

JUNE 5/6 2021

FT Weekend Magazine


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The James Daunt way

By John Gapper



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Ini Archibong, **Design Supplement**

‘I started to see walking as a route to understanding. I had visions of myself as an investigator of the city’

Lou Stoppard, p45



‘For us, eggs sit perfectly at the end of the day, the ideal weeknight fare’

Honey & Co, p54

FT Weekend Magazine

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SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

In football, at least, Europe is at the top of its game



When the Euro 2020 championship finally kicks off on June 11, European politicians and policymakers should be taking notes. This tournament showcases an ideal of Europe – how it could be.

The European championship stems from the most fertile period of continental integration. On June 1 1955, six men representing six European countries gathered around a table in Messina, Sicily, for talks that ended up creating the European Economic Community, ancestor of the EU. Three months later, Sporting Lisbon played Partizan Belgrade in the first match of football’s European Cup, ancestor of today’s Champions League. And in June 1958 in Stockholm, the continent’s football associations agreed to start a European Nations’ Cup, the ancestor of Euro 2020.

The pan-European football formats have outlasted regional tournaments such as central Europe’s “Mitropa” Cup and Britain’s Home Championship. Generations of European fans have learnt the continent’s geography through club names, from Braga to Dnepropetrovsk.

Today, knowledge exchange in European football is a model for all other sectors. The best teams play each other constantly. After Chelsea beat Real Madrid, the Madrileños go home and work out what Chelsea did better, and so the sport evolves. Spain updated the Dutch passing game, and then the Germans and English learnt from Spain.

English academies now produce footballers such as Mason Mount and Phil Foden, who play like continentals. In football, English exceptionalism died in about 1993, killed by the failings of the indigenous long-ball game with its warrior ethos. That’s one difference between football and political ideologies: in football, success and failure are usually clear. You can blame the referee for one bad scoreboard, but after years of them, you have to start learning from other people.

Weaker versions of football’s knowledge exchange operate in other sectors. Germany learnt from foreign school systems after its “Pisa shock” of 2001, when its schools underperformed in the OECD’s rankings. Northern Europeans learnt about food from the French and Italians.

But football shows how much better this could be done. Here, knowledge is spread around the continent by multilingual émigré coaches such as Jürgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola, moving around an almost perfectly functioning single market. These men are revered in their adopted countries and have become advertisements for their home countries. Over the past year, Britons performed four times more Google searches for Klopp than for Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel; Guardiola got 39 times more searches than Spain’s prime minister, Pedro Sánchez.

Meanwhile, Europe’s social democracy pays off in football. You can’t pick future champions aged

two based on body type. The only way to create talent is to get millions of kids of all backgrounds playing, on decent fields, with qualified coaches. The world’s most egalitarian continent does this best. Nowadays it even gives girls a chance.

And so the EU, with 6 per cent of the planet’s population, has become football’s lone superpower. The only non-EU country to finish in the top three of the World Cup since 2006 is Lionel Messi’s Argentina. Four different EU member-states have won four straight World Cups. The German coach Franz Beckenbauer’s boast in 1990

‘The way to create talent is to get kids of all backgrounds playing. The world’s most egalitarian continent does this best’

that a united Germany would become unbeatable proved false. Instead, knowledge spread from core Europe to the historically disadvantaged south: Spain (twice), Greece and Portugal have won the past four European championships.

The continent’s deepest historic divide persists: eastern Europe lags in football as it always has economically. But Croatia’s run to the World Cup final in 2018 suggests that an ever more connected continent will spread knowledge eastwards too.

European football shows how the local, national and continental levels can all thrive at once. Manchester City’s wealth didn’t stop neighbours Blackpool and Morecambe being promoted from lower divisions in playoff finals last week. Nearby Macclesfield was reborn mere weeks after becoming the only English club to fold during the sport’s worst economic crisis since the second world war.

And football shows that a united Europe can coexist with nationalism. Europe since 1945 has mostly guided conflicts between nations into peaceful arenas – above all, football stadiums and Brussels conference rooms. The only significant outbreak of violence at a European Championship since 2000 was perpetrated by Russians (outsiders at the continental party) against English fans in Marseille in 2016. Otherwise, supporters now mingle happily in bars and stands.

After France v West Germany in 1982, TV commentator Georges de Caunes could still say that for Frenchmen of his generation, the kick with which German keeper Toni Schumacher felled France’s Patrick Battiston evoked memories of war. When France next plays Germany, in Munich on June 15, it will be a gathering of friends. Modern European nationalism is a cheery beast.

In fact, speaking strictly as a football fan, I almost wish that Euro 2020 had some of the extra-sporting hostility that international matches had in my childhood. But speaking as a person, I’m glad Europe has helped lay those ghosts. **FT**

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'I've moved beyond finding happiness in inanimate objects'



INVENTORY ANTHONY SELDON, HISTORIAN AND EDUCATOR

Sir Anthony Seldon, 67, has written and edited more than 40 books on contemporary history, including biographies of John Major, Tony Blair and David Cameron. He was vice-chancellor of the University of Buckingham until 2020 and was knighted in 2014 for services to education and modern political history.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

To be a writer and storyteller. I would dictate stories to my parents. *Freddy the Frog* still awaits publication.

Private school or state school? University or straight into work?

Two prep schools, Dulwich and Bickley Park, then Tonbridge School. At Worcester College, Oxford, I read philosophy, politics and economics because my father

was an economist and writer. I adored Oxford. It was very liberating. I directed a lot of plays and met life-long friends. I didn't do a lot of work. The curriculum was dull. I scraped a good enough degree to go to LSE and write a doctorate and start taking work seriously.

Who was or still is your mentor?

My parents. My English teacher at school, Jonathan Smith, the writer. I had to leave for half a term for organising a demonstration against the Vietnam war. I was allowed back to resit my A-levels, and I lived with him and his wife Gilly. He helped me to rethink myself. Robert Ogilvie, an extraordinary headmaster and an Oxford don.

How physically fit are you?

I do yoga twice a day, I walk 13,000 paces every day. Physical health is really important and we haven't highlighted it enough in education.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

Both, though ambition is more important. Throughout my life, I've been astonished by people who've been talented and not risen far, and the ambitious who've got to the top.

How politically committed are you?

Very, but not party political. I've always been emotionally on the left, intellectually more on the right. I'm a 19th-century liberal. My political heroes are those who don't segment people by race or region or social background, but who highlight what we share in common.

What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?

Enduring love.

What's your biggest extravagance?

It used to be a Plus 8 Morgan sports car. Now, it is finding old, exquisite restaurants in France and having

long meals with friends. I've moved beyond finding happiness in inanimate objects. It's the solace of harmony, with others, with oneself, that is clearly the only wise object.

In what place are you happiest?

Devon country lanes in spring, with the high hedges and wildflowers: bluebells, campion, stitchwort.

What ambitions do you still have?

To see my three children happy and fulfilled, a responsibility I am all the more conscious of since my wife died of cancer four years ago. To forgive others, and forgive myself. And to try to do good.

What drives you on?

I've been blessed all my life with energy. I want to try to bring more happiness through bodies like Action for Happiness, which I co-founded, and the International Positive Education Network, of which I'm president.

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

My children. A very happy marriage. I don't think I've done anything else that is important.

What do you find most irritating in other people?

Doing the things I'm most guilty of myself, like talking too much.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?

"Try harder, you've still got a lot to do."

Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?

I can't think of an inanimate one.

What is the greatest challenge of our time?

Artificial intelligence. We will solve climate change, because ultimately it's in the interest of governments and business to solve it. But it isn't in the interests of either to solve the riddles of AI, which could be the greatest boon or could strip away that which makes human life meaningful.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

I live sometimes in that afterlife. I think it's less a belief and more an experience: numinous eternity in the present moment. We can all experience this, but we have to lay down the grinding gears of our habitual, judging minds.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

Five. I worked too hard at the wrong things and not hard enough at the things that really matter.

But I have time to correct that. **FT**

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Interview by Hester Lacey.

"The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister" by Anthony Seldon is published by Cambridge University Press

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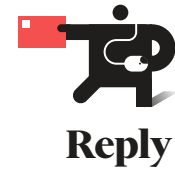
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ROBERT SHRIMSLEY THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION



Vet practices and pet peeves

I am beginning to wonder if the dog is in on the hustle. She makes a bloody good show of reluctance to go to the vet, pulling on the leash and planting herself on the pavement once she recognises where we are heading. Half an hour later she bounds out, evincing such joy at the reunion that one barely registers the bill she has run up for her consultation.

Was there really anything wrong? Or do she and the vet just sit and gossip about that retriever from four doors down while she gnaws on a bone and the practice's new business manager reviews the mutt's key performance indicators for the last quarter? "I'm sorry, dog, your numbers are way down, we are going to need to shave your leg and put a cone on your head for two weeks to get those repeat visits up. Oh, and take home a leaflet on teeth whitening." I'm imagining a scene from *The Sting*: the dog, the vet and some guy in the corner playing Scott Joplin.

My cynicism was crystallised last week both by the discovery that the special doggy toothpaste the vet had been prescribing was available online for a third of the price and by the sudden doubling in our pet insurance premiums.

To be fair, we had abused the insurer's trust by making a claim. The pooch had torn a cruciate ligament. This is a major injury and one that threatened to keep her out of the Euros. Seriously, it's no joke. Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk has been out for the whole season with this issue. The operation was so expensive I had to assume we were using the same surgeon.

A few months later we were offered an MRI scan (the cost of which now runs into thousands) for a persistent wheeze that disappeared with a prescription of anti-inflammatories, which looked very much like a box of Trebor mints, but without



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

the compensatory benefits for her breath.

Happily, the insurance premiums were not as eye-watering as we feared since we had been automatically quoted for gold cover, when it turned out that for a mere 25 per cent increase we could buy bronze cover. This would suffice as long as the dog understands that any really expensive treatment will now need to be spread across two calendar months and that she will have to meet the cost of any cosmetic surgery herself.

And what is gold cover for a dog anyway? For that price I would hope it's a private suite at the Wellington Hospital, complete with bathrobe and a selection of dog movies. I imagine the beast propped up in bed, pressing the buzzer for another fillet steak and perhaps just a smidgen more of that rather good offal.

It's our own fault for upgrading from rodents. The lifespan of a hamster allows for a certain hard-heartedness in the face of high-end surgical procedures. But a dog is a different matter. The slightest droop of the ears and suddenly you are launching GoFundMe pages and flying in the reincarnation of cardiac surgeon Christiaan Barnard for a consultation. (Actually, you

need platinum cover for Barnard, but gold does get you a session with Deepak Chopra on herbal supplements and dog meditation.)

The increase in premiums also reflects a rise in vets' fees, drug prices and the availability of more complex treatments. Blame for this is laid at the door of private equity-backed companies such as VetPartners (BC Partners), Medivet (Inflexion Private Equity) and IVC Evidensia (EQT), which are mopping up independent practices and setting challenging stretch targets. And after consolidation and centralisation comes inflation. There are reasons private equity firms buy businesses, and few of them are about animal welfare.

There's nothing wrong with a profit motive and the staff at our own practice are still lovely, if a little keener on upselling. Vets need to be viable businesses, which not all were. The big companies insist they are investing in training and better technology, rather than sweating their new assets and exploiting often far-from-wealthy owners' love for their pets. Let's hope so. A vet should be a haven for a sick dog, not a cashpoint for a fat cat. **FT**

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What alternatives are there? ("What's wrong with the Michelin guide?", May 29/30.) Online reviews (Google, TripAdvisor, etc) are a mix of people giving five stars for being nicer than their local café and one star hoping for a free meal. Bloggers also give overly positive reviews in the hope of free meals. I know which newspaper restaurant critics I trust in the UK, but have no idea when travelling. The Michelin guide is the most impartial and comprehensive guide I know. **Plutus via FT.com**

Nice article ("Why we should all learn to love Campari - and how to drink it", May 29/30). The author evokes memories of my 16-year-old self: Campari cocktails and Gitanes cigarettes! Don't think I have had a Campari since I was 18, but suddenly I feel compelled to revisit it. **Joe (FKA Donald) via FT.com**

@sdwagar May 29
Third time was definitely the charm for me - and now can't wait to try @alicescelles-suggested Campari and grapefruit...

Further to "A rebounding economy won't mean a return to the status quo" (May 29/30): for decades, employers have been sloughing off more and more of their risk on to employees, for example by making little effort to avoid lay-offs; by getting rid of pensions; and, in the US, by reducing healthcare coverage. Many of these risks are very hard for workers to sustain individually. So the Pew Center survey results should not be surprising, except insofar as they show that workers are finally confronting and understanding their exposure. Personally I'm glad to see it. **Redant via FT.com**

Re "Alas poor Boris: a Shakespearean travesty" (May 29/30): to B.1.1.7 or B.1.617.2? That is the question. **HaydenC via FT.com**

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FT Globetrotter has launched a brand-new guide to Singapore, celebrating the joys of the Garden City with expert advice on eating and drinking, exercise, cultural activities and much more. We're looking for your best Singapore tips too. Submit them at ft.com/globetrotter/singapore

Quiz answers The link was stars of Hollywood's Golden Age. 1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 2. Peck. 3. Lake District. 4. Gable. 5. Monroe Doctrine. 6. Cagney & Lacey. 7. Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. 8. Hudson. 9. Hairlow. 10. Grant. Picture quiz Carmen Mirandaa + Anna Ryder Richardson = Miranda Richardson

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Spelunkers: Incomparable. Indomitable Unpronounceable.

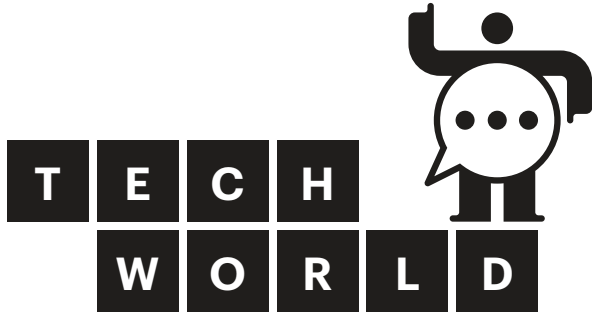
Let's hear it for the 'spelunkers'. The subterranean explorers of the 1970s who did for caving what Mallory did for mountaineering. And the inspiration behind 'GMT-explorer' watches, which provided 24-hour timekeeping for light-starved cavers. Now we've resurrected the genre with the new C63 Sealander GMT. Not only does it boast a twin timezone movement, a hi-vis 24-hour hand and a dial that's as legible as it is beautiful, but, happily, you don't have to be a spelunker to wear one.

