



Social Dimensions of Architecture

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Abstract

Architecture is a reflection of social interactions. Architectural configurations which are defined by forms, spaces, façade and functions have continually evolved under the influence of ever-changing social conditions. History shows that the world has experienced several shifts in social paradigms. Each resulted in a profound transformation of society in nearly all aspects. And for each, architecture always transformed itself, despite taking some time, by leaving its old conventions to meet new requirements of the new dominant paradigm. Accordingly, a deep understanding of how architecture works and develops through time, in other words the historical account of architecture, requires an insight into the interrelation between social environment and built environment. The paper outlines the changing social context from pre-modern era to present days, then puts architectural movement into such context, and clarifies how they are related.

Key Words: social paradigm, divine order, modernism, postmodernism, capitalism, marxism, creativity, architectural concept



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The Old Order and Modernism

In the pre-modern era, architecture had hardly been considered a product of individual's free creative soul. Building designs were always rigidly guided by the divine order, social hierarchy and long-held traditions. Designing was more semantical than functional or technological. A pre-modern builder was never regarded as a designer whose ideas would impinge on the way people led their lives. But he was a humble craftsman or administrator whose building works were predetermined by the will of his superiors, whether they being gods, princes or overlords; by unanimous worldview of the time; and by shared values and customs. In the hands of pre-modern builders, the design of forms, external facades and internal spatial organisation was restrictive not only to practical limits such as construction techniques, local materials and utilisation of space, but also to certain symbolic patterns which represented the essence of both superior entities and communal beliefs. Aesthetics was largely defined by accepted proportional decency and decorative compositions. Therefore, the designing was very much a collective conscience rather than an impulse of individual creativity. However, despite an absence of an independently-minded designer, pre-modern architecture was by no mean monotonous. As it was highly localised and shaped by regional context, diversity of regional architectural characters was prevalent. Pre-modern architecture in each region was usually independently developed under its own specific context. It also gradually evolved toward its own optimal perfection.



The modern era had arrived with a new set of ideologies which caused the total shift in social paradigm. The emergence of anti-established ideas such as humanism, individualism and rationalism in the medieval Europe posed a great challenge to the traditional social order, i.e. feudalism and the Catholic Church. With the series of revolutionary events between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, e.g. the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the rise of nation states and the Industrial Revolution, a large part of Europe transformed into a modern society. Modernism became mainstreamed. It brought about an entirely new breed of philosophy of which modern man intellectually relied on. On metaphysics, the idealistic concept of absolute truth that involves gods, spirits and immaterial worlds which long dominated the pre-modern thoughts were totally rejected and replaced by the materialistic view which regards material objects and environments that can be perceived by the five senses of human as the only reality. On epistemology, the knowledge of the truth was no longer seen to be revealed by supreme beings, but to be discovered by human themselves through their reason and empirical investigation. Science was the only reliable vehicle that could disclose the truth and offer true knowledge. On ethics, morality of a man was no longer judged by faith, testaments or loyalty, but by impacts of his own acts to himself and others. Those that generated more happiness than misery were supposed moral, while those in reversal were immoral.

With no demanding gods, no relentless suzerains and no incomprehensible nature, man is mentally and tangibly liberalised from his enduring subordinate role, and becomes an independent agent who is capable of acting on his own to better his life right in the present days, not to wait for the doubtful religious promise of eternal happiness until the next life. From then on, he is free to shape the world into whatever he prefers and whatever his competency allows. The modernists are confident that, by this liberty, man's life and the society as a whole can be improved with no limits. The world will not be trapped in the cyclical history of repetitive events. It will move forward in linearity into the glorious future with perpetual materialistic *progress*.

