

## **Politics, Pluralism, and Postmodernism**

[abridged]

The 1960s did not spark the social or political revolutions forecasted by campus riots in the United States and in Europe or the disruption of the 1968 Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago. As argued, however, by British historian and author Arthur Marwick, the challenge of new viewpoints stemming from minority groups, whether women, blacks, gays, or students, produced more open-minded attitudes toward difference and the protection of individual rights.

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The 1960s also signaled the critical recognition of several coexisting cultural expressions in the areas of art and design, a situation sometimes referred to as *Pluralism*, in which no single approach to modernity dominated, and where the exchange value of all designed goods obscures former distinctions between "good," mass, and popular design. The situation accommodated, and even encouraged, diversity, but only within an acknowledged common culture of consumption, economic growth, and globalization. Perhaps late twentieth-century Pluralism may be understood simply as the commercialization of diversity: the margins do not exist without a dominant mainstream, but the mainstream also demands the margins to nurture innovation and penetrate new markets. Art historian Thomas Crow cogently summarized the situation: "The avant-garde is the research and development branch of the culture industry."

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Toward the end of the 1970s, the pop and counter-cultural challenge to modern architecture and "good design" was becoming more widespread. ....

At the same time, alternative design initiatives and protests began to relinquish the subversive and threatening political overtones they had in Italy and elsewhere in the later 1960s, acquiring an international high-end commercial cachet underwritten by manufacturers such as Alessi and Formica. In Milan, for instance, organizations espousing new directions were initiated in the later 1970s. Alchymia (1976) and Memphis (1981), for instance, included contributions of not only Italian but also Japanese and North and South American designers. The activities of Memphis and other groups or individuals designing ambiguous but less threatening appropriations of historical styles and popular culture are often

described as being Postmodern, a term commonly used among critics and historians, and that has filtered into more general usage.

For design, Postmodernism encompasses projects and forms that signal an end to the polemic between aesthetically or socially directed design on the one hand and commercially motivated design on the other, an opposition that emerged as a strain of modernism in the early nineteenth century with the design reform movement and that continued to dominate design theory for much of the two decades following World War II. It may also be described even more broadly as an attitude through which various tendencies of modernism in design are deprived of their oppositional status or pretensions. Theoretically, Postmodernism shares with mass culture a user-oriented approach to design that emphasizes multiple interpretations and meanings and embraces ephemeral rather than permanent characteristics of the design enterprise, exemplified by connections with the improvisational, open-ended nature of performance art and the inclusiveness of popular forms of expression.

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## DESIGN AND POSTMODERNISM

The term Postmodernism is often found in conjunction with others such as post-industrialism and late capitalism, all referring to a culture in which economic growth is the common subtext, emerging first in the early years of postwar affluence in the United States and spreading to Europe and other developed nations. Late capitalism signifies investment directed toward increasingly segmented audiences (rather than collective or a single shared taste), and a readiness of businesses to design, manufacture, and market products with increasing speed, responsiveness, and sophistication in a highly competitive environment. The design enterprise is also accelerated through the increased efficiency of batch rather than mass production, target marketing, and reduced material costs due to the shift from mechanical to digital components. Batch production focuses upon the assembly of limited quantities of varied products using similar components for flexible yet efficient manufacture. One example of batch production is in the fashion industry, where a limited number of "bodies" are expanded through variations in "trim" to permit more consumer choice. As another example, British design historian Nigel Whitely cites the success of the Swatch wristwatches first in Britain and then internationally in the 1980s, the result of inexpensive plastic materials and production, and an especially fashion-oriented approach to wristwatches to complement clothing styles (fig. 15.1). The ephemeral, virtually disposable Swatch (the name combines the words "Swiss" and "watch", but also brings to mind the word

"switch"), manufactured by the Swiss company Eta beginning in 1983, targeted a young audience less likely to be influenced by the emotional attachments sometimes associated with personal objects and heirlooms. ....

