

March 2016

SPACES AS RECONCILIATION-ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN VERSUS CULTURALCHANGES

Rana Dubeissy

Associate Professor of Architecture, Lebanese University, Lebanon, ranadbc@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bau.edu.lb/apj>



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Engineering Commons](#)

Keywords: Cities, Production, Fordism, Modernism, Postmodernism

Recommended Citation

Dubeissy, Rana (2016) "SPACES AS RECONCILIATION-ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN VERSUS CULTURALCHANGES," *Architecture and Planning Journal (APJ)*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bau.edu.lb/apj/vol23/iss2/24>

SPACES AS RECONCILIATION-ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN VERSUS CULTURALCHANGES

Abstract

As cities become increasingly dense and social communities become more diverse and fragmented, Modern approaches fail to submit an elucidation, nor a valid response to the metropolitan density. The architect has a significant role in understanding the needs of social communities; he has to be sensitive to the bits and parts of the metropolis to decipher and comprehend the multitude of layers superimposed upon each other. Postmodernism has provided the architect with wider scopes to include vernacular traditions, particular wants and needs that can produce more quenching customized architecture. This research is a qualitative research with an Interpretive strategy, derived from the tradition of phenomenology, which seeks to understand the complex world from the perspective of those who lived it. A holistic analysis of Modernism where space was aesthetically constructed for a larger social project is sought for in this research. Also, it argues to prove that Postmodernism provided an independent space, not necessarily having a social objective yet provides tools to represent ethnic communities and cultural diversity. This research also discusses the nature of the catalysts of communities in the present era. The aim of this research is to endorse the role of the architect in communicating positively with social communities through his deep understanding of the constant revolutionizing of production, the never ending disturbance to social relations, the agitation and the insecurity. New ideas are always sweeping older ones, and humans are in constant need of an architecture that expresses their time. Architects have a social responsibility to understand the needs and provide scenarios.

Keywords

Cities, Production, Fordism, Modernism, Postmodernism

SPACES AS RECONCILIATION - ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN VERSUS CULTURAL CHANGES

R. DUBEISSY¹

ABSTRACT

As cities become increasingly dense and social communities become more diverse and fragmented, Modern approaches fail to submit an elucidation, nor a valid response to the metropolitan density. The architect has a significant role in understanding the needs of social communities; he has to be sensitive to the bits and parts of the metropolis to decipher and comprehend the multitude of layers superimposed upon each other. Postmodernism has provided the architect with wider scopes to include vernacular traditions, particular wants and needs that can produce more quenching customized architecture.

This research is a qualitative research with an Interpretive strategy, derived from the tradition of phenomenology, which seeks to understand the complex world from the perspective of those who lived it. A holistic analysis of Modernism where space was aesthetically constructed for a larger social project is sought for in this research. Also, it argues to prove that Postmodernism provided an independent space, not necessarily having a social objective yet provides tools to represent ethnic communities and cultural diversity. This research also discusses the nature of the catalysts of communities in the present era.

The aim of this research is to endorse the role of the architect in communicating positively with social communities through his deep understanding of the constant revolutionizing of production, the never ending disturbance to social relations, the agitation and the insecurity. New ideas are always sweeping older ones, and humans are in constant need of an architecture that expresses their time. Architects have a social responsibility to understand the needs and provide scenarios.

KEYWORDS

Cities, Production, Fordism, Modernism, Postmodernism

1. INTRODUCTION

The late Twentieth century witnessed major socioeconomic changes. Transformations in processes of labour, in consumer's lifestyle, in demographics and geopolitics had their repercussions on architecture. Profitable production remains the stabilizing agent of the economy, which is the fundamental rule of the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, within this frame, the construction sector continues to be one of the most lucrative areas for profit where it was implemented on a large scale. Facing this condition of "commodifying" built spaces the question of the role of the architect arises. Traditionally, it was the architect and the client/occupier of space. Now it is the investor, a prospective user of space, and the architect. How can the architect design in a condition where the occupier of space is to be decided later by a sales person?

