



Est. 18 9801



FIFTY YEARS THAT CHANGED THE FUTURE OF DESIGN: THE LEGACY OF STAR TREK

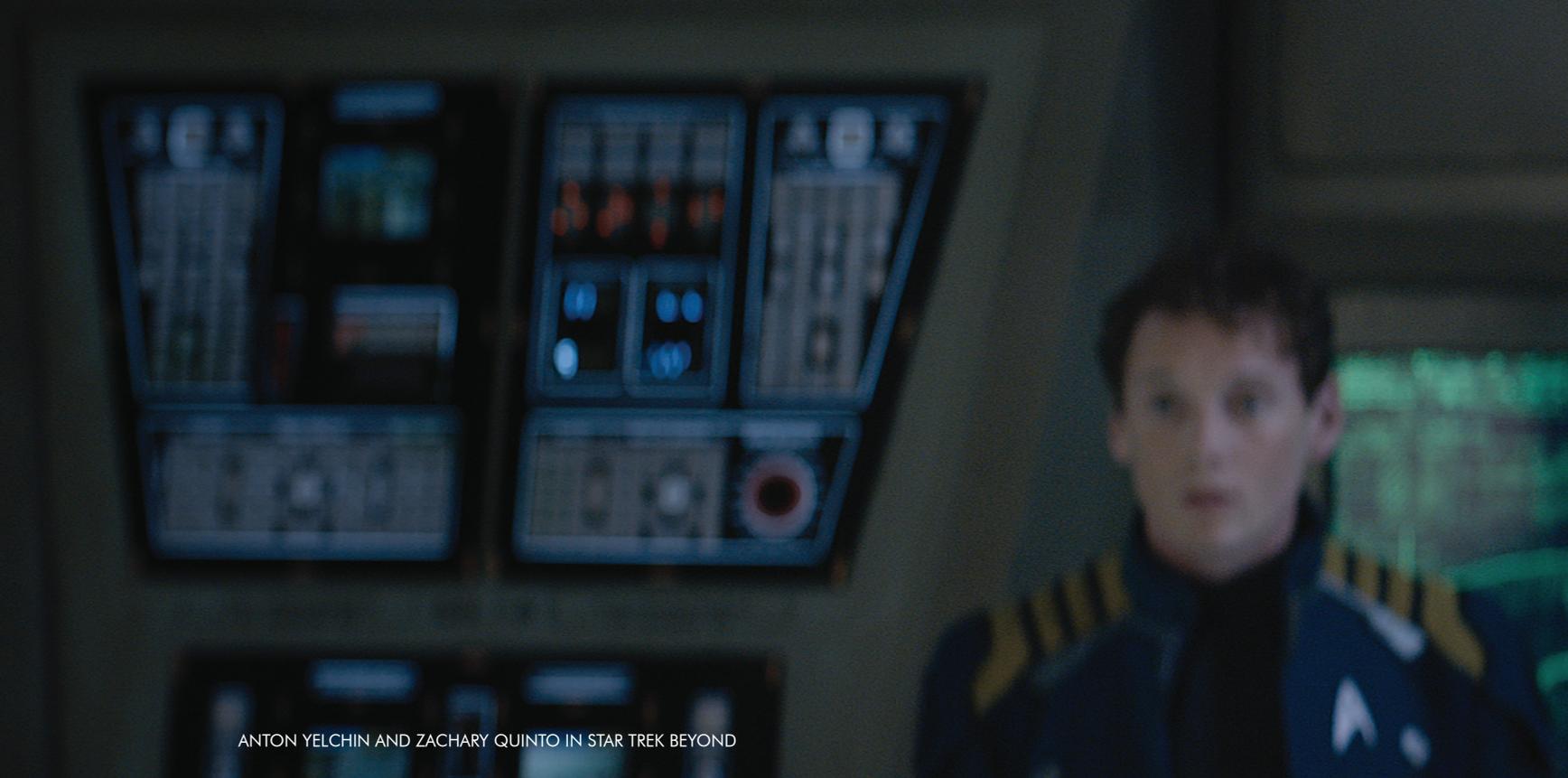
Words by Dominic Preston

It will have been fifty years this September since Kirk, Spock and the crew of the USS Enterprise first burst onto TV screens, forever changing pop culture, science fiction and the baffling career of William Shatner. It'd be hard to entirely estimate the impact the franchise has had across its five TV series and twelve films to date (soon to be thirteen, when Justin Lin's *Star Trek Beyond* arrives in July) —from featuring US television's first ever interracial kiss to inspiring the development of real-life versions of its finest fictional tech, it has shaped the modern world more than it might seem. But forget the present, it's also all but defined our vision of the future.

That's something that Tom Sanders, production designer of the upcoming *Beyond*, is clearly aware of. "It was such a great period of design. It was post-war, and it was futuristic," he says of the series' '60s origins. "I think it's the only time, design-wise, that we created all that futuristic stuff — the cars that look like rockets and all that stuff. And I think *Star Trek's* based in the '60s, so we stayed true to that to an extent."

Though when *Star Trek Beyond* arrives in cinemas this July, don't expect slavish devotion to its earliest designs. Sanders avoided watching any of the originals after getting

THE BRIDGE IN STAR TREK BEYOND



ANTON YELCHIN AND ZACHARY QUINTO IN STAR TREK BEYOND

the job, which he admits is “not something I would have ever pursued.” So how did he get involved? “A phone call,” he jokes, though it’s clear the project held at least some appeal. “I was never a big *Star Trek* fan. I mean, I am now, but I was never a big *Star Trek* fan before. But when it came up I was really excited about it. I surprised myself I think.”

The original series, which ran from 1966-1969, owes its most iconic work—including the *Enterprise* itself—to art director Matt Jefferies, who leveraged his own experience as a US airman in World War II to develop interiors and exteriors that were as (hypothetically) functional as they were beautiful. It was his idea to separate the ship’s engines from its living quarters due to the potential risk they posed, just as he envisaged that in the series’ far-flung future the entire ship could be run from a few panels in the bridge. In fact, his design for the ship’s control room was so impressively practical that it was later repurposed for the design of a US Navy communications centre in San Diego. It’s no surprise that across the series’ many iterations, the structure of the bridge is one of the few elements to go virtually unchanged—there was little to improve.

