

An Architecture for Our Time

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Post-modernist architects congratulate themselves on how cutting-edge and avant-garde their buildings are, but in reality, they are not responding to the needs of our time in the way that the early modernists responded to the needs of the last century.

Modernist architects of the early and mid-twentieth century were politically idealistic and radical. Their architecture expressed their faith that modernisation and progress would bring a better world.

Because this technological optimism has faded, today's post-modernists do not have the social idealism of the early modernists to give their work meaning. They strain to create novel forms, as if novelty were an end in itself. If we look at why avant garde architects have lost their idealism, it can help us understand what sort of architecture is needed in our time.

Architecture and the Ideal of Progress

The radical politics of the nineteenth century was based on the ideal of progress, which spread because the industrial revolution made it seem that science and technology would continually improve people's lives.

Around the time of the French revolution, the philosopher St. Simon wrote that industrialisation would not only eliminate poverty but would also sweep away traditional forms of authority — the monarchy, aristocracy, and church — and bring a society managed by technical experts. Likewise, Karl Marx believed that the communist revolution would sweep away traditional forms of authority and bring a planned industrial economy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American economist Thorstein Veblen carried the ideal of progress furthest by advocating what he called "technocracy", which he described as a society "managed by competent technicians with an eye single to maximum production...".

Early modernist architecture was politically radical in the manner of Veblen. The most dogmatic modernists were deterministic: design was a product of a functional requirements and of the most efficient use of modern materials. Like Veblen and the technocrats, dogmatic functionalist architects believed that decisions in a modern society should be made on technical grounds, and that new technology would sweep away traditional forms.

Modernist architecture became popular, because the ideal of progress was so widespread during the mid-twentieth century. Its gleaming glass, steel, and concrete buildings helped to

spread the faith that technology and planning could heal the sick, replace the slums with hygienic housing projects, and create affluence for all.

Modernism as the Status Quo

During the 1950s, modernism still had this radical spirit. It was not only on the leading edge aesthetically but also on the leading edge of social reform.

Through the 1960s, the modernist vision was being put into practice, and it was failing. Modernist housing projects built by idealistic governments became vertical slums that were worse than the old slums they replaced. Freeways blighted neighborhoods, and revolts by local citizens made it virtually impossible to build new freeways in central cities.

By the 1970s, modernism was the status quo, and it was oppressive. Glass and steel high rises towered over our cities, and freeways sliced up our countryside. Social critics attacked modernism, saying that we were a technocratic society, where ordinary people were powerless because the planners were in control. Environmentalists created a political movement dedicated to controlling destructive technologies.

Modernism changed from a radical movement to the status quo because our society changed. The modernists criticised the traditional society of the early twentieth century in the name of technology and progress. But they cannot criticise the technological society of our time in those terms.

By the 1970s, modernism was exhausted. Because the modernists' glass and steel high rises were no longer new and exciting, some architects began to call themselves post-modernists and to search for fresh novelties that could still shock and surprise people.

Like the early modernists, the post-modernists wanted to be the avant garde that lead society into the future. But the post-modernists are no longer capable of the social idealism of the early modernists, because we no longer live in the traditional society that the early modernists tried to change in the name of progress.

Post-modernism has retained the aesthetic dogmas of early modernism — its rejection of historic ornamentation and its search for 'strikingly original' futuristic designs — but it no longer symbolises any social ideal. Post-modernists sometimes play at being radical by claiming that their architecture 'subverts' conventional 'paradigms', but they are just professors talking to other professors. They are not part of a larger movement to reform society, as modernist architects were in mid-century.

Traditionalism as Social Change

Post-modernists often criticise New Urbanism by calling it 'nostalgic' or a 'pastiche' of historical styles. But unlike the post-modernists, New Urbanists are part of a powerful movement to reform society: hundreds of environmental groups across America support New Urbanism and smart growth, in order to fight suburban sprawl, to reduce air pollution, and to

conserve energy. New Urbanists have overturned the principles of modernist city planning by reviving traditional neighbourhood design.

