

# Postmodernism and hyper-reality in architecture



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**Introduction**

This essay will address architecture's position in a consumer society.

Consumer society can be described as the outcome of modernism where consuming material goods is the paramount feature of its balance and values. It is the result of the escalation in manufacturing and rapid industrial developments. It is also the outcome of the immense pace of diversification and growth of culture, creativity, technology and urbanism as a way of life. I will use the concepts of semiotic philosopher Jean Baudrillard's as a basis in understanding the implications of this culture on the built environment, urban design and technology. I will also examine the desire for fantasy realms that mirror reality by examining Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra and the "hyperreal". To understand the expression of this phenomenon in our consumerist culture I have chosen to examine its manifestation in the urban context of Montecasiono and also virtual environment of Second Life. My aim is to better understand the architects' position in this current culture and what it could mean for the future of architecture.

**Postmodernity and Hyper-reality**

The postmodern condition does not simply replace modernity but it rather opens up a new and complex layer of meaning of the modern by emphasizing its paradoxical aspects. Modernity has become deeply rooted in contemporary societies and thus it is almost impossible to find a condition where it has had no influence. Post-modernity by default cannot be separated from modernity as emancipation and liberation are inherent to the modern. In the post-modern era the electronic picture is the predominant force defining its figurative character. It is saturated with pictures in the

degree which was not observed in history. (Asanowicz, 2014) To understand some of the complexities of our image driven culture I will first be exploring the writings of Jean Baudrillard.

According to “ Simulacra and Simulation” (Baudrillard, 1994) in our post-modern society, “ It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real”. Baudrillard suggests that postmodern culture is not merely artificial, because the notion of artificiality still involves some sense of reality against which to identify it. What he conveys is that we cannot recognize the distinction between artifice and nature. Baudrillard then argues that there are three “ orders of simulacra”. Simulacra (Simulacres in French means: stereotype, a pseudo-thing, an empty form, a blank form) is one of the key concepts of postmodern aesthetics. (Asanowicz, 2014). The first order of simulacra is related to the pre-modern period where the image is a clear imitation of the real. Baudrillard associates the second order of simulacra with the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century where mass production and the increase of copies break down the differences between the representation and the image. The third order of simulacra is specifically associated with the postmodern age. It suggests that the representation precedes and determines the real. The distinction between reality and its representation is has disappeared and there is only the simulacrum. Baudrillard defined this distortion of the lines between the original and its copy as the ‘ hyperreal’ (Baudrillard, 1994). Not only does the simulacrum simulate the original but the simulacrum of truth is truer than true and thus the hyperreal is realer than real. (Horrocks & Jevtic, 1999)

This kind of simulated image is all around us, nature reserves are constructed to disguise the absence the natural environment in urban areas. Reality TV programs are edited to romanticize the mundane. Baudrillard uses the example of Disneyland, " Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle." (Baudrillard, 1994). To relate this theory to a South African context I will use the example of Montecasino. While the simulated environment is patently false, guests at Montecasino buy into the " reality" of fantasy because society will continually absorb simulacra and its preference for it over reality. Offering a surplus of services and entertainment options in a Tuscan themed environment, Montecasino disorients and mesmerises its guests in a world of fantasy where spending money enhances participation in, and enjoyment of the retail and leisure experience. Baudrillard comments on the blurred distinctions between culture, consumerism and identity: " Work, leisure, nature and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and all more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life, and in our ' anarchic and archaic' cities, have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping. All these activities have finally become desexed into a single hermaphroditic ambience of style" (Baudrillard, 2001).

Another example of hyperreality is that of Multi-User Virtual Environments. This has fascinated me since I engaged my first multi-player role-playing computer game and recognized the addictive qualities it stirred. Today these virtual environments are much more sophisticated with virtual worlds like World of Warcraft and Second Life simulating not only of our physical world but also of our social, political and economic condition. Second Life has an active socialist party, an opposing Marxist party and even an anarchist group. Prostitution, gambling and consumerism are central to the simulation. Users of these environments create avatars which they define as the most accurate reflection of their real self. Aside from hyperreality, many of the concepts Baudrillard postulates in *Simulacra and Simulation* are present. It is a semiological perfect world, where the users are deprived of the ability to move, eat and drink. The avatars have nothing else to consume but “ signs” of the real. Avatars can rent prostitutes to have sex which is devoid of human contact or experience consequently consuming the “ sign” of having sex. The avatars buy expensive virtual clothes to express the distinction against the avatars wearing free clothes. No actual clothes have changed hands, but people spend real that they have actually earned to consume “ signs” of goods. From a modernist this would seem irrational but Baudrillard states that, “ Nothing resembles itself, and holographic reproduction, like all fantasies of the exact synthesis or resurrection of the real (this also goes for scientific experimentation), is already no longer real, is already hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994) , therefore it could be argued that there is no difference in consuming something “ real” or a “ sign of the real”.

