

Issues in the relationship between modern and postmodern design



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Identify and discuss two key issues in the relationship between Modern and Postmodern architecture and/or design.

Modernism and Postmodernism are closely linked but also differ in their ideologies and methods. By discussing two key issues in their relationship, the differences and similarities between them will become more apparent. The first key issue will talk about Modernists' rejection of the past and their defiance of establishing a 'style' while discussing the Postmodernists' use of various styles by referencing the past while also thinking of the future through the use of double coding. The second key issue will involve the Modernists' optimistic view of the future and society as well as Postmodernists' contradicting view of that opinion and their emphasis on the needs of the individual. The use of examples of corresponding buildings will aid in the explanation of the relations between the two 'movements'.

In history there often tends to be a mixture of "continuity and change"[1] where different aspects of design are used simultaneously to create a sort of "hybrid combination". According to Jencks this can look a little odd at times if not done correctly especially when various styles are mixed into one. Modernists longed to distinguish themselves from the past backed away from ornament to create their own style, even though they denied that it was a stylistic movement but rather a conscious one. It was about interpreting new ideas as society was changing so they looked to create something new and modern. The Postmodernists believed in the idea of how a building or place was being used such as that they looked at the positives of it rather than the negatives of why such a place was not

succeeding.[2]Modernists ignored any past references by attempting to create architecture and design which was completely new whereas Postmodernists believed in moving forward while still looking back towards the past. They weren't ignorant of it.

Modernists believed that their movement was not a style at all whereas Postmodernists believed that aspects of modernism such as revealing the structural function of a building and using no ornament was in fact a style on its own. It was almost industrial and stylistic in its approach[3]. The Pompidou Centre shows modernism becoming 'decorative'. Revealing the means of production was seen as the new decoration to postmodernists. The use of revealing the function of a building was in itself a type of decoration. That was not the intention of the modernists, but it was the way postmodernists looked at modernist architecture. To Jencks this is a building that wants to communicate even if its communication is about its function[4]. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi criticises the modernists' ignorance of their own modes of communication and their refusal to acknowledge the iconography of power which underpins it. The simplistic paired down design and use of raw materials had an industrial style to it even though modernism tried to avoid acknowledging one. Modernism thought that, "it was experiencing itself"[5]by creating a new way of thinking and a new approach to architecture but realistically people have no choice but to be aware of the past and all that comes with it in order to make new observations and revelations about the future. Hôtel Martel rue Mallet-Stevens shows an example of Modernist design where the architecture of the building is completely devoid of any ornamentation or

design. The exterior was “ made up of cleverly proportioned geometrical volumes that expressed the internal arrangement”[6]. In figure 2 it is very clear that when looking at the building among other architecture of its kind, there seems to be a consistent style throughout even if it was unintentional by modernists.

Postmodernists believed that by taking the aspects of design which worked and succeeded in the past and making adjustments to it by interpreting their own ideas into it, they could create design which worked well with consumers. This was achieved through the observation of how an object would work for the individual and in what way it would be used rather than providing ‘ design for all’ which was the goal with modernism. However naturally the idea of designing something which would work for everyone was an idealistic world view and not likely to be achieved. Postmodernists believed that “ the juxtaposition of tastes”[7]was better appreciated as a design aspect as it was more familiar to people due to the use of different tastes and ideas of different people and not just a singular view of one person. By using ideologies that the public was more accustomed with, the architecture didn’t appear so foreign and so out of place. People could understand and appreciate it for what it was as it related to them on a personal level.

Postmodernism in the 1970s represented a mixture of styles which was in tune with the changing cultural and economical society. It started to represent and celebrate the idea of being different and acknowledged that no one individual is the exact same and wants the same things as others do.

This idea was referred to as “ radical eclecticism”. It was a sort of <https://assignbuster.com/issues-in-the-relationship-between-modern-and-postmodern-design/>

intertextuality as a strategic tool and a form of “ contemporary reality”[8]. Architecture adapted itself to the people and its surrounding and not just the basic function of the building which was a common factor of the Modernist movement. It was about design with the individual in mind and not the community as one entity[9]by taking something that already existed and altering it slightly to create something new through the use of appropriation. Figure 3 shows the PPG place which uses such principles by mixing together the ideas of Modernist skyscrapers and references of gothic monuments to create something unique[10]. The building was commissioned by PPG Industries which was previously known as thePittsburghPlate Glass Company. Since the company manufactures architectural glass, Johnson decided to use glass as the primary material for the exterior. The building however does include “ office space, retail shops, restaurants, and a publicly accessible winter garden”[11]. Philip Johnson uses this project as a means to always reinvent himself and to draw from his love of history and acknowledges the fact that it’s perfectly fine to draw inspiration from the past.

