When I was in kindergarten in 1967, my class was given red crayons and the mimeographed image of the Canadian maple leaf flag, which we were told to colour in. What wasn’t very well explained to us was that this was a new flag that had been designed, in the Canadian manner, by committee, just in time for the country’s centenary. In hindsight, I can see that my somewhat elderly teacher probably loathed this new flag. She likely believed that the old flag – baronial and ornate, with a Union Jack and lots of doodads – was the real thing, not this reductive glyph that seemed more like a corporate logo than something to be flown at the Legion Hall.

Aside from the flag experience, I actually remember very little of the sixties, but not in the hippie sense of forgetting – I was simply too young. Those cultural memories I do have along with the flag memory are murky: Vietnam on the old black and white TV, new music from the Beatles, and, thankfully, Expo 67 – particularly the U.S. pavilion’s geodesic dome and the Moshe Safdie modular housing. What I’m now realizing is that while exuberant modernism was business as usual to young people like myself, to older Canadians Expo was something else. It marked a cathartic and definitive breaking away from the Canadian past. No longer was the nation’s visual identity going to be defined by styles or expressions that were either too regional or too historically problematic. Modern was incontestably better, although again I return to the new flag of 1965. I remember my parents railing on about it and how awful it was (and in their mind, still is). I’ve never been too fond of it, not because I think it’s
unattractive, but rather – and I figured this out in kindergarten – because it’s undrawable. I’ve had a series of parties recently where a total of over a hundred guests were handed a red felt pen and asked to draw a maple leaf on a wall slated for demolition. Most of the results resembled fig or marijuana leaves. Not one guest – all of them adults who’d grown up with the maple leaf – came close. The larger point being made here is that post offices and mailboxes swapped their ornate undrawable coats of arms for an equally undrawable reductive modernism motif. *Plus ça change ...*

But the sixties are now a long time ago, so long ago that younger generations don’t realize what they’re doing when they loot it for style cues and ideas. The sixties are officially history, and for the first time we have the historical distance to be reasonably objective about much of what happened then, design included. Forty years later we can look at Canada’s attempt to define its sense of mythic self without sentimentality as almost sentimental in itself. Like those old teen movies of the era, instead of *Hey Gang! Let’s put on a show!*, it was more like, *Hey Gang! Let’s put on a country!*

The sixties were also a point when there was no possibility of going in reverse, only forward, and quickly, sometimes too quickly. I may have been five and a half when I visited Expo, but I clearly remember its built-ten-minutes-ago aura. All of those shiny pavilion walls that look so sexy in photos were, up close, pretty sterile. And this isn’t a put-down – it’s a way of illustrating how fast change was happening. World’s fairs are intrinsically like stage sets, and while I do remember being on the monorail there and saying to myself, *It’s like floating above a parking lot,* I was also aware that most of the islands on which Expo was built were only a year or two older than the fair. I remember being told that we Canadians now inhabited an era of designed super-projects. Here was the proof. A recent trip back to the fair site was odd for me. It felt like time travel gone wrong. Many of the pavilions whose lifespan was to have been only a year or so have been kept on architectural life-support. The fair’s temporality was revealed with depressing force. Something that so forcibly moulded the memories of tens of millions of citizens now had only the power to depress.

The sixties marked another large change for Canada. After being industrially crippled by the Imperial Preference System – a trade agreement that essentially treated Canada as a goose from which Mother Britain could endlessly pluck golden eggs – the former colony was clearly manufacturing and marketing
items on its own. While shadows of the IPS system cripple Canada to this day, 
the sixties at least began to offer Canadians a whiff of hope that they might one 
day get off the raw materials treadmill. Exuberant new designs deflated old and 
defeated ways of thinking. To look through an Eaton’s catalogue from the era is 
to see generational warfare played out in the nation’s clothing and furniture 
departments. Just how the department stores managed to inventory this clash 
of sensibilities is hard to comprehend.

It’s also important to remember that the sixties were the decade when the 
focus shifted to urban life, creating the tendency to sentimentalize the land and 
the out-of-doors. Raw materials, in the form of the land and its abundance, 
became liberating, and Canadian design of the times seems to have revelled in 
that abundance. Massive structures made of undiluted and roughly hewn 
chunks of metals and woods were a way of waving goodbye to the past and of 
postulating an almost James Bond future of style through excess. When our 
family moved to Vancouver in 1965, we lived on a street now regarded as a 
design laboratory and considered required visiting for architectural students. 
Back then, all I wanted was a house with dormer windows like the families on 
TV had. Now I look at the sixties houses and wonder if I could afford to ever live 
in one. They’ve aged very gracefully.

I also grew up skiing, back when it was dirt cheap and not the sport of kings. 
This is important because the architecture and design of skiing are intrinsically 
sixties. They marry together high technology and new materials with the rustic-
ity of the mountain and generous helpings of the raw materials found there. In 
1964, the Canadian pavilion at the Triennale di Milano was a cottage – designed 
by Ottawa architect Paul Schoeler. Within this “roughing it in the bush” envi-
ronment was a stereo much like the one featured in The Graduate. Here the con-
cept of “big nature” was tempered by a sophisticated Clairtone Project G stereo.

The whole notion of the “decade” is arbitrary, although it’s true that decades 
sometimes make for good bookends for specific cultural moments. Our cul-
ture’s obsession with decades intensified in the sixties, possibly because the 
decade itself was so clearly a decade, one that saw the fruition of many ideas 
vital to the continued vitality of the country – a distinct location in global 
politics and a continuing debate about geographical and ideological unity.

I look at it this way: I’m 43 this year and Canada is 137, which means that 
I’ve been around for nearly 31 per cent of the nation’s official existence. My
father has been around for 57 per cent of the country’s existence. Those are big numbers. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: Canada is a young country and it has yet to become what it is ultimately going to be. Unlike many countries, we still have the power to control our future. It’s what unifies us, and recognition of this fact was perhaps the greatest sixties design of all.

And I still wish our flag were easier to draw.

_Douglas Coupland_