Early modernist urban planners believed that the centralised economy would inevitably take over all the functions of society, just as centralised factories had replaced small workshops. Housing would be in specially designed housing projects or suburban neighbourhoods, industry would be in industrial parks, offices would be in office centres, city governments would be in civic centres, and concert halls would be in centers for the performing arts. These single-function zones would be built on large blocks, which would have internal streets designed for local access, and which would be surrounded by freeways and wide arterial streets designed to move traffic efficiently.

When modernist urban planning was put into practice, it produced our suburban landscape of housing tracts, shopping malls, business parks, and freeways. It created total automobile dependency, because separating land uses meant that there were no services within walking distance of homes. It destroyed the sense of community that older neighbourhoods had, because people no longer walked by their neighbors' houses on their way to local shopping streets. It created a bleak, ugly landscape of strip malls and parking lots, because the single-function developments faced inward and turned their backs to the arterial streets that surround them.

The New Urbanists reject this modernist urban design in favor of traditional urban design. Instead of large blocks, they build small blocks, so traffic is dispersed on many narrow streets. Instead of single-use zones, they build mixed-use developments, with the street grid connecting different uses and making it attractive to walk as well as to drive. Instead of complexes that face inward with parking lots facing the streets, they design buildings oriented to the street and sidewalk. To make walking possible and save land, they build at higher densities than conventional suburbs.

New Urbanists are building developments today that are similar to the railroad suburbs, streetcar suburbs, and urban neighbourhoods of a century ago. Their use of models from the past is a real challenge to the modern economy, because it implies that people would be better off living more simply. Suburbia and the automobile were the mainstays of postwar economic growth, whereas New Urbanists are saying that we would be better off if we lived in homes that use less land and in neighbourhoods where we have the choice of walking, rather than being forced to drive every time we leave our houses.

If New Urbanist neighbourhoods are more liveable than conventional automobile-dependent suburbs, that fact is a real threat to General Motors, ExxonMobile, and Wal-Mart - unlike the self-consciously 'radical' gestures of the post-modernists, which do not challenge our economy at all.

From Scarcity to Affluence

We no longer have the technological optimism of the early modernists, because the economic changes of the last century have made it obsolete.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the West had a scarcity economy, and modern technology promised to end the scarcity. In 1900, the average income in America was just above what we now define as the poverty level, and industrialisation was increasing average income rapidly. It seemed that technology could bring everyone a decent standard of living, for the first time in history.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the West has a surplus economy. Average income today is more than five times as great in real terms as it was in 1900, and most Westerners are more affluent than anyone imagined a century ago. For example, in 1900, middle-class Americans living in streetcar suburbs did not own vehicles; only the rich could afford to keep carriages. In 1950, half of American households owned cars. Today, most American households own two or more cars, and there are more cars than there are licensed drivers. Similar statistics apply in many other Western countries.

Today, Westerners are no longer impressed with the idea that modernisation and economic growth can bring everyone a decent standard of living, because the most of them already have a decent standard of living. In 1900, American urban workers lived in tenements where there was only one toilet per floor, where you filled a tin tub in the kitchen to take a bath, where inner rooms had no sunlight, and where children had nowhere to play except the streets. The early modernists wanted to help these people by building 'workers housing', which was standardised and impersonal but which at least gave each family its own bathroom, windows that looked out over lawns, and playgrounds for the children. But today, most American workers live in the suburbs, and they certainly do not want to go back to 'workers housing'.

Because most Americans today have the basics and more, the promises of technology and economic growth no longer seem as important as they did a century ago, when we were struggling for decent food, clothing, and shelter. At the same time, 'progress' has begun to cause problems that no one thought about a century ago. Economic growth has already begun to cause global warming, and it threatens to cause energy shortages. Bio-technology threatens to genetically reengineer nature and to change what it means to be human.

A New Humanism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, we needed to unleash modernisation, so technology and economic growth could overcome scarcity. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we need to control modernisation, to subordinate technology to human values.

We need to reject the post-modernists' belief in innovation and change for their own sake. Instead, we need to focus on enduring human values, so we can modernise selectively. Modernisation is a good thing when it furthers human values but not when it undermines them.

We need a new humanism across our entire culture, and it has already begun to appear.

