Design in the Postmodern Era

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Philip Nobel on Postmodern Design

“Freed from a dominant style, design is faced with the style trap: the limits imposed by glamour...

When design is glamorized, it begins to solve problems of image first and problems of use - living - second.”

“Design, tied as it is to life through use, should have larger ambitions than to feed a market hungry for new images of affluence. What is lost when glamour reigns?”
"Design has taken on its own life, and this raises a problem often encountered in consumer culture.

The energy is pure delight. But can we turn it off?"

Herbert Muschamp (2000)
Postmodernism

Has dominated cultural debate and theory since the 1970s. The concept has been used so much that it has become inflated.

Followed the collapse of 'heroic' modernism represented by Le Corbusier. Its features had been: a break with the past, ‘arrogance of the New’, firm belief in the human’s unlimited capabilities of modernizing society and solving the global problems by applying science, engineering and design.

Postmodernism expresses skepticism and sometimes nihilism towards the idea of ‘progress’. The idea of “The New” has been questioned. Endless recycling of material from the humankind's cultural 'archives' replaces the idea of unique innovation.

As a cultural current postmodernism penetrates all (or nearly all?) forms of cultural production in contemporary culture. Postmodernism seems like another “total” design trend, but its “unity” or “essence” are debatable.
Dating Postmodernism (or Trying To)

It has been claimed to have begun in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s... There is no general agreement. The answer depends on the critic, point-of-view, country, ‘cultural and political stance, etc.. It has been asked: “Was it the nuclear bomb that started it all?”

Andreas Huyssen (in After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, 1986) claimed that postmodernism did not simply follow modernism. Rather, it is a recurring historical current that alternates with modernisms. Postmodernisms been occurred periodically since the late 19th century.

For Huyssen, Art Nouveau was already ‘postmodern’. It was then overshadowed by the rise of ‘high modernism’. ‘The postmodern’ again emerged in the 1960s with Pop Culture and Psychedelia with their playfulness and referentiality.
Postmodernism - Some Origins

Most often seen as beginning in the 1960s.


Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) argued that modern(ist) architecture was meaningless because it lacked the complexity and irony of historical buildings.

Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) praised the honesty of the commercial environment of Las Vegas - modernists despised it as decadent and messy.
Postmodernism as Anti-Modernism

“We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward.”

(Learning from Las Vegas)

Page from Learning from Las Vegas
Robert Venturi on Postmodernism (1966)


Robert Venturi, Eclectic House Series, 1977. This chart brings together elevations from different periods of architecture.
“Naive” anticipation of post-modernism?
“California Crazy” style (1910-1920s -)

“Symbol in space before form in space: popular architecture as a communication system”
Extreme Early Postmodern Architecture

The Notch Façade Showroom, Sacramento, 1977
The Inside Out Building, Milwaukee
The Inside Out Façade Today... (Best Products was liquidated in 1997

A postmodernist redesigning (really coating) of an existing boring 1960s building.

Not shown - check!
Postmodern Hotel Architecture:

John Portman, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Atlanta, 1967; Bonaventure Hotel, Downtown Los Angeles.

Visit Bonaventure, and take the elevator to the top and back!
Universal City Walk, Los Angeles

A branded city, simulated city, world as a city, city as a world, *Theatrum Mundi* (the world as a theater).

A combination of many incompatible cultural traditions and references, presented as deliberately created simulations.

One of the ultimate urban postmodern environments.
Sumet Junsai: The Bank of Asia (the Robot Building), 1986, Sathorn business district, Bangkok, Thailand

- Check!
Vlado Milunic, in association with Frank Gehry: Nationale-Nederlanden building (“The dancing house,”) Praque, Czech Republic
Szotynscy & Zaleski: Krzywy Domek ("crooked House"), Sopot, Poland. Inspired by fairytale illustrations of Jan Marcin Szancer and drawings by Swedish artist Per Dahlberg.
The Memphis Group - Pioneer in Postmodern Design

Founded in Milan by the designers Ettore Sottsass and Michele De Lucchi in 1981.

Slogan: “Design should address the symbolic needs of the customer” (from the Memphis manifesto)

Goal to combine different elements in surprising ways. Wide range of products. Endless search for new expressions.

“Memphis furniture will soon go out of fashion.” - OK for Memphis!

Ettore Sottsass: Casablanca sideboard, 1981
The Memphis Manifesto


Ettore Sottsass: Tahiti lamp, 1980s
Michele de Lucchi: Lido Sofa, 1982
Michele de Lucchi: concept objects
(like colorful wooden toys)
- a design icon of the era

Ettore Sottsass: Ashoka table lamp, 1980s
International Design Trends

Origins associated with radical and iconoclastic design groups like Memphis in the 1980s.

