

Postmodernism Now: Politics, Culture, Context

Saturday 30 June, 11.00-18.00

Bakala Auditorium, the Design Museum



Radical revolt or a nightmare of pastiche? Popular or populist? Democratic or consumerist? This symposium looks at this most polarising of movements, why is it making a comeback and what it might mean for our current moment.

Postmodernism emerged in the 1970s as the cultural response to the era's shifting economic and political sands: the break with the mixed economy of the post-war years and the emergence of neoliberalism. This moment of flux and of overturning old certainties was manifested in a culture that was colourful, pluralist, exuberant, ironic, contingent, knowing and self-aware. In contrast to the certainties of the post-war era, all became relative in an invigorating culture of permissiveness and free-floating signifiers.

The backlash began in the early 1990s when Postmodernism began to be seen as an aesthetic aberration forever associated with reactionary politics, Thatcherism and the hyper-consumption it unleashed. Today, we are told that Postmodernism is back, with a slew of books, reappraisals, and a new generation of architects and designers advocating its principles of aesthetic pluralism, licentiousness and stylistic promiscuity.

In this symposium, leading architects, designers, artists and critics reflect on the Pomo revival, discussing its influence and legacy, and what relationship the current renewed interest in its ideals and values has to our own period of political and economic uncertainty, flux and transition.

11.00 Welcome

Sumitra Upham, the Design Museum

11.10 Introduction

Owen Hopkins, Senior Curator at Sir John Soane's Museum

11.45 Session 1: Is Postmodernism radical?

Postmodernism is typically associated with the politics of the market and individualism. Yet it can also be seen more neutrally as a radical attack on the status quo, whatever that may be. This session poses Postmodernism as a radical sensibility with no ideological affiliation and examines how this relates to the urban and socio-political issues of today.

Speakers: Douglas Spencer and Léa Catherine Szacka

Chair: Edwin Heathcote

13.00 Lunch Break

14.00 Session 2: When does popular become populist?

Kitsch, wit, irony, colour, surface, decoration, the playful reworking of past historical styles – postmodernism aimed to meet people on their own terms by embracing the market and consumerism. Yet this was arguably its fatal flaw, with what was once marginal and opposed to the status quo, quickly became mainstream through a proliferation of Pomo corporate HQs and classical cul-de-sacs. This session reflects on postmodernism's relationship to the public and questions whether its new aesthetic is driven by social and political forces.

Speakers: Daisy Froud, Sean Griffiths and David Madden.

Chair: Mel Dodd

15.15 Break

15.45 Session 3: Are we all Postmodern now?

One of Postmodernism's chief concerns was how architecture communicates within urban, social and cultural contexts. This has since become architectural orthodoxy. This final session explores the legacy of postmodernism in an age of hyper-connectivity. It asks; does postmodernism belong to the 80s or does today's hyperreal world of social media, virtual reality and big data prove it never went away?

Speakers: Alice Bucknell, Sam Jacob and Indy Johar

Chair: Brendan Cormier

17.00 Keynote

Charles Jencks followed by a conversation with Deyan Sudjic

18.00 Symposium ends

This event has been organised alongside the exhibition ‘The Return of the Past: Postmodernism in British Architecture’ which is on at Sir John Soane’s Museum, 16 May – 26 August 2018.

Speaker Biographies

Intro: Owen Hopkins

Owen Hopkins is Senior Curator of Exhibitions and Education at Sir John Soane's Museum and was previously Architecture Programme Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts. He is curator of numerous exhibitions including Adam Nathaniel Furman: The Roman Singularity (2017), Origins – A Project by Ordinary Architecture (2016) and Mavericks: Breaking the Mould of British Architecture (2016). Hopkins is also author of five books, including Lost Futures: The Disappearing Architecture of Post-War Britain (2017) and From the Shadows: The Architecture and Afterlife of Nicholas Hawksmoor (2015). Hopkins has been a judge for the BD Architect of the Year Awards, the AJ Architecture Awards and at the World Architecture Festival.