By finding a common vernacular through the design of postmodern architecture, the value was put into what the building communicated and the power which these buildings conveyed. Such tactics transmitted an almost parody of the modernist style through the use of double coding[12]and metaphors which allowed anyone to enjoy the architecture whether they were aware of the true origins or not by making a mockery of those who took it seriously. To Johnson architecture was a “ perceptual experience and could be sculptural as well as referential”[13]. He didn’t set out to grab references

from one specific period of time even though the building looks to have some Gothic attributes. It was all about consumption and the way buildings were perceived. The use of mirrored glass as opposed to translucent glass reflected light, colours and different imagery which only gave the building more character and meaning. Anyone who was reflected in the building's façade became a part of the overall image and communicated the meaning that the building was for the people. It was important how the building was being used by the public. Jencks believed that a building was successful if it communicated well with the people. Postmodernists looked to the non-professional centre to learn something new which included the general public as they were the consumers that postmodernists were building for. They would look at how people interacted with different spaces[14] such as how people prefer to sit in the kitchen most of the time rather than the sitting room regardless of the fact that the sitting room would be more comfortable in design aesthetics. Modernists would speculate that there must be a fault with the sitting room and would try to fix it whereas the Postmodernists would look to find what made the kitchen so successful and why people preferred to use it. By not turning their back onto the past but learning from it instead, they were able to improve upon it. Jencks believed that a building should be double coded in its design and by not avoiding historical references it allowed an ease of communication as people would have already been familiar with the concepts and would have welcomed it more. Therefore, Modernism and Postmodernism wasn't so different it was just that the latter embraced the fact that architecture communicates, and it doesn't always have to represent a single idea. The idea of denotation and connotation comes into play here as it shows the differences of what the <https://assignbuster.com/issues-in-the-relationship-between-modern-and-postmodern-design/>

building actually is or does (denotation) and then what it symbolises (connotation)[15]. John Fiske said that, “ denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed”[16].

Modernism was an aesthetic response to modernity and the idea of living in a constantly changing environment which was dominated by technology. It focused more about the collective rather than the individual and their needs. They had a utopian world view where they saw the future as a means of a better world through the establishment of a universal language[17]. They aimed to create a new world, a sort of utopian ideology in a way to create a better society than was already present by showing people what the future should look like. They envisioned the future as a better and more positive place for everyone which the Postmodernists acknowledged was not realistic or physically possible for everyone. There was a large lack of faith in the optimistic futurist outlook and that technology could make the world a better place. Postmodernists questioned everything that formed modernist ideologies. They challenged all and instead their designs represented a cultural and philosophical aspect of modernism and highly encompassed a revival of the neoclassical design. This as a result showcased their enjoyment of the comfort of nostalgia and tradition. They celebrated the visual style of the earlier eras and didn't look down on history and referencing the past which is why postmodernists saw the loss of faith in modernist's ideals. They rejected all the truths of modernism and were more focused on the consumption rather than the production like the modernists were. The consumer is not truly concerned in how a building is constructed or how it solves a problem but how successful it becomes. It should be

meaningful in a way. People do not understand the language of the *avant garde* [18] , it needs something more traditional such as a pitched roof symbolising the idea of home[19]. Everyone knows it without the need of any detailed inspection required. Modernists believed that the use of ornament was misleading to consumers[20]but in fact, ornament was nostalgic and traditional as it was an element of design that was always present in history since prehistoric times. Removing it was almost strange and dehumanising in a way. It lacked familiarity.

There was an “ incredulity in the metanarrative”[21]which meant that there was a lack of belief that the world is always getting better through criticism of the dominant world view. Postmodernists loved to question everything[22]and showed a lack of belief towards progress and enlightenment as well as technology which is not always better or reliable. This also included the belief that people are not all the same nor does everyone want to be the same. Ralph Erskine’s *Byker Wall* shows an example of that. It’s completely opposite to Le Corbusier’s housing unit (Unite d’ Habitation)[23]and his universal solution to the housing crisis. The public did not care for modernist architecture - not entirely. They longed for tradition and something that gave the impression of the idea of ‘ home’. *Byker Wall’s* design is built in such a way that no two apartments are physically identical. Looking to the past for inspiration gave the impression of nostalgia which is what the people desired, and the circular shape gave a sense of community. The end user or the consumer was the most important as it would be them who would be the ultimate user of the design. This was achieved through the use of the vernacular. Jencks points out that new buildings should take into

account the surrounding areas as well as new technologies to combine and create something that is both familiar in a traditional sense and new at the same time.[24]

In conclusion modernist architecture tended to be very blunt in its design and form. It spoke for what it was which was Jencks's idea that architecture was a language and that it communicated to the public. Postmodernist architecture on the other hand had more variety to it. Through the use of double coding and intertextuality, architecture had a more interesting outlook to it and it allowed people to interact and think about its ideologies more so than with modernist architecture which was blunt and to the point. Perhaps this was due to the fact that postmodernism thought of the individual and their different tastes rather than society as a collective of people who 'all wanted the same thing'. Postmodernism acknowledged that and because of this the buildings become more relatable and 'common' to the community.

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