

Postmodernist design under the influence of postmodernist cultural ideological trends

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Abstract: Postmodernist design was born under the influence of postmodernist ideological trends generated by the counterculture movement in post-industrial society, representing a critique and subversion of modernism. This paper examines and interprets the emergence of postmodernist design under the influence of postmodernist cultural ideological trends and the resulting cultural phenomena and artistic characteristics from several perspectives: the mass culture of countercultural ideological trends, the deconstruction of aesthetic depth, historical context and symbolic decoration, and the multiple expressions of symbolic meaning.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Counter culture, Culture, Artistic Characteristics

1. Introduction

1.1. The ideological origins and rebel spirit of postmodernist design

Postmodernism represents the late stage of modernism, and much of the critique directed at postmodernism can be traced back to modernism itself. Postmodernist design was born under the influence of postmodernist ideological trends generated by the counterculture movement in post-industrial society. Various postmodernist ideas—such as attention to form, history, context, and popular aesthetics, advocacy for change and innovation, and emphasis on openness and pluralism—have already been injected into design works. Simultaneously, through reflection upon and critique of modernist design principles, diverse countercultural design trends have developed. Breaking free from the constraints of functionalist design concepts, postmodernist design emphasizes the decorative and metaphorical qualities of objects, as well as the subversion of tradition, blurring the boundaries between the refined and the vulgar, and between art and non-art. This has formed the complex, contradictory, eclectic, and fractured cultural phenomena and artistic style characteristics of postmodernist design.

1.2. A theoretical elucidation by Jencks

Contemporary theorist Charles Jencks, in his work *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, writes about the characteristics of postmodernism as follows: "The reaction against mainstream culture, the blurring of boundaries between elite culture and mass culture, the prevalence of plagiarism, the death of the subject, the fragmentation of the psyche, the loss of historical sense..." [1].

1.3. The development trajectory of postmodernist design

With the transition of Western society from industrial to post-industrial, Western culture also underwent a new fission. During this period, various cultural theories were drawn into a debate on postmodernism, with different theories and schools expressing their own views. Postmodernism encompassed almost every field of culture, from social sciences to natural sciences, from literature to history, from architecture to design art, and so on. With the rise of the counterculture movement, various cultural contradictions were exposed, and the design field, influenced by this trend, also joined the wave of transformation. Through reflection upon and critique of modernist design principles, it gradually moved toward revision and transcendence, developing diversified countercultural design trends. Postmodernist design ideology is one of the most influential schools among them, representing the introduction of a design school concept. It formed in the

1960s, developed in the 1970s, and matured in the 1980s. As the formation of a new school in the development of contemporary Western design trends, this design tendency successively appeared in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Over nearly 30 years of development and evolution, it rose and expanded in architecture and then spread to influence other design fields. However, in the thirty years of postmodernist design development, no solid core was formed, nor were there clear boundaries; what remained were merely numerous cultural phenomena and stylistic schools.

2. The popularization of counter cultural design trends

2.1. The rise of pop art

When the counterculture movement in Western society flourished and reached its peak, it also deepened the suspicion and critique of the modernist International Style within the design field. During this period, avant-garde ideas represented by pioneering art challenged orthodox design concepts, giving rise to the immensely popular counter cultural design trend represented by "Pop Art" (Pop Art) and design. The term "Pop" derives from the English word "Popular," emerging in the mid-1950s. In 1952, a group of British artists, designers, and critics, represented by Richard Hamilton, spontaneously formed an "Independent Group." Through analysis of mass culture, particularly the development of American mass consumer culture, they believed that designers should understand public opinions and diverse tastes regarding consumer products, and regard popular forms favored by the masses as legitimate sources for design. In 1956, the "Independent Group" held an art exhibition in London entitled "This Is Tomorrow." Richard Hamilton's collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* exhibited there became the earliest iconic work of Pop Art.

2.2. The international diffusion of counter-design

The avant-garde ideas demonstrated by the "Pop" art and design movement attracted the attention and recognition of countries worldwide, and soon influenced the United States and other Western nations. American mass consumer culture became the most fertile soil for Pop art and design to take root and grow. In the mid-1960s, American Pop Art shocked the entire art world, with Andy Warhol being the most renowned. His creations became widely popular, such as the Green Coca-Cola Bottles symbolizing consumer culture and the endless image replication work *Marilyn Diptych* representing Pop culture. Italian design, which had traditionally emphasized its own national cultural heritage, was also quickly influenced by the new design trends from Britain and America, including Pop Art, Neo-Dadaism, and Surrealism, giving rise to counter cultural and radical design movements. They put forward a series of radical design propositions, advocating "working for humanity rather than for economic goals." The furniture they designed, beneath its gaudy colors and bizarre shapes, created a sense of novelty and amusement. Boldly employing new materials and new techniques, they broke through traditional design constraints. In their view, the era when mainstream high culture dominated had passed; popular culture and mass culture should be accorded the same degree of respect as high culture. Facing the rapidly developing commodity consumer society, artists and designers adopted bold ideas and attitudes of transformation, using a comprehensive mode of expression to interpret social life and popular tastes, allowing "consumer products" to play the leading role and emphasizing the existence of "objects" and the authenticity of their value.

