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Is there a duty to be modern?

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Tradition and Modernism: Design between the wars

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One of the features of the modernist theory of architecture and design which we still tend to take for granted is the idea that the form-giver is under an obligation to be modern. Now to be «modern» has of course been in the interest of every designer, not only the modernist one, if he were to survive in his business. But to be modern in this sense has rather been what the man in the street, not the modernist, has meant by being «modern». For the man in the street the modern was, and still is, identical with the fashionable. The modern in this sense has always been intrisically bound with the commercial, in the sense that the designer, since the very beginnings of commercial civilization, has been obliged to be modern for commercial reasons. He has had to see to it that his own business, or the business he served, offered the customer also the latest fashion. In other words, the non- modernist designer has felt obliged to be modern for the sake of the customer.

The modernist designer, however, has felt obliged to be modern for reasons which have had nothing to do with what the customer wanted and what could consequently be commercially successful. On the contrary, as we know, modernist designs have often been intensely disliked by the general public. During the interwar period they were mostly in collision with public taste. But if the modernist designer's obligation to be modern has had nothing to do with his obligation towards the customer and via the customer's satisfaction towards his own commercial staisfaction, from where has then the obligation come? To whom has the modernist designer felt obliged to?

The answer to this question is to be found, sometimes explicitly and sometimes only implicitly, in almost every piece of modernist writing on design. And the answer is that the modernist designer has felt obliged to be modern because of his obligation towards History, History with capital H. Now, what do we mean by that? According

to modernists the modern era, by virtue of being different from all previous epochs, was entitled to a contemporary style of its own, distinctly different from all previous epochs. This new style had to resemble the great historical styles in one respect only: like these styles, it had to be a genuine expression of its own epoch. That architects and designers of the 20th century continued to use variations of styles born in the distant past and in epochs so different from the modern time, was considered an act of distruth, cheating and dishonesty.

The gist of the alleged obligation towards History was succinctly expressed by the Swiss architect and future Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer in 1926: «Each age demands its own form. It is our mission to give our world a new shape with the means of today. But our knowledge of the past is a burden that weighs upon us, and inherent in our advanced education are impediments tragically barring our new paths. The unqualified affirmation of the present age presupposes the ruthless denial of the past».

Modernists, convinced that each age demands its own form, defined the formgiver's prime task as a kind of ministering to the modern epoch's putative need for new forms. It is important to note that it was not the client's need but the epoch's need which comes first. The modernist designer's new loyality is now with History – or, rather, History has become client no. 1.

In the following I shall try to answer three questions, all related to the problem of obligation to be modern: (1) Where did this feeling of the obligation towards one's own epoch, and ultimately towards History come from? (2) Is it true that each age demands its own form? (3) Is there any principle difference between the modern and the fashionable?

1. It seems that the idea of obligation towards History emerged almost as a logical consequence of the new historical consciousness which accompanied the new discipline of art history and architectural history, with its relativistic attitude towards period styles. In the decades around 1800 the styles of the past were for the first time presented as unique expressions of cultural, social, technological and other *extra-artistic* pressures of particular historical epochs.

The disruptive consequences of this historical consciousness in the field of design seem to have started with relativization of the status of classicism. For as long as classicism's claim to embody timeless and absolute aesthetic truth remained unchallenged, there could be no discipline of «art history» as we know it, with its sequence of stylistic epochs on equal footing, and each valuable in its own right. Art history as a scientific discipline could emerge only after non-classical styles were put on equal footing with classicism, which had considered them to be monstrosities for their ignorance of classical rules. It is enough to mention Vasari's condemnation of the Gothic, and the general Renaissance view of what was then named Middle Ages – that regrettable period of absence of classical discipline in-between the two great epochs.

The relativization of classicism was, surprisingly enough, started by classicists themselves. Already in the 17th century the French architect Claude Perrault questioned the previous view that the beauty of classicism was based on its embodying the absolute aesthetic truth, and held that it was based rather on custom. When the German art historian J. J. Winckelmann in the 18th century interpreted classicism for the first time in relation to its social, cutural and national background, he also, unintentionally, cast doubt upon the traditional claims of its timelessness and its absolute status. Before long it became obvious that classic-

ism colud not be considered as a timeless and absolute norm, and simultaneously seen as a result of a historically determined period.

The relativization of the status of classicism soon paved the way for rehabilitation of the Gothic and the other non-classical styles – and later even anti-classical styles – from classicist condemnation. The generation of romanticists who performed the first wave of rehabilitations used the same relativist argument which had previously undermined the supremacy of classicism: namely the argument that the non-classical styles must be seen, just as classicism itself, as genuine and legitimate expressions of their own historical periods. In this way there emerged, for the first time ever, a public awareness of a line of historical styles understood as causally determined, historically necessary expressions of their own epochs.

