

# WHAT DO THE CONTRASTING VIEWS OF HARRIES AND EISENMAN ADD TO ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE IN BRINGING AESTHETIC IMPRESSIONS BACK TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT?

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**Abstract.** In the era of modernism, the natural symbols of art – expressed through aesthetic elements – have been seen replaced by the verbal notations of communication. The replacement forced the postmodernists to deconstruct the concept of modernism to bring back the notion of symbolic art superficially and to revitalize the meaning of art and its cohesive presence in the built environment. The revitalization process, however, does not seem to have gone without raising questions in the academic community. Does the aesthetic impulse come from the structural spirit of a built form alone? Is just aesthetics deeply rooted in built-form identity? Is aesthetics not associated with the social environment and economic living? Can aesthetics exist in isolation? Can aesthetics be more of a by-product of functionality than the product itself? Using the works of Harries and Eisenman, the paper develops a review sketch exploring these questions. Many other attributes, such as aesthetics production, aesthetics generation, and environmental aesthetics, and their roles in art appreciation have ensured positions in the discussion. The conclusions seem to warn that the influence of social co-existence in defining built-form aesthetics in the postmodern era and later, divorced from reality – avoiding the presence of the different layers in the social fabric and their relationships among themselves – seldom helps to produce any futuristic vision but invites chaos in thoughts and perceptions crossing over between studies and practices in architecture.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, environmental aesthetics, design authenticity, built-form identity, identity-identical dilemma, aesthetics production, aesthetics generation, social coexistence, artistic living, economic tenancy.

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## 1. Introduction

*"... if modernism was a white box, and Pomo was a grey box with decoration – with whipped cream on it, sprayed out of a can, deconstructivism broke the box open, and you had basically shards."*

– Peter Eisenman 10 May 2022

Many years ago, Vitruvius gave three golden rules of Good Architecture (McEwen, 2004; Suppes, 1991) – *Firmitas* (referring to the firmness of the structure), *Utilitas* (referring to the utility and essentially the uses of the built space), and *Venustas* (associated with the delight factor understood as the beauty). Each era had its share of contributions to exploring the beauty component of Architectural culture. While seeing through these lenses, one tries to understand, or even critique, the aesthetic value of built forms and their designs (Gangwar, 2017). This paper takes a dig at the meaning of aesthetics and its association with

the built environment in the postmodern era by using the works of Harries (1988) and Eisenman (1988). The paper looks into the contradictory views of the two authors by identifying various constructs of aesthetic experience dealing with architectural and environmental designs.

The long-standing dilemma is that, on the one hand, Harries (1988) remains concerned with authenticity and the established identity of a total design and that, on the other, Eisenman (1988) inclines towards making modernism work by bringing aestheticism back superficially in built-form designs. The study delves into the two questions in particular. Should one go with Eisenman, who brings perspectives for decoding architecture and its aesthetics in the postmodern era through the notions of flexibility and temporality? Or, should one stick with romanticism, as Harries inspires (Harries, 2010), for celebrating architecture that focuses on bringing out the beauty element through classical approaches to treating the built spaces as sacred or permanent features?

The premise of finding what dilemmas becomes even more intriguing if one adds the component of whose dilemmas are in the discussion – it is like a cliché seeing a poor man has stood in pursuit of acting out the role of a rich by overcoming behavioral constraints, or vice-versa. Simultaneously, the understanding of aesthetics in architecture and the built environment remains incomplete if one does not examine it through the entire length of its realization, that is, how one perceives things and how one consumes them (Aureli & Eisenman, 2013; also, see Jameson 1983 for more on the boundaries or separations of designs). The process includes scrutinizing the aesthetics component at various stages of development (Storey, 1994), such as conceptualization, design, implementation, and post-occupation. It is also essential to include the perspectives of both designers, directly involved in the various stages from conceptualization through implementation with a forehand knowledge and sense of design, and the users, responsible for evaluating aesthetics experience in the post-occupancy phase. The study starts by developing a background describing the approaches adopted by Harries (1988) and Eisenman (1988) and then progresses by exploring various facets of aesthetic understanding and experience from the positions of designers and users. The exploration converges to the point of doing justice to both classical (in some very commodious sense) and more socially and environmentally inflected approaches to defining architectural aesthetics. The discussion synthesizes the takeaways, much of which has remained unexplored in the studies and practices of architecture and the built environment.

