The Core Principles of Modernism

Overview

Modernism is an Art and Design Movement loosely of the period 1860 to 1960 that is characterized by an opposition to the craftsmanship period that housed movements such as Art Noveau, that appeared quite fanciful and an embracing of the new machine age potentially focusing more on cheaper production over high quality production. It gave birth to avant garde movements such as Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Dada, Cubism, Surrealism and Expressionism that were all experimental in nature and looked at the world through different eyes. It also brought forth designers such as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. Through projects such as the Bauhaus Building and L’Unite d’habitation, these designers illustrated the concept of logically and efficiently working your way to solve a problem. They put a heavy emphasis on functionalism. Not only thinking about the aesthetics of a product, but also taking into account materials, process and ergonomics.

A common theme that seems to be displayed is that of standardisation with people such as Joseph Witworth devising the British Standard Whitworth System which created components such as the screw thread in order to produce goods at a rate that was able to meet the demands of the market. In the greater scheme of things lies a culture in which processes of industrialization and urbanization are used to transform a society in this case one that was exclusive instead of inclusive due to divisions of class and what was considered taste.
Electric kettle, designed for A.E.G. (Image 1)

This AEG Kettle made of brass, chromium plated metal, bakelite and cane illustrates the relationship between material choice and function of product. Its metallic parts are suitable for forming as well as light and easy to clean, while the handle though practical, also hints at a familiar traditional look.

The Unité d'Habitation (Image 2)

By using reinforced concrete and matroil in construction, here Le Corbusier creates both a dull and intense in appearance, well considered living space. Not only are the rooms designed to human scale, but the building also contains education, recreational and day to day miscellaneous services.
In designing a specific template and font for the cover of Penguin books with the publisher, title and author in their respective positions and unifying each face of the book with the penguin logo, Tschichold creates a system that continues to generate recognition and association with authenticity.

This machine was used to cut flat surfaces into components used in the engineering of products such as textile spinning equipment. Due to its precision and ease of operation it was able to advance the mass production of goods and increase in profits like other machinery of its time.
Lustgarten Rally of the Hitler Youth from ‘Germany Awakened’ (Image 5)

In this poster, a group of German Youth at the Lustgarten rally are seen demonstrating the famous salute first exchanged between Adolf Hitler and Paul von Hindenburg said to have symbolized the longing of the nation for reconciliation. The flags and uniforms publicly declare a general consensus.
Citations

As most art and design movements have a tendency to be a break from a former way of thinking over a certain period of time, Modernism was no different. This search which was ultimately a quest for a better life was only to be expected most especially during the interwar years. Amidst the economic euphoria due to the rise of the machine age of the early 20th Century so came a longing to find a new identity after the devastation that had previously occurred. The modernists saw this as a problem which design could solve if it became completely uncorrupted and calculated to the very last detail.

Under the leadership of architecture all the arts of design ought to evolve towards the establishment of standards (types, norms) a homogenous style- a prejudice that was translated into visible fact for a few years at the Bauhaus in the twenties (Banham, 1960 p76)

Certainly the primary element is function, but function without sensibility remains mere construction...Function plus dynamics is the challenge. (Banham, 1960 p181)

But that simplicity demands, on the contrary, great constructional exactitude, absolute precision of intention and reasoning... it aims to provoke that enjoyment of mathematical order that is one of the most lawful aspirations of the modern frame of mind. (Banham, 1960 p261)

Those artists in New York who saw themselves as moderns, ‘rebelled against the past century’s genteel artistic standards and wanted to replace the older culture with a new indigenous American art and literature more representative of their generation. (Rawlinson, 2007p11)

Adorno’s notion seems far from exclusive; material is what artist’s work with. It is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colours, sounds, associations of every sort and every technique ever developed. Form too can become material. (Rawlinson, 2007 p29)
Critical Analysis

The sense for putting function ahead of ornament is fully expressed. The consideration of how things work and which materials need to be put in place in order for them to work at their best and a guaranteed sameness is clear. As much as modernism seems to be about a need for precision and accuracy that conveniently facilitates the rise in capitalism, it also deepens into a spiritual need for purity.

Automobiles, steamers, yachts ... and so forth possess within themselves, as the purest expressions of their time, the elements of a new language of aesthetic form and can be considered as the point of departure for a new art, through their restrained form, lack of ornament and plain colours, the comparative perfection of their materials and the purity of their proportions –largely due to their new, mechanical methods of production. (Banham, 1960 p159)

At the same time high emphasis is placed on materialistic possession through elaborate exhibitions imitating big screen films like those produced in Hollywood. Consumers are said to be persuaded that in order to keep up with the times they must adhere to the standards of the modern world for them to be the perfect modernist man or woman.

In the 1920s, the MET showcased architects that studied their domestic environments in order to identify problems and propose solutions for them, disregarding any concern for aesthetics or appearance. This inspired Raymond Hood’s philosophy for the business executive’s office which focuses on aspects such as ease of maintenance, user friendliness and materials and processes. Similar principles were applied in Schoen’s child’s nursery and bedroom planned to stimulate and meet the needs of the growing child.

Critics’ responses to modernism as a whole were opposing. In America, those who were in favour found the practicality praiseworthy and likened it to the nation’s Yankee forfathers, who are known for using objects best designed for the task at hand and not owning more than needed. Those who were against it, saw it as the application of trendy ornament. Its ability to effect change though is evident.

Leger presents the ball bearing as a totalizing engine for future human society, while Albers presents his ball bearing as a glamorous commodity that will seduce society. The two artists cultivate the idea that machines-omnipotent, voracious and clever-will rewrite our material world in their image. (Wilson, 2009 p152)

As for whether Modernism dates back to around the 1870s and if it was really based on a vision to unify is questionable, but its theologies about moving from old to new bring about a hope that could have potentially brought people together. One thing to note though is that whether consciously or unconsciously, a desirable aesthetic that may be considered decorative and even ornamental did develop which can still be viewed today in some of the world’s most angular, smooth, sleek, crisp and pristine architecture, but only depending on one’s definition of ornament.

True ornament is not a matter of prettifying externals. It is organic with the structure it adorns, whether a person, a building or a park. At best it is an emphasis of structure. (Rawlinson, 2007 p61)
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Visits

Science Museum, Making the Modern World, London; visited on 6 January 2012
UNIT 1

THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF MODERN DESIGN

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