

MODERN, POST MODERN OR WHAT?

Julian Jacobs *The Canadian Architect*, September 1983

This lengthy Joycean response to our issue on Post Modernism is shown with minimal changes. To have used a heavy editor's pencil would, we feel, have diminished Mr. Jacobs' sardonic delights. The author is a Toronto architect in his own practice.

Whatever. If the quest for style alone is productive, that's the answer to your question because "whatever" characterizes Western culture today — and will even more tomorrow. Not one appropriate style but whatever style is appropriate. Whatever translates to Pluralism, not Post Modernism.

We ask for an Aspirin when we have a headache. Madison Avenue calls that "brand identification." The U.S. is similarly influencing architecture: many who currently subscribe to *Progressive Architecture* are conditioned to subscribe to Post Modernism. And Graves, descendant of a Roman polychrome bas relief artist, is promoted as the most heroic brand identifyee. But Canadian architects follow the U.S. only to the extent that we believe their ideals should be ours too. Espousing U.S. Post Modernism (or even adopting the label) bears careful consideration not only because the style is often decoration based, a non sequitur and misrepresentative of the taste values of the teeming billions, but because imitating it would inevitably stunt our own growth.

Despite the Americans' architecturally unsettling expressions of Post Modernism, Jencks defines it as historical, metaphoric and contextual. Now historical may refer to anything that has occurred, metaphoric could implicate the universe outside architecture, real or fictional, and contextual must cover the unimaginable rest. This ideological imperialism would therefore firmly plant a U.S. flag onto anything designed or built — certainly on this planet. But while Jencks' definition is all inclusive, American brand Post Modernism isn't. One example: the high tech style is metaphoric by definition but eludes Post Modern classification. Alternately,

temporarily discounting the global village theory (which may well throw Greece into America's backyard) why is Acropolis Revisited on the roof of an office building in downtown Portland an exemplar of contextualism?

This distortion between theory and practice questions the label and indeed the style. The words "post modern" mean simply "coming after modern," which seems reasonable. But Modernism is rejected, baby plus bath. The baby happens to still be an enormous source of architectural invention and potential. Venturi recommends we learn from Vegas but not Chicago. Architects need all the help we can get — shouldn't we learn from everything? It seems ironic that Post Modernism should properly have come before Modern, before Mies, Gropius, Corbu, even before Perret, Corbu's teacher. In its Baroque manifestations, Post Modern is aesthetically closer to Art Moderne. So Post Modernism, if typified by Graves, should theoretically be *Pre-Modernism*.

Another irony: Post Modernism repeats Modern's central faux pas. A dominant movement in art/architecture in this century has been from representational to nonrepresentational; from being understood to not understood and alienating (with some diversion by Pop and Magic Realism). Mainstream building before Gropius could be considered traditional or representative: a building usually "looked like what it was." Image followed purpose more before Modernism. If one asks any child from Helsinki to Hollywood to draw a house, what appears is two vertical lines, double pitched roof, door, windows and chimney with optional smoke. That, more or less, is an archetype because children don't lie. A stage set could evoke the essential house with a piece of lumber on a cant overhead, a fireplace and cooktop in a flat surface (shelter, warmth, food). The rest may be arbitrary, presuming not contradictory. Shouldn't we distinguish the primeval or deeply rooted from the fashionable? Strenuously though it tried, the International Style failed to rid the Western mind's association of house with

sloped roof. So will Post Modernism. A revolutionary idea accelerates environmental evolution only to the degree it enjoys currency. The Edison light bulb. The periodical, while valuable as medium, incites a demand for novelty at a tempo irrelevant to society at large. An empathic attitude favors a richly varied evolution: streetwise yet transcendent, comprehensive yet comprehensible. Not only purist Minimalism nor Fellini Romanesque.

Post Modernism may be trying to address the central issue (humanism) but does so in a manner which loses Mr. Canuk in the woods again. Since 1950, whenever he has been asked to describe Modern Architecture, Mr. Canuk said "cold and sterile." Wait until Post Modernism is in his vocabulary. While Corbu sketched his universal man and signature hand, inspired by Jesuit monks' cells he yearned to brutally concretize the proles into two-metre cubicles by the kilometre. Morality aside, at least Modernism had integrity from design plan through constructed form. The invention "*plan libre*" produced liberated forms hitherto inconceivable and children could recognize the Barcelona Pavilion from the plan. And of course Mies gave the world the fabulously elegant detail. Modern goes well beyond style into architecture — Post Modern doesn't.

Post Modern's answer to the "Box for All Seasons" is the Decorated Box etcetera. Each practitioner is capable, with the alchemy of the ubiquitous wax pencil, of transforming the Box into a birdhouse, jailhouse or just-plain-house, guided by the processed aesthetic of one, serialized, artist-concept vision. There are now more adults than children using coloring pencils. Virtuoso facades, kinky paraphernalia and reactionary value notwithstanding, Post Modernism has not generated a single new idea of planning, space, structure, construction technique, user involvement, urban design or other miscellany. But then decorated sheds are not pedestrian enough for all that. The Magaziner Mentality.

Beyond the profession's rumbling accusations that Post Modernism may be out of its time and mind, what then is the ultimate formula for style? However, the essential premise of this question is misguided. Erickson, even with his limitations, is the only Canadian to have achieved sustained global renown partly because he isn't searching for a style per se but an *integrity*.

Space, form and style are inseparable.

The other problem is style consensus: we don't need it. For the first time since the origin of the profession we are liberated; each of us can be promiscuous but discriminating each time (liberty not anarchy); free to create the definitive Superprism and then change drawing tables and create Vernacular, Fantasticism, Primitivism, Pre-Modernism, whatever is just right. Our field may be envisioned as a network of typologies but not as a reductivist one liner. This is what Venturi should have meant by an architecture of "inclusion" or "but-and" (Trudeau's wrong: the universe isn't unfolding as it should, it's simply unfolding). If, in the mercurial twentieth century equation for a New Architecture, the past side of now is symbolized by the null set of opposing extremists Mies and Graves, then the future side should render us beneficiaries of freedom of style. Let's enjoy it.

If style were foremost . . . but it isn't. Perhaps first we should finely tune in to the aspirations of a complex, heavily textured, evolving society and of separate individuals, assuming nothing about architecture much less style. Perhaps entering an heuristic mode, even imagine scratching prehistoric images on cave walls at Lascaux then taking a spacetime walk between a program and a solution to unravel one's own story about a structure-space uninhibited enough to tap one's guarded personal wealth of emotion, memory-experience, intuition, spirituality, artistry.

Via computer technology we are rapidly approaching an era of Absolute Information to contribute immensely to our spontaneously creative resources. Site potentialities, contextual data, user preferences, appropriate precedents, material and technical possibilities, fixed and flexible project components, future options, benefits costs, lists of ramifications, even styles, enormous quantities of relevant information will be readily integratable. We will look back on the Post Modernist period as the nervous tail end to the Dark Ages of Period Style building.

The integrity and identity of our country is a function of the integrity and identity of our architecture. Only the design architect operating deep into that dark no man's land between convention and the fringe of his emotions is capable of giving precise form to the emerging socio-cultural matrix. In the eternal Here and Now, the future present is boundless. If we still need a banner label Canada has Pluralism, Computer-Aided Pluralism and Whatever.