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Revolutionizing Design:

The Use of Manifestoes to Affect Twentieth Century Architectural Trends

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Throughout the twentieth century, architectural manifestoes call for “alternative solutions based on observations of [design’s] current state” (Nesbitt 16). Adolf Loos’s 1908 “Ornament and Crime” rebukes nineteenth century art nouveau, Antonio Sant’Elia’s 1914 “Manifesto of Futurist Architecture” vilifies neoclassicism, Walter Gropius’s 1919 “Manifesto” calls for social revision, and they cumulatively lay the groundwork for Le Corbusier’s 1923 Towards A New Architecture, the bulwark of modernist values of efficiency and ascetic design. Rem Koolhaas describes the effects of half a century of modernism in his 1978 “retroactive manifesto,” Delirious New York (Koolhaas 9). Then Demetri Porphyrios’s 1989 “The Relevance of Classical Architecture” strikes at the very foundations of modernist philosophy, while post-modernist manifestoes, William McDonough’s 1992 “Hannover Principles” and Charles Jencks’s 1996 “13 Propositions of Post-Modern Architecture” call for greater integration of systems and philosophies. Finally, The Royal Institute of British Architects’ 2005 “A Manifesto For Architecture” assimilates the ideas of the previous one hundred years and calls for maximally integrated, efficient design. With varying levels of success, these manifestoes mobilize the shifts in architectural thought throughout the twentieth century

and into the next by demonstrating different combinations of salience, vision, and denigration.

Partly attributable to Adolf Loos's 1908 "*Ornament und Verbrechen*" ("Ornament and Crime"), Benedetto Gravagnuolo says his ideas are better known than his architecture (66). With "Loosian poetics," he blasts art nouveau, and drives the functionalist anti-decorative movement into the modern era.

The evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects... Taking more time to design, ornament, as a rule, increases the cost of the object ... Simple ornament is no longer a natural output of our culture, and therefore represents a phenomenon of backwardness or a manifestation of degeneration... Ornamentation is wasted effort and therefore a waste of health... [and] material... the two things together mean a waste of capital (Loos qtd. in Gravagnuolo 66).

Loos's second line of attack proves even more puritanical. To legitimize his "passion for smooth and precious surfaces," he asserts that only primitive people and criminals use tattoos (Rykwert 1; Gravagnuolo 67; Fig. 1). "Ornamentation is a crime," it inflicts "violence [onto] the integrity of the object" (Loos qtd. in Gravagnuolo 67; Gusevich 109). "For Loos, as for Freud, civilization is synonymous with the repression of erotic instincts" (Gravagnuolo 67). "All art is erotic... The first ornament to have been invented, the cross, was of erotic origin" (Loos qtd. in Gravagnuolo 67). And for his *coup de grace*: "The level of civilization of a people can be judged by the



Fig. 1 - Adolf Loos's 1910 Pre Modernist Steiner House, Vienna

state of the walls in their latrines (Loos qtd. in Gravagnuolo 67). Following translation into English in the 1930s, “Loos’s ideas became popular in America... U.S. art was far behind and eager to catch up with the modern architectural ideas brought here by emigrating members of the avant-garde Bauhaus movement from Germany” (Meyer). Running “up against the entrenchment of the ancient régime,” Loos’s precursor to modernism convincingly demoralizes art nouveau’s conventional use of ornamentation (Lyons 1).

Even more vitriolic than Loos, Antonio Sant’Elia’s 1914 “Manifesto of Futurist Architecture” uncompromisingly maligns all architectural tradition in accordance with the ideas set forth in F.T. Marinetti’s 1909 “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” (Attach. 1). Reflecting futurists’ iconoclastic anti-romanticism, Sant’Elia claims that

[n]o architecture has existed since 1700... [Modern architecture is nothing more than a] moronic mixture of... stylistic elements [and] the new beauty of cement and iron are profaned by the superimposition of motley decorative incrustations... [This] idiotic flowering of stupidity and impotence... took the name of Neoclassicism, [and] these architectonic prostitutions... continue to stamp the image of imbecility on our cities (Sant’Elia).

