

What shift?

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We have shifted from a society under the influence of modernity into a post-modern society. This not uncontroversial claim is what I intend to scratch the surface of. To do this we not only have to look at the meaning of the terms modernity and postmodernity, but we also have to look at the meaning of the word 'culture'. Culture and society are two notions that are entwined.

In a broad sense culture contrasts with nature. Culture is everything that humans themselves have created and continually create. This can be the clothes we wear, weapons we fight with, food we cook, roads we build to travel on, words we speak and the houses we live in. Everything is created by us for ourselves to live our lives in and around. Very few live in nature alone, if there is such a thing as living outside culture. We all live in culture.

This culture, what we create, is not created at random. Usually everything we create is created by design. The craftsman and the author has created their work for a purpose, and has had thoughts on why it was created the way it was. When we move into looking at the intentions and purposes of the created, we move into studying a slightly more narrow definition of culture. Here we move into viewing culture as the ideas behind and the ideas conveyed through what we create, and what specific ideas produce. Culture is related to meaning. The creation and communication of meaning is a basic notion in human life and of human culture.



Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier
Poissy, near Paris, 1928-31



As individuals we convey meaning in just about everything we do. We water our flowers in our attempt to create a pleasant home, which in turn is something we want to indulge on ourselves or perhaps give to our children living in the home. We exchange glances with travellers on the bus to communicate our view of the odourous person who just got onboard. We park our new car outside the garage so that the neighbours can get a good look. Our communication of meaning and our behavior is governed by ideas and intentions we have. How these ideas got there and how we behave is a whole different story which I won't go into here. But we can, taking a big leap, roughly categorize these ideas. Ideas can be grouped into movements.

Ignoring a large part of the idea-movements in human history I jump to what is called modernity. To see if we now, as a whole society, are changing the collective ideas that influence our behavior, from what is called modernity to what is called



Top, **Pruitt-Igoe Housing**, Minoru Yamasaki, 1952-55. Blown up 3.32 pm, July 15 1972, and signaled the death of Modern Architecture.

Above, **Ville Contemporaine**, Le Corbusier, 1922

Below, **Plan Voisin for Paris**,
Le Corbusier, 1925.
Never realised.



postmodernity, we first have to look the ideas of modernity. The ideas of modernity come out of the Enlightenment of the 17th and the 18th centuries. In the new modern world man, it was almost always men, would have the ability to control his environment. Through the arts and sciences we would be able to create the world we wanted to, and what we created would just get better. A central idea in modernity is this idea of progress. We are as a collective travelling on the linear road to a brighter future, and we are in control. There was also only one truth to found. Through our progress in all the sciences we would discover the truth about all existence.

The 'we' who are in control did not mean the whole human race. 'We' turns out to be the enlightened few, usually white and male, that in their benevolence seek a better world for all of us. As we can see in the history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the enlightened group of people were also the people with money and power, and not always in pursuit of the good of all humanity. In the middle of the nineteenth century and forward modernity begins to focus on technology and the machine. It is through the machine and technology that the ever brighter future will be created.

As society got more and more complex the importance of gaining control over it also grew. When the ruling enlightened class could no longer impose its ideas solely by the use of force, it had to control the culture in which the people lived in. This was accomplished through the institutions of the arts and the institutions of learning and science. Through these institutions the enlightened elite could convey quite effectively the most beneficial ideas that created the modern culture. Towards the end of the 19th century the growing socialist movement was starting to make its voice heard. It introduced the class dimension into modernity.

The development of modernity is also closely related to the development of capitalism. The enlightened elite was also the class with power and with capital, or at least they were working together with those who had money and power. Capitalism needed the control of the masses. A fundamental drive in capitalism is its need for constant change and development. It had to, and still has to, continually move into what is new. Creating new demand is what capitalism does. The modernist

idea of constant technological progress fits together with capitalism perfectly. But this constant movement and change has the backside of creating and maintaining constant uncertainty. As Marx remarked: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times.” (CP, 99)

Coming into the 20th century we find an increased debate and movement of conveying the progress of society to the masses. Seeing that development wasn't benefiting the lower classes the socialist movement both ideologically and practically worked to improve life for these classes. A highly visible example of this we can see in the development of modernist architecture. Pioneers like the Bauhaus envisioned a better society for everyone through a new and rational architecture. “Modernists see space as something to be shaped for social purposes and therefore always subservient to the construction of a social project...” (CP, 66). The idea that architecture had a vital role in improving people's lives was very dominant from the 1930's and onward. Influential architects such as Le Corbusier conveyed strong ideas when he created houses as “machines for living in”, and working by the principle that order brings about freedom. An intrinsic part of modernist architecture was the focus on large-scale development of cities and living areas according to a rational and efficient plan. Self-evident was also the fact that these social architects and planners knew what was best for society, taking over the same project as its enlightened predecessors. Linked with capitalism, modern architecture served many useful purposes. Its intention was to create better living and social conditions for the working classes. Keeping the working classes content was very important for capitalism to be able to flourish.

But planning and designing the lives of the working class couldn't go unchallenged forever. Exploding in the 1960's was the revolt against the capitalist and modern hold on western society. The condescending stance of the elites couldn't go on. Many ideas and movements took shape in the sixties, one of which was postmodernism.

Postmodernism is in itself not easily nailed down. The general mood though of postmodernism is that of a rejection of moder-



Above, **Piazza d'Italia**, Charles Moore, New Orleans, 1975-78.

Right, **Public Services Building**, Michael Graves, Portland, Oregon, 1980-82.



