



CONSEQUENTIAL QUESTION
HAS MODERNISM FAILED US?

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FAILED US?

John Jennifer Marx, AIA

Founding Partner/Chief Creative
Officer, Form4 Architecture

What do the past 100 years tell us about the next 100? John Jennifer Marx considers second-century modernism.

Modernism, viewed as a style in addition to a movement, has a fascinating and tumultuous history. Early modernism's design ethos had an imaginative and intuitive quality that evoked rich, deep human responses. Initially this movement was an act of rebellion—stylistic, cultural, social, economic and political—against the burdens of western history at the turn of the 19th century.

Modernism challenged humanity to change in fundamentally positive and thoughtful ways. Its ramp-up period was spectacular in its holistic nature: Everything from spoons to cities accelerated toward an emerging modern zeitgeist.

As a culture of architects and business patrons, we believed passionately in that future, starting in the 1930s with art deco and art moderne. By the 1950s, popular culture fueled a drive toward rockets and stardust, based on the conviction that “mankind” could conquer disease and poverty and have dominion over nature, all through the delights of technology, rational thought and science. Modernism represented a future vision of humanity's potential to soar to great heights, freed from the shackles of past conventions, atrocities and social orders. Can we rediscover our fervor?

One hundred years later, modernism can be seen to have created its own set of conventions and ground rules—and limitations. The law of unintended consequences caught up to us. Modernism is in need of renewal—or reappraisal, at the least.

Modernism: A Retrospective

Today, modern architecture is at a crossroads. While celebrating the progress it has nurtured, the modernist design ethos must admit to its past transgressions and current public alienation. In learning from modernism's bracketed history (negative and positive), architecture could move forward thoughtfully—and perhaps radically—to fulfill its aspirational potential to be of service to, and inspire, humanity.

In modernism's developmental years, a philosophy of rational pragmatism ultimately diverged from a sense of artistry. This led to an unhealthy imbalance, an arrogance that thinking alone was the highest order of human achievement. This prioritized thought process over creative process and produced a series of unfortunate outcomes, the most alarming of which centered on architecture's growing lack of cultural relevance to the public.

Culturally, many factors influenced this shift. In 1966, concurrent with the glorious stylistic crescendo of mid-century modernism, Robert Venturi, in "**Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture**," asked us to not design from the heart. Also in 1966, the Temptations' song "Beauty is Only Skin Deep" exemplified a social movement that began to hold that anything beautiful was de facto superficial. Many architects intentionally began to remove beauty and grace from their palettes in attempts to be taken seriously.

Architecture then drifted through the 1970s, '80s and '90s, moving toward problem-solving, conceptual clarity, intellectual rigidity and machine architecture. These are all valid theoretical stances in balance but lose momentum when they also introduce migration from joy and warmth and move us away from expressing the human heart.

Architecture in the late modern decades lost sight of one of our most important attributes—the passion to engage, to serve, to inspire. Culture often changes in cycles, wherein things of great value (e.g., modernism) can become exaggerated to the point of absurdity. The eternal challenge is to recognize and rebalance these shifts when they occur. When we get complacent, or bored, we succumb to entropy, to taking the easier or safer road. We might even dismiss the need for constant renewal and regeneration—an ill-informed coping mechanism for survival.

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Caught in conflict between art and business, the profession of architecture seemed to fall victim to pragmatic materialism disguised as philosophical and theoretical integrity. A blandness emerged in the form of non-poetic minimalism. The reactions to this have been visible from inside and outside the profession.

Frank Gehry famously stated what many in the profession were too shy to utter at a press conference after an exhausting flight to Spain. “Let me tell you one thing,” he emphasized. “In the world we live in, 98% of what gets built and designed today is pure shit. There’s no sense of design nor respect for humanity or anything. They’re bad buildings and that’s it.” This remark was prefaced by the raising of his middle finger.

To substantiate the claim of public disdain for modernist work, a 2020 Harris Poll¹ of everyday Americans compared modern to historic U.S. federal buildings. More than 72% of Americans chose historicist architecture over modernism. This result was uniform in terms of race, class, education, gender and socioeconomic status.

