

Taking Down the Bauhaus Wall: Towards Living Design History as a Tool for Better Design

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ABSTRACT This paper explains how design history can become a tool for better design practice. Design historians are inclined to perceive the aesthetic idioms pertaining to past artefacts as expressions of particular periods, and their aesthetic validity as limited to the periods in question. This tends to turn design history before the Bauhaus into an overview of extinct aesthetic species. However, the ‘objects of the past’ in fact exist right now, in the present, both physically and as multiple images. What is needed to turn the aesthetic captives of

design history into a treasure trove for present-day designers is to develop an ability, lost in teachers and students alike, to see the pre-Bauhaus world of aesthetic idioms as part of our present. In order to achieve this, we design historians should cease to subscribe to the self-serving modernist claim that there is just one genuinely modern aesthetic idiom.

KEYWORDS: design history, design pedagogy, modernist design theory, design practice, modernism, postmodernism, historicism, styles



In this short paper, I will try to explain why I believe that the discipline of design history, as an entrance into the world of past artefacts, can become a tool for, and perhaps even a key to, better design.

This, however, can happen only if we as design historians and design theorists help to open up the world of pre-modernist design solutions to recycling and reinvention in the same way the world of the modernist visual idiom of the past 90 years has been open to continuous reuse and redesign.

To do that, however, we have to begin by rejecting the key modernist idea that the modern epoch must have a style all of its own, i.e. the inherited notion that there is room for only one visual aesthetic (Behrendt, 1938; Gropius, 1935; Pevsner, 1937). It was this notion that turned the world of pre-modernist aesthetics into the design-historical museum of expired forms we consider it to be today. I strongly suspect that we design historians have never really parted with the idea of *one epoch, one style*, and that we still tend to perpetuate the established division into the modernist – i.e. alive and therefore reusable aesthetic or style – and the pre-modernist, i.e. the allegedly defunct and useless ones.

In the following, I'll attempt to explain in more detail why it is important to do away with that modernist division, and in what ways such might contribute to better design for many more people than for devotees of minimalism.

The modernist claim that there is only one legitimately modern visual idiom – the modernist one – is the obvious reason why, during the past 60 years or so, practically all professionally schooled designers and architects kept to a single design aesthetic, the one developed mainly after the First World War. This ornamentless, anti-historicist, nonfigurative idiom was claimed to be the only legitimate style because it was purported to be the only authentic expression of the modern epoch.

Most ordinary people, those living their daily lives outside our insulated world of art and design, find the modernist insistence

on this single aesthetic pretty odd, however. It appears to be beyond the non-art and non-design people, regardless of their level of education, to understand why professionally trained designers and architects (excepting perhaps the fields of graphic and home furnishing design) have been willing to practice one type of aesthetic only, the one that these same designers and architects obviously enjoy and prefer. What is the reason for their flat refusal to deal with the plethora of existing non-modernist preferences, that is, with the fact of modern diversity of tastes?

The immediate reason why contemporary professional designers and architects keep offering most of their design solutions in the abstract modernist idiom only, is, of course, rather simple: the modernist idiom is the only idiom contemporary designers and architects are capable of practising. In the course of their education, they were provided with no knowledge of, no familiarity with, and no training and practice in any other kind of idiom. This is so because design and architecture schools of the past 60 years have been modernist schools, led by modernist teachers, and employing modernism-friendly historians, all embracing the modernist idea of a single style of the epoch (Cooke, 2002; Cramer, 2007).

This shortage or downright absence of professionally trained non-modernist designers then explains the usually less-than-impressive aesthetic quality of other than modernist types of design and architecture – much of stylistic historicisms, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and other kinds of figurative design, and of various decorative and ornamental schemes.