This idea of styles as expressions of historical epochs led to the belief that eventually was to change the face of the architecture and design of the 20th century: namely the belief that a new epoch must have an original, genuine and all-embracing style of its own. Already in 1820s and 1830s, as different revival styles more and more often appeared simultaneously, the idea of a genuine style generated a vexing question as to what actually was the *real* style of the time. Those among form-givers, and historians and critics of architecture and design who considered the new historical, deterministic interpretation of period styles to be the innermost clue to their essence, felt ill at ease with the revivalist architecture of the time. They felt that their own era was entitled to have an authentic style of its own, pertaining to its own historical epoch, and that architects and form-givers in general were consequently obliged to meet the epoch's need. The demand for the new style subsided around 1850, to reemerge with a new intensity in 1890s, becoming veritably voci-

ferous in between the wars.

This demand implied a radically new design philosophy which finally crystalized in the central imperative of modernism, *the obligation to be modern.* The modernist designer seemed to have pursued the following kind of reasoning: «Historical research in art, architecture and culture has shown that the styles of the past were not *created by designers* but rather *caused by historical determinants of non-artistic nature.* If this was the essence of the styles of the past, is then not the designer obliged to become a sort of a tool, or a medium, which the historical forces of the modern epoch could use to find their own genuine expression?» It is apparent from the programmes and manifestos of the European avant-garde from the 1890s on that to become a sort of medium for the determinants of the present was the high ideal of the modernist designer. In the period between the wars there seemed to be general agreement that the absolute precondition for *bringing about* (we cannot say *creating*) the legitimate, genuine and authentic style of one's own epoch was to be exclusively modern, i.e. to identify oneself fully with the modern time and to cut oneself off from the past.

We now have the answer to our first question. The feeling of obligation towards one's own time, and ultimately towards History, was a consequence of taking seriously the new historical and relativizing view of the past.

2. I would like to proceed to our second question and ask now whether it is true that each age demands its own form, or, in other words, *what constitutes the legitimacy of the modernist obligation.* It seems reasonable to expect that the obligation to be modern is either as legitimate today as it was sixty years ago, or else that it never really was a legitimate obligation. The general answer to the above question is that the obligation will seem

legitimate or illegitimate depending on one's philosophical view of the status of historical and scientific knowledge. For those who, like modernists, believed that the deterministic, relativist and materialist picture of the world, which historians and scientists have presented, is the only true picture, the obligation was a legitimate one; the modern age, logically speaking, obviously demanded its own genuine form. Once you accept the materialist contention that your immediate experience of freedom of will and freedom of choice is nothing but a subjective illusion, and that only necessity, natural or historical, is the real governing principle of the world, you will be obliged – if you are to be consistent – to comply with this new truth. And that is what modernist designers sought to do.

If you on the other hand see the historical/scientific picture of the world in e. g. Popperian or Kuhnian terms, as a bulk of not yet refuted hypotheses, or as a succession of «styles» of seeing the world, there will hardly follow any such obligation. On the contrary, you will see clearly the contradictions such an obligation entails. Seen from the viewpoint of those who *do not* take the scientist or the historian as a producer of absolute truths, modernism can in fact serve as a living illustration of the contradictions which emerge once you accept, and try to act on, the materialist position which maintains that only causes are real while intentions are but subjective illusions.

The first such contradiction, which is a sort of model of all the following ones, arises when you, of your own choice and by your free will, accept as truth that there is no choice and no free will. Modernism is ridden with this type of contradictions through and through. Take the idea of producing a genuine, authentic and necessary style for the modern age. According to materialist historians, all previous styles were ultimately results

not of intentions, but of causes. The modernist form-giver, accepting the historian's generalization that style is born out of extra-artistic, material factors – i. e. that it is *caused* and not *created* – wants to act according to this knowledge. What he in fact does is make a *programmatic attempt* to bring about something which was produced *without any program.* He *intends* to produce something that was brought about *without intentions.* He *strives* to produce *spontaneous* results. His *primary* aesthetic aim is to produce forms where aesthetics plays *secondary* role. He condemns lie, immorality and pretence in design, but what he in fact does is *pretending not to pretend.*

It is, however, necessary to emphasize that all these contradictions are there only as long as we view modernism as *non*-modernists, i. e. as long as we *do not* share the modernist view that scientific materialism and the relativist interpretation of the world represent the only truth. As long as modernists perceived the causal principle as the Truth with capital T, what they strived for made sense. From the modernist point of view there have never been, and never could be, any contradictions of the above mentioned sort, as long as modernists remained modernists. The reason is the very assumption that science discovers absolute truth. For if science does that, is it not logical to expect that acting on that truth would guarantee that our actions would be free of contradictions and free of mistakes, as long as we make every effort *to be one* with the casual principle? So the fault was not with modernist objectives in the first place; rather it was with the philosophical position which made these objective look natural and attainable.

