What's cool? (and what's not)

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Questions of taste

I'm completely lost. What's cool now? And what's naff?

I was contemplating the complex subject of taste again the other day, and I ended up comparing interiors to food. I really can't stand it when someone is eating something — oysters, let's say — and another person around the table shrieks: "Ew, I could never eat an oyster. How could you?"

I want to stand up and shriek back: well, don't eat them then, but keep schtum and let Jonathan here enjoy his slippery bivalve in peace. It's so strange to admit that you hate a thing in front of someone who clearly loves it.

We had such a situation recently. Someone visited our cottage, sat themselves down in our sitting room and asked me how I could live with so much stuff. "Doesn't it feel oppressive?", they asked, looking like they might drown at any moment. "'*Stuff*?' I said, gesturing across the piles of books and stacks of old china. "This is my *life*."

I write a column offering advice, but it's just that — advice. Advice and musings on things I find interesting and unusual and hopefully beneficial. Eat the oysters, don't eat the oysters; be a hoarder, give up all your possessions and live in a hut in the woods. Do what makes you happy.

I don't do trends, so I always find the question "what's cool now?" tricky to answer, because who am I to say, a 32-year-old bespectacled lover of bullion fringe, painted china sailors and knock-off Rococo? Really, one shouldn't worry if one's interests are "cool" or not.

Also, I detest trend lists because they usually include such nausea-inducing terms as "cosy cottagecore comforts".

Alas . . . I must and will answer. Here is what I think is cool (and naff) right now:

Buying old is cool. I have said this a million times, but I'll say it again: buy furniture from junk and antique shops, buy weird stuff, buy unloved stuff. This is cool. It's also the sustainable choice! Buying cheap imitation mid-century is not cool.

Do fun things with your old furniture. Paint it yourself, if you fancy. Over the past year or so I've definitely noticed a lot more painted furniture around, and I'm here for it. Tess Newall is a fabulous example: Newall, who has been called "the modern day decorative artist", takes inspiration from folk decoration and focuses on domestic interiors, hand-painting furniture (and walls) in a whimsical style.

Talking of paint jobs, I'm also very much into marbleising and other specialist finishes. These were particularly popular a few decades ago. I love an old-fashioned trick of the eye and really, could there be a more fantastical and unique way to finish off a room than with some glorious hand-painting?

Ewan McGregor plays the 1970s fashion designer Halston — Atsushi Nishijima/Netflix

Don't feel like committing to the full palazzo look? A simple hand-painted border is a great thing. How about something Bloomsbury-inspired? See Vanessa Bell's book covers for ideas.

What else? The 1970s has been "cool" for a while: low lighting, shag carpets, jewel-toned velvets, brass and bamboo. There's also another 1970s aesthetic, the Halston look, which I'm sure is appearing on agency mood boards across the world in the wake of the brilliant Netflix series about the fashion designer. This is much more minimal: all clear plastic nesting tables, grey jersey, sectional sofas and white orchids.

The 1980s country trend is also fashionable — think Laura Ashley, pastel shades, ruffles, glazed chintz and paint jobs, such as stippling.

Now, I absolutely love a ruffle, but what I'm really craving is fewer frills and more metal. I want 1980s chrome and glass, black metal and lacquer and some very hard edges. See Barbra Streisand's Malibu home photographed for Architectural Digest (actually, from 1993). I love Streisand's kitchen with its glossy black cabinets, black and red tiles and mini television. Black tiles are certainly cool.

The 1970s Halston look is cool, appearing on mood boards across the world in the wake of the Netflix series

Bloomsbury-style painted cupboard by Tess Newall

Check Pamono for good things: the website is currently selling a set of 1980s industrial-style metal chairs that I am really into, and can picture alongside an intense fuchsia — walls or a tablecloth, maybe.

Camelot: now I'm not sure that one can call this a trend, but personally, I'm having an Arthurian moment. If it's decorated with crossed swords or prancing, I'll take it. Stained-glass panels, plaster shields, theatre props — the lot. I currently have my heart set on a collection of six Edwardian shield-shaped plaques for sale via Graham Smith Antiques. Heraldry is the new . . . I don't know . . . flower arranging?

