Neomodernism: The Sociology of a Style

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Abstract: Despite the much celebrated emergence of architectural Postmodernism in the 1970s, by the mid- to late-1990s architectural critics were speaking of a ‘New Modernism’, ‘Super Modernism’ or what I would label ‘Neomodernism’ – due to its mannerist appropriations of modernist geometric tropes and materials. Initially associated with ‘star architects’ such as Richard Meier, Norman Foster, Renzo Piano, and, more recently, Zaha Hadid, the style in question was heavily promoted by magazines and lifestyle media such as Wallpaper* and Dwell; as well by a popular culture celebrating the ‘glamour’ of ‘retro’ or mid-century modernism. While this cultural trend is multi-faceted and the product of various causal factors, what I am interested in here is how ‘Neomodernism’ owes its success to the ‘consistency’ or recognizability of the style. What we are dealing with here is a style of architecture that is tailor-made for dissemination through glossy coffee table books, magazines and television programs; and for immediate recognition by mainstream consumers.

Labels matter. They do more than classify things; they also conjure up images with different aesthetic, emotional and even spiritual associations. While art and aesthetic production were in the past thought to function differently to consumer culture, as John Frow (2002: 56) puts it, today there is a ‘a ‘convergence between, on the one hand, the commercial branding of aesthetic goods and, on the other, the aesthetic valorization of commercial goods’. In the age of aestheticized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1994), we are bombarded with glossy books, magazines, television programs, lifestyle manuals, and other devices for classifying the world in aesthetic terms. In this paper, I focus on one specific domain within contemporary capitalist culture: namely, architecture and design. In particular, I propose to evaluate the emergence of Neomodernism and to
outline what it tells us about the role of styling and image-making in an economy where branding and the ‘economy of attention’ have become central principles of marketing and corporate success (Lury, 2004; Lanham, 2007).

Why is the label ‘Neomodern’ an interesting case study in the aestheticization of capitalist commodity production? I think the fact that architectural taste could shift so quickly in the space of two decades is more than just a question of fashions accelerating; it is also testament to the increased power of labels themselves. Thus, architectural critic, Charles Jencks (1977; 1990: 17), who had earlier issued Modernism its ‘last rites’, was by the 1990s insisting that the label ‘New Modern’ could be applied to an architecture ‘born from the ruins of the International Style (and cognate modes) and in opposition to what it now characterizes as old-hat: Postmodernism’. Jencks (1990: 14) notes that for a movement to be ‘Neo’ a ‘sufficient period of death, mourning and reconsideration’ needed to ensue before a ‘revival’ was possible. What made the new Modernism ‘Neo’ in Jencks eyes was its essentially ‘mannerist’ qualities. He wrote of architects such as Eisenman, Libeskind, Gehry, Koolhaas and Hadid, that they are Neomodernist because ‘they are no longer utopians who wish to change society but rather aesthetes who play with Modernist forms: their essential message is not ethical but stylistic, a new baroque celebration of the language’ forged during the period of Classical Modernism (Jencks, 1990: 17). Their own protestations notwithstanding, architects like Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, have also relied more on style than anything else. They have practiced what many critics have called a ‘High-Tech’ version of Neomodernism, evidenced in buildings such as the Pompidou Centre, Lloyds of London, Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and, more recently, with ‘The Gherkin’ as it is
affectionately called. Jencks (1990: 98) notes how in their early works Rogers and Foster used ‘Bright yellows, red, and blues [which are the colors of industrial machinery, sports cars, ships... and indeed most technical objects of the present’. The celebration of materials used in high-tech industrial production - or, one might say, fetishistic attachment to technology and its aesthetic qualities - reached a new architectural high, when Frank Gehry started using titanium as his signature surface material.

Interestingly, it was at about the same time that architectural Neomodernism was identified as a new architectural trend that Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck started talking about a second or new modernity. Particularly evocative in this respect is Bauman’s (2000: 2) *Liquid Modernity* which proposed that ‘fluidity’ could well be the ‘leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era’. For this author, the metaphor of liquidity meant to suggest that, in contrast to solids, liquids are mobile and difficult to contain: “They “flow”, “spill”, “run out”, “splash”, “pour over”, “leak”, “flood”, “spray”, “drip”, “ooze”” (Bauman 2000: 2). This is why despite the fact that some liquids are in reality heavier than solids (‘cubic inch for cubic inch’), we are nonetheless prone to ‘visuali[zing] them all as lighter, less “weighty” than solids’ (Bauman 2000: 2).

The metaphorical framework deployed by Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* possesses some uncanny similarities with the types of architecture that have been in vogue since the 1990s. The predominant design sensibility since the 1990s seems to be one that celebrates quintessentially modernist values such as ‘light and air’. Bauman (2000: 2) suggests that liquid social forms are also characterized by ‘lightness’ or ‘weightlessness’; and proposes these qualities are perfect metaphors for living in a state of ‘mobility’ and
‘inconstancy’: ‘we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move’. The liquidity metaphor is all the more poignant in that the new modernist architecture has impacted the styling of airports, hotels, bars and off-the-plan designer apartments as much, if not more, than any other type of building type. Furthermore, Bauman (2000: 104) appears to legitimate applying the concept of liquidity to architecture when he invokes Marc Augè’s (1995) concept of ‘non-places’ and suggests that these non-places provoke the feeling that ‘no one should behave as if truly at home’. What else is a hotel or airport other than a temporary place to inhabit? A place where we are not meant to set down roots.