For the sake of progress, it is clearly justified for man to encroach deeply and extensively upon the realm of nature in order to control it, manipulate it and extract all available from it for which human activities can be carried on to enhance the human civilisation. In scientific eyes, nature does not mean the sacred personified



mother-nature who mercifully takes care of the world, and people were obliged to pay respect and take care of her. But it is a combination of separated lifeless objects and living organisms, including soil, rocks, water, air, plants, animals and men. Albeit a part of nature, modern man sees himself not equivalent to others, but the master who has the legitimacy to rule the nature and do virtually anything out of it to meet his endless needs. Such nature's components are not unified parts of the holy cosmos as seen in the pre-modern time, but divisible parts of the mechanistic universe that is governed by the permanent law of physics. These matters are labelled *natural environment* and *natural resources* which are valuable as long as they realise human benefits.

Modernism in Architecture

Although modernism had been dominant in Europe since the nineteenth century, it was not until the early twentieth century that it has seriously influenced architectural works. Its essence and its associate products and events, such as the industrialisation, advanced capitalism, expansive colonisation and subsequent westernisation, and increasing technological sophistication, gave architecture new values, principles and techniques that are not only far apart from but also against the conventional architectural ideal. Modern architecture embraces much of the modernist's key notions. Under rationalism, architectural forms and spatial organisation are rationalised. The symbolic expressions in any part of buildings that represent subjective contents but are irrelevant to objective human activities are all stripped off. What allowed to remain is purely functional. Modern architectural theorists admire the industrial movement and its ensuing machineries that hold unprecedented qualities of maximal efficiency and precision, as well as standardisation. To them, buildings are not organic shelters for accommodating local people's livelihood. But they are man-made *machines* that produce simple geometrical spaces and forms according to reasonable functions of reasonable activities, which, in the modernist's point of view, are universal. Aesthetics is also rationalised. Architectural beauty does not arise from ornamental elements which mostly lack functionally justifiable role in buildings, but straightforwardly from configurations of spaces and forms that shape the buildings. In this sense, modern architecture is defined by *clarity* and *simplicity*.

With the universal rationale, both functions and aesthetics of modern architecture are never localised, but innately international. It is widely believed that they are





applicable and appreciable everywhere, regardless of local differences in kinds of people, culture, climate, topography, belief, social system, natural resource or any other. This is indeed the removal of local context out of architecture, as well as architecture out of local context. In the twentieth century, the international style is feasible, thanks to the technological innovation of new construction materials like *concrete*, *metal* and *glass*, and of the manufacturing production which makes possible mass production of such materials with standardised quality.

In the name of progress, traditional architecture is depreciated and deemed as a source of cliché. In the modernist's thought, *old* attaches negative connotation. It equals lagging behind, obsolesce, irrationality, inefficiency, impotence, or in sum, inferiority. On contrary, *new* is positive. Its presumed meanings are unerringly opposite to *old*. With this attitude, modern architects are tempted to pursue the devout mission of constructing something constantly anew and to despise or even destroy the traditional ones. To build a building, it is then offensive for an architect to simply reproduce spatial patterns already outlined by the architectural precedent. Ideally, he rather involves in a process of tailor-made designing that aims, under the modernist's principles and functional requirements, to create a unique set of spaces and forms which mainly originate from his very own idea. In effect, newness and uniqueness are bound, building design is individualised, and *originality* is acclaimed.

In the modern time, architects, unlike pre-modern builders, gain a new status of a separate profession. Supported by states and professionalism, they, together with engineers, affirm their exclusive role in designing buildings, and hence monopolise most building commissions. Accordingly, they are in the position that is likely to command the physical development trend, and thus enjoy the *top-down* approach to design which is based on the public credence, whether being sensible or not, that the architects are the only type of people who know best about built environment and can give the conclusive solution to the built-environment problems. They are the only one who decides what architecture should be like.

