

Robert A. M. Stern "Gray Architecture as Post-Modernism, or, Up and Down from Orthodoxy"

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The richness of architectural practice in the late 1970s, particularly in the United States, demanded an articulation of the postmodern. Yet, at this relatively early stage of theorizing—eight years before the debates on postmodernism were played out in journals like *New Left Review*, *New German Critique*, and *October*—architecture seemed ineluctably partitioned into binary oppositions variously labeled modern/postmodern, rationalist/realist, exclusivist/inclusivist, New York/Yale-Penn, white/gray, and the like. Robert Stern's "Gray Architecture," part of a special issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* titled "New York in White and Gray," and his "At the Edge of Modernism," the postscript to the second edition of his *New Directions in American Architecture* (1977), summarized what at the time were generally understood to be the attributes of these dichotomies.

For the May 1973 issue of *Architectural Forum*, Stern had organized "Five on Five," a polemical response to the publication of *Five Architects* by five other architects loosely associated with Yale or the University of Pennsylvania (alternatively, with Robert Venturi and Louis Kahn).¹ For the April 1975 issue of *A + U*, Stern and Peter Eisenman coedited the special feature "White and Gray: Eleven Modern American Architects," with Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully as the respective intellectual sponsors.² In 1976, in a forum held at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, and again in the present essay, Stern hooked the various characteristics of "grayness" to a now certain and general shift in mood represented by Arthur Drexler's "The Architecture of the Beaux-Arts" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.³ By 1980, the signs of the complete institutionalization of such characteristics included the inaugural issue of the student-edited *Harvard Architecture Review*, entitled "Beyond the Modern Movement," the editorial of which itemized desiderata of postmodernism that seem to be direct elaborations of Stern's principles of contextualism, allusionism, and ornamentation: (1) history (as the repository of past forms), (2) cultural allusionism (or pluralism and populism), (3) anti-utopianism ("working with what 'is' rather than what 'should be'"), (4) urban design and contextualism (*à la* collage city), and (5) formal concerns (by which is meant symmetry, closed and static spaces, landscape as form, and the diminution of programmatic concerns)—all of which is presumed to lead to (6) referential form ("that is, the search for meaning").⁴

Postmodernism's much-touted search for meaning oscillates between a renunciation of the modernist claim to radical difference through formal innovation (and the resultant identification of postmodern architecture with the commercial spaces of advertisement and product packaging) and a claim for postmodernism's pluralism and populism, or, in Stern's words "a new way of gathering up the diverse threads of the architecture and the culture or our polyglot nation."⁵ The most interesting theoretical issue, however, one that attends both these declarations, is the effacement of the distinction between so-called high and mass culture. For it is a distinction on which modernism depended for its utopian vocation (the radical disjunction of the new from the status quo in order to invent new forms adequate for a new society) and its search for authentic experiences over and against the degraded

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see Rowe and Koetter (104 ff)

see Scott Brown (62 ff) and Jencks (308 ff)

culture of commerce. The collapse of the difference between high and low is in some sense a collapse of *difference*, and as such must still be regarded as ambiguous, hovering between an enlargement of the cultural realm and a mere symptom of further degradation.

Notes

Because *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* published a full-length French version and only an abstract in English, and the original English text has been lost, the present version of this essay incorporates some translations of the French text back into English as well as minor revisions made by Stern.

1. *Architectural Forum* 138, no. 4 (May 1973). The respondents were Robert Stern, Jacquelin Robertson, Charles Moore, Alan Greenberg, and Romaldo Giurgola.
2. *A + U* 52 (April 1975). The "whites" were Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, John Hejduk, Richard Meier, and Werner Seligmann. The "grays" were Robert Stern, Charles Moore, Giovanni Pasanella, Jacquelin Robertson, Richard Weinstein, and T. Merrill Prentice. The issue included Japanese translations of parts of Colin Rowe's *Collage City* and Vincent Scully's *The Shingle Style Today, or, The Historian's Revenge*.
3. See Stern's intervention in "Forum: The Beaux-Arts Exhibition," held at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in January 1976, published in *Oppositions* 8 (Spring 1977), pp. 169-171, and excerpted in this volume as part of the document on the Beaux-Arts exhibition:
4. *Harvard Architecture Review* 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 4-9. Stern's own contribution to the *Harvard Architecture Review*, "The Doubles of Post-Modern," which aspired to give the new architecture a pedigree within the "ongoing culture which we call the Western Humanist tradition," in fact adds little more than decorative obfuscation to the blunt symmetry of "white" and "gray." Stern's "doubled" categories are traditional modernism/schismatic modernism, and traditional postmodernism/schismatic postmodernism. The latter double is doubled again: traditional postmodernism that breaks with modernism in order to reintegrate with humanism/traditional postmodernism that is a continuation of modernism's effort to break with humanism; and schismatic postmodernism that is a continuation of modernism (the realization of modernism's desired break with humanism)/schismatic postmodernism as a continuing tradition (the postmodern breakthrough to postmodernity, "a totally new state of consciousness").
5. Robert Stern, "Postscript: At the Edge of Modernism," in his *New Directions in American Architecture*, 2d ed. (New York: Braziller, 1977), p. 136.

