

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

5-1-1984

Towards a post modern aesthetic

Barry Yavener

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Yavener, Barry, "Towards a post modern aesthetic" (1984). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

TOWARDS A POST MODERN AESTHETIC

by

Barry Raymond Yavener

May, 1984

6929162

APPROVALS

Adviser: Taylor E. Sigley

Date: May 17, 1984

Associate Adviser: Jon Dodd

Date: 5.17.84

Associate Adviser: [Illegible]

Date: May 17, 1984

Assistant to the Dean
for Graduate Affairs: Fred Meyer

Date: 5/22/84

Dean, College of
Fine & Applied Arts: Robert H. Johnston Ph.D

Date: 5/24/84

I, Barry Yavener, hereby grant permission to the
Wallace Memorial Library of RIT, to reproduce my thesis in whole or
in part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use or
profit.

Date: 5-17-1984

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Introduction	1
The Theory	5
The Pieces	8
The Conclusion	21
Footnotes	24
Sources Consulted	25

INTRODUCTION

Furniture design is currently experiencing yet another change in stylistic direction. Contemporary modes of thinking are being questioned and alternative solutions to design problems are being sought. Furniture is gradually becoming more elaborate and in many cases more colorful. Greater amounts of time are being allocated to develop surface ornamentation. A piece's embellishment is rapidly becoming as important as the piece itself.

Ornamentation in furniture designed in the last few decades was used very sparingly. Now it appears that these details and interesting additions are conceived of first and then the overall piece of furniture is designed around those specific details.

It is natural that design trends change. History has seen many and this one in principal is no different than any other. The motives or justifications for stylistic changes are varied. The reason may be due to a foreign influence, a renewed interest in nature, or just the attainment of a certain saturation point is reached. Whatever the reason, a search for new and fresh ideas is undertaken. These new styles vie for position and attention until eventually one becomes dominant, gains favor and assumes command.

The change does not occur overnight. It is a gradual process that only resolves itself with time. Consequently one can detect a definite overlapping in design styles when researching past works.

Naturally to be able to categorize these works, names or labels had to be assigned to the various periods in history. Names such as "Empire", "Art Nouveau" and "Queen Anne" are but a few

examples of this labeling system. The names are of course chosen for differing reasons, but whatever the rational some of these same methods are used today for the purpose of categorization.

In reviewing artwork one will notice many of the items reflect the same stylistic principles that governs the architecture that surrounds it. Following the aforementioned system of labeling, we find that many of today's names also have their source in architecture. I refer specifically to the Late Modern and Post Modern styles, which is the focus or central concern of this thesis.

The modernist tradition from which Late Modern stems is extremely compositional in nature, judiciously evaluating all constituents that comprise a form. It is a movement that is concerned solely with itself, the new, the avant-garde. Jurgen Habermas, sociologist and inter-disciplinary scholar presently associated with the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg, Germany catalogues modernism as "... defying the cultural order...".¹ It represents a formalistic attitude that associates with abstraction, expressivity, clarity and refinement.

Late Modernism extends those parameters mentioned above. Still clinging on to the modernist positions, the aim is to push the limits and try to create a more visually interesting statement. As an example I again refer to architecture where more and more glass is utilized and lesser amounts of concrete in an attempt to develop a lighter, cleaner structure trying all the while to focus one's attention on the overall form. There is a real importance attached to making the objects more sculptural, to develop

permeation of angles and dynamic thrusts. There still exists that emphasis on purity and one directionalism, however, those original ideas are being questioned. In essence, more risks are being taken for the preservation of the modernist mentality.

Post Modernism, a term conceived by the architectural historian Charles Jencks, gained popularity in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Through his publications, Jencks saw Post Modernism as a kind of eclecticism that was being brought into architecture by a small group of young New York architects. Their purpose was to offset that extreme modern monolithic point of view related to the International style of architecture, the style made popular by the influence of Mies Von Der Rohe. Actually the problem was not so much him as it was his followers and imitators. These architects were borrowing similar techniques of construction but neglected to include a particular spirit that Mies was able to capture. I am referring to a lack of certain surface treatments that make a buildings exterior appear like a rectangular glass cube.