With futurist zeal, he entreats architects to halt their “onanistic recopying of classical models,” and throw “their minds open in the search of new frontiers,” where people’s “tumult can rage without seeming a grotesque anachronism” (Sant’Elia). Like Loos, he stresses the need to do more than just create “new moldings and frames for windows” - architects must trample “all that is grotesque and antithetical (tradition, style, aesthetics, [and] proportion)... The decorative must be abolished.” UCLA art historian, Irina Costache, writes, “This [last] statement, however, should not be taken literally. The daring proclamation, like many others the futurists made, was merely a ‘cry of rebellion’

that attacked the limited understanding of the decorative arts as passive, frivolous, and superficial” (184). Regardless of Sant’Elia’s intentions, concluding with lists, a common strategy in many manifestoes, allows readers to clearly see his contempt - they can then quickly choose to disagree with him. The first list, entitled, “I Combat and Despise,” lambastes avant-garde “pseudo-architecture”, all classical architecture, the embalming [and] reconstruction of ancient monuments, perpendicular and horizontal lines, and costly materials (Sant’Elia). The second list, entitled, “And Proclaim,” affirms that “Futurist architecture is the architecture of simplicity. (One cannot help but ask what is more simple than perpendicular and horizontal lines).



Fig. 2 - Antonio Sant’Elia’s futurist vision of “urban conurbation”

Envisioning a city, perhaps like Murmansk, Russia, he prescribes reinforced concrete as a substitute for wood, stone and brick, the use of oblique and elliptical lines, and no decoration except for colored materials. Like the public support for his ideas, he predicts that “the fundamental characteristics of futurist architecture will be its impermanence and transience” - every generation must build its own city (Sant’Elia). Envisioning a highly industrialized and mechanized city of the future, he sees not a mass of individual buildings, but “a vast, multi-level, interconnected and integrated urban conurbation designed around the ‘life’ of the city”(Osborn; Fig. 2). “His visionary perception of a new modern metropolis inspired generations of young architects and designers, not least of whom Virglio Marchi proposed architecture as ‘habitable sculpture’” (Osborn). With

“Manifesto of Futurist Architecture”, Sant’Elia combatively links his “voice to the countless voices of previous revolutionary conflicts” (Lyons 4).

Reflecting popular political ideology, German Marxist architect and founder of the Bauhaus School, Walter Gropius’s 1919 “Manifesto”, in excitable lyric, calls for the “conscious co-operation and collaboration of all craftsmen,” and the erasure of their class



Fig. 3 - 1938 Gropius House, home of architect, Lincoln, Mass.

distinctions (Attach. 2). Like many manifestoes, he groups people together and directs their movements: “*Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts!* For there is no such thing as ‘professional art’” (Gropius). His desire for “us” to “create a new *guild of craftsmen* without the class-distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artists” supports Janet Lyon’s analysis of manifestoes as “the testimony of the historical present tense spoken in [an] impassioned voice (Gropius; Lyon 9). His ideas extol, in part, what Hannes Meyer, Gropius’s replacement as the School’s director, states as the responsibilities of the architect,

to improve society by designing functional buildings that will improve the lot of the common man... All things on this earth are a product of the formula: (function times economy)... Building is not an aesthetic process... architecture which produces effects introduced by the artist has no right to exist (qtd. in Munsey; Fig. 3).

Just as in Karl Marx’s The Communist Manifesto, “Manifesto” calls for unity, equality, and revision of thought.

Le Corbusier's 1923, Towards A New Architecture, for better or for worse, has been accredited with influencing more twentieth century design than any other manifesto (Nurwisah).



Fig. 4 - Le Corbusier's 1929 *Villa Savoye*, near Paris

Using numerous examples, photographs, and anecdotes, 'Corbu' maps out his ideas on urban living, claiming, "architecture is stifled by custom" (Le Corbusier 9). Buildings should be a product of their own age, rather than throwbacks to classical or Renaissance architecture. Amidst the 1920s economic boom, globalization of markets, spread of mass consumption and availability of new materials, he insists that architects must recognize the problems confronting society, such as scarce resources and housing shortages. Appropriating the ideas of Loos and Gropius, Le Corbusier contends that, "architecture has nothing to do with various 'styles.' The styles of Louis XIV, XV, XVI or Gothic, are to architecture what a feather is on a woman's head... something pretty, though not always, and never anything more" (37). He repeatedly calls for a new perspective based upon the theory that "the house is a machine for living in" (10). Le Corbusier's 1928-1930 "international style" *Villa Savoye*, designed to be mass-produced and fit the needs of its occupants, aptly manifests the idea that, as machines are created with economy in mind, so must the house (Rybczynski 1; Fig. 4). "Cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, [and] pyramids... are the most

beautiful forms,” Le Corbusier reasons (Le Corbusier 35). “The Pyramids... The Gates of Markand... Santa Sophia... the Cupolas of Brunelleschi... all these belong to Architecture... The Grand Palais does not” (32-33). He envisions amalgamated housing, green space, super highways, raised streets, and ascetic design independent of its surrounding environment. Up until, and even after such pioneering post-modern manifestoes like Hans Hollein’s (difficult to find) 1968 “*Alles ist Architektur*”, Le Corbusier’s “Radiant City” actualizes all over the world in buildings like New York’s destroyed World Trade Centre, Harlem’s condemned housing projects, and UBC’s Arthur Erickson inspired 1972 Buchanan Tower (Nurwisah). “Philosopher among architects,” Louis Kahn, who says, “The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building,” also exhibits Corbu’s influence (qtd. in Moore i). Le Corbusier’s clear visioned manifesto not only defines the (not always pleasing) modernist movement, but also the twentieth century’s ‘international style.’