While we customarily think of modernists as modernity freaks of sorts, it is certainly surprising to find that the modernist vision of a stylistically homogeneous modern epoch has a strikingly backward-looking, even conservative origin. For modernists insisted that the modern epoch should conform to the pattern of stylistic unity assumed to have been characteristic of the preceding, pre-modern periods (Ackerman, 1994a; Gombrich, 1968, 1999; Mowl, 2000; Muthesius, 1996[1902]; Sauerländer, 1983; Schmoll gen Eisenwerth, 1977). The modernist vision, in other words, was built on a model of pre-capitalist, feudal periods (as presented by 19th-century historians of art, architecture and culture), where stylistic unity, to the extent there was any, was a consequence of very small wealthy elites having exclusive say in all matters aesthetic. In emulation of such a picture of the past painted by the historians, modernists presented their novel aesthetic as a historically necessary idiom – as the allegedly foreordained expression of the modern epoch (Hitchcock and Johnson, 1932; Michl, 1995; Sullivan, 1947[1896], 1979[1901–2; 1918]).

Yet nothing in the nature itself of the modern period had suggested a development towards stylistic homogeneity. On the contrary. Perhaps the most striking feature of this modern epoch has

been a continued evolution towards ever greater diversity, in taste, cultures, lifestyles, aesthetic preferences – a development that undoubtedly had to do with the incremental rise of the living standard in the Western capitalist societies. The historicism of the 19th century, modernists' *bête noire*, can be seen as the first powerful manifestation of this growing diversity. In rejecting stylistic diversity as such, the modernists were, paradoxically, rejecting what was the truly new and authentically modern in the modern epoch – even while deeply admiring the new machines, equipment, devices, tools and instruments that came to spawn that very diversity. Modernists never understood – or rather never wanted to understand – that the deplored stylistic pluralism of the 19th century was the dawn of the modern age of heterogeneity rather than a historic aberration in need of urgent remedy (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Crick, 2002).

Modernists, fascinated as they were by the art historical notion of separate style periods, thought of aesthetics and style not in terms of means and ends, but as expressions of *the given*. This given was for them the 'function', or production processes, or materials or the nature of the historical period (Behrendt, 2000[1927]; Gombrich, 1978, 1980). The problem with this design approach was, and still is, that just as we all express our personalities, unintentionally, in whatever we do, the same goes for our products. They cannot help but express their 'functions', or the nature of production processes, the character of materials – or their own particular time. All this happens anyway, whether we aim at it or not, so there is hardly any need to single out 'expressing' as a programme of its own. But strangely enough this is pointed out only quite seldom (Boas, 1950, 1953; Michl, 1988).

The main allure, and bonus, of this expression programme was its considerable promotional – or rather self-promotional – value. In conceiving of style as expression of the given, modernist designers conceived of themselves as mediums revealing the novel, historically necessary, face of the present (Ackerman, 1994b; Mies van der Rohe, 1991[1924], 1991[1927]; Plekhanov, 1940[1898]; Teague, 1949). In their own eyes they were now imbued with a higher and much more respectable calling, compared to the often drab daily undertaking of meeting the preferences of fickle human users. In embracing such elevated notion of the designer, modernism instituted a change of rules: it made the designer rather than the user the hub of the design game. True: the change led to an eruption of inventiveness and resulted in a visual world characterized by a novel, abstract formal language, which we are all familiar with and enjoy. But turning the designer into a medium of History had a price: the non-modernist user was now left out of the equation (Forty, 2000).

How then to make design history a tool for better design? I believe, as I have suggested, that the key is in doing away with the

apartheid-like division between the supposedly legitimate pool of stylistic idioms of the previous 90 years or so, and the purportedly illegitimate pre-Bauhaus, pre-modernist stylistic past. This, in turn, presupposes abolishing the modernist idea of only one lawfully begotten stylistic expression for the epoch, the idea on which the segregationist attitude to design history has rested. Only such abolition would, I believe, bring the user back into the equation.