Trained as an architect, Eisenman leans toward the argument that “logical and objective considerations can provide a conceptual and formal basis for any form of architecture,” but for neither being platonic nor isolated – evading the context that leads to “joining of form to intent, function, structure, and techniques in the sense of primacy in the hierarchy of elements (cf. Graafland, 2007, pp. 93–94).” As a philosopher, on the other hand, Harries (2010) has directed much of his writing to an architectural context that is platonic, sacred, and nostalgic – annexing unity and dignity of aesthetic experience in shelters without which, as Harries adds (1980, p. 36), “the dream of the complete building remains unrealized.”

## 2. Discussion premise

At the basic level, Harries (1988) recognizes the relevance of aesthetic interpretation in built environments while seeing through the lenses of early modern philosophy of art, culture, and architecture. On the contrary, Eisenman (1988) puts forward the postmodern idea, implying that wrapping up functional spaces with aesthetic envelopes characterized not only by historical details but with material texture in a hybrid manner can be an approach to bringing back the natural aesthetics superficially in built environments. The approach discards the ideology of shaping a built environment by involving instinctive and natural elements

of design both objectively and phenomenologically. The natural elements of design bear the complementing binary relationship between objects (or phenomena) in the world lived, experienced, and understood (Seamon, 2018; Harries, 1988). In the relationship, one object or phenomenon brings the other instinctively. For instance, darkness brings light instinctively; the outside cannot exist when there is no inside. Other examples are horizontal and vertical, rising and falling, lightness and heaviness, moving and resting, up and down, and so on.

The notion of postmodernism (McRobbie, 1994) came in the 1960s and eventually became a movement in art, literature, and architecture (Figure 1). The movement became prominent in the late 1970s and 1980s and remained dominant in the design industry until the 1990s. The postmodern movement was considered a reaction to the orthodoxy, austerity, and formal absolutism of the International style – a popular architectural culture of the early Twentieth Century (Eisenman & Harrison, 2008). According to Storey (1994), “one response to modernism’s incorporation was to [a] re-evaluation of popular culture; modernism, despite its often quoting of popular culture, is marked by a deep suspicion of all things popular.”

Modernity describes the progressive economic and administrative rationalization of the social world (Weiss & Wesley, 2002, p. 32). The impact of the rationalization on



**Figure 1.** Superficial addition of symbols. Venturi House, Philadelphia (source: Buszek, 2023)



**Figure 2.** Voicing out functions suppressing the inner spirit of the built forms. The Strip, Las Vegas (source: Venturi et al., 1977)

the built environment is distasteful and is often disfavored, especially when one looks at them from the traditional stance (Figure 2). Harries (1988) relates this crisis of aestheticism with the problem of enduring expressions – the expressions that deteriorate the syntactic (symbolic) connection between spaces that one recognizes and experiences naturally and culturally. In the modern era, built spaces are to voice out functions with billboards instead of expressing their meanings inherently. A sensitive analogy to this lost recognition, as Harries draws (Harries, 1988, p. 38), goes: “coins which have lost their picture and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.”

The crisis of aestheticism in the modern era defends the requirement for an alternative design approach – an *after-modern* or postmodern approach that, on the one hand, would cater to the shelter needs of the population mass and, on the other, help to bring aesthetic impressions back to the built environments. The postmodern era witnesses a giant leap in acceptance to experiment with new technology, style, and art. While these experiments move on with much zeal and universal acceptance (Williams & Sewpaul, 2004), a part of such explorations also wants to remain affectionate and loyal to the identity connotation, showing an affinity towards carrying the feeling of conservative thoughts associated with the original art and form – the nostalgia associated with the living paradigm (Gutleben, 2001).

