

# Must We Divide Architecture into Styles-Case of Modern Architecture of the West

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**Abstract:** *Traditional readings in Modern Architecture is usually a function of sequential readings of the aesthetic prototypes or 'styles' that developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in the western world. The paper attempts to re-interpret the story of modern architecture as a consequence of socio-cultural and political revolutions or 'epochs', rather than merely a function of 'styles'. The paper is divided into small paragraphs, each one describing architecture as the expression of an epoch, and its relation with 'style', supplemented by relevant examples.*

**Keywords:** modern architecture, styles, epochs, revolution

## 1. Introduction

Architecture at a given time and place is a factor of 'what', 'why' and 'how'. 'What' refers to the built environment, 'why' to the socio-cultural context whereas 'how' to the technological settings. It is the interplay of all the three factors that impart complexity to architecture, and hence demands interpretive readings of the built form. In case of modern architecture of the west, 'what' refers to the architectural character of the built environment and is conveniently regarded as 'styles' or 'idioms'. Hence mainstream readings in modern architecture contains the sequential readings through these aesthetic prototypes called 'styles'. A number such 'styles' emerged in 19th and 20th century which claimed modernity as its chief attribute.

The concern lies in reading the history of modern architecture through the filter of 'styles'. Such tags oversimplify an entire era of architectural revolution, experimentation and invention. Therefore, the paper attempts to understand the connection of 'styles' or paradigms with the socio-cultural and technological 'epochs' or paradoxes. These 'epochs' give meaning and determine the language of architecture. The paper attempts to narrate the story of modern architecture as a reflection of 'epochs' and its subsequent manifestation in the built environment.

William Curtis in the book *Modern architecture since 1900* states that modern architecture was an expression of a variety of new social vision challenging the status quo and suggesting alternative possibilities for a new life. Architecture was a manifestation of these socio-cultural orders that was held by the society. Hence architectural expression developed, evolved and changed with these changing orders or 'epochs'. The paper re narrates the story of modern architecture by studying the reflection of these 'epochs' into 'architectural expression'. Therefore, architecture is interpreted as an expression of these epochs, and parallels have been drawn to corresponding architectural characteristics or 'styles'. The paper is divided into small paragraphs, each one describing architecture as the expression of an epoch, and its relation with 'style', supplemented by relevant examples.

## 2. Expression of Architecture

The origins or roots of modern architecture can be traced back to early 19th century with post renaissance or the age of enlightenment, when the past or classical period was considered superior and a source of inspiration. This revival was possible and backed by the advancement of history and archaeology, which provided detailed architectural documentation of the past. This revival of architecture of the classical period and its translation to appropriate contemporary vocabulary became a statement of superiority (Architecture style regarded as *Neo Classicism*). Therefore, architecture became an expression of the past and exotic forms of Graeco-Roman classicism, Ancient Egypt, and Gothic were forcefully fitted over the plans derived from contemporary functional needs. This is clearly evident in the form of Girard College designed as an imitation of Greek Classical temple, by Thomas Walter. House of Parliament, London is another example of Gothic revival, where the elevation of the building is inspired from the English Perpendicular Gothic style.

Moreover, the pressure to standardize these traditional styles as prototypes for building envelope was rejected because of two main reasons. Firstly, realization of inappropriateness of the ugly deformation and insensible manipulation of canonical proportions to forcefully house contemporary functions. Secondly, the changing needs and the evolution of new typology and function, could not be housed by traditional building envelopes. Therefore, this resulted in synthesis and invention of form from traditional details rather than superficial manipulation (Architectural style being *Creative Eclecticism*).