¹ RANA DUBEISSY, PhD
Associate Professor of Architecture, Lebanese University, Lebanon

2. CHRONOLOGY OF MODERNISM AND FORDISM

The emergence of Modernism was marked by Le Corbusier's manifesto *Vers Une Architecture*, in 1923. In the light of war-torn Europe, Le Corbusier offered Architecture to prevent revolution and political upheavals (Le Corbusier [1923] 1986, p.289). The Swiss-born architect argued that there be a necessity to boost industry, following the example of the United States of America. To satisfy the mass demand, especially in the housing sector. Le Corbusier believed that the house is a "machine for living", it can be designed and produced in a similar process as a Ford car, which is: standardisation, simplicity, and mechanisation. Therefore, Modern Architecture and mass-production technologies were deeply associated with holding up the promise of economic progress.

Cultural Modernism was the product of rapid economic and political changes of Fordism. Artists like Pablo Picasso and Le Corbusier had deep faith in the Modernist movement and they played their role in expressing it through their art and architecture. Fordism and Modernism reached their climax after World War II amid economic growth and cultural innovation. Then both began to slow down in 1960 to fall in crisis in 1973. Among the attempts to solve this crisis was introducing the mode of flexible production of goods on a new global scale, what was known later as Post-Fordism. This open economy led to a new culture of postmodernism where difference and disturbance were welcomed.

Fordism, with its new system of production, introduced a new mode of consumption. New consumers needed to be found to buy all the new goods pouring off the production lines. Also, the Working class was the largest provisional market and ready to quench its thirst. So Henry Ford doubled the wages of his workers allowing them to buy the goods that they used to produce earlier in their homes, thus transforming the producers into consumers.

The culture of Modernism flourished alongside with Fordism as an answer to the social contradictions created by the new modes of life. Fordism aimed at transforming humans into abstract uniform objects in an entirely controlled system. The workers performed their tasks totally detached as if the work is imposed on them by an external power. Moreover, the time spent at work was regarded as the worth of the individual. So basically the biggest contradiction created was between the worker and his work, between the subject and the object. Fordism's ultimate goal was to transform a human into being alien to itself, then to reintegrate him into a better model that fits the modern industry better.

Modernism set these contradictions as the problems to be resolved. Art and architecture addressed the issue through the experience of *time*, *space* and the *human self*.

On the *time* dimension, the contradiction took the shapes of the change versus the permanent. Modernist artists and architects addressed the issue of the form of a radical break with everything that was before, break with the tradition and everything that represents it. The cultural continuity from premodern times, engulfed by tradition and religion and nature was erased giving the space to the new production technologies and consumption. Time was before subject to human rhythms and culture, but now it is rationalised and being controlled by a stopwatch and an assembly line. Some faithful Modernist sought to humanise this new concept of time by setting it as the ultimate force of the progress of technology aimed at ordering the chaos. While artists like Mondrian and Le Corbusier pushed in their work for a machine aesthetic, falling in love with the abstract. (Harvey 1989, pp. 10-12, 31-35; Jameson 1991, pp. 302-313).

On the *space* dimension, the contradiction defined itself as between the surface and the depth. As a result of technological progress and development, quick time is experienced on railroads and in automobiles and by using telegraph and the innovative assembly line all of that led to space compression. Instead of spending hours of travel or labour, where space held a diverse coexistence along its landscapes, now it is rendered into superficial and subjectively perceived, rather than actively investigated and fitting. Also, it is important to note the emergence of the capitalist real estate market which made the heterogeneous landscapes of work and play homogenous property subject to the objective laws of the building market. (Harvey 1989, pp. 20-23; Jameson 1991, pp. 6-16).

On the *human-self* dimension, the contradiction was best represented through the opposition between the centeredness and the fragmentation. On one hand the individuals in the Fordist production system were fragments in a larger system organised by an alien logic and capital rational. On the other hand, the mass consumption system gave the individuals the illusion of a private life, excluded from the outside, guarded by possessions. This paradox is expressed in Franz Kafka's works and "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, which represented a centred and autonomous individual, but is out of control...

Architecture played a significant role in reflecting these contradictions that resulted from Fordism. In the 1920s, European architects like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies Van Der Rohe launched the Modernist movement, preaching for a radical break with the old and the traditional. Attacking all the historical and formal styles. They argued that the rationalised and unadorned and standardised give an order to the chaos. They designed mass-produced housing suitable for the workers. Modernists also adopted the dialectics of surface and depth; they designed buildings whose surfaces were free of decorations and expressed its inner structure. Moreover, the cities they designed, they guaranteed coexistence between fragmented production and entered consumption. Where the factories were separated from worker's homes where they can still live the illusion of centred and autonomous self.

