

Postmodernism: Realizing the Surreal

Connor Lucas
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With little knowledge of its rich roots, postmodernism can easily be dismissed as a rather amateur, thoughtless amassment of design elements and forms pilfered from historical periods all over the board; from the classical forms of ancient Greece to the nature-inspired structures of the early-twentieth century's Art Nouveau. However, postmodernism has a provenance that is as complex and varied as its design aesthetic. As evident by its name, postmodernism follows the far-reaching early-to-mid-twentieth century movement of modernism- but that doesn't mean that it holds the same values or sensibilities. Rather, postmodernism is considered to be a direct reaction to its predecessor, that which was considered by critics and postmodernists alike to be a restrictive, poorly aging decree that was beginning to do more harm than honor to the urban landscape.

Attempting to reaffirm modernism's status at the first word of its downfall, a newspaper article states, "Orthodox modernism is a style of pristine, cool, austere buildings; its extraordinary reserve exemplified in the glass boxes and flat-roofed houses of the postwar era. In its greatest examples it is stunningly beautiful, but it is the beauty of spareness, not of excess"¹- but after nearly six decades in the spotlight, the reservedness and spareness that was once appealingly new was beginning to take a turn towards the uninspired. The new generation who would later be known as postmodernists felt that the formalism of modernist architecture had a sense of discomfort and indifference; focusing too much on form, perfection, and the "dismissal of frivolous ornament."² Postmodernists controversially turned the minimalist homogeneity of

¹ Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View; Modernism Reaffirms its Power," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1985,

<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/24/arts/architecture-view-modernism-reaffirms-its-power.html?pagewanted=all>

² Adolf Loos, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, "Ornament and Crime" in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982)

modernism on its head during the 1960s; rejecting the ideas of perfection and purity and instead opting for a return of informality characterized by ornament, whimsy, and reference.

Recognizable styles of architecture from a myriad of periods and places are fragmented into individual forms that are carefully arranged into the complex and often contradicting ‘ad hoc’ designs of postmodern architecture. The vast difference between the sequential architectural movements is best illustrated by a pair of opposing mantras: self-proclaimed modernist Mies van der Rohe famously stated that “less is more,” while postmodernist Robert Venturi is closely associated with the line “less is a bore.”

But postmodernism’s roots and ideals as a movement go back further than the late-twentieth century. The radicality and controversy generated by postmodernism beg for comparison to those brought on by another historical movement: surrealism. Established in France in the early 1920s by writers, artists, and thinkers like André Breton, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Max Ernst, surrealism similarly began out of disdain for society at the time. The restrictions of Capitalist society and Marxist ideas sparked “a thirst for social rebellion.”³ While the early-twentieth century style never fully extended to the realm of architecture as postmodernism did, there are significant similarities in ideals and breaking of conventions. In the same way that postmodernism draws upon real-life situations and forms while altering them to the extreme edge of recognition, surrealism strived to realize the subconscious; similarly creating skewed visions of reality. **The concept of turning dream-like ideas into physical design is an overarching concept between both movements; whether it’s the paintings and poems made by the surrealists or buildings constructed by an architect, like postmodernist structures**

³ Jackie Craven, “Surrealism, the Amazing Art of Dreams,” *Thought Co.*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-surrealism-183312>

such as Michael Graves' *Team Disney Building*, Charles Moore's *Piazza d'Italia*, and Philip Johnson's *AT&T Building*.

Perhaps one of the most recognizably unique and surreal examples of postmodern architecture is Burbank, California's *Team Disney Building* by Michael Graves. Commissioned in 1985, the building was designed to house the corporate offices of The Walt Disney Company. Perhaps shockingly, the 350,000 square foot office building looks like anything but a stereotypical commercial space: "the front façade is a Post-Modern interpretation of the Parthenon."⁴ The use of such a historic, grand monument as inspiration for a mere office building may seem radical, but it was bold, perhaps controversial ideas like this that defined the postmodernists. The silhouette of ancient Greece's Parthenon has been fragmented and simplified for modern day (as the postmodernists did) without altering the proportions of the structure constructed in 447 B.C. With Disney's respectable position as one of the world's largest international media conglomerates, it is hardly surprising that they would want their headquarters to be monumental; representing strength and power- with a perhaps unexpected sense of fun. Being that The Walt Disney Company tasks itself with providing entertainment of many forms to adults and children alike, it is appropriate that the architecture physicalizing their ideals would maintain a certain lack of seriousness.