Design addressed to the global market: global cycles and waves of fashion. Trends defined through prestigious exhibitions like the Milano Triennale. Challenge: how to design products that will appeal to consumers around the globe, regardless of cultural differences?

Re-issuing and re-cycling of ‘Master Designs’ (furniture by Le Corbusier, Rietveld, Wright, Aalto, Eames by Vitra, etc.) is typical.

Branding of new categories of global products like mobile phones and tablet computers. Development has become extremely rapid and needs to be mastered by carefully planned design strategies, a kind of ‘science of design.’
Features of Postmodernism

“Anything Goes” attitude. The plundering of “cultural archives”: anything that has ever existed as potential material for design, in almost any combination.

Focus on exterior, surface, and the ‘skin’ of things. Culture as an endless play of “signifiers” with little regard to “signifieds.”

Boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, and between art and design, become vague and indistinct.

Simulation rules. Representation told us something about reality; simulation only pretends to refer to the ‘real’.

Humor, irony, and play with meanings and identities replace modernist seriousness. A way of escaping hidden anxieties? Premise: postmodern world is troubled world.
Naive domestic postmodernism?
The refrigerator door as bricolage.
Door stoppers at the Tokyu Hands store, Tokyo, Japan
Simulation

According to critic Gene Youngblood, the word "simulation" has two main uses:

1) **'fake copy'** (digital photographs can be constructed seamlessly; they often only pretend to represent something real 'out there')

2) **'model of the possible'** (e.g. simulation of travel in training simulators; computer-simulated models of cars or airplanes are used to test their qualities before even the prototype has been built).

Digital photograph by Keith Cottingham
Photography: From Representation to Simulation

Photographs have always been faked. However, digital photography makes this easier to do than earlier and more difficult to notice. It has caused an ontological crisis.

We used to believe that photographs are representations of something real that once existed in front of the camera. Some photographs are still like that, but they can also have been faked, in other words, they can be simulations that only pretend to represent something real.
Faked photograph released during John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. The composite photograph is a simulation, “a fake copy’.

John Kerry and Jane Fonda did not take part in an anti-Vietnam demonstration together as the photograph claims.
Internet Simulation Meme
Simulation as model of the possible: FA 18 flight simulator
“Model of the Possible”: Mercedes Benz, virtual wind tunnel simulation
- "The visual crisis of culture creates postmodernity"

- "Contemporary images are the sites of disappearance of meaning and representation"

- Simulation dominates; simulation precedes the real; it turns reality into its own image. "The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

- The "disneyfication of reality": Disneyland is a simulation, an imaginary version of America. Now America is understood via Disneyland. For many, America is Disneyland. Disneyland is “hyperreality”

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) on Postmodernism and Simulation
Appropriation, Pastiche

*Appropriation:* The act of borrowing, stealing, or adopting signs and meanings to use them for one’s own ends.

*Pastiche:* mixing things with no reference to their real history or without respecting rules about what is "right".


Last summer appropriations and pastiches shown, including an ad for the fashion house Marithe François Girbaud which was banned because of Catholic protests.
Inter-referentiality

The interplay and mixing of cultural references.

Cultural production refers constantly to earlier cultural products, often without serious concern for ‘serious’ meanings.

Leads to an endless recycling of cultural meanings. These lose their specific referents. However, recycling of motifs from the past can also be used for critical ends.

Berghof, Landes, Rang: Frankfurter Fl
Writing Desk for Raenert, 1985-86.
Features of Postmodern Design Culture

Recycling of ideas from “cultural archives”; references to earlier design movements in new design products.

Branding is everything in postmodern design culture.

Designer as a Brand: Design identified with glamour: “designer as a media star”, ‘high design’.

Affordable design for everyone (‘stylish’ chains of stores like IKEA, Muji, Target): design as a way of life. Design everywhere! Again: branding regulates the design process.

“Lifestyle shopping”, brand awareness (partly as a result mass-production of fakes - ‘fabricated attitude’?), life-style -oriented chains of stores (GAP, Urban Outfitters, UniGlo...)
More Features of Postmodern Design
Culture

**Product constellations**: products associated as part of a life-style (Rolex+BMW+Ray-Ban)

Companies don’t produce objects, they create brands. **Branding of cities**: Geary’s architecture is identified with Bilbao. A symbolic investment for the local community.