However, architecture broke free from the shackles of the past, when a horticulturalist designed a structure that was totally governed by the composition of its structural elements rather than predefined notions of beauty and aesthetics. Crystal Palace (1851) designed by Joseph Paxton was made of modular cast iron column and beam, the walls fabricated by precast standardized glass panes. Architecture now became the expression of structure. This invention and rationalization of architectural form, seen as epitome of

functional and structural honesty, took another turn, with Eiffel tower being designed to show off France's technological and engineering excellence. *Thus, architecture was now seen as an expression of new Industrialization.*

The consequence of this industrialization was environmental pollution and degradation, which gave birth to another epoch. A need was felt to go back to the basics (1850s), where this time basic was synonymous to the natural world rather than classical past. Hence world witnessed the development of a new urban typology of public parks, pioneered by Frederick Law Olmsted. These parks were not just green patches of well-defined landscape connecting people to the natural world, but also served as major socializing spaces. *With this architecture took a humanist turn and became an expression of the societal needs.*

Subsequent years witnessed a greater overlap between Classism and Industrial Revolution. William Morris realized that classist commodity produced from machine was neither beautiful nor usable, and therefore derived new sensibilities for design (Arts and Crafts movement). An initial manifestation can be seen in Red House, by William Morris, where he only used the learnings from past vernacular to derive sensibilities without deliberately copying and imitating. Moreover, he used the power of machine and new materials to realize the form. *Architecture was now seen as an expression of the manifestation of the past wisdom.*

These substitutions and changing meaning of architecture to respond to the people, time, and place further developed varied interpretations and understanding of architecture. Moving ahead from architecture being derived from the past, new trend emerged, where *architecture was seen as an expression of function*, and from projection of this function. The functional bias towards architecture is clearly evident from the principles and works of Louis Sullivan, who stated the notion 'form follows function'. The Guaranty building, Buffalo designed by Sullivan clearly highlights the three major functional zones, by changing characteristics of form in the elevation.

Architecture has the power to evoke emotions through its design and experience. The designs of John Russel Pope's Thomas Jefferson Memorial and Lutyens's Viceroy house were derived from Classical Roman and British Architecture respectively. Such derivations from the past especially in public and administrative buildings was perceived superior. *Hence architecture was now viewed as an expression of power.* The Zeppelin Field stadium, designed by Albert Speer furthermore reinforces the quality of architecture to express power and emotions (Fascist Architecture). The structure is inspired from Roman classicism, intended to express Nazi's under Hitler. The linear, dense yet rigid division of façade express the masses of soldiers standing in attention. This emotive power of architecture is further evident in the Chapel at Ronchamp by Le Corbusier and Einstein tower by Erich Mendelsohn (German Expressionism). The form of Ronchamp cathedral with its organic roof moving upwards, resembling the joined hands of devotees, express sacredness. *The function of architecture was now seen as the symbolic representation of the human*

*thought.*

Contemporary to this was the rise of International Modernism. With the advent of Industrialization and mass production of raw materials, architecture took a utilitarian turn. In the early 20th century architecture became a representation of aspiration of industrialization. Peter Behrens in the design of AEG turbine factory in Berlin (1912) used prefabricated units as basic module for design and construction, shows the power of technology in building. Clarity of form was determined by function and structure. Similar clarity, mechanical and utilitarian expression of built form is reflected in the design of Fagus factory by Walter Gropius, who was influenced by Behrens's design principles. This new vision of design manifested itself in a school of thought called as the Bauhaus, founded by Gropius. The school held its design principles in standardization of components, use of machinery, and developing prototypes of common design. *Architecture was now perceived as an experimentation ground of industrialization, an expression of technological power, acquiring an industrial image.*

Some architects used mechanization and technical power to express the clarity of function, through form. They saw architecture through utilitarian filters, and an expression of function. Le Corbusier regarded the most important yet personal space i.e. a house as 'a machine to live in'. In his book called 'Towards a new Architecture' he equated the contemporary ship, aircraft and automobile with Classical marvels like Pantheon, saying that they were equally beautiful in use and design. He believed that if any object was designed from a utilitarian perspective it would be naturally beautiful. This idea of beauty, as a factor of utility and function is seen in Villa Savoye, designed as a prototype for a house.

