

Tradition and Modernity in Architecture

The defining events for architectural discourse in the twentieth century have been the rise and decline of orthodox modernism. Orthodox, because it came to dominate many architectural schools, the modernism typified by the pronouncements of CIAM and the writings of Le Corbusier and Gropius inculcated a design strategy based on rationality and functional analysis of the program, the ideal of the building as a single aesthetic object, the proscription of applied ornament, and the refusal of overt historical references. Modernism was never so monolithic as its apologists claimed, nor as restrictive as its opponents averred, nor was it ever the only current of architectural design. Nevertheless, modernism remained either the dominant set of ideas to be espoused or the fraternal antagonist to be opposed in architectural discourse for a large part of the twentieth century, even as modern rationalized construction and planning techniques swept almost all before them.

The weakening of modernism's hold on architectural discourse began during the very period that modern design appeared almost everywhere in the rebuilding following the second world war. Gradually, movements against strict abstraction and rationalism urged the incorporation, if not the reproduction, of historical references and multiple architectural traditions. Even more radical movements in literature and the visual arts began to find their way into architectural discourse and some practice.

While the term "postmodern" could be and originally was applied to any movement that relaxed high modernism's purity and prohibitions, gradually the term has narrowed to indicate a particular mode of historicist quotation and irony, often simplified into a standard vocabulary of classicized columns, arches, fenestration and roof lines. Despite a great deal of discussion about the needs of local communities for increased meaning and self-expression, the social concerns that characterized high modernist theory seem to have weakened in postmodern design practice.

As the "postmodern" became the name of a particular style, other stylistic options were generated, "high tech," "deconstructive," "late modern," and "neo-modern" styles being prominent in discourse, with others no doubt soon to follow. Some of these new styles proclaimed themselves not to be styles all but rather to be based on some understanding of building and design that reached beneath the eclecticism that was perceived as threatening on all sides. This was also the very claim made by the modernist pioneers about their own designs during their period of reaction against nineteenth century eclecticism. Indeed architectural discourse seems more fractured in the late twentieth than it was in the late nineteenth century.

The deeper question raised by this story of a succession from modern to postmodern styles is the appropriateness of any such narrative of stylistic periods.

Discerning unified periods and traditions in architecture is not as straightforward a task as it might seem, because architecture as a cooperative and constructional art involves many processes and groups with their own sometimes parallel and sometimes divergent histories and modes of transmission.

Buildings receive influence from many directions, for instance, where the designers and builders came from, their training, what methods they take for granted, or what is featured in the current publications and media that have great power for spreading and cross-breeding styles. Kinds of decoration, ways of massing, what functions are taken as primary, the ways of organizing architectural firms and developing designs and communicating with the clients and builders, methods of financing, community decision or approval processes: all of these have their own histories. Methods of construction and engineering develop at their own pace of innovation that does not correlate directly to styles of design. The

efficiencies of steel frame and concrete construction techniques have fostered both modernist functionalism and postmodernist applied historical decoration. All these influences do not necessarily change as a whole or in step with one another. Among these many processes and factors, "style" is only one variable. No single process of design or production is so dominant within one time or one locale that we can speak of it as carrying "the tradition." Nonetheless architectural theory has until recently been dominated by the notion of unified periods and styles.

Critical practice inherited from the nineteenth century relied on such periodization. Unified styles and matched sets of philosophical and artistic options were seen as dominating successive periods and fitting into an underlying narrative of development in society and civilization as a whole, as influenced by Herder, Hegel, and the development of art history as a separate discipline. More recently, such narratives have come under attack even if the assault often continues to tell similar narratives with an expanded cast of characters.

The idea that architecture has been dominated by one sequence of styles has been contested, as has the ideal that design should continue to be dominated by some unique style that will provide a proper expression for our age. Under the pressure of multiple cultures and better historical knowledge, the underlying narrative of society or civilization as advancing through defined stages seems less certain, and it is not so obvious that there is a unified "spirit of the age" that is to be maintained and expressed in architecture and other cultural productions. The more we learn about marginal and deviant practices, about background connections among supposedly separate areas of culture or building, as well as about the variety of interpretations and interactions that happen with supposedly similar buildings, the more questionable becomes the unity of the presumed periods. Even the unity of modernism seems less evident when we compare the simplified and commercialized versions of the International Style to the more flexible and regionally inflected variants of modernism that neither accepted the full CIAM doctrine nor simply continued local vernaculars.

As modernism's hold was relaxed, we might have expected that one or more historical styles of building would become dominant, but this has not happened. Aside from the fact that contemporary construction techniques make it more expensive to construct buildings in older ways, there is no simple opposition of modernism versus tradition. Nor has modernism gone away, since postmodern reactions against it remain modernist at heart.

The word "tradition" in the sixteenth century referred to the act of handing something over to another or passing something down through time, as well as to the items or practices so handed along. There were many separated zones of such passing down: family and community rituals, schools of painting, craft lineages, religious organizations, and so on. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as "culture" came to signify the unity of a people's outlook, values, and practices, "tradition" became the historical transmission and development of cultural totalities. Present cultural identity could be located in a historical stream that brought it both content and legitimacy.

Modernism in architecture developed as an unstable mix, accepting the notion of a cultural totality but seeking content and legitimacy within itself rather than from any historical stream. Contemporaries were to concretize the spirit of the times. In architecture this meant a rejection of historical styles and a search for new technological solutions, universal functions, and self-referential buildings that showed only their functions and their mode of construction.

