

## A CASE AGAINST THE MODERNIST REGIME IN DESIGN EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

*The article argues that the present dominance of the modernist design idiom, and the general aesthetic inferiority of existing non-modernist stylistic alternatives, is a consequence of the fact that design schools have for decades banished non-modernist visual idioms from their curricula. The author discusses original arguments for the single-style / single taste modernist regime of contemporary design schools, and contends that the modernist vision of a single unified style, which prompted the banishment, was rooted in a backward-looking effort to imitate the aesthetic unity of pre-industrial, aristocratic epochs. Against the received view of modernism as an expression of modernity, the author argues that the modernists were, on the contrary, intent on suppressing the key novel feature of the modern time: its pluralism in general and its aesthetic diversity in particular. It is further asserted that the design philosophy behind the modernist regime was largely self-serving, aimed at securing the modernists an educational and aesthetic monopoly. The author pleads for transforming the modernist design education into a modern one, where a pluralism of aesthetic idioms and positions replaces the current one-style-fits-all approach.*

**Keywords:** design history; design pedagogy; modernist design theory; stylistic diversity; modernism, historicism, styles

### **DESIGN SCHOOLS NEGLECT THE DIVERSITY OF AESTHETIC PREFERENCES IN CONTEMPORARY MARKETS**

There is no doubt that the modernist visual idiom has been a striking success – so much so, in fact, that the word *design* has now come to stand for a definite visual style. Terms such as *design sofas*, *design fireplaces*, *design apartments*, *design boutiques*, and many other design-branded things, obviously refer to the modernist minimalist aesthetic the media and public have come to associate with the word design. But this identification of design with a particular stylistic idiom is not only a sign of the success of this idiom, but also, at least to my understanding, a sign of a major problem. I contend that the focal points of the problem are contemporary design and architecture schools.

Let me add that this text relates mainly to the world of three-dimensional design, and not so much to graphic design or textile design where the situation has never been so dominated by one idiom only. It does touch upon architectural design as well, though architecture is not its main focus. And although I have in mind European design schools in general, I am aware I may be speaking from a limited North European perspective. So please judge for yourself and in your own context the validity and topicality of what follows.

I submit that the magisterial position of the modernist visual idiom, which turned the term design into a synonym for modernist minimalism, cannot be explained by the usual claim that the idiom proved fit in many contexts. Rather, it has a lot to do with the fact that an absolute majority of designers and architects, who graduated from the modernist design schools since the 1950s, have been neither willing nor able to design in any other stylistic idiom practiced during the same period. The ubiquity of the modernist esthetic is, in other words, largely a result of restricting design education to the modernist idiom alone. This modernist restriction, or rather the modernist educational monopoly, is the problem I want to discuss.

I mentioned other stylistic idioms. Probably you would object that non-modernist idioms, such as the present day versions of stylistic historicisms, the anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and other kinds of figurative design, as well as various decorative and ornamental schemes, are nothing more than fringe phenomena, not worth taking seriously. But wait: if we see designers and architects as members of professions vitally connected to the mechanism of supply and demand, what are we to make of the fact that things dressed in non-modernist styles are still very popular, and that they, in fact, have never really disappeared? Although almost entirely ignored by both design and architectural historians, these non-modernist idioms have existed all the time alongside the modernist aesthetic, and have done so for one simple reason: there has always been demand for them. And they have always been in demand because they have given pleasure to many people. As design teachers, we may deplore the fact, but that does not make it go away. Whether we like it or not, we have been living in an age of stylistic pluralism.

But even if some of you would acknowledge that various non-modernist stylistic idioms are popular, you would probably point out that those idioms, as embodied in concrete products, are, aesthetically speaking, mostly mediocre or worse, compared to the majority of modernist objects. Regrettably, it is true. But again: is that lower aesthetic quality a sign of an intrinsic inferiority of these non-modernist idioms as such? Or is it rather the consequence of the refusal of design schools to offers instructions to those who would choose to meet this kind of demand, and design in one of the non-modernist idioms? Those who practice the non-modernist visual design usually have no design education, and it shows. Schooled designers, on the other hand, receive no practical knowledge of any non-modernist formal languages. In addition, they are equipped with a strong bias against practicing of that kind of idioms. Extremely few of them are able to overcome that prejudice, knowing or suspecting they would risk excommunication from their own professional community.