**Product semantics**: the product is conceived as a symbolic expression (as well as an object for use).

Frank Gehry: Guggenheim museum, Bilbao, Spain. Gehry’s architecture has been used to brand cities as modern, original, and fashion & culture conscious.
Example: Branded Hotel: The Standard, Downtown L.A.
Lead designer: Claude Beelman. Formerly LA Headquarters of Superior Oil (1952)
Example: Branded Restaurant, Katsuya by
Philippe Starck, Los Angeles
Philippe Starck (1949-):
"Form Precedes Function"

“The role of the designer is to create more happiness with less.”

“I am very interested in the unconscious, because it never lies - whilst the conscious is always a lie. I work on the commonplace, on the collective unconscious.”

“Everything is only a game that one has to play with the greatest possible respect, the greatest possible sense of responsibility, and at the same time with humour and lightness of touch.”

“I would be glad to forego killing flies. However… it may seem crude to wield a flyswatter, but it is a far more ecological response than an insecticide spray (both the substance and the delivery system are toxic). To counteract the savagery of the blow, Dr Skud wears a delicate human face. A tripod enables him to stand erect like a small guardian angel.” (Starck)
Philippe Starck’s (in)famous sayings...

“A Poor Christmas gift designer like me who is obliged to speak out…”

“Design doesn’t interest me. I don’t read about design or go to exhibitions about design. I use this vehicle like other people use political discourse, songs or books.”

“Wake up, stand up, stop being a consumer”.

“Design is dead.”

“I’m not a god, I’m not a genius, I’m not a monk, I make non-design for non-consumers. I don’t know if I do exist.”
Postmodern design at its most elitistic. Escape into luxurious uselessness for those who have money or a status in society:

Marc Newson’s Ikepod Hourglass (HGS, 2011)

“Quite possibly the coolest desk adornment ever made.”
Price tag: small $ 13,000, large $ 28,500

Naomi Klein on Brands and Branding

According to Naomi Klein (No Logo, 2001), since the mid-1980s, corporations primarily produce brands, not products.

For Klein, this reversed the principle of the classic American economy: “the basic and irreversible function of an industrial economy is the making of things.” (Fortune magazine, 1938).

Since the late 19th century the brand - embodied in the corporate logo - has been used to affect and channel consumer desires and expectations.

Brand is graphic and advertising design addressed to the mind of the consumer, just like many forms of industrial design are addressed to the consumer’s body.

Brand concentrates ideological, economic, and social power into a semiotic sign. This sign is meant as omnipresent.
From Production to Branding

“For years we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product.

But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product.

We’ve come around to saying that Nike is a marketing-oriented company, and the product is our most important marketing tool.”

Nike CEO Phil Knight
Lifestyles as Products

“We don’t sell a product, we sell a style of life. The Diesel concept is everything. It’s the way to live, it’s the way to wear, it’s the way to do something.”

Diesel Jeans owner Renzo Rosso
American Apparel billboard, Sepulveda Blvd, Los Angeles, August 2014
- Claim AA is “brand-free!” (just another marketing strategy - advertisers try to make you believe anything the want. Think before you trust them. Advertisers have no moral. They only want to make money money....)
Product Semantics

Rose into prominence in the 1980s. A way of applying postmodernist thinking into industrial design.

Design objects are treated as signs, or as complex and often ambiguous linguistic enunciations (statements)

The meaning of a design is asserted to be more important than any practical purpose. The emotional relationship to the user is emphasized. Connections with lifestyles are established.

Alessi bottle opener, Italy
The “Philosophy” of Product Semantics

"Design by association"

The emotional values the designers and producers want the consumers to attach to the product are defined in advance. See Donald Norman’s influential book Emotional Design.

Partly caused by developments in microchip technology: miniaturization of internal workings gave designers more opportunities to experiment with the form. It did not need to be tightly determined by internal requirements.

Risk: the emotions and meanings intended by the designer may not always be recognized the same way and accepted by the consumer. The consumer may reject the products, adapt them or use them for other means.
What Is A "Mood Board"?

"Maps" that try to respond to the range of demands by the consumer. Related products, logotypes, environments or other design material are arranged onto blank sheets in order to construct an artifactual and associational context for the thing that is being designed.
Emotional Design

"My personal philosophy, in fact is that form and function are not any more a sufficient response to satisfy customers. Design has also to take care of the emotional aspects, the significance of an object should overcome the mere shape of it.

The design of a product, its shape, the colour, the signs and marks should be able to establish a non verbal communication between man and object."


Roberto Pezzetta: fridge for Zanussi
Japanese emotion design, “boyfriend's body pillow”: does “form follow function” here?

Well, there is the girlfriend's body pillow too ...
**Pylones** - cute postmodern designs but are they also good designs?

Remember this? How much has changed?