### 3. Nostalgia of living

Industrial development has led to tremendous growth in the built environment (Kumar, 2020; Kahraman, 2015; Powell, 2007, and many others). Mass production of structures has become a way to cater to housing and infrastructure needs. The approach to designing built forms one size and one type for all, the prototypes, to meet the demand, and perhaps to meet the demand very swiftly to generate an economic surplus (Callinicos, 1990), somewhat has snatched away the nostalgia of living from people (Watson, 2005). By emphasizing the diverse schools of thought on the commons, Eisenman (1988) explores this nostalgia of living in terms of the desire for truth, which, during that era, has been translated with the existence of structures that arguably, and perhaps discursively, has tried to

fasten the theory of classical expression of aestheticism. For instance, one persuasively pictures a longing relation of new conventions or even dynamic forms, often marked by isolated “material-discursive entanglements,” as in *Residenze Carlo Erba* (Adigüzel & Şenel, 2022, p. 38; Figure 3), with the surrounding traditional structures. The transition between modernism and postmodernism is evident but sometimes remains uncontrolled.

In fact, positioning himself far from classicism and formalism (Rowe & Koetter, 1984) and sententiously opposing them in many cases, Eisenman’s (1984) ideas and practices in the 80s have shifted to an uncommon style derived from Darreda’s philosophy of deconstruction. Grounding on post-structuralism, Eisenman (Derrida & Hanel, 1990) has used the deconstruction philosophy in architecture to break the strong bond between form and function – the bond that establishes the symbolic connection between spaces that one recognizes and experiences instinctively. With the absence of such an instinctive experience in post-modern structures, Eisenman has led the spectators to not only feel but also think around the condition of *presentness* – a condition that makes the present “state of being” detached from the nostalgic past and the wishful future (Figure 4).

*Presentness* (Eisenman, 1990, p. 16) is “neither absence nor presence, form nor function, neither the particular use of a sign nor the crude existence of reality, but rather an excessive condition between sign and the Heideggerian notion of being.” By citing *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, Berlin, and *The City of Culture in Santiago*



**Figure 3.** Material-discursive entanglements. *Residenze Carlo Erba*, Milan (source: Eisenman architects, 2009–2019)



**Figure 4.** Dismantling the nostalgic bond. *Il Giardino dei Passi Perduti*, Verona (source: Eisenman architects, 2004–2005)



de Compostela, Spain, Eisenman says (appeared in Eisenman and Belogolovsky, 2016; Figure 5):

*"The whole idea of my architecture is about stopping any communication and placing within architecture itself a device that causes you to react emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Without representation, my architecture means nothing. But the experience is something else. You walk through the Berlin memorial and it has nothing to do with what happened in the camps. It is about walking in that space and you get strange physical sensations such as undulation, tilting, [and] leaning, and you feel perplexity, isolation, [and] disorientation; you never know where you are. ... It is about not understanding the meaning. There is no iconic representation in either Santiago or Berlin. The idea is to create a particular experience in the space by being in that space [the presentness]. Both of these projects have strong experiential qualities of intensely vibrating spaces, and they are very different from my early work, which is more conceptual."*

The notion of presentness makes Eisenman contradict Harries. Advocating how to free architecture from what is not, as argued by Culler and Derrida (1987), Eisenman seeks to hold the present state of being instead of looking into what the past has to offer – the ideology that Harries advises. In fact, Eisenman (1998) strives to run against the notion of maintaining a signature style in the design culture – a style that he either developed in the past or will realize in the future. Instead, Eisenman constantly challenges himself and shifts from one presentness to the other owing to the idea that "architecture requires the displacement of conventions ... to create what will be ... [because] creation does not repeat what is" (Eisenman & Belogolovsky, 2016).

Harries (1988), on the contrary, adds a different picture to the context of classical expression of aestheticism and the aspects that contribute to deploring the sense of a building structure and its prevailing beauty. When one superimposes aesthetic components on functional buildings, the concern of aestheticism of architecture merely becomes a matter of decoration, Harries (1988) adds. For instance,



**Figure 5.** Presentness in City of Culture of Galicia, Spain (source: Eisenman architects, 1999–2011)

according to Harries (1988, p. 42), the external beauty of the Gothic Cathedrals and Farmhouses with Rococo art comes from their structural spirits alone, and the addition of decorative elements to the envelopes of these buildings remains superfluous. With this in mind, one might also read Harries that all buildings constructed in the pre-modern era must carry the essence of natural aestheticism and withstand the test of time (Kellner, 1988). The concern arises when one tries to grasp and justify the aesthetic notion by separating a built form from the built environment, which Eisenman advocates. The mere saying that external beauty entirely comes from the structural spirit of the building cannot stand convincing. A careful investigation may shed some light on whether aesthetics stands as a standalone notion (Allen, 1950; also see Stephanson and Jameson 1989 for more on aesthetic questions associated with the institutionalization and later against the canonization of built forms) or symbolizes a holistic vibe that resonates with the surrounding landscape.