To propose new and unique architecture continuously, modern architects rely on *design concept* and *creativity* which are interconnected. The former basically provides a main theme for which all the design undertakings are referred to. It works to realise the design aims which may vary from simply meeting functional needs, making particular atmosphere to affect user's feelings, to achieving aspirations of designers—although the latter two were not fully recognised by the devoted modernists. Design





concept explains why a building and its components are what they are, whatever unconventional or peculiar they may be, and even why the building ought to be built in the first place. In effect, it justifies the existence of the building, even though not everyone agrees. Modern architects usually praise design concept as *the* very essence of design and they usually think of it as their private creation that differentiates one's works from those of the other and of the past. For them, good concept means good design, and good design means good architecture. It is believed that good concept derives from *creativity* which often comes forth mysteriously from the creative brains of talented architects. Creativity is the force behind conceptualised process which brings about distinctive concept. It is therefore widely appreciated as it is the origin of newness and uniqueness which are wholeheartedly admired by modern architects. Unlike pre-modern architecture, a modern building which is unorthodox in nature, if its design concept explanation is satisfied by the public or critics, is not only avoid an accusation of heresy, but it could even be seen as a work of creative orthodoxy. In this sense, it can be said that creativity legitimises both design concept and design itself.

Modern architectural design and construction technology have always been interacted to each other and so developed in accordance. Pragmatic technology is a prerequisite for modern designs to be realised. Those that are strikingly innovative often provoke designer's inspirations. Nonetheless, designing is not merely technologically reliant, but it also offers imaginative visions for which technology innovators tend to catch up with. Apart from technology, modern architectural design also intertwines with capitalism. The realisation of the design demands capitalist's investments, while the capitalist's profit-making projects need attractive, practical and feasible designs to be competitive as well as profitable in the market. Modern architecture with its designed properties is supported by the idea of *development*, an offspring of *progress*, one of the modernism's key assets, which is reinvented and popularised during the latter half of the twentieth century. Although development is meant to upgrade living quality of the deprived groups of people through whichever most suitable means, it had been predominated, during the mid twentieth century, by physical bias as well as anti-local and anti-past attitude. On this standpoint, development is almost all about clearing old traditional settlements that are assumedly remarked overcrowded, dark, unhealthy and socially unsafe, and constructing new modern structures that completely discard all those undesirables. With the series of simple



but impressive proposals to urban solution exhibited during that time by visionary modernist architects, particularly Le Corbusier, major development actors, such as government agencies, international aid agencies and local developers, believed that modern architecture, with its rational designing that embraces the rule of functionalism and with highly efficient and economical construction process, is the viable solution of the then severe urban problems.

Modern Regime and Built Environment

The modern regime that includes modern architecture, construction technology, capitalism and development, has led to unprecedentedly extensive construction-led missions that profoundly transform built environment. Increasingly sophisticated and powerful technology gives modern man capability and confidence to build structures that are bigger, higher, lighter, more protruding and more complicated; to achieve settlements in geographically-unlikely sites; to change any topography to meet building's requisites; and to complete constructing works in much faster pace with less labour. It therefore enables modern architects, capitalists and development actors alike to fulfil their ambitions. Capitalists pursue their ambition of maximising profit through real estate development. It is acknowledged that space is saleable and rentable. It thus can be turned into a commodity. In collaboration with modern architects, they build new kinds of structures, e.g. skyscrapers, long-spanned coverings and weather-proof building envelopes, to accommodate new kinds of spatial requirements and arrangements that can be sold, e.g. offices, supermarkets, department stores, hotels and condominium, which respond to new kinds of consumer's demands in the emerging modern market. Industrialisation and modularisation of construction has made construction process streamlined, and hence mass producing of buildings is feasible. With this, capitalist's projects meet economy of scale. Building costs are significantly reduced, demands soar, sales escalate and profits accrue. The sale or rent of space through building has since become good business. This in turn urges the capitalists to build more and more buildings.

