

DESIGN THINKING AND THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

The term modern is typically associated with form, material and style in reference to products and industrial design. Modernity though has more significant implications and nuances to its meaning in the contemporary setting. Indeed the notion of modernity has a century of use behind it in reference to design and longer if one considers aesthetics, art, literature and the legacy of the Enlightenment. Within this historical context there are considerable ambiguities and contradictions to be found in meanings associated with the modernist project. Two types of modernity are noted here: aesthetic modernity and the modernity of the middle classes (or bourgeois modern). While the consumerist impact of the latter is readily evident today, the heroic nature of the former seems lost in age where a sense of history is often absent.

Further modernity, as seen in the advancement of technology, maintains a dominant yet strange presence in today's world. Indeed convenience has replaced the heroic and coupled with today's sophisticated technology (and sometimes because of it) there are also phenomena which blur simplistic modernist distinctions. Professional boundaries are fuzzy, users increasingly participate as creative contributors rather than as passive consumers, and concerns beyond utility are well articulated within the sustainability agenda.

Yet, within this swirling milieu can one approach the question of modernity (and postmodernism) in a fresh way? This paper seeks to explore attributes of design thinking in a manner to further an overall discussion on modernity itself, as a continuing project, and inclusive of its pluralistic postmodernist aspects.

Keywords: Design thinking, modernism, modernity, postmodernism, avant-garde

1 ON THE TERM MODERN

The relationship of design to modernism frames a discussion on modernity in a particular way, due to the very necessity in design that one makes something. Essentially this addresses how the attributes of design, manifest in form and material, come to embody the prevailing ideas of the era in which they're created. This is true for both for the designer and the audience of the piece, who interpret a number of ideas at play, in order to make sense of the fabricated thing. Yet meanings associated with modernity are expansive and convoluted, stretching back for centuries. Such tangled complexity can elude reflection in the contemporary piece. A broad examination of the term and its legacy of meaning can inform a unique discussion on modernity and its relationship to design, and provide an intriguing basis to explore this relative to the operational theories of design thinking.

The term *modernus* first came into use in the middle-ages as a means of distinguishing contemporaneous works of poetry from ancient (Calinescu, p.13). This offers an initial sketch of the oppositional dynamic of modernity that would take on numerous forms in later eras. In the Enlightenment, modernity gained a new outlook given the emphasis on one's faculty of reason. Yet moderns of this period could not develop a theoretical framework that would allow them to give expression to this aesthetically, given that in their view, characteristics of beauty had to be universal. For them this universality was defined in antiquity, hence their enthusiastic emulations of antiquity in neo-classical styles. The Romantics who followed were however able to develop such a theoretical position. Significant in this is the fundamental idea that beauty is not universally defined but established culturally according to the prevailing ideas of a given era. Essential to this is the concept of linear time and the attending notion that one era supplants another.

Also necessary is an understanding of the role for those who then shape such ideas, which necessitates emphasis on the creative individual and the force of his or her will (Watson, p. 827) in making the 'new.' In this creative impulse the seminal notion of modernist 'heroics' arises.

The heroic act however needs an adversarial context, evident in the notion of two oppositional modernities which emerges in the 19th century. One is a legacy of the Enlightenment, and is seen in an individual who adheres to a "doctrine of progress," maintains an optimistic belief in the benefits of science and technology, sees time as a commodity, pursues reason, pragmatism, action and success, and operates within a humanist ideal of freedom (Calinescu, p. 41). To the heroic aspirations of the Romantics such qualities are seen as hopelessly banal and a product of philistinism. This view engenders a split in the perception of modernity between a bourgeois modernity and an aesthetic modernity whose moral mission is to lead the way in establishing standards of aesthetic expression of one's time.