#### 4. Landscape nexus

*"... Let the splendor of diamond, pearl, and ruby vanish like the magic shimmer of the rainbow. Only let this one tear-drop, this Tajmahal, glisten spotlessly bright on the cheek of time, forever and ever."*

– Written by Tagore (1861–1941, pp. 95–96.  
Translation: Kshitish Roy).

The landscape setting – the *context* – always stands strong while creating an architectural masterpiece that withstands time. The stones of the Taj Mahal (Figure 6) turn magical in the beautiful landscape setting. Because of the setting, the mood of the monument changes throughout the day from sunrise to sunset and from moonrise to moonset. The argument is that without establishing the logical nexus between the building structure and its canvas landscape, one cannot describe built-form aesthetics, identity, and the totality of the design. In The Fallingwater of Frank Lloyd Wright (Levine, 1998; Figure 7), for instance, the bold and prominent horizontal elements blend logically with the vertical lines of the background trees. The *complementary contrast* perceived in the design turns the built form magical. Without addressing the background landscape nexus with the building structure, Wright possibly fails to capture the spontaneous blend of the form with the context of the surrounding landscape. Without grasping the logical blend, Wright also possibly fails to comprehend how the aesthetic meaning gets added to the built form (Waldheim, 2002; Vaughan & Ostwald, 2022). "That this particular configuration of verticals and horizontals moves and speaks to us presupposes" what Harries (1988, p. 125) calls "the natural language of space."

*"The natural language has its foundation in the way human beings exist in the world, embodied and mortal, under the sky and on the earth; it is bound up with [the] experience of rising and falling, of getting*

*up and lying down, of height and of depth. Buildings speak to us because our experience of space and therefore of particular spatial configurations cannot but be charged with meaning. As a re-presentation of buildings, architecture re-presents and lets us attend to that speech."*

Now, backtrack to the Seventeenth Century. In the paintings of Jacob van Ruisdael, Harries (1988; Figure 8) points out that the vast land and the open sky develop the background environment, in which the vertical axis of the structure defines a natural nexus between the land and the open sky. The landscape nexus with built forms, as Harries (1988) observes, often remains subtle or even absent in postmodern architecture. The focus stays on adding decorative elements to the built forms without even paying attention to the background environment.

The counterarguments resisting the nexus phenomenon also run parallelly (Waldheim, 2002; Mills, 1988) and raise critical questions. What happens when the background environment emerges as barren, dull, chaotic, and contextless? Can postmodernists create a new context without physically having or seeing it? The quest brings the politics of Foucault on aestheticism into the picture, much of which, as O'Farrell (2006, p. 182) reports, is directed toward design structuralism – an attempt to create



**Figure 6.** The landscape setting of the Taj Mahal functions as a canvas behind the monument and reflects myriad emotions of love at different times of the day and seasons in a year, offering eternal beauty and universal acceptance (source: Taj Mahal, n.d.)



**Figure 7.** Complementary contrast in The Fallingwater (source: Fallingwater, n.d.)



**Figure 8.** Association between sky, land, and the built form. Landscape art of Jacob van Ruisdael (source: The Yorck Project, 2002)



**Figure 9.** A new context. Secretariat Building, Chandigarh. Architect: Le Corbusier (source: Wikipedia, 2006)

a new context that influences the surrounding elements instead. O'Farrell (also see Dumm 1988 for more on the politics of postmodern aesthetics) argues that postmodern structuralism grounds the idea of relatedness between elements. He defines relatedness through power, which comes to a structure when its design gains the ability to influence things around it instead of being impacted by surrounding things. The approach creates a new context (Figure 9) – a context of sustenance in which the actions of one structure influence the existence of the structure itself and the surrounding others. This way, postmodernism generates numerous scopes for describing aestheticism in architectural culture.

