

# forewarned is FOREARMED

*Far removed from Nostradamus and his vague doomsday prophecies, today's futures forecasters use a combination of academia and observation to predict trends for society's benefit. We ask some forward-thinkers where we are headed.*

Words by **Nicola Harvey**

In the 14th century, a seer by the name of Michel de Nostredame (aka Nostradamus) penned a book called *Les Prophéties*, in which he recorded quatrains that, since his death in 1566, have been interpreted as predictions of monumental incidents around the world. But were these vague, dateless musings actually forecasts of things to come? From star signs in the Sunday newspapers to Hollywood blockbusters and award-winning novels, attempts to envision the future have long captured our attention. What, then, do we make of the modern-day practitioners of futurology, futurism, futures studies and trend forecasting? Can people really predict the future?

Dr Jennifer Gidley, a research fellow at RMIT University in Melbourne, argues for the role futures studies play in the development of a healthy, productive society. As president of the World Futures Studies Federation, she illuminates the difference between futurism, which has a long history of predicting utopian scenarios, and futures studies, an academic discipline that combines philosophy, sociology, history and economic theory with real-life observation to propose, for the benefit of society, "not just one kind of future but multiple".

Such research is in high demand in the public and private sector. In Australia, government departments commission futures studies to guide policy. In 2007, Britain's Ministry of Defence reported on future strategic risks facing the world, concluding "the middle classes could become a revolutionary class ...". Such an assessment, pre-GFC, surely shocked many a middle-class *Guardian*-reading, café-latte-drinking Londoner. "Us? Take to the barricades? Surely not." The recent student riots in central London told another story.

Across the Atlantic in the small town of Kingston, in upstate New York, the Bronx-raised trend forecaster Gerald Celente is enthusiastic about the prospect of a middle-class uprising. "Imagine we are in 2012," he says in an excited manner. "Food riots, tax protests, farmers' rebellions, student revolts, squatter diggings, homeless uprisings, tent cities, general strikes, bossnappings, kidnappings, industrial saboteurs, gang warfare, mob rule, terror. And people ask, how could it have come to this?"

## SOCIETY WHITE-COLLAR REBELS

Celente, founder of the *Trends Journal*, describes himself as a political atheist and a citizen of the world. He has a reputation as a wily, keen and opinionated observer of current affairs and is considered the go-to guy for analysis when a monumental event occurs in the US. "Gerald Celente has a knack for getting the zeitgeist right," reports *USA Today*, while the *New York Post* declares: "If Nostradamus were alive today, he'd have a hard time keeping up with Gerald Celente."

From the rise of organic produce to the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1997 Asian currency crisis and the 1987 world stock market crash, Celente has been on the record predicting major zeitgeist shifts since 1980. Today, protests are on Celente's mind. "Just look at what's happening in Greece and Spain and France [where workers strike to protest over austerity measures, unemployment, bank bailouts and retirement age increases]. Just look at the numbers! Americans are laughing at the French for protesting the retirement age rising to 62, while here in the US they want to push it up to 67," he says. His advice to those struggling today is clear: think for yourself. "A social breakdown is going to happen and people have to prepare themselves now," he says. "It's absurd for adults to think that a politician is going to make any difference in the coming years. When are they going to grow up?"

Celente believes the international community, and the US in particular, is heading for a double-dip recession – what he describes as the "long winter after the grasshopper summer of 2010" and soon the gulf between the very wealthy and the middle class will become so vast that it will push people to rebel. Some find Celente's doomsday forecasts irksome, but he presses they are the result of thorough media analysis. But is revolution really on the horizon?

Martin Raymond, co founder of London-based The Future Laboratory, shares Celente's view that revolution is afoot, but in his opinion it will not be on the streets. While consumerism still dominates, people will continue to push for change

*"A social breakdown is going to happen and people have to prepare themselves now."*

with their wallets. "For many in the UK, the recession has been a positive experience and brought into focus things that make them happy," Raymond explains. He and business partner Chris Sanderson guide a staff of 40 in their office in London and maintain contact with freelance reporters around the world who submit daily information on grassroots cultural happenings. Through observation, Raymond has become a man in the know. "Two in three people around the world believe they would be better off if they lived more simply," he says. ▶



Students protest outside the Conservative Party headquarters in central London, November 2010.