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BY TIM BRADSHAW IN LONDON

Timely lessons from Minutiae, the 'anti-social' app

Just over 1,440 days ago, I installed a new photo-sharing app. Last month, after using it for exactly one minute almost every day since, I “finished” it.

This is not standard operating procedure for smartphone software. Few apps are designed for completion, instead preferring to ape the bottomless feeds of Facebook and Twitter. Most want to lure you in for daily use, but I have found only one that locks you out again after just 60 seconds.

The app in question, Minutiae, is more art project than start-up. Over the past four years, Minutiae has sent me a notification at a random minute every day, giving me just a few frantic seconds to photograph whatever was around me at that moment.

My Minutiae archive was only fully accessible once 1,440 days were up (equal to the number of minutes in 24 hours). The result is a document of my existence unlike any I would otherwise photograph, let alone post on Instagram. It is often mundane, occasionally moving, and inescapably me. Despite being a self-declared “anti-social” app, it also offers lessons for other social media companies.

Minutiae’s creators, Martin Adolfsson and Daniel Wilson, met at the New Museum’s incubator programme in Manhattan for those working on ideas straddling art, design and tech. “It morphed from something we did on a whim, as a bit of a counter-reaction to social media, into a more gradual visual archive of real life,” says Adolfsson. “You’re really forced to think on your feet and it becomes a brutally

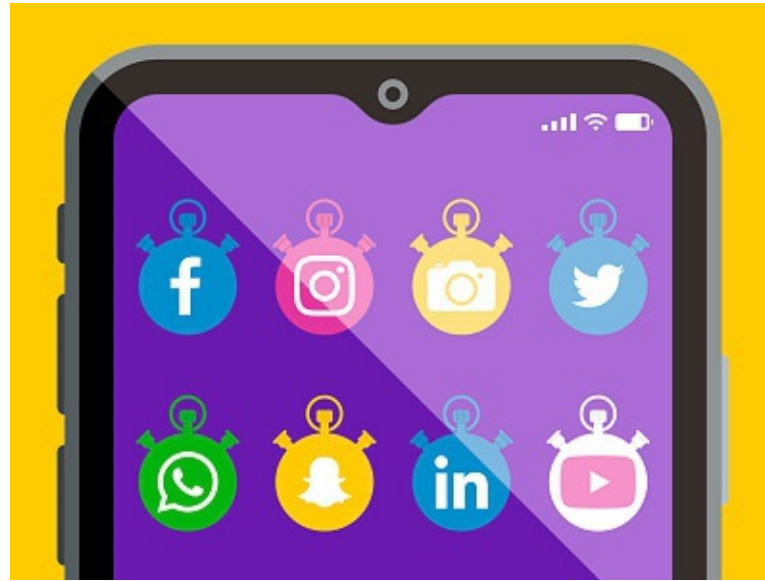


ILLUSTRATION BY PÂTÉ

honest self-portrait of what your life really looks like, whether you like it or not.”

Since I paid \$15 to install the app in 2017 (and wrote a column about its novelty), I have lived in four apartments, three cities and on two continents. Plenty of photos are just too revealing to put on social media: stockpiled loo roll, my embarrassingly large shoe collection, neglected houseplants.

During lockdown, avoiding repetitive photos became a daily stimulus to creativity. I was amused to see how my home office evolved from a laptop on a pile of books to an ever-growing array of screens and accessories.

Then there are pictures that appear boring but hold personal resonance: the FT’s old newsroom, packed with people; a suit hung up ready for a funeral; a deserted

‘Minutiae proved that constraints can be much more satisfying than information overload’

Las Vegas casino in the aftermath of a mass shooting I reported on; clouds looming behind palm trees that later became a holiday-ending tropical storm.

Minutiae is not entirely anti-social. During that daily one-minute window, I was able to flick through photos from another anonymous user with whom I had been paired. The frantic peek inside offices and living rooms from Indonesia, Turkey or Nowheresville, US, felt refreshingly real and almost too intimate.

Despite Adolfsson’s insistence that Minutiae is “an art project in the form of an app”, other software developers should pay attention.

If an app only asks for one minute out of my day, I may be more likely to keep using it, instead of getting lost in an endless scroll that I later regret. Minutiae has had only 25,000 downloads but about 40 per cent of the people who signed up in 2017 completed their 1,440-photo cycle, which is a far higher retention rate than most apps, says Adolfsson.

A new cluster of photo-sharing start-ups are also taking inspiration from Minutiae, seeking more “authentic expression” (in the words of one). BeReal sends a simultaneous notification to groups of friends, giving two minutes to snap a pic (which feels like an eternity compared with Minutiae). Poparazzi, which topped the US App Store charts last week, wants to kill selfies by only letting people post photos of their friends, not themselves. Even Instagram is now letting users turn off “like” counts from their news feeds, an idea first posited by Snapchat a decade ago.

Whether these venture-backed social start-ups can endure without the network effects of more aggressive viral sharing remains to be seen. But for a small-scale project, Minutiae has had an outsized impact: it proved that constraints – even when artificially imposed – can be much more satisfying than information overload.

After a lockdown year in which arguments about screen addiction gave way to an all-screen, all-the-time existence, perhaps Instagram fatigue may finally be setting in. At the very least, Minutiae and its ilk are a timely reminder to reset our relationship with our phones and replace the infinite scroll with a full stop. **FT**

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Tim Bradshaw is the FT’s global technology correspondent



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In his acid parliamentary testimony last week, Dominic Cummings, the prime minister's former chief adviser, blamed a lot of different people and things for the UK's failure to fight Covid-19 - including "groupthink". Groupthink is unlikely to fight back. It already has a terrible reputation, not helped by its Orwellian ring, and the term is used so often that I begin to fear that we have groupthink about groupthink.

So let's step back. Groupthink was made famous in a 1972 book by psychologist Irving Janis. He was fascinated by the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, in which a group of perfectly intelligent people in John F Kennedy's administration made a series of perfectly ridiculous decisions to support a botched coup in Cuba. How had that happened? How can groups of smart people do such stupid things?

An illuminating metaphor from Scott Page, author of *The Difference*, a book about the power of diversity, is that of the cognitive toolbox. A good toolbox is not the same thing as a toolbox full of good tools: two dozen top-quality hammers will not do the job. Instead, what's needed is variety: a hammer, pliers, a saw, a choice of screwdrivers and more.

This is obvious enough and, in principle, it should be obvious for decision-making too: a group needs a range of ideas, skills, experience and perspectives. Yet when you put three hammers on a hiring committee, they are likely to hire another hammer. This "homophily" - hanging out with people like ourselves - is the original sin of group decision-making, and there is no mystery as to how it happens.

But things get worse. One problem, investigated by Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie in their book *Wiser*, is that groups intensify existing biases. One study looked at group discussions about then-controversial topics (climate change, same-sex marriage, affirmative action) by groups in left-leaning Boulder, Colorado, and in right-leaning Colorado Springs.

Each group contained six individuals with a range of views, but after discussing those views with each other, the Boulder groups bunched sharply to the left and the Colorado Springs groups bunched similarly to the right, becoming both more extreme and more uniform within the group. In some cases, the emergent view of the group was more extreme than the prior view of any single member.

One reason for this is that when surrounded with fellow travellers,



TIM HARFORD

THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST



Some gripes about groupthink

people became more confident in their own views. They felt reassured by the support of others.

Meanwhile, people with contrary views tended to stay silent. Few people enjoy being publicly outnumbered. As a result, a false consensus emerged, with potential dissenters censoring themselves and the rest of the group gaining a misplaced sense of unanimity.

The Colorado experiments studied polarisation but this is not just a problem of polarisation. Groups tend to seek common ground on any subject from politics to the weather, a fact revealed by "hidden profile" psychology experiments. In such experiments, groups are given a task (for example, to choose the best candidate for a job) and each member of the group is given different pieces of information.

One might hope that each individual would share everything they knew, but instead what tends to happen is that people focus, redundantly, on what everybody already knows, rather than unearthing facts known to only one individual. The result is a decision-making disaster.

These "hidden profile" studies point to the heart of the problem: group discussions aren't just

about sharing information and making wise decisions. They are about cohesion - or, at least, finding common ground to chat about. Reading Charlan Nemeth's *No! The Power of Disagreement In A World That Wants To Get Along*, one theme is that while dissent leads to better, more robust decisions, it also leads to discomfort and even distress. Disagreement is valuable but agreement feels so much more comfortable.

There is no shortage of solutions to the problem of groupthink, but to list them is to understand why they are often overlooked. The first and simplest is to embrace decision-making processes that require disagreement: appoint a "devil's advocate" whose job is to be a contrarian, or practise "red-teaming", with an internal group whose task is to play the role of hostile actors (hackers, invaders or simply critics) and to find vulnerabilities. The evidence suggests that red-teaming works better than having a devil's advocate, perhaps because dissent needs strength in numbers.

A more fundamental reform is to ensure that there is a real diversity of skills, experience and perspectives in the room:

'While dissent leads to better decisions, it also leads to discomfort. Disagreement is valuable but agreement feels so much more comfortable'

the screwdrivers and the saws as well as the hammers. This seems to be murderously hard. When it comes to social interaction, the aphorism is wrong: opposites do not attract. We unconsciously surround ourselves with like-minded people.

Indeed, the process is not always unconscious. Boris Johnson's cabinet could have contained Greg Clark and Jeremy Hunt, the two senior Conservative backbenchers who chair the committees to which Dominic Cummings gave his evidence about groupthink. But it does not. Why? Because they disagree with him too often.

The right groups, with the right processes, can make excellent decisions. But most of us don't join groups to make better decisions. We join them because we want to belong. Groupthink persists because groupthink feels good. **FT**

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Tim Harford's new book is "How to Make the World Add Up"



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The gospel according to James Daunt

The genteel bibliophile behind Daunt Books and the rescue of Waterstones now has one of the toughest jobs in US retail: getting Americans back into bookshops. Whether or not he really can is a matter of faith. By *John Gapper*

Photo illustration by *Guillem Casasús*. Photography by *Charlie Bibby*





Daunt Books on Marylebone High Street, where James Daunt developed his distinctive approach to book retailing

On a bright Tuesday in April, the car parks at Fosse Park, an out-of-town shopping centre south of Leicester, are packed. Recently eased lockdown rules have allowed shops to reopen, and many people are enjoying their freedom. Eager customers line up in the sunshine.

One of the visitors is Oana Bacos, a 26-year-old who works nearby. Today, Bacos is giving herself a treat in a newly opened outlet of bookshop Waterstones. She stands by the shelves, holding a paperback of *Convenience Store Woman* by the Japanese novelist Sayaka Murata. “The bookseller recommended this, and we had a nice chat about what she enjoys, what I enjoy and all the books we have in common,” she says. “I love being here and browsing. It’s so different from looking online.”

Before the pandemic, Bacos was a regular at the Waterstones in the centre of Leicester, one of 286 stores run by the UK’s largest book chain. Her presence in Fosse Park is an omen: more retailers are now moving out of town. “People are happy to return to shops but bookstores are special,” says the store’s manager, Louise Walker, who joined a chain in 1987 that was later taken over by Water-

‘Amazon is the predator that has culled the weak... If we relax for a second, it will eat us’

James Daunt

stones. “They are so pleased just to be here, they talk about it like a lifeline. They want to touch the books, even smell them.”

The future of this precious experience is far from assured in the age of Amazon, ebooks and the pervasive strain on physical retailers of all kinds. A great deal depends on the benign dictator of English-language bookstores, James Daunt. The 57-year-old executive is well known in the UK for founding Daunt Books, a quirky but much-loved group of nine shops, 31 years ago. In 2011, as the might of Jeff Bezos’s juggernaut shook publishing, Daunt was called in to rescue Waterstones from threatened extinction.

Now he is attempting to repeat the trick. In 2019, the investment fund that owns Water-

stones, Elliott Advisors, purchased the ailing Barnes & Noble and its 607 US bookstores for \$638m and put Daunt in charge. Then the pandemic struck.

While many stores suffered during lockdown, book sales rose sharply as people sought diversion. “I’m optimistic that people have enjoyed reading books, and they’ll continue to do so,” says Daunt, sitting by a tome-piled table at his own chain’s first store in London’s upmarket Marylebone district. “The big question is, will they find it most pleasurable to buy them in places like this?”

Another pressing question is whether Daunt can conquer the larger and more diverse US market using a formula honed in the UK. The number of bookstores in America fell from 11,200 in 2004 to 6,200 in 2018, and some doubt whether anything can halt the decline. “If his mission is to turn Barnes & Noble into a successful chain, it can’t be done,” says Mike Shatzkin, a veteran New York-based analyst. “It’s impossible. The best strategy for the owners is to take out cash as long as they can and then sell the bones.”

Daunt knows that failing would hurt more than his reputation. It would jeopardise the distribution infrastructure that supports thousands of independent bookstores across the US, with knock-on effects in UK books. “If we go bust, our world is pretty much screwed. You end up with only

Amazon and the publishers,” he says. “Amazon is the predator that has culled the weak in this business and left only the strongest. If we relax for a second, it will eat us.”

When Daunt arrived in New York to take charge of Barnes & Noble two years ago, he attended a party held by Madeline McIntosh, US chief executive of Penguin Random House, the world’s largest publisher. Editors were eager to meet the new B&N boss, but McIntosh thought Daunt seemed distracted. “He kept on looking around at my bookshelves,” she recalls. “When he was leaving, he said, ‘I hope I can come back to browse. That’s what I’d really like to do.’ So he’s a book nerd, like us. That’s why we like him.”

This bookishness is not an act. But it is easily misread as softness, especially by Americans. Daunt is, in fact, distinctly determined, sometimes ruthlessly so. As he puts it, “Don’t assume good fortune. Do whatever is necessary to get through.” His first step at B&N was to halve the staff at its New York head office, and he later laid off 5,000 employees. “Behind his cool exterior, there’s an emotional intensity. He’s incredibly committed and driven,” says Tom Weldon, who heads Penguin Random House in the UK.