Lastly, the only furniture I'm interested in at the moment is mock-Gothic. But it has to be white and look about as camp as a five-tier wedding cake. I want chairs with quatrefoils and crenellations, please. I want a total flight of fancy, along the lines of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.

So there it is: faux-marble, black metal, and wedding cakes. You're welcome. As for what's naff? Well, for me it has to be gloomy Victoriana. I love a fringe — don't get me wrong — but not on a lampshade, please.

If you have a question for Luke about design and stylish living, email him at lukeedward.hall@ft.com. Follow him on Instagram @lukeedwardhall

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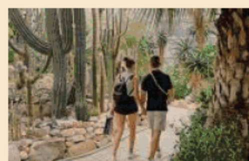

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London, the eternal city

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In Tenochtitlán, the famously beautiful Aztec capital obliterated by Spanish conquistadors in 1521, its inhabitants had long dreaded that another capital, on the far side of the lake from their own city, offered them an ominous foretaste of their own doom. Teotihuacán, like Tenochtitlán, boasted great temples and palaces; and once, just like the Aztec capital, it had been home to hundreds of thousands of people. All, however, had vanished — and so utterly that today we do not even know the name of the people who lived there.

The Aztecs honoured them as "wise men, knowers of occult things, possessors of tradition" and the Aztec kings, as a marker of respect, would make periodic pilgrimage to the deserted city. The temples raised in Tenochtitlán were a conscious attempt to stave off the pattern of ruin that had claimed Teotihuacán: for without the human sacrifice that was performed on their summits, so the Aztecs believed, the gods themselves might weaken, chaos descend, and the sun start to fade. Only *chalchiuatl*, "the precious water" pumped out by a still-beating heart, could serve to preserve them, and to keep the rhythms of their city alive.

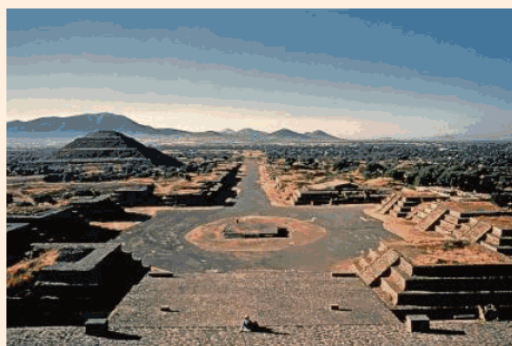
The Aztecs, when they attributed the collapse of Teotihuacán to forces greater than they could understand, were not so wrong. Whatever the proximate causes of its decline in the mid-6th century AD, few archaeologists today doubt the ultimate reason: the exhaustion of the ecosystem on which it had depended. There is no city so venerable, no city so celebrated, that it cannot, deprived of the means to sustain itself, crumble to dust.

Uruk, the world's original metropolis, the mother-city of Mesopotamia, had been in existence for more than 4,000 years when, some time around the birth of Christ, the wetlands from which it had emerged began to dry up. Within a few centuries, its fields had been swallowed by desert, and its monuments left as nothing but sand-blown mounds. In due course, its very existence would come to be forgotten. The city to which — according to the Sumerians — the goddess Inanna, back in the early days of time, had brought the secrets of civilisation, and thereby made urbanisation possible, had returned to dust.

Yet if Uruk can serve us as a minatory parable, a reminder of the end to which all cities will ultimately come, it can offer us as well, perhaps, a degree of reassurance. Its history is striking not just as a record of annihilation, but of resilience. Over the course of its millennia-old history it was repeatedly conquered, repeatedly put in the shade of upstart powers, repeatedly battered by waves of destruction — and yet repeatedly it recovered.

There can be a great deal of ruin in a city. There are ancient capitals that are still capitals today. In the late 6th century, even as Teotihuacán was plunging into its doom spiral, another imperial metropolis seemed on the brink of total ruin as well. Rome, only a few centuries previously, had been the largest city on the face of the planet, and its concentration of monuments a peerless display of wealth, magnificence and might.