GETTY; REUTERS

## FUTURE TRENDS

### ARTS & ENTERTAINING CIVILITY RETURNS

Disillusioned with globalisation, dismayed by the actions of the big banks and isolated by the rise of faceless social networking sites, people are returning to a new era of community and civility. “We’re interested in being around the table, where you forget your job,” says London-based designer and trend watcher Jerome Rigaud of DesignMarketo. “You have bread and cheese and wine. Everyone is on the same level sharing ideas.” Exhausted by the excess of a 24-hour plugged-in lifestyle, people – through desire or financial necessity – are turning off. “People in their twenties are looking at things you’d associate with their parents,” Raymond explains. “Dinner parties and supper clubs are a big focus for people and it’s all happening in their own neighbourhood.” Rediscovering the art of conversation is, Raymond says, one of the most exciting trends of the coming year. “It’s a return to live culture. People are now just using technology to be more active in going out,” explains Raymond.

Gidley is optimistic about such developments. Her early research into futures studies 15 years ago stemmed from an interest in why one in four young Australians were suffering from some form of mental health issue. “It was being strongly linked to hopelessness about the future,” Gidley explains. “What often gets ignored in talking about young people is their psychological perspective ... there is a great power in the right conversation with the right person at the right time. A certain thing can sow a seed which can really shift your way of thinking about something,” she says.

### EDUCATION FREE THE MIND

Raymond quotes brand consultant Lukas Fiereiss when he starts discussing why experiential spaces are so important in the modern day. “A human is only human if he is playing,” he says. Gidley agrees with this notion, but is concerned

that the education system stifles play, creativity and imagination. “It goes back 200 years,” she explains. “When mass schooling was developed, most people didn’t get an education. It was reserved for those going into a religious order or for the very wealthy. Then it was hijacked by the industrial revolution and schooling became about training people for the factories.” This economic



Top and left: stylist Loren Platt selects guests for The Firm dinners in London and invites them to bring a dish, with which they are photographed. The pictures are then uploaded to The Firm’s blog. Above and below: Grantpirrie gallery in Sydney hosted a series of events in 2010 called Resonate, where guests were invited to idle on the upper level of the gallery listening to live music that could be heard but not seen. They intended to challenge the idea that art must be experienced within ‘the white cube’.



model persists today, much to Gidley’s consternation. Yet alternative education systems such as the Steiner model and Kura Kaupapa (Maori immersion schools) are gaining support.

There is folly, Gidley explains, in training young children for employment when the jobs of the future are not even imagined today. She quotes Einstein as reason to address what she sees as a creative crisis. “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Gidley is adamant children [and adults, one suspects] need to ‘wake up’ to the world around them. “How young people are acculturated today doesn’t encourage attentiveness. Kids are becoming more and more distracted. They’re not awake. In order to be awake you need to be grounded and aware. This comes through activities like painting or gardening, where you need to be focused on the task.”

THE FIRM DINNERS IMAGES COURTESY OF LOREN PLATT; GRANTPIRRIE IMAGES COURTESY OF TERRY ROSS



Clockwise from top left: farmers markets – Willis Street, Wellington; Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, Brooklyn, New York; Urban Beekeepers with bait hives in Dalston, London.

### AGRICULTURE RURBANITES

On a small block of land in the Sydney suburb of Erskville, repurposed wardrobes, tires and drawers are sprouting bushes of sage and rosemary, rows of carrots, stalks of corn and heads of broccoli – the result of locals commandeering an empty site for a practical purpose. In New York City, Brooklyn Grange and the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm grow organic produce and harvest honey from rooftops. In London, Ben Faga took to beekeeping with a desire to produce food in a sustainable way. “We have become increasingly aware of the dire situation of honeybees, but I believe the problem not only lies in large-scale agrochemical practices, but also in modern beekeeping methods,” he says. With two biodynamic apiaries, one at the Rough

Luxe Hotel in Kings Cross and another on the roof of his Dalston studio, as well as a network of ‘bait hives’ in gardens around Dalston, Faga is reinvigorating the local bee population and reaping the rewards of having fresh honey on tap.

Also in London, the Dalston Barn, designed by the French architectural collective EXYZT, is used by local residents as a dance class venue, a community theatre, an after-school classroom, and as a base for the adjacent community vegetable garden.