Terms such as ‘Post’ and ‘Neo’ convey moods and forms of existence that are different in subtle, but nonetheless significant, ways. One of the best analysis of such terms has been offered by Jeffrey Alexander (2003) in an essay entitled, ‘Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How Intellectuals Explain “Our Time”’. He explains that interpreting historical or stylistic change through symbolically-rich terms such as ‘modern’ (and its various prefixes) is about ‘dividing the world into sacred and profane and weav[ing] stories about the relationship in between’. Thus, while Postmodernism seems to be about the present, in many respects, it is ‘fixed by the past’ and its sense of ironic detachment flows from an ‘ideology of intellectual disappointment. (Alexander, 2003: 209). By contrast, the ‘Neomodern’ attitude to the present and to the future is much more ‘optimistic’ but rejects the ideological zeal or sense of telos of earlier accounts of modernity:

In Neomodern theory, the profane can neither be represented by an evolutionarily preceding period of traditionalism nor identified with the world inside of North America and Europe. In contrast with the post-war
modernization wave, the current one is global and international rather than regional and imperial. (Alexander, 2003: 219)

In architecture and design, the use of terms such as ‘Post’ and ‘Neo’ embodied similar overtones. Postmodernists tended to ‘double-code their buildings so that they [could] communicate with their users as well as other architects’; and this often involved connecting architecture to ‘previous traditions – the Classical language, Queen Anne Revival and Art Nouveau’. Thus, we might say of Philip Johnson’s famous AT & T building in New York – thought by Jencks (1990: 56) to epitomize the postmodern architectural style - that the ‘top of this skyscraper looks very much like a Chippendale highboy or an eighteenth-century grandfather clock’. By contrast, the ‘New Modernism’ of the 1990s rejected historicist allusions and ornamental features in preference for the type of simplicity and functionality that earlier forms of Modernism had celebrated.

So how was Modernism able to re-emerge as a style in the guise of Neomodernism? One reason is that Modernism already entailed a major gap between rhetoric and practice in that many ‘univalent formalists’ were ‘inadvertent symbolists’ in that they repeated ‘patterns’ and also managed to evoke popular associations that might not have been intended. Jencks list of ‘inadvertent symbolists’ include Mies van der Rohe, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, I. M. Pei, Philip Johnson, Aldo Rossi and James Stirling. Another is that as the iconography of the International Style became known on a global scale, architects themselves have become ‘corporate brands’ much like ‘Coca-Cola, Xerox and Ford... a marketable commodity just as that of Picasso and Ché Guevara in other fields’ (Jencks 1977: 85). In such a system of architectural production, ‘every building becomes a monument to the architect’s consistency’ and practitioners are forced to develop their ‘own way of doing things, [their] own details
and mannerisms’ (Jencks, 1977: 85). Through everything from widely publicized competitions to design new buildings to coffee table books celebrating the ‘Masters of Modern Architecture’, the emphasis shifts from designs that are ‘appropriate to the job or the urban setting’ and towards ‘repetitive geometrics’ and ‘idiosyncratic sculptures’ that bear the mark of the architecture’s signature style (Jencks 1977: 85).

Enter Neomodernism: for what is the architectural ethos that emerged in the 1990s if not, what Nathan Glazer (2007) has termed, the replacement of Modernism as ‘cause’ by Modernism as ‘style’? As a glossy book on the subject, intended for the lay public, notes: ‘The New Moderns are those people who have begun and will increasingly choose a clean, spacious, light and clutter-free architecture in the 1990s and beyond’ (Glancey and Bryant, 1990: 10). The very same book narrates the taste for the Neomodernist ‘way of living’ as something that ‘makes sense in today’s noisy, intense, consumerist world’; adding that in response to Europe been ‘littered’ with pseudo-historic and eclectic buildings during the 1980s, it was no surprise that ‘wealthy people are tiring of the visual clutter and sheer bulk of too many worldly possessions and discarding these in favor of austere homes’ (Glancey and Bryant, 1990: 10). The chapter titles of this same book tell a potent story in their own right: they include ‘the mastery of space’; ‘New Modernism at night’; ‘color and texture’; the drama of the stair’; ‘the mastery of light’; ‘the new modern house as a gallery’; ‘the functional kitchen’; ‘living in small spaces’; ‘inside meets outside’; and ‘furniture and fittings’. As the various images contained in such books attest, Neomodernism is a case of technological functionalism meeting ‘Pop hedonism’, polished concrete and striking primary colors combining to bring ascetic Modernism into line with the pleasures of mass consumerism.
What seems to have shifted between the so-called death of Modernism and its stylistic revival, in the guise of Neomodernism, is the relative importance of producer and consumer within what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) terms the ‘field of cultural production’. The remarkable thing about Neomodernist design is precisely that consumers embrace it. People choose to buy apartments where the interiors are sparse, barren and inhumanely clean. They also flock to bars and restaurants that embrace Neomodernist principles. The story of Neomodernism is therefore the story of Modernism making its peace with mass consumerism and mass culture – something seemingly unthinkable in the period between 1920-1960. Sensuality, domestic comfort and even a certain tolerance for pleasure and the ‘emotions’ are part and parcel of Neomodernism. As the Founding Editor of the British magazine, Elle Decoration, Ilse Crawford (1999: 32) puts it: ‘Today we need our homes to provide a balance to the insecurities and the hard edges of the mechanical world around us, while incorporating all the advantages and visual excitement of modernity’. She surmises: ‘we find ourselves entering an age of “soft modernity”’ (Crawford, 1999: 32).

