

What's on?

Mark Burgess

Britain was in a miserable state in 1950. It had fought two world wars in the span of a generation and the fruits of victory had turned to ashes; rationing was still in force as if the U-boats still stalked the North Atlantic supply routes, America was pouring money into the economies of the Axis powers and Britain watched its wealth and power evaporate. Everywhere was grey. The best description of Britain then is Orwell's *1984**

The government typically thought that rather than alleviating this misery, it would tell the people that they were, contrary to all evidence, living in a golden age. So the 'The Festival of Britain' was conceived by Herbert Morrison as "a tonic for the nation"; much in the same way as his grandson, Peter Mandelson, created the Millennium Dome (Tony Blair described the Dome as "a creation that, I believe, will truly be a beacon to the world"). But, unlike the Dome, the Festival of Britain was done on the cheap (£1.25 million; the Dome cost £789 million plus £1 million per month to maintain once empty). And, unlike the Dome, the Festival of Britain was extremely popular and made a profit.

The Festival of Britain was designed to show off the best of British science and innovation as well as the best of art and architecture. What is interesting is the way in which artists responded to the latest scientific discoveries. Art had always found inspiration in Nature, from the *Acanthus* capitals of classical times to the wallpaper



Part of the exhibition. To the right is Lady Alice Bragg's dress made of lace designed after the crystal structure of beryl. Wellcome Library, London



The structure of afwillite on screen-printed spun rayon. Helen Megaw, who discovered this structure, would later play a crucial role as Adviser on Crystal Structure Diagrams in the Festival Pattern Group. Designed by S. M. Slade for British Celanese. Wellcome Library, London

of William Morris, but here we find artists appropriating scientific images of subjects invisible to the naked eye.

A new and mysterious technique was X-ray crystallography, which used X-ray beams to stake out the structure of a molecule in a complicated and subatomic version of the game of battleships. The Wellcome Trust exhibition *From Atoms to Patterns* features the work of the Festival Pattern Group, a project instigated by Helen Megaw that brought together X-ray crystallographers, designers and manufacturers. The crystallographers' diagrams and photographs inspired an eclectic array of patterns for curtains, wallpapers, carpets, lace, dress fabrics, ties, plates and ashtrays.

The exhibition gives a background to the Festival of Britain and to X-ray crystallography: a new and exciting branch of science in the 1950s — although the exhibition has a page from W. L. Bragg's notebook of about 1913 and a photograph of the man himself, with the spectrometer he built while teaching at the University of Leeds.

Helen Megaw is shown with her photogoniometer (a piece of equipment used to take X-ray photographs of crystals) with a ball-and-stick model of the mineral afwillite on the desk. Her electron-density contour map of afwillite was used as the basis for dress fabric and wallpaper. There are samples of the fabric based on horse methaemoglobin crystals, a dress of which Max Perutz's wife, Gisela, wore at the International Union of Crystallography conference in Stockholm in 1951. The same conference saw Sir Lawrence Bragg's wife, Lady Alice, in a dress made of lace designed after the crystal structure of beryl.

An upholstery pattern based on the structure of myoglobin was printed on Leathercloth, a new fabric from ICI, and Dorothy Hodgkin's contour map of insulin inspired a design printed on the then novel material, PVC (polyvinyl chloride), with another version appearing as a wallpaper design.

The Wellcome exhibition has photographs and souvenirs of the original version at the Festival — most of these artefacts have been hidden away in the vaults of the Victoria and Albert Museum for the past 50 years and this is the first time it has all been brought together since 1951. Hurry if you want to see it — the exhibition closes on 10 August (www.wellcomecollection.org/exhibitionsandevents/exhibitions/fromatomstpatterns/index.htm).



Plates based on images of beryl by Sir Lawrence Bragg, designed by Peter Wall for Wedgwood. Wellcome Library, London



Do Ho Suh *Fallen Star 1/5*, 2008 (ABS, basswood, beech, ceramic, enamel paint, glass, honeycomb board, lacquer paint, latex paint, LEDs, pinewood, plywood, resin, spruce, styrene, polycarbonate sheets, PVC sheets). Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. Photo: © Stephen White

The profits from the Festival of Britain were used to convert the Royal Festival Hall into a concert hall and to establish the South Bank, an ugly collection of brutalist buildings. The Hayward Gallery is one of them and is celebrating its 40th birthday by disguising itself in an exhibition called *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take on Architecture* (www.haywardgallery.org.uk). This brings together artists whose work is structural or architectural: Rachel Whiteread is here, for instance, with a village of doll's houses. The Korean artist Do Ho Suh shows a scale model of his first house and a New York apartment block (*Fallen Star*) and a staircase of red net (*Staircase - V*), Tomas Saraceno has a grand version of a bouncy castle (*Observatory, Air-Port-City*) and Atelier Bow-Wow, a pair of Japanese architects, have an installation called *Life Tunnel*, made of steel-plate and uncomfortably reminiscent of the *Alien* films.

An explicit tribute to horror is Mike Nelson's *To the Memory of H. P. Lovecraft*, which seems to be based on Lovecraft's story *The Dunwich Horror*. Lovecraft was

a writer of gothic horror. In *The Dunwich Horror*, some hellish spawn of things that belong not to this world grows up hidden in a great barn, eating cattle by the ton. As often happens with pets, someone forgets to feed it and it burst out, massacring the villagers all around ("Oh, my Gawd, my Gawd,' the voice choked out. 'It's a-goin' agin, an' this time by day! It's aout — it's aout an' a-movin' this very minute, an' only the Lord knows when it'll be on us all!").

To enter Mike Nelson's installation, you climb up the concrete stairs and brace yourself to open the trap door that allows you access. It's an unnerving moment, and the scene that meets your eyes is stunning – absolute devastation is all that is left after the thing has scratched, clawed, gouged or torn its way out. (Apparently, Mike Nelson took an axe to this area of the gallery; it must have been a lot of fun.)

A terrifying experience is Gelatin's *Normally, Proceeding and Unrestricted With Without Title*. Here you row boats which look something between a wardrobe and a coffin across a metre-deep shallow boating lake. The boats are made of scrap

and not afraid to show it. The lake is like an infinity pool and you look down 12 m or so on to the river, so there is a tension between whether the boat will fall apart and you will get wet, or the wind will carry it over the edge and you will die.

More relaxing is *In the Frozen Study of a Disaster*, by Havana-based Cuban collective Los Carpinteros. This is more like a still from the end of *Zabriskie Point*. It's a freeze frame from an explosion in a house, with chunks of wall, shards of glass and dismembered furniture hanging motionless in the air (supported by fishing line).

This exhibition is closing soon on 25 August.

**not a misprint; the description of the rationing and drabness is straight from 1948. Even the 'telescreens' are a reflection of how the television was seen at the time; people would often switch the set off before undressing, unsure whether it as a two-way device. Anthony Burgess develops this thesis in the first part of his book 1985. When he presents the novel Orwell should have written, in the second part of the book, it is ironic that it is a rather unhinged description of Britain in 1977.*



Mike Nelson *To the Memory of H.P. Lovecraft*, 1999, 2008 (mixed media). Courtesy the artist, Matt's Gallery, London and Galleria Franco Noero, Torino. Photo: © Stephen White