Although historians sometimes “retroactively [use the term ‘manifesto’] to identify a text’s foundational status,” Rem Koolhaas uses it to identify New York’s foundational thought, as well as to fashionably market his ‘ism’ in his 1978 “retroactive manifesto,” Delirious New York (Lyon 12; Koolhaas 9). By amassing a comprehensive record of the city’s architectural milestones, he contravenes the manifesto’s “inherent lack of evidence,” and establishes “Manhattan as the product of an unformulated theory, Manhattanism” (9; 10). Just as “a blueprint does not predict the cracks that will develop in the future,” this book describes “a Manhattan as conjecture, of which the present city is the compromised and imperfect realization” (11). Koolhaas shows how hitherto unexpressed, utilitarian ideas combine to formulate the city’s “paradigm for the

exploitation of congestion” (13). The city’s predetermined “Manhattan Grid,” planners’ projected “maximum bulk” for different parts of the city, designers’ penchant to build right-angled skyscrapers that turn the streets into “a utilitarian polemic,” and Central Park’s “taxidermic preservation of nature” provide much evidential support for this Manhattanist paradigm (18; 33; 18; 21). To appreciate their exploitation, Koolhaas notes that after the 1853 Latting Observatory completion, “inspections from above [also became] a recurrent theme under Manhattanism” (25). By encapsulating these utilitarian ideas, this “ecstatic love poem to Manhattan [challenges] conventional thinking in urban design,” and thereby bolsters the burgeoning post-modern movement (Muschamp).

Amidst this movement, Demetri Porphyrios’s 1989 “The Relevance of Classical Architecture” calls for the revival of authentic classicism (Attach. 3). In standard prose, Porphyrios looks beyond modernism’s lack of aesthetics in order to attack its theoretical foundations:

Modernist buildings [are] seen not only as things of beauty but also as [symbols] of liberated and non hierarchic society, [which compels] a refusal to look back to the various architectural traditions... supposed to have connotations of authoritarian domination (Porphyrios 92).

He explains that modernists believe “style means ornament... status seeking, conspicuous consumption... bound to be socially and morally corruptible (92). “As an avant-garde, [modernism] made us familiar with the idea of showing rather than concealing the conventions and devices which are used in constructing a work of art” (93). Equally frustrating in his opinion,

post-modernism works show themselves for the contrivance they are, but in doing so they also state that everything else in life is a contrivance and that simply there is no escape from



Fig. 5 - Demetri Porphyrios’s 1998 Post Modern Revival of Authentic Classicism 3 Brindleyplace, Birmingham

this... The self-paralysing parodies [post-modernists] thrive on, when unwrapped from their intellectualist idiom, are but dispirited commonplaces (93-94).

From this “foreshortened, impassioned, and highly selective history,” Porphyrrios states that classicists, on the other hand, view architecture as “the imitative celebration of construction... qualified by the myths and ideas of a given culture” (Lyon 14; Porphyrrios 95; Fig. 5). Rather than just use “raw building material without any imitative meditation,” as do modernists, “classicists [establish a lasting] dialogical relationship between the craft of the building and the art of architecture... It is unfortunate that [many architects look] for... originality as talent... [M]odernists tend to think that ... contribution comprises solely in that which is different” (96). Blasting modernism one last time, Porphyrrios concludes by stating that, “architecture has nothing to do with ‘novelty-mania’... intellectual sophistries [and] excremental culture... The real contribution of an architect lies in what he/she chooses to borrow” (96). By credibly arguing in prose Porphyrrios demonstrates how the manifesto’s form can adapt to the demands of selected discourse communities, and still remain steadfast in its “struggle between the... corrupt and the sanctified” (Lyon 15).