To counter this, it would be easy to resort to historicism and sentimental nostalgia to bridge an ever-deepening disconnect between the public and modern architecture. Just last year, the Beautifying Federal Civic Architecture Act—stating, “Classical architecture is the preferred and default architecture for Federal public buildings”—was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives. (There has been no further action.) The elements of humane design reside in these styles, but do not represent the path to our collective future.

Modernism Reinterpreted

To adapt to our current reality and prepare to face a larger problem set, we need to create more humane and culturally relevant forms of modernism. We need to open it up to embrace the full range of humanity and be inclusive across a wide spectrum of cultures, genders and regions.

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Despite our attempts to predict and design the future, we often find that our solutions quickly become the past. But this paradox can be a designer’s sweet spot, a dynamic we can leverage for greater impact. Freed from the shackles of historical constraint, modernism offers a powerful range of expressions that gives designers an open canvas to



Second-century modernism: In search of balance
Image courtesy John Jennifer Marx

create renewed emotional engagement. But when we look at issues such as universality (e.g., inclusive access by many, ageless appeal, et al.), we will need to balance this with the notion that design is most memorable and relevant when it has a unique human expression. To regain this condition, we must look back to modernism’s early gestational moments, back to when we believed in the promise of “the future.” Rather than a future solely based on rationalism and technology, we need now to reintroduce the human spirit.

By its nature, architecture exerts its presence for decades, if not centuries. It is not easily thrown away. It has forever been a fundamental tenet of the profession to take a long view of that responsibility. That said, modernist architecture has ironically developed an overt obsession with “timelessness.” Timelessness, a paradox, has become a constricting cultural force, imposing sets of normative behaviors. In a modernist context, timelessness has come in practice to mean “without style or character.” Poetic minimalism resides outside this characterization because the “poetic” is what elevates a specific example of minimalism to the level of timelessness. Absent poetry, minimalism is banality, arguably what is at the core of the public’s dissatisfaction with most modern work.

On the other hand, timelessness, if seen as a measure of rigor, discipline and high standards, can be powerful within the context of a specific style of architecture, whether as a refinement or extension of an existing style or the creation of a new one. To say something is “timeless” is a high aspiration. It means it will always have an enduring resonance. The most timeless buildings are those we will not throw away because we love them too much.

Modernism is capable of producing lovable and inspiring buildings. It takes only intention. Lovable might be best approached as a broad set of intentions rather than as an issue of style. One might start with a set of intentions to create “lovable design” and examine that question deeply. From a perspective of emotional meaning and resonance, one can then search for formal expressions of those intentions that fit the context, client, building use and artistic interests of the project designer and team. Rather than assigning a specific “style” as lovable, it might be better to encourage the widest possible range for self-expression. To have thousands—if not millions—of designers each creating different imaginative responses to “lovable design” would substantially change the character of the built environment. The public just might fall in love with architecture again.

A New Outlook: Emotional Abundance in Second-Century Modernism

Can we update this ideological framework and establish a new outlook that is open-ended and operational? If the first century of modernism can be considered an architecture of abstraction and ideas, what might we design if we turn our attention, in this second century of modernism, to an architecture of emotional abundance? Second-century modernism can create an architecture of richness and community by placing a higher priority on emotional meaning.

This shift in the design process will balance the rational with the intuitive and engender a “less + more” approach to expanding the range of cultural values. Such an inviting, inclusive approach welcomes you to embrace the paradoxical qualities of human existence and design from the heart *and* the mind.

¹ The poll of more than 2,000 respondents was commissioned by the National Civic Art Society, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that works to advance the classical tradition in architecture and urbanism.

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*John Jennifer Marx, AIA, is chief artistic officer of San Francisco-based **Form4 Architecture**, responsible for developing the firm’s design vision and language. He advocates philosophy, art and poetry in the thoughtful making of place through the compelling power of form, aware that architecture is a balancing act between self-expression and collaboration. Marx is the author of several books and treatises. His newest book, “Second-Century Modernism,” will be published in 2025. Marx earned his Bachelor of Science degree in architecture studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*