Daunt drifted through his early, privileged life. The son of a roving diplomat, he boarded at Sherborne, a public school, and later studied history at Cambridge. He tried his hand at investment banking as a JP Morgan trainee in New York. Katy Steward, his then girlfriend and now wife, worked at an aid organisation that developed education policy in west Africa and did not approve. “Much as I might be enjoying it, was that really how I was going to spend my life?” he recalls her asking. “So I left.”

The iron entered his soul when he set up his first bookshop in an Edwardian building on Marylebone High Street in 1990. He soon discovered that it was not an easy life. He had to sit on a lot of expensive stock, which took a long time to sell. He needed large spaces in desirable locations with high rents, and he required a lot of knowledgeable staff. “I found,” Daunt says, “that the economics of a bookshop are terrible, like shit.” He spent his first four years fearing bankruptcy. Sometimes he did not pay creditors because he was short of cash. “If there were two men in suits in the queue, I knew the bailiffs had turned up,” he says.

Amid this struggle, Daunt developed his distinctive style: recommending books that he and his staff had actually read and enjoyed, rather than publishers’ favourites, and displaying them artfully with their covers face out, sometimes with handwritten notes of recommendation. Most retail chains now grasp the importance of creating an enticing atmosphere in stores, but he mastered it early. He understood bookshops work best if they feel like clubs in which dedicated readers can consult expert curators.

Despite the scale of the operations over which he now presides, Daunt retains the manner of his early years. He gets around his London shops by bicycle.

‘If his mission is to turn Barnes & Noble into a successful chain, it can’t be done’

Mike Shatzkin, analyst

When we meet in Marylebone, he sports a plaster on his forehead, having hit himself by accident while pruning an apple tree at his home in Hampstead. (The family also has a second home in Suffolk.) “I will plough my way through something serious,” he says of his reading habits. “I’m reading Alex Ross’s book on Wagnerism now.”

His spartan habits extend to holidays. The family bought “a wreck of a house” on the Scottish island of Jura four years ago but have yet to refurbish it and instead stay with old friends on their annual visits. “It’s a big, wild island, a magical place,” Daunt says. “If you walk up the west side, there are some wonderful beaches. You carry a tent or stay [overnight] in a bothy, but the most fun is to sleep in a cave.”

Daunt’s distinctive personality, his charm married to deliberate reticence, can puzzle some US executives. “Sometimes I wonder, ‘Is this because you’re James or because you’re British?’” says Jackie De Leo, B&N’s vice-president for bookstores. “I have to pull out what he really means. He doesn’t give you all the answers, but I think there’s a method there.”

Paul Best, head of European private equity at Elliott Advisors, cannot remember who first suggested doubling down on the fund’s 2018 acquisition of Waterstones by buying Barnes & Noble too. “The idea evolved as we talked, and we asked James, ‘Do you think the Waterstones playbook could work there because it would be quite bold?’”

Bold is an understatement given the troubles of physical shops and shopping malls in the US. One 2020 study estimated that online retailing would contribute to 25 per cent of US shopping malls closing within five years. The mathematics of the challenge facing bookshops are simple. Shatzkin, the analyst, estimates there were 500,000 US titles in circulation in 1990, and the largest Barnes & Noble stores stocked 125,000 of them. There are now 20 million titles, and most bookshops carry no more than 30,000, Shatzkin says.

A reader who seeks a specific book is far less likely to find it in a store than online, where the inventory is essentially infinite. “A bookshop is not the best place to find what’s available,” Shatzkin says. “And it’s not the most convenient when a book weighs a pound or two and could just be delivered.”

Chains such as B&N and Borders were once seen as the predators themselves, squeezing out independents with their scale. B&N grew from a single store in New York in 1971 to a national chain under the ownership of Leonard Riggio and his family. But both companies were beaten by Amazon. Borders went bankrupt in 2011 and B&N ate through several chief executives in the struggle, opening in-store cafés and selling CDs and DVDs next to books.

Both B&N and Waterstones, owned by the music retailer HMV between 1998 and 2011, tried to match Amazon with heavy promotions and three-for-two offers. They used similar techniques to other retailers, such as changing stock every three weeks and employing “planograms” to ensure that the displays in all stores matched. They took “co-op” fees from publishers in return for placing top titles in the best spots. None of it worked.

Daunt watched it all sceptically from Daunt Books. “It’s how every chain bookseller in the world runs, so it’s not that Feltrinelli or Fnac or Empik is different,” he says of other big European chains. “They all operate the same way, and they’re all terrible.” It was only in 2011, when the Russian billionaire Alexander Mamut acquired Waterstones for £53m and put him in charge, that he got the chance to prove it.

It was a time of uncertainty about the future of physical books, with Amazon having steadily upgraded its Kindle ebook reader since launching it in 2007. It seemed possible that books were fated to go the way of CDs and later DVDs. Daunt himself hedged his bets in 2012 by striking a deal with Amazon to sell Kindles in Waterstones. (He ended it in 2015). B&N, meanwhile, invested in its lacklustre competitor, the Nook ereader.

But the book survived. Ebooks comprised only 15 per cent of US trade book sales in February. Books are cherished as objects and even decoration, becoming the de facto backdrop of many a Zoom call during the pandemic. “You don’t need to hold a CD to listen to music, but the weights, the fonts and the paper quality are such a huge part of the book experience,” says De Leo.

Daunt’s solution to Waterstones’ troubles was simple: he ran it more like Daunt Books. It is accepted wisdom that businesses cannot be managed at scale in the same way as when small. The logistics are more complex and layers of supervision are needed. Daunt thought this made no sense for bookshops because the magic came from giving staff more autonomy.

“This is mine, and with my team I can sell the pants out of this place,” he says, glancing around his Marylebone shop. “At Waterstones and now at Barnes & Noble, you have to bring the ethos of this shop – literally this shop.”

Waterstones had become monotonous under HMV, says Kate Skipper, now the chain’s chief operating officer. “If you walked into any shop, the same thing greeted you, but what is right for Crouch End may not be right for Huddersfield.” To change tack, it not only had to trust its employees but sacrifice the £27m it was paid by publishers to promote their books the year before Daunt joined. ▶

◀ Switching to Daunt's strategy was financially brutal. Waterstones lost £43m in 2012 and £23m the following year. But it steadily recovered, having cut costs and empowered booksellers. It no longer had to return 25 per cent of the books foisted on it by publishers. (Returns now run at less than 5 per cent.)

"I'm not prepared to tolerate bad bookshops because I know what a good one is. If you give intelligent booksellers freedom, they will create them," Daunt says. "It may take time, but it will happen."

It was unnerving for publishers not to be able to ensure good placement for books they wanted to market heavily, but most say they were happy to exchange control for better shops. Andrew Franklin, the founder of Profile Books in the UK, says, "To have a bookseller who cares about books in charge of bookshops, rather than finance guys who know nothing about them, is incredibly reassuring."

When he arrived at B&N in 2019, Daunt started to execute the same plan. He shed middle managers and part-timers, leaving places for some of the booksellers who had left as it shrank in the final Riggio years. "The first thing I said at Waterstones and B&N was, 'This is a place for people who love books. Look in the mirror and ask if you really want to engage. If you don't and it's just a retail job, go and get one at Boots or Target. Just leave.'"

Then came the pandemic, which closed B&N stores in spring 2020 and stopped Daunt's weekly commute from London to New York. But closure allowed B&N to change the layout of its stores according to Daunt's preferences. "James said, 'Well, lo and behold, we have employees who want to work and nothing to do. It's the perfect time to re-lay the stores,'" says Amy Fitzgerald, B&N's senior retail director.

The stores had been arranged like libraries, with rows of shelves holding books in alphabetical

'Readers need to be surprised, expressed to. They can't get that from an algorithm'

Sharmaine Lovegrove, publisher

order, a method that made things easy for staff and readers who knew what they were looking for, but made for poor browsing. Daunt's formula is to mix up shelves with round tables piled with books by topic. A history area might have German literature, travel guidebooks and pop-academic studies. It is designed to make readers linger and sample, like bees around flowers.

"It's very visual, this game," Daunt says, pointing at a table. "I could rearrange that table to be completely dead, from a colour perspective. If you put all of the blue next to the blue, you have just become dull. You've got to juxtaposition, and then make the books sing off each other intellectually."

He cares little about some aspects of a store's looks. The flagship Waterstones in Piccadilly still has old, scruffy carpet. But he is obsessed with arranging as many books as possible with covers out, on shelves angled to catch the light. "We had a great Argentine shopfitter, and I remember sitting with him and James in Piccadilly, debating the right angle for the shelves," says Luke Taylor, Waterstones' retail director.

Daunt's methods demand more of staff. B&N could employ part-timers to shelve books "by the gun" - using scanners to read barcodes. It now requires human intelligence and remembering the location of each title. "It is tougher, and we've not

hidden that from anybody," Fitzgerald says. "They have to think around corners."

The US is full of shopping malls next to multi-lane highways that are very little like Marylebone High Street. But Daunt insists that mall stores can be made into more enticing places and his formula of diversity can work as well there as in the UK. "If somebody in Illinois told me how to run this shop, I would be pretty pissed off. So I'm not going to do it the other way around."

Meanwhile, B&N is opening smaller outlets on high streets. It has just reopened in Westport, Connecticut, and Best thinks there is potential to grow in bookish spots such as Brooklyn, where there are only two B&N stores. One reason for optimism is that independents are now growing again. From a low of 1,650 across the US in 2009, they reached 2,470 in 2018. "We've been very pleased with the sales performance, I'll say that," says Fitzgerald of B&N's new era.

Even with thriving sales in the pandemic, publishers were eager for bookshops to reopen. Online shopping led readers back to established authors, driving "backlist" purchases of older titles. Debut authors, particularly of fiction, suffered from the lack of booksellers reading new works and spreading the word.

The idea that bookstores might disappear horrifies publishers. "I just think that would be terrible," says Sharmaine Lovegrove, a former bookseller who is now publisher of Dialogue Books, a UK imprint of Hachette. "Readers need to be surprised, expressed to. They can't get that from an algorithm."

Lovegrove, one of the few black editors in UK publishing, says that bookshops are essential to encouraging diversity and dissuading publishers from simply picking authors in their own image. "I'm always amazed there are no bookshops within 10 minutes of most publishers' offices," she says. "It's only when you've sold Doris Lessing to a 60-year-old black man or a crime novel to a 19-year-old girl that you know readers are capable of so much more."



Before and after: what Barnes & Noble stores had become (left) and a recently reopened store remodelled according to the Daunt formula



Daunt in his first shop in 1990. He says he spent the next four years fearing bankruptcy and, occasionally, dodging creditors

But other publishers worry that Daunt now so dominates English-language bookselling that it damages titles that do not suit his formula. “He’s just too snobby, and he’s missing out on the next generation,” says one, who asked to remain anonymous. “Waterstones and Barnes & Noble need to be more of the people.”

Daunt remains serenely certain of his approach. His doubt is whether he can keep all his bookstores going, especially in the UK. As he expands in out-of-town centres such as Fosse Park, he frets about the long-term effect of the pandemic on high streets. “We run quite a lot of marginal shops in places like Bolton, Barrow-in-Furness and Blackpool. I promise you Barrow-in-Furness does not make us money, but it seems important that it’s there.”

He speaks warmly of his shops’ social importance. “Lowestoft [in Suffolk] is not the smartest town, but if you go there at four o’clock in term time, you will find teenagers sitting on the floor reading manga because it’s a nice place to be. What else are they going to do if it shuts?” He is lobbying, along with others, for the UK government to eliminate business rate taxation on shops and compensate with an online sales tax that would take more from Amazon.

‘I’m not prepared to tolerate bad bookshops because I know what a good one is’

James Daunt

The question of what Daunt will do if this campaign fails brings out his tougher side. “Well, how long is John Lewis waiting?” he asks rhetorically. (The chain of UK department stores announced in April that it would close a further eight stores.) “As the leases come up, you make a decision. You don’t hang around. I’m being boxed into a corner where I have to make really bad choices.”

Some think that he is under more pressure to cut loss-making shops since Waterstones was taken over by Elliott, whose founder, Paul Singer, was once called “the world’s most feared investor”. One says, “Nobody would choose Elliott as an owner, so he has a challenge on his hands.”

Elliott says it expects Waterstones as well as B&N to expand rather than to shrink. “We’re a

rational investor and if you look at it holistically, these [Waterstones] stores are good for the cohesion of communities in which we operate,” says Best. “That’s important to us as well.” Daunt says he is content to have Elliott as an owner, but one day would like the business to be taken public, so that he could manage it “for people who just want a nice, sensible dividend”.

Not that his history suggests much reluctance to take hard decisions. He has let staff go without compunction and rejected a 2019 campaign, backed by authors, to make Waterstones pay its entry-level staff the minimum rate suggested by the Living Wage Foundation. The company made post-tax profits of £22.7m in 2019, but Daunt said that, while he wanted to improve pay eventually, he would not jeopardise Waterstones’ finances or reduce his leeway to pay senior employees more.

In his Marylebone shop, where it all started, where he once feared creditors coming to take it all away, I ask if it ever troubles him to be tough. “We turned Waterstones from a business suffering a catastrophe into a profitable one,” he says. “You need fewer people but the compact is you invest a decent amount in others. You get into a virtuous cycle and you end up with well-run, happy bookshops. So do I feel guilty? No, I don’t.” **FT**

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John Gapper is FT Weekend business columnist



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Design special

Cover: Ini Archibong photographed for the FT by Namsa Leuba



'People just want to have fun, spend a day out and Instagram the hell out of everything'

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'Hundreds of millions of dollars are being poured into lab-grown leather and silk alternatives'

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'I created my own version of success'

Ini Archibong photographed at Beau-Rivage Palace, Lausanne, Switzerland



Ini Archibong's sculptural, spiritual furniture and installations are inspired by everything from fantasy and philosophy to hip-hop and Yoruba belief systems. He talks to *Kadish Morris* about creating a pavilion that celebrates the African diaspora – and the challenges facing black designers everywhere. Portrait by *Namsa Leuba*

Ini Archibong often begins work not with shapes but with sounds – homemade hip-hop, to be precise. “Sometimes I don’t even sketch,” he says. “I’ll make an hour’s worth of beats and close my eyes. Those shapes I imagine become furniture pieces.”