To do this, I suggest that we as design history teachers endeavour to focus on the presentness, more than the pastness, of stylistic idioms, whether they belong to the modernist or the pre-modernist eras. For things of the past do not really dwell in a past, in the sense that they disappear from our present, the way deceased people do. Most of the objects and buildings we came to appreciate for their artistic value, in fact exist, physically, right now – at this very moment, and so do their countless images. Subliminally, we all know this, of course, but acknowledging it fully has rather shocking implications: the objects and buildings of the past are in fact contemporaneous with ourselves. We can take a picture of ourselves in front of the 12th-century Verdun Altar in Klosterneuburg, or inside the 17th-century church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome or beside the 19th-century Prince Albert Monument in London – today. They are all as much a part of the now as the recent Opera House in Oslo is. They can be all experienced in the present, and as such they are a part of the present time, and of our own lifetimes.

Exactly this perception of the presentness, the *nowness* of objects from the past seems to be the main characteristic of the attitude of the non-art public. It is an ability that in us, the art and design lot, has apparently been blunted by our absorption of the modernist ideas that saw architecture and design more as one-off expressions of given historical periods than as results of re-emerging choices of ends and means. As design historians, we are still inclined to perceive design objects as date-labelled captives of the past and, I am afraid, we still tend to impart that attitude to design students as well. The public's incomprehension as to why the pre-modernist stylistic conventions are shunned by today's professional designers seems to stem from the straightforward perception of the presentness of past objects and buildings, an attitude untainted by the delusive modernist doctrine.

The perception of presentness of objects and buildings in the now, independent of how old or novel they are, opens the door to an alternative way of seeing the nature of stylistic idioms. Instead of the traditional idea of style as an outpouring of a bygone (or a present) epoch, and invalid after the end of the epoch, we should start thinking of stylistic idioms, both modernist and pre-modernist, as sets of aesthetic *inventions* or *discoveries* available as diverse means to different ends. Conceiving of stylistic idioms as inventions and discoveries radically changes their status and identity. They can now be treated as independent of the time and place of their origin,

and as such they become alive again. Designers can employ and re-employ them in the now, to provide products as well as buildings with certain types of visual character in agreement with the communicative objectives of the designer.

To summarize, I contend that design history will only become a force for better and richer design if we design historians designedly de-programme ourselves, i.e. if we cease to embrace the modernist distinction between historically authentic and inauthentic stylistic expressions of the epoch. Then, when looking beyond the 'Bauhaus wall', there would no longer be any reason to see the pre-Bauhaus visual idioms as inextricably tied to their particular periods, as if they were marked with 'best-before' labels. We should embrace the above-mentioned tendency of the public – the group largely left to their own devices by the modernist concept of stylistic idioms as historically necessary expressions – and learn to see the artefacts of the pre-modernist past as a permanent presence. And since the somewhat forgotten *raison d'être* of the design profession is to take into account the preferences of the consumers, we should teach design students to see, not only the past 90 years, but the whole of design and architectural history, as something that, in fact, exists right now. Considering design history as design *present* rather than design *past*, turns the past into a living supply of stylistic inventions and discoveries, a supply that, like the modernist idiom, can be tapped, re-employed and redeveloped by inventive and daring designers in order to satisfy the diversity of tastes and plurality of stylistic preferences among the public of today. But, first, we have to take down the Bauhaus wall inside our own heads.¹

Note

1. Some of the points touched upon in the above text are expanded in my earlier paper; cf. Michl (2007). I am of course aware that in the 1980s and 1990s there was a movement, known as post-modernism, largely rejecting the modernist idiom. In retrospect, one can surmise, however, that the movement suffered from the implications of its name. Whether intended or not, the prefix *post-* in postmodernism, as well its term *late modernism*, gave the impression that postmodernism aimed at overcoming and replacing modernism, in the same way modernism was to overcome and replace the earlier historicism. It seemed, in other words, that postmodernism moved within the same orbit of period thinking as modernism did. As such, it was perceived as a new pretender to the modernist throne and provoked a pronounced defensive reaction from the established modernists. The present paper, in contrast to the perceived postmodernist agenda, does not propose to overcome and replace a particular visual idiom by any other idiom, whether new or old. What it proposes is to abolish the entrenched period attitude to stylistic idioms among

design historians, as a way of making all existing stylistic idioms – not just one of them – legitimate choices for designers.

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