Jencks observed these young New York architects attempting to offer a contrary aesthetic position. Tired of the monotheistic glass cube, they began to introduce cultural traits back into architecture, which had been abandoned during the 1940's and 1950's when the International style was most popular. Rather than everything being contained in a singular rectangular upright form, their idea was to try to break up those very serious unified statements with a lighter approach. They began to think in terms of aggregates of forms in relation to each other and to the structure of the building.

Gradually the term Post Modernism was appropriated from architecture and applied to the other visual arts to describe works. The art critic, Douglas Davis was one of the first to adopt the term. He began to see this same use of combining dissimilar forms and meanings to replace monotheistic forms and meanings. Other critics like Rosalind Krauss, Professor of Art History at the City University of New York and Douglas Crimp, Managing Editor of October Magazine, also defined Post Modernism as a clear break with the aesthetic field modernism. This reinvestigation of differing cultural signs and the combination of them is forming a new nexus. These new ideas give a greater sense of freedom and plasticity to the object.

At the heart of Post Modernism then is eclecticism. It is the borrowing of ideas from a variety of sources and establishing a relationship between them.

In addition to eclecticism there is another integral component of Post Modernism. This feature is called historicity. It is the merging of historical elements or motifs. These separate elements are combined to create a form from which one may trace several sources where the whole becomes greater than the sum of the individual parts.

A third aspect of Post Modernism is more subtle than the elements above, yet no less important. That ingredient is the new highly technical media and the impact it is having on society. Never before has so much information been at our fingertips. This new phenomenon of photoreproducing anything, keying that information into computer networks, coupled with the ability to

instantly retrieve the images has changed the way we view the world. No longer do we need to travel overseas to research forms, the archives from every major establishment has been entered into computers.

So much material is available to us that it has become an arbitrary selection of forms. The key is that even though we have all this information at our disposal it does not mean that the statement is any less significant.

THE THEORY

Within this broad definition of Post Modernism there exists many interpretations. Everyone seems to have their own translation. Frederic Jameson, Professor of Literature and History of Consciousness, suggests that "...there will be as many different forms of Post Modernism as there were high modernism in place..."² This statement seems correct when we view current works, some are more reproductive in essence while other works are wild abstractions of the same forms. Whatever the translation, all of these endeavors fall under the loose classification of Post Modernism.

The reason for this is due to the prefix, "Post". Whenever you encounter this prefix or the prefix, "Neo", in front of another word you are involved in a period of transition. For example Post Impressionism was the transition between Impressionism and Cubism.

With this information in mind one is now capable of understanding the course of evolution that my work is taking. Beginning with a late modern aesthetic, the pieces on display

gradually move away from that ideology toward the realm of the Post Modern. It is a mental transition that spans more than two years in time, though the work presented only represents the final stages of development.

One reason for my move towards a Post Modern frame of mine was due to the fact that I was raised in an environment filled with antique furnishings. The more I came in contact with Post Modern furniture the more I realized that this move towards the use of historical forms fit in well with my own background. This is the feature that appealed to me the most.

I became more interested in this new wave of furniture that was being produced around me and decided to look at the movement more closely. Though much of these new works had their roots in history, each piece seemed to handle the translation differently.

Slowly I began to develop my own ideas about Post Modernism, by selecting those aspects that best reflected my own ideas about furniture, I realized again that I was most sympathetic to the idea of using elements from the past. The first attempts were made by incorporating fragments of past works as a starting point in the designing process. Playing off of those shapes I could create new feelings and moods or design with the notion of creating the same feelings that the original forms were intended to evoke. Disparate shapes and forms might also be carefully added to activate or pacify those same emotions while still being sympathetic to the form.

It is the ability to interpret history freely that is so attractive to me. What worries me however, is a movement within Post Modernism to, in my opinion, not take the designing process

far enough. Some work produced seems to be nothing more than reproduction. It is my feeling that we may borrow these elements from history, but we must reinvest these highlights in new and different ways and not take the past so literally. The original intension of Post Modernism, and one I am in agreement with, was to extract elements from history and use the forms in such a way that may create a feeling of that original period but not to produce period pieces.