Modernism's end was declared by the architect Charles Jenks (1991, p, 23) in July 1972 when the American State Court ordered the demolishing of Pruitt-Igoe housing project in Missouri. The public housing project consisted of 33 buildings and was built to be "the Oasis in the Desert", but soon it became a place of crime and danger. The project was designed according to the fundamental principles of Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). This infamous event symbolised the end of faith in industrial standardisation as main agents for economic progress. Charles Moore (1967, p. 35) said that since the 1920s industry changed and mechanisation meant repetition, where cities are arranged like corporations in a central hierarchical form. The revolution in information and electronic media have changed the mode of production thus transforming the process of production into a decentralised one. Post-Fordism, which came beyond mass production, helped in the emergence of a Post-Modern culture where diversity and difference are its key features.

3. POST-FORDISM AND EMERGENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

In the late 1960s, Fordism entered a crisis stage, and new economic strategies emerged to solve this crisis. Economists argue that by that time work could not be further divided nor machinery could hold more specialisation, which resulted in slow growth and decrease in profits. Also, by that stage, Fordist methods had spread into Europe, Asia, and Latin America, which weakened the American monopoly by the international competition on mass-produced goods. The conditions that pushed American manufacturers to look for new markets and new production models.

In contrast to mass-producers with their economy of scale offering few standardised products, post-Fordist producers focused on economies of scope with diverse and continuously changing goods. This generated new consumption markets focuses on the small, specialised, and niche. The new system had to be flexible and open, demanded quick adaptation of workers and machines to produce new diverse goods. Skilled Fordist workers were replaced by robotics and computer-controlled machine tools that could be quickly adapted (Piore and Sabel 1984; Amin 1994; Aglieta 1979).

Post-Fordism transformed the market to be vast and decentralised, fragmented and unequal. Higher income groups buy fancy goods while lower income groups buy cheaper goods. New experiences and sensibilities have emerged due to this economic condition, and they are deeply encoded with postmodern culture.

The fundamental contradictions of the Modern culture were echoed in the Postmodern culture as well:

On the *time* dimension, the opposing forces of change and permanence persisted. People had to face a flux of discontinuous changes totally out of control. Modernists defend these changes

claiming a sense of unity behind them. The Postmodernists were avoiding any sense of unifying history. The Modernist directional time was replaced by a Postmodernist historical meaningless flow.

The loss of historicity in Postmodern culture, according to critics, had two reasons in the post-Fordist economy. First, the modern sense of development thrived on the contrast in modernising societies that were not modern, yet when capitalist modernisation spread and covered wider geography the contest disappeared, so nothing seemed to be developed anymore. Second, the post-Fordist economy emphasized a steady flow of versatile goods, an economy constantly changing, creating new markets, and it guaranteed fast changing fashions and images to sell. This constant change in the materiality of the world did undermine historicity and led nowhere.

On the dimension of *space*, Postmodernism disregarded the dialectic between the superficial and the deep, and the process shrunk into an interplay on superficiality. As post-Fordism stretched its markets to cover wider geography, the historical depth of spaces diminished, and areas became more homogenous. Post-Fordism highlighted the differences between peoples and spaces through goods tailored superficially to appeal to different nations and ethnic groups (Jameson 1991, pp40-43).

Moreover, most importantly, on the *human-self* dimension, the post-Fordist economy colonised the psyche and created more desires and wants for more goods. The centred self was decentralised into minor needs. The modernist neurotic was surrounded by a flow of unrelated signifiers in an eternal present leading to a sense of schizophrenia (Jameson 1991, pp. 14-16; Harvey 1989, pp. 53-54; Grossberg 1992, pp. 351-353).

In *architecture*, the effect of Postmodernism was very prominent. Architects like Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, and Charles Moore turned to historical symbols to restore a sense of human value and dignity. The machine aesthetics were abandoned in the hope of unearthing the old traditional aesthetics and historicism. These symbols were used in a decontextualised manner only to decorate without any historical depth. The postmodernists stress to differentiate their buildings for the diverse cultures and markets while modernist longed to unify all buildings hoping for a universal language. Post-Fordism abandoned any rational in planning; the market was the ultimate planner (Jencks 1991; Venturi 1966; Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972).