Archibong seems to relish mixing things up. Since graduating in 2015, he has created a curvaceous watch for Hermès, a hand-sculpted table mirror for watch brand Vacheron Constantin and an interactive sound installation in Dallas. Still just 37, he has the kind of CV that many more established makers would envy. His poetic, mystical designs reference everything from his Nigerian heritage to philosophy, fantasy stories, mathematics and music.

For a while, he juggled music-making and design, but he decided to put his energy into the latter. “I knew that I could always make music, even if I didn’t have an audience,” he says, speaking via Zoom on a train to Geneva from Neuchâtel, where he is based.

The project now occupying his attention is arguably his most ambitious yet. It begins with a commission for this month’s London Design Biennale, the Pavilion of the African Diaspora, a temporary “folly” created in collaboration with architect Zena Howard from Perkins+Will. Sail-like in shape, the billowing structure evokes the ships that carried enslaved African people to America and the Caribbean. Installed on the terrace of Somerset House, it will act as a stage for talks and events celebrating African identity.

The pavilion will tell “the story of our people”, Archibong says, a “monument” to those from the African diaspora, as well as a testament to their global influence: “[It’s] a place that represents them. It’s also a physical space for them to express themselves to each other and for other people to bear witness to our dialogues.”

Project organiser Tamara Houston compares Archibong’s creativity with the African diaspora itself, “layered and complex with no single form of language”. His vision and work “always elevate the spirit”, she says. ▶

◀ Those supporting and advising on the project include musician Nile Rodgers, choreographer Robert Battle and museum directors Monetta White and Franklin Sirmans - a wide spread of talent from different disciplines and different places, all of whom have roots in Africa.

After the biennale, the pavilion will travel this autumn to New York, where it is scheduled to go on display alongside another new piece, "The Wave". The project will come to a climax in Miami at Art Basel in December, when these structures will be joined by a third, this time in the shape of a conch shell. The horn-like shape of the conch is a central metaphor for the project, Archibong explains: the idea is to summon people from across the African diaspora to assemble, as well as amplifying and broadcasting the creativity of people of African descent. "This particular project is thinking about resonance and voices," he says.

Archibong's engineer father and computer-scientist mother emigrated from Nigeria to the US before he was born but, growing up in Pasadena in suburban southern California, he

was immersed in a strong Nigerian community. "Both of my grandmothers came from our village and lived with us the entire time I was growing up," he says. "My house was full of Nigerian artefacts. On the weekends, we'd go to church and dress in traditional clothes. We kind of led this double life as Nigerians and as black American kids."

A design career wasn't exactly on the cards: his family expected him to get a solid education, then a steady job. "I'm Nigerian. I'm supposed to be an engineer or a doctor," he laughs.

He started at business school before dropping out and applying for a scholarship to Pasadena's ArtCenter College. It wasn't until he graduated that his parents came round to his career choice: "When they saw how other people reacted to my work, they were like, 'Wow, this is really something.'"

A stint in Singapore with Tim Kobe's collective Eight Inc, perhaps best known for developing the original concept for the Apple Store, came next, followed by a masters in luxury design in Lausanne.



Left: Untitled/Winter table mirror for Vacheron Constantin

Right: Galop d'Hermès watch; 'Theoracle', an installation at Dallas Museum of Art updated with caution tape following the Black Lives Matter protests

Below: Jadis lighting sculpture, from the 'In the Secret Garden' collection; it takes its name from a character in CS Lewis's Narnia stories

Below left: design for the 'The Sail, Pavilion of the African Diaspora', created for the London Design Biennale. Its billowing structure references the ships that carried enslaved African people to America and the Caribbean



'When I design and create, I do it in a natural way. I don't overly plan. I try to do it from my gut'

Switzerland is now home - Archibong's studio is here, and it's where his daughter was born in 2017. "It never crossed my mind growing up that I would ever live on a lake with mountains behind me and trees at my window," he says. "It's like a postcard."

His breakthrough was the collection he debuted at Milan Design Week in 2016. It was sponsored by the actor Terry Crews, who first met Archibong while the designer was working in a menswear store in his twenties and who has kept a close eye on his career.

The collection, created in collaboration with Crews' Amen & Amen design house, was entitled "In the Secret Garden". It looked both luxurious and alluringly futuristic, consisting of slender, hand-carved marble tables balancing on pink-and-blue glass legs, a glittering chandelier of crystalline lampshades resembling flowers and a brilliant white sofa whose underside was covered in vibrant west African batik print.

But it was the stories behind these pieces that made them stand out: the Galilee table "represented the belief in self as a conduit of the power of God", Archibong explains, while the chandelier was inspired by CS Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the sofa by the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. (Squint and you can see that it's in the shape of a grin, with the backrests two large eyes.)

More recent projects have included the equally experimental "Below the Heavens" collection for the furniture brand Sé in 2018, which featured pastel-hued sculptural furniture inspired by the monolithic shapes of standing stones, crafted from marble and brass. Another collection, showcased at last

year's London Design Festival, references the post-volcanic landscape of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, with a wooden table and benches painted emerald green; they were supported by blocky hexagonal structures resembling columns of basalt.

Yoruba belief systems, which developed in what is now Nigeria, have been a powerful wellspring for Archibong. His curving white "Oshun" sofa is named after the *orisha* (guiding spirit) of fertility; a wallpaper design coloured the serene blue of Lake Neuchâtel near his home is called "Yemoja", after a water spirit who is the patron saint of rivers. "I'm trying to capture [the *orishas*'] spirit and their energy," he says.

Sometimes his mystical, kaleidoscopic pieces feel more like art or sculpture than homeware. As he points out: "In luxury, the function of an object is important, but it's not more important than how it makes you feel."

He prefers to follow instinct, creating forms that are then drafted on paper by his design team, before doing virtual 3D modelling himself (a skill he developed as a teenager). "When I design and create, I do it in a natural way. I don't overly plan. I try to do it from my gut," he says. Final fabrication in marble and glass is done by skilled craftspeople.

In November 2019, he installed a piece called "Theoracle" at Dallas Art Museum - a celestial installation made up of 10 capsule-shaped glass bulbs encircling a curved white obelisk, all set behind a black pool filled with water. In the original design, visitors were encouraged to interact: if you placed your hands on the bulbs, they turned out to be synthesizers that created sounds, which in turn made the surface of the water vibrate and shimmer. ▶



‘I didn’t have people to model myself after that looked like me in the design industry. I want to lead by example’

‘Below the Heavens’ for furniture company Sé, inspired by Yoruba traditions. The Oshun sofa is named after the orisha (guiding spirit) of fertility

◀ After the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, Archibong “updated” the piece to protest violence against black people, covering it with yellow caution tape that prevented visitors from getting too close.

“It’s my only work that’s directly about what we experienced in America,” he says. “Putting the caution tape is basically saying: no one’s allowed to touch it until further notice. If you guys aren’t going to play fair, I’m going to take my ball and go home.” It is now in the museum’s permanent collection.

He feels no desire to return to the US: “People that didn’t grow up having a black experience in America, they underestimate what that does to somebody’s psyche,” he says. “I was 29 years old when I moved to Singapore, and within a matter of three to six months I woke up and I realised that I didn’t really have any imminent threat.”

He is keenly aware of his own status as an expatriate African-American designer working in an industry that, for all its global reach, remains overwhelmingly white. Research done in 2020 shows that among 4,417 furniture collections from leading brands such as Ligne Roset, Knoll and Cappellini, only 14 collaborations were with black designers. Although names such as Stephen Burks, Kesha Franklin and Jomo

Tariku are becoming better known, there is intense pressure among the black designers who have developed profiles to create a certain kind of career, says Archibong. “Can I be a black designer that’s not a celebrity?” he asks.

“It’s never really been looked at as a place for us,” he says. “I didn’t have people to necessarily reference or model myself after that looked like me in the design industry. So, because of that, I created my own version of success. I want to lead by example.” But it’s also important for him simply to be himself, he adds: “As a black man in design, it’s important for me to show up as me.”

Archibong’s next big project is his first solo show at New York gallery Friedman Benda this autumn, where he will debut a dozen or so original pieces. “There’s also a bunch of secret stuff that we can’t talk about yet,” he says.

Then we’re back to music. Archibong is talking about his plans to have a DJ at the London opening of the Pavilion of the African Diaspora. “There’s going to be a lot of sounds,” he says. Maybe some pieces of his own music too? “No, no, no,” he says, suddenly shy. “I keep those under wraps.” **F**

The Pavilion of the African Diaspora is part of London Design Biennale at Somerset House, London, from June 1-27; londondesignbiennale.com



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Comfort zones

Ikea's Rudsta cabinet: glass-fronted display cabinets have been prominent on Instagram, decked with plants, ceramics and candles

As we've hunkered down during the pandemic, our domestic spaces have served not just as home offices, but as sanctuaries, spas and restaurants too. *Aaliyah Harris* delves into the top trends to emerge from a year of lockdown living

In the frantic early weeks of Covid-19, we bulk-bought printer paper and gym equipment, pasta and toilet rolls: staples and stopgaps intended to get us through a few weeks of lockdown, which turned into a few months. Meanwhile, designers busied themselves developing high-tech products that could help us brave this frightening new reality - everything from 3D-printed, hands-free door handles to wearable air purifiers to picnic blankets encouraging social distancing.

But as the pandemic wore on, consumers began thinking past mere survival towards how they could turn their living spaces into sanctuaries rather than bunkers. Our homes weren't just shelters from a deadly pandemic, we began to realise, but needed to be galleries, restaurants and spas too.

From inflatable hot tubs to antique wicker baskets, here are a few of the most unexpected items we've bought during the past year or so, as well as some pandemic design trends that look likely to last.

Display cabinets

Whether it's because our living spaces have become Zoom backdrops or because our obsession with houseplants has continued to bloom, glass display cabinets are all the rage. Ikea's metal-framed "Rudsta" was released in February 2021 and was soon all over Instagram, where users dotted their shelves with plants, ceramics, candles and barware. Similar models by other brands have been a reliable presence on the pages of design magazines and websites. If these are a bit too indoor-greenhouse for your taste, small-drawer "apothecary" cabinets are also back - a clever way to tidy away pandemic clutter.

Weighted blankets

Weighted blankets were developed to help people with ADHD, autism and anxiety to sleep better. But they've become mainstream in recent years, and surged in popularity during the pandemic. Sleep expert Stephanie Romiszewski, director of Exeter's Sleepyhead Clinic, says that's hardly surprising - she has noticed a sharp increase in sleep problems since Covid-19 began: "Naturally, getting less light, getting outdoors less, changes to your entire lifestyle [and] environment and not going to work is going to have an impact on your sleep." Department store John Lewis recommends choosing one that's about 10 per cent of your bodyweight. ►



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Natural colour schemes, houseplants and even eucalyptus bundles to hang in the shower (right) have helped bring the outside world in



Natural designs

Given the hazards of the outside world, many of us have tried to bring a touch of nature into our homes - a trend that continued even when lockdowns started to ease. Those lucky enough to have gardens splurged on plants, bulbs and bird baths; even people without outdoor space experimented with assembling indoor herb gardens or hanging fronds of eucalyptus in the shower (and, yes, more houseplants). So-called biophilic design is a major trend in architecture and has filtered down into homeware too, with green, blue and sand-coloured paint palettes becoming popular and a renewed interest in wooden surfaces and finishes.

Hot tubs


As swimming pools, spas and saunas remained out of bounds in many countries for months at a time, the craze for inflatable pools and hot tubs has lasted. Retailers reported a jump in sales last summer and there was another spike of interest around Black Friday in November, when B&Q was selling a four-person model for £300. The Lay-Z-Spa has repeatedly sold out over the past year. Even John Lewis, which has never stocked hot tubs before, has recently started. At the height of the obsession last summer, Reuters reported that some US consumers, frustrated by long lead times and forced to holiday at home, were fashioning DIY pools from metal livestock tanks.

Pizza ovens

With indoor socialising banned, it's hardly surprising that many of us splashed out on garden furniture, patio tiles, fancy barbecues, patio heaters and fire pits. Perhaps more unexpected is the boom in outdoor pizza ovens, as the appeal of sourdough starters and lockdown cooking began to wane. John Lewis has reported an increase in demand of 90 per cent for them; other retailers have seen an even higher rise as people make up for missed evenings out.

Cottagecore

Cottagecore - the fad for countryside style, from Laura Ashley-esque florals and ruffles to wicker baskets and tea served in antique china - became popular on TikTok and Instagram in 2019 and was recently described in the FT as being like "cuddling chickens and swinging baskets of fresh eggs with fwuffy bunny wabbits".

Think no to sleek marble fixtures and grey colour palettes, yes to dried flowers, gingham checks, hand-crafted furniture, quilts and candles. Even limewash is back: used to decorate and protect plaster and stone for millennia, this limestone-based paint has become omnipresent on interior design Instagram. Harper's Bazaar has noted its ecological and non-toxic credentials, and points out that with the right primer you don't even need to have ancient plaster walls to get an antique, weather-worn look. 



With indoor socialising off limits, many moved their entertaining to the garden, investing in patio heaters, barbecues and pizza ovens

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Shopping for new ideas

The pandemic has hit department stores hard, with the collapse of major chains and many landmark buildings boarded up. Could historic spaces be recycled as galleries or health clinics, and what else does the future of high-end retail hold? By *Edwin Heathcote*

Above: customers thronging London's Selfridges in 1966, during the golden age of department stores

Facing page: the futuristic SKP-S store in Beijing



When the first great department stores opened in Paris and the US in the late 19th century, they were like nothing that had been seen. There were cafés, restaurants and smoking rooms, fountains and winter gardens, luxury goods that customers could browse without being bothered by staff. There were even ladies' lavatories: women could spend an entire day in town in safety and without moral opprobrium. A glimpse of lifestyles that had previously been available only to the elite was now on view to almost anyone who strolled in.

