Victoria and Albert Museum, London
24 September 2011–15 January 2012

In his 1994 essay “The Generic City,” Rem Koolhaas wrote:

Postmodernism is the only movement that has succeeded in connecting the practice of architecture with the practice of panic. Postmodernism is not a doctrine based on a highly civilized reading of architectural history but a method, a mutation in architectural practice that produces results fast enough to keep pace with the Generic City’s development. Instead of consciousness, as its original inventors may have hoped, it creates a new unconscious. It is modernization’s little helper.1

This remains perhaps the only really insightful thing ever written on the subject of architectural postmodernism—unless, that is, one also includes the statement from around the same date by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck—an arch critic—when he described postmodernism generally as a meaningless concept “used by blind people who don’t know what’s going on.”2

There was certainly a sense of both of these tendencies—panic and blindness—in the 2011 exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum on the subject of postmodernism. If, as Manfredo Tafuri declared, the deeper function of bourgeois art is “to ward off anguish,” then the visitor could see that anguish bleeding from its very heart in this show.3 Rooms were stuffed full of furniture, clothes, film clips, pop videos, and everything else in an effort to convey the notion of a populist, exuberant, diverse, ironically low-art approach rooted in a feeling of super-abundance. The problem, of course, is that the period being covered by the V&A show, from 1970 to 1990, felt nothing like that back then. Indeed, it now appears in retrospect to have been a relatively homogenous era in terms of urban culture in Western capitalist countries, certainly when compared to globalized conditions today.

It was also notable that the architectural exhibits in the V&A exhibition—including the classic films of Las Vegas produced by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and their Yale students in the late 1960s, Leon Krier’s pedagogical columns for the Strada Novissima in the 1980 Venice Biennale, James Stirling’s Stuttgart Gallery extension, Ricardo Bofill’s monumental housing estates in France, and Aldo Rossi’s Modena Cemetery—came across as solid and serious, indeed hardly postmodernist at all. The funniest, most exuberant, and most ironic of postmodernist architects, such as Stanley Tigerman in the United States and Piers Gough in Britain, did not even get an airing. This omission of the most in-your-face architectural postmodernism was especially curious, as one was shown instead something as inconsequential as Charles Jencks’s design for his own studio house in Cape Cod, which registered barely a blip back then, suggesting that some serious revisionism is now going on.

Much of the rest of the V&A show preferred to employ a catch-all quality for various 1980s phenomena, being clearly the happiest when dwelling upon pop music, clothes fashions and kitchen gadgets—as well as indulging a fetish for Ridley Scott’s film Blade Runner (1982), which surfaced twice. In these rooms one got a sense of the pulse of the time, with giant screens showing Laurie Anderson performing her songs or cabinets containing the severe costumes worn by Grace Jones. Memphis furniture and Alessi utensils figured large. There were also a few nods to postmodernist art, as in Jeff Koons’s silvered bust of Louis XIV (1986), but I doubt that any art historian would think the range did anywhere near justice to what could be classified under that stylistic category within the art world.

The most frequent criticism made of the V&A’s exhibition was that it did not try to define or question the nature of postmodernism to any extent. If, as Koolhaas argues, the premise of postmodernism was never really about re-introducing the use of history to modernist art and architecture, then its claim for existence needs to be in positing a brand of democratic populism that rebelled against what its adherents regarded as the hegemony of orthodox, rule-bound modernism. Postmodernism prided itself in giving ordinary people once again the sort of cultural artifacts they actually liked. After all, Charles Jencks, the architectural critic/historian who formalized the term in his seminal 1978 book The Language of Postmodern Architecture, started his career as a proselytizer for the 1960s American version of community architecture known as “participatory planning.”4 Yet the stated empathy for the cultural plight of the common man and woman soon gave way to a style that only seemed to want—following the relative austerity experienced in Western nations in the post-oil crisis years of the 1970s—to reflect corporate success during the 1980s credit boom. As Denise Scott Brown has written: “Architectural post-modernism started as a sincere attempt to confront . . . issues regarding popular culture, symbolism and communication, and the automobile city. Yet it was soon hijacked by commercial interests and used by their architecture to create “signature architecture” shorn of social content.”5 Founders such as Charles Jencks also started to back off from their Frankenstein creation, given that it had moved so far away from its counter-cultural roots. Jencks has since refined his thesis about postmodernism, claiming there was a huge difference between postmodernism as a broad cultural approach and the shallow, cliché-ridden business architecture of the 1980s, which he dismissing as “PoMo.” For him, the decline was signaled when “Michael Graves started building for the Disney Corporation and Margaret Thatcher gave her blessing to the decorated shed,” thereby turning postmodernism into a slack, empty-headed and frequently kitschy architectural trend.6