Novelty sewing machines, The Squirrel and The Cherub, circa 1858.
Hi-Tech ‘emotion objects’

Sony’s Aibo, 1999. Not a toy, rather a companion to lonely humans! Was Sony’s emblem, but no longer part of its brand identity (compare with Honda’s ASIMO).

Sony’s Rolly - weird dancing entertainment player (2008) - an emotion object that failed. Why?

Robohon (Sharp, Japan, 2015) - A smartphone that is also a functional robot. Expected on the market in 2016. Would you buy one? Check “Robohon” from YouTube!
"Is good design the perfection of an object for commercial success?

For the glory of the designer? For beauty? For glamour? For use?"

Philip Nobel, 2000
Tibor Kalman’s House Rules

Tibor Kalman (1949-99) was a radical graphic and product designer, an innovator, who used postmodernism for unconventional purposes.

Founding editor of Benetton’s Colors magazine (1990)
Tibor Kalman: the Black Queen (not shown)
Excursion: Postmodern watch design

A favorite occupation of postmodern designers, but do people really want different kind of watches? Some people think that the wristwatch is going to be extinct in the era of smartphones. A million dollar question: will the smart watch or iWatch be a success, or a hyped failure?

M&Co

Philippe Starck: “Palindrome Two” watch for Fossil (2009). The watch tells the time through two dials each with a single hand. The hours are on the left and the minutes on the right. Philippe Starck: O-Ring Digi, Fossil (2006)

Nooka watches

Mr Jones Docilis Internal Watch. “Docilis trains the wearer to live without a watch, by internalizing the time. The watch delivers a small electric shock to the wrist at regular intervals. The wearer learns to internalize the time and no longer depend on their watch.”

Innovations, Failures and Successes

The Segway Human Transporter (by Dean Kamen) - success or failure? Check “Segway Accidents” from YouTube
Jimi Heselden, Owner Of Segway Inc., Dies In Segway Accident

The Washington Post - August 2000

Jimi Heselden, the owner of Segway Inc., died in an accident involving the scooter he invented. He was developing the Segway, a two-wheeled vehicle that can be steered by a rider's body movements. The accident occurred near his home in Seatac, Washington.

Heselden was a former NASA astronaut and had founded Segway Inc. in 2000. The company was developing a personal transport vehicle that could be steered by body movements, similar to a hovercraft. Heselden had demonstrated the Segway at various events and had planned to release it to the public.

According to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Heselden was testing the Segway on a beach near his home when it overturned. The accident caused serious injuries and he died a few hours later.

The death of Heselden was a significant loss for the technology industry and for the development of personal transport vehicles. It also highlighted the challenges associated with developing new technologies and the importance of safety in innovation.
Example of postmodern design:
KONE vacuum cleaner by Karim Rashid for Dirt Devil
The Dyson vacuum cleaners (1993-)

Innovative design both internally and externally.

An “emotion object” meant to change the experience of vacuuming.

Designed by company owner James Dyson and his team, UK.
A plea for functionality, but without abandoning postmodern play with meanings:

“Designers should be building, testing and using the product, not just making it look pretty.”

James Dyson
Autonomous robotic vacuum cleaners - a fad or a real functional breakthrough?

iRobot Roomba

Check YouTube for:
Cleaning robot Fukitorimushi (Japan)
Dyson’s other product line: Airblade (2006-)

James Dyson as part of the Dyson brand
Yet another product line: the Dyson Air Multiplier (2009-)

An innovative bladeless fan design
"Utility, not vanity, should drive change in design; that's one of the things that distinguishes it from art."

Herbert Muschamp
Is there a way to get beyond Postmodernism in Design? What could it be?

Some of the most successful designs from recent years combine refined style, design innovations and an emphasis on function with postmodern playful references and appeals to the user's emotions.

The iPhone (Apple), lead designer: Jonathan Ive
Design may be fun, playful, and adventurous. But it should also be conceptually sound, concentrated, and functional.

Great shell is important, but it is never enough; what’s inside matters. Even innovative designs can have weaknesses...
Great designs should emerge from ethical awareness. They should potentially be tools for making the world a better place.

Unfortunately, great designs can be created and used for bad and negative purposes...

You should question all the designs you see and hear, every day! The more aware you are of them, the better you get along in your life.

Always ask: Was this design made in ethically acceptable conditions? Is the design used for good or bad? Why? How can the situation be improved?

Apple's iPhones are made in horrible sweatshop-like conditions at the Foxconn factory and elsewhere in China.
Never forget:

Understanding Design - Reading Reality

Reading Design - Understanding Reality

.......
Have a Nice Weekend!