This witty sensibility comes through most strongly and iconically in the figures found on the front facade of the building. Taking the place of the Parthenon's Ionic columns is a series of larger-than-life sculptures of the 'Seven Dwarfs' as featured in Disney's fairytale *Snow White*, cleverly appearing as if the characters are playfully holding up the triangular, classically formed

⁴ "The Walt Disney Company: Team Disney Building," *Michael Graves Architecture & Design*, <https://michaelgraves.com/portfolio/team-disney-building/>

pediment. These figures play into the semiotic tendencies of postmodernism, with the extremely illustrative imagery signaling the purpose and use of the building to outsiders. This concept of symbolic architecture is described by postmodern theorist Charles Jencks: “Language dominates all sign systems. Architecture can therefore be understood in direct analogy with language and thus reconceptualised in semiotic terms, with architecture based, instead of words, on ‘visual codes’.”⁵ The thread of surrealism’s influence on postmodernism again presents itself in this piece of architecture, because the dwarf characters themselves touch upon reality, but the fact that they have been greatly increased in size and are holding up architecture is something out of a dream.

An additional example of postmodern architecture that exhibits surrealist elements is the *Piazza d’Italia* by Charles Moore. Located in downtown New Orleans, Louisiana, the structure is an urban plaza designed for the public; a public that was swiftly feeling cities during the era of suburbanization and ‘white flight’ that followed World War II. In an effort to reinvigorate the city’s downtown area and to realize the vision of New Orleans’ largely overlooked Italian-American community for a monument that commemorated their experience as immigrants, Moore was commissioned to design the plaza in 1974. While not as immediately comprehensible as the symbolism of the *Team Disney Building*, the borders of the court’s fountain serve as a direct, semiotic representation of the borders of the country of Italy. Because the plaza is a tribute to the country, it is expected that classical Italian forms would be present in its design and essence. But in true postmodernist fashion, these forms have been altered significantly from reality, completely stripping them of all historical context. Colonnades, clock

⁵ Charles Jencks, “Post-Modern Architecture” in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1984)

and bell towers, and a Roman temple have been fragmented from their origins and reconceived abstractly and minimalistically to make up the vertical, layered structure of the piazza.

Surrealistically coated in bright colors and neon hues, the ad hoc use of borrowed aesthetic elements almost entirely for form rather than function makes this project a “seminal Postmodern landscape.”⁶ Modernism’s ban of form in exchange for a strict concentration on function is rebelled upon by Moore, paving the way for postmodernists for many years and buildings to come. Due in no small part to its colorful, recognizable design elements as well as its exposure as a public plaza, the *Piazza d’Italia* is one of the best examples of postmodernisms’ ideas of ‘inclusive architecture.’ Regardless as to whether or not one has studied architectural theory, the architecture of this plaza can truly be enjoyed by anyone.

As one of the physically largest pieces of postmodern architecture, Philip Johnson’s *AT&T Building* manages to maintain postmodernism’s sense of inclusivity as it contributes to the prominent New York skyline at 37-stories high. When the then-largest corporation in the world needed new headquarters in 1984, they turned to the architect for a landmark in the same way that The Walt Disney Company tasked Michael Graves with the design of their own postmodern monument. Like the *Piazza d’Italia*, the pink granite interior (postmodernly borrowed from the Romanesque and the Florentine Renaissance) of the building continues the postmodern theme of bringing color back into design, which was in direct opposition to the minimalism of modernist architecture. The exterior of the building, however, is where postmodern ideals truly come through. Capping off the structure is a large open pediment that is perhaps the most recognizable element of the design.

⁶ Alan G. Brake, “Postmodern Architecture: Piazza d’Italia, New Orleans by Charles Moore,” August 21, 2015, *Dezeen*. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/21/postmodern-architecture-piazza-d-italia-charles-moore-new-orleans/>

Instead of drawing inspiration from classical *architectural* forms as was common for the postmodernists, Johnson decreased the scale of his muse down to a single style of furniture: Chippendale, made by famous 18th century English designer Thomas Chippendale. The design alters an easily recognizable, real life element by augmenting it into a larger than life scale, towering over those who can place its form as reminiscent of something existing in their own homes. Bringing this ‘everyday’ form to such a large scale creates just the kind of dream-like experience intended by both surrealists and postmodernists alike. Further, this open pediment reinforces the postmodern focus of bringing form back to design. Serving no real purpose other than aesthetics, the iconic element is just the kind of empty decoration to which modernists were averse, as exemplified by a recount by architectural historian Barry Bergdoll: “This was seen to be a kind of bad-boy behaviour, having an absolutely ornamental top.”⁷

Despite its conception following decades of modernism, postmodernism is more than just a hasty and fiercely opposing reaction to an increasingly restrictive and homogeneous architectural movement. Instead, it is a motion that is more than worthy to stand on its own as a legitimate and complex style with complexities reflected in the architecture it has produced. The great talents of postmodernism question the idea of sticking to a uniform style, proving that it can be just as, if not more, difficult to bridge the gaps between elements and forms from varied time periods and architectural styles. Altering the milieu of the urban world with structures as surreal as the dreamlike style of the early twentieth century, the lasting effects of postmodernism can be seen today in great buildings like the *Team Disney Building* by Michael Graves, the *Piazza d’Italia* by Charles Moore, and the *AT&T Building* by Philip Johnson.