In our approach to modernism we are consequently faced with two alternatives. When we *accept* the philosophical starting point of modernism we tend to be reduced to passively repeating modernist self-interpretations. In accepting their

starting point we have namely conceded that it is in principle possible to produce necessary forms, and in conceding this we have no particular reason (unless we want to launch our own version of modernism) to doubt that modernists were doing exactly that. Of course we can haggle over the «truthfulness» of this or that modernist form but that is as far as we can go.

The other alternative is to try to *question* the philosophical starting point of modernism, which will almost immediately disclose the contradictory and paradoxal nature of that position, and of modernism as a whole. In other words, if we keep sharing the philosophical position of modernism, we will not be able to see modernism from without, simply because we will in fact be modernists ourselves. Only when we became outsiders to modernism, will an avalanche of contradictions start pouring on us. And we will see that the ground on which modernism is buitl is made of the stuff of which dreams are made.

Take another central tenet of modernism, the idea of modern epoch as an objective, definite entity. It was for the sake of the modern epoch, or the modern *time*, or *our* time, or the *present time,* that modernists argued they were obliged to create the modern style. The whole of modernism is built around the belief that modern epoch, or *the present* in general, is something as real and as definite as the historian's historical epochs. But the notion of *the present* – from which all the other above notions spring – proves on closer inspection to cover entirely arbitrary units of time. If we try to pinpoint what we really mean by the term we find ourselves immediately in great difficulties as to establishing where, or rather when, the «present» really begins and the «past» ends. Introspection will show that the present is not a definite, objective unit of time as we tend to expect, but rather an entirely subjective, continually changing refe-

rence-point. What we call present is a unit of time always primarily defined by our ongoing *mental* relationship to a concrete situation, a concrete problem, a concrete activity at hand. It is this mental relationship that, like a searchlight in the dark, defines at any moment the area we call «present».

It then follows that the same thing which for one person belongs to the past, for another person may be a burning part of the present – and the other way around. And it can be felt so not only by two different persons but by one and the same person as well. Consequently, the notion of present may cover just about *any* unit of time; the present for me may mean my last couple of days in a new city, though in another context it may mean the time since the beginning of Bauhaus, and in the third context the term present may refer to the whole period since the Renaissance. (It follows, of course, that the term past, or history, is as relative as the term present – that what is one man's present is another's past.) That is why modernists could neither really affirm the present age nor really turn their back on the past. There never was, and never is, only *one* present or *one* past.

One of the consequences of the attempt to meet the alleged demand of the age for its own form was that modernist designers started to talk about their own work almost exclusively in terms of causality and necessity and epochs and periods: as if they were not *the producers* of new things but *historians and researches* of things produced by someone else. They were doing that because as consistent materialists they had to believe that their own world of daily decision-making and choosing was really a subjective illusion; to describe what one was doing in terms of alternative choices would be a sure sign of intellectual backwardness, or downright stupidity. That is probably why we find almost no modernist account of design process in terms of *choices*, and why practically all these

accounts are quasi-historical and quasi-scientific descriptions in terms of *causes and necessities.*

The duty to be modern was a duty to produce necessary forms, those that belong to one's own age. But – seen from a non-modernist viewpoint – there really is neither need nor possibility to produce «necessary» forms. It is not so that some forms are necessary and determined by material causes, while others are not. Rather it is a matter of perspective: in the observer's or historian's perspective, all man-made forms are ultimately necessary and determined, because the observer, or historian, will always be looking at things that are already completed and finished. From the perspective of the doer, the creator, the form-giver, those same forms are, however, always results of intentional choices. But modernists, being materialists, believed that there was only one true view of things – the materialist one. The materialist position implied the obligation to produce modern, necessary forms – the modern forms being necessary, and the necessary forms being modern – and, ultimately, to produce an authentic style that the modern times demand. It is the logic of consequent materialism that leads to the conclusion that each age demands its own form. But this conclusion makes sense only to those who share the materialist philosophical position. This then is the answer to our second question.

