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### 3.2.1 Proclaiming the End of Postmodernism in Architecture

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#### ABSTRACT

In recent years, ever greater numbers of researchers have been turning their attention to the subject of postmodernism in architecture, with most starting by stating when it expired. Indeed, it is when a cultural movement is definitively part of the past that people most commonly undertake to study it. Whereas the date of its emergence is regularly put back to earlier and earlier moments in the history of architecture, postmodernism in architecture is commonly considered to have ended – or died – in the mid-1990s, a period that corresponds to the most recent past into which historians have commenced their investigations. From that time onwards, the field of contemporary architecture has been declared open to theory and criticism. This paper will carefully examine the conditions under which postmodernism's death notice was given in architecture, noting furthermore how this notice differed between the architectural cultures of Europe and the United States. Which historians, critics and architects conducted its autopsy? What arguments were developed, for example, in the columns of the American journal *Architecture* in 2011 to say that post-postmodernism's time was up? Clearly distinguishing stylistic questions and anthropological issues, the paper will go on to consider the possibility that the end of postmodernism was announced prematurely, outlining a number of hypotheses with a view to historicising contemporary architectural production.

#### KEYWORDS

Architecture, postmodernism, style, history, criticism

At the end of the 1980s, in the United States and in New York in particular, students, architects, critics and historians began to speak of postmodernism as something that belonged to the past. In the columns of the *New York Times*, the critic Paul Goldberger assured readers that for thirtysomethings, postmodernism was now both institutional and old-fashioned, while modernism was enjoying something of a comeback, albeit 'in fashion more than in substance.'<sup>1</sup> A few months later, in June 1988, in an article published in the *New Criterion*,<sup>2</sup> Roger Kimball expounded on how even the discipline's most illustrious elders were overcome by doubt. He was in fact reporting on a symposium and a debate, held respectively at Princeton University and the Parsons School of Design in New York City, during which architects Robert Maxwell, Anthony Vidler, Peter Eisenman, Robert Venturi and many others speculated about the 'death of postmodernism' and the advent of the 'next wave of architectural fashion'. In this same period, the historian Heinrich Klotz, who had been a companion to the movement, concluded the English edition of his history of postmodern architecture published by MIT Press by stating: 'The result of such daring adventures – trying to reach identity with the historical styles and still stay in the present – necessarily leads to the announcement of the "end of postmodernism." The final stage seems to have been reached, yet there is still much to come.'<sup>3</sup> And finally, there are many who hold that the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art during the summer of 1988 marked the beginning of a new era. Indeed, the critic Charles Gandee, in his review of the exhibition for *House & Garden*, claimed, with a hint of irony, that now 'Postmodernism is *passé*.'<sup>4</sup>

What was going on at that moment? Exactly what kind of postmodernism was under discussion here? And what does it actually mean to proclaim its end? Were the critics writing history in real time or just making hasty judgments? Whether the future proves them right or wrong, at the very least we should give serious consideration to these influential commentators on the American architectural scene and examine the arguments they put forward. Indeed, it is frequently from this announced end that postmodernism is interpreted today, as a movement succeeded by contemporary architecture. In the end, this terminal and founding moment puts into question the methods and the aims of historians and critics in ways that the present paper will attempt to enlighten.

#### THE FIASCO OF POSTMODERN ARCHITECTURE

Beyond the failures of such notable icons of postmodernism as the Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, which fell into disrepair a few years after its inau-

guration,<sup>5</sup> the first, often repeated argument that is used to condemn the movement at the turn of the 1990s focuses on the superficiality and artificiality of most of its realized projects. In the *New York Review of Books*, the critic Martin Filler avers that 'it is now widely acknowledged that postmodernism, which began two decades ago as a populist rejection of rigid and repetitive late modernism, has turned out to be just as formalist and schematic as the style it intended to supplant.'<sup>6</sup> The historian Alan Colquhoun is more specific in the columns of *Assemblage*, highlighting the casual use of the classical language of architecture made by developers and large firms: 'The problem that we encounter in the typical postmodern American office building is the lack of connection between the purpose of the building and the historical associations of its artistic form.'<sup>7</sup> He goes on to demonstrate the inability of postmodernism to implement its promise of giving meaning to architectural forms. The skyscrapers designed by Philip Johnson in the years before for Bank of America, AT&T, PPG, etc., could easily have served him as examples. Let us note here that henceforth it is postmodern constructions rather than postmodern discourse that are being condemned.

