

Deterritorialisation and Reterritorialisation: The Breakthroughs and Predicaments of Postmodern Design from a Deleuzian Perspective

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Abstract: Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and reterritorialisation, this article examines how postmodern design challenged modernist norms and the predicaments that emerged from this process. It conceptualises the institutionalisation of modernism as a relatively stable order structured by functionalism, standardisation, and formal purity, and analyses how postmodern design unsettled this order through historical quotation, symbolic collage, and the recombination of heterogeneous elements. The study argues that postmodern design broadened the possibilities for expressing emotion, historical memory, and cultural identity. Yet, through dissemination and commercialisation, these forms of difference were transformed into marketable styles and markers of identity, resulting in the stylisation of design language, the superficial treatment of cultural meaning, and the blurring of evaluative boundaries. Postmodern design did not simply replace modernism; rather, it developed through the continuing interplay between deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Keywords: Deleuzian philosophy, territorialisation, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, postmodern design.

1. Introduction

Deleuze's philosophy of difference and aesthetic thought are strongly constructive, grounded in the conjunction of intensity, becoming, and immanence [1]. This suggests that his critique of established orders is not confined to negation but also addresses the generation of new relations. Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of territorialisation, deterritorialisation, and reterritorialisation refer respectively to the stabilisation of relations, the loosening of established boundaries, and the formation of new orders from mobile elements. Deterritorialisation may open up new possibilities, but the elements it releases may also be incorporated into new structures.

Modernist design established relatively stable norms through functionalism, standardisation, and formal purity, whereas postmodernism unsettled them through historical quotation, symbolic collage, the revival of ornament, and formal hybridity. In the course of dissemination, institutionalisation, and commercialisation, however, the differences generated by postmodern design were reclassified, reproduced, and converted into new stylistic categories. Its historical breakthroughs and inherent predicaments were therefore not successive stages but intertwined outcomes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

2. The Territorialisation of Modernist Design

Modernist design did not emerge as a fully formed system. Its territorialisation was a gradual process in which industrial production, functionalist principles, and social reform were brought into a relatively stable relationship and subsequently reinforced through education, professional institutions, and mass production. The following sections examine the formation of these principles and their institutionalisation as

dominant design norms.

2.1. The Historical Formation of Modernist Design Principles

In the late nineteenth century, machine production transformed the relationship between design and manufacturing, while also generating problems such as formal disorder, excessive ornamentation, and uneven product quality. The Arts and Crafts movement responded by emphasising manual labour and the qualities of materials, but its commitment to traditional craft production could not provide a general solution for large-scale industrial manufacturing. Redefining the relationships among form, function, and production under industrial conditions consequently became a central concern of modern design.

In the early twentieth century, the Deutscher Werkbund, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, and Russian Constructivism collectively promoted a shift towards machine production, standardisation, and mass production. Geometric forms, structural simplification, and a formal language suited to industrial production gradually became defining features of modernism. Its social ideal was expressed in the attempt to improve everyday life through standardised housing, furniture, and household products. The stabilisation of the relationships among function, structure, materials, and production methods thus marked the initial territorialisation of modernist design.

2.2. The Institutionalisation of Modernist Design Norms

From the 1920s onwards, modernism gradually moved from avant-garde experimentation to widespread dissemination. Bauhaus education, exhibitions of modern architecture, professional journals, and international organisations introduced functionalism, formal simplification, and standardisation into architecture, product design, and graphic design. After the Second World War, reconstruction

and industrial expansion established modernism as the dominant language of international design.

As modernism spread, its earlier radical and reformist force gradually diminished. Geometric forms, unornamented surfaces, and standardised structures, initially developed in opposition to historicist ornament, gradually became fixed styles through repeated use. Function, simplicity, and rationality were elevated from specific design methods to universal criteria, while the homogenising logic of instrumental rationality further subjected architectural design to standardised norms [2]. Local traditions, popular taste, and historical styles were frequently excluded from these dominant norms.

By the mid- to late twentieth century, the modernist emphasis on unity and universality could no longer adequately address emotional experience, identity, and cultural difference. Through prolonged dissemination and institutionalisation, a design language once associated with innovation became a new form of authority. Postmodernism consequently reintroduced ornament, historical symbols, and popular culture, thereby initiating the deterritorialisation of modernist norms.