## 5. The authenticity question

Postmodernism has been able to shatter the modern ideology of aestheticism (Harries, 1988). However, much of the movement outcome has misallocated and misplaced the inherited symbols of built forms. The use of superficial elements to add beauty to built forms has merely raised the question of design authenticity. Harries continues to assess the righteousness of traditional design approaches by stressing the fact that (p. 40) "[s]uch translation makes conspicuous what was long taken for granted opens our



eyes, and captures our attention.” Harries alleges further (Harries, 1988, p. 40) that “inherited symbols once again speak to us deeply or with their original voice; reduced to material aesthetic to play they tell instead of the erosion of architecture’s traditional symbolic function and some architect’s wilful fantasy.” A prominent example of this fantasy is the supergraphics of the Field Museum of Chicago banners (Figure 10), which develop a strong impression contrast with the context (Glaser, 2015) of the neoclassical portico of the museum. The impression contrast corroborates an artistic, architectural, philosophical, and cultural influence in postmodern architecture, much observed to rise in reaction to modernism – a reaction that breaks the structural boredom by offering design fantasy and supremacy – a *neo-formal* identity.

Deconstruction diverts from postmodernism from this point more subjectively by dismantling the binary oppositions of inherited symbols (Culler & Derrida, 1987; explained before) describing the world lived, experienced, and understood. According to Hoteit (2015), “deconstruction attempts to expose these binary dualisms and deconstruct them without privileging one component over the other by asserting the truth of the uncertain hesitant.” The *presentness* is a condition between sign and the Heideggerian notion of being (Eisenman, 1990, p. 16; Figure 11). Deconstruction is a philosophy (introduced by Jacques Derrida in his book *De la Grammatologie* in 1967) that Eisenman uses in architectural design to define the presentness or the state of being without connecting built form with function. Untainted by individual sensibilities, the design remains integrated with its syntax, which communicates a grammar of signs and pure textuality, showcasing the application of the deconstruction philosophy. Deconstructivism is the opposite of constructivism, which is “a style of architecture developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s,” and as Eisenman and Ravenscroft (2022) points out, “[it] has anything to do with breaking down [the] hierarchy, breaking down relationships, one to one related sign and symbol.” Deconstruction brings flexibility and temporality, a type of subjective identity, much

of which exists within the scope of the built-form perception – a perception through which the designer tries to make the spectator feel and think about the presentness. The notion of presentness (Eisenman, 1990) is the consciousness of being with other entities within an environment the built form translates into.

Eisenman and Harrison (2008) also shed some light on the aspect of built-form identity through the notions of canon, canonic, and canonical – an orthodoxy, as in canon law having roots to an identity, not purely in classical terms, but as a hinge, a premonition to the future – causing identity as the default ingredient for authenticity. In canonical terms, expressions, elements, and artifacts repeat but also constantly change, showing disruption in monotony and causing mutation – “a canonical pattern in music is contrapuntal,” as Eisenman and Harrison (2008) offers an analogy, “repeating but also constantly changing.” The repeating pattern resembles the learned thought, and the change draws complexity in the pattern elements that are untried before, causing curiosity in the learned thought itself about what is new. Curiosity generates interest (Nia, 2015), wonder, and the pull factor – translating into a sense of aestheticism – to explore the original pattern further. Take the example of the Taj Mahal again. Over the years of its existence, there have been attempts to mimic the monument. Attempts made for the historic Biwi-ka-Makhbara (Figure 12), built by the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, to the most contemporary example of a residence built in Madhya Pradesh, India, in a miniature form – popularly the Mini Taj Mahal – stand as a testimony to the obsession to find an identity in the social realm. The identity quest in both cases has been pursued by making new structures identical to and repeating the original form – the Taj itself. The replicas have found fame quickly because of their popular identity – but at the cost of compromising authenticity.

On the contrary, the Chapel of Ronchamp, the legacy of Le Corbusier (Haddad, 2009; Figure 13), showcases the opposite side of the argument – designing with authenticity



**Figure 10.** The supergraphics of the Field Museum, Chicago (source: Chicago Parent, 2021)



**Figure 11.** The state of being – freeing form from function. City of Culture of Galicia, Spain (source: Eisenman architects, 1999–2011)



**Figure 12.** Biwi-ka-Makhbara, Aurangabad (source: Little Black Book, n.d.)



**Figure 13.** Formalism vs. Abstractionism: a – First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, Connecticut describing formalism (source: Dwyer, 2023); b – Ronchamp describing Abstractionism (source: Kroll, 2010)

while not making the outcomes identical – belonging to the same typology (the Chapel here). While the approach offers a new identity to the design over time, an authentic one, it takes the conventional meaning orthodoxy away from the built form. The counterargument is that, as the critiques unveil (Wās, 2012; Samuel, 1999), the built form still withstands time and the essence of a church – the substance of a religious place.

