

Miesian Ideology and the Postmodern Paradox

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Construction not only determines its form, but is form itself. Where authentic construction meets authentic content, genuine pieces of work result; pieces of work, authentic and true. And these are necessary. They are necessary both in themselves and as members of a true order. Only things which already have order in themselves can be ordered. Order is more than organization. Organization is to set a purpose.

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Whereas order is to give a meaning. If we would treat each thing according to its very nature, all things would fall easily into an appropriate order and only then they would really become what they are. In this manner, they would become truly complete. The chaos in which we live would give way to order, and the world would be meaningful and beautiful again.

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What I have said is the ground on which I stand; it is what I believe and the justification of what I do. Convictions are necessary but only of limited significance in the sphere of work. In the end, what matters is still the achievement. (Crossed-out addition to the rough manuscript: Goethe meant this when he said "Artist create, don't talk".)

Somewhere in Chicago in the 1950's, Mies gave an address in German. When analyzed, the document proves to be a concise overview of the ideology he held for most of his life. The ideals and values he puts forward are hard to disagree with, and one can easily be swept up and adhere to his logic. The ideas he presents don't seem all that alien, and might even feel familiar - accessible. Yet today, in the current state of the profession they appear to be all but lost. This paper will therefore be presented in two segments. The first part will be an in-depth analysis of some of the themes and ideas presented in the address Mies gave to gather a better understanding of his principles and the message they carry. The second part will relate them to the current situation and present philosophical standpoint in the architecture field, to understand why they aren't all that present anymore - and why they should.

At the very beginning of the lecture, Mies stresses out a very important idea that will serve as a starting point for this argumentation. Art as the manifestation of a perfect architecture.^[1]

The word itself [Baukunst, trans. the art of building] makes it clear - as he puts it. The fact is, he saw architecture as an art form. He also believed in a strong grammar

- architecture as language. If you are good at it, he says, you speak a wonderful prose. But if you are really good at it, you can be a poet.^[2] Him seeing architecture as an art form and comparing it to poetry might come as a surprise to some - especially his detractors, and this might be the very reason few people were able to capture the beauty of a miesian vocabulary - but even the shortest visit to any of his work should convince anybody fairly easily of the high poesy found in his architecture. By looking at his work - and in this case address, through the lens of art, we can gather a better understanding of some of its underlying principles.

Art is sometimes seen as an absurdly complex and impossible practice to define - and we will get to that in better detail later, but for now let us look at the definition of art given by Merriam-Webster - a surprisingly simple one:

"Something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings"

The Oxford dictionary gives an even simpler one:

"Skill; its display, application, or expression"

From these two straightforward definitions, we can extract two important themes; skill, and the expression of an idea - its

communication, and up until recently, art served almost exclusively one purpose - the expression of religious beliefs to the masses. It did so through extreme skill, and beauty. It fits very appropriately its given definition. Architecture followed a very similar path, and the great works of architecture - mainly cathedrals during those times, also expressed religious grandeur through skill and beauty; they needed to express the heavenly beauty and help in the belief of the masses; this was their mission, what they had to communicate. When seen at it through the lens of an artistic discipline, they were very successful at doing this - and became great works of art. Of course this was just as true outside the realm of architecture and in the discipline of the plastic arts - painting, sculpture - where artists achieved great works of art through extreme skill and a great importance given to beauty. Their works had to be beautiful in order to speak to the masses, this was a necessity, a very specific sought after quality. The qualities of classical beauty that are often dismissed and seen as past-dwelling were in fact very minutely orchestrated; matters of proportions, spatial relations, colors, textures, materials, environments were all carefully studied in order to achieve the greatest beauty, and to best communicate the message that needed to be heard - the message of god. These questions of skill and beauty were defined, grounded on firm principles. Skill is easily quantifiable, and so was beauty. These

artists knew very well what needed to be done in order to achieve a work of art that appears to be beautiful - it had to follow some rules, obey to a specific grammar. This is what Mies is trying to tell us in his address; the grammar which is to be followed in order to achieve a higher - better, level of architectural expression.

And this brings us to the next topic of discussion the lecture addresses; construction as form. If the stipulation of architecture as art is true, then it must carry a message - and involve a skill. This, he argues, lies in technology and construction. Architecture is the art of giving meaning to a historical period, movement or event - the epoch. And in the art of building, the epoch's essence - its content, lies in technology and construction. This is therefore the message that should be carried, expressed, in architecture for it to be true to itself and possess authentic content, giving it a purpose. A purpose that was brilliantly achieved in Gothic and Romanesque architecture, a period in time that is so clearly represented by its architecture - because it expresses these traits, the technology and the construction of the time, and turns it into art - into something with meaning. Architecture and construction aren't two separate processes, the building isn't thought in terms of form first and then built following what it should look like. Rather, construction itself determines the building, its form, and becomes architecture. This approach, he

stipulates, creates an objective base for the development of an architectural language, grammar - a principle on which to lean not dissimilar to the ones artists obeyed to in the past, turning architecture into art again.

The ideas Mies puts forward in this address are almost the archetypal approach to a rationalist philosophy. They follow very specific logics and principles to be adhered to. As we now know it, this approach quickly became overshadowed with the rise of postmodern philosophy soon after. Some of its principles might seem evident, but they are important to understand the condition on which they developed and how a lot of them are still misunderstood or purposefully misinterpreted; especially in the discipline of the arts.