It's difficult to reconcile all this with the dying department stores that now loom, unloved, in cities, towns and suburban malls. A walk through central London takes you past the dead hulk of Debenhams on Oxford Street and the former Army & Navy in Victoria, which will shut next summer. It's perhaps even worse in the US: the ailing JC Penney has closed more than 160 stores, Neiman Marcus has been battling with bankruptcy and restructuring,

and other once-mighty names are in trouble. One estimate suggests that 800 US department stores may close during the next five years - roughly half the remaining mall-based total.

The pandemic retail apocalypse has been written about extensively, but what about the architectural losses? While Selfridges has recently been granted a licence to host weddings at its swaggering Edwardian Oxford Street headquarters, as well as experimenting with pop-ups and opening a vegan butcher, Marks and Spencer is demolishing some of its landmark stores and replacing them with generic mixed-use buildings that have little of the flair of the originals. Gems such as the streamlined 1930s Debenhams in Taunton, south-west England, face uncertain futures. The trend appears to be to let these buildings go: just as the retail world has moved on, these cavernous carcasses should be knocked down or gutted to make room for something else.

Is this the only option? As well as being architecturally significant, these remarkable buildings are an incredible

resource. They may be desolate now, but myriad fascinating futures are possible.

Take Paris's La Samaritaine, a grand, 70,000 sq m complex of Art Nouveau and Art Deco buildings in the first arrondissement, which opened in 1870 and grew to become one of the architectural wonders of its age. After a lengthy and controversial redesign process, it will finally reopen later this year, wrapped in rippling, translucent glass designed by the Japanese architects SANAA. A luxury hotel, a remodelled store and offices are part of the scheme; more surprisingly, perhaps, it also includes 96 social housing units and a nursery - an impressive intervention in a sensitive historic site.

There are more experimental possibilities too. Kathryn Bishop of strategic consultancy The Future Laboratory points to projects where department stores have been converted into retirement homes or sheltered accommodation. The Folkestone senior-living community in Wayzata, Minnesota, is a former mall, its brick-faced blocks offering a simulacrum of ►

Right: Paris's La Samaritaine, which opened in 1870 – one of the wonders of its age

Below right: after a lengthy renovation, the store will reopen later this year, wrapped in a rippling glass facade and incorporating a luxury hotel, restaurant, social housing and nursery

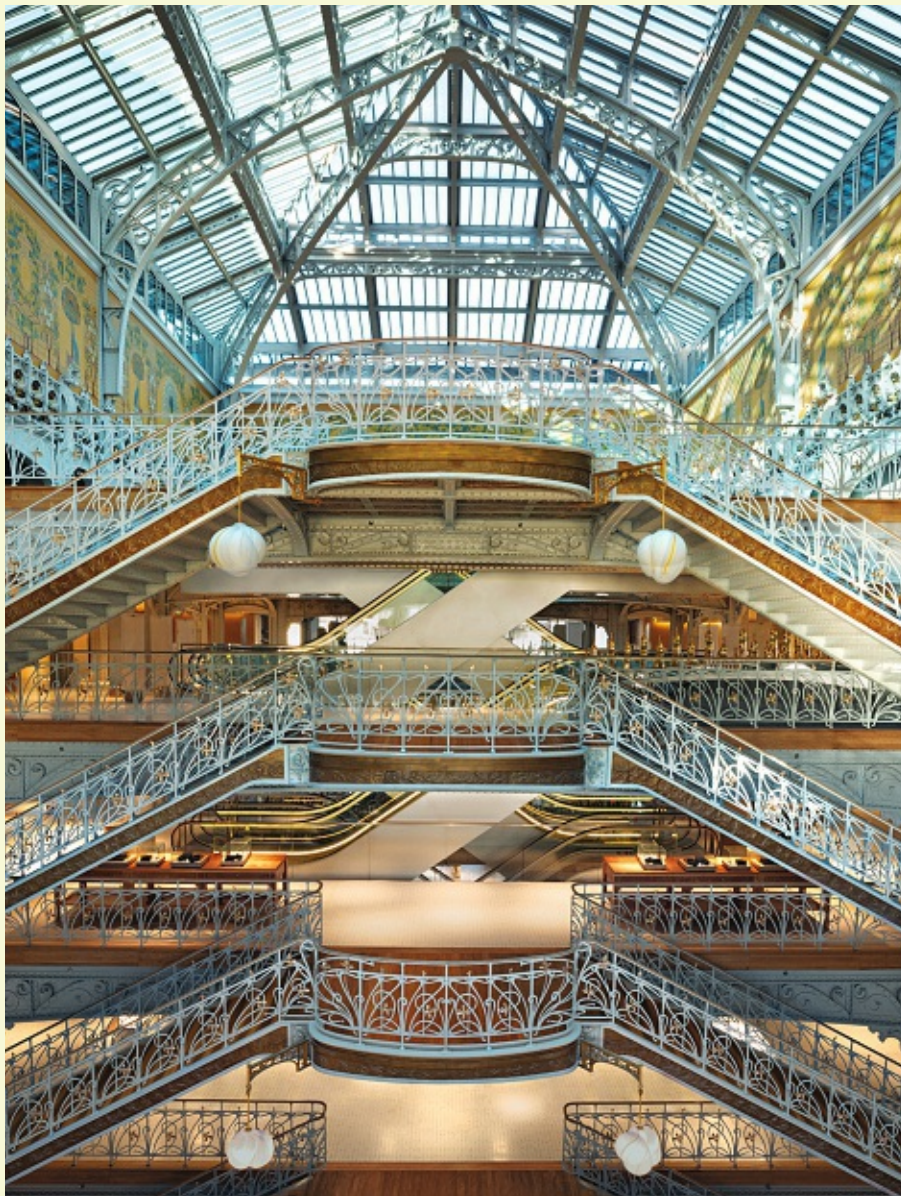
◀ urbanity. “Many Americans over 55 don’t want suburban bungalows but sidewalks and shops,” she says. “We might see health and wellbeing much more integrated in the streets.”

Another possibility is culture. Might not empty retail units make perfect spaces for art, theatre, workshops? There are big windows for studios and display, and deep floor plates for galleries. Museums are keen not to be perceived as exclusive – what better way to present their treasures to the public than on high streets? Or perhaps spaces in less residential areas could transform into nightclubs, which have been shut down by the pandemic. After all, nightlife always appropriates spaces conceived for other uses.

What went wrong with traditional department stores in western cities? It seems obvious to blame the huge growth in online shopping – accelerated by the pandemic – but Vicki Howard, an academic at the University of Essex and the author of *From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store*, identifies a longer, sorer history. This reaches back to the late 20th century, when debt-driven expansion enabled major retail players to swallow up local brands, creating identikit stores that were shadows of their former selves. “Businesses took every opportunity to strip away those costly amenities which had made them luxurious – the service, the training of the staff,” she says. “Then they expanded into the suburbs, where they built windowless boxes, maximising floor and display space in the middle of a car park. The materials they used didn’t stand the test of time and they ended up as strip malls.”

This shift from city centres was faster in the US, but it hasn’t been entirely one-way, Howard adds: in the past decade, as downtowns have been gentrified and revitalised, abandoned malls have been redeveloped too. The Mall of America in Minnesota, the country’s biggest, filled up some of its empty spaces with a large walk-in health clinic in 2019, a move that looks prophetic in light of Covid.

If the idea of the department store itself is to endure, it is going to have to change. For some, this might mean prioritising luxury. The success of London’s Dover Street Market, created by Comme des Garçons founder Rei Kawakubo and her husband Adrian Joffe in Mayfair, has established a model for the department store as a high-concept, high-design hangout, closer to an art gallery than a shop and mixing streetwear with haute couture. Dover Street Markets have now materialised in locations including Tokyo, Beijing and LA. In New York, Roman & Williams ▶



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Left: Whiteleys in 1984. Once one of London's most imposing stores, the Grade II-listed building is now being transformed into a mixed-use space with hotel, apartments, restaurants and retail arcade

Below left: SKP-S in Beijing: 'The Chinese have understood that people just want to have fun,' says architect Torquil McIntosh



◀ Lafayette Street outlet offers antiques, crafts, art, dining and design in an upmarket interior which has something of the crowded luxury of the grandest 19th-century stores.

London-based architecture practice Sybarite is building a number of adventurous retail spaces in China, some repurposed from older structures. Sybarite's stores recall the ambition of the golden era of Selfridges and the like - if not the aesthetic. One project for the high-end store brand SKP-S brings sci-fi fantasy to central Beijing: a "Mars zone" features life-size model space vehicles, accommodation modules and immersive evocations of the Martian landscape; its snaking corridors look like something from *Star Wars*.

Sybarite co-founder Torquil McIntosh explains that Chinese consumers, once derided for copying western fashions, are now leading the way in retail. "The Chinese have understood that people just want to have fun, spend a day out and Instagram the hell out of everything," he says. "Customers switch between their phones and the real environment and back every second."

For other projects, the key will be location. Bishop identifies a phenomenon she refers to as "small box stores". If the past few decades were dominated by suburban malls filled with huge DIY outlets, home-furnishing outfits and discount supermarkets, many of these businesses have been trying to get back into city centres - "even Ikea", Bishop points out. The fact that so many of us have been working from home during the pandemic has had a revitalising effect on local high streets, with workers popping out to shops and cafés near where they live. Stores and big brands might have to come to us rather than expecting us to go to them.

Empty shops are usually seen as an indicator of economic blight but, looked at another way, they are spaces of opportunity. It will take subtle shifts in regulation and developers' mindsets - away from relying on financially leveraged global brands paying assured rents. It will also take engagement from local authorities and communities, committed to maintaining these distinctive and often historic structures on their streets. And it will need a new, nimble entrepreneurialism. Sure, department stores as we've known them might not survive. But their future could be far more interesting. **FT**

Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture and design critic



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Fabrics of the future

A handbag made of mushrooms? Sneakers manufactured from pineapple leaves? Expect some surprising innovations as fashion brands seek out sustainable materials, says *Lauren Indvik*



For thousands of years, humans have outfitted themselves in silk and wool, cotton and linen, fur and hides. You can probably find most of these, if not all, in your own wardrobe.

But a decade from now, you might well see fewer such time-tested materials hanging there. Your “silk” dress might be derived from orange-peel fibre or yeast fermented in a lab. Your “leather” shoes or handbags could be crafted primarily from pineapple waste or lab-grown mycelium, the network of root-threads growing beneath mushrooms. At the very least, your cashmere jumper or nylon windbreaker is likely to be made at least partly from recycled material.

As anxiety about climate change and the welfare of garment workers has deepened, the \$2.5tn global fashion industry is under pressure from consumers - and increasingly governments - to improve its ecological and social footprint. Textile manufacturers, once concerned chiefly with performance and price, are now introducing a range of materials to cater to surging demand from brands for “ethical” fabrics. Venture capitalists are pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into start-ups to bring lab-grown leather and silk alternatives to market.

New materials “are no longer just being created with performance in mind”, says Claire Bergkamp, chief operating officer of Textile Exchange, a sustainable-fibre trade body, and the former sustainability and innovation director at Stella McCartney. “There’s a real uptick in innovation to solve environmental concerns.”

The demand for new materials is being driven by a change in consumer values. In survey after survey, people say they prefer to buy clothing from so-called sustainable brands and are even willing to pay more for it. The success of environmental champions such as Patagonia and sneaker start-up Allbirds has caught the attention of fashion executives keen to appeal to the next generation of shoppers.

Collective initiatives such as the UN’s Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action and French president Emmanuel Macron’s Fashion Pact have galvanised brands from Burberry to Nike to Inditex - the parent company of Zara and the world’s biggest clothing retailer - to commit to substantially reducing carbon emissions within their companies and supply chains.

When the French luxury conglomerate Kering, whose brands include Gucci and Saint Laurent, pledged in 2017 to cut its environmental footprint by 40 per cent by 2025, the company was aware it couldn’t do it solely with what was available on the market.

“We knew that to reach this target, our own projects linked with raw materials - for example organic cotton, organic wool, sustainable cashmere - would only reduce our footprint by about 20 per cent,” says Marie-Claire Daveu, Kering’s chief sustainability officer. “So if we want to reduce by 40 per cent, we need to find disruptive innovations.”

In 2013 the company had established a Materials Innovation Lab, which functions as a library for certified-sustainable fabrics - there are now 2,800 of them - and extended an invitation to designers at Kering’s brands to bring in materials they liked, to see if a lower-impact alternative could be found.

'Leather is a 19th-century material in a 21st-century economy'

Matthew Scullin,
chief executive, MycoWorks



The conglomerate has also partnered with the Amsterdam-based incubator Fashion for Good to help identify and grow start-ups working at the intersection of fashion and sustainability. Daveu points to Balenciaga's October 2020 catwalk collection, comprised of 90 per cent recycled, upcycled or certified-sustainable materials, as an example of the changes brought about by these investments.

Another driver of change - particularly when it comes to fur and leather alternatives - is animal welfare. This spring, Hermès, maker of the Birkin bag, caused a stir when it announced that a new edition of its classic Victoria travel bag, launched in 1997 and typically crafted from calfskin and lined in canvas, would be reissued primarily in lab-grown mycelium. This material, developed by the California start-up MycoWorks, is made by combining agricultural waste and mycelium to form a sheet that can be tanned just like real leather; Hermès plans to do the tanning at its own facilities in France. (The bag is not Hermès's answer to the increasing demand for vegan footwear and accessories - this new version still incorporates calfskin.)

Mycelium can be grown in weeks, not years, and Matthew Scullin, chief executive of MycoWorks, says the attraction for brands is as much about speed and scalability as environmental footprint. "Leather is a 19th-century material in a 21st-century economy," he says. "It's a very fixed thing that doesn't scale easily, especially the real high-quality leathers that are primarily sold to the luxury industry."

"What brands are excited about is having greater control of their supply chain, of having a natural material [that is similar to leather] that is made to order to their specifications," he continues. For brands, mycelium "is a paradigm shift".

Hermès has not said how many units of the bag it plans to release, but it will be one of the first mycelium-based handbags manufactured at scale. Others are on their way. Adidas recently announced it will use Mylo, a mycelium leather alternative from Bolt Threads, for a new version of its bestselling Stan Smith sneaker. Stella McCartney has designed a black bustier top and balloon-shaped trousers from the stuff.