⁷ Jenna McKnight, “Postmodern Buildings: AT&T Building, New York by Johnson/Burgee,” August 28, 2015, *Dezeen*. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/28/postmodernism-architecture-att-building-sony-tower-philip-johnson-john-burgee-new-york/>

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“Architecture as language - semiotic componential analysis of architecture à la Charles Jencks.”

StadtInnenArchitektur. May 14, 2012.

http://stadttinnenarchitektur.de/?p=410#footnote_3_410 (accessed March 2, 2018).

One of the recurring themes of postmodernist architecture is the use of symbolism through design and decoration, the origins of which are analyzed in this article on semiotics.

Brake, Alan G. “Postmodern Architecture: Piazza d’Italia, New Orleans by Charles Moore.”

Dezeen. August 21, 2015. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/21/postmodern-architecture-piazza-d-italia-charles-moore-new-orleans/> (accessed March 2, 2018).

Written from a relatively modern perspective, this analysis of the Piazza d’Italia details its history, design, and controversy as one of the most important and recognizable structures of the postmodernist period.

Craven, Jackie. “Surrealism, the Amazing Art of Dreams.” *Thought Co*. March 7, 2018.

<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-surrealism-183312> (accessed March 10, 2018)

With the movement of surrealism influencing the chosen thesis for this study, it is important to look at its historical origins, representations, and perpetrators.

Eisenman, Peter. “Post-Functionalism” in *Oppositions* 6 (Fall 1976). (accessed January 28, 2018).

“Post-Functionalism” is an important source in looking at the architectural body of theory of Postmodernism due to the fact that it directly analyzes the theory next to its predecessor of functionalism/modernism.

Goldberger, Paul. “Architecture View; Modernism Reaffirms its Power.” *The New York Times*.

November 24, 1985. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/24/arts/architecture-view-modernism-reaffirms-its-power.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed March 5, 2018).

This period piece written during the height of these architectural movements provides valuable insight into the real-time reactions and opinions of both critics and the general public.

Goldberger, Paul. “Architecture View; A New Disney Building Mixes Art With Whimsy.” *The New York Times*. May 12, 1991. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/12/arts/architecture-view-a-new-disney-building-mixes-art-with-whimsy.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed March 5, 2018).

While it is vital to study postmodernism from those that embody and truly ‘live’ the theory, it is beneficial to look at it from the point of view of someone who is not an architect or architectural theorist or historian. This primary source from the time period details the Team Disney Building by Michael Graves.

Jencks, Charles. "Post-Modern Architecture" in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th ed. New York: Rizzoli, 1984. (accessed January 28, 2018).

The concept and category of postmodernism is introduced and detailed by Jencks in this writing. Because it is the first time that this body of theory is the subject of a writing, it is important to study its introduction to society.

Loos, Adolf, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith. "Ornament and Crime" in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982. (accessed October 10, 2017).

Despite the fact that this piece was written at least half a century prior to the architectural movements of modernism, the ideas expressed by Loos likely provided inspiration to modernists as the main tenets are shared.

McKnight, Jenna. "Postmodern Buildings: AT&T Building, New York by Johnson/Burgee." *Dezeen*. August 28, 2015. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/28/postmodernism-architecture-att-building-sony-tower-philip-johnson-john-burgee-new-york/> (accessed February 18, 2018).

This article provides a detailed account of the AT&T Building, one of three in this study. From its inception and design to the post-construction critique, McKnight provides valuable information on this piece of postmodernist architecture.

Otero-Pailos, Jorge. "7: Architectural Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern" in *Architecture's Historical Turn*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010. (accessed January 28, 2018).

The phenomenology of postmodernism as an architectural experience is analyzed by Otero-Pailos. Because of the surrealist, 'out of this world' qualities of postmodernism, it is important to study the human experience and the orientation of the body and mind within the spaces and buildings of this theory.

"The Walt Disney Company: Team Disney Building." *Michael Graves Architecture & Design*. <https://michaelgraves.com/portfolio/team-disney-building/> (accessed March 6, 2018).

With portfolio photos and a description of the Team Disney Building from the point of view of the architect, this source provides a firsthand account of the building's intentions.

Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972. (accessed April 12, 2017).

While this source doesn't look at postmodernism specifically, Venturi analyzes semiotics, the study of signs, which is an important aspect of Postmodernism, particularly the buildings chosen for this study.