The second argument put forward to explain the burnout of the movement concerns the affirmative rather than the critical nature of most of the projects. For many commentators, by going from camp to kitsch, that is to say from parody to pastiche,<sup>8</sup> postmodernism lost its subversive and revolutionary power and so came to be considered as nostalgic, if not to say reactionary. This is evidenced by many projects, such as those Michael Graves designed for Disney – the Swan and Dolphin Hotels (1990) and the Walt Disney Headquarters (1990) – or Robert Stern's Casting Center (1989). Mary McLeod shows how, in the late 1980s, far from its grassroots origins postmodernism was thus directly associated with the 'new corporate style',<sup>9</sup> and as a result was devalued in the same manner as modernism had been twenty years earlier. For left-leaning architects and critics, this was enough of an invitation to bury postmodernism and place their hopes in a new movement awash with references to Russian constructivism.

The third frequently invoked argument concerns what had once been postmodernism's hegemonic status. From this point of view, the movement was undermined from within by a number of architects rightly or wrongly considered as its heroes. Robert Venturi came out with a series of scathing comments. For some time, he had railed against the advent of a new orthodoxy: 'the Post-modernists in supplanting the Modernists have substituted for the largely irrelevant universal vocabulary of heroic industrialism, another largely irrelevant universal vocabulary – that of parvenue Classicism ...'.<sup>10</sup> At the end

of a decade during which it had been omnipresent in specialized publications, postmodernism was a victim of its success, and for many observers had betrayed the promise of pluralism and eclecticism it held to in the place of an ideology.

### THE END OF STYLE AND THE RISE OF STYLING

Through the various arguments they developed, most commentators on the American architectural scene were certainly in consensus by the late 1980s about assimilating postmodernism to a historicist or classical style that succeeded the International Style. Moreover, the detractors of postmodernism concurred on this point with its propagandists, a pair of whom, Charles Jencks and Robert Stern, successively published two canonical works: *Post-modernism: the new classicism in art and architecture* and *Modern Classicism*.<sup>11</sup>

What is one to make of the postmodernism becoming a style? Firstly, that it retrospectively differentiates projects and designers hitherto bunched together by Charles Jencks under the welcoming banner of 'radical eclecticism'.<sup>12</sup> Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas and Peter Eisenman can no longer be considered postmodernist, but for a time became deconstructivists. Conversely, Allan Greenberg, Quinlan Terry and John Blatteau, who came from traditionalist backgrounds, were now categorized as postmodernist. The movement gained in unity, but its critical ambitions were reduced and it certainly lost some of its richness.

More fundamentally, it was the very notion of style that on this occasion took on a particular meaning, even a new one. The classicist or historicist style is not a style in the manner this notion is understood by modern architects, that is to say, as the historian and critic Peter Collins puts it, 'the expression of a prevailing, dominant or authentically contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of human experience peculiar to their day.'<sup>13</sup> Instead, the style in question referred to a series of *a*-historical and *a*-geographic formal features, completely independent of the technical, economic and social context in which they appeared – in this case the post-industrial American society of the late twentieth century. At a push, style can in this sense be considered as a signature by which we identify one architect over another. As understood by late 1980s commentators, the classical style was a fashion destined to be replaced by another fashion, like that of deconstructivism. Moreover, Philip Johnson describes the latter as 'not a new style' in the same way as modernism had been, but rather a set of 'formal similarities'.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, the announcement of the death of postmodern style in the American architecture world might indicate paradoxically the true coming of postmodernism, which from then on would be irreducible to any particular style and would deploy itself in countless forms of individual expression. This is what McLeod suggests when she emphasizes the continuity, rather than the rupture, that occurs with deconstructivism.<sup>15</sup> It is also what Jencks argues in an issue of *Architectural Design* entitled "Post-Modernism on Trial" when he interprets the announced demise of the movement as a sign of renewal, precisely because of the revived pluralism that it heralded.<sup>16</sup>

### THE LIVING-DEAD POSTMODERNISM

What light can the discourse pervading other professions and other disciplines in the same period shed on this so-called end of postmodernism in architecture?