Session one, speaker: Léa-Catherine Szacka

Léa-Catherine Szacka is Lecturer in Architectural Studies at the University of Manchester. She is the author of Exhibiting the Postmodern: The 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale (Marsilio, 2016) – for which she was awarded the 2017 SAH GB Alice Davis Hitchcock Medallion – co-author of Le Concert: Pink Floyd à Venise (B2, 2017) and co-editor of Mediated Messages: Periodicals, Exhibitions and the Shaping of Postmodern Architecture (Bloomsbury, 2018). Szacka has lectured internationally on postmodern architecture and published in numerous edited volumes and journals (Log, OASE, Arch+, AA Files, JAE, the Journal of Architecture, AD, etc.) In 2014, she presented “Effimero: Or the Postmodern Italian Condition”, at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

Session one, speaker: Douglas Spencer

Douglas Spencer teaches at the Architectural Association, London and University of Westminster, and is a critical theorist of architecture. His *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* has been described as “a milestone in architectural criticism” (JAE). He has contributed essays for numerous publications including *The Journal of Architecture*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Architectural Design*, *e-flux*, *AA Files*, *New Geographies*, and *Volume*, and chapters for collections such as *Architecture and Feminisms*; *Landscape and Agency*; *This Thing Called Theory*; and *Architecture Against the Post-Political*.

Session one, speaker: Elly Ward Morris

Elly Ward, an independent, award-winning multi-disciplinary designer working across architecture, interiors, exhibition, art installation and product design. Ward began her architectural career with FAT and went on to form Ordinary Architecture after its closure where she designed a number of housing, exhibition and art installation projects in London, Venice and

Los Angeles for clients such as the Royal Academy of Arts and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Her own work has been exhibited and published widely. Ward has been an invited guest critic and speaker at several institutions and schools of art and architecture in the UK and US and she is currently a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art.

Session one, chair: Edwin Heathcote

Edwin Heathcote is the architecture and design critic for The Financial Times. He was an architect educated at the height of Post Modernism and is the author of a number of books including 'The Meaning of Home'. He also writes for GQ, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, ICON and Apollo and is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of online writing archive Readingdesign.org

Session two, speaker: Daisy Froud

Daisy Froud is a strategist specialising in 'community engagement' and participatory design. She devises tools and processes that enable diverse voices to meaningfully contribute to design decision-making, and to shaping the future of places in intelligent, imaginative and equitable ways. From 2003 to 2014, Daisy was a co-founder of architecture practice AOC. Since 2007 she has taught on the history and theory of spatial politics at The Bartlett School of Architecture. Daisy is a Built Environment Expert for Design Council CABE, a Mayoral Design Advocate to the Mayor of London, and sits on the advisory Design Panel for High Speed 2.

Session two, speaker: David Madden

David Madden is an Associate Professor in Sociology and teaches in the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics. He is co-author, with Peter Marcuse, of *In Defense of Housing: The politics of crisis*. He has conducted qualitative, ethnographic and historical research in New York City, London, and elsewhere, addressing topics including urban change, housing, public space, gentrification, critical theory, and planetary urbanisation. David holds a PhD from Columbia University and is a member of the editorial board of the journal CITY.

Session two, speaker: Sean Griffiths

Sean Griffiths is Professor of Architecture at the University of Westminster and practices under the name Modern Architect as an architect, artist and most recently, game designer. He is also a regular contributor to journals and online magazines. His current work is generated by research into chance, contingency and indeterminacy in architecture. Sean was formerly a founding director of the internationally renowned Art/Architecture practice, FAT which controversially pursued an interest in Post Modern aesthetics, throughout the 1990's and 2000's. FAT disbanded in 2014 shortly after it represented the UK at the 2014 Venice Biennale.