Not all leather alternatives are being grown in a lab: food waste is playing its part, too. Paul Smith and Hugo Boss have both released sneakers in Piñatex, a non-woven fibre made from the waste leaves of pineapple plants. Last year, Taiwanese fabric manufacturer Singtex unveiled a jacket made from a combination of recycled coffee grounds and plastic bottles. Orange Fiber, a silk-like twill fabric derived from the leftovers of citrus juice production, has appeared in collections from Salvatore Ferragamo and H&M. And Tommy Hilfiger has produced sneakers made partly from Frumat, a cellulose-based material extracted from apple skin and core waste.

These products have been manufactured in relatively small quantities as part of capsule collections, and it will be some years before any of them could make serious inroads into fashion supply chains.

Despite all the attention lavished on leather alternatives, leather is not the fashion industry's biggest problem when it comes to environmental and social impact. It is, after all, a byproduct of ▶



Above: materials for the production of Mylo, a mycelium leather alternative, in the lab

Left: Mylo foam

Below: working on a Mylo version of Adidas's Stan Smith sneaker

Facing page: Hermès's Victoria bag in Sylvania from MycoWorks: 'What brands are excited about is having a natural material that is made to order to their specifications,' says MycoWorks' Matthew Scullin





Left: Dan Widmaier of Bolt Threads, the California startup behind Mylo

Below: Salvatore Ferragamo scarf in Orange Fiber 'silk' derived from the leftovers of citrus juice production

'Polyester is difficult [to replace] because the price is so low – it's cheaper than water in some localities'

Dan Widmaier, chief executive, Bolt Threads



◀ the meat industry, and while brands should (and often do) take partial responsibility for the huge impacts of cattle farming on the planet, the elimination of leather from fashion's supply chain would only go so far.

The elimination of polyester and other petroleum-based fabrics could, however, make a significant difference. Fifty-five per cent of textiles produced are polyester, followed by fellow synthetics nylon (5 per cent) and acrylic (2 per cent). Cheap, easy and quick to produce – unlike cotton or leather, brands don't have to wait for polyester to "grow" – its environmental consequences are enormous. Three hundred and thirty million barrels of oil are used each year to manufacture polyester alone, according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a charity that promotes the circular economy, and it cannot yet be recycled at scale. Worst are polyester's effects on the ocean: laundered, synthetic fabrics shed microplastic particles that get into waterways and are ingested by aquatic organisms, entering the food chain. The foundation estimates that synthetic fabrics are responsible for more than a third of the primary microplastic pollution found in the ocean.

Because it's so inexpensive, there has been little incentive for start-ups to develop

alternatives. "Polyester is particularly difficult because the price is so low – it's cheaper than water in some localities," says Dan Widmaier, co-founder and chief executive of Bolt Threads. "Unless there is regulatory or legislative action, that's not going to change."

There are hints of such action coming, albeit not in fashion: an EU-wide ban on single-use plastics such as straws and cutlery takes effect this July.

Most of the innovative materials are being brought to market by the upper echelons of the sector. With less cost pressure, luxury brands can afford to experiment with materials that have not yet achieved economies of scale. And with under-35s driving most of the sector's growth, there is an imperative for these brands to match their customers' rapidly shifting values.

"At the end of the day, the reason [brands] don't use organic cotton or recycled polyester or other more sustainable options is cost," says Textile Exchange's Bergkamp. "I hope we get past this obsession of saving a few cents on production, because those few cents have a huge knock-on effect on many, many people and systems in the supply chain."

These are far from the only innovations remaking the fashion world. In 2015 Google developed a flexible, conductive smart fabric called Jacquard. It has been deployed in a Levi's denim jacket that enables wearers to respond to calls or navigate a music playlist by brushing their sleeve, and in a Samsonite backpack that offers turn-by-turn directions and notifies users when they've received a text message.

Fun as those applications may be, scientists are generally more interested in smart fabrics' potential to monitor and respond to information such as body temperature, heart rate and blood sugar. They could have a variety of applications across health and sport, as well as in defence, where they could also be used to detect the presence of harmful chemicals. In August 2019, Apple filed a patent for a smartphone-connected conductive fabric that could gather health and fitness data and allow wearers to control workout apps without the aid of a touchscreen. If integrated into sportswear, it could also provide feedback on posture and form when lifting weights or holding a yoga asana.

These sorts of fabric are not sustainable, requiring synthetics such as nylon and components such as batteries and sensors that do not biodegrade easily. But maybe they hold the key to another future, an even more intriguing one: a world in which our clothes aren't just what we wear, but an integrated part of how we live. **FT**

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Lauren Indvik is the FT's fashion editor



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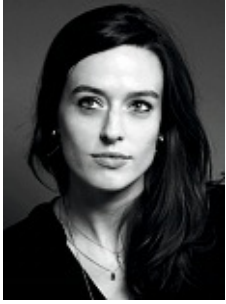


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Defiant steps

Lou Stoppard began walking as an antidote to the monotony of lockdown, but found it became much more

When I was 13, I became enamoured with the scene in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth "Lizzy" Bennet walks to Netherfield Park to visit her sister Jane. "Crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles," she arrives unkempt, and her suitor's supercilious sisters express disgust: "She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning," says one. "She really looked almost wild."

The sisters are incensed, it seems, not just by Lizzy's appearance but by the act of walking. They grouse, "To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it?"

To my teenage self this walk was a radical act, a refusal to bow to expectation – or the constraints of long dresses. I was young and dreamy and full of illusions that I was Lizzy (principled, headstrong) when I was almost certainly her sister Kitty (immature, self-involved). I longed to be judged for walking to Netherfield.

I hadn't thought of that passage in years, but it came back to me last spring as I took my daily hour of lockdown exercise, hair frizzed, ►



Illustrations by Elenia Beretta



◀ cheeks pink as a pig, beads of rain on my eyebrows – positively wild. I’d walk from Caledonian Road in north London uphill to Hampstead Heath and back, and the journey would, at various stages, smell like coffee, weed, spices. I’d hear Cardi B echoing from a car, Classic FM from a window, a cacophony of sirens. I’d pass the small housing block next to the fire station, which, with its blue balustrades and peeling white paintwork, looked almost like it belonged in Los Angeles. Later, there were town houses with pristine front gardens, velvet curtains. I’d often step off the pavement to keep my social distance and my feet would kick the small laughing-gas canisters that seem prolific in London, silver “treasure” as my friend’s five-year-old calls them.

Walking became a way of pushing against expectation, including government advice to “stay home”. I thought of Lizzy. The act was suddenly meaningful, precious, defiant.

For a long time, as a busy person in an economy that prioritises productivity, walking had been purely functional, a shuttle from A to B, rather than an opportunity to relax or reflect. I focused on whatever I was walking towards or wherever I had walked from, brain clotted with deadlines and schedules. There was little room for revelation, let alone noticing – something that seemed to be other commuters’ experience too, given the frequency with which we bumped into each other. But in lockdown, there was no requirement to get anywhere except back home. Walking became something with no purpose other than itself. This left plenty of time to think, and I decided to think about walking.

I also tried to pay attention to the physical sensations. I found myself lulled by the meditative repetitions of walking. And, after years of not appreciating my own body, I began to study my form and gait with wonder. Within a



‘There was no requirement to be anywhere except back home: a walk was something with no purpose other than itself. This left plenty of room to think’

few weeks, I had fashioned myself into a fervent pedestrian, a contemporary Ada Anderson, whose long walks in Wales during the 1870s prepared her for a career as a champion “race walker” in the UK first and later in the US. (Surprisingly, walking was America’s premier spectator sport in the late 19th century.)

I started to see walking as a route to understanding. I had visions of myself as an investigator of the city, watching others, noticing snippets of conversation. I was having a moment as a Walter Benjamin-ish flâneur. High on an exercise-induced rush, I convinced myself I was a pioneer of psychogeography.

Still a Kitty, not a Lizzy, alas. At least I wasn’t alone. All over the country, people were having their own ambulatory epiphanies. I read articles that declared walking to be a new “national hobby”. I read that walking was good therapy. And for a while it was.

Often, I listened to audiobooks and stories. Like Benjamin, writers have been drawn to discussing walking, probably because it aids and resembles writing, in that one is simultaneously focused and open. When I listened to writers describing their walks or their characters’ walks, my journeys became theirs. Suddenly, I was Keisha (later renamed Natalie) in Zadie Smith’s *NW* stepping out of an old life – marriage, routine, pressure – and walking on and on without a plan. “She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking,” Smith writes. “She had no name, no biography, no characteristics.”

This mild foray into imposterism made me think of Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City*, a gorgeous autobiographical account of life in 1920s Brownsville, Brooklyn. Growing up in cluttered quarters with Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents, Kazin’s is a story of ambition and escape. As well as pounding the

city pavement, Kazin reads Faulkner, Emerson, Whitman and Melville. “Sometimes,” he writes, “I was not sure which character I was on my walks, there were so many in my head at once.”

I could relate. I would stand on Parliament Hill looking over London and feel that I could scatter my pathologies to the wind. I saw myself as a stranger, just as I saw those passing me as rich enigmas, all wisdom and secrets. I could choose to be someone else entirely, I’d think. Then I’d go home.

In a 1927 essay titled “Street Haunting”, Virginia Woolf explains that to walk is to be both alone and accompanied, unbothered and comforted thanks to the presence of others, the “bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had given life the slip”.

And yet, if you can walk in one direction, you can also walk the opposite. Just as you can give “life the slip”, walking can also be a way of recalling former selves and summoning imaginary company. A few weeks into lockdown, homesick for my past life in the city and thirsty for interaction, I chose routes I had previously walked with friends or exes. It was a chance to feel close to them, to inhabit past happinesses. I’d pass places I knew or had known and heard familiar voices.

There is a lot of walking in Natalia Ginzburg’s “Winter in the Abruzzi”, an essay that rang appropriate for lockdown since it recounts her family’s liminal life in exile in the Italian countryside in the early 1940s. (Both Ginzburg and her husband were anti-fascists, and he was sent away from Rome during the war.)

Ginzburg writes, “Every evening we walked arm in arm, sinking our feet into the snow. The houses that ran alongside the street were lived in by people we knew and liked, and they all

used to come to the door to greet us.” Later, her husband died after being tortured in prison and, when confronted with the horror, she looks back at the time before in disbelief: “I have to wonder if this really happened to us, we who bought oranges at Giro’s and went walking in the snow.”

Looking back, I can map my moods against my walks, routes, benches I sat on or continued past. By May last year, when the virus was everywhere and my hypochondria was flourishing, I walked to feel healthy. I’d take deep breaths and imagine the trees could protect me. Come October, I walked to feel calm and so that I could have some degree of control over the direction of my life. And by December, I often walked simply to see the fairy lights, or to look at Christmas trees in apartment windows.

And then another March, this one marked by the death of Sarah Everard, who was abducted while walking home through south London at night. (A police officer is to stand trial for her murder.) It became impossible to push down another constant in my walks, the thing that had been there underneath whatever joy or nostalgia I found, the thing that, like most women walking on their own, I had accepted to the point it barely registers as unjust: fear.

Why is that man picking up speed? Will it be pitch black before I’m back? Everard was simply walking home, doing what I do, every day. “I have to wonder if this really happened to us, we who bought oranges at Giro’s and went walking in the snow.”

From then on, walking became a form of protest. To continue – despite the threat or, worse, despite the advice to avoid it – was to resist. Walking had felt necessary only for myself, to keep me sane, to keep me occupied.

‘I have walked every day since Everard died. On the day I write this, that’s 77 days’

Now it felt necessary collectively, in a way that made me feel needed, a sensation that lingered in my mind as I put on my trainers and became even more pronounced as I returned home safe, keys in hand. I knew I had to be out there, not to observe, or even theorise, but simply to take up space. “To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is... alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it?”

I have walked every day since Everard died. On the day I write this, that’s 77 days. An app on my phone rewards my efforts. “You are walking more,” it tells me. I am also walking differently. When men walk towards me, I don’t step aside, as I once did. If they are in a group, I remain steady, and they must flow round me like a shoal of fish.

Of course, I am still afraid. I jump at unexpected sounds or if someone shoots by on a scooter. I do not try not to suppress the flinch because it is entirely rational to be scared. But I do try to go on. To walk is to exercise a right, to say this is mine as well as yours. Not just to men, but to those who would and will remake the city. On some of my earlier walks, I think I had been looking for the world to show me my place. Now, I just take it.

I plan to continue to walk every day after lockdown ends entirely. Walking is a simple way of proving to myself and others that I intend to take my time, to move at my own tempo, not the tempo of the city. To walk is to reject falling in step with the crowd, shepherded unwittingly to keep up, keep up. It is a small way of rejecting the rush.

Today as I walked, there were people going in and out of buildings again. Balloons hung outside of reopening stores. All around me, there were signs life is coming back. And so I decided to walk further, everything there for the taking. Even if doubled back, no two walks are ever the same. **FT**



A whole new ball game

North Macedonia's football team is heading to the European Championship for the first time. And yet, few of the country's inhabitants are fans. A strong performance could help change that. Photography by *Matteo de Mayda*. Words by *Simon Kuper*

A small country's first appearance in a major tournament is a football fairy tale: the ordinary kids who made it to the big time, with their whole country behind them.

But North Macedonia's story captured here in Matteo de Mayda's photographs is more complicated. Thrilling as its run to this month's European Championship has been, culminating in last November's 1-0 playoff victory over Georgia, the team very much does not have the country's two million inhabitants behind it.

What is now known as North Macedonia has almost always been ruled by foreigners, from Bulgarians through nearly six centuries of Ottoman Turks to Yugoslav apparatchiks. It gained independence in 1991 as Yugoslavia fell apart, but for decades its national team excited little local interest. Many Orthodox Christian Macedonians considered themselves heirs to the great Yugoslavian football tradition rather than the measly Macedonian one. They continued to support Yugoslavia's national team and later Serbia, just to the north.

Then there are the ethnic Albanians, who make up about a quarter of the population. They are almost all Muslims, though the local ethnic complexity is such that the most famous Macedonian Albanian was the Catholic nun Mother Teresa. North Macedonia is a throwback to the melting pot of ex-Yugoslavia before ethnic cleansing. One star of today's national team, Eljif Elmas of Napoli, has Turkish roots.