3. The deconstruction of aesthetic depth

3.1. The alienation of aesthetic concepts and venturi's complexity aesthetics

After Western countries entered the post-industrial society, the transformation and impact of social ideology led to the alienation of people's aesthetic concepts, giving rise to the pluralization of truth, the relativization of values, the decentralization of evaluation, and the Incommensurability of paradigms. The social masses have been liberated from their passive position in past aesthetic activities and have become the subjects of aesthetic activities. [2] In his work *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the renowned American architectural designer Robert Venturi proposed: "Architects can no longer be intimidated by the Puritanical orthodoxy of modernist architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure,'

compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward,' ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as 'interesting,' conventional rather than 'designed,' accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating..." [3] Venturi's ideas fully embody the aesthetic interpretation of postmodernist design characterized by centerless representation and systemless "language." Its aesthetic categories are no longer pure, subjective, fixed, neat, and concise; instead, they introduce people into an eclectic, hybrid, symbiotically pluralistic, uncertain, and contradictory space-time.

3.2. The popularization trend of postmodernism

Modernist mainstream culture is an elite culture that demands profound meaning in artworks; readers and viewers must engage in continuous analysis and comprehension to discover the intrinsic connotations of works and thereby obtain aesthetic value. However, postmodernist art deconstructs the autonomy that modernism enshrined as its creed. It refuses interpretation, dissolving the depth of meaning previously regarded as the highest realm of works, rendering them flat and replacing them with superficial, shallow content. Consequently, commodity, popularity, entertainment, technicality, and conformism have become important characteristics of the popularization trend in postmodern art and design. The rise of this mass art signifies the breakthrough and expansion of the boundaries of human artistic aesthetic concepts themselves, making art part of life; simultaneously, it means that commodities, technology, and entertainment themselves have been infused with new aesthetic connotations—that is, the aestheticization of life. As demonstrated by Pop art and design works, this has narrowed the distance between art and the masses. People can comprehend the world through figurative images; there is nothing to interpret, everything has become surface-level, thereby causing artworks to lack depth and leading to the disappearance of thought. As the postmodern artist Warhol stated: "If you want to know all about me, just look at my paintings, my films, and me—there I am, and there's nothing behind it." Thus, postmodernism is an era of intellectual poverty; its cultural meaning is no longer culture in the traditional sense. From modes of thinking and consciousness to concepts, artistic methods, and means, everything tends toward popularization and vulgarization. Art and design works are characterized by popularity, free style, pluralism, and peaceableness, which is consistent with today's commercialized social trends. Commodities are works, and works are also commodities; the boundary between art and life has become indistinct. For example, the colorful wooden bookshelf and colored lamps (1981) designed by Ettore Sottsass, founder of the Memphis Group, are less bookshelves and lamps than interior decorative artworks.

4. Historical context and symbolic decoration

4.1. Modernism's ironic reconstruction of historical styles

Historicism and the stance of decorativism are among the typical characteristics of postmodernist design. Modernism consistently opposed decorativism, believing that decoration caused unnecessary additional expenses and exaggerated functionality and the austere style of non-decoration. Postmodernism, however, restored decoration and highly emphasized decorativeness; whether in architectural design or product design, designers invariably employed various forms of decoration, particularly drawing nourishment from history and applying it, forming a sharp contrast with modernism's coldness and rationalization. Simultaneously, in a linear mode of thinking, history possesses eternal value, and people must draw strength and inspiration from it. Postmodernism views things as non-linear and mutational, bidding farewell to the continuity of tradition and history by breaking apart the fragments of past, present, and future—combining, deconstructing, and haphazardly piecing them together. "As symbolic decoration in postmodernism, the objects adopted encompass a wide variety of historical styles, from Gothic to Baroque, from Classical to Renaissance, all-inclusive; however, the manner of adoption is not historical revival, but rather derisive, playful, satirical, exaggerated, and symbolic description—the spirit is entirely different... The ideological foundation of postmodernism is urban-centered contextualism, and its means of expression are various metaphors and historical symbols." [4] Therefore, postmodernism does not simply restore historical styles; rather, it extracts, mixes, and splices historical styles.