## 6. Identity and identical

Gleiter (2014, p. 128) has sought to explain the deconstructive approach of Eisenman by citing an example of designing houses with (more or less similar) only marginally varied cuboid forms to express simple, easy, and formal strategies of decomposition (through sections, divisions, subtractions, and other possible modes of transformation). These designs remain accompanied by pages of tedious protocols and seemingly endless sequences of diagrams intended to prove the logical rigor of the deconstructivism process. However, the discussion here comes at a conflicting moment where one can run further to question whether or not design authenticity could exist in mass production, where most of the things stand identical (as probed by Eisenman, 1988). The argument is that, in mass production, designers maintain the identity of all units but compromise the authenticity of each one. Hence, the identity quest for authenticity inherently, perhaps undesirably, brings the idea of eliminating identical built forms (Kellner, 1988). The elimination of the repetitive built forms from the designs prohibits the notion of mass production that becomes obligatory to meet the needs of modern social and economic living. History shows a direction to solve the dispute.

Take the ancient building *Rani ki Vav* (Queen's Stepwell, Gujarat; Figure 14), with over 225 pillars (Roy, 2021) spread over the seven floors of the structure. The structure becomes a testimony to maintaining its built-form authenticity while using identical design elements (Priya, 2010). The overall scheme of the Stepwell does not change, but each congruent element, each pillar, is designed to voice a different carving style, a story perhaps, articulating each unique. It is a classic case that keeps authenticity and identity uncompromised. The uniqueness cuts in both ways: it reflects the free thought of the artisans showcased on the identical pillar canvas, and, on the other hand, the combination of the pillar elements, however distinct they might be individually, gives the overall structure an authentic identity and meaning. It is worth noting that the repeating and constantly changing notion in *Rani ki Vav* emerged much before Eisenman introduced it. The approach to maintaining authenticity yet promoting a unique identity adds aesthetic value to Stepwell.



**Figure 14.** The pillars of *Rani ki Vav*. Gujarat (source: Sharma, 2017)



Today, the time has changed. What was understood before might not be so relevant now. So are the living and working environments and their aesthetic experience and meanings. On the margins of reason and perhaps excess rationality, architecture is often seen to lack ideologies to overcome fragmentation among disciplines (Kalyan, 2011). Instead, architecture is reckoned more to encounter discursive entanglements sweetened by personalized thoughts, beliefs, and introspections (the solo artist, see Kelbaugh, 2004, p. 66) than what the society, culture, economy, and environment mandate objectively. There are, in fact, no rules that separate architecture from non-architecture. With this, and all at once, the critique of Eisenman (response to Derrida appeared in Eisenman, 1990) turns into the praxis of aesthetics epistemology – a discursive one entangled with the philosophy of art (Figure 15). The prevailing present remains free from the past when, and only when, the effect of the past – the existing surrounding context portraying the neutrality (signs) of built-form culture – is abandoned. Similarly, the prevailing present will remain free from the future when, and only when, the possible effect of the future is cast aside.

The present is always discursive without the past (Hillier, 2007), specifically in the notions of critical history, nostalgia, and meaning, in which Eisenman is seen to regulate himself while apprehending the transition between modernism and postmodernism. Perhaps for this reason, according to Buckminster Fuller (appeared in Rudolph, 1999), traditional aesthetics itself, the sense of it, has helped to evolve into environmental aesthetics. According to Carlson (2005), “environmental aesthetics extends beyond the narrow confines of the art world and our appreciation of works of art to the aesthetic appreciation of environments, not only natural ones but also our various human-influenced and human-constructed environments,” doing more to do with day-to-day living than tackling an art movement alone (also see Nasar, 1992 and Wohlwill 1976 for more on environmental aesthetics). It is to serve the aspects of everyday science and to analyze the forces that drive the postmodern era, especially looking at the impact of the social environment and economy (Stamps, 1989) on built-form aesthetics. According to Carlson (2005),