The ladies writing table and chair is the work I chose to discuss first. I am doing so because this set, I believe is the least Post Modern in concept. Although the forces of Post Modernism were already upon me, they were only slight at this time. In fact the leg detail which was extracted from the Worldway Postal Center in Los Angeles, California was the only conscious act of the Post Modern influence. I was still strongly infected with that Miesian search for clarity and purity of form. There was a great concern for the relationship between table and chair as well as the interrelationship of structural members. I was searching for a very formal look and I desired everything to work toward that goal.

I decided to use only one type of wood in the pieces because I believed that it would make a more unified statement. Ebony feet were attached to the bottoms of all leg members but this I believe does not at all distract ones attention from the form, in fact I believe it adds a touch of elegance that adds to the formality of the set. The use of negative space, being one of my favorite design elements, was utilized in this piece to emphasize the feeling of lightness and grace. There was a great desire in me at that time to design furniture that had a feminine quality. I believed then and still do that fine work possesses that feeling. This is the main reason for the slightness of the structural members.

The table top was shaped so that it draws the user towards it. The chair I believe, reflects this shape and it also continues the angular quality that is also present in the table top. The material for the chair was selected for the formal color as well as

for the pattern present. The pattern design on the fabric consists of small diamonds that are grouped to form a larger diamond, thus carrying through the geometrics of the set. The drawer sides were also angled to follow the same feeling as the rest of the pieces.

While designing the umbrella stand I came to the realization that the Late Modern influence was rapidly loosing the grasp it had on me for so long. More and more I found myself searching history to discover special details that I could extract and update into interesting pieces. As a rule I try not to look at furniture for inspiration because I find that it restricts my own designs. Designing the umbrella stand I did however and chose a style known as Biedermeire.

The Biedermeire style proper (1815 - 1830) developed toward the end of the Napoleonic Empire and was an offshoot of the Neo-Classical style. It seems that a new feeling was emerging among the bourgeoisie of Germany and Austria for comfort and innovation. Unlike the imperial French Empire style that it was paralleling in time, Biedermeier furniture was less pretentious and was not built by the King's courts but by ordinary craftsmen. It utilized combinations of geometric shapes and strived towards uncluttered surfaces. The country having a major influence on Biedermeier work, both technically and artistically, was England. It seems England, at that time, was more advanced than any other European country. Germany and Austria realized that the foundations for the Industrial Age were being laid and it would be in their best interest to keep abreast of developments.

While reviewing Biedermeier pieces I came across a spittoon built in Vienna around 1820. I enjoyed what was happening in the upper section of the piece, but I believed that the base did not work well with the rest of the form. I rearranged the upper section and totally redesigned the base.

I feel that this piece, of all the work presented is the least extravagant, which is exactly what I wanted since it follows the desires of its ancestors. I feel that I was true to them and to my own theories on Post Modernism.



The next work that I want to discuss is the chest of drawers. As in much of today's Post Modern furniture the tendency to emulate architectural characteristics is great. In following this line of thinking there was a desire to incorporate an architectural motif in this piece. This time though, I chose to make the extracted element a recognizable one. After careful deliberation I decided to create an oriental feeling within the piece. With this thought in mind I set out to search for an element that would best satisfy my purpose. While studying early Chinese architecture I came across an element that I thought would work well. The element that attracted my attention was a roof detail. There were many to choose from but the one that would best suit the piece was from the Sung Dynasty (960 - 1279). Theseverely upswept corners would lend itself perfectly to the chest of drawers.

During the forth, fifth and sixth centuries the features that are typically associated with oriental architecture appeared. Among these were the curved roof and upswept corner details. These were designed by Chinese architects to give greater emphasis and attention to the roof. Working with already existing styles in use, namely the Beam-Frame system of support, these architects exaggerated details to express and refine the roof as one of the main elements of the building.

In my opinion it was not until the Sung Dynasty that these changes were fully realized.

