

Yesterday's Tomorrows Exhibition Themes

Introduction

Examining the history of the future teaches us about the past. Visions of the future are cultural predictions that tell us something about the times and culture in which they were created. In examining these predictions, we can see how forecasts change as societal needs, fears and conditions change. During the past 100 years, American visions of the future have fluctuated between secular utopias characterized by breathtaking leaps of science and technology and urban chaos fraught with danger and disintegration.

Yesterday's Tomorrows provides a unique opportunity to reexamine futuristic visions and the society which created them, thus giving us a deeper understanding of American history and culture.

Finding the Future

The future exists only in our imaginations. But, during the twentieth century, Americans have expressed their imaginings about the future in books, movies, magazines, television, radio, toys and advertising. The future presented in these media ranges from cheerful utopias of technological wizardry to dark visions of societal dysfunction.

Home of Tomorrow

During the nineteenth century, Americans thought that proper housing was essential to the future social and moral health of their families. But ideas about the home evolved: the home became a "machine for living," and modern architecture, mass production and increased automation within the home took precedence over real human and societal needs. Home designs continued to reflect contemporary beliefs about family life, gender roles and social relations. Many of today's home designs show exteriors that hearken back to the past while their interiors are replete with the latest gadgets.

Community of Tomorrow

"Ideal" American communities envisioned in the early twentieth century reflected hopes, excitement and fears about the reality of an increasingly urban society. Strategies for future communities were marked by a series of contradictions: communitarianism v. individualism, image v. social reality, utopia v. urban chaos. Today, planned communities where work, leisure and domestic life can be harmoniously integrated echo the communitarian utopias of the nineteenth century.

Transportation of Tomorrow

Futuristic vehicles are uniquely American ways of imagining tomorrow, reflecting Americans' faith in progress and technology. Before the 1920's, mass transit systems dominated Americans' visualizations of tomorrow's transportation. But the automobile became the dominant mode of transportation and so was the focus of designers' and planners' futuristic visions.