By AD600, however, the vast expanse of palaces, triumphal arches and amphitheatres, constructed over the centuries to serve as the capital of the world, had come to stretch abandoned, a wilderness of ruins. This was the same wilderness that, more than a millennium on, would inspire Edward Gibbon, "musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol", to see the city as a monument to utter decay. Rome's post-imperial history serves, to this day, as a byword for decline and fall.



(From top) A deserted Piccadilly Circus during lockdown; the Avenue of the Dead in the ruins of the Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacán; a later Parthian temple built on the site of the ancient city of Uruk, thought to have been founded around 5,000BC
API/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images; Essam Al-Sudani/AFP via Getty Images

Yet what to Gibbon seemed a marker of degradation — the sound of barefooted friars singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter — could seem to others something very different: striking evidence that the city was indeed eternal. "Daily, rising up out of the ruins of shattered walls and decayed temples, we see the fresh stonework of churches and monasteries." So wrote a German monk in the early 11th century.

The medieval history of Rome did not at all strike those who lived through it as a story of decline. Capital of the papacy, it sheltered treasures infinitely more precious than anything the Caesars had boasted: the bones of martyrs. Everywhere, repositories of an awesome supernatural power, churches stood guard over these relics, their stonework suffused with the charisma of the departed saints themselves. Rome, to medieval Christians, provided a vision of how the world itself might be renewed.

Cities are tenacious creations. Even the worst catastrophes — war, fire, pestilence, famine — can serve as opportunities for renewal. Not every city, of course, can claim, as Rome did, a sacral quality for itself; but most cities that have endured for many centuries into the present can draw on attributes that, no matter how severe current tribulations, will not have been eliminated merely by the onset of Covid.

HG Wells's narrator in *The War of the Worlds*, standing on Primrose Hill, is thrilled with the knowledge that the dead city stretching out before him would soon be restored to life. "All the gaunt wrecks, the blackened skeletons of houses that stared so dismally at the sunlit grass of the hill, would presently be echoing with the hammers of the restorers and ringing with the tapping of their trowels."

> Cities are tenacious creations. Even the worst catastrophes can serve as opportunities for renewal

Wells, by ending his novel on such a positive note, was very much going with the grain of history. London may never have suffered an invasion by Martians; but it has certainly suffered numerous disasters. Compared to Boudicca's incineration of the city in AD60, or the Black Death, or the Blitz, Covid barely registers as a serious calamity. The record of the past 2,000 years suggests that London is almost indestructible.

Back in AD550, as Teotihuacán and Rome were both suffering precipitous population collapse, the city was already empty. A traveller standing then on Primrose Hill and looking towards the Thames would have seen a spectacle of abandonment far more advanced than anything witnessed by Wells's narrator: collapsed roofs, crumbling walls, monuments lost beneath ivy. London had been a creation of the unitary geopolitical entity established in lowland Britain by the Romans; and, with the end of that unitary geopolitical entity, so had London too come to an end.

The fragmentation of the early medieval period, however, did not last. By the 10th century a unitary kingdom, in the form of England, had begun to emerge. London duly returned to life. A site that combined the lowest bridging point on the Thames with a port open to continental Europe had far too many natural advantages not to flourish. As it had done under the Romans, so it did now under the late Anglo-Saxon kings: it took its place as the largest, richest and most important city in Britain.

It is a status it has never lost since. "The Great Wen", Cobbett famously called it. A metaphor that casts London as a boil that just grows and grows, and can never be healed, is one with which many environmentalists today, looking at the spread of cities far beyond their previous bounds, and across the planet, might well find an apposite one: for urbanism, despite the role it played in spreading Covid, will hardly be checked by the pandemic.

Cities will recover, and flourish, and grow. Even if infection rates persist, and the Twenties fail to roar, the patterns of innovation blazed by urban areas as varied as the Bay Area, Beijing or Lagos will continue to evolve; and whether these megalopolises are best compared to acne or to blooms in a flower bed will obviously depend on perspective.

For 6,000 years now, cities have been sinks of suffering and disease; and for 6,000 years now they have served to foster the solutions to suffering and disease. Whether ruin or redemption is to be humanity's fate, cities will be at the heart of all our futures. They are where the war to save our world will be fought.

Tom Holland is a historian and author