Post-industrialism, seen in the design and manufacture of products such as the Swatch watch, is a broad and useful contemporary term signaling that the heroic age of industrial mass production has been surpassed by an increased emphasis upon the research, service, and communications sectors of economies and expanded efforts in fields such as product semantics rather than more traditional "form-making" previously associated with industrial design. In short, changes in the practice and perception of design have accompanied the shift from the mechanical age to the information age. In many traditional manufacturing industries, capital investment in robotics reduces the need for unskilled, assembly-line labor and demonstrates the increasing degree of sophisticated and intelligent interactivity between humans and machines, yet another theme in the contemporary discourse of design.

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The use of computers to generate patterns for machine-knit sweaters provides another instance of acceleration through a more direct relationship between design and production. If part of the history of modern design that we have been tracing depends upon examining the separation of design from manufacture from the eighteenth century onward through capital investment in technology and the growth of a consumer economy, the advent of computer-generated patterns and rapid-prototyping technology signals, at least in part, an about-face that uses machines to create unique products that are the direct, less mediated extension of the designer's imagination.

In the later twentieth century, theorists began to refer to contemporary design as being "soft," a term implying a number of related concepts, including the designer's manipulation of virtual and increasingly flexible rather than real materials and forms via computer imaging in a more dynamic and interactive process, emphasizing the interface between users, products, and services rather than the form of objects.

## POSTMODERN PRODUCTS

Postmodern design emerged in organizations such as Memphis, made up of industrial designers "liberated" from their contracts with particular companies, with the freedom to pursue directions beyond

the parameters of "good design". Postmodernism or Pluralism also was the overriding theme of the exhibition "Design Now: Industry or Art" held at the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt in 1989.

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While 1960s appropriations of popular culture took place outside of mainstream manufacturing practice, for instance, in Italy and were approached either rhetorically or with an eye toward a rebellious youth market in terms of style and price, Postmodernism of the early 1980s began to attract high-end commercial interest, seen in Robert Venturi's (b. 1925) series of chairs manufactured by Knoll.

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French architect and designer Philippe Starck (b. 1949) emerged in the mid-1980s with original furniture for sophisticated clients such as fashion designer Pierre Cardin and French Prime Minister François Mitterrand. He is in this regard the heir to the luxury French Art Deco tradition of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, but using assembled industrial materials, employing simple, often abstract geometric shapes with elegant solutions to support systems and collapsibility for storage, as in his tubular and sheet steel Tippy Jackson folding table manufactured in Italy by Driade in 1985 (fig. 15.5).

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In domestic wares, the Italian manufacturer Alessi has been active in promoting original design in silver. In the early 1980s American architect Michael Graves (b. 1934) designed the Art Deco-inspired tea and coffee service that featured polished ribbed surfaces, ebony feet, ivory handles, and non-functional blue knobs (fig. 15.6).

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While the political activism of Memphis or Alchymia participants was subdued in comparison with earlier anti-design activities of the later 1960s, other contemporary designers continued to employ elements of popular culture to reflect issues of political and environmental awareness, albeit in a rhetorical way. One direction for such activity has been the reuse of materials, seen for instance in Ron Arad's (b. 1951) Rover chair of 1981, constructed from used automobile seats attached to a tubular metal frame, incorporating the socially conscious initiative of recycling.

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Much of this activity demonstrated the belief that Postmodernism's eclectic sources encouraged a healthy acceptance of diversity and difference in society, breaking down social boundaries in a tolerant, global society.

This view was not without its critics. Skepticism regarding the meaning of Postmodernism's inclusiveness was ongoing, and the issue of tolerance and liberation remained a matter of debate

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Marxist critics lamented the lack of forms of art and design to nurture the seeds of resistance to capitalist hegemony.

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Meanwhile, the growing gap between developed nations and the Third World continued to demonstrate, for some, the need for a more thorough sense of social responsibility in design on a global scale. Cultural and technological disparity remains an undercurrent in envisioning the role of design in the future: lobbying efforts for Internet access throughout the schools and households of the United States are typical of the ideology of progress, yet ignore the fact that a majority of the population in many underdeveloped countries lack the basic services many of us take for granted.....