Of course, the bridge is just the tip of iceberg. Jefferies was also responsible for the handheld phaser guns, which somehow manage to look simultaneously chunky and sleek, futuristic and yet immediately identifiable as firearms. Then there are the communicators, an extraneous metal grill establishing a design that has echoes right down to the ubiquitous flip phones of the late ‘90s. It’s not just props and sets either—the striking, simple Starfleet uniforms may look a bit like Primark pyjamas to the modern eye but they remain instantly recognisable. Bright and colourful, they set the show’s optimistic tone, while the insignia and rank markers hinted at Starfleet’s structure, acknowledging a depth to the fictional organisation that never needed to be made overt.

When producer/director J.J. Abrams brought the world of *Star Trek* back to the big screen in 2009, he went back to the series’ roots. Faced with the unenviable task of making the ‘60s sets and uniforms look futuristic again, he brought us the gleaming Apple Store *Enterprise* and a surprisingly successful take on the classic uniforms, complete with touches such as the miniaturised Starfleet insignia print across the entire fabric. It’s the bridge that draws the most attention though, recreating the basic shape of Jefferies’ original design but updating its boxy aesthetic, swapping in sleek curves instead. The deep crimson floor offers a nod to Jefferies’ red detailing, but otherwise the design is monochromatic, dominated by blinding whites doing their best to convince that this really was a look into the future—and not back at our own pop culture past.

Abrams has stepped back now though, his work on a certain other massive sci-fi franchise forcing him to leave *Trek* in the hands of *Fast & Furious* director, Justin Lin. With that change of hands, production designer Scott Chambliss jumped ship, leaving Sanders to take the reins. And while he would be forgiven for sitting back and taking advantage of the work Chambliss has already done, instead he’s used the opportunity to re-examine every detail of the fictional Federation. That’s most obvious in the uniforms, this time adopting a heavier, matte fabric, closer in feel to the ‘60s originals.

