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Moulded by the age

EXHIBITION

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Designing Modern Life at the Design Museum

THE modern, an idea and word much overused but little understood, is the subject of this modestly sized but intellectually ambitious yearlong display. As the exhibition rightly notes, it is designers rather than artists who, throughout the 20th century, have been at the real frontline of change in our visual and social environments.

Focusing on specific examples, such as Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand's design for the quintessential modern home in the Twenties, the birth of the London Underground in the Thirties, the electronic consumer product boom of the Sixties and the mass market, lifestyle revolution of the Eighties, the show intelligently charts the evolving manifestation of the modern in the lives of ordinary people. In keeping with convention the display highlights the role of exceptional individuals, ranging from Le Corbusier and Stanley Kubrick to Peter Saville and Spanish designer Martí Guixé in shaping our conceptions of modernity.

More penetrating viewers, however, will observe that the long-term historical trends in play, such as technological evolution and the economic empowerment of the masses, have been rather more significant in affecting change than individual creative talents. The greatest irony of all is that when the idea of modern design burst on the scene, with all its functionality, clean lines and disdain for affectation, it was deemed to be the last word in antibourgeois creative thinking. French magazine Art et Decoration called Perriand and Le Corbusier's 'modern home', "a declaration of war on the padded and stuffed bourgeois salon". But now the movement's terminus is to be found in Conran's over-designed restaurants on King's Road.

As the exhibition proves, despite itself, modern design's early utopian ambitions failed in the face of the overwhelming forces of economic productivity and expediency. Rational design did not usher in an age of rational and equitable social

relations, just nicer looking consumer products. In time the age of the modern will be remembered as the time when man finally discovered he was powerless in the face of enduring realities. We have been designed by modernity, not the other way around.