Moving to an era, so called the second phase of modernism (1954-1970), marked by the end of World War II, the expression of architecture kept on taking dramatic turns. Post-world war, the notions of architecture was exported globally. This exchange of ideas resulted in standardization of architectural principles for all people and all context. Architecture was now seen as an expression of universality, wherein the built form represented standard and universal design, relevant for all function and places. Mies Van der Rohe's design for chapel at MIT, was nothing more than a glass room, which was functionally apt even for a store, meeting room or garage. Glass tower designed by Mies was a prototype for all skyscrapers to come. The design was so flexible that it could be placed in any context and function form luxury apartments to office buildings. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, served as another universal design for a house. *Architecture began to be seen as a function of universal design, an art of designing prototypes.*

Moreover, this bias towards universality suffered a backlash as architecture governed by functional and structural parameters came to be seen as mundane and meaningless. Architecture has always been a representation of culture, which has manifested itself in the built form through symbolism. In the backdrop of this understanding, architecture took an 'expressionist' approach, *where the*

major objective of the architects was to impart an artistic statement to their works. Sigfried Geidion, 1949, insisted the need to infuse meaning and symbolism in architecture. Lewis Mumford highlighted the importance of buildings not just to do something but 'to say' something. Eero Saarinen's design of form for TWA terminal, Kennedy airport, expresses the miracle of flight through its winged shaped shell structure resting lightly on glass walls. Furthermore, Saarinen's chapel at MIT, demonstrated the power of form to transcend the space into sacred realm by the design of form, and interplay of light. Later works of Le Corbusier also explored the power of form to convey meanings and express human emotions. Ronchamp Chapel, explores the meaning of built form with respect to the landscape, and also enhances the sacred experience within through the filter light entering through colored glass windows placed in thick concrete walls.

This view of architecture being an expression of meaning was supplemented by the idea of structure as true depiction of its material and structure, and times even exaggerated and romanticized. *Architecture became a statement of exposed material and construction details (Brutalism)*. Le Corbusier used broad framework for concrete to obtain natural rough texture on the concrete walls at the Secretariat building, Chandigarh.

Hence, the major premise of modern architecture held in the understanding that architecture was a product of culture, time and people. This concept led to several reactions and hence different versions of modern architecture. Therefore, it was differently understood by different people, designers and architects leading to multiple readings in modern architecture.

### 3. Conclusion

Mainstream narratives in modern architecture is based upon the fragmentation of architecture into aesthetic prototypes or 'styles'. This stylization of architecture has resulted in modernism to be studied as any other historical style, depriving it from various layers of socio cultural and technological (epochs) readings and interpretation.

The paper narrates the story of modern architecture as a factor of these epochs, and its manifestation in the built form, which imparted character and expression to architecture. The paper is a narrative of various 'styles' in modern architecture as a product of these epochs. The paper explains the dynamic and changing expression of architecture with time and context. This complexity in architectural character is addressed by understanding architecture as an expression of epochs, namely past, technology, power, emotion, character, function, industrialization etc. These revolutions manifested in the built form imparted architecture a unique character and language, which can be regarded as 'styles'.

The paper does not oppose the association of architectural character with 'styles', instead it attempts to impart a wholistic approach to read the built environment. It proposes a need to interpret the built form not just as a product of

aesthetic prototypes but as an expression of epochs, and a container of human values.

### References

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### Author Profile



**Maria Akhtar** received Bachelors in Architecture from VNIT, Nagpur, and Masters in Architecture Education from SMMCA, Nagpur in 2014 and 2017 respectively. Her Masters dissertation titled, "Architecture –a cultural Artifact : Ancient World view", was nominated for National Awards for Excellence in Post-Graduate Architectural Thesis -2017, conducted by the Council of Architecture. She is working as Assistant Professor with Dayananda Sagar College of Architecture, Bangalore since July 2017.