At the outset of this brief essay, I would like to suggest that the "White and Gray" debate is not (as has been suggested in the press) an encounter between polarities such as might have occurred in 1927 between advocates of the Beaux-Arts and apostles of International Style modernism. Rather, this debate, beginning at the University of California at Los Angeles in May 1974, has grown into an ongoing dialogue between two groups of architects who, in their built work and theoretical investigations, share our active to chart out and clarify a direction which architecture can take now that the orthodox Modernist Movement has drawn to a close.

Peter Eisenman, to my mind the principal theorist among the "White" architects, sees this new direction in a particular way, which he labels "Post-Functionalism." Eisenman seeks to free architecture from explicit cultural associations of any kind. My view of this new direction differs from Eisenman's: I call it "Post-Modernism" and see it as a kind of philosophical pragmatism or pluralism which builds upon messages from "orthodox Modernism" as well as from other defined historical trends.

For "Post-Modernism," and probably for "Post-Functionalism" as well, it is safe to say that the orthodox Modernist Movement is a closed issue, an historical fact of no greater contemporaneity than that of nineteenth-century academicism; and though messages can be received from both these historical periods, as from the past in general, nostalgia for either cannot be substituted for a fresh, realistic assessment of the issues as they are now. The struggle for both groups, then, is to return to our architecture that vitality of intention and form which seems so absent from the work of the late Modernists.

"Post-Modernism" and "Post-Functionalism" can both be seen as attempts to get out of the trap of orthodox Modernism now devoid of philosophic meaning and formal energy, and both are similar in their emphasis on the development of a strong formal basis for design. Beyond this, however, they are widely divergent, in that "Post-Functionalism" seeks to develop formal compositional themes as independent entities freed from cultural connotations, whereas "Post-Modernism" embodies a search for strategies that will make architecture more responsive to and visually cognizant of its own history, the physical context in which a given work of architecture is set, and the social, cultural, and political milieu which calls it into being. Contrary to what was said at the end of the 1960s, "Post-Modernism" is neither a sociology of the constructed nor the technico-socio-professional determinism of the orthodox Modern Movement; it affirms that architecture is made for the eye as well as for the mind, and that it includes both a conceptualized formation of space and the circumstantial modifications that a program can make this space undergo.

Implicit in this emergent Post-Modernist position is a recognition that the more than fifty-year history of the Modernist movement has been accompanied by no notable increase in affection on the part of the public for the design vocabulary that has been evolved. This is partially so because that movement

has been obsessively concerned with abstraction and has eschewed explicit connections with familiar ideas and things. (Even the pipe railings of the 1920s are by now, for most of us, cut off from everyday reference; who among us has been on an ocean liner in the last twenty-five years?) For a Post-Modernist attitude to take root in a meaningful way, an effort must be made toward recapturing the affection of architecture's very disaffected constituency, the public.

The exhibition of drawings of the Ecole des Beaux Arts which was presented in 1975 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the discussion of the significance of that exhibition in the press, at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, at the Architectural League of New York, and within the frame of seminars at the School of Architecture at Columbia University, made it possible for architects of New York—many of the "Whites" and "Grays," in particular—to begin to reweave the fabric of the Modern period, which was so badly rent by the puritan revolution of the Modern Movement. It is not surprising that the tradition represented by the Ecole des Beaux Arts—the poetic tradition of design—should be examined with renewed sympathy, and that one of the hallmarks of the Ecole's design methodology, the beautiful drawing, should be restored to a position of influence. A large part of the work of the "Grays" tends to establish connections with the formal, spatial, and decorative invention of the nineteenth century.

For the "Grays," at least, Venturi and Moore have laid the foundation for the philosophical structure of Post-Modernism. In the search for an architectural position able to draw on historic issues, including both Modernism and nineteenth-century eclecticism, they have reminded us of the power to achieve symbolic meaning through allusion—not only allusion to other movements in architectural history, but to historical and contemporary events of a social, political, and cultural nature as well. In organizing the Beaux Arts exhibit, Arthur Drexler, long associated with the position of orthodox Modernism, has also made a contribution to the philosophical structure of Post-Modernism. The Beaux Arts exhibit suggests that Modern architecture might find a way out of the dilemma of the late Modern Movement by entering a period where symbolism and allusion would take their place alongside issues of formal composition, functional fit, and constructional logic. In his introduction to the Beaux Arts show's catalogue, Drexler admonished that "we would be well advised to examine our architectural pieties 'in the light of an increased awareness and appreciation of the nature of architecture' as it was understood in the nineteenth century."

The Beaux Arts exhibition reminded us of the poverty of orthodox Modern architecture: trapped in the narcissism of its obsession with the process of its own making, sealed off from everyday experience and from high culture alike by its abstraction and the narrowing of its frame of reference within the Modern period to the canonical succession of events and images and personalities delimited by Giedion and Pevsner, and drained of energy as a result of a

confusion between the values assigned to minimalism by a Mies van der Rohe with those assigned by an Emery Roth.