The sides of the chest of drawers are curved similar to the way some openings into Chinese gardens were handled. All frame members were tapered to create a feeling of refinement and elegance

as well as to try to keep the weighty feeling to a minimum. The bottom members were curved upward to give the piece some lift. The woods chosen were utilized because of the richness they possess and because I enjoy their interaction.

The only other detail left to be resolved was the handles. In looking at the overall design of the piece I decided that one more detail with an oriental feeling was necessary.

The main portion of the handle was merely a reflection of the bottom frame member. The three projecting pieces evolved from viewing oriental gateway, though of no particular source. The handles were cast in bronze and is similar to oriental furniture that utilized ornamental metalwork in their later works.



The lavender fan cabinet also follows the pattern of using historical fragments for design stimulation. However, I again decided to take forms that are not traceable to their original source. The overall shape of the cabinet was developed from an almost insignificant detail from the side of the gold openwork of a mount for a Celtic cup, dating from about two hundred years before the birth of Christ.

During the designing process of any piece of furniture I constantly strive to question the norm. In other words, I ask myself questions as to why certain elements are handled the way they are. Then, if possible I modify the traditional solutions. Following this procedure I decided to have the doors of the cabinet open by swinging down from the sides. While drawing this I realized that something was lacking. Through my own thinking, as well as from the input of my colleagues, the idea of a folding presentation was conceived. The fans were developed to fulfill this need and their shapes were designed to reflect the overall shape of the cabinet, as well as to follow the practices of early Celtic artwork by utilizing geometric ornamentation.

Lavender was chosen for the glass and for the fan work due to the fact that it is a color typical to Post Modern art forms. Black was used next to the curly maple for high contrast and a strong impact. All brasswork was fabricated to accent the shapes and geometric feeling of the cabinet.





The Rooks and Columns table combines all of the elements typical to the Post Modern aesthetic discussed earlier. Though the idea of unity and order still linger, I believe that it is an asset rather than a liability. The preciousness of leaving the wood alone colorwise, so typical to the modern woodworker, is all but gone here. It is not to say that natural wood surfaces will never again be used, but that the option and ability to alter a woods natural state is now at my disposal.

Following a trend in Post Modern furnishings, an architectural theme was used. The idea was to try to achieve the feelings and appearance of an ancient Greek temple. The columns, which were originally purchased at a garage sale, came off a porch in Rochester, New York and was the nucleus of the design. Although they are closer to Roman Doric columns in style, I feel that the elements work well together and this is eclecticism in full swing. In accordance with my Post Modern philosophy, the columns were painted to further remove them from their original context. Even though Doric columns historically had no bases, I felt that one would terminate the form better, allow for a mix of mediums and continue to follow the ideas of eclecticism.

This table, being less serious in nature than the previous pieces, posed fewer restrictions on me aesthetically. I felt less pressure and more receptive to new possibilities. The idea of using black plastic chess rooks on the base was the direct result. I believe that the decision to use these actually helped the overall concept of the piece.



The other wooden elements, which included both bases and top, were given specific edge treatments and then stacked to maintain the temple-like feeling.

The last detail is the brass bar work on the edge of the top. It is a distinguishing feature in the Frieze (middle section) of Greek Doric Entablature (roof structure), during the fifth and sixth centuries before the birth of Christ. The three channels or Triglyphs were used for vertical support of the Entablature. I employed this motif to balance the table visually. Feeling that the base and columns were attracting too much attention, I decided that this would be a good solution to the problem as well as create more visual stimulation in the piece.

THE CONCLUSION

A question that comes to mind after reviewing contemporary art and architecture is, "What made the characteristics of Post Modernism so attractive?" We might easily have taken any number of paths that would have led us away from modern aesthetics. There seems to have been a great desire to change the object and the social context which accompanies it, but why backwards? Fredric Jameson thinks that "...we wish to be recalled to a time less problematic than our own..."³, a form of escapism if you will. Michael Graves, an architect involved in Post Modern aesthetics claims that, "...the symbols of culture are again becoming crucial to our identity in relation to buildings and places..."⁴ Rosalind Krauss maintains that, "The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having evolved from the forms of the past."

