

Primitivism & Modern Design

abstract

There is a heroic tale of Modernity in which rationalist design establishes itself as hegemonic and evolved when the same heroes of Modernity carried out a revisionism to correct some of the shortfalls towards a closer integration with nature and an opening to the uniqueness of subjective experiences. This is not the only possible story. In this paper another is proposed which, at least in regard to Marcel Breuer, one of the heroes of Modernity and creator of some of its icons, can be narrated without forcing the actual events at all. This other kind of possible story says that Modernity was a continuity of the tradition; that in the 1920s, 30s and 40s can be found elements that could perfectly well fit in with the line of supposed revisionism of the 1950s. Which would mean that perhaps never existed revisionism, since regionalism, the vernacular, the ancestors (what in general is reported as "primitivism") had always been there.

keywords

architecture, Breuer, historiography, tradition, vernacular

Introduction

In the field of Modern Design, primitivism doesn't have criticism tradition. This concept has not been used in the historical debate carried out by the historiography of modernist design and architecture. Moreover talking of primitivism in relation to Modern Design goes against the orthodoxy of the discipline and against the popular iconic stereotype. Modern Design is represented by products that are the result of industrialisation, which follow the principles of the machines and seek serialisation and standardisation, taking into account only the practical functions of the objects. However the inaugural masterpiece in the career of the product designer who best knew how to embrace this stereotype, the Hungarian Marcel Breuer, was the "African Chair", made in 1921 together with Gunta Stölzl and considered expressionist. It is said that this chair embodies the spirit of the early Bauhaus period – a spirit that was reoriented in 1923 with the new label of "art and technology" which was also materialised in a chair produced by Breuer. This was the "Wassily Chair" (1925) and her mechanical coldness of chrome. A piece that represented the culmination of a process of simplification and industrialisation. However, it would seem that the spirit of the beginning of the Bauhaus remained latent in Marcel Breuer who, once in exile in the USA, carried out a revisionism of Modernity and, as an architect, drew up a project for a traditional "cottage" type dwellings. This paper aims to demonstrate that the description "primitivist" could enter into the critical design debate and, therefore, Primitivism could be considered one of the constituent part of Modern Design.

But, what is meant for "Primitivism"? In fact, this concept involves a complex network of sociological, ideological, aesthetic, scientific, anthropological, political and legal interests.

In the late twentieth century, the term “primitive” has been described as Eurocentric, as revealing a Western-centred view of an alien culture. The term “primitivism” is now so charged that the use of the word itself has become problematic. It is possible to use the term without making an implicit value judgement? Perhaps that is possible if the Primitivism is related to a set of western attitudes towards the way of non-western societies. The makers would hope to gain through this relationship some values as the return to origins, simplicity, authenticity, directness of expression, more instinctive or intuitive, craftsmanship, escape into nature (Edwards 2004:158), lacking in elements such as organization, refinement and technological accomplishment, a difficulty in discerning a rationale underlying, and a chaotic mix of styles (Myers 2006: 268).

1. The Primitivist Sequence

What is hidden behind the story of the epic historiography of Modernity? By simply following the sequence of events without the story, maybe through the persistence of vision another type of chain would emerge.

For questions of economy and a lack of time, here only one designer has been taken as a *leitmotif*, but one who is undoubtedly representative of Modernity: Marcel Breuer. The starting point for the orthodox story of Modernity is taken as 1920 when Marcel Breuer went to study at the Bauhaus School opened just one year before, and signed up for the Woodwork workshop directed by Johannes Itten. The dates of the end of the period that have been chosen are 1945/50 when, according to Sigfried Giedion (one of the official historians), the architects of the “third generation” of the Modern Movement (those who according to Giedion have an “inner affinity” with the past) began their professional careers (Giedion 1967: 670). Approaches in design history have developed a lot since Giedion and Pevsner who we already know had a biased vision on design history and very much identified himself with the modern movement. But traces of this bias can be found in recent researches (Abercombie, 2000: 324; Ainsley 2000: 212; Fusco 2005: 206; Ireland 2009: 515; Noblet 1993: 210; Purvis 2006: 271; Raizman 2010: 221; Sparke 2004: 182; Woodham 1997: 123).

In this paper, instead of trying to exemplify this canonical model of Modern Design by selecting works that fit the paradigm, we do the opposite and select designs that remain outside the orthodox historiography. Let's do that with Marcel Breuer work.

1921. Weimar. African Chair. Marcel Breuer & Gunta Stölzl. This was the first piece designed by Breuer. He made it with his class colleague Gunta Stölzl at the Bauhaus when they were students there. It is an oakwood chair painted in bright colours with textile applications that are interpreted by experts in two ways. On the one hand they are related to Steiner's theosophy making the chair an instrument for meditation and placing it against an Hindu backdrop. On the other hand it is considered to be a “chair” in the academic sense, a throne offered to the director Walter Gropius as a sign of status and power, giving it medievalist references both in terms of function and form (Wagner 2005: 14).

1921. Berlin. Sommerfeld House. Marcel Breuer & Gunta Stölzl. This is a project by architects Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer which involved the whole of the Bauhaus School. Breuer and Stölzl took part in the interior design and furnishing. Sommerfeld House is analysed in the historiography as a “strange house”, a “special case” and a “strange episode” that bears no relation to the “Neuen

Bauen", a house in an architectural style that is surprising expressionist in its aesthetic (Kress 2008: 48).

