



What's wrong with postmodernism

Description

Training and professional competence offer no immunity against casual and unguarded opinion. In spite of my training, like any novice, I'm keen to identify certain buildings as *postmodern*. Such structures are usually signalled by a triangular pediment somewhere, or an arch, semi-classical columns, axial symmetry, and they are of monumental scale, or out of scale. Such buildings are also of a particular period (1975-1995), the stone facing and pastel external rendering has dulled, and there's not enough glass.

The MI6 Building at Albert Embankment, Vauxhall, London, by Terry Farrell and Partners fits the bill, and there are many others. Strangely, I don't have any photographs of the MI6 Building, but I notice that the Wikipedia entry lists one of its nicknames as Ceausescu Towers, so here's a picture of the Neoclassical Bucharest Palace of the Parliament started by Ceausescu in 1984.



Forget *Learning from Las Vegas*, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, *Meaning in Architecture*, and other key texts from the period that pushed architecture to the forefront in a rebellion against the purely functional, stable and modern. Now postmodernism is merely a style in the past tense.

Are we still postmodern?

I make these reflections as I've been invited by an online forum to write something about postmodernity: "Do we live in a postmodern society?" "Is there a clear distinction between modern and postmodern? Could you address modernity as a living tradition?"

Architecture has provided some spectacular monuments to movements in culture, politics, philosophy and art. But a while ago I abandoned architecture as a tool for thinking with. I've benefited from discussions about space, the body, technologies, the home, landscape, place and even design, but not architecture writ large as a canonic collection of authoritative artefacts (i.e. buildings), especially when such collections reduce philosophy to a series of styles.

Jean-François Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* in the 1980s. It was the key political text on the subject of postmodernity. "Condition" is an easier term to deal with than "style," "movement," "epoch," "age," or "-ism."

Lyotard famously described the postmodern condition as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). Such scepticism favours local stories, a multiplicity of viewpoints, diversity, and difference, as opposed to over-arching narratives, such as progress in science, a unified theory of everything, appeals to core values, and other metaphysical codes. Knowledge and understanding are much more piecemeal than that and depend on local conditions, individual cases, exceptions, and disconnects.

Even those who deny this plurality of conditions, i.e. those caught up in fanatical fundamentalism, are working against and within warring ideologies, and that problematic speaks further of the postmodern condition.

Post-relativism

Is the postmodern condition one in which anything goes, a locally determined relativism and subjectivism? To me the challenge provided by the postmodern condition resides in halting the oscillations by which we gravitate either towards a position of fundamental truth or relativism, objectivity or subjectivity, externalizable process or internal genius, the universal or the contingent, rock solid certainties or unresolved scepticism.

In architecture and the arts such battles found expression in the objectivism of Enlightenment Rationalism; the subjective was championed by Romanticism. (Some design scholars used to call this the battle between the Rats and the Roms.)

Less celebrated than Lyotard's text it was Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* that aided me most in thinking differently, or at least recognising the traps of the objective-subjective division. See [The eye of the beholder](#). Jacques Derrida also had a hand in that. See [Derrida for stand-ups](#) and [Deconstruct that!](#) Whatever architecture makes of postmodernism, the postmodern condition is still a work in progress for the rest of us.

Bibliography

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Note

- According to Lyotard, "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity (its characteristics will be described later). I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure" (7).

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