

MODESTY AND THE POST MODERN MOVEMENT

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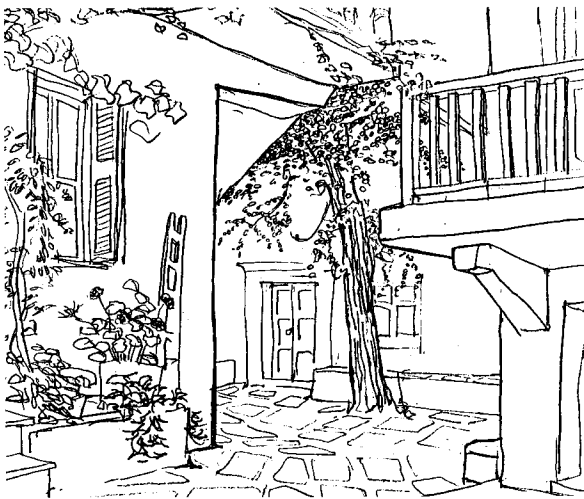


If one mentions Post Modern architecture in certain professional company today, it is like committing a social impropriety. There will be hostility from those who think that the title is just a current fad made up by a few architects talking about themselves and those who react as if it were an elitist's conversation more interested in semantics than buildings or the people who use them. They are not looking hard enough. There is a Post Modern Movement in architecture and it is a reflection of a Post Modern Culture.

Post Modern is different from its predecessor Modern. Post Modern is evolutionary while Modern was basically revolutionary. This leaves the critics who talk about the failure or death of Modernism on the shaky ground of denying history and its process in order to establish a new aesthetic (a very old trick). The major point is the the Modern Movement did not fail any more than the Beaux Arts failed. All historical periods have made meaningful contributions that were afterwards reevaluated because they did not fit into the cultural climate of the times that followed.

To establish a Post Modern position about culture and architecture as its reflection, I would like to tell a story, not of failure but of some shaky Modern misdirections inherent in a project that I worked on. In 1966 after having done a travelling fellowship on "Post-World War II Community Sized Projects in Great Britain," I wandered into the Greater London Council seeking a job. I was hired, assigned a desk in David Grove's housing section and told to start developing a design for the first stage of what was

then called Erith. The rumor was that this scheme, which included 1500 dwellings, a lake, shops, schools, etc., would become a segment of an intown-London-newtown for 70,000 people. I was the first architect assigned to the project, fresh out of school and concerned with the political idea of involvement in housing and large scale projects. My personal reference systems at the time were culturally American, politically East Coast anarchist, and educationally an amalgam of Corb, Brutalism, and Team 10. Another influence was my recent travel in Italy and Greece, one week of which was spent on the Greek Island of Mykonos, whose image would come out again in what is now built at Thamesmead (the project's final name).



Mykonos.

I had a major role in developing two sections of the first stage. One part was the low rise high density housing, one floor off the ground to protect against flooding from the Thames River. This carpet or fabric housing was arranged so that vehicular access was limited to the periphery by "mews", leaving a pedestrian route through those spaces much the same as Radburn, N.J.¹ The second part, which I worked on in much greater detail, was the linear block, an assemblage of different types of dwellings put together around and over a pedestrian deck that was to eventually lead to the newtown center. The buildings making up this continuous form were organized by a complicated geometric repetition to give a seemingly endless variety of experiences and activities. Instead of a finite form being extended indefinitely, it was an infinite form much like the DNA molecule. This linear block and its symbolic function of path identification partially came from



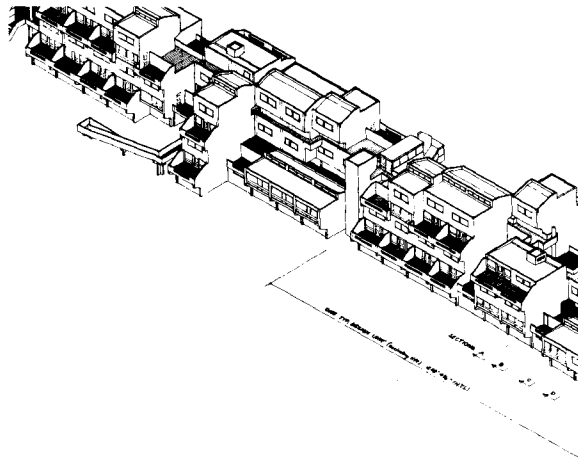
Thamesmead: siteplan, showing pedestrian and vehicular circulation.

my fond memories of Mykonos.

"The new Thamesmead buildings," wrote Richard MacCormac, "stand out as a spectacle which demands your attention and response before you turn away. The architecture is persistent, sharp and invigorating or tiresome and obtrusive depending upon your state of mind or the weather;" and "... it is in many ways deeply considered, humane, even passionate and that is what architecture is all about."²

The project won an Architectural Design award in 1967 and the International Union of Architects' Grand Award for Architecture and Town Planning in 1969. The pride coming from Thamesmead's notoriety got very mixed up when Stanley Kubrick filmed the movie "Clockwork Orange" around the linear block. His political comment on violence in the movie brought up the question of the appropriateness of the linear block's high energy level for the calm, civilized English personality.