Once you start thinking of it, it is certainly odd that design schools have largely ignored the full scope of aesthetic demands in society, and that for several generations only one particular type of aesthetic, to the exclusions of all others, was chosen to be imparted. To limit the scope of instruction to a single aesthetic idiom would surely be less baffling and much less problematic in private design and architecture schools, which naturally follow aesthetic orientations of their owners. But an overwhelming majority of design schools are state-run, public institutions, financed via taxes exacted from all citizens – not only from the modernist buffs. Besides, the governments which finance architecture and design schools are neither autocratic nor totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. They belong to modern democratic states, where the plurality of political, cultural, and religious positions, as well as the resulting diversity of lifestyles in the populations, is accommodated as a matter of principle.

One would then expect that, being run by modern democratic governments, the design schools would feel obliged to cater not only to the idiom popular with designers, architects, and art people themselves, but also to other categories of existing stylistic and taste preferences popular among those who do not happen to be, or not aspire to be, designers or architects, or design historians or art critics. This is, however, not the case. I would therefore argue that the schools have for years failed to do their job properly. As a consequence, we keep letting down huge numbers of ordinary, non-art people, who live outside our little ghetto-like art world. Why this apartheid-like approach to design training? How come all state run design and architecture schools practice a single-idiom / single taste aesthetic monopoly? How did we get there?

### **MODERNISM IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN WAS AN ANTI-MODERN, BACKWARD-LOOKING IDEOLOGY**

The dominant reason for this state of affairs is that modernism is, by its very nature, a monopolist ideology. The majority of present day design schools still seem to be wedded to a more than one hundred year-old modernist vision of a single style. Since the end of the 19th century, modernists argued that in contrast to previous epochs where each epoch had supposedly produced its own typical stylistic idiom (Classicism and Gothic would be the chief examples), the present time,

although enormously different from all previous epochs, had failed to bring about a style of its own. Designers and architects were purportedly reduced to repeating the idioms of the past, recycling both Western and exotic historical idioms (Horáček, 2014). According to modernists, it was imperative to bring about the still absent aesthetic unity to which the modern epoch was supposedly entitled.

Now, in their effort to create a new “authentically modern” idiom out of the means of the present, modernists claimed to have turned their backs on the past. But have they really? True, they ceased using both the *form language* and *pattern language* (Salingaros & Mehaffy, 2006) of historical styles of the past. But their goal, an aesthetically unified modern epoch, had nothing to do with modernity. It was born out of a profoundly backward-looking vision (Kellow, 2006:ii, iii). Modernist architects and designers wanted to recreate the present in the image of past epochs. They insisted that their own period have the same stylistic unity that, according to the discipline of art history, characterized the pre-modern, feudal epochs prior to the Industrial Revolution. But the stylistic unity of those past epochs, to the extent there was any, was a by-product of very small elite power groups, such as royal courts, aristocracy or the church, having, on account of their wealth, a decisive say in all things aesthetic, with hardly any input from the rest of the society. This explains the enormous attraction of the modernist idea that the Modern Epoch was obliged to have a new style all of its own. Modernists, arguing that they had worked on behalf of the Modern Epoch allegedly longing after its own authentic expression, set up themselves as the new elite group, aiming to secure the same aesthetic unity as the pre-modern period purportedly had. This was to be achieved through their monopoly decision power in all things aesthetic.

To exemplify the past-dependent modernist vision of a single, unified, modern idiom, let me quote four passages from four leading 20th century modernists.

The Swiss architect Hannes Meyer expressed succinctly, though unwittingly, this backward-looking aim of modernism in his article “Die neue Welt” (“The new world”) from mid-1920s when he wrote:

Each age demands its own form. It is our mission to give our new world a new shape with the means of today. But our knowledge of the past is a burden that weighs upon us, and inherent in our advanced education are impediments tragically barring our new paths. The unqualified affirmation of the present age presupposes a ruthless denial of the past (Meyer, 1975:107).

