market, all incompatible with one another). Anyone who tries to read more than a few pages of a book in this form soon longs for a normal printed volume. So physical proximity is still important, particularly for older age groups, especially where public transport is inadequate; and the many branch closures that have occurred are therefore a serious matter.

Public libraries are not the only resources that might be called on. Some libraries (increasingly called by some such name as 'information centres') of institutions of higher education allow non-members of the institution to use them for consultation or even for borrowing, usually on payment of an annual fee (of the order of £100). They nearly always require some declaration of a real need to use them - for example, you may be writing an article on a local history topic. In fact, however, the collections of academic libraries are accessible to ordinary public library users without the need to visit them, by means of interlibrary loans and photocopies - as are the massive resources of the British Library Document Supply Centre near

Boston Spa (near Wetherby in West Yorkshire). If your public library does not have the book or journal you want, it should normally be available in a few days. With an increasingly networked public library system, this is beginning to apply to information as well as books.

The public library has been called 'the university of the people'. As we all know in U3A, an increasing proportion of the people consists of older and retired people who want to keep themselves informed and keep their brains alive. For many of U3A's activities, information is required, and the public library is the obvious one-stop source of information, for leisure and enlightenment alike. Recent surveys in 1998 and 2000 show that over-65s account for 16% of borrowers, but a higher proportion of heavier borrowers, and that their borrowing is increasing faster than any age group except the 6-11 year-olds. I might have said "only 16%" – it ought to be much higher.

The public library, both as a local resource and in its recently much enhanced role as a gateway to national resources, is especially vital for us. It is necessary for us all to know what our public library can provide - and also what it should provide; and where it does not provide what it should, we need to do all we can to ensure that it does. The 16% of us who are borrowers is not as high as it should be. The more we use our libraries, and the more pressure we place on their services, the less excuse their funding masters will have for letting them decline further.

***Maurice Line, Harrogate U3A
formerly Director General of the British Library***

Comparative History

By murmuring to oneself, "William, William, Henry, Steve,/ Henry, Dick, John, Henry three", one can eventually come up with the fact that Edward V preceded Richard III. From a ragbag of memory one could dredge up that *Petruska* came after *L'après-midi d'un faun* and before *Daphne and Cloë* or that Monet died too soon to see Seurat's *La Baignade*. This linear approach to history, perhaps the result of a compartmentalised education, makes it much harder to know, for instance, what music was being written when Hardy was engaged on *Tess*, and whether he could have ridden a safety bicycle to observe which Prime Minister giving a speech in the House.

In an effort to draw together some strands of history in a way that gave us cross-references from one area of life to another, we decided to study every aspect of a decade. We chose the 1890s as a fruitful period. Meetings were planned to take place monthly. It was emphasised that the group would be pleased to accept any contributions, however slight, and that it was not compulsory to make a contribution. Volunteers immediately offered to speak on politics, transport and popular entertainment. Fifteen meetings later each of the members of the group had made at least one contribution, the more diffident members having been encouraged to offer subjects by the friendly atmosphere of our meetings. We have heard members' accounts of the aristocracy, music, fashion, visual arts, union movements, education, the Navy, the situation of women, literature, monarchy, the Empire and the situation of children.

Ron Roberts, West Dartmoor U3A

Music

Music Workshops – a new approach

Many U3As, including our own, have wonderful music appreciation groups and music making of various kinds. All of these provide learning and pleasure for our members.

Since January 2001 U3A in London has had the good fortune of experimenting with a different approach. A widely acclaimed chamber ensemble, called Double Image, obtained a modest grant from the London Arts Board in the context of the "Year of the Artist". The grant enabled the group to become the "Ensemble in Residence" to the U3A in London for a period of six months.

In close co-operation between the musicians and interested members of U3A we drew up a programme of nine fortnightly workshops and two public concerts. U3A had to find the funding for the venue, a piano and some publicity. We publicised the programme among the members of U3As in the Greater London Region and gathered thirty-eight enthusiastic members. We divided the cost among ourselves which meant that the whole programme, including the concerts, cost £18 each.

The workshops were a wonderful education in music-making for the uninitiated. Sessions gave us a chance to learn about interpretation, rehearsal practice, conducting, composition, and

instrumental techniques. There was always some performance involved. We covered periods from Bach to Brahms and beyond and also had a contemporary composer talk to us about her work and life. In the conducting session we learnt the secret behind the waving of arms by conductors and even had a chance to try for ourselves. We were given the opportunity to comment on the rehearsal of the programmes for the public concerts and all noticed the difference in the way we listened as a result.

The most exciting outcome of the "residence" was the friendship that has developed between U3A members and the musicians (piano, violin, cello, flute and clarinet) and the enthusiasm that has surfaced for future co-operation.

The Double Image Ensemble would always be open to suggestions for future co-operative ventures with U3As if local Arts Council or other funding can be found. Music is their livelihood and, unlike members of U3A, they could not undertake these exciting ventures without payment. But the pleasure and knowledge they have brought to us is immeasurable.

There may be other ways of developing inter-generational music projects. Why not try the local music academies? Many music students are budding professionals who might well enjoy the experience.

Marion Bieber, U3A in London

Music at Thameside U3A

We are a small but dedicated group of disparate musical ability. Some cannot read music, some can play an instrument, all love music and are keen to learn more about it. I issue general notes before starting on a musical topic, giving everyone an opportunity to ask questions at each meeting, and then providing at each session with some sort of biographical information about the composers and a brief analysis of the music. To clarify the analysis, it has been necessary to explain in fairly simple terms the basis of form in music. On enquiring at the Resource Centre about

available teaching aids, I discovered that most of the music material consists of opera videos. I have, therefore, made available to the Resource Centre, material that I have written on the development of the theme and variations, fugues, the concerto and the sonata.

I hope this material will be of help to other groups and that I will receive constructive criticism which could lead to more effective material being developed (by me and/or by others) for the future benefit of music lovers in the U3A.

Ron Hewston