Early Romantics articulated theories that saw the advent of the Christian era as inherently modern, distinguishing it from earlier, pagan antiquity. This was seen as a time for the introduction of new aesthetic norms, specific to a Christian context. Expression was found in a Gothic sensibility, fostering an affinity with sentimentality, intuition, and a sense of the mysterious, embraced as a "complex reaction to the dry intellectualism of the *siecle des lumieres*" (Calinescu, p. 60). Later Romantics though saw themselves as existing towards the end of this era and so first tabled a notion regarding the death of God. This initiates another split in the modernist sensibility, whereby modernism becomes largely secular in expression moving away from its former religious association. Yet the desire to foster a sense of the sacred would continue to hold a fundamental constituency in human endeavour. An underlying urge in modernity aspires to the heroic in filling this spiritual and moral void. Certainly Wagner's work is highly exemplary of this ambition (Scruton, p. 71-3). Another manner of filling the spiritual void can be found in the utopian aspirations of modernists. Originally utopia conveyed a spatial sense; that the ideal could be found in a specific geographic location (Calinescu, p. 63). However increasingly it took on a temporal connotation, referring to an immanent and ideal future mode of existence. This outlook is predicated upon a notion of linear time and upon certain plausibility, given the Enlightenment position that universal laws governing human behaviour and morality are discoverable and can be acted upon to achieve the ideal. Yet such an ambition can appear nihilistic since the conception of utopia carries with it its own immediate negation: if perfection is indeed ever achieved, then it would require a shift to a repeatable sense of time to propagate its (likely dull) existence for perpetuity.

2 THE AVANT-GARDE

Stemming from an extreme notion of modernist heroics, a more concrete sense of the avant-garde arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century and later became iconic of modernity in the early part of the twentieth century. Given the term's military lineage, the avant-garde adopts a confrontational stance against the bourgeois sensibilities of tradition, cultural stagnation and most importantly, against the salesman and the vulgar commodification of popular culture. It is different from modernism in that its proponents tend towards a more radical, dogmatic and martial posturing, enthusiastically pushing the modernist mantra that requires destruction to engender creativity.

Prior to the Great War, Italian Futurism emerged as one of the strongest expressions of the avant-garde in both art and design. The Futurists embraced the cult of the new, insomnia and frenetic energy, disgust with banality, a pronounced hatred of history and the academy, and an overpowering love for speed and its then novel mechanism of delivery, motorized technology. Futurism was predicated upon a notion that the utility and efficiency of the machine formed the ideal which society and civilization should embrace, architecturally and definitively finding form in the machine aesthetic of Sant'Elia's work (Hughes, 40-8; Banham, p. 128-30). Somewhat antithetically, yet adopting the Futurist device of the manifesto, Dada finds bourgeois values vacuous. Established by various expatriates in Switzerland in 1917, its proponents saw the ravaging, mechanized bloodlust of WWI as the ultimate impotency of tradition, traditional authority and officialdom, middle class values and history. The only moral option left to an artist was

to abandon all forms of expression which carried that baggage and return to a quintessential human innocence in expression. Hence the nonsensical name, an emphasis on playful yet primitive theatrics, a distrust of technology and the abandonment of any pretence at control in favour of happenstance and chance (Hughes, p. 60-3). Both movements represent high points of thought in the modernist avant-garde. As avant-garde movements evolved after WWII, they sought an increasing purity in expression, yet seemed more to achieve a sense of the “already said” and a less relevant sterility.

Baudelaire first found issue with the avant-garde notion in the mid-nineteenth century. In this he saw a paradox where the anti-conformist aim of the avant-garde would necessitate an opposing but symmetrical conformity on the part of its adherents. Within this dynamic, the work of an avant-garde is consistently subject to rebuttal on the part of the any emergent movement which follows. The incontrovertible problem with modernity thus becomes evident in its most extreme expression: its existence attempts the immutable but becomes relativistic since any form it takes can never endure its subsequent negation (Calinescu, p. 110).

3 A SWIRLING CONTEMPORARY

The demise of one movement in the spawning of another is emblematic of the mechanics of modernist shifts and further, of an association with decadence. Times of decline seem to engender decadent indulgences, yet aspects of such a transitional phase can also lead to a time of increased critical inquiry, fostering a greater refinement in the arts. For some thinkers in the 19th century, *decadentism* (Calinescu, p. 168-9) is seen as a means of shocking the middle class and championing individualism, echoing the modernist affectation for the hero (or, decadently, the dandy). While decadence is often seen in a more scandalous light, it also seems to allow for a loosening of traditional mores in reaction to notions of over-production and a kind of “modern melancholy” aligned with bourgeois progress.