There is no simple opposition of modernism with tradition. Modernism itself became a tradition in the sense of a visually and spatially recognizable mode of building, with a traceable history, and a style that

can be handed down, quoted, parodied, mixed with others. It became an identity with its own values and past heroes to be lived up to.

Inevitably, then, modernism came to be felt as a constraint on freedom. The modernist gesture applies to itself, leaving the modernist style and narrative behind. This involves denying modernism's totalizing narrative and its separation from history, but without the supposed narrowness of past traditions. An avant garde postmodern architecture picks and chooses among historical and modernist references, refusing unified identities either across history or in the present time.

This is still modernist at heart. Modernism claimed to offer wider possibilities through new building technology and new analyses of function, and through the freedom of a design process that was no longer restricted to a standard vocabulary of historical forms. In postmodern polemics modernism was in turn accused of imposing restricted possibilities because the modernist rational maximizing of function led to a narrow formal vocabulary of its own. The breadth of modernist building somewhat refutes that accusation, but what is important is that the whole dispute is carried out with both sides agreeing with the modern presupposition that opening an ever wider sphere of self-conscious possibilities is the only proper move towards progress in design. Thus the reactions against modernism agree with the modern esteem for ever increased self-consciousness in design and what is presumed to be a liberating distance from history even when citing past styles or monuments. In this sense all of the reactions to modernism remain firmly modernist.

Disputing such modern presuppositions about self-consciousness and progress is much more difficult than attacking the rigors of the International Style, especially since such a dispute seems too easily connected with attempts to enforce a reactionary fixed identity or retrograde vocabulary. Many fields of cultural production and analysis today are haunted by the question whether it is possible to deviate from the great Enlightenment and modernist presuppositions, reducing modern self-consciousness and subjectivity to one mode of self-relation among others.

So in what sense today are we left with either modernism or the tradition? If modernism means universal rational functionalism, architecture can no longer appeal to those universals. But the modern individual or social subjects still attempt to give themselves content and legitimacy. In architecture the search for more self-conscious design and wider possibilities continues amid a less unified field of possibilities that cannot be neatly periodized or furnish a single guiding narrative. "Our" identity is in question without the presupposition of some deep unified answer to be discovered, but this, in turn, questions the search for any self-founded identity. In all of this tradition continues in something like the pre-modern sense: plural, uncoordinated zones where practices and meanings are handed along, but now with the receiving subjects less unified in their self-conscious receiving and reworking and blending possibilities and meanings.

This leaves architects unsure of their vocation. Architecture has concerned itself with who and where we are, but today the unity of the "we" is both affirmed and denied in complex ways that perplex the architect. Can a city be composed of multiple fragments? Should there be a relaxation of the architectural imperative to represent ourselves? Can architecture have a civic expressive function if there is no unified spirit to express? What are buildings to do or be beyond or alongside their functional and representational roles?

Architects are beginning to explore the degree to which the physical singularity of the built structure and its spatial effects resist full incorporation into any claimed tradition or style or other scheme of representation and meaning. But there is no agreement about how to deal with context and the influence

of local practices and meanings, if architecture does not exhaust itself in meaning and representation.

So the decline of the International style in architecture poses questions more far reaching than "what style shall we build?" The issues touch our identity and our conception of history in an age that is self-consciously pluralistic. None of these issues are being resolved in architectural theory any more than they are in society at large. They are, however, being addressed in theoretical writings (for example in the writings of Norberg-Schulz, Alexander, Harries, Vidler, Wigley), and they underlie practical disputes such as those over the choice of modernism or classicism in England, Neo-Traditional planning in the United States, and the importation of Western designs into the expanding cities of Asia.

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Should we then talk about a spirit of our own postmodern age, perhaps a spirit of ironic diversity? Or should we say that our age is too diverse to have a unified spirit? Or is the whole idea of a unified spirit to be doubted in any age?

The continuation of modernism relates to this question of "our" identity, since modernism defined itself as a culmination, a final period connected with the Enlightenment claim to have made a decisive rational transition away from previous modes of living and thinking.

Pre-Enlightenment narratives, for example in some religious traditions, had also told stories about decisive moments and definitive changes, but had generally located such moments either in the far past or in a future end time to come. The Enlightenment and modernist narratives put the decisive moment right now in the present, so that we were on the other side of a transition to fuller self-consciousness and self-mastery, freed of past blinders and restrictions.

(This Enlightenment model of a decisive transition did not, however, demand that what came before and what was to come after that transition also be conceptualized as a series of transitions, as was done in nineteenth century philosophical and critical theories.)

Another way of asking these questions is to wonder whether the notion of tradition must be inevitably connected with the discourse of periodization.

The nineteenth century eclecticism that modernism reacted against, despite constant reference to historical periods, was itself already modern in its willingness to pick and choose freely from many historical periods.

If we consider tradition as an act rather than a thing, then the act of handing down, with its reception and variation, is distinct from "style" as a relatively unified collection of patterns or of paradigmatic examples.

It is possible to avoid fixed narratives of the development or progression of styles and traditions, perhaps through a more spatial metaphor of difference, perhaps through refusing any simple location of personal or social identities.

We come to think our tradition—our action of receiving and handing down—as a texture woven from a concurrent multiplicity of interacting discourses and partial identities rather than as expressing some unified spirit, or even some multiple but already fixed set of ethnic or religious or political identities.

Whether such a deviation results in narrow reaction or promiscuous blending or new creativity remains to be built and thought.

There is likewise an open question what "style" can mean in a time of relentless quotation, when merchandising and maneuvers for attracting attention have undermined older ways of creating the effects of importance and public grandeur, and when local and historical gestures may slip towards the intense but simplified historicity of the theme park.

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