The supreme modernist ambition, as the quotation reminds us, was to do at present what craftsmen, designers and architects of the past supposedly had always focused on: to generate an authentic expression of their own epochs, entirely independent of previous stylistic idioms.

Several years later two American architectural writers, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, employees of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, formulated the past-dependent modernist ideal with even more clarity when they stated:

Now that it is possible to emulate the great styles of the past in their essence without imitating their surface, the problem of establishing one dominant style, which the nineteenth century set itself in terms of alternative revivals, is coming to a solution (Hitchcock & Johnson, 1932:19).

The German architect Walter Gropius claimed in 1935 that:

It is now becoming widely recognized that although the outward forms of the New Architecture differ fundamentally in an organic sense from the old, they are not the personal whims of a handful of architects avid for innovation at all costs, but simply the inevitable logical product of the intellectual, social and technical conditions of our age (Gropius, 1935:18).

And in 1964, after discussing the educational aims of the Bauhaus, Gropius stated his continued hope, that “we could gradually develop an art form that expresses the times, [an art form] such as existed in strong cultures of the past” (Neumann, 1970:19).

In 1967 the Danish designer and critic Poul Henningsen discussed in his article “Skal vi oppgi nutiden?” (“Are we to renounce the present?; Henningsen, 1967:170) the two new restaurants built and furnished in a peasant hut style, erected on each side of the new motorway leading out of Copenhagen. He claimed that although cozy and popular, both restaurants were “devoid of architectural quality”. His only support for that claim was that in the future (he mentioned explicitly year 2100, i.e. in some 130 years hence) these two buildings had allegedly no chance of ending up in an architectural museum, as representatives of what the Danes of the 1960s had achieved. Henningsen takes it here completely for granted that the architectural quality of a building consists in its future museum potential, as a representative of its historical period, rather than in pleasing its users. Quotations of this sort could fill several pages. Now, who were really the captives of history: the 19th century historicists, or rather the 20th century modernists? (Michl, 2014)

Not surprisingly, this effort to create a single, unified style was to collide with the real nature of the modern epoch, i.e. its essentially pluralist make-up. When the new religious, political and economic liberties of the late 18th and 19th century unleashed the brain powers of gifted common men, and led to what came to be called the Industrial Revolution, (Bernstein, 2005) the ensuing growth in the standard of living made the emerging stylistic diversity more and more manifest (Bell, 1979).

The early modernist architects and designers, in their search of clues of the authentically modern visual idiom, had misread the new, unprecedented utilitarian forms and shapes of the modern industrial means of production, interpreting them as signs of the novel “functional” style. To put it metaphorically, they were spellbound by a pointing index finger, while paying no attention to what the index finger was pointing to. What they failed to see was the rising standard of living the new machines and industrial constructions were slowly bringing about. Now, with the rising wealth (that the index finger really was pointing to) many more people than before, both the expanding middle class and the growing working classes, began – through their buying power in the market – to have a say in how things were to look. While buyers and users themselves greatly enjoyed this new empowerment, an increasing number of architects, designers and art people came to see the growing stylistic diversity as a Babel-like confusion. In their nostalgic obsession with the idea of aesthetic unity of the preceding aristocratic epochs, the modernist proponents completely missed what was truly epoch-making in the new industrial development: they failed to see the dawn of a radical diversity of lifestyles, and of plurality of aesthetic styles, vogues and trends that was emerging with it (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

### **MODERNIST SCHOOLS KEEP SPIRITING AWAY THE MODERN DIVERSITY**

After the Second World War, the new one-idiom-only design and architecture pedagogy, modeled on the 1920s’ Bauhaus curriculum, was, with some delays, successfully implemented in practically all industrialized countries. Walter Gropius promoted already in the mid-1930s, in his book *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, the Bauhaus pedagogy as the model for any future design education (Gropius, 1935), on the account of its proclaimed position as a spearhead of the historically inevitable development. Gropius’ comrade, the Swiss architecture and design historian and theorist Sigfried Giedion, attempted shortly after the Second World War to promote (unsuccessfully) a worldwide reform of architecture and design education on the Bauhaus lines via the newly established United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris (Giedion, 1949). The subsequent modernist monopolization of design education was undoubtedly helped both by the violent status quo dislocations that came in the wake of the WWII, and by the widely advertised claims that the new modernist aesthetic was *the* historically necessary idiom the Modern Man had been waiting for. The general acceptance of the latter claim may explain why there has hardly been any research interest in following the concrete steps that led to the establishment of the modernist education monopoly.