Deeper and more fascinating were the philosophical roots of postmodernism, again something not examined to any degree by the V&A exhibition. One side during the 1980s were the critics of modernism from French poststructuralism, such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, who famously attacked the “grand narratives” of modernism and Marxism. More interested in material practices, Fredric Jameson was among those who argued that Western economies had
entered upon a distinctive new phase of consumer-led capitalism after the Second World War, creating thereby a cultural condition that was provisional, relativist, and diverse in its manifestations. In Jameson’s view, the new cultural condition of postmodernism had supplant ed the previous, production-led era of capitalist development typified by the mass-production techniques of Henry Ford and others. Jameson wrote persuasively about the spatially bewildering and synthetic internal mall world of John Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as a quintessential expression of postmodernism.

The problem with Jameson’s position lay, however, in whether the phenomena he highlighted were in fact signs and products of a distinct economic and cultural condition, or merely another twist of existing consumerist processes within capitalism. In the opposing corner, one could cite the claim by Jürgen Habermas that we were, and in fact still are, living within an ongoing and unresolved “project” of modernity, one that is yet to be completed. As a second generation scholar of the Frankfurt School, Habermas rejected the idea that postmodernism succeeded the era of modernism. Habermas sees the condition of modernity as having undergone major transformations and taken serious knocks over its history, but as such we are still in the process of trying to comprehend and enact it. As a result of the growing criticisms of postmodernism as being merely the emperor’s new clothes, the path was open for younger theorists to come to prominence during the sharp recession of the early 1990s; they did so by offering far more fluid and open-ended readings of urban and architectural culture. In this regard, Britain’s key cultural contribution to postmodernism, the Venturi Scott Brown extension to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square (1988–91)—funded appropriately by the owners of a supermarket chain—also served as its monument and epitaph in Western countries.

Instead, the cultural impetus for postmodernism went east and began to mutate wildly as part of the emerging processes of globalization, as Koolhaas so astutely observed in his “Generic City” essay. It is regrettable that this global dimension only got the briefest and weakest mention in the V&A’s exhibition—partly no doubt due to the curatorial decision to cut off the time period in 1990. Likewise, the catalogue that accompanied the show did little to provide any wider understanding of the meaning or legacy of postmodernism, except for a fascinating but ridiculously overstretched claim that the internet is actually the ultimate end-product of postmodernism. It is disconcerting for us to see endlessly like this by major museums with the styles of past decades being raked up and endlessly like this by major museums with so little critical scrutiny, as if in a spirit of nostalgia tourism. The underlying, unresolved tension seems to be between opening up our view of the subject and the need to provide visitors with a reassuring retrospective, not helped of course because people can remember and relate to thirty-year-old objects so much more easily than thirty-year-old ideas. Postmodernism remains a tantalizingly enigmatic moment and one that, in fact, may make relatively little dent in future architectural histories that are written about the era. Those are likely to focus instead from the 1980s on the mutation of orthodox modernism into high tech or the deeply self-conscious efforts to combine poststructuralist theory and early digital architecture through what was termed deconstructivism—both of which seem to exert a far greater influence on contemporary architecture.

MURRAY FRASER
Bartlett School of Architecture,
University College London

Related Publication

Notes