In moral philosophy, we need an ethics based on human nature. When a reductionist scientist like James Watson, one of the discoverers of DNA, says that we should use genetic engineering to improve the human race, we need to be able to answer that, as soon as he begins talking about changing human nature, he steps into a moral void where the word 'improve' no longer has any meaning. In fact, thinkers across the political spectrum are beginning to say this: from Bill McKibben on the ecological left, to Francis Fukuyama in the center, to Leon Kass on the right, social critics are beginning to warn us about the dangers of a 'post-human future'.

In economics, we need to realise that growth is valuable as long as it helps people to live fully human lives, but that economic growth for its own sake is stultifying. Today, Americans work such long hours to keep up with the suburban standard of living that they do not have time for their families, their friends, or their own interests. We need to allow people to downshift economically - to consume less and work less if they believe it will let them live better lives. In fact, some ecologists are beginning to say that the growth economy not only threatens the natural environment, it also makes our lives less satisfying.

In art, we need to reject the avant garde's pursuit of novelty for its own sake, in favor of a new classicism centered on enduring human values. We can see the focus on human excellence in the long tradition of classical art, for example, in the discobulos and Michelangelo's David. In fact, neo-classical artists such as Alan LeQuire are now reviving this classical, humanistic tradition art.

In architecture, also, we need to reject the avant garde's pursuit of novelty and its belief that new technology should sweep away the past, in favor of design based on enduring human values. Christopher Alexander has laid the groundwork with his theory that there are continuing patterns underlying all traditional architecture, which modernists have abandoned, but to which we must return in order to build on a human scale.

Different cultures will use different forms of traditional ornamentation to symbolise these enduring values, but in the West, only the classical style can symbolise a revival of the human values that were disrupted by the industrial revolution. Of course, we would expect different dialects of the classical style in different regions, based on their climate, local materials, and history: the tradition of classical architecture is different in England and in Italy.

The New Urbanists have led the way toward this new humanism, by insisting that we must return to the enduring principles of urban design which were abandoned by the modernists, in order to build neighbourhoods that are human-scale. In ethics, economics, and art, the new humanists are still a small minority, but New Urbanism has already established itself as our most important theory of urban planning.

Architecture can also help lead our society toward a new humanism. Just as modernist architecture helped promote the belief in technology and progress during the twentieth

century, a human-scale classical architecture can help promote the belief in enduring human values that we need in the twenty-first century.

The Post-Modern Future

The skyline of Milan is about to be transformed by three new glass and steel high-rises, up to 715 feet (218 meters) high, a 1.5 billion Euro project financed by Italy's three largest insurance companies and designed by a team led by Daniel Libeskind in the usual twisted, distorted forms of post-modern architecture. Because the architects congratulate themselves on how avant-garde these twisted high-rises are — "an unprecedented project... to create a spectacular new sort of 21st-century city", says Libeskind — it is useful to ask what they really symbolise.

First, they symbolise the huge corporations that dominate our economy, just as the last generation of boxy high-rises did. In the past, the economy was smaller scale, and so the city was built on a smaller, more human scale. But now high-rises tower over the city, representing the wealth and power of the corporations that finance them.

Second, they symbolise a society devoted to sensationalism and novelty, where the media rush to cover anything that is new and different. Journalists always marvel at how 'innovative' and 'cutting edge' these buildings are, but they never bother to ask whether they will make the city more liveable or more humane.

Third, they symbolise a fascination with technology that makes us say, 'if we can do it, we should do it: new techniques of computer modeling make it possible to build twisting high-rises, and therefore we should build twisting high-rises'.

Post-modernists say that anyone who opposes their style is 'afraid of the future'. They do not seem to realise that the sort of future we will have depends on the choices we make now. If we use technology wisely, then by the end of the coming century, most people in the world can be comfortable economically and can have the leisure that is necessary to live a fully human life.

But if we follow the post-modernists' lead, if we do whatever technology makes possible without thinking about what it means in human terms, then by the end of the coming century, we can expect ecological crisis and widespread use of biotechnology to reengineer nature and human nature.

The twisted, distorted shapes of the post-modernists' buildings would be the perfect symbol of this post-human future.

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