This education monopoly came to be seen as the key to eradicating the modern stylistic diversity and to replacing it with a single, all-embracing modernist idiom. In this effort, two



different measures can be distinguished. One was to impart, sustain and reinforce in the student the belief that there is a single, true, and only moral expression of the modern epoch. Students, who, to begin with, were largely open-minded about the modern diversity of stylistic positions, were taught to respect only one taste culture. It was the culture identical with the less-is-more aesthetic preferences of their teachers, who considered themselves representatives of the aesthetic truth of the epoch. Students were induced to see the current non-modernist styles in contemporary use as ridiculous, inane, and even morally repugnant. The deal was that in repudiating pluralism, the students too would enter the elite (i.e. the avant-garde), and partake in giving collective birth to the aesthetic truth of the time.

The other ubiquitous feature was the promotion of the so called critical attitude to market economy. Although we all sometimes find the working of the supply and demand mechanisms personally objectionable, the wholesale modernist cultivation of a negative view of the market has been hardly more than a self-serving measure: it aimed at denigrating and rejecting this prime generator of aesthetic pluralism. As suggested earlier, the market economy, by empowering not only the tastes of the rich and powerful elites, but also an increasing number of emerging taste cultures, kept undermining the modernist project of a single style of the epoch. Market mechanism can be seen as a permanent ballot, or a referendum, about what at any time is in demand, based on consumer responses to inventive experiments of businesses (Gilder, 1981, ch. 4). Modernists wanted to do away with this ballot system because it kept providing non-modernist idioms at the expense of their own, allegedly historically necessary style. It was therefore considered imperative to weaken or preferably eradicate the market mechanisms. In this context it is not surprising that most of inter-war modernists were strongly attracted to various forms of socialist, collectivist ideas, as socialism promised to abolish the market system through monopolizing all means of production in the hands of the government. In the eyes of the modernists, this represented high hopes for realizing their vision of an all-embracing aesthetic expression of the epoch.

All this, the single style / single taste pedagogy, imbued with the concept of design as an aesthetic truth, coupled with imparting a strongly negative attitude to stylistic diversity and to market economy, were measures devised to bring about the modernist goal of an “authentic” visual expression of the new epoch. When contemporary design schools still cling to teaching a single aesthetic idiom, i.e. to ignoring the diversity of market demands, they in effect still gear their students, for five or six long years, to simulating a non-existent aesthetic unity in face of the modern epoch’s unredeemable stylistic diversity. This may sound like too absurd a procedure to be true, but how else can one understand the modernist education monopoly still firmly in place?

### **THE MODERNIST MONOPOLY IMPOVERISHES OUR AESTHETIC ENVIRONMENT**

Some generations ago, the modernists devised a novel, fresh, matter-of-fact, naked-like stylistic idiom, an elementarist kind of aesthetic, until then largely missing among the established tradition-based visual signs of prestige, status and wealth. Developed in the 1920s, and largely based on the achievements of post-cubist abstract painters and sculptors, the new idiom was for quite some time enriching the aesthetic alternatives open to consumers at the time when diverse non-modernist stylistic competence still reigned supreme.

Today, with modernism for decades completely dominating design education, the erstwhile liberator has turned into a new autocrat. The problem is that perpetuating the modernist aesthetic monopoly keeps impoverishing the aesthetic means that could have been available at the designer’s hand. This in consequence impoverishes our aesthetic environment. The minimalist idiom itself, although admittedly refined and sophisticated as an aesthetic, seems to most people to be able to communicate their present day wealth – wealth in a broad sense of that term – mainly in one particular manner: through sophisticated signs of fictitious poverty.