**Figure 15.** The prevailing present and memories. IBA Social Housing, Berlin (source: Eisenman architects, 1981–1985)

*“This area [of environmental aesthetics] involves the aesthetics of not only more common objects and environments but also a range of everyday activities. Thus, early in the twenty-first century, environmental aesthetics embraced the study of the aesthetic significance of almost everything other than art. Together with this broader scope of environmental aesthetics, the twenty-first century has also given rise to renewed and more intense investigations of the relationship between environmental aesthetics and environmentalism as well as to several new interests and directions.”*

## 7. The social and public art

The new meaning of aesthetics in architecture has evolved with time mainly because of the change in the social setup (Atkinson, 2002), justifying how people have defined living. What people have considered essential earlier might have become luxury later. The design of built environments has witnessed this change. Take, for instance, the case of the Chicago Fair of 1893 (Tselos, 1967; Figure 16). The purpose for which the designers brought the White City into existence explained the need for a voice on the world map (Marling, 1992) by showcasing social art through the complete transformation of a public place. The intention was to attract people to a culture that might have remained restricted within geographical limits otherwise. Chicago came into the picture amongst many cities to commemorate the 400 years of the Voyage of Columbus (Marling, 1992, p. 13) to America. Many architects joined this mission of creating something unique for the fair and came out with the idea of having a large public square surrounded by the white colonnade structure – the White City signature. According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2023),

*“... the fair’s new buildings had impressive Classical facades with a uniform cornice height of 60 feet (18.25 meters). The plaster palace fronts bore little functional relationship to exhibition halls inside; but the grandeur of the White City, electrically lit at night, temporarily led to a resurgent interest in Classical architecture.”*

The Fair was responsible for paving the way for better infrastructure (sanitation) and splendid architecture for the city. Now, fast-forward 125 years. Would it still make sense to undertake such an extravagant endeavor in the modern era? The era has witnessed a drastic shift from artistic living to economic tenancy, often causing spatial functions to supersede beautification and luxury. The logic resonates at the foundation of environmental aesthetics philosophy – the philosophy that makes designers realize the necessity of social and economic living more to make the built environment function efficiently and economically than to look extravagant. The philosophy also helps to understand that personalized thoughts, beliefs, and introspections of aestheticism not catering to social and



economic living can only worsen a development scenario. According to Kelbaugh (2004, p. 66), one has to bear in mind that "Architecture is an art, but it is more social and public art rather than a fine art."

The connection between functionality, structure, and aestheticism (the triad) is that functions shape the structure and that the structure naturally generates a sense of built-form aesthetic – an authentic sense of aestheticism that comes from the structural spirit of the built form. Replication of such a structure only causes repetition of its aesthetic identity. In consequence, each form loses its aesthetic authenticity.

The other side of the story is that replication is obligatory in economic living – a living that caters to the population mass. That is the reason why modernism comes into the picture. Modernism has offered a new living identity, without which living might not have been possible for many – an identity without which the built environment would not have functioned effectively, not only from the economic stance but also socially. By accommodating social and economic living, modern secularity with mass-produced structures, rather than offering artistic uniqueness, has helped to add the pulse and configurational meaning to the built environments. The factor that has remained absent in these built environments is the traditional sense of aestheticism. Eisenman and Harrison (2008) have presented an example to support the argument. "Mies' use of the column: the icon, which has a visual and formal similitude to its object; the symbol, which has a cultural and an agreed-upon conventional meaning about its object; and the index, which describes a prior activity of the object," as they (Eisenman & Harrison, 2008, p. 53) write, offers mere scenographic representations of built environments. The forms that comprise these environments, according to them, are "like hanging from the air, rather than traditionally rooted onto the ground like a pantheon," and, therefore, not establishing a connection between functionality, structure, and aestheticism as understood traditionally.

Postmodernists have sought to tackle the deficit of natural aestheticism by implanting traditional decorative elements into modern built forms without confronting

the connection between functionality, structure, and aestheticism. The superficial addition of elements to the built forms has resulted in a new concern instead of solving the deficit. It is the concern of a lack of authentic aestheticism. Within the arts, archaeology, the study of antiques, and similar fields involving unique or scarce artifacts from the past and concerning the documents in law, authenticity refers to the truthfulness of origins and attributions, not a blunt copy or forgery (Harries, 1988). It is, however, worth noting that built-form aesthetics have real-world implications in both modern and postmodern worlds. Evangelinos and Tscharaktschiew (2021) have found that the sense of aesthetics impacts the design of urban agglomerations over time. They have suggested that adding aesthetic components increases the value of public infrastructure planning and design projects. Using the aesthetics index (developed by Birkhoff, 1933), they have shown that the users' willingness to pay for the aesthetic appearance of the buildings and public acceptability of designed spaces improve considerably.