4.2. Contextualist design practice and decorative facades

It quotes extensively from historical traditional culture, and "juxtaposes various classical and modern element symbols, with different formal languages converging simultaneously; these opposing and disparate components are pieced together without transition, without intermediate levels..." [5] Designers quote historical elements and classical traditional languages and symbols, injecting them into design works through deconstructive and deformative techniques. The works exhibit both a tendency to return to historical forms and an inclination to envision future society. The design tendency of this period advocated comprehensively and arbitrarily extracting required fragments and vocabularies from the classical languages of various historical periods, as well as from local and folk traditions, and recombining them. Venturi proposed the design concept of the "decorated shed" in response to the drawbacks of modern architecture, arguing that architecture is a shelter with decoration, that the decorated facade of architecture can exist independently of structure, and pointing out that it holds equally important roles and significance as the structural entity... Through the cognition of decorative imagery content, the understanding of symbolic architectural sign meanings, and the recollection of historical element forms, people generate deep resonance in their hearts, thereby satisfying their needs and pleasures for beauty. [6]

5. The multiple expressions of symbolic meaning

5.1. The multiple expression mechanism of postmodernist design

Postmodernist design pursues a symbolic form with significance, employing semiotic perspectives to regard design as a language—a universal and inherent language determined by practicality, structural reliability, economy, and technical equipment. In design, it emphasizes the multiple expressions of design language, pursuing the interconnection between form and symbolic meaning, thereby enabling the designer's intended meaning to be conveyed through this association. [7] This is mainly manifested in three aspects: First, employing formal elements such as points, lines, planes, textures, and colors as certain symbolic vocabularies, summarizing and generalizing them to create abstract geometric formal beauty. Second, relying on intuitive and sensory understanding, emphasizing people's physiological and psychological responses. Third, utilizing metaphorical modes of expression, adopting classical and traditional vocabularies to directly present external things to perceptual concepts, implying a relatively broad and universal meaning, using concrete visual images to suggest abstract concepts, and embodying certain symbolic meanings through visualization.

5.2. The symbolic practice of postmodernist design

Ettore Sottsass, founder of the Memphis Group, integrated architecture, aesthetics, technology, and social interest in his design, continuously exploring the latent factors of design. He stated: "For me, design is a way of discussing society, a way of discussing politics, love, food, and even design itself—ultimately, it is a utopian way of symbolizing a perfect society." [8] The Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, designed by Moore, prominently expresses the Italian theme of classicism. The entire plaza adopts a Baroque circular plan as its composition, boldly extracting and transforming various element symbols based on the integration of ancient mythological sculptures and multiple classical orders, while employing modern technologies and materials such as stainless steel and neon lights to express, through symbolic means, the dialogue between history and modernity. The Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in Germany, designed by Stirling, is a typical example of "simile" and "metaphor" manifested through the mixed use of multiple languages. The design adopts the masonry method of 19th-century classical stone blocks, corresponding to the central circular plaza space of the old Berlin Gallery, appearing solemn and weighty, evoking associations with the Roman Colosseum; the concave treatment of the exhibition room cornice, meanwhile, exudes the aura of an ancient Egyptian temple. This use of symbolic signs to imply meaning not only generates visual associations in form, but more importantly, it can evoke people's contemplation and imagination of history and the future, thereby producing empathy and achieving emotional resonance. Therefore, the symbolic expression in postmodern design is often ambiguous and changeable; designers hope for multiple interpretations of the design theme, and strive to imbue design with symbolic thinking, employing suggestion, association, and recollection as modes of thought and expression.

5.3. The historical contribution and contemporary significance of postmodernist design

Postmodernism emerged during a historical period in which openness and pluralism were prevalent fundamental concepts, representing a product of an era in which the very notion of viewing the world was undergoing transformation. Postmodernist design is an inevitable development in art, having become a powerful and widely influential artistic trend in the late twentieth century that remains vigorous to this day. Its historical contribution is immense and undeniable, particularly the liberating significance it embodies. Liberating people from the suffocating aesthetic culture of Western-centrism, it enables them to acquire a new aesthetic perspective for examining art and design, thereby providing contemporary art and design with the possibility of pluralistic and open thinking and practice, obtaining an entirely new vitality, and moving toward society and the masses. This is precisely the significance of our study of the cultural phenomena and artistic schools of postmodernist design.

6. Conclusion

As a product of cultural fission in post-industrial society, postmodernist design gradually developed as a pluralistic design trend through reflection upon, critique of, and transcendence over modernist design principles. From the rise of "Pop" art in the counterculture movement to the deconstruction of aesthetic depth and the turn toward flatness; from the symbolic decoration and playful splicing of historical context to the multiple expressions of symbolic meaning and the construction of metaphor—postmodernist design consistently takes openness, pluralism, and eclecticism as its core, continually breaking through the inherent boundaries between elite culture and mass culture, the refined and the vulgar, art and life. It not only liberated the design language constrained by functionalism but also provided contemporary design with an entirely new perspective for examining tradition and the future, enabling design to truly move toward society and the masses, and acquiring a completely new vitality in the interweaving of commodity and artistry, technology and aesthetics. Although postmodernist design failed to form a solid core or clear boundaries during its more than thirty years of development, its complex cultural phenomena and rich stylistic schools continue to profoundly influence contemporary design practice, and its historical contribution and liberating significance cannot be overlooked. Today, as globalization and digitization intertwine, re-examining the cultural logic and artistic characteristics of postmodernist design remains of important theoretical value and practical significance for understanding the pluralistic directions of contemporary design and grasping the interactive relationship between popular aesthetics and commercial society.

7. References

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