Habitat Housing, Moshe Safdie, Montreal, 1967.

nity and modernism. As Lyotard put it: “This idea of a possible, probable, or necessary progress is rooted in the belief that developments made in the arts, technology, knowledge and freedom would benefit humanity as a whole... It is no longer possible to call development progress.” Collins dictionary describes the advent of postmodernism as the “end of the dominance of an overarching belief in ‘scientific’ rationality and a unitary theory of progress, the replacement of empiricist theories of representation and truth, and an increased emphasis on the importance of the unconscious, on freefloating signs and images, and a plurality of viewpoints.”

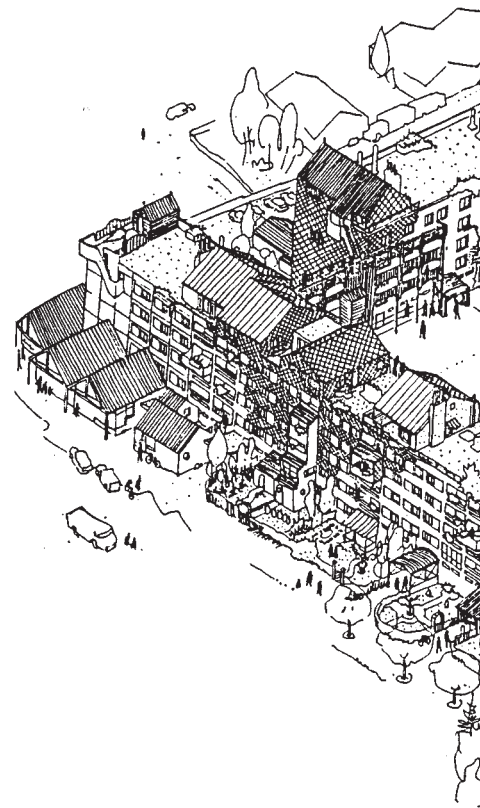
What proponents of postmodernism see is the death of a single truth or view of reality. Lyotard talks about the end of the legitimacy of the grand narratives. The grand narrative are the totalizing ideologies that describe reality, like the teachings of Marx or Freud for example. These have to give way to many partial, fragmentary, subjective and provisional narratives. Lyotard again talks about a myriad of language-games that we are all involved in. A consequence of this is the absence of a meta-narrative to compare all narratives through. We end up with much truer pluralism.

We are only beginning to see the effects these ideas are having on society. What we can observe is the increasing diversity and fragmentation of western society. We see different cultural domains being blended and exchanged. Particularly dwellers in large urban metropolis pick and choose the different cultural meanings that suit them. Unstoppably we are moving away from monocultures into more pluralistic cultures.



Another trait of postmodernism is its concern with surface. Especially the aesthetic side to postmodernism has tended to discard the modernist search for the hidden meaning. “The cultural producer merely creates raw materials (fragments and elements), leaving it open to consumers to recombine in any way they wish.” (CP, 51) The author and viewer meet in the middle, the created art, on equal terms and a dialog can take place. In this way the modernist culture of an enlightened elite teaching the stupid masses is rejected. Everyone is invited to be involved in the process of creating meaning. Not everyone is interested in communication and creating meaning, but that is a different matter. Postmodernist ideas still give everyone the opportunity. “Postmodernism has been particularly important in acknowledging ‘the multiple forms of otherness as the emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class, temporal and spacial geographic locations and dislocations’.” (CP,113)

Signs, the signified and communication are of central interest in postmodernism. We live in the many language-games of communication that Lyotard describes. This world of com-



munication emerges as a world of chaos, fragmentation and ephemerality. Lyotard explains that “the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs.” (CP, 113) Aesthetically it often takes the form of collages of images, sounds and text, and relating to the images streaming out of our televisions.

Looking specifically at architecture we can see that it has definitely become more playful, experimental, playful since moving away from the International style of modernism. A typical characteristic of postmodernism architecture is its eclectic quotation of different styles in the same building. While modernist architecture had a master plan of aesthetics that came from the architect, postmodern architecture has more of what Venturi aptly illustrates: “There is nothing wrong with giving people what they want”. (CP, 60) Charles Jencks generally describes the postmodern building as speaking on two levels. One level of design appeals to other architect and people interested in design. These people actively look for the meaning of the building design. The second level of meaning in a building speaks to the public and the inhabitants of the building. These people are more concerned with traditional values of the building and how it works in their daily lives.

An interesting fact that becomes obvious when looking at post-modern architecture is that it has been widely and almost instantly accepted in the commercial world. There are a multitude of examples of this ranging from shopping centers to the extravagant hotels of Las Vegas. A prime example of company adapting postmodern architecture is Disney. Their buildings incorporate a variety of borrowed style in creating buildings that exist on the border between reality and fiction. Their architecture succeed in what many call a postmodern ambition of telling a story or stimulating emotion.

So can we say that there is a shift in the nature of our culture from modernism to post modernism? The ambition of post-modernist thought and culture is a definite revolt against modernism. Unfortunately we see too many signs that it is merely the aesthetics of postmodernism that have been manifested. The deep underlying structures of our society, largely governed by capitalism, have not changed. Capitalism in its many forms

Left, **Walt Disney Headquarters**, Michael Graves, Burbank, California, 1988-90.

Above, **Zup Perseigne remodelling**, Lucien Kroll, Alençon, France, 1980.



has been quick to take on the guise of postmodernism. Giving people what they want is not hard to do. More fundamental changes to our society postulated by postmodernists, such as a more truly pluralistic, egalitarian and humanistic society where more and more voices are heard, is very much still in the process of happening. There is ofcourse no way of saying what direction it is going to take. That is up to the participants in our ever changing cultures. We choose what narratives to believe and act upon.

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