Writing in *The New York Times*, the critic Andy Grunberg in 1990 affirmed that in visual arts, postmodernism 'has lost its momentum' and was showing 'signs of fatigue'.<sup>17</sup> In the art criticism and theory journal *October*, which had for a long time served as a laboratory for the movement, the critic Hal Foster lamented that 'treated as a fashion, postmodernism became *démodé*'.<sup>18</sup> As for the literary world, the situation was no different. De Viljo Sloan commented that 'postmodernism as a literary movement in the United States is now in its final phase of decadence.' Its misfortune was to have been 'increasingly institutionalized and infested with academic theory and criticism.'<sup>19</sup> Seen from the point of view of its various cultural manifestations, postmodernism therefore seemed to be in decline and destined not to survive very long the modernism it had contested.

In the humanities and social sciences, in contrast, the meaning attributed to postmodernism broadened throughout the 1980s. From a subject of strictly epistemological reflection in the work of the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard,<sup>20</sup> postmodernism became paradigm that illuminated the economic, political and social context as a whole for many neo-Marxist intellectuals. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism refers to 'the cultural logic of late capitalism',<sup>21</sup> and, in the view of David Harvey, to a 'historical condition'<sup>22</sup> characterized by a new form of the flexible accumulation of capital. For those academics who single out the example of architecture, questions of style are instrumental; the most important thing is that postmodernism meets the growing demand for product differentiation in a competitive economy. In this respect, historical forms, symbolic images and signed architectures

play a crucial role in the real estate market. The sociologist James Mayo argues in this spirit that 'just as with the historic roots of Postmodernism, architectural firms are using deconstruction as a design approach to market their buildings. Business interests have thus appropriated deconstruction for aesthetic capital as they have with other approaches to style.'<sup>23</sup>

When thus placed in a broader context in the early 1990s, postmodernism seems less ailing than humming with great vitality, a vitality mirroring that of American capitalism as boosted by Reaganomics. From this point of view, one could also consider postmodernism in the light of the debate sparked in 1989 surrounding the dissemination of Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the end of history.<sup>24</sup> The American philosopher argued that liberal democracy had triumphed over rival ideologies and was thus the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution', as well as 'final form of human government', therefore bringing about the 'end of history'. In the very same way, it is into a perpetual present – a stasis – that postmodernism entailed the American architectural scene in the early 1990s, from which it has been merely adapted to various trends in matters of form and signification.

### POSTPOSTMODERNISM?

Dead, but not really, postmodernism haunted architects, critics and historians all through the next decade. In 2001, *Architecture* the journal of the American Institute of Architects published a special feature whose clearly stated objective was again to turn the page. On the front cover, Venturi defended himself against an invisible prosecutor, arguing that he had never been postmodern, and in his editorial, the critic Richard Ingersoll stated that 'you don't need a coroner to find out if postmodernist architecture is dead.'<sup>25</sup> Throughout the issue, as a decade earlier, the debate was about classicism and historicism. In the academic and professional fields of American architecture, postmodernism therefore essentially remained a style of the past, and not an active principle in the present. This is a view of reality that researchers, particularly historians, now must probe to see what elements of denial it includes and how it obscures our understanding of contemporary architecture.

That said, many questions arise concerning the way in which the history of contemporary architecture can be written today. Because it is suspended in a perpetual present, can contemporary architecture still be analysed from a diachronic point of view? Or is it better to approach it from a strictly synchronic angle? One of the issues at stake is in fact to know whether histo-