The work of the "Grays" presents certain strategies and attitudes that distinguish it from that of the "Whites." These strategies include (in no particular order):

- The use of ornament. Though ornament is often the handmaiden of historical allusion, the decoration of the vertical plane need not be justified in historical or cultural terms; the decorated wall responds to an innate human need for elaboration and for the articulation of the building's elements in relation to human scale.
- The manipulation of forms to introduce an explicit historical reference. This is not to be confused with the simplistic eclecticism that has too often in the past substituted pat, pre-digested typological imagery for more incisive analysis. The principle is rather that there are lessons to be learned from history as well as from technological innovation and behavioral science, that the history of buildings is the history of meaning in architecture. Moreover, for the Post-Modernist these lessons from history go beyond modes of spatial organization or structural expression to the heart of architecture itself: the relationship between form and shape and the meanings that particular shapes have assumed over the course of time. This Post-Modernist examination of historical precedent grows out of the conviction that appropriate references to historical architecture can enrich new work and thereby make it more familiar, accessible, and possibly even meaningful for the people who use buildings. It is, in short, a cue system that helps architects and users communicate better about their intentions.
- The conscious and eclectic utilization of the formal strategies of orthodox Modernism, together with the strategies of the pre-Modern period. Borrowing from forms and strategies of both orthodox Modernism and the architecture that preceded it, Post-Modernism declares the past-ness of both; as such it makes a clear distinction between the architecture of the Modern period, which emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century in western Europe, and that puritanical phase of the Modern period which we call the Modern Movement.
- The preference for incomplete or compromised geometries, voluntary distortion, and the recognition of growth of buildings over time. This is manifest in a marked preference for the Aalto of the fifties over the Corbusier of the twenties, for the plans of Lutyens over those of Voysey, and for the long love affair with the American Shingle Style of the nineteenth century. These preferences are paired with an architecture that appeals to Platonic geometry, particularly in its general composition. Thus, geometrically pure rooms are linked together in an unaccustomed manner and create larger and frankly hybrid forms, tied together visually by the envelope of the exterior walls. These hybrid forms are rarely perceptible at first glance. For lack of a more appropriate term, I would call this an "episodic composition," which must be distinguished from the determinist composition of Modernist orthodoxy.
- The use of rich colors and various materials that effect a materialization of architecture's imagery and perceptible qualities, as opposed to the materialization of technology and constructional systems that remain so overtly significant in brutalist architecture.
- The emphasis on intermediate spaces, that is, the "pochés" of circulation, and on the borders, that is, on the thickness of the wall. From this comes an architecture made of spaces whose configuration is much more neutral and supple, from a functional point of view, than the so-called continuous spaces of the orthodox Modern Movement.
- The configuration of spaces in terms of light and view as well as of use.

- The adjustment of specific images charged with carrying the ideas of the building. It is thus possible for the architect to create simultaneously two premises or spatial units within one building or two buildings in a complex that do not resemble each other even if their compositional elements are the same. An attitude of this sort permits us to see the work of Eero Saarinen in a new light.

To return to the philosophical intentions of "Gray" architecture, the importance of the writings of Vincent Scully is evident: his vision of architecture as part of a larger whole, which is at the heart of the cultural formation of the "Grays" (many of whom were his students at Yale), often runs counter to arbitrary stylistic and cultural categories and puts a particular emphasis on the interrelationship of the building, the landscape, and culture. Scully has begun to influence not only architects but also historians like Neil Levine who, in his account of the Beaux Arts, assigns great importance to questions of communication and in particular to that of an *architecture parlante*. He has equally influenced George Hersey, whose studies on the associationism of mid-nineteenth-century English architecture make an important contribution to the philosophical foundation of the eclecticism emerging in the "Grays."

Not surprising, then, that Hersey should have been a client for whom Venturi achieved one of his most stunning houses. One finds at the root of the "gray" position a rejection of the anti-symbolic, anti-historical, hermetic and highly abstract architecture of orthodox Modernism. Grayness seeks to move toward an acceptance of diversity; it prefers hybrids to pure forms; it encourages multiple and simultaneous readings in its effort to heighten expressive content. The layering of space characteristic of much "gray" architecture finds its complement in the overlay of cultural and art-historical references in the elevations. For "gray" architecture, "more is more."

"Gray" buildings have facades which tell stories. These facades are not the diaphanous veil of orthodox Modern architecture, nor are they the affirmation of deep structural secrets. They are mediators between the building as a "real" construct and those allusions and perceptions necessary to put the building in closer touch with the place in which it is made and beliefs and dreams of the architects who designed it, the clients who paid for it, and the civilization which permitted it to be built; to make buildings, in short, landmarks of a culture capable of transcending transitory usefulness as functional accommodation. "Gray" buildings are very much of a time and place: they are not intended as ideal constructs of perfected order; they select from the past in order to comment on the present.