Talking to several designers I found that they desired to build furniture based on the past, but feared the consequences. With the advent of Post Modernism they feel free to build the pieces they have thought about for years, the status of the work being legitimized by correlating the pieces to history.

On a personal note, I feel that Post Modernism is a plateau, a kind of resting place. A point in time where we can catch our breath, relax, forget the complexities and turmoil that accompany our lives so that we may be ready for the next assault.

The next logical question, I believe, would be to ask, "Where do we go from here?". When confronted with this question most designers replied with a similar, "I do not know, I will just have to wait and see what happens" attitude. I then decided to turn to the source, the area from which Post Modernism emerged, architecture. Perhaps here one might find the answers.

Each year Progressive Architecture Magazine hosts an architectural design competition. Hundreds of architects submit their slickest plans in search of recognition. In reviewing this years designs selected as the best in each category, it was obvious that there was a change in the moods toward Post Modernism. All the jurors chose to pass by the designs with more overt historical ornamentalism, indeed the saturation point for Post Modernism as we know it may already be upon us. The winning designs did have a historical basis but they were severely stripped of embellishments and a more constructivist attitude prevailed this year.

Is this the direction that furniture design will travel, will it stay here for a while, or will it seek a new stimulus, something other than architecture?

During the course of this thesis I was separated from two of my peers that had, on several occasions, offered their advice concerning questions of an aesthetic nature. Without their help I floundered. Then I realized that I would have to make the design decisions. In the past, when having to choose between various design options, my gut reactions suggested one answer, though my well intentioned colleagues persuaded me to pursue another. Looking

back, I now realize that more often than not these so called gut reactions were the better choice, and that I always possessed the ability to make the correct decisions but I lacked the confidence to trust my own judgment. Recognizing this, I was more determined than ever to look to myself for the answers. The designs that followed this discovery were more exciting and stimulating than any previous. I started excepting and applying concepts that were at one time out of the question. As I gain confidence I am and hopefully will continue to reevaluate and scrutinize all external stimulation and will place more trust on ideas that come from within.

Following this thinking the directions taken by furniture design, architecture or any other concentration will certainly have their influences on me, but not to the extent they have in the past. The real and more important question is, "In which direction am I headed?" The answer to this question will depend less and less on the world around me and more on the world within me, and even I do not know the answer to that.

FOOTNOTES

¹Jurgen Habermas. "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic. ed. Hal Foster. (Port Townsend, Washington, 1983) p. 10.

²Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. ed. Hal Foster. (Port Townsend, Washington, 1983) p. 112.

³Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. ed. Hal Foster. (Port Townsend, Washington, 1983) p. 116.

⁴Michael Graves, "Michael Graves on the Language of Architecture". Architectural Digest. April, 1983. p. 36.

⁵Rosalind Drauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in The Anti-Aesthetic. ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington, 1983) p. 31.

SOURCES CONSULTED

1. Alfieri, Bruno. Lotus 6
Venezia, Italy: Fantonigrafica
1969
2. Boyd, Andres. Chinese Architecture 1500 BC - AD 1911
Chicago, The Chicago University Press
1962
3. Bussagli, Mario. Oriental Architecture
New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
1973
4. Chambers, William. Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Machines and Utensils
New York: Arno Press. A New York Times Company
1980
5. Finlay, Ian. Celtic Art An Introduction
New Jersey: Noyes Press
1973
6. Fletcher, Sir Banister. A History of Architectue on the Comparative Method
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons
1954
7. Foster, Hal., ed. The Anti-Aesthetic Essays on Post Modern Culture
Port Townsend. Washington: Bay Press
1983
8. Graves, Michael. "Michael Graves on the Language of Architecture". Architectural Digest
April, 1983. pp. 30 - 36
9. Himmelheber, Georg. Biedermeier Furniture
London: Faber and Faber Limited
1974
10. Jacobsthal, Paul. Early Celtic Art
London: The Oxford University Press
1969
11. Jencks, Charles. The Language of Post Modern Architecture
New York: Rizzol International Publications Inc.
1977

12. Lawrence, A.W. Greek Architecture
Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd.
1957

Individuals Interviewed:

Robert Morgan
Richard Newman
Houghton Wetherald