From a broader point of view the building of the newtown had other problems. The project was to be industrialised housing for the masses. The underlying theory was the same as had been developed in the early part of the Modern Movement: that the machine and its image could be used paternalistically to cheaply satisfy the needs of architectural production. What happened in reality was, because of the large size of Thamesmead, it became the target of union demands. This drove the cost of building to the point where a social dream was shattered and the factory closed. In a more fundamental sense big government doing big business was defeated by big labor, which had a different social agenda. It was a real fly in the ointment of Modernism.



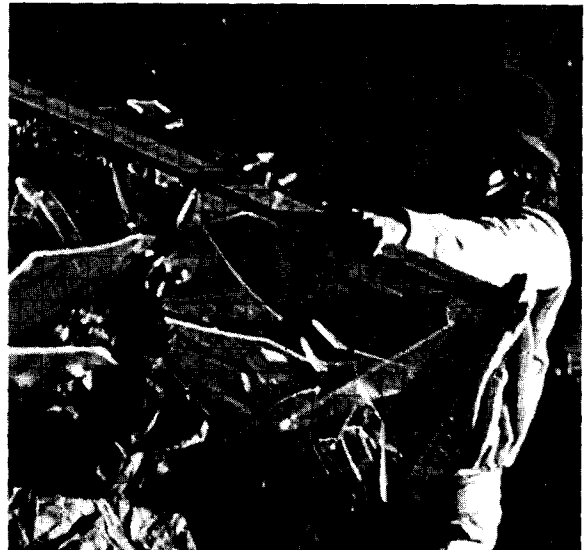
Thamesmead: linear block.

The prevalent architectural attitudes of that time were best described by the 1960's introduction to the Team 10 Primer: "They came together in the first place, certainly because of a mutual realization of the inadequacies of architectural thought which they had inherited from the Modern Movement as a whole, but more important, each sensed that the other had found some way towards a new beginning." Jerzy Soltan described the height of the Modern Movement in the 1930's when he said, "How could we in the CIAM think of roses when the forest was burning?" In the pre-heroic age of the Modern Movement, Otto Wagner in 1894 wrote, "Our starting point for artistic creation is to be found only in modern life." This development of Modern Movement thinking about life only being in the present and future overlooked the past. In so doing, abstractions took the place of experience.

Something else happened to Modernism in the

1960's: there was a cultural revolution. It was not the hard kind of violent revolution that the early Moderns had hoped for but a soft revolution. It was soft for three reasons. First, the 1960's and early 1970's were non-violent, even though there were radical frenzies. Secondly, no dominant intellectual theory generated it. And thirdly, the soft revolution had a broad segment of society sustaining it: youth. The implications of this revolution touched many aspects of society, including life styles, alternate design strategies and the political process. Most of the undeclared principles of that time developed problems, for the 1960's still clung to revolution as a means to achieve a new utopian condition.

The universal outlooks of both the hard and the



soft revolutions have changed and grown into evolutionary stances which I call Post Modern. The mode of the late seventies is to work within a given system, for one cannot drop out anymore. The complex and interrelated nature of contemporary culture does not allow for the simplistic replacement of systems that revolution implies. The consequent changes that are occurring, although rapid, have other identifiable characteristics. For instance, the movie "Star Wars" exhibited an attitude that differs from the "Machine Aesthetic." George Lucas personified machines as people who are rusty, afraid, loyal and humorous. He also put the movie together out of a nostalgia for the ingredients and characters that made up a collage and he did it with a very literal reference system that many people appreciated and enjoyed.

Another popular success was Alex Haley's *Roots*, which was a proud search for what made him what he was. His message was that one's identity, in an unsure

time like our own, could only be understood by seeing life as a continuation of the past, only a part in history's patterns. He did not look on the past as Karl Marx did when he wrote, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." Both *Roots* and "Star Wars" were cultural successes because, among other things, they were primarily stories with a low keyed moral message having an absence of polemics.

Another important characteristic of Post Modern Culture is a holistic approach to life. The best example of this is the ecologists and their interest in patterns rather than parts, for they believe that the human being is only one part of an interdependent cosmic system, so that if you kill a tree you kill part of yourself. This idea has been put forward in many other fields but the essence of the argument is a deemphasis of the individual, and it removes the human being to the place of a modest participant in the universe. Ever since the Renaissance demythologized religion by substituting Man for God as the center of consciousness, there has been the worship and idealization of Man. It does not matter whether the conservatives viewed man as an individualist with free will or the Communist seeing "the world as not generic Man but men; and not men, classes of men."³ It is all the same centrality. Once human beings are removed from idealization they become infinitely more complex and likeable.