Development actors during the mid twentieth century pursued their ambition of maximising social benefits through providing socially-related building ventures. They insisted on building modern infrastructure such as roads and bridges, and public utilities such as civic centres, housing and parks. The development actors usually viewed *public housing* estates as their flagships since the projects directly affected livelihood of



the multitude of people. Also back then, it was widely trusted that the improvement of people's physical living conditions would definitely lead to the improvement of all other aspects of people's lives. Of course, the physical improvement was placed in the hands of innovative modern architects. Modern architecture offered what totally opposing to those found in traditional accommodations and neighbourhoods. Modern living units were set in massive multi-storeyed building blocks, and uniformly planned according to certain criteria which, in architect's thought, were universally suitable for all. Each was spacious, airy, bright, clean and rationally-organised. The building blocks were all uniform and orderly grouped. They were served by common amenities and surrounded by vast parks full of grass. It was claimed that this kind of housing would bring about healthy living and safe community. With this optimism, it was rational for the development actors that the social betterment would be done through clearance of slums and other traditional settlements, and the replacement of them by modern housing.

The modernists claim that modernism is good for all. The modern regime and its projects unquestionably bring great benefits to modern man. And the modern architectural design, a crucial drive of the regime, is desirable for all. However, not everyone agrees with the modernists. In fact, modernism has long been questioned as early as the mid nineteenth century. Karl Marx analysed the capitalist's society in Europe and pointed out that capitalism, a vital part of modernism, works to extract economic surplus from the majority labourer's class, whose members have only labour to offer in the production process, to the minority capitalist's class, whose members control all other means of production, such as capital, land, raw materials, buildings, machines and transport and communication. The extraction of surplus leaves the former just barely surviving incomes and keeps them in dire living conditions, while the latter seizes most of the wealth yielding from the production and leads luxurious life styles. He argues that this inevitably results in social contradictions in the form of class struggle. In the Marxist's view, real estate development is a capitalist's exploitation project that makes the capitalists grow richer while the labourers poorer. Modern architectural design is an efficient tool of such project. It combines technology with capital and makes the exploitation process more efficient and more effective. Buildings is not merely architect's machines for producing rational space but also capitalist's machines for generating profits which are actually labour surplus extracted from deprived labourers.



Postmodernism and Postmodern Society

By the early twentieth century, science, another vital part of modernism, was also attacked. The theory of Relativity by Albert Einstein, and the theory of Quantum Mechanics drastically changed the worldview of scientists, causing them to realise that the universe is more complex than previously believed, and dashing the hopes at the end of the nineteenth century that the last few details of scientific knowledge were about to be filled in. The theories completely rejected the norm of Newtonian science which is the foundation of modern values, e.g. rationalism, reductionism, empiricism, objectivism, positivism and determinism, and greatly undermined the credibility of science as the supreme arbitrator of the modern society. Social science, which mostly adopts the scientific principles and methodology, certainly felt the impact.

The harsh criticism not only comes from the new science. It is also from the academic field of *humanity*. Around the time Einstein proposed his famous theory, there was a revolution in linguistics, *the Linguistic Turn*, that literally turned upside down the way academics think of the relationship between *man*, *language* and *reality*. The Linguistic Turn gave rise to a new school of thought called *structuralism*, which later developed into *post-structuralism*. The post-structuralists put a serious question on the kind of *knowledge* and *reality* which lay the foundation of modernism. For them, reality is unlikely objects that are discovered by modern man. But it is rather created by language through the use of language. And knowledge that supposedly represents reality discovered is therefore a pure creation of man that hardly reflects what really is in nature. The argument practically invalidates most of the modernist's virtues, e.g. positivism, objectivism, rationalism, empiricism, and hence science and social science as a whole. From the 1970s onward, modernism has noticeably declined. A new intellectual movement which is based on structuralism and post-structuralism has risen. It is termed *postmodernism*.

