

# Towards Understanding Visual Styles As Inventions Without Expiration Dates.

How the view of architectural history as permanent presence might contribute to reforming education of architects and designers

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## AN EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The main thesis of the article is that there are good reasons for seeing pre-modernist architectural and design idioms as still valid and feasible visual inventions, in contrast to the modernist view that has considered them as stone-dead expressions of past historical periods. The thesis is supported by philosophical arguments developed by the late British philosopher Karl Popper.

The article's first half discusses the main aspects of the modernist theory of architecture, mainly from the perspective of Popper's critique of what he called "historicism", i.e. a belief that the course of history is set and that men are able to discern its direction and act accordingly. The present author sees modernism as an approach to architecture based on such a belief, and he rejects the modernist theory as a train of arguments above all aimed at serving the interests of the adherents of modernism themselves.

The modernist theory of architecture, as well as of design, was based on the argument that we live in a Modern Epoch, and that this fact demands a novel, modern stylistic expression, that must be entirely different from all previous stylistic idioms, but, at the same time, as historically necessary as those previous stylistic idioms purportedly were. The author explains the enormous success of this modernist program among architects by the fact, that it offered an old heteronomous profession a new identity – that of executors of plans of non-human 'clients', such as "Modern Epoch" or "History". Adherents of modernism felt in this way exempted from the duty to meet aesthetic preferences of those human clients and users, that rejected the non-figurative, minimalist aesthetics promoted by modernists, and opted for traditional, i.e. non-modernist visual solutions.

In its second half the article juxtaposes the dismissive modernist attitude to the architectural past with Karl Popper's epoch-making claim about the existence of what he calls *objective knowledge*. This knowledge Popper describes as knowledge without a knowing subject, a kind of knowledge that is independent of any single person because it exists outside of himself, in a separate world (he denotes as *World 3*), that is accessible to anybody. An example of such objective knowledge can be a library of books, containing

existing theories, hypotheses, discussions, problems and solutions. Here, according to Popper, belong also all existing works of art, including architecture and design.

In the author's opinion, Popper's claim about the existence of objective knowledge throws a novel light on the problem of creativity and with it also on the modernist attitude towards the past. Popper sees human creativity, in any area, as fully anchored in the objective world of already existing knowledge, and as impossible without such anchorage. This view was nicely summarized in Popper's aside, "*...if anybody were to start where Adam started, he would not get further than Adam did ...*". According to the present author, the key feature of this world of objective knowledge is that every single entity belonging to it exists in the present, in parallel with all other present entities. The world of objective knowledge is therefore a permanently present world. It is accessible to, and adoptable by, anybody who has an interest in making its content into his own. Being accessible and public, this world is at the same time criticisable and this criticisability is what makes its further creative developments possible. The claim about the objective existence of knowledge then implies that all works of art, including architecture, although of diachronic origin, exist in a synchronic dimension, in a permanent presence. In the world of objective knowledge, there is simply no difference between "architecture of the past" and "architecture of the present", as both exist in the same temporal dimension, i.e. right now.

If we accept the claim that there is a world of objective knowledge, it will be obvious that the modernist architects did not, and could not, start where Adam started. Modernism all the time operated within the world of existing aesthetic solutions, existing theories, and existing problems, without temporal borders, that is, just as any other kind of creative enterprise in the past. The modernist assertion, that architectural idioms of the pre-Bauhaus past are not to be re-used in the present, because they are dead visual expressions of the past conditions only, is then to be seen as hardly more than a way of denigrating the previous revivalist approach to architecture, and of promoting a radically novel modernist visual idiom. Such attitude to the pre-modernist architecture has necessarily collided with how the majority of the public, that is, with how the people who never shared the modernist objectives, have perceived the architecture and design of the past.

The author concludes that there are no reasonable arguments for why all schools of architecture and design should keep limiting the education of the future architects and designers to the modernist visual idiom alone.