“This *Star Trek* is a little more of a travelogue,” Sanders explains of the changes. “And I think bringing me on board, I brought a little more realism into it. We didn’t go too far, but to believe the travel we wanted to bring everything up a little bit, make it a little more real and a little less stylised.”

Does that mean that, perhaps for the first time, this *Trek* will look (gasp!) practical? “I mean, to an extent. It’s still *Star Trek* though,” he admits. “We had fun inventing other worlds, and to support the other worlds I felt the whole



thing needed to be...not totally real, but just brought up a little bit. Aging stuff down, we just brought it a little bit into a different realm than what's been done before."

That 'low-rider' aesthetic is reflected not only in those weightier uniforms, but also in what look to be grungier, grittier designs to the sets. "We tweaked everything. It may not be noticeable to everybody, but we went back to everything that we did, and approached it kind of fresh. I approached it a little bit naive as a *Star Trek* fan, so I stayed loyal as much as I could to the whole genre, but I'd say all the way through, everything that we did, we brought into a lot more realistic area."

Early *Star Trek's* strictly stylised aesthetic extended off-world too, beyond the Federation to the series' rich variety of aliens. Some are relatively subtle—Spock's elfin ears and perpetually arched eyebrows—others less so, as in a species that were entirely white on one side and black on the other, in one of the many episodes to explore sensitive social issues through allegory. That's not even mentioning the infamous green-skinned Orion slave girls. Sure, the primarily facepaint-based design ethos has aged uncomfortably, but the effects are still striking, as are many of the alien costumes—playing with colours, fabrics and all manner of cut-outs to explore the sort of territory the minimalist Starfleet uniforms couldn't.

Abrams' two *Treks* mostly steered clear of the truly alien, but *Beyond* is going back to its exploratory roots, offering the new films' first truly alien worlds. "We invented a couple worlds, so those are just totally thought out. Those were created in my brain," Sanders tells us. "I wanted to come up with something that could be another planet, but it is *Star Trek*, so we could get away with stylising that world. We wanted to create some alien worlds and make sure they're alien. We tied in with some location work, and we actually built one of the worlds, pieces of it that we added on. It was just organically created as we got into it."

This isn't Sanders' first sci-fi project (he worked on M. Night Shyamalan's *After Earth* a couple of years back), but it's likely his most ambitious—though he suggests that his history of more realistic, down-to-earth (literally) projects helped add weight to the alien worlds.

"When you create a world like *Apocalypto*, you are creating a world even though it's our world. So I thought what I was able to inject into this was bringing that kind of feeling. When you land on another planet, in the old TV show it was on-stage and they'd have some dorky rock...so to support us landing on another planet and believing it, it had to have a lot of realistic aspects. Otherwise it just wouldn't work. To give realistic aspects to that, I thought we needed to bump up the ship, and we needed to bump everything up just a degree, so you'd believe that the whole thing is one piece, rather than you jump from a ship that was really stylised to a planet that looks kind of real. So we gave the whole thing a makeover so it would all kind of work together."

Of course, that's not to say things aren't going to get a little weird, and early footage has already revealed some strikingly alien designs. Chris Pine's Kirk and Zachary Quinto's Spock will be joined by Sofia Boutella's silvery alien, Jaylah, while they'll face off against Idris Elba's ridge-faced villain, Krall on a planet dominated by bulbous, almost organic structures.

"We created so much of the new planet that you really believed you were on another planet. It's unmistakably different than Earth. I did things on the planet that you would never do. And with this genre, I figured I could take a chance and do something really crazy. It's really striking, as well. I tried to make it real, but I tried something that you can only do in a genre like this. I could take that other world in a completely different area because it's *Star Trek*. It's a stylised world. I think we've learned to expect that from *Star Trek*."