Such insights are not out of place today. Nor are they out of historical context, given Toynbee’s sense that the post-modern age really began in the latter part of the 19th century. Toynbee anticipated that a fundamental condition of postmodernism lay in the blurring of class distinction and the emergence of “mass society” and “mass culture” (Calinescu, p. 133-7). Today this sense is evident in a wide ranging consumerism and the addiction to technological advancement. Heidegger’s criticism of technology is useful in understanding the impact of this both in the condition of people’s lives, and in how humanity effectively occupies the planet. Heidegger pursues an inquiry to address the very essence of technology. Here two facets seem to dominate, one is more positive and is manifest in the notion of *poiēsis*, which is the sense of “bringing forth” (Heidegger, p. 10) or technology as a type of revelation, reflecting an almost magical sense. However there is also a banality and indeed a danger to technology, particularly in the various forms it has taken last half century. In this, the captivating convenience which technology affords (Heidegger’s “enframing,” p. 20) tightly frames one’s behaviour and thought within the utility provided. For instance the dumbing down of language evident in text messaging is indicative of a greater lack of reflection in one’s engagement with a wider reality. Being *connected* in this wireless activity becomes more important than saying something useful, and as indicated in some studies, a continued reliance on such devices can even erode critical cognitive ability. Further, this technology represents a “standing reserve” (Heidegger, p. 19) whereby great effort and material investment is directed towards facilitating the delivery of this utility in the form of a product and the attending industrial, transportation, and communication infrastructure which that requires.

These facets of technology echo a dichotomous post-modern sensibility. Duality is also evident in the desynonymization of modernity from the term ‘contemporary’ (Calinescu, p. 87) given that modernity can be seen as now distinctly historical and is therefore less associated with the here and now. Indeed given this historical context, the modernist inclination to negate history is no longer tenable. Further other prevailing ideas are eroding the supportive premises for a modernist outlook. This includes the loss of a deterministic absolute in science; particularly as this relates to the idea of measurement, doubt regarding the irreversibility of linear time, and to an endorsement of chance, seen increasingly as a relevant and

useful concept beyond its theoretical necessity in evolutionary biology.

Such pluralism can make the articulation of distinctions difficult. In some ways this is advantageous as class, and more recently professional distinctions, are obfuscated. Certainly technology plays a role in this too, enabling individuals to create work (particularly in the media and communication arts), on par with that of traditional professionals. Indeed technological connectivity flattens the limitations of time and geography, enhancing international trade in a manner that negates borders and the costs associated with travel (Friedman). It can also foster a bottom-up approach to solving problems of utility in a more widely engaged manner. Manzini's theories regarding "enabling solutions" (Manzini, p. 3-22) come to the fore here, where individuals and communities can focus on using a wide range of local resources with greater effectiveness, lessening reliance upon consumerist models and enhancing creative individual agency. As individuals become more empowered as creators and contributors, the linear model of passive consumerism is increasingly frustrated.

The contemporary world today is indeed swirling with artefacts, technologies and ideas. Yet much of this is still framed within modernist, and by extension, post-modern paradigms. The mantra of aesthetic modernists which requires destruction in order to create is, as a paradigm, inherently wasteful. It is endemic of thinking that propagates consumer electronics as seemingly utopian ideals only to be usurped by subsequent models, months later. For consumers this is reflected in a type of enframed view, where one is focused exclusively on the next convenience offered by ever evolving technology. Indeed Jameson (p. 125) argues that the "perpetual presents" that today's media and technology afford are "consonant" with postmodernism. Yet the focus on convenient technological utility and the very negation of history evident in this are also manifestations of purely modernist aims.

4 DESIGN THINKING AND THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY

While the idea of modernity is, as evidenced in the discussion above, convoluted, it does entail the ongoing genesis of *new* things. Yet the new thing carries with it the aspiration to endure, often positioning the creative product (or outcome) as the focus of critical discussion. This focus perpetuates a certain modernist paradigm where if the conditions of consideration mutate, such as with a post-modern relativism, the critical emphasis on outcome still remains entrenched. Such emphasis objectifies the outcome in a type of immutable stasis, perhaps isolating it from broader streams of consideration.