Most Macedonian Albanian football fans support Albania or Kosovo. The two fans of KF Shkendija (which has an Albanian nationalist background) pictured here in the crumbling stands won't be cheering for North Macedonia this month. They belong to Shkendija's ultras' group Ballistët, named after an Albanian fighters' group from the second world war. Peace mostly prevails between Albanians and nationalist Macedonians, but there have been outbreaks of violence.

FK Vardar, a club popular with ethnic Macedonians, has a nationalist ultras' group known as the "Komiti", named after bands of rebels who resisted Ottoman rule. During a period of "antiquitisation" a decade ago, a nationalist government rebuilt the capital Skopje with neoclassical monuments that supposedly evoked Alexander the Great's Macedonian kingdom. You can see a statuesque Alexander raising his right fist behind the middle-aged fan sitting on the grandiose fountain. The remade Skopje has been called "the Disneyland of the Balkans".

The Komiti's most recent crusade was against the country's name change, in 2019, from Macedonia to North Macedonia. Greece said the old name implied territorial claims on the neighbouring Greek province of Macedonia and made renaming a condition for letting the country into Nato. North Macedonia's ruling social democrats have generally appeased Greece by downgrading bombastic nationalism. The national stadium, previously named after Alexander's father, Philip II, was renamed after the pop star Tose Proeski, a Balkan Elvis Presley, killed in a car crash aged 26.

It was in this unquiet atmosphere that the national team suddenly found glory, led by 37-year-old striker Goran Pandev, who scored the winner against Georgia. Pandev - who also funded the youth academy pictured here - is a national hero who could probably get elected president if he wanted, reports de Mayda. North Macedonia's prime minister Zoran Zaev exulted in the qualification, while carefully avoiding any mention of the country's name. Then, in March, North Macedonia slayed mighty Germany in Duisburg and is now on track to qualify for next year's World Cup.

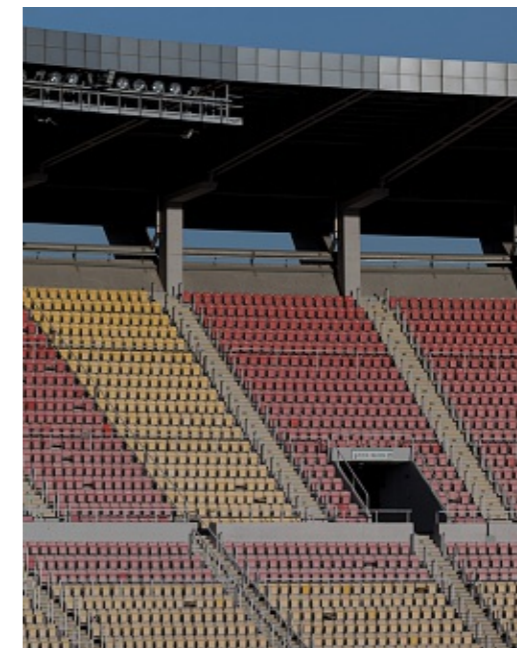
These are heady days in a poor country with surprisingly good football infrastructure, where women and girls are finally being encouraged to play too. If the national team can amass more glory this summer and possibly even at the World Cup next year, it might just help solidify North Macedonia's fragile national identity. **FT**

Simon Kuper is an FT columnist. This work will be exhibited at Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Milan, June 12-October 24; mufoco.org



Opening spread: FC COOL trains in Skopje

Above: a North Macedonia supporter. Right: Rozita, 30, an FK Vardar fan shares her tattoo of the team's crest



Clockwise from left: a fan of the national team; Toše Proeski National Arena in Skopje; two members of KF Shkendija's ultras' group, Ballistët; a player on the youth female team of FC COOL; Akademija Pandev, the youth academy founded by striker Goran Pandev



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VIEW FROM LEVEL 39 AT NEWFOUNDLAND.
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Honey & Co Recipes



Come fry with me

Photographs by Patricia Niven

Somehow along the line someone decided that eggs should be consumed at breakfast. We can see the sense: eggs are nourishing and delicious, look like the sun and are one of the few things that takes longer to eat than to cook. A perfect way to start the day in a restaurant or hotel, that is, but not in our house. We may cook for a living, but at home we balk at turning the stove on before noon. Our breakfast is rarely more involved than a tall glass (yes, glass) of cardamom-scented Arabic coffee, usually followed by another one.

For us, eggs sit perfectly at the end of the day when they are still delicious and nourishing, still sunny and quick to the plate. They're the ideal weeknight fare. We like them soft-boiled with marmite soldiers or anchovy toast, hard-boiled with chopped salad, tahini and pickles, or scrambled with or without cream or chives. There have been many nights when we've tipped our glasses (Pinot Blanc, not too cold) to Elizabeth David and sat down to a green salad and a cheese-stuffed omelette.

But when we're feeling a bit less rushed and in need of deeper, richer flavours, this is the dinner we treat ourselves to. Something special happens to the celeriac as it cooks slowly in the pan. The pale white cubes turn golden, then a deep burnished tan. They develop an unexpected nutty sweetness that complements the earthy mushrooms and salty pork. A toasted bun underneath, a fried egg on top, poised for that moment when the fork pierces the yolk, for that perfect bite of egg, hash and bread.

If eggs belong only at breakfast for you, this still works a treat. You can wake up extra early and make it all from scratch. (And if you're that kind of person, please come and live with us.) Or, you can make the hash the night before, warm it up, toast the muffin and fry the egg in the morning. Which is not that much for most people. It may even be doable for morning-haters like us - once we've had that second coffee. **FT**

By Itamar Srulovich. Recipe by Sarit Packer

Celeriac and mushroom hash with fried egg on an English muffin

To serve two

- 1 small celeriac, about 400g
- 200g small chestnut mushrooms
- 1 tbs olive oil
- 40g butter
- 5-6 large sage leaves
- 50g diced pancetta or bacon
- 2 English muffins
- 2 lovely eggs
- Salt
- Black peppercorns, freshly ground

1 — Peel the celeriac, removing all the rough exterior, and dice the lovely white flesh into 1cm cubes. Halve the mushrooms or quarter if they are large.

2 — Heat the olive oil and half the butter in a large frying pan, add the celeriac and fry on a medium-high heat, tossing occasionally, until the cubes start to caramelise all over. Add the mushrooms, sage and diced pancetta or bacon, and fry until the pork is golden and the mushrooms cooked - if your frying pan seems a little dry, add a tablespoon or two of water and toss. It should take about 15-20 minutes for the flavours to develop fully. The celeriac should be very soft.

3 — Remove to a bowl on the side, cover to keep warm and return the frying pan to the heat. Cut the muffins in half and spread with a little butter. Fry for a minute, before flipping and warming the undersides. Transfer the muffins to the plates, then heat the remaining butter in the pan and fry the eggs to your liking - we like crisp whites and runny yolks.

4 — Put the celeriac and mushroom hash on the muffins, top with the eggs, sprinkle with salt and pepper and serve hot.





Pink hues artfully blended
to evoke the joys of a lazy
sun kissed Provençal lunch.

Matthew Williamson



Pink hues artfully blended
to evoke the joys of a lazy
sun kissed Provençal lunch.

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Do you speak wine?



Think about all those TV cooking shows. What is their weakest element? Surely it's when the experts try to describe what they are tasting. All too often we have to content ourselves with "delicious", "yummy" or just "mmm!".

As I know only too well, taste is almost impossible to describe. The process of tasting is so hidden, so private, so internal that the impressions that result from it cannot be extracted and observed by anyone else to be compared and discussed. Which leaves professional tasters, such as wine writers like me, grasping for parallels between the flavours and aromas they sense and those of actual objects. Fruits and flowers are especially popular in this context.

What is less subjective, for wine anyway, is what can be measured analytically: levels of alcohol, acidity, sweetness and tannin - all of which can be sensed by the tasting equipment in our mouths as well as in a lab. In my own descriptions, I try to highlight any extremes in these features of a wine, what one might call its vital statistics, as well as observations on its state of maturity and its quality. But it's the aromas, or flavours, that are so difficult to describe, even though the equipment in our noses is so much more sophisticated than that in our mouths.

Over the past few decades, as interest in wine has grown, descriptions - so-called tasting notes - have become ever more extravagant, typically including a long list of flavours. These days, consumers are likely to encounter something like "dried strawberry, iodine, oyster shell, wet earth, fresh mushrooms, flowers, ripe dark peaches and nectarines" or indeed "rich blood plum flavours intersected with blackberry with a spicy edge and some flinty, graphite notes". All this is in stark contrast to the pithy description in

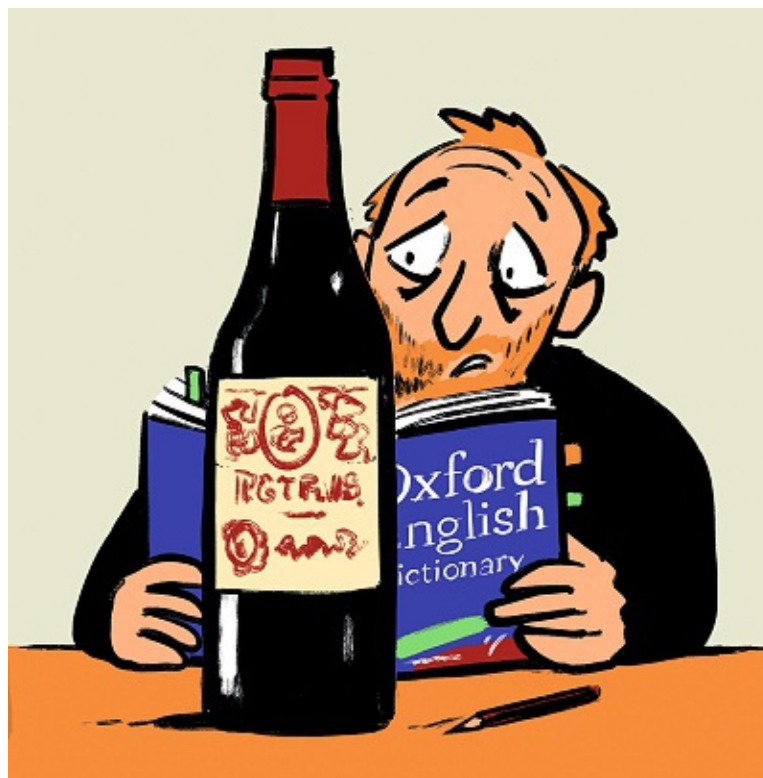


Illustration by Mark Long

James Thurber's 1937 cartoon of a dinner party: "It's a naïve domestic burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption."

Yet change is coming. As Esther Mobley, wine writer of the San Francisco Chronicle, put it at the recent Symposium for Professional Wine Writers: "There is widespread agreement that the language we use to talk about wine is broken."

"Tasting notes have become ever more extravagant, typically including a long list of flavours"

The beauty of this year's symposium was that instead of being attended by a dozen wine writers in Napa Valley's luxurious Meadowood resort, it was online and open to a far broader cross-section of wine communicators from all over the world. Not surprisingly, there was much disgruntlement at the way wine language is still dominated by western norms.

As the London-based English editor or co-author of at least three standard wine reference books, I am presumably in the direct line of fire. As must be the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), the global leader in wine education, whose courses are studied in more than 70 countries, but which is also based in London. In the 1990s, a standardised "systematic approach to tasting wine" was devised by the WSET in which students were - and still are - encouraged to use a fairly limited set of descriptors.

Because the WSET provides the foundation for so many wine lovers' knowledge, these few descriptors dominate many drinkers' vocabulary. Yet they are far from universal. There have been complaints from Asia, for example, that some of the fruits mentioned - gooseberries come up a lot - are virtually unknown there.

According to Ian Harris, WSET chief executive, the organisation started on a plan to move away from the Eurocentricity of its tasting vocabulary last year, but the results are unlikely to be seen for some time, not least because many of their course materials are printed.

Now that the make-up of wine consumers, students and media is at long last widening, the calls for wine writing to be more inclusive and accessible are becoming louder. At the recent symposium, Haitian-American Regine Rousseau, who runs the marketing platform Shall We Wine, argued for "the poetic as well as for traditional tasting notes. But most of all we ▶

Some common wine-tasting terms

- Crisp** Just the right level of acidity
- Finish** The sensation at the end of the tasting process; the more prolonged and persistent the better
- Flabby** Not enough acidity – unappetising
- Fruity** Has become a euphemism for “a bit sweet”
- Full-bodied** Has a high level of alcohol or at least tastes like it
- Green** Underripe fruit
- Hard** Too much tannin and/or not enough fruit
- Interesting** No wine producer wants to hear this. It means the taster can’t think of anything more laudatory
- Long** A wine with a persistent finish
- Nose** A noun meaning the aroma of a wine, as in “muted nose”
- Oaky** Smells of oak, used to be a compliment but is now regarded as pejorative
- Round** No obvious tannin
- Short** A wine that cuts off suddenly as soon as you’ve swallowed or spat it out
- Tart** Too acid

... and some more fashionable terms

- Linear** Newish term that may be associated with a lack of weight in the mouth, no extraneous elements such as unfashionable oak, plus perhaps elevated acidity
- Drive** A new term. A wine that has Drive could be Linear with a bit more weight
- Mineral** Ah, books and papers could be written – indeed, have been written – about this one. Tastes like something associated with stones, rocks or the chemistry lab
- Saline** Very fashionable term that verges on Mineral with a bit more saltiness
- Racy** I’m guilty of using this quite frequently for wines that seem particularly fresh but with some ageing potential
- Energetic** A Racy wine with Drive?
- Precise** Conforms to the taster’s view of what that sort of wine should taste like



◀ need to make room for other voices and cultures.”

As an employee of WSET, Barbadian-American Deniece M Bourne was in a difficult position and defended her organisation’s tasting vocabulary on the basis that it is comprehensible to the greatest number of their students. Yet it was clear that she’s also itching for change: “People want experiences now. I think you should bring your own to the wine.”