3. The Deterritorialisation of Postmodern Design

Postmodernism emerged through a critique of modernism and derived its initial impetus from the proclaimed death of modernism [3]. In design, this critique was first articulated most clearly in architectural theory and practice during the 1960s and later extended to furniture, product, interior, and graphic design. Postmodernism did not completely reject modern industrial production. Instead, it loosened modernism's established conceptions of function, formal conventions, and evaluative criteria, allowing historical symbols, ornamental vocabularies, popular culture, and regional experience to re-enter design.

3.1. From the Critique of Modern Architecture to the Emergence of Postmodern Design

From the 1960s onwards, modernist architecture was widely adopted in European and American urban development. Functional zoning, standardised components, geometric volumes, and glass curtain walls became common architectural features. Although these principles effectively responded to the demands of post-war reconstruction, their repeated application also produced spatial uniformity, weakened local characteristics, and reduced the complexity of lived experience. The modernist language originally developed in opposition to historicism and excessive ornamentation was thus transformed into a new fixed model.

In 1966, Robert Venturi challenged the pursuit of purity, unity, and clarity in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, calling for renewed attention to the complex relationships and multiple meanings within architecture. He later worked with Denise Scott Brown and others to study the commercial landscape of Las Vegas, incorporating advertising signs, commercial symbols, and popular visual culture into architectural research. Charles Jencks similarly criticised the uniformity of modernist expression from the perspective of architectural language. Postmodern architectural thought set pluralism against modernist purity, the complexity of reality against utopian idealism, and historical continuity against avant-garde rupture [4]. The

criteria by which architecture was judged, as well as its relationship to history and everyday life, were consequently redefined.

In architectural practice, Venturi, Charles Moore, and Michael Graves reintroduced pediments, arches, classical orders, and ornamental patterns without merely reviving traditional styles. Through exaggerated proportions, material substitution, symbolic collage, and formal displacement, they displaced historical elements from their original contexts and transformed them into a design language open to recombination and reinterpretation. The disruption of existing relations did not cause these elements to disappear; instead, heterogeneous elements could enter new processes of meaning-making and form new relations [5]. Historical symbols were no longer treated simply as remnants of past styles, while architectural form was no longer confined to the direct expression of function and structure. It also began to mediate communication, memory, and cultural identity.

3.2. From Architecture to Other Fields of Design

From the 1970s onwards, postmodernism expanded into furniture, product, and interior design. Italian radical design challenged modernist assumptions about products and function. Groups such as Archizoom Associati and Superstudio used exhibitions, installations, and conceptual projects to criticise the increasingly close relationship between functionalism and consumer society. Through exaggeration, irony, and non-utilitarian forms, they reopened questions about products, consumption, and ways of life. Design no longer merely solved existing problems but also sought to identify new ones [6]. This shift redirected the focus of design from functional improvement towards cultural criticism and conceptual expression.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Studio Alchimia and the Memphis Group translated this critical position into a distinctive product language. Ettore Sottsass and other designers used vivid colours, geometric patterns, plastic laminates, and decorative surfaces to foreground the artificial qualities of industrial materials and their associations with mass culture. Although their products retained basic functions, they also became vehicles for expressing personal taste and cultural identity.

In visual communication, New Wave typography disrupted modernist grids and regular page layouts. Text could be tilted, overlapped, or fragmented, while imagery drawn from advertising, music, fashion, and subcultures entered professional design. Visual communication therefore shifted from an emphasis on neutrality and precision towards individuality, emotion, and mediated experience. Postmodernism consequently developed from an architectural critique into a cross-disciplinary design phenomenon.

4. The Reterritorialisation of Postmodern Design and Its Predicaments

Postmodern design did not remain in a permanently open state after challenging modernist norms. As its strategies circulated more widely, they were gradually codified by professional institutions and absorbed into commercial markets, giving rise to new stylistic conventions and categories. This section examines this process through the stylistic codification of postmodern design and the weakening

of its cultural meaning under consumer culture.

4.1. From Avant-Garde Rebellion to Stylistic Codification

During the 1980s, the influence of postmodern design expanded rapidly. Historical references, symbolic collage, vivid colours, and ornamental forms, previously confined largely to architectural theory, radical design, and localised experiments, circulated across a wider range of design fields through exhibitions, magazines, design education, and commercial production. Postmodernism thus developed from a limited critique into a widely recognised design movement.