3. The answer to our third question – what is the difference between the fashionable and the modern – will be similar to the last answer: it all depends on your philosophical starting point. If you as a designer see materialism as the whole answer you will probably tend to see the fashionable as something entirely different from the modern. If you, however, consider materialism as one possible – interpretation of the world, then distinguishing between the fashionable and the modern makes no sense, and the two words will have

almost the same meaning. Let me elaborate a little on this.

If we look closer at the usage of the word *modern*, as e. g. in expressions like *modern technology*, we see that the word usually functions as a synonym for words like *new*, or *latest*. Now words like *new* or *latest* – or *modern* – have two different uses. Either they simply describe the *fact* that something is not old but was produced recently. Or they indicate that the new, latest or modern is a *value* in itself. In the last hundred years or so the «new», «latest» and «modern» have been becoming *value* in basically two different ways. One is because they have served as a vehicle of social differentiation, i. e. as a status symbol identifying members of a certain social group. In this function, serving as a symbol of social differentiation, the modern was considered a part of the *fashionable*. The other, newer, way in which the modern was turned into a value was when modernists identified the modern with the *necessary*. Modernist forms were thought of as modern *because* they were considered to be necessary forms.

As indicated at the beginning of the paper, the value seen in the modern (in the modernist sense) had nothing to do with what the absolute majority of consumers understood by the word; for them the word «modern» simply described one of the *choices* they had within the spectrum of the fashionable. The modernist idea of modernity on the other hand has had nothing to do with choice. On the contrary, the criterion of modernity has been the degree to which the object's form was, allegedly, a *necessary* expression of the material determinants of the present time. It was the form which was thought to be most determined and least arbitrary one, which was considered truly modern. The value of the modern, in other words, consisted in its alleged compliance with a scientific, materialist view of the world.

Now, as indicated earlier, there is also a non-materialist view of necessity which sees the problem of existence or non-existence of necessity as a question of perspective. Forms may appear objectively necessary, or subjectively chosen, all according to whether you see them from the observer's or the doer's point of view. For those who see necessity not as something out there, but as a product of our perspective, it is an impossibile, indeed, an absurd, task to try to produce necessary forms *by design.* But if necessary forms cannot be produced by design – *then there is no value in the modern that is independent of the fashionable.* The modern becomes *in reality* identical with the fashionable – and the obligation to be modern then in reality means an obligation to follow the fashion of the day.

It is, however, impossibile to *prove* beyond doubt that modernism has been something quite different from what modernists have believed it to be, that the true nature of modernism is not an exercise of necessity but rather an exercise of fashion, and that necessity in modernism only played a role of an excuse, but never was a fact in the sense *modernists themselves* believed it to be a fact. The reason why all this cannot be proven beyond any doubt is that there is no way to refute the philosophical underpinning of modernism, the materialist view of the world. This kind of materialism is based not on a hypothesis but on a faith, and every faith is irrefutable in principle since it rejects all arguments against itself as wrong by definition. This irrefutability of the materialist faith, and its attraction as a substitute for traditional religious orthodoxies, may also help to explain why modernism has lasted for so many generations.

We may add to our answer to the third question that we find good reasons to believe that there is no principle difference between the fashionable and the modern.

In conclusion let me give a short summary. Modernist designers have believed their attachment to the modern would guarantee objectivity of their forms (while the fashionable would lead only to subjective, arbitrary design) because they have believed in a principle difference between the modern and the fashionable. I have tried to show that *in theory* it could be argued that the modern can be distinguished from the fashionable if the materialist – i. e. the scientific and historical – interpretation of the world in terms of cause and effect is seen as modernists saw it: as *the only* truth about the world. It could be argued that if the form-giver embraced this new truth, i. e. if he let the causal factors of the present rather than fashion-dependent public taste determine the forms, he would produce new forms that would be objective and necessary, by virtue of belonging exclusively to the modern epoch. To make sure that this happened the designer would be therefore obliged to be modern. If, however, the materialist interpretation of the world is not the only possibile one – and I for one believe it is not – then the obligation to be modern in *practice* has functioned as an obligation to follow the forms at any time proclaimed as truly «modern» by modernist leaders. This contention appears to be more probable than the modernist one, which claims to have achieved objective forms, since it seems to square better with the facts of modernist practice. This practice, as distinct from modernist theory, would seem to prove that the difference between the modern and the fashionable is nought but the difference between two near synonyms.

In conclusion then: there is hardly a case for any obligation to be modern. As a non-modernist thinker put it, «To be of one's time is a task which one fulfills through the fatality of one's dates».