4. POSTMODERN REPERCUSSIONS ON THE AMERICAN CITIES

Young artists in America by the late 1960s were already disappointed by Modernism culture. By that time it had lost its glamour and became associated with the corporate establishment, especially its “bulldozer approach” to urban development. Artists lacked inspiration so they turned into the vitality of the consumer culture, and thus pop art was born. Architecture witnessed for the first time architects working with inner-city neighbourhoods against urban development, pushing against the uniformity of modern plans. A new appreciation emerged to the vernacular, diversity, decoration and symbolism.

Robert Venturi was one of the principal architects of that time who argued that complexity and vitality are closer to the ordinary people while the functionality and the simplicity of Modernism were elitist and boring. He even encouraged using historical styles in architecture. Greek columns and colonial carriage lamps on suburban houses carried ordinary meanings. Architects incorporated such decorations when their designs were communicating with the broad public.

Corporate new strategies to cut costs and reach flexibility destroyed the American landscape, and later other countries who flooded same strategies. The decision was to close plants and abandon unionised workers, and shift industries in search of cheap labour. This stressed the fragmentation of the marketplace, and manufacturers adopted more upscale goods that quenched the thirst of the new orders and managers in the niche markets. For years to come post-Fordism expanded with Postmodernism its cultural ally.

Convention centres, shopping malls, restaurant districts, and historic restorations were developed to give some life back to the devastated cities due to plant closings and corporate exodus. Even office buildings and headquarters were part of this renewal plan, a package wrapped in an intensified style of the consumer culture. These development plans were consumption hubs

trying to offer people what they lacked in their working lives. Also, since most of these cities had sites of abandonment or decaying industries, or evacuated houses, the development plans included an architecture of closure and insulation. No one wanted to see the ugliness of the abandoned (Davis 1990, pp. 221-263).

Postmodernism also had a sense of irony. Architects used historical symbols but with a twist in scale or context to reveal to the people that they are playing with the popular language. Postmodernism was double-coded, its simple symbolic language of memory and escape was not applied a serious manner. The same was applied in art and fashion as well.

5. CONCLUSION: ARCHITECTURE OF RECONCILIATION, HOW?

Culture is a response to the economic changes within a particular social structure. With the universalising of the consumer identity and the proliferation of information technology, a new culture of microtechnology is springing up, pushing architecture to create new modes of representation. However, critics argue that the need for the classic image city will persist, and people will always need to walk to schools and places of work and play. This argument may fail sooner than we think. Architects should be ready to react to the new culture of information.

We understand that the profession of architecture, design and practice, remains bound to the image of power and marketing of pleasure, yet the current economic crisis and the political instability the world is living today are leading to rapid demographic shifts. This condition faces architecture with questions and demands for humane spaces of security and inclusion. Booming populations increasing the density in cities and spreading to rural areas in a relatively short period, are pushing authorities to succumb to the need for providing houses and facilities for these instant communities.

Successful design approaches for these housing projects are mostly community-based, trying to express the *time*, *space* and *human self* dimensions from the users' perspective and to his favour. Moreover, Public spaces are back to lead the design discourse since they represent the space where the communities and the city converse. A full arch has been completed in social architecture this year through the recognition of Alejandro Aravena and his innovative approaches to social housing.

Methodologies adopted from sociology and anthropology can widen the scope of the architect and provide him with the needed tools to plan and design. Architecture as a discipline should open up to comprehend diverse languages and release its armour to go multi-disciplinary. Issues of gender are also rising to the surface. The architect as the organiser of spaces will no longer be able to avoid representation of gender issues and nor to stand for the human-self with a clear conscious and with responsibility.

REFERENCES

- Aglieta, M. (1979). *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*. London: New Left Books
- Amin, A. ed. (1994). *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press
- Davis, M. (1985). *Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism*. New Left Review
- Grossberg, L. (1992). *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York: Routledge
- Harvey, D. (1985). *The Urbanisation of Capital*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Death and Life of American Cities*. New York: Random House
- Jenks, C. (1986). *What Is Post-Modernism?* New York: St Martin Press
- Le Corbusier. [1923] 1986. *Towards a new Architecture*. New York: Dover
- Moore, C., (1967). *Plug It In, Ramses*. Perspecta
- Piore, Michael, J., and Sabel, C. (1984). *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity*. New York: Basic Books

- Venturi, R. (1966). *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art
- Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., and Izenour, S. (1972). *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism Of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press