To a certain extent, this is mitigated in post-modern thought as greater theoretical relevancy is embodied in the creative endeavour, allowing for a plurality of views. The acknowledged presence of such pluralism makes explicit an undercurrent of ambiguity which can actually be found in modernist design work. For example, one criticism of Corbusier's Villa Savoye is that in spite of its masterful character, it is a modernist architecture of form and surface, expressed in its materials and finishes. Prevailing notions of the machine are not reflected in its more traditional construction or use of building systems (Banham, p. 325-30) and the formal resolution of the structure has an almost arbitrary emphasis on pure form. Aside from a specific criticism of its architecture, such insight also alludes to a broader question as to how dominant theoretical notions are applied in the specifics of making something. Post-modern inclusion of historical context or socio-cultural aspects such as feminism contribute to useful bodies of theory, yet do not necessarily inform how such information can be considered, implemented and used in the creative act. In this, a fundamental question as to where the *critical* resides emerges an overriding challenge of modernity. It is not something readily apparent, given for example, the critique of the International Style above, or postmodernist questioning of a priori modernist absolutes, or even the difficulty traditional modernists have had with the pal mal relevancy of post-modern thought.

Design thinking can be seen as an approach to locating the critical within the creative act. Often thought of in terms of design deliverables such as sketches and prototypes, design thinking is perhaps more readily identified with the thought process associated with the creation of such things than with the deliverables themselves. One way to consider it is as a sense making process. As Krippendorff (p. 159)

contents, context is the main cognitive device which allows one to make sense of things. That is, an individual can arrive at a sense of an object's meaning through an imaginative and conceptual placing of the object within a particular context (e.g. that chair would look great in my living room). The challenge for design lies in doing this before an object actually exists. Interim design deliverables allow for sense-making in both conceptual and concrete terms to allow one to consider a variety of issues associated with creating something. The playful manner in which this occurs is reflected in Buchanan's terminology (p. 10), where the act of contextualizing something is referred to as a "placement." Here something is contextualized without an a priori sense of its dominance, where context is considered temporarily as a means of learning about the issues at play in a particular way of approaching a given problem. Design thinking is really the discipline then of cycling through many such contextual exercises to understand how sense *can* be made of something and given this, the designer is then in a position to choose which contexts *should* dominate and the manner in which they should.

The role of choice in this cannot be overstated as it entails a rigorous contemplation of what constitutes the 'good' or goodness in the creative endeavour. A significant aspect in the history of the modernity is an absolute idea of where the good can be found. Yet the dichotomous relationship between modernist absolutes and relativistic leanings in the theoretical choices available to artists, thinkers and creators is also significant. Indeed an historical relativism first emerged as part of the Romantic era, which in turn was seen to inform a greater scholarly emphasis on individual will in the creation of cultural products. As theory has continued to evolve, the idea of goodness in a modernist absolute has proven to be an ever changing target. Given the swirling contemporary described above, the impetus to *be* 'modern' (or post-modern) is no longer a dominant or even tenable criterion. There is an effective blurring of ideology, theory and actors in the creative effort. Such fuzziness likely requires an increased thoughtfulness in approaching design problems, and in determining where the critical resides. Modernity in this no longer functions as an ideology but its history can provide a goldmine of thought and ideas that can be tapped into to inform creative efforts at an operational level.

Arguably the relativistic manifestations in both modernist and postmodernist design are best understood through the nuanced contextualization evident in the designer's thinking. With today's swirling contemporary, the fight for the critical lies less in class distinctions of taste and more in a cognitive/temporal conflict between a disconnected and immediate 'now,' versus much wider notions of connectivity and contextualization. As evidenced in Manzini's work, the objective is more towards integration (temporally, historically, socially, culturally, economically, environmentally, etc.) as the tendency towards utopian articulation in an autonomous creative outcome is always, and will always be, unachievable. Design towards an immutable endstate is increasingly unworkable and integration requires an understanding of how design decisions, and thus design manifestations, will fit within larger streams of consideration. Such thought lies not only in the pursuit of the creative act but also in establishing the parameters which govern what creative act is required. In this design thinking is significant and can perhaps inform a critical ideological acceptance of continuous, creative change without the modernist addiction to violent usurpation first.

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