As its influence expanded, certain formal characteristics became increasingly fixed. Historical references, geometric juxtapositions, contrasting colours, and decorative surfaces came to be regarded as typical features of postmodern style. Design strategies originally intended to question modernist norms became detached from their critical contexts and turned into recognisable, imitable, and repeatable visual formulas. Such deconstructive practices did not necessarily challenge the underlying production system or functional structures of modernist design, but often remained revisions of its external forms and visual styles [7]. When conceptual criticism was reduced to formal variation, postmodernism gradually changed from an avant-garde practice into a codified style.

This transformation constituted the reterritorialisation of postmodern design. Early postmodernism loosened uniform standards and opened space for history, ornament, and popular culture to re-enter design. Once these breakthroughs were reorganised through exhibition systems, professional education, and the design market, they produced new classifications and norms. A formerly open and experimental language was fixed as an identifiable and reproducible stylistic category, while its critical force declined. What became codified were primarily visual characteristics rather than a unified design method. Postmodern thought remained heterogeneous and unstable, functioning more effectively as a critique of modernist norms than as a coherent methodology capable of sustained application [8]. Reterritorialisation therefore did not produce a unified alternative to modernism; instead, it stabilised selected postmodern strategies as a recognisable style.

4.2. Commercial Expansion and the Weakening of Cultural Meaning

The expansion of postmodernism was closely related to the development of consumer culture during the 1980s. As competition among brands intensified and commercial spaces and mass media expanded, design placed greater emphasis on product image, consumer experience, and expressions of identity. The postmodern emphasis on difference and symbolism aligned with market demand for product diversification, while vivid colours, historical styles, and regional elements were used to shape product images and cultural identities.

The market did not reject the postmodern challenge to uniform standards but absorbed it as a new commercial resource. Ornament, parody, and hybrid forms were widely employed in commercial spaces and everyday products, while local cultures, historical memories, and popular tastes were transformed into themed visual motifs. Although design appeared increasingly diverse, such differences were frequently reclassified according to brand positioning and

consumer groups. Capitalist reterritorialisation operates by folding disruptive and decoded flows back into itself, recoding them as capital, and using them to generate profit [9]. Rebellion, individuality, and plurality thus became marketable characteristics.

The cultural meaning of postmodern design was also weakened in some commercial practices. Through repeated use, historical symbols could become detached from their original social contexts, leaving only external forms suitable for recognition and circulation. Local cultures could likewise be reduced to fixed patterns and visual labels. The juxtaposition of forms from different cultures and historical periods could produce new interpretations, but it could also reduce history to a repository of styles available for arbitrary use. The central question is therefore not whether historical symbols may be reused, but whether design retains the capacity to engage with their historical and cultural contexts.

The postmodern critique of uniform standards also complicated the evaluation of design. Once complexity, hybridity, and polysemy were treated as values in themselves, the boundary between critical formal experimentation and commercially driven visual stimulation became increasingly difficult to identify. The historical breakthroughs and internal predicaments of postmodernism were therefore not separate phenomena but emerged together through repeated processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

5. Summary

The significance of postmodern design lies not in whether it ultimately replaced modernism, but in how it brought long-established functional standards, formal conventions, and design principles back into critical debate. It demonstrated that design does not follow a single path and that concepts such as rationality, progress, and modernity are shaped by specific historical conditions. However, disrupting an established order does not produce a permanently open state. Once new forms are widely disseminated, they may again be classified, reproduced, and stabilised. Deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are therefore not successive stages but intertwined processes that operate throughout the development of design.

From the perspective of design history, stylistic change should not be understood solely in terms of form but should also be examined in relation to transformations in social structures, mechanisms of dissemination, and cultural ideas. New design possibilities do not emerge independently of historical conditions; rather, they are shaped by the social and cultural relationships through which existing norms are questioned and reorganised. Postmodern design was therefore not an inevitable development after modernism, but one of several possibilities formed under particular historical circumstances. A Deleuzian perspective helps to explain how design orders are established, unsettled, and reconstructed, thereby providing a dynamic historical framework for understanding the development of design after modernism.

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