Arguably, one of the things that was missing from debates about Modernism – before the advent of Neomodernism - was the recognition that 1950s and 60s corporate styles of Modernism were much more hedonistic, and sexier, than their Welfare State and State Socialist counterparts. The glamour of Modernism is now made explicit in television shows such as Mad Men. But it took a while for this aspect of Modernism to come to the fore. It was lying dormant within popular culture and in a sense it was films and television shows that had always made us aware of modern architecture’s potential visual excitement. Now, however, there is a wholesale set of cultural institutions and
markets devoted to the Neomodernist cause. As Alice Friedman (2010) points out in *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture*, the Ersatz, populist and even ‘playboy’ qualities of modern design are essential parts of its re-valuation:

In recent years, mid-century modern architecture and design have achieved unprecedented levels of popularity and critical recognition, not only among collectors and ‘retro-chic’ aficionados but among academic historians and scholars as well. This new enthusiasm has resulted in a virtual tidal wave of books, museum exhibitions, and specialized websites... Vintage magazines, scrapbooks, photo albums, and home movies are now studied and collected with a passionate intensity and with an increasingly sophisticated eye for details.... and in the popular television series *Mad Men*, the evocative recreations of period colors and materials... threaten to upstage the actors and plotlines altogether. (Friedman, 2010: 1)

So how has the cultural economy of architecture fundamentally changed with these processes? In *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, Jencks (1977: 12-13) developed an interesting typology associated with the shift from a ‘mini-capitalist system’ where the architect was ‘directly accountable to the [private] client’ to the ‘welfare-state’ and ‘developer-capitalist’ models where the ‘architect’s motivation is either to solve a problem or... to make money’ for the developer. But these models of cultural production – even though they differ in scale, motivation and in who gets to act as arbiter of taste – are still centered on architecture as a distinct circuit of ideas, symbols and money. Today, however, architecture is governed by a range of formal and informal institutions that alter the relationships between culture and economy. The rise of Neomodernism is associated with the full-blown consolidation of the architect as celebrity-cum-brand and also with the globalization of architecture’s physical and imaginary presence. As Donald McNeill (2005: 501) puts it, ‘The figure of the architect as magician, egoist, as possessor of privileged vision, has been with us since the
Renaissance’. But what has changed radically in recent decades is the territorial reach and mediated quality of architectural symbols and personnel:

[T]he intensification of the accoutrements of globalization – time-space compression, individual mobility, the flow of images, for example – would appear to have fundamentally altered the relationship between architect and city... The intensification of travelling images, where iconic landscapes and buildings provide the backdrop for satellite news broadcasts, or adorn magazine covers, or are touched by countless hands in the journeys of a million postcards, mean that the Bilbao Guggenheim or Sydney Opera House are now instantly recognizable forms... the authors of these iconic buildings – Hadid, Piano, Meier, Koolhaas, Gehry, Foster, Calatrava, among others – are sought to rebrand, reposition, or otherwise publicize the cities of advanced capitalism. (McNeill, 2005: 501).

Of course, this cultural economy cannot do without architects or the technical processes without which architecture would not be architecture. But even the nature of creativity and the production ‘nexus’ that architects are a part of are fundamentally altered by the emergence of the global ‘star architect’. When architecture becomes part of the popular culture – as in the regular appearance of the Gherkin in televisual shots of the London skyline – the cultural and economic dynamics exceed the control of the architect (or his firm) whose signature/style confers value upon buildings.

This is why Neomodernism is an architectural style tailor-made for a global culture in which the logic of brands predominates. As Adam Arvidsson (2007: 7) notes in his book *Brands*, the ‘substance of brand value lies in consumer attention’ and in managing ‘social communication processes’ that are ‘external to the brand-owning organization’. His central hypothesis is that brands are ‘immaterial capital’ and that they ‘embody the fusion of the attention and the production economy, of aesthetics and economics more generally, long underway in the transition away from Fordism’ (Arvidsson, 2007: 7). Therefore, although, it wasn’t inevitable that Neomodernism
should emerge and become the dominant architectural style of global culture, there are plenty of reasons as to why it has done so well in an age of branding and where aesthetics are part of the economy. Neomodernism is perfectly suited to a culture of ‘star architects’ and glossy media, as well as to a situation where art and commerce have finally made their peace.

References