1923. *Weimar. Exhibition of Bauhaus designs at the Haus am Horn*. Marcel Breuer & Gunta Stölzl. Here the architects were Walter Gropius and Georg Muche. This event allows us to bring together several pieces made by Breuer and Stölzl – all of them in wood with the backs and seats made of animal materials (horsehair) and vegetable fibres, always presented on carpets and accompanied by wall hangings. In the photographs from the exhibition we can see, for example, the "Chair with Colourful Woven Seat" (Weimar, 1921) and the "Wood-Slat Chair" (Weimar, 1923).

1932 - 1936. *Laminated Wooden Furniture*. Marcel Breuer. If the inclusion of laminated furniture by Aalto, later continued by Saarinen and the Eames was considered a departure from "Pure Modernism" (the tubular steel pieces), Marcel Breuer who was considered the "pure Modernist" managed to depart from his own work when in 1932 he designed laminated wooden furniture and was also looking for unique forms generated by a continuous line to give an organic sense to the furniture (Máčel 2003: 103). One example is sufficient – the *Chaise-longue* designed in 1933 for the British Isokon company. It was a perfect demonstration that furniture was no longer being produced by the addition of parts. The lounge is formed by an interlaced line which makes up the sides from which the legs and armrests emerge, interconnected by a single curved s-shaped surface that forms the seat (Máčel 2003: 107).

1936-1948. *Cottage-style houses*. Marcel Breuer (& Walter Gropius). This series began with a trade fair pavilion (the Gane Pavilion, Bristol, 1936) not in the USA. All scholars agree that the first appearance of this cottage-style architecture that Breuer would promote when he moved to America was in the stone walls of that pavilion (Devesa 2009: 4). The cottage type house is conceived as a refuge in a natural environment made of a stone base supporting a timber cabin above the ground, usually composed of a single space designed around a large fireplace. There is a long list of houses in the United States that Breuer built in this style (often together with Walter Gropius) but the following are particularly significant: Fischer house and studio (New Hope, PA, USA, 1939), Chamberlain Cottage (Wayland, MA, USA, 1941), Marcel Breuer House II (New Canaan, CT, USA, 1941) and Marcel Breuer Cottage (Wellfleet, MA, USA, 1948).

2. The Primitivist Montage

Evidently, as film-makers well know, all selections that are subsequently sequenced are montages. So in the section above several events have been assembled with a view to fulfilling the intention outlined in the introduction: to make primitivist elements of Modern Design emerge. And it is not difficult to see them. There is no doubt that Breuer's first design were influenced by Johannes Itten and his spiritualist philosophy, especially the anthroposophy that traces the origins of Breuer's initial designs back to a Buddhist or general Indian backdrop (Wagner 2009: 9-11). There is also clearly Africanism in the 1921 inaugural chair in the sense of being a throne-type and the inclusion of the fabrics. In general all the textile work by Gunta Stölzl in Breuer's furniture during the Weimar years had African roots as well as American, of course, in the tradition of the American Indian textiles (Paternosto 2001: 84). There is clearly a throwback to the naturalism that is almost always present in Breuer's work, making him a pioneer of organicism which, according to many, refounded the Modernity in Scandinavia.

And finally there is ruralism and vernacularism in the forms of his wooden furniture and the way the pieces fit together that are a reminder of Marcel Breuer's native land of Baranya in Hungary (Bergdoll 2003: 273 & Mácel 2003: 54). In the "cottage" projects in the USA there is also a revisionism of the balloon frame of the American pioneers. The point to which this concept of the vernacular blends with that of the primitive would be the subject for another article.

3. Conclusion

Specialists consider that when Breuer moved to the United States (at the end of July 1937) with his architectural work he showed that Modernity had changed since its epic period and that as other members of the younger generation had to take into account the challenges of a new world order, rejecting the discourse of the International Style of the MOMA exhibition in 1932.

Gropius, Breuer, le Corbusier aren't the only designers with two phases: the "pure" modernist and the revisionism. This schema is applied also to Josef & Annie Albers (Albers 2005: 154), Alexey Brodovitch (Remington 2003: 136), Josef Müller-Brockmann (Purcell 2006: 61), Charlotte Perriand (Perriand 2003: 119), Gerrit Rietveld (Baromi 1977: 27); Paul Renner (Burke 2000: 180), Jan Tschichold (Jong 2008: 262), Wolfgang Weingart (Weingart 2000: 75) and oriented studies could grow this list.

From here on we could identify future threads of enquiry as the revisionism of Art Deco (1993: 210) or some national idiosyncrasies like "Milanese style" (Hollis 1997: 138) and the "Wendingen style" of Dutch Design (Purvis 2006: 103); relocate extraordinary cases like the one of Frank Lloyd Wright or some "anomalous" cases like Hendrick Nicolaas Werkman (Heller, S. & Ballarce, G 2001: 139); look over some supposed revivals (Abercombie 2003: 56) and famous debates as the conflict between Jan Tschichold and Max Bill (Burke 2000: 180).

If we carried out these threads we could broaden the range of design criticism. Design needs more, new and accessible venues. Nowadays design criticism has a very restricted subject matter, largely limited to object categories that have traditionally been affiliated to design.

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