

Postmodernism post-mortem

Now Postmodernism is over, we can try to define it. But the V&A's exhibition doesn't clear things up, writes Joseph Rykwert

So it's over. Officially. With a big show at the V&A to bury it. Postmodernism has passed into history — of a kind. After Po-Mo, quipped a New York wit, comes Po-Po-Mo. And after Po-Po-Mo — comes No-Mo! So that's where we now are.

From that No-Mo vantage point, we can take stock of what the label suggests in a large and splendidly modern exhibition which will go on until 15 January, and which is accompanied by a lavish, many-essayed catalogue, as well as a limited edition vinyl disc of Postmodern tunes and CDs of the same. You even have a choice of Postmodern patterned ties.

For all that I had seen the show and read the catalogue, I was not much better informed. It really is not at all clear, except in a negative sort of way (ie not-modern?), what the label implies or suggests (I hesitate to write 'mean', since meaning is not a notion which fits easily with Postmodernity). Some of its most brilliant advocates, like the geographer David Harvey, shared my perplexity: 'Does Postmodernism have revolutionary potential by virtue of its opposition to all forms of meta-narratives... or is it simply the commercialisation and domestication of Modernism?'

Even setting edges to the style — or was it perhaps a movement? — is a problem, partly because all sorts of people who rejected the label at the time (Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, notably) have now explicitly identified themselves as Postmodernists. Nor does the catalogue really help with definitions or classifications. Gangsta rap turns out to be Po-Mo, as do the clothes designed by Vivienne Westwood, as well as Karl Lagerfeld photos for Chanel. Curiously enough, so is the work of Barbara Kruger, whose graphic manner and spare, moralising messages seem to put it squarely into the 'Modernist' camp. Why, for that matter, is David Bowie Postmodern, but Sting is not? Why Robert Rauschenberg yes, but his friend and associate Jasper Johns not?

One of the claims Po-Mo made on architects is that it corrected the woeful neglect of history by the Modernists. But already in the 1920s, Modernists talked about the 'lessons of the past', and towards the end of the war this concern became more urgent. It was allied to a sense that some kind of renewal, some acknowledgement of continuity with history, was overdue. Hence the predecessors of literary Postmodernism in the 1950s talked about the nouveau roman and nouvelle critique, while architects were among the most assiduous readers of a nouveau roman masterpiece, Michel Butor's *La Modification* of 1957 (Englished as *Second Thoughts*), in which the narrator identifies two cities, Rome and Paris, with the two women in his life. Anglo-Saxon Postmodernism really hit

the fan in the mid-seventies, when Charles Jencks suggested that the famous controlled explosion of the Pruitt-Igoe estate (designed by the office of the same Minoru Yamasaki, whose best-known work, the World Trade Center in New York, was blown up more spectacularly on 9/11) in St Louis in 1972 signalled the end of Modernism. The explosion was filmed, and was widely shown in architectural schools, where students were left to draw their own conclusions.

Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe were all dead by then, while CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, founded in 1928), the standard-bearer of Modernity, had already broken up in 1959 — precisely over attitudes to history. Pruitt-Igoe's problems had more to do with administration and the social problems of St Louis than with architecture, never mind style. Meanwhile Venturi had published his *Complexity and Contradiction* in 1966, where he offered his anti-Miesian slogan 'less is a bore', and as a counter-example of admirable complexity, some — fortunately miniature — images of buildings by the justly forgotten 1930s Italian architect, Armando Brasini.

There is no reference to the discreditable Brasini in the exhibition or catalogue. However, the architecture on display does allow you to take stock of the most important buildings that Postmodernism has left behind in our cities, and they form the bulk of the exhibits. There is the embarrassing excrescence on the National Gallery in London; the stale and unfunny AT&T joke building in New York; the wretchedly uninhabitable blocks of flats in Cergy-Pontoise and Montpellier (which make the Pruitt-Igoe buildings look very desirable), and in provincial Modena, the crushingly lugubrious cemetery. There is also the permanent embarrassment of Celebration, a 'gated town' in Orlando, Florida. A little more cheerful are the tatty Postmodernities of Disneyland. The Po-Mo heritage in product design is analogous: Morphosis, the 'iconic' Postmodern studio, produced some unusable, if brightly coloured furniture, now largely forgotten; and the Morphosis guru, Ettore Sottsass, replaced Olivetti's much loved, sleek and beige Lettera 22 portable with his clunky red-yellow-black 'Valentina' — which became his best-known design.

But he was too late, anyway: portable typewriters were about to be displaced by the computer. And Apple, which produced some of the best designs in that new world, had no truck with the style. More notably, the architecture of Modernism was transformed into high-tech, and the further reaches of that manner have now come up against the barrier of ecological concerns, all of which is to do with substance. So if a style it was, Po-Mo missed one of the crucial elements that characterise such phenomena — it was not the exclusive or even dominant manner of its period.

Now that we are in No-Mo, what does Po-Mo really look like? A bit bedraggled, truth be told. It certainly does not, as the styles of the past did, typify a period — too much else was going on at the time. Some recent developments pick up on aspects of it; the computer has allowed architects to apply ornamental patterns relatively cheaply to facades and outside walls for instance, without affecting the structure of the building. But maybe it's no use looking for echoes. Our new

Modernity has no time for styles, as Paul Greenhalgh suggests in the perceptive essay which closes the catalogue. Perhaps its charm, even at the time, was a matter of a few captivating images. The ones which stick in my mind are Madelon Vriesendorp's insidiously seductive watercolours and the cartoon film which I had never seen before.

Joseph Rykwert is author of a number of books on architecture, including *The Judicious Eye* (2008).

Review of Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-90, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (until 15 January 2012).