

Fashion is change, for sure. Fashions in design come and go, and come back again. Fashion is fun and it's useful; it stimulates markets and makes you smile, but it doesn't improve things, it makes change for the sake of change. Innovation is change too, but change with real purpose. When applied to design and technology it's a one-way street: we innovate to improve, be it function, manufacturability or cost. We innovate in fashion too, but in the pursuit of novelty — newness for its own sake.

The man's business suit evolved from 1900 to 1965 on the principle of newness, driven by the pursuit of modernity, culminating in the tight, short-jacket, high button, tight trouser, thin lapel, smooth fabric look of suits in the optimistic, pre-Vietnam, pre-hippy days of JFK and the Space Race. That was innovation, the look was refreshing and new and confirmed to the wearer that his world was very different to his father's. Then in 1967, the ideals of the Summer of Love suddenly brought back the possibility of velvety wide lapels, the frock coat silhouette and ballooning trousers — and 'retro' was born (though we didn't call it that). And it's been a roller coaster ride of baggy-slim, high-low and tapered-flared-straight ever since, as the trajectory of change went from time's arrow-straight to the looping curls of overlapping nostalgias.

So fashion in clothing, its changing look and feel, can be innovative — the 'modernisation' of a man's suit for example — and it can be nostalgic or cyclical — like the re-introduction of high-waisted, pleated pants in the 80s. Technical innovation in clothing, as elsewhere, moves forward only, however. In the 90s the rapid development of so-called technical fabrics went hand in hand with an explosion of interest in sportswear — either the real thing, or sports-inspired leisurewear.

Designers a decade earlier relied on and celebrated the natural, creasy, low-static softness of cottons, linens and wools, but now, fuelled and funded by the rise and rise of sports brands like Nike, they went wholeheartedly synthetic. But the new synthetics, unlike their sweaty, crackling forebears, were remarkably wearable: soft, light and, adding a new word to the dictionary — breathable. Real technical innovation made possible real design innovation; the fact that hoods and zippers and Velcro became fashionable design themes was a mere consequence, not the driving force.

Throughout its short history, car design has been thoroughly innovative in its very nature. Regular improvements in technology and in functional design have powered the industry in continuous forward motion. Of course there has been a parallel, more

trivial, more fashion-driven design component too. We call it styling sometimes, but truly it's automotive fashion design and it has given us most notoriously the fins of the fifties, but also the mid-60s coke bottle side elevation, 70s prismatic body geometry and the 80s wedge. In the 90s? Well, head and tail light jewellery for one, and cart-spoke wheels of course. All these fashion elements are an essential part of the product culture and should not be dismissed, but it's clear they have little to do with functional or technical innovation.

And what's up this decade, this century? First let's be clear that history doesn't do decades that well, so the seeds of the noughts' fashion fling were sown in the 90s. There were the Nissan 'Pike Factory' cars, most notably the Figaro (actually of 1989) and of course the New Beetle, first previewed in 1994. But since 2000 we've seen the PT Cruiser, Thunderbird, Mustang, Ford GT, new Dodge Charger and, no doubt, a new Camaro. All from Detroit and all unashamedly retro — as nostalgic as thin lapels, a string tie and tapered pants.

This is a new and disturbing trend in car design. Has Detroit lost its nerve, perhaps? The US industry is not doing well and it may be comforting to remember sunnier times, the relative optimism of the fifties and sixties, a time when GM was the most powerful corporation in the country, in the Western world, indeed. But seen from the perspective of social theory, it's possible that the automotive industry has entered a new phase in its history, essentially I'm sorry to say, a post-modern phase where nostalgia for things past is as important in driving product development and design as the hunger for things new.

What a disturbing thought.

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