The newest phase of consumer society is accordingly concerned with the effect of digital consumption. This is intensified by globalisation, new information technologies and real-time communication. In the next section I will discuss the implications of society's preoccupation with consumption and hyperreality on Architecture.

#### **Post-Modern Architecture in a consumer society**

Frederic Jameson suggests that Postmodernism replicates or reproduces and reinforces the logic of consumer capitalism. Thus when we study a consumer society we should focus on the seductive and alluring as this is inherit to the consumer lifestyle. In architecture terms such as image, ambience and enchantment of appearance are more important than modern notions of individualism, rationalism, naturalism and functionalism (Jameson, 2002).

Few contemporary architects have consciously thought of their works with consideration to our image driven culture. In "Visions' Unfolding: Architecture in the Age of Electronical Media", Peter Eisenman postulates that by using computer programs which randomly fold surfaces and connect the building and landscape into one continuous whole, the architecture does not surrender to any particular explanation, but continuously disrupts what is defined as architecture (Eisenman, 1999). This does address the idea of surface being the most important aspect of design but the problem is that the works is possibly not seductive enough, rather the work is merely fascinating.

On the other hand the work of Jean Nouvel is shrouded in the enchantment of appearance. In Jean Nouvel in Conversation: Tomorrow Can Take Care of Itself, he says that "image is the matter of architecture and thus the future  
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of architecture is not architectural in the tectonic sense". Nouvel emphasises that his architecture is not composed of space but of communicative surfaces, which he calls interfaces. He is not interested in details but only in images.

Koolhaas and Tschumi are two other architects that have based their works on a conscious study of atmosphere rather than functions or meanings in architecture. Lastly one cannot forget to mention Bernard Tschumi. After the vertical, modern, in La Villette we have the horizontal, minimal, conceptual and postmodern hyperrealism. The "cinematic" adaptations in the architecture enable "events" and are said to provide new freedom for the visitor when choosing routes and viewpoints. Lastly the famous "congestion" in Koolhaas' works can be recognised as an atmospheric effect created by "programming". Koolhaas tries to create architecture congested with the masses in diverse actions. These actions have typically not been assigned a specific place. Rational individualism must be abandoned when interpreting mass society.

#### **Conclusion**

In its most recent forms, architecture is already becoming transparent, mobile, flexible and interactive. It almost tries to disappear in order to let a hypothetical mass creativity show through. It replaces the immaterial with floating rules of the game, a screen of deconstruction which leaves the subjects quite free to invent their own game rules. Besides, architecture is not the only thing to give way to this interactive utopia of exchange and playful recreation: all art, politics and virtual technology is going in this direction. These tendencies manifest themselves in contemporary

architecture in the new possibilities for pluralism, “ open” architecture, the flexible interrelationship between producers and consumers, interactivity, and “ the innovative consumers”.

Moralism against consumer society and commercial architecture does not work because it is characteristic of consumer society itself that it spreads moralities concerning how people should live and which kind of buildings they should have. These moralities concerning consumers are disguised in the form of “ choices”. Neither building without architects nor pragmatist architecture can make the position of architects better in society, because these phenomena are already included in the mythologies of consumer society.

As concerns the relevance of Baudrillard’s theory in architecture, it has become apparent through my theoretical work that this makes impossible such traditional architectural concepts in general as creativity, the fulfilling of needs and functionality. Architects can only speed up or slow down interpersonal socio-economic processes and in this way increase social reciprocity and cohesion.

According to Baudrillard’s analysis of the present socio-economic patterns in society, it has become almost impossible to make truly seductive and reciprocal architecture. Baudrillard’s theory does not leave very much for architects to lean on, up to the question of asking whether architecture can at all be designed under Baudrillard’s terms, however believable he is in pointing out the crucial problematics of culture in consumer society.

Source List

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