

# IN DESIGN THERE'S NEVER A CLEAN SLATE



A thoughtful piece recently from Vlad Savov in *The Verge* – *Retrovolution: mining the past to make the future.*



Anders Warming doesn't like the word "retro." Ever since taking over as Mini's chief of design in 2010, Warming has had to wrestle with the term's meaning and its application to his company's cars. Because it stems from "retrospective," says the Danish designer, "it means you're looking in the wrong direction." He prefers to think of heritage instead, a concept that simultaneously acknowledges where a design comes from and looks to where it needs to be going.

It's not just that branding grows ever more interested in the past as a source of meaning, authenticity, value.

The strong argument I offer is that design always attends to the past, has to, whether this is expressed in styling or not. The simple reason is that every design act has to take account of the current environment that determines design choices – the constraints of viability, feasibility, people's expectations. This environment is, of course, an inherited one, the result of decisions and processes that may

reach back thousands of years (as do urban infrastructures). This is the importance of infrastructures generally and path dependencies – that, for example, electrical standards established over a century ago completely condition the possibilities of designing such powered goods today.

Perhaps ironically therefore, the most effective innovations are always those that are most sensitive to time – the passage of time and how things hang on to influence what comes after. (A kind of corollary is that creative innovation only really becomes clear with hindsight.)

While the designers I talk with are always very conscious of this significance of design history, there are few formulated principles or methodologies for so dealing with time, history, memory. Given the challenges facing the world today, this is one of the most pressing challenges for human centered design.