In Melbourne, Joost Bakker and New Zealander Jason Chan developed a temporary cafe called the Greenhouse, which became permanent in Perth. “We wanted a holistic approach,” says Bakker. “We hooked up with a biodynamic wheat grower in Wagen and now we go through tonnes of wheat every week. Eighty per cent of the goodness in flour is gone within 24

hours. I believe that’s why in the West we’re getting increasing levels of cholesterol and diabetes and allergies. It’s because we’re eating flour with all the goodness taken out,” says Bakker.

The movement for developing community urban gardens is flourishing and as those involved will attest, such projects are countering our once voracious appetite for imported produce. According to a joint report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, food prices could rise 40 per cent in the coming decade. Thus, the need for alternative food sources is pressing. Celente views the rise of the ‘rurbanite’ as an essential element in what he’s coined the ‘American Renaissance’. It’s about appreciating quality and beauty and going back to the way things were in bygone days, says Celente. ▶



**CONSUMER CULTURE NOT MADE IN CHINA**

Supporting farmers markets, buying artisan products and frequenting neighbourhood-run enterprises is not protectionism, says Celente. “It’s survivalism.” Kate Rhodes, director of the Victorian festival State of Design, points to the resurgence of bespoke tailors in Melbourne, including MaterialByProduct and Captains of Industry, as proof high-street chain fashion retailers are starting to fall out of favour. Likewise Martin Raymond says consumers are embracing connoisseurship as an extension of their identity. “Consumers have become more interested in branding themselves by becoming experts in once forgotten rituals,” he says. In light of this, many chain stores simply can’t keep up with the new community-based sartorial trendsetters. “Most manufacturers have a two-year turn-around period, so by the time it gets to the high street it’s not on trend,” Raymond says.

Ordinarily, what’s on the catwalk passes by like a carnival of fantasy rather than something we attempt to recreate ourselves. So, in order to garner our attention, a few high-end fashion brands are changing the way they operate. In mid-2010 in San Francisco, the global denim brand Levi’s set up a workshop for screen-printing T-shirts for locals to create their own designs. Gucci invited its specialist workers into select stores in New York and Tokyo for live leather-working demonstrations during which the artisans put the finishing touches and hand embossed customer’s initials to Bamboo and New Jackie bags, while Hermès took customers into its workshops via the internet to show how artisans produce the leather goods. Similarly Prada launched its ‘Made in’ range, celebrating and utilising the exceptional skills of weavers from Peru who make gorgeous knitwear, Indian Chikan embroiders who decorate cotton frocks and Scottish textile makers who produce soft, covetable kilts. Dedication to process and source is key (in reflection of the rise of fair trade principles),

materials are minimal and without fuss, and colours are bold, monotone and natural – mimicking age-old dyeing techniques. Gone are the lacquered, sequined, synthetic, alien-like fabrics of past years.

Sarah Mower, a UK-based fashion commentator, explains that after a decade-long devotion to cocktail hour and red-carpet dressing, designers are filling the void with simple, elegant items to match the simple lifestyle many of us are choosing. “‘Pared-down’ is the fashion cliché for it, but there’s far more involved than plain undecorated clothes,” she says. Well-tailored trousers, a tailored Crombie-style coat and countless white shirts and T-shirts are now *du jour*. In the coming year, the great sartorial statement is devotion to quality and simplicity. Echoing the ideas of Gidley and Raymond, the effervescent Celente lays out the future in simple terms: we are entering the ‘(a)live’ age and we will reject gross materialism and obsessive consumerism. “It is a rediscovery – a rebirth of quality and all that had been best about our society before it denigrated into the worship of the sacred bottom line.”

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**THE EXPERTS**



**GERALD CELENTE**  
Founder of the *Trends Journal*. Opinionated current affairs observer considered the go-to guy for analysis in the US.



**JENNIFER GIDLEY**  
President of the World Futures Studies Federation. Her research in the field of futures studies goes back 15 years.



**MARTIN RAYMOND**  
Co-founder of the London-based Future Laboratory and author of *The Trend Forecasters Handbook*. Observation is his stock in trade.



**NOSTRADAMUS**  
Notable 14th-century seer whose musings have been interpreted as predictions of modern-day world events.



Levi’s San Francisco Print workshop. Top: London street style. Right: Captains of Industry in Melbourne. Opposite: designers are offering pared-down fashion to suit a simpler lifestyle.



CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY IMAGE COURTESY OF CORY WHITE, MRBLANC; LEVI’S IMAGE COURTESY OF MARCELLA KLIGMAN; STREETSTYLE IMAGE COURTESY OF LSN

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