One difficulty with this inversion is that its enjoyment is usually limited to well-to-do people with abundant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The inversion might be amusing if it was consciously intended and played with, but is it? As long as designers see their idiom in terms of

aesthetic truth, the results tend to be rather humorless. Humor in design seems to be a product of keen awareness that one deals in visual conventions rather than in aesthetic truths. Since humor and wit are related to a measure of skepticism, they do not go well with the ideologies of truth and authenticity. This may be one reason why general public often perceives the modernist design objects as dull, and the modernist architecture as contrived and arrogant. It certainly does not help that the modernist abstract idiom is almost exclusively self-referential.

As schools refuse to teach, cultivate, refine and fine-tune any non-modernist aesthetic strategies, and thus limit innovation possibilities to the minimalist style alone, they indirectly encourage only one kind of innovative direction: further away from heteronomy and more and more towards autonomy, i.e. closer and closer to “free art”, appealing more and more to art insiders only. If such a direction looks like a *cul de sac*, what else to blame than the single idiom monopoly of the design and architecture schools?

That the modernist victory was bound to end up like that is hardly surprising, taking into account that the rationale of the modernist design theory was predominantly strategic: it was about winning a war. It aimed, in the first place, to deride, disgrace, and disqualify the very idea of historicist and eclectic, i.e. pluralist, approach to design (Wright, 1931; Adam, 1988, 2008), and, second, to promote modernists’ own strikingly new visual idioms as historically inevitable, and therefore as the only legitimate aesthetic expression. In other words, the key modernist tenets – such as the claims that the new epoch demands its own aesthetic expression, or that functions contain their own preordained aesthetic solutions (as the form-follows-function slogan suggested) – did indeed an effective demolition job, and secured the modernists the coveted monopoly position. Nevertheless, as practicable, day-to-day design guidelines, the tenets proved entirely empty. To the modernist designers, their own theory was only helpful as a pep talk (Michl, 1995).

### STATE FINANCING TENDS TO CEMENT THE ONE STYLE MONOPOLY

That the design and architecture schools go on offering a single visual idiom in a modern world of increasingly pluralist and aesthetically diverse societies, is after all not very surprising. The schools, run by the governmental departments, have always been financed by the taxpayers’ money. As there is no financial linkage to the market outside the schools’ walls, the schools experience no financial loss because of the mismatch between their supply and the demand out there. This may explain why the state schools have no incentive to abandon the entrenched monopoly of the modernist aesthetic, and to start relating to diverse kinds of markets outside the school walls. After all, who would want to rock the boat when the departmental money comes streaming in anyway?

But has not the monopoly situation changed? It seems that nobody explicitly promotes the modernist vision any longer. Two-three decades ago there was the short-lived movement of post-modernism, which, somewhat naively, attempted to replace modernism altogether. Before, during, and after post-modernism, scores of bright architects, designers, theorists and critics had been pointing out various problems with modernism, as well as developing alternatives to the modernist design theory (Muthesius, 1964[1927]; Barnes & Reinecke, 1938; Ames Jr., 1949; Mumford, 1964; Pye, 1964; Norberg-Schulz, 1977[1966]; Jencks, 1969; Jones, 1969; Tzonis, 1972; Allsopp, 1974; Brolin, 1976; Posener, 1976; Watkin, 1977; Blake, 1977; Pye, 1978; Bonta, 1979; Scruton, 1979; Hubbard, 1980; Jencks, 1980; Wolfe, 1981; Herdeg, 1983; Jones, 1983; Zeisel, 1984; Brolin, 1985; Rybczynski, 1986; Norman, 1988; Lawson, 1990; Petroski, 1992; Blake, 1993; Ackerman, 1994; Krier, 1998; Brolin, 2000; Watkin, 2001; Lawson, 2004; Lewis, 2004; Norman, 2004; Salingaros & Alexander, 2004;; Silber, 2007; Millais, 2009; Salingaros, 2013). As a consequence, reality has made inroads into the educational practice of design schools.

In the schools of design, we nowadays speak about product semantics, and emotional design, and we teach students the marketing aspects of design. All this can be seen as signs of departure from the previous monopolist modernism. But still: product semantics discussions are mostly limited to the modernist abstract aesthetic, as if visual culture commenced only in the

1920s with the abstract-art-derived aesthetic, and the Bauhaus. The notion of emotional design is often discussed as if non-modernist design or pre-modern idioms have never existed. Marketing courses run in parallel with the standard "critical" platitudes about the consumer society still at home in other courses. The schools still largely keep to their one-style-fits-all modernist ideal. And the users who prefer some sort of non-modernist, traditionalist look of things, still tend to be treated as if they were somewhat retarded. The modernist design ideology seems to be fully internalized now, running imperceptibly in the background like the air-conditioning system of the school's infrastructure.