## 8. Mutation and perception anomaly

Simply put, the mutation causes a fundamental alteration of the original form and function, leading to change (Auerbach, 2013). The change in the built environment also drives people, their ideas, and even the things they perceive to mutate and co-exist. The mutation remains associated with the social, economic, political, and even cultural and religious settings of the built environment people live in and continuously interact with. And these interactions people retain in their memories. According to Bond (2017), "We now know, for example, that buildings and cities can affect our mood and well-being, and that specialized cells in the hippocampal region of our brains are attuned to the geometry and arrangement of the spaces we inhabit." Hence, the changeover in architectural culture has much to do with the built-form impressions (Dear, 1986) that people bear in their minds. A drastic and rapid change replaces the old impression with a new identity, whereas a smooth and continuous transformation causes mutation while retaining the essence of both old and new (Jameson, 1991). The postmodern interventions, contextually, pave the way to tie the operational importance of modernism with the identity connotation of classical (Figure 17) and even vernacular styles. The question of mutation and perception anomaly in architectural design becomes prominent when the built-form operation and its identity connotation, rather than completing one another, work against and create a disintegration gap. A smooth transition and, therefore, mutation take place when the gap gets reduced.

Architecture often brings creation that helps a smooth transition of a built environment from one tradition to another, one philosophy to another, and even one approach to another while accepting that all new things can merge with the old and co-exist. The disintegration gap between built-form operation and its identity connotation results



**Figure 16.** The Chicago World Fair of 1893 (source: Nichols, 1861–1897)



**Figure 17.** Built-form transparency makes a smooth mutation between old and new. The Louvre, Paris (source: Rindoff, 2023)



**Figure 18.** Disintegration between built-form operation and identity connotation. Wexner Center for the Visual Arts and Fine Arts Library, Ohio (source: Eisenman architects, 1983–1989)

in a drastic change. The drastic change can wipe out the prevailing senses and identity meanings (symbols) of built forms, causing a severe mutation and perception anomaly. Good examples are the contemporary projects of Eisenman designed with deconstruction theory (Figure 18).

Furthering this, Hillier (2007) also sheds some light on the notion of mutation and perception anomaly by drawing differences between (1) the ideas people think of and (2) the ideas people think with. Correlating these two, one sees that the former equates with the logic of co-existence, and the latter helps capture the reasoning behind the evolving identity or even a new context. A constant struggle continues to strike a balance between co-existence and identity sustenance in postmodern designs. The right balance governs the degree of acceptability and defines whether or not the transition has been smooth or drastic.

## 9. Contexts and contradictions

Adding to the mutation and perception argument, Dickinson (2020) compares the Genius model led by the designer with the Polymath model governed by the development

process. By involving different stakeholders, the comparison points to the fact that the judgment of selecting a smooth or rapid transition in the design process influences the output quality of built-form aesthetics. Take the development of Gurugram, India – a city that has come into reality to support the National Capital Region (NCR). Gurugram has surfaced like a Millennium city, having all high-tech provisioning and world-class infrastructure to attract and cater to a global population of tech-driven generation. The opportunity seen here is about creating a new identity on the world map analogous to the Chicago Fair. The Chicago Fair ended up like a short-lived enterprise. Although voiced like a genius model, the Fair gained little or no logic of co-existence with no significant modern operational abilities. The enterprise, therefore, remained far from accommodating the evolving Polymath identity (also see Dickinson 2020 for more on Genius and Polymath models derived from the work of Christopher Alexander).

In the short span of 20–25 years of development, on the other hand, Gurugram has already started witnessing crises (Guptha et al., 2022), often referred to as the city sitting on the disaster. While taking no credit away for having lavish and hi-tech apartments, swanky office buildings, and recreational greens, the overall city design has started showing indications of falling short on sustainable terms. Gurugram is a case where the co-existence factor has taken a back seat in the development process. Most of