The rise of postmodernism comes along with the dramatic change in the human society. The late twentieth century had seen a series of historic events. Half a century of the Cold War ended after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The West, led by the United States, with its democratic value and neoliberal ethics has dominated the world, economically, politically and culturally. The accelerating growth of technology has transformed the way people live more rapidly and widely than in any other periods of the world history. Organised research and practice of science led to advancement



in the fields of transportation, communication, agriculture, manufacturing, engineering and medicine. The leap of transport and telecommunication technology has resulted in the formation of the interconnected web of communication that expands around the world. Along this, mass media have thrived and diffused throughout. The world has been westernised and become more culturally homogenised than ever, with the global popularity of western pop music, Hollywood movies, global news networks and other entertainment media. Western way of living, reflected through fast food, modern art, fashions and particularly architecture has been globally appreciated and imitated. Within such western-oriented cultural homogeneity, consumerism has developed. Undoubtedly, capitalism plays a key role in this development. As the maximal-profit seekers, the capitalists make the market inundated by the diversity of products and services, which mostly encourage western values and lifestyles while marginalise local traditional livelihoods. With the variety of consumer's choices, the economy has moved from the appreciation of *mass production* and *economy of scale* during the modern era to *mass consumerism* and *economy of scope* of the postmodern age. The widespread economic liberalisation and globally-connected telecommunication networks have greatly facilitated transnational investments and trades, and as a result their growth has soared at exponential rate. By the end of the century, the true global economy has been recognised. Human society has moved toward the age of *globalisation*.

The development of the twentieth century has been made possible by the large-scale exploitation of fossil fuel resources, especially petroleum, which offered large amounts of energy in an easily portable form. With the growing demand on such source of energy, the world has become totally dependent on fossil fuel.

The late twentieth century is not only the period of progressive development, but also the period of devastating events, such as a series of economic slumps, ethnic conflicts, social unrests, terrorist's attacks, nuclear threats, natural disasters, widespread epidemics and energy shortages. As acknowledged by the postmodernists, modernism with its normative sentiments such as rationalism, scientism, neo-liberalism and internationalism has not led the world to become a utopia where everyone lives in healthy physical and social environment. On contrary, despite all the advances, most societies around the world have experienced various kinds of degeneration, e.g. environmental decays, financial crisis, health hazard, social segregation, famines and so on. These usually lead to various kinds of serious conflicts between people in the



same societies or between different societies which in turn exacerbate the already dreadful situations.

Architecture in Changing Society

Architecture has never been separated from such intellectual and social movements. The fall of modernism was certainly sensed in the architectural field, despite several decades later than those in social science. Like modernism in general, the fundamental merits of modern architecture, including rationality, unity, simplicity, clarity, originality and universality, were strongly criticised. Postmodern critics point out that the simple geometric forms, spaces and facades in modern architecture, which are the outcome of both the economic forces of *industrialisation of construction* and *capitalisation of space*, and the modern ideologies of *simplicity* and *universality*, lead to *repetition of sameness*. Building characters around the world are homogenised, and also building topologies are obscured. The concern on uniqueness and originality is only realised within limits. Designing is indeed not about unbound creativity. But it is legitimate in the modernist's stance as long as it strictly conforms to the modernist's principles and capitalist's advantages. Despite all the novelty that modernism boasts to offer, this ironically reminds us of the supreme rule that was used to govern pre-modern architecture.

With its platonic characteristics, modern architecture stands completely out of its surrounding context in nearly all aspects. Modern buildings are largely unrelated to, or even against, the topography, urban fabric, climate, resources, ecological system, livelihood and history of where they are located. Professionalism further alienates modern architecture from ordinary people and from human nature in general. Professional discourse, which is formed by specific jargons and dialogues that modern architects employ to communicate among themselves mostly on the matter of designing, is largely irrelevant to everyday-life affairs, which are shaped by mundane but diverse tastes, faiths and aspirations of individuals, as well as social and physical environment. It practically entraps modern architects in a relatively closed social enclave. Modern designing is therefore guided more by idealistic principles constructed by theorists, rather than by the actual requirements of users and society. The interests of modern architects and those of the public are then diverged. Unlike pre-modern architecture, modern architecture is a reflection of neither collective conscience of a society nor individual's creativity, but an expression of the professional discourse which



is a part of the modern movement. The postmodern critics argue that the arbitrary nature of modern architecture, which honours unity, order and top-down directing while dismisses all the acts of divergence, is comparable to *fascism*. In fact, during the early twentieth century, modern architecture was supported by rising dictators of many fascist regimes who tried to break away from past authorities, and realise their utopian visions by constructing cities anew through modern architecture.