Session two, chair: Mel Dodd

Mel Dodd is an architect and academic and Programme Director of Spatial Practices at Central Saint Martins. Her teaching, practice and research interests focus on the relationships between

social and political infrastructures, and built environments, included in her book 'Live Projects: Designing with People' (RMIT Press, 2012), and forthcoming Publication 'Spatial Practices: Modes of Action and Engagement with the City' (Routledge 2019)

Session three, speaker: Sam Jacob

Sam Jacob is principal of Sam Jacob Studio for architecture and design. His work spans scales and disciplines ranging from master planning and urban design through architecture, design and art projects. Previously, Sam was a founding director of FAT Architecture. He has exhibited at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the MAK in Vienna and Venice Biennale. Sam is contributing editor for Icon magazine and columnist for both Art Review and Dezeen. Jacob is Professor of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, visiting Professor at Yale School of Architecture and Director of Night School at the Architectural Association.

Session three, speaker: Indy Johar

Indy Johar is an architect, co-founder of project00.cc and a Senior Innovation Associate with the Young Foundation and Visiting Professor at the University of Sheffield. Over the course of the last 15 years at 00, Johar has co-founded multiple social ventures from Impact Hub Westminster and Birmingham and the HubLaunchpad Accelerator. He has co-led research projects such as The Compendium for the Civic Economy and experiments including the wikihouse.cc, opendesk.cc., and most recently Dark Matter Laboratories. Johar has co-authored multiple publications and has taught and lectured at various institutions from the University of Bath, TU-Berlin; Architectural Association, University College London, Princeton.

Session three, speaker: Alice Bucknell

Alice Bucknell is an American artist, writer, and editor based in London. Working between art, architecture, and digital culture, she investigates the links between high art and pop culture, cosmology and technology, spiritualism and late capitalism, among other unlikely bedfellows. She contributes to a range of print and digital publications, including the Architectural Review, Art Papers, frieze, Migrant Journal and Metropolis Magazine. She received dual degrees in visual art and social anthropology from the University of Chicago and has since worked in art collectives, institutions, and publishing houses in the US, UK, and Europe, including Log in New York and the Agora Collective in Berlin.

Session three, chair: Brendan Cormier

Brendan Cormier is a writer, curator, and urban designer based in London. He is currently the lead curator of 20th and 21st Century Design for the Shekou Partnership at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Prior to this he served as the managing editor of Volume Magazine. He regularly writes for Mark, Domus, Azure, Monu, Thresholds, Conditions, and Canadian Architect. Cormier has taught at the Berlage in Delft and Bruce Mau's Institute Without Boundaries in Toronto. In 2009 he co-founded the research and design studio Department of Unusual Certainties in Toronto, where he designed several exhibition installations that explored urban issues. In 2011, Cormier was innovator-in-residence at the Design Exchange, Canada.

Keynote: Charles Jencks

Charles Jencks is a renowned cultural theorist, landscape designer, architectural historian, and co-founder of the Maggie's Cancer Care Centres. His best-selling books include *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, *Adhocism*, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* and *The Architecture of Hope* (on Maggie's Centres). His recent landscape work is summarised in *The Universe in the Landscape*. Scotland is home to several of his most exciting landscapes including *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* and *Jupiter Artland*, outside Edinburgh. His continuing project *The Crawick Multiverse*, 2015, commissioned by the Duke of Buccleuch, culminates annually in a three-day festival of performance art and public debates with the world leading cosmologists and scientists.

Deyan Sudjic

Deyan Sudjic is Director of the Design Museum in London. His career has spanned journalism, teaching and writing. Deyan was director of Glasgow UK City of Architecture 1999 and in 2002 he was Director of the Venice Architecture Biennale. He was Editor of *Domus Magazine* from 2000 to 2004, and was Founding Editor of *Blueprint Magazine* from 1983 to 1996. Deyan has published many books on design and architecture, including *The Edifice Complex* (Penguin, 2006), *The Language of Things* (Penguin, 2008), *Norman Foster: A Life in Architecture* (Orion, 2010), *Shiro Kuramata* (Phaidon, 2013), *B is for Bauhaus* (Penguin 2014) and *Ettore Sottsass, the Poetry of Things* (Phaidon 2015). His most recent book, *The Language of Cities*, was published by Penguin in October 2016. Deyan was made an OBE in 2000.