Postmodern philosophy sought to detach itself from the rigidity of rationalism and some of what it considered its grand narratives^[3] - based on the acceptance of a universal truth - logic, and argued instead that there isn't a single truth, or that if there is, it is impossible for anyone to know. Instead it proposed a shift in values - values that were dependent on economical, social, and personal factors. Often associated with relativism, pluralism and self-referentiality, postmodern philosophy presented itself as a much more malleable approach than rationalism - and in this case, modern philosophy. This flexibility is very apparent in Walter Truett Anderson's classification

of what he sees as the four currents of post-modernism; the Postmodern Ironist, the Scientific Rational, the Social Traditional and the Neo-Romantic.^[4] In a few years time, postmodern philosophy took over as the dominant school of thought in philosophy and very soon took hold of the arts - and architecture.

The confusion about the movement - and its misinterpretation, begins here. In philosophy, post-modernism was a necessity. It was an intense period of questioning - healthy questioning, that shook ideas that had been stagnant for some time, opened the door to the exploration of new territories and led to the development of new movements, such as Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, metamodernism or posthumanism. And while in the field of pure philosophy this was a very fruitful change; it was much less so in other areas. Often accused of leading to obscurantism - the practice of deliberately preventing the facts of some subject matter from becoming known; post-modernism's own lack of principles made it hard to move past it. Noam Chomsky even went as far as arguing post-modernism as meaningless due to its lack of analytical or empirical knowledge.^[5] Philosopher Daniel Dennett even went as far as declaring that "Postmodernism, the school of 'thought' that proclaimed 'There are no truths, only interpretations' has largely played itself out in absurdity, but it has left behind a generation of academics in the humanities disabled

by their distrust of the very idea of truth and their disrespect for evidence, settling for 'conversations' in which nobody is wrong and nothing can be confirmed, only asserted with whatever style you can muster."^[6] They are both here talking about its negative impact on the humanities - but if we imagine it carried over the the disciplines of the arts, and architecture, their criticism seems to be even more relevance.

The lack of principles inherent to postmodern philosophy was used against its own critical quality, and served instead as a defensive tool; immunization against any sort of criticism - and therefore evolution. Not only was this detrimental to critical thought - it also served as validation of anything that merely existed. The original healthy questioning disrupted any preconceptions that existed previously. Ideas of authority, principles, definitions, ideologies, and even beauty or skill - our two main attributes found in art, became irrelevant due to the very nature of the philosophical message in which they inscribed themselves. A message which we are still fully emerged in today. The arts resorted to the only approach that still had any quantifiable value; through interest. Because they couldn't be good anymore - what is good? - or beautiful - what is beauty? - they sought the only thing left to seek; being interesting at the cost of everything else. The postmodern paradox lies in the very

premise of its philosophy; because of its very nature, or at least what it has become - absolute freedom from any form of authority and criticism, any change of direction can only be seen as a step backwards and prematurely outdated. And in the sake of interest, this simply isn't possible. Ultimately, it seems that architecture had an even poorer departure from the philosophical current. Whereas art kept a semblance of its root intact; to deliver a message - express an idea, architecture made part with it and became an exercise in style over formal issues. Postmodernism became concerned with ornaments; deconstructivists literally broke up their buildings. The richness and ambiguity of Derrida's questioning was completely gone and architecture followed a very similar path to the arts - this time without anything to express. It should be said - if not a bit unscrupulously, that Jacques Derrida himself stepped away from the architectural equivalent of his deconstructive philosophy after the publication of his collaborative project with architect Peter Eisenman in *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*.^[7]

Finally, it is interesting to note a field in which postmodern philosophy had little to no impact; the natural - or hard, sciences, insofar as they emphasize quantifiable data produced, tested, and confirmed through the scientific method.^[8] It is also the field that had the most groundbreaking progress in the last decades. It might seem obvious that scientific research

is conducted following very specific and rigorous methods; yet if the arts are to be believed this shouldn't necessarily be the case. Although the leaps done on one side against the stagnancy of the other should be more than enough to convince us otherwise. We could question how relevant the discussion is when talking about scientific method on one side and artistic behavior on the other; but the end objective for both of these is evolution and progress; only through different means.

It is easy to be critical of our own times and arguing that - in some instances, the past was better; it is less so to do it without dwelling and romanticizing it. The situation we are living in architecture today seems to stem from a misinterpretation and exaggeration of the postmodern philosophy, a mentality which we are still fully within and haven't moved past yet. But the original message - as first used by Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, seems to be lost; the questioning of notions of truth and objectivity became their annihilation, and used as a tool against critical thought. A relativistic approach is necessary; there is little doubt about that. The mistake that has been made so far has been to use it as justification and dilution of its original intent. Because relatively speaking there are no truths to be accepted, nor principles. This of course doesn't include everything, and it would be impossible for anyone to live or even do the simplest thing if he was to

actually believe that - decisions still have to be made. A relative approach is necessary in order to frame the point of reference; but once this first step is achieved, a rational - critical philosophy is necessary in order to avoid the destructive loop uncontrolled relativity allows for. And in this context, the appeal of a document like the Mies address seems more relevant than ever ■

Notes

1 Mies Van der Rohe, Unknown Address. Domus N°674, p17-24, July 1986.

2 "Mies Van der Rohe - Architecture as Language" Short movie, Alexandre Favre, 2012-2015.

3 Postmodernism: definition of postmodernism in Oxford dictionary (American English) (US).

4 Truett Anderson, Walter "The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World." Tarcher/Putnam, 1995.

5 Noam Chomsky on Post-Modernism, bactra.org.

6 Dennett on Wieselstier v. Pinker in the new Republic, <http://edge.org/conversation/dennett-on-wieselstier-v-pinker-in-the-new-republic>

7 Peeters, Benoît "Derrida: A Biography", p377-8. Polity Press, 2013.

8 Lagemaat, Richard van de "Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.