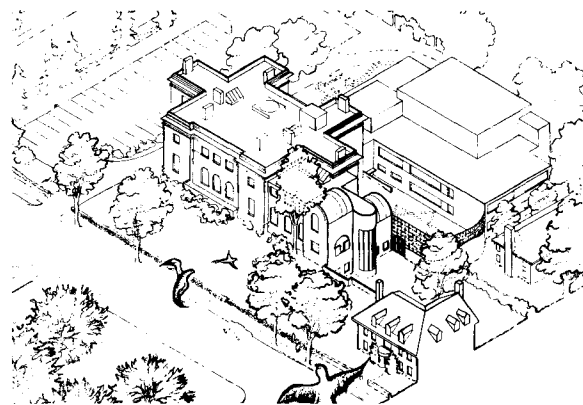
If architecture is a reflection of Post Modern culture with the attendant abandonment of many universal ideals that served as principles for the Modern Movement, what are we left with? Feeling unsure, to be certain; searching for a modified language, of course; looking for adaptive and flexible approaches, without question; but where are we going? Currently architects are dealing with the theory of the parts of our profession: adhocism, typology, contextualism, historical mindedness, process, etc. What concerns me is that the study of these parts of the design strategy, although of great meaning, miss certain patterns of human connections. These connections must be made by an architectural language that communicates with the symbols of words and with the meanings and feelings that have gone through the personal, cultural and educational screens that everyone has set up. Within this framework, a layering of references can be established that is based on the richer references of modest people. This goes beyond the adaptive gestures of given design situations and deals with the mysteries of dreams, memories, and feelings.

To illustrate, I need to tell another story. At present I am working on a 4500 square foot addition

to the Hebrew College library in Brookline, Mass. The college is located in an urban context of large old homes gathered around a beautiful linear park studded with gnarled beech trees. At the end of this park and almost on axis is the college library – a Beaux Arts mansion originally constructed for the New England representative of the Carnegie Steel Company. With such a strong contextual situation, the design thrust was to find a compatible geometry that reinforced the use of the library and made references not only to the past, but to present, and future.

A geometry emerged that solved the programmatic needs of an enlarged library while enhancing the existing one, by eliminating stacks from one space and established it as an elegant reading room. The bookstacks were then moved to the addition which included two small symmetrical reading rooms – one closed spacially and one fluid with the rest of the addition. The Beaux Arts would not have treated two similar spaces in two different ways; and even Louis Kahn, who owed so much to the Beaux Arts, would not have used space in this manner. In essence, the addition offered a new contrast of the comfort and repose of an enclosed room with the fluidity of movement and time in the other new library areas.

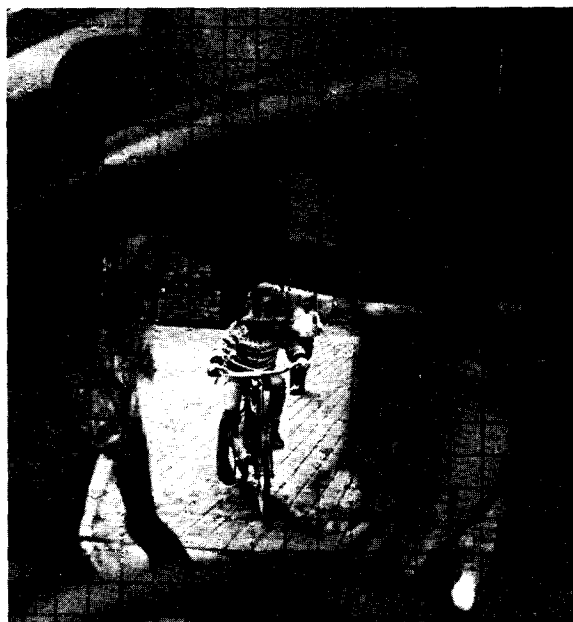
The exterior of the new work started on the street facade by keeping the existing roof lines, window shapes, and massing. It ended with a barrel vault, recalling spaces and forms much older than the Beaux Arts or the Renaissance. The adjoining elevation repeated some elements of the first and referred to Louis Kahn with a window. This wall stepped down to an elevation that used two tablet shaped windows as literal symbols of Judaism and faced the center of the college – a new private court formed with another of the college's buildings. Memories of the past were mixed with feelings about the present and projected into the future.



Hebrew College Library.

As demonstrated in this project, Post Modernism has a unique attitude about time. Pre-Modern looked to the past for inspiration with Man, God or Religion as the frame of reference. Modern was schizophrenic, as Early Modern looked hopefully to the future and Late Modern saw time as only Now – a depressing, existential Now. Post Modernism's attitude about time has no prejudices. The past, present and future evolve simultaneously.

At Thamesmead Stanley Kubrick made his comment after the completion of the project. Contrary to my dreams, he lost the Mykonos image and saw the linear block as a high energy comment on the future. In the Hebrew College project comments came from neighborhood groups, which said, "The barrel vault on the street elevation is too different. It should be a flat roof like the building that's there." Fortunately, this dialogue came before the addition was built. My somewhat flexible ego has returned to the drafting board, this time with the benefit of having gone to a preview of the movie and read the reviews.



¹ Designed by Henry Wright and Clarence Stein in 1932.

² Richard MacCorman, *RIBA Journal* (18 October, 1972).

³ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*.

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