Postmodern design

During the post–World War II period the modernist ideals of rationality and functionalism, modulated by concern for social welfare, overwhelmingly dictated the shape and form of downtown buildings and spaces. By the 1960s, however, it was clear that the modern movement's original imperatives had been replaced by the imperatives of an advanced capitalist economy. The legacy of the movement was not social housing for workers but flagship buildings for corporations. The building skyline of all major American downtowns was outlined by the flat rooftops of monumental glass boxes.

In the late 1960s a new design ideology appeared as a commentary and a reaction to the primacy of the modern movement. Interestingly, the postmodernist polemic against modernism concentrated more on issues of style rather than substance. Postmodernism advocated a selective revitalization of older styles (Jencks 1977), often leading to a pastiche of vernacular architectonic elements. The overall effect has sometimes been characterized as aesthetic populism (Dear 1986). Postmodernist writings were critical of the anonymity, standardization, and placelessness of the International Style. Reacting against the aesthetic austerity and purity of form that modernism had espoused, they called for an architecture of "complexity and contradiction" (Venturi 1966) that would draw from commercial and vernacular landscapes, as well as from the world of television and advertising.

While postmodernism seemed to concentrate on aesthetics, the construction of witty "decorated sheds" (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1977, 87), some looked beyond the playfulness, depthlessness, and superficiality of this new design ideology. Fredric Jameson (1991) was one of the first to argue that rather than being a temporary stylistic fad, postmodernism represented the "cultural logic of late capitalism"—it was the product of and response to a historical reality, the third expansion of capitalism around the globe. A postindustrial economy, characterized by an internationalization of fictive commodities and based on financial and business services, required an architecture for the consumer, identified as the white-collar office employee (Lash 1990).

The idioms that compose the language of postmodernism intend to serve the same need: to make space all the more appealing for consumers. Many consumer experts argue that a product is more easily liked if it is familiar. Hence, while modernism often intended to shock its audience by using new materials and vocabulary and by breaking with the past, postmodern design uses familiar elements borrowed from older styles. Arches, columns, pilasters, and pediments are historical quotations, but they also provide visual references to beloved and popular settings of the world (Italian piazzas, country towns, European hill towns, and so on). Umberto Eco (1985, 166) has called this practice the "new aesthetics of seriality," where the repetition of known and expected patterns and themes aims to relax, entertain, and even amuse the viewer. Eco explains that postmodern aesthetics avoid interruption, novelty, or shock and instead value the repeatable, familiar, and expected.

Often a product has to be attractive or entertaining in order to sell. The minimalism and austerity of modernism are replaced by a pastiche of colors and by stylish and highly ornamental materials that intend to attract, impress, and at the same time promote the feeling of affluence in a materialistic, capitalist society. The aesthetic result blends well with the purposes of commercial enterprise. The appearance of the signifier is enhanced through decoration, packaging, and advertising, while the meaning and substance of the signified become fuzzy.

Sometimes a product needs to achieve some distinction in order to sell. The universality and standardization of modernism are replaced by designs custommade for developers and their clients. Ironically, however, these designs do not show any particular sensitivity to the context, culture, or local history of places, but simply provide the decor for the act of consumption (Boyer 1992). Scott Lash has argued that this postmodernist idiom reveals a "de-semanticized historicity," since historical signifiers are utilized not for their relationship to the history of the setting but simply for their ability to produce an effect on the consumer (Lash 1990, 72).

A product should not scare its prospective consumers. In contrast to the political agenda of the early modern movement, postmodernism appears neutral and apolitical; it is interested in aesthetics rather than ethics, in the medium but not the message (Harvey 1989; Ellin 1996). Postmodern design eliminates feared and unwanted political, social, and cultural intrusions. Space is cut off, separated, enclosed, so that it can be easily controlled and "protected." This treatment succeeds in screening the unpleasant realities of everyday life: the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the landscapes of fear, neglect, and deterioration. In the place of the real city, a hyperreal environment is created, composed by the safe and appealing elements of the