It is criticised that modern architecture is dull, monotonous and soulless. Functionalism which stems from abstraction and rationalisation of space largely fails to offer spatial organisation that accommodate the practical uses of people. The failure is predictable since the functionalists stress on the question of how people ought to live, while ignore to learn how they actually live. Under the influence of the Newtonian science, they compare people with atoms, and treat them as if they were dull objects which behave and interact with each other or the environment according to the drives by external forces, rather than as complex organisms that are capable of pursuing their own destinations. Through this standpoint, the functionalists try to make people adapt to architecture, instead of making architecture conforming to the needs of people. When people fail to do so, undesirable effects are unavoidable.

The simplification of aesthetics further deteriorates the situation. The modern definition of beauty hardly gives people a simpler means of aesthetic appraisal. Plain surfaces without ornamental element, repetitive geometric voids and foreign materials typical of modern architecture makes an appreciation of buildings and an interpretation of the attached meanings not less but more complicated. As comprehensible environment lacking, people lose the sense of place and time which is used to connect them emotionally with their locality. Each individual becomes astray. Individualisation of individuals gets deeper. Community that ties people together and nurtures social wellbeing falls apart.

The postmodernist's critiques are not just theoretically speculative. The detrimental facet of modern design was evident during the second half of the twentieth century. A large number of modern housing estates, which were designed exactly under the modernist's rules and used to be admired by development agencies, had struggled with so many social and physical problems. Typically in these estates, crime rate soared, public properties were extensively damaged, graffiti was seen everywhere, physical assaults were usual, common amenities were left idle, public circulations and building equipments were neglected, and physical environment as a





whole degenerated. With the problems maintaining or worsening, exodus occurred. The widespread vacancy of residential units deteriorated the situation. By then, the failure of modern architecture was undeniable. It was symbolised by the complete demolition of building blocks in Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St. Louise in 1972.

With the fall of modern architecture, postmodern architecture arose. Its premises stand opposite to modernism. Postmodern design prioritises plurality over unity; reproduction over originality; locality over universality; eclectic over uniformity; decorative over reductive; contradiction over unanimity; bottom-up over top-down; emotionality over rationality; revitalisation over renewal; existentiality over functionality; ordinary over speciality; complexity over simplicity; participation over professionalism; and decentralisation over centralisation. On this basis, postmodern architects leave the old modernist's paradigm and turn to other sources of references, e.g. history, social and geographical context, human behaviour, language and nature. The movement initiated many new approaches to architectural designs, e.g. historicism, contextualism, behaviourism, deconstruction and green design. Some emerged earlier while some later; some were made popular but some barely known; some were short-lived but some lasting long. By the turn of the century, architecture has become a melting pot of competing ideas. Some design approaches were mingled, some broken into niches, while some extinct altogether. Defining postmodern architecture is almost an impossible task. By then, eclecticism rules.

Conclusion

Architecture has never been separated from social environment. Indeed, it is a spatial representation of social interactions. The divine order shaped the ancient civilisation and defined pre-modern architecture. Rationality and uniformity guided the modern culture and hence determined modern architecture. The recent widespread appreciation of complexity, diversity and emotionality deeply undermined the modern norm and led the current society to diffusing directions. Under this circumstance, equivocal postmodern architecture has emerged. With the incessant social evolution, it is predictable that future architecture will transformed itself to realise the new social context.

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