Fig. 7 - Emilio Abasz's 2000 Fukuoka International Hall

Riding post-modernism's "green wave" of the early 1990s, William McDonough's 1992 "Hannover Principles" attempts to establish broad ethical guidelines for sustainable design (Attach. 4). After being commissioned by the city of Hanover, Germany to "develop standards for the millennial World's Fair with the theme 'Humanity, Nature, and Technology,'" at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, McDonough announces that people must insist on the co-existence of "humanity and nature." People must recognize interdependence and "respect relationships between spirit and matter" People must also accept responsibility for their design decisions, and treat nature as a model and mentor - not as an inconvenience" (Nesbitt 408; McDonough 409-410; Fig. 6).¹ Although lacking in the negation of other ideas and 'loudness,' this manifesto doubtlessly affirms McDonough's campaign. "We're not interested in acceptable levels--in minimal impact. We're not interested in being less bad. We're interested in being 100 percent good," says McDonough (Shulman 1). The manifesto medium allows this architect to palimpsest his "green" principles ovetop of the modernist value of maximum efficiency in order to present his ideas on how to integrate humanity with nature.

If the refutation of Le Corbusierian modernism in Charles Jencks's 1996 "13 Propositions of Post-Modern Architecture" is not apparent in the first line, "Multivalence

¹ Emilio Abasz also recognizes this interdependence. His 2000 Fukuoka Prefecture International Hall successfully maintains "the green space of the existing park while providing the city of Fukuoka with a multi-use, symbolically decisive building" (Emilio Abasz and Associates Inc; Fig. 7).

is preferred to univalence,” than the ninth proposition dispels any doubt: “Architecture necessitates metaphor and this should relate us to natural and cultural concerns, hence the explosion of zoomorphic imagery, face houses and scientific iconography instead of ‘machines for living’” (Jencks 661, 662). Known more for his landscape art, Jencks combines nature and science into his world famous gardens. The author of the best-selling The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (1977) notes that his reaction to over-simplicity, minimalism, and linear dynamics stems from ideas that “more of nature is nonlinear in behavior than

linear,” and since architecture

“is a public language,” it

“necessitates ornament (or

patterns),” and inevitably

“celebrates criticism, process,

and humour” (661-662; Fig. 8).

Manifestoes that prioritize a

more natural, humanistic

approach come as a relief after more than half a century of modernist austerity - “Let the

flowers of revolution bloom” (Lyon 27).



Fig. 8 - Charles Jencks’s 2002 post-modernist “Landform” – “rendering by co-evolution”, Scottish Gallery of Art, Edinburgh

Anticipating the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) successful implementation of the 21 points listed in its 2005 “A Manifesto For Architecture”, future design should continue to integrate more systems, push for economy and efficiency, and satisfy designers’ needs to express themselves, thereby satisfying the respective objectives of the futurists, modernists, and post-modernists (Attach. 5). Illustrating the

refinement of compromise and well-established values, the ‘30,000 strong’ group manifesto calls for design that is “sympathetic to domestic renewable energy generation” (United Kingdom 6; 3). Other innovative ideas call upon the British government to “use the development of publicly-owned land to pioneer sustainable design and construction techniques...[and] ensure disclosure of energy consumption in all new buildings (3).

[Through] improved public transport... [the government must] enable the viability of smaller settlements... remove obstacles to home working... [and ensure] that all public projects allocate 1% of the construction cost to the integration of art with design and encourage private developers to follow suit (4).

The manifesto also argues that Government funding should be made conditional upon good quality design and even goes so far as to suggest that regional assemblies should appoint design champions (5). To perpetuate these values, RIBA advocates making “every school a demonstration project for sustainability” (3). This institutional manifesto’s degree of refinement and lack of abrasiveness imbue it with respectability; however, with such a large group, radical, and even outlandish ideas, manifesto hallmarks, are muted.

Throughout the twentieth century, architectural manifestoes call for change, whether it is to design only with primary shapes, to design non-linearly, or to even plant grass on building roofs. “The modernist period is characterized by the production of an unprecedented number of manifestoes, many of which simultaneously challenge and instantiate the premises of modernity with which they are linked,” and architectural manifestoes are no exception (Lyon 40). Although many agree that the ‘international style’ is attributable to Le Corbusier’s Towards A New Architecture, art historian, Sigfried Giedon, writes that the theories of both Bauhaus and Le Corbusier play “equal

parts in formulating ‘the new tradition’” (Tournikiotis 22). To help transfer designers into the post-modern era, Koolhaas shows the effects of New York’s “determination to remove its territory as far from the natural as possible” (Koolhaas 11). Post-modern manifestoes, more tempered in their refutations, but no less frustrated with the *status quo* and just as sincere in their proposals, embrace the natural and call for the greater integration of ideas. The beauty of all these manifestoes lies in their salience and lucidity. In an era of free information, accessible even in people’s pockets, and ever advancing ‘tune-out technology,’ ideas need to be loud. In one sense, architectural manifestoes surpass all others in terms of noticeability – for what better way is there to express one’s ideals than to project them three-dimensionally as part of the skyline?

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Figure Website Links

- Fig. 1 - (<http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/steiner/index.htm>)
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