

Bruce Sterling delivered the futurist goods at this weekend's lean but excellent conference [You, Me and Everybody We Know is a Curator](#). Here's a transcription of the entire delivery typed up as best I could, but it still doesn't transmit Sterling's oratorical flare. This seductive and prophetic keynote speech – refreshingly without powerpoint - set an urgent framework for the rest of the lineup.

Gothic Chic in the Future Favela

[by Bruce Sterling:](#)

The next decade we're entering into the teens. It's a decade inhabited by digital natives, rather than digital revolutionaries, though this is something that has already happened. It's already behind us, after 1989, when we switched from analogue to digital, from actual to virtual, from scientific to user-centric, local to global, multinationals to financial moguls.

Most of my life has been spent talking about this change. This next decade is in the hands of people who don't care about that. They don't know what a typewriter ribbons *was*. They don't remember older ways of doing things abolished by these revolutions. Digital natives are growing up in a depression, when banks make people poor, and healthcare makes people sick. Digital natives never have to be told to digitize anything. The hardware is all around. Their immediate response is to grab for a mobile or a laptop.

The driving forces of the digital revolution continue and intensify, but there is no previous order left to rebel against. We don't get a digital new world order. Digital culture is too fluid and inherently destabilizing, there are too many small pieces to join, and it's always in beta form. The digital is a tool, but not a tool that interest groups can use to advance their own interests. We don't get prosperity or governance from it. It's not a force for good or ill but a phenomenon like electrification, the railroad, or other transformative infrastructures. Railroad natives were bored to death by people who explained railroads as if they were impressive. They're just there once they're there.

Now we need to comprehend the teens...today. My intuition is that the teens offer two categories of historical experience. What's it like? Gothic high tech and favela chic. These two cultural sensibilities are not here yet.

Gothic high tech is the analogue past, It's the industrial order with enormous holes and absences, with dead areas formerly thriving but that have been undercut or disintermediated, or digitally layered over or off-shored or abandoned. They no longer pay or socially function. They are ruins.



In the graphics world they're obvious: analogue graphics, letter set, hand-letter typed fonts, scissors, glue, type setting machines, books, magazines, print media, and the early digital media of 80s and 90s, stuck on abandoned websites and dead social networks. No one is in charge; it's visibly decaying. Megatons of it, irrelevant, incapable of restoration, the walking dead...the House of Usher.

This will worry us. Rot was caused by the fact that you are super high tech. These are the consequence of the transition. The transition has torn money out of the system faster than wealth was generated. You are the curator of conditions of gentile poverty. The curator repurposes it; the heritage industrialist, the cultural industrialist, the knowledge worker of a dysfunctional heritage have awesome access, but are broke. The European cultural experience becomes the global experience. Amsterdam's industrial shipping infrastructure has become a tourist attraction. Repurposed city centers are now common in Europe; they are shrink-wrapped ruins of Chinese restaurants, Brazilian night clubs, the spear heads of globalization. High-tech gothic.

It's not conservative or backwards looking to say the basic means of production are cut and paste. This enables one to skip the boring parts that require original thought from scratch. No blank page is already blank.

Favela chic takes the logic of software and networks and applies them to institutions no matter what they are. It's like taking a mac laptop and using it to hammer in nails. It represents the promise of change, instead of making do with overused stuff. It makes sense to young people and idealists. It's consistent and easy to grasp. The problem is that over time, it tends to be squalid. It is user centric rather than planned. It's made of small pieces joined: beta, open source rather than refined by competition. It pastes over institutional failings with utopian rhetoric. Time reveals its slipshod cheesiness and cheapness, its poor engineering. Electronic democracy is about blogs, spam, flame wars, rather than the responsible participation in society. Sharing music means destroying the music industry. Digital artisanship means precarious employment. Dot com starts ups means existing monopolies on the ground and occupational forces that can't establish functional governments. E-banking means financial panics. It's endearing but flawed. It can't take yes for an answer, which would imply building something solid instead of the next favela. It can't acknowledge downsides. The universal forces of time and entropy apply to their labor. Revolutionaries are allergic to continuity. Digital culture will need critical reassessment in about five or seven years from now.

For people in museums this is more problematic. Because it's more about irruption. We should scan all of our museum holdings and put them online, but now no one comes through our doors. How can we pay to maintain our website? The favela chic response is to just change the subject.

Mackenzie said the mobile internet is gonna be twice as big as the laptop revolution. The logical step isn't to create a workable public order but a decent civilization. The logic is to transform everything into equivalents of internet architecture. Citizens become users, laws become code, cities become urbanwear applications.

Will we become internet civilization? No, the internet is unstable. Guidebooks become old fashioned immediately. The internet has gothic high tech aspects that can't be disguised. Whereas the museum's purpose is to hold on in perpetuity. There is no storage method for digital data that can predictably last for fifty years. Favela chics are jargon imperialists. They say if you're not on search engines you don't exist.

What is the response? The Unesco Cultural Heritage, academic conferences, live events. This conference is about picking over the ruins of favela chic and pulling it into gothic high tech. The digital is going to vanish like the dot coms, unless efforts are made to snatch it back. But that's the problem. Nothing is left to conserve. Advanced but rapidly decaying hardware is everywhere. Maybe we'll have an internet of things?

It's critical to understand this will pass, this period has clear issues and a victory condition. There's a promising situation called chic favela gothic. We'll grow into an oxymoron. Realizing contradictions open things back up. Favelas are the plant nurseries, the squats, the reunited spaces, repurposed structures. High-end, low-end, for everybody. Chic favela gothic looks like a violent contradiction of terms, but it will make sense.

In 2020 children of digital natives will be interested in their analogue grandparents, in our parents. Those living from '45 to '89 will be romantic to young people denied that way of life. The digital revolution will have outlived its luster. It won't be shiny or new but fashionable to count cost and valorize painstaking, beautiful analogue things that belonged to long dead atomic ladies and gentlemen. They'll prize analogue museum pieces for weird, wrong reasons. What does a chic favela gothic institution look like? How does it strategize? It wouldn't want a gothic ruin, but an unprecedented, elegant combination. Everybody lives in museums, in resolving contradictions. In new forms of the old continuity.

In the digital dark ages we may lose tons of stuff. I'm worried about the death of analogue published documents, magazines, and newspapers. We may lobotomize ourselves. We may become haunted by totalitarian states that ceaselessly reinterpret the past. Actual people's experience that are set in record then incessantly reworked. The internet lends itself to that. Things we see stored there are not really restored. We don't have storage methods. We can have a black out that lasts years. The internet is vulnerable to all kinds of passing upsets.

There may be a tipping point where it's easier for a social network to start a religion or a museum, rather than the other way around. We may start making printouts of our digital stuff. But I say in my book *Shaping Things* that design objects exist as data and only occasionally as printouts. Right now we're doing a crap job. No social network is also doing a cool store. Deviant art could lead the art world; deviant art has tons of art and could build a Deviant Art museum. Los Angeles low-brow artists have their own curators, collectors, and distribution system. But I worry about rhetoric that valorizes this stuff. Time will not be kind.

Morgan Currie for UvA: [Masters of Media](#)

An additional interview with Bruce Sterling can also be found on: [Masters of Media](#)