Mobley’s panel certainly did when asked to describe the same wine... Rousseau conjured up molasses, wet coconut shell, Scotch bonnet pepper and more. I was cheered when Joseph Hernandez, born in the Philippines and raised in California, mentioned Robitussin in his tasting note as I quite often find aromas in wines that I associate with cough linctus.

Everyone agreed that there is considerable work to be done on wine vocabulary, but the greatest scorn was reserved for tasting notes such as “masculine”, “feminine” and “sexy”. Hernandez in particular resented anyone’s presumption that they knew what he regarded as sexy.

I guiltily did a quick search of the 200,000+ tasting notes published on JancisRobinson.com since 2000 and – sure enough – found 192 masculines, 147 feminines and 37 sexys, although many of them were quotes from producers or were preceded by the get-out adverb “stereotypically”.

So how to proceed from here? None of us can escape our personal

experiences. Having written nearly 100,000 of those tasting notes, I am sure I’m guilty of writing a good portion of extremely dull ones. I certainly agree that intensely personal reactions to individual wines are much more interesting than long lists of flavours. I don’t honestly think anyone gets up in the morning intent on finding a wine that tastes of dried strawberry, iodine, oyster shell, wet earth et al. And the fact that we all vary considerably in our sensitivities to various compounds makes these impressions ineluctably personal anyway. More useful surely is to alert people to whether a wine is especially tart, old, strong, syrupy etc. And to describe it, if possible, by telling its story, or the story of one’s interaction with it.

I doubt it would fit into the WSET’s systematic approach but I love it if a wine has such a strong personality that I can’t stop myself anthropomorphising it – which may puzzle some readers, but at least it can help to distinguish it.

Harold McGee, food science writer, author of *Nose Dive* and keen observer of tasting notes, wrote to me recently: “Now all the good stuff seems to be ‘expressive’ and ‘precise’ and ‘linear’. Oddly more and more abstract – maybe a symptom of our digital times?”

There are undoubtedly fashions in tasting terms. I provide observations on just a few current favourites. **FT**

More columns at ft.com/jancis-robinson

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A SELECTION FROM POMPETTE INCLUDING CERVELLE DE CANUT AND DILL AND VERMOUTH CURED SALMON. PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN CAREY

Pompette, Oxford

I really want my first proper review, in what seems like years, to be a good one. So, when I arrive at Pompette, a brasserie in Oxford, and they sit me down and explain that “during lockdown we built a new bread section”, a smile steals across my lips.

In-house bread can be disappointing. Chefs decide they *can* make bread, without actually questioning whether they *should*, and so we suffer taut, individual sourdough boules with a Kevlar crust containing seaweed, ash and finely pared shavings of pretension.

Not so at Pompette, where the baguette is simple and outstanding: a proper chew, encapsulating a creamy, aerated crumb. It comes with a slab of Burgundy butter and a promise. Bread is the simplest thing, but when they get it right upfront, you immediately click your critical phaser from “kill” back through “stun” to a setting of “hum happily to yourself and let these guys feed you”.

Pompette is pretty French. Not wholly, slavishly French, but French-born, French-raised and with a pronounced accent. Chef Pascal Wiedemann was executive chef at Terroirs in London and began his culinary career under the brilliant Henry Harris at Racine. Yet more promise.

There is nothing sexier than quiet self-assurance, particularly in a steak tartare. Who needs a fussy kit-of-parts with a showy egg yolk? Why the hell should you make it yourself? That’s the chef’s job, and Wiedemann does it with skill. The meat and shallots are hand-minced, shot through with copious soft green herbs and bestudded with sharp, popping capers. It’s meaty, sure, but fresh, light and joyous. All the more reason, then, to serve it with a socking great tranche of that Ur-baguette, soaked and fried in beefy dripping. It’s a great way to start a meal.

By this point I found myself thinking, if I was at the top of a mountain with this bloke and he told me he’d tied the rope, I’d be happy to chuck myself over the edge without checking.



‘There is nothing sexier than quiet self-assurance, particularly in a steak tartare’

Pompette
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01865 311166
pompetterestaurant.co.uk
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In a good sashimi restaurant, you should always examine the cut face of the fish. It should be smooth, cut with a single stroke. It makes no difference to the flavour but it proves that the chef cared enough to have a sharp knife and was skilled enough to use it. Likewise, Bayonne ham with celeriac remoulade could be easy to slap out in the kitchen but, at Pompette, you can see that it’s been freshly sliced, the celeriac freshly dressed. Somebody back there cares, and they can’t help showing it.


A chicken is a bugger of a thing to grill: if the legs are cooked, the breast is dried out. But if you find a small enough bird, like Wiedemann’s herb-marinated coquelet, and you know how to spatchcock it, then every portion is miraculously of the correct thickness to grill. You think it needs nothing else - until you try the aioli.

A nicely butchered turbot was grilled rare-at-the bone and served with asparagus. It came with some excellent Jersey Royals, but the beurre blanc was so rich, emollient and abundant that I had to order chips with which to wipe it up.

There was, of course, cheese. A small selection - Comté, Epoisses, Fourme d’Ambert - but thoughtfully curated and carefully handled. And to round things off, pistachio tart with Gariguettes strawberries and crème fraîche.

Afterwards, I wanted to wipe my lips on the tablecloth, reel out into Montmartre, dash off a canvas and head to Les Deux Magots in search of absinthe *et amour*, but I don’t think they do things that way in Oxford.

Wiedemann’s talented partner Laura is worthy of special mention. We’re mere hours into the new regime of “inside dining”, and she has somehow managed not just to recruit a complete front-of-house brigade but to have drilled them into some of the best service I’ve had in years. A balancing act on the line where efficiency and attention meet warmth, intelligence and welcoming informality.

Between them, the Wiedemanns are delivering a masterclass in hospitality in the neighbourhood brasserie you dream of. As I leave, I notice a house for sale on the same street. Just saying. 


.....
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A Round on the Links by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1. Which leading 20th-century theologian was hanged in 1945 for his part in the July 20 plot to kill Hitler?
2. Which imperial unit of volume is equivalent to a quarter of a bushel?
3. What's the largest national park in England?

4. What's the most common type of roof on British houses?
5. Which doctrine of 1823 asserted US opposition to European colonisation anywhere in the Americas?
6. Which 1980s American cop show starred Sharon Gless and Tyne Daly in the title roles?
7. In 2019, Michael Gove was appointed to which cabinet post?
8. New York harbour (above) is at the mouth of which river?

9. Which New Town in Essex was designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd (below)?
10. In *EastEnders*, which of the Mitchell brothers did Sharon marry first?



The Picture Round by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



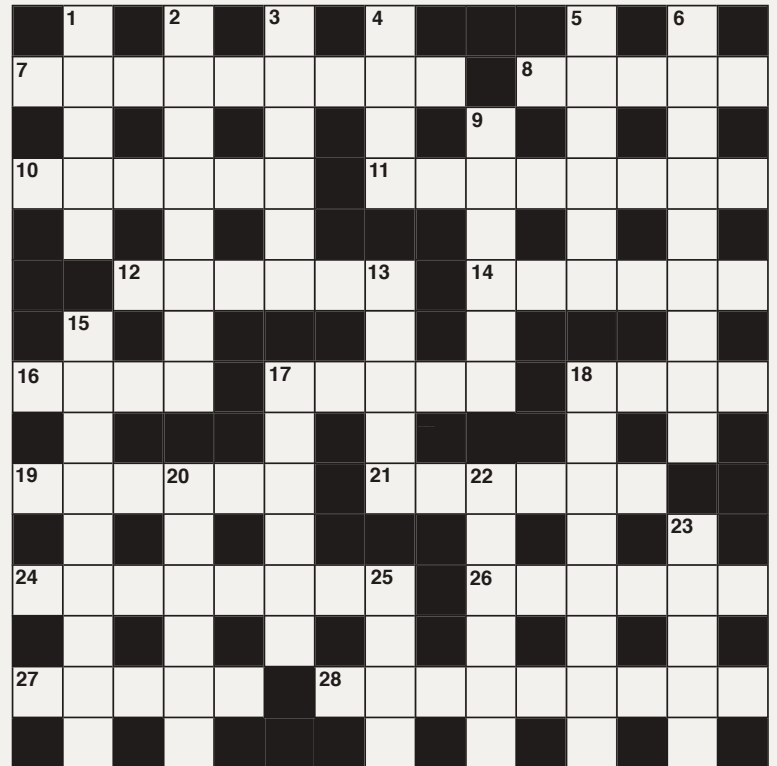
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Answers page 8

The Crossword No 542. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

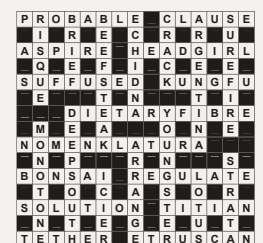
- 7 Animal with horny plates (9)
- 8 Benefactor (5)
- 10 Mind, spirit (6)
- 11 Countrywide (8)
- 12 Social standing (6)
- 14 Fold, pleat (6)
- 16 Travel document (4)
- 17 Vague, unreliable (5)
- 18 Lily-like flowering plant (4)
- 19 Black eye, colloquially (6)
- 21 Abrade (6)
- 24 Teach (8)
- 26 Black-and-white bird (6)
- 27 Midday meal (5)
- 28 Enrage (9)

DOWN

- 1 Raised part of that surcharge for coating (5)
- 2 Bacon and chopped pecan - dry one (8)
- 3 Archaeological investigation set out to understand (6)
- 4 Pastry dish for side losing 6 (4)
- 5 Gruff animal with antlers gets right in (6)
- 6 Metal spout aims badly (9)
- 9 Awkward atmosphere envelops leaders of the industry conference (6)
- 13 Old underwear lasts (5)
- 15 One's quiet, working in dismal shame (9)
- 17 Amazing stout incorporating our blend (3, 3)

- 18 Set of notes for opera that's orchestrated around gig, perhaps (8)
- 20 Small number cite edited bulletin (6)
- 22 Noise from strange Manx cat? (6)
- 23 The same party includes getting it on time (5)
- 25 Large vehicle's to go down in value (4)

Solution to Crossword No 541





GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

A lesson in achieving the impossible



Thanks to Covid-19, the familiar compass that teenagers use to plot their future is malfunctioning. Exam grading, university-place allocation, job and internship applications – all have been sent haywire, even for those at well-resourced schools with enough social and economic capital to embrace online education.

The result is a sense of anxiety gnawing away at a generation, an unease I see every day in my own children’s lives. Even if my teenagers, with access to digital learning, are among the lucky ones, their peer group is beset with a level of worry about the future that is completely alien to my own youthful experiences more than three decades ago.

Is there any way to resolve this? Not easily. But I recently stumbled on a valuable source of inspiration. Published in April, *I Am a Girl from Africa* is the memoir of Elizabeth Nyamayaro, a political scientist and former senior adviser to the head of UN Women. If you meet Nyamayaro today – as I recently did on Zoom at an event for the New York Public Library – she seems like a classic UN diplomat. She’s articulate, charming and adept at packaging a politically correct message for the 21st century. Indeed, Nyamayaro ran the UN’s HeForShe campaign to persuade men around the world to support female emancipation. It is now a trendy message for governments and companies to adopt, and Nyamayaro imparted it well in a 2015 TED talk that has since had 1.5 million views.

But as *I Am a Girl from Africa* explains, Nyamayaro was born in a poor, rural region of Zimbabwe and was raised by her grandmother. When she was eight, her home was hit by drought and famine. One day, searching for help, she collapsed in the dirt under a tree, alone beneath the scorching sky. “The earth feels hot as fire... I am simply too weak to move. I am starving. I have had nothing to drink or eat for three days,” she writes. “I will die here, I think, but I am too tired to be frightened.”

What saved her, as she drifted “in and out of consciousness, between darkness and light”, was a UN worker who found her and gave her water and a “blue plastic bowl of porridge”. These revived her just enough to stagger back to her village.

It is a powerful reminder of how the UN and humanitarian agencies can do extraordinary good with emergency aid. But what is equally remarkable is what happened next: Nyamayaro decided that she wanted to work for the UN herself. It seemed an impossible goal but when she was 10, Nyamayaro went to live with her aunt, who was a doctor in Harare, and set about getting a good education. Then, in her early twenties, with tenacity and creativity, she found a way to London, arriving with barely £250.

It was a brutal experience. Nyamayaro vividly describes the daily indignities that penniless

immigrants suffer: grim cleaning jobs; chaotic hostel accommodation; constant abuse from powerful supervisors – and the alliances immigrants have to form to survive.

Eventually, Nyamayaro found her way into a UN office, managed to secure an internship there and then enrolled in more education. “I cried myself to sleep so many nights when I failed to find a job... skipped meals, drinking water to curb my hunger so I could save every pound for university fees,” she writes.

‘How a starving kid became a UN leader might seem an extreme tale, but versions of this struggle play out around us every day’

By dint of extraordinarily hard work and good luck, she earned a staff job at the UN, rising through the World Health Organization, World Bank and the private sector before joining UN Women and kick-starting HeForShe. It is an astonishing tale, not least because Nyamayaro’s account pulses with optimism and gratitude for what she has been given by others and the luck she has experienced – and made.

Now I daresay that many privileged western teenagers might feel that this tale has little immediate relevance given the extremities of Nyamayaro’s life. Indeed, I suspect that any parent who tells their kids to read it may be greeted with an eye roll.

But there are three reasons the account is thought-provoking. First, it highlights what can be achieved with a spirit of tenacity and creativity, even in the face of extreme uncertainty. Second, it shows why it pays to be grateful for the people who help you, and for simple things too.

But the third reason why Nyamayaro’s account is striking is that we need to widen our gaze right now and look beyond the immediate contours of our life. The past year of lockdowns has made many of us myopic, trapped in small spaces with people from our own social tribe, beset by fear. I suspect this is fostering risk aversion among many teenagers: when you find it hard to imagine a world beyond your familiar paths, and are constantly told to be vigilant, it becomes harder to leap into the unknown.

There is no easy way to counter this. Even if teenagers want to leave home and backpack around the world now (as my peer group did), it is hard given pandemic restrictions – and may remain that way for some time. But somehow we all need to adopt a broader perspective, to imagine different futures and paths. Reading tales from different places or times is one way to engage in some mental travel. We all need this now – whatever our age. **FT**

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