In contrast to design schools, situation is positively different in the field of contemporary non-modernist architectural theory or practice. Here one can find vibrant, free-standing, but interconnected groups of vocal practicing architects and theorists, both in Europe and in the US, dissociated from the established schools of architecture. Besides penetrating and lucid criticism of the modernist ideology (Adam, 1988, 1991, 2003; Salingaros, 2002; Salingaros & Alexander 2004; Mehaffy, 2003; Kellow, 2006) there have been proposed explicit theoretical alternatives to the modernist design theory and pedagogy (Alexander, 1977, 1979, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Krier, 1998, 2008; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007; Salingaros, 2005, 2006, 2013). Also, a fairly great number of remarkable buildings in non-modernist visual idioms have been built in the past 30 years or so: please, google names of contemporary non-modernists such as Robert Adam, Leon or Rob Krier, Demetri Porphyrios, Robert A. M. Stern, or Quinlan Terry (more at [intbau.org](http://intbau.org)).

### A HOPE AFTER ALL?

Is there any chance that the established schools of architecture and design would include in their curriculum other aesthetic idioms, in addition to the modernist one? Well, realistically speaking, the chances are close to zero. In my experience, the standard answer to the sort of critique presented here – that design schools offer one stylistic idiom only, while modern epoch is distinguished by its stylistic diversity – is namely this: *We do not teach one idiom only – in fact we teach no idiom at all. What we do teach are methods.* This kind of response suggests that the central tenet of modernism is still believed to be true: the modernist forms are still thought of as by-products of objective factors, rather than as results of conscious imparting of a visual idiom. Admittedly, to insist on this traditional modernist self-understanding is a reasonable position to take. To admit that schools do teach a definite stylistic idiom leads immediately to the question of why exactly that idiom, and why only one and not more than one. So the most effective way to prevent this kind of profoundly unsettling questions is to deny that the schools have any stylistic agenda at all, and to keep insisting that the focus is on the methods. Sad to say, it seems that the modernist design schools are constitutionally unable to face reality inside their own walls. To admit that they, just as all schools before them, impart established aesthetic conventions, would wreak havoc with their whole identity. The schools therefore appear to be unreformable.

Unreformable, that is, unless we succeed in opening the eyes of our students – some of them future teachers – for the reality both inside and outside of the established schools. To that end we should make clear to these teachers-to-be the gist of our criticism: that modernists, in spite of their novel visual idiom, never came with any new design method – that the postulated radical distinction between the historicist and modernist design process has never materialized; that the modernist injunction to start from "functions" or from "problems at hand" means in practice starting from yesterday's forms, yesterday's solutions and yesterday's idioms; and that in this sense, the modernists – both past and present – worked exactly like the historicists before them did, simply because there has never been any other way of solving problems than by starting from yesterday (Lawson, 1990, 2004; Michl, 2002; Petroski, 1992). In other words, we should teach the students to see the modernist aesthetic not as an "authentic expression" of the modern epoch, but as something very different: as a strikingly new and innovative *contribution* to the stylistic diversity of the modern time. The schools should therefore embrace this modern stylistic diversity, and not only the modernist idiom – i.e. the most recent manifestation of that diversity. In other words, we should try to persuade the students that offering an aesthetically

pluralist curriculum would abolish the only thing that is wrong with the modernist idiom: its intolerant, monopolist pretensions. The abolition of the modernist regime, we should emphasize, would clear the way for truly *modern* schools of design and architecture, as against the old *modernist* ones.

**NOTE:** The text above was originally presented as an invited lecture at the conference of Cumulus / The International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media, in Bratislava, Slovakia, on October 12, 2007, under the title “Am I just seeing things – or is the modernist apartheid regime still in place?” The present text is partly reformulated, somewhat expanded, and equipped with bibliography.

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