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Post-Functionalism

Underlying the similarities that drew the New York Five together were forces that only a few years after the publication of Five Architects sent them off in very different directions. Applying the ideas of literary and critical theory, Eisenman extended his notion of an autonomous architecture, leading to a new Modernism in which 'form is understood as a series of fragments – signs without meaning dependent upon, and without reference to, a more basic condition'.

It is true that **sometime in the nineteenth century**, there was indeed a **crucial shift within Western consciousness**: one which can be characterized as a shift **from humanism to modernism**. But, for the most part, **architecture**, in its dogged adherence to the principles of function, **did not participate in or understand the fundamental aspects of that change**. . . This shift away from the dominant attitudes of humanism, that were pervasive in Western societies for some four hundred years, took place at various times in the nineteenth century in such disparate disciplines as mathematics, music, painting, literature, film, and photography. **It is displayed in the non-objective abstract painting of Malevich and Mondrian; in the non-narrative, atemporal writing of Joyce and Apollinaire; the atonal and polytonal compositions of Schönberg and Webern; in the non-narrative films of Richter and Egging.**

Abstraction, atonality, and atemporality, however, are merely stylistic manifestations of modernism, not its essential nature. Although this is not the place to elaborate a theory of modernism, or indeed to represent those aspects of such theory which have already found their way into the literature of the other humanist disciplines, it can simply be said that the symptoms to which one has just pointed **suggest a displacement of man away from the center of his world**. He is no longer viewed as an originating agent. **Objects are seen as ideas independent of man.** In this context, man is a discursive function among complex and already-formed systems of language, which **he witnesses but does not constitute**. . .

Modernism, as a sensibility based on the fundamental displacement of man, represents what Michel Foucault would specify as a new episteme. Deriving from a non-humanistic attitude toward the relationship of an individual to his physical environment, it breaks with the historical past, both with the ways of viewing

man as subject and, as we have said, with the ethical positivism of form and function. Thus, it cannot be related to functionalism. It is probably for this reason that modernism has not up to now been elaborated in architecture . . .

What is being called **post-functionalism** begins as an attitude which **recognizes modernism as a new and distinct sensibility**. It can be understood in architecture in terms of a theoretical base that is concerned with what might be called a **modernist dialectic**, as **opposed to the old humanist (ie functionalist) opposition of form and function**.

This new theoretical base changes the humanist balance of form/function to a dialectical relationship within the evolution of form itself. The dialectic can best be described as the potential **co-existence within any form of two non-corroborating and non-sequential tendencies**. One tendency is to presume architectural form to be a recognizable transformation from some pre-existent geometric or platonic solid. In this case, **form is usually understood through a series of registrations designed to recall a more simple geometric condition**. This tendency is certainly a relic of humanist theory. However, to this is added a second tendency that sees architectural form in an atemporal, decompositional mode, as something simplified from some pre-existent set of non-specific spatial entities. Here, **form is understood as a series of fragments** – signs without meaning dependent upon, and without reference to, a more basic condition. The former tendency, when taken by itself, is a reductivist attitude and assumes some primary unity as both an ethical and an aesthetic basis for all creation. The latter, by itself, assumes a basic condition of fragmentation and multiplicity from which the resultant form is a state of simplification. Both tendencies, however, when taken together, constitute the essence of this new, modern dialectic. They begin to define the inherent nature of the object in and of itself and its capacity to be represented. They begin to suggest that the theoretical assumptions of functionalism are in fact cultural rather than universal.

Post-functionalism, thus, is a term of absence. In its negation of functionalism it suggests certain positive theoretical alternatives – existing fragments of thought which, when examined, might serve as a framework for the development of a larger theoretical structure – but it does not, in and of itself, propose to supply a label for such a new consciousness in architecture which I believe is potentially upon us.

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