Modernist Architecture: Architecture Of Paradox And Contradictions

Architecture is a complex topic to talk about as it can function as a creative and artistic masterpiece whilst also being an intrinsic function as to how humans operate. Architecture dictates society and society dictates architecture. In a sense architecture is the embodiment of both the individual and the group, thus making it so hard to define. Geographically and aesthetically architecture defines our lived experience in an environment and to only some extent does the individual actually have the choice to consider how they would like to experience their environment.

Architecture is full of paradox and contradictions. The architect dictates the functionality and aesthetic of a space but the architect can not build this space with their bare hands. The power and lack of power of individuality is forever circular. Just like the power and lack of power that exists within a collective of people. The answer to these contradictions and paradoxes lies gently within ‘balance’. We must nurture and believe in the individual whilst harnessing all that it takes to exist within a collective. It is exciting and difficult to fathom how this translates into architecture.

The history of Modernist and Postmodernist architecture illustrates so articulately the ambition humans have to live in a coherent and kind world and how even when we try so hard to get it ‘right’ we often get it ‘wrong’. And often the repercussions to our idealised actions are seen not immediately but years later.

Modernist architecture is controversial and feeds the fire of many arguments surrounding the architectural answer to societal utopia. Modernism in infrastructure gained mass popularity after the second world war; attractive in its minimal stylisation. Its fundamental principle, coined by the American architect Louis Sullivan, was that ‘Form follows Function’ And of course the aesthetic result looks exactly how one would expect from form following function; Bland and utilitarian.

Whilst the aim of early modernism in architecture derived from a place of ‘good’ as to equalise all classes in society and to achieve universality. An essential part of the human spirit was forgotten; individuality. Modernist design engulfed streets with uniform concrete buildings that were repetitive and dehumanising and lacked consideration of the individual.

Modernist architecture presented a similar obstacle that also occurs in a democratic society- the equalibralism of individuality and plurality. We recognise that both are imperative in order for a society to function in all of its diversity. But, as we recount history we know that both individuality and plurality in their most extreme and excessive forms, harvest oppression. There have been a range of complex political frameworks including communism, socialism, capitalism/liberalism and even fascism that admittedly existed and exit to better the functionality of humans co-existing. But these idealistic theories are fabricated with rules and regulations that seem too clinical for the fluidity and complexity of human nature, as individuals and as individuals existing alongside each other. Modernist architecture, forced human unification and the result was unsuccessful in its hope to democratize society and furthermore was complicit in the effect it

has had on contemporary architecture.

Nowadays western Societies are dictated by meritocracy. Individuals believe their wealth or lack of wealth is only a projection of their diligence and merit, and in many cases this is true. A capitalist society promotes the mentality that in order to become successful and reap the benefits of consumerism one must work hard. Those who work hard, win. The problem with this infused western mentality is that there is a big percentage of people who work extremely hard, in laborious jobs with ridiculously long hours and yet they never see the big bulging enticing light at the end of the tunnel. It would be wrong to call this low socioeconomic group a ‘minority’ because they make up more than half the population of the western world, and are sometimes housed in ‘public housing’. The modernist design is fundamental to Public housing. And although the origins of modernist architecture were theoretically inclusive, the repercussion it has had on society now is more oppressive than opportunistic. As daunting modernist towers now house millions of people, these buildings now exist as to reinforce poverty and disadvantage men. Modernist architecture does not nurture individuality and instead has a blanket effect on dehumanising those with a low socioeconomic status in contemporary society.

PostModernism design was the lashback and reaction against modernist architecture in the 60s. Postmodernists acknowledged that plurality was not marginal -but- an essential part of life and that difference should be nurtured and protected. Fierce in their conviction to highlight the uniqueness of the individual, the postmodernists era conceived radical eclecticism. Which joyfully harboured everything that modernist design was not. Articulation of space, mood, facade, ambience and function became the methods of seizing this idea of plurality. Buildings became more complex to look at and ‘form follows function’ was reconfigured to ‘function follows figure’. Critic ‘Hilton Kramer’ often referred to PostModernist architecture as ‘Kitch’ and to some extent it was, just like most of the design that occurred in the 70s and 80s and is now back in fashion. postmodernism was all about getting back in touch with the spirit of expression and experimentation.

The underlying philosophy of achieving universality through emphasising the unique in postmodernist architecture later became controversial. Many academics and architects started to notice how the PostModern designs core ideology; inclusiveness was transcending into some sort of exclusive exhibition of wealth and prestige. Paradoxically this new design became a flaunt show. From relating to the everyday individual it became relating to the individual who had wealth, money and education. Postmodernism turned into mannerism and started living in the realm of the elite and the exclusive.

Architecture defines humans. But not every human can define architecture. Most people in the world are not privileged enough to be able to play some part in the decision of how they would like to be defined by architecture; And most people don't understand the impact architecture has on their life.

Modernism and Postmodernism architecture were intrinsically good. Both movements attempted to universalise the human experience, but both movements only got so far. The world is constantly evolving, and normally people are just trying to do the best they can in it and for its future. History is full of mistakes and misjudgments. If we do the best we can, to excruciatingly analyse our past. We may learn from our past.