



## *Philosophy of Architecture*



Erasmus+

## Lecture 6. Relationship between architecture and consumerism and commercialism

6.1. Introductory remarks

6.2. Relationship between architecture and consumerism and commercialism

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## *6.1. Introductory remarks*

As Ann Thorpe is explaining, the mentality that consumerism and economic growth are cure-alls is one of the biggest obstacles to real sustainability, but any change seems impossible, unthinkable. Our contemporary paradox finds us relying for our well being on consumer-driven economic growth that we actually can't afford — not in environmental, economic or social terms. Although architecture and design have long been seen as engines for consumerism and growth, increasing numbers of designers are concerned about the problems resulting from growth. But designers face a paradox of their own; in scenarios of sustainable consumption, where people consume or build significantly less, what will be left for designers to do?

Facing the economic crisis, climate change and the end of the world anxiety of a globalized public, Thorpe urges designers and architects to question and change the foundation of modern design and architecture: mass production, consumption and economic growth. We need a design revolution to survive.

## 6.1. *Introductory remarks*

### References

Thorpe, A. *Architecture and design versus consumerism: How design activism confronts growth*, Earthscan/Routledge, 2012, 256 p.

## 6.2. *Relationship between architecture and consumerism and commercialism*

Architecture of Modernism has never look for general consensus, and in fact, never got it; it has always looked down at those poor individuals who could not understand, and felt all the more superior for it.

Modernists have always thought they know what is good for the world and for the people; Modernism, from its very beginnings, always wanted to be understood as a social means and service, spreading their charities and benefits over the anonymous users who were considered to be too uneducated to appreciate.

*Don't ask questions; it is good for you even if you don't understand. We know and decide what is good for you.*

## 6.2. *Relationship between architecture and consumerism and commercialism*

Don't we all have this elitarian attitude still in our heads?  
("I do! I have to freely admit it.")

I still prefer to get good critics in the specialized press,  
rather than from the people in the street.

If the non-educated like my work, there must be  
something wrong. That means I haven't been  
sophisticated enough, and I might appear a loser in front  
of my peer architects.

Yes, there has been Robert Venturi in the 1960s who laid  
out all his theories about the Ivory Tower of Modern  
Architecture, about its abstract formal language that  
nobody could understand or identify with, and about  
architecture that had to become an art not only aiming at  
its own justification or at the architect's own glory, like in a  
kind of incestuous exchange among "those who know". **6**

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We have all read these wise books, and again, we appreciated their intellectual sharpness and could even see that he had a point, but at the same time we are (almost) all continuing to produce Ivory Tower stuff.

Time was not ready for Venturi's admonitions in the 1960s. We were not ready, and partly are not ready to this day. We are so much children of Modernism that we have just been unable to turn around. After all, we haven't learnt it differently, and our secluded niche is just too nice and warm to leave it and go out into the cold.

We should know but we don't want to know that before Modernism, architecture was not a secret science among the chosen few. Before Modernism, architecture was made from elements that could be learnt and used to good effect, by people of average intelligence.

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Haven't we got a wealth of really decent buildings from the pre-modern era in which no architect has been involved, and don't we have, at the same time, an awful lot of horrible modernist buildings in which architects have been involved and expressed themselves? Isn't the surface of the world covered with abstract sophisticated modernist rubbish?

But it seems that the time has come that the sickness over this is becoming too much, even among the architects themselves. The pressure on the Ivory Tower has been mounting enormously, and more and more answers to the problem of complacent architecture are being proposed.

Architecture is trying to come out of the Ivory Tower: A very exciting process!



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Of course, there are still those who are not willing or able to come out of the Tower, or shrug back in as soon as they have felt the strong wind that is blowing outside.

However among those who come out of the Tower and those few who have never been in it, can basically be seen two main currents:

On the one hand, there are those architects who think they have understood that architecture can be used as an element of the post-modern mass culture. They aim at a broad popular effect, even if it is only short-lived. They see architecture as something that works and ever renews itself like fashion does: You get a tickle to the eye, you get the fascinating effect of a moment, and then you turn around and look for the next, possibly stronger tickle.

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To have this effect, you must not be bothered and distracted by deeper sense and meaning; things have to be arbitrary enough to not teach or tell you anything: Don't ask why I look like this and not like that. Just decide and make your own opinion about whether you like the effect of surprise and spectacle that I am offering to your eye, or not.

Enjoy if you can; if not, it doesn't matter either: Look at the next thing. Of course, to have the effect of surprise and spectacle, you have to change constantly and to change the effects ever more to keep the spin going. This, in turn, fits perfectly with the mechanisms of the commercialism and consumerism of our times where the craving for change is the motor of the economy and the benefits that a society can gain from a strong economy.

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This is the reason why this kind of deliberately “un-opinionated” and “funny” architecture is so easy to sell.

To be commercially successful as an architect, you’d better adapt this kind of working. Your architecture will be welcome as an advertisement, and the business world will be waiting for you.

You will be published widely and maybe propelled to stardom, and isn’t this what all the young kids (and no-more-kids) in architecture dream about?

But, as any commercial advertisement, this is cynical. Any commercial advertisement is an unfair manipulation of the emotions and feelings of the individual by instilling artificial needs, an abuse of innocence if you want.

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We can feel this unfairness very well when we look at advertisement aiming at children who are totally defenseless against this kind of manipulation, but it is not true at all to say that grown-ups can defend themselves much better against this sort of sublime and abusive manipulation.

But this current, the one of architects who cynically put themselves at the service of short-lived consumerism, is luckily not the only one existing. On the other side, there are those architects who understand as well that architecture has to get back down to earth and reach the general public, but they take a different road. These architects are looking for effects that have nothing to do with the effect of the “unseen” and the surprise, and with short-lived consumerism.

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They look for longer lasting effects and do not recognize that innovation is a quality in its own right. They do not believe in the invention of the ever new.

These architects believe that any individual has an inborn ability to sense the dignity and truth that lay in lasting beauty. They look for the timeless beauty and try to offer it. They are convinced that real beauty is always beyond its time.

These architects are far from being functionalists or technocrats or people who want to teach the people a new way of life, in the way that the modernists wanted to. They recognize that their only way to do something for the world and for the people is through the beauty of space, through the feeling of space, inside the building as well as between the buildings and between the building and the landscape.

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To do this, they have nothing else in their hands to work with but light and the masses and surfaces that are hit by the light, and the drama and joy of experiencing the effects that can be produced with these few elements.

With these few elements alone they create emotions; emotions that you can feel without having an education in architecture.

Of course, their buildings are also functionally and technologically correct, but in this case, function and technology are only there to fulfill the purpose of taking the stress out of the use of the building and to free the attention for the perception of the beauty of space.

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Fortunately, there are more than a few architects who look at architecture from this perspective, and I can see beautiful work of lasting qualities continuing to emerge from many parts of the world.

It is certainly the more difficult and less tempting way to go, because the use of “silent” qualities makes it so much harder to gain recognition and good earnings. But in the end, I am sure that this will be the kind of architecture that will stand the test of time, the one that will still be looked at when all the fashions will be gone.

Hasn't it always been this way? As long as I see that there are architects, and particularly the younger ones, going this more ambitious road, I am not worried for the future of architecture as a key discipline of any culture.

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The return to “silent” and timeless qualities is the sustainability that architecture really needs. This kind of sustainability is at least as important as the ecological and economical ones.

We need no constant innovation; innovation is a phantom that we must not chase. We just have to use the elements that are there already, in a better and more efficient way.

And we have to trust in the people’s inborn and unmanipulated sense and instinct for beauty, and provide them with chances to apply this sense and instinct, to train it and thus make it ever stronger.



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This would be a way for architecture to help enhancing the general level of culture, and to really become a service to the people, instead of a service to mere commercial or abstract intellectual interests.

Which one is the way out of the Ivory Tower in which architecture has hidden for the last hundred years? How can architecture gain general acceptance once more? Is adaption to commercialism, consumerism and fashion the right way? Or is it the search for the more “silent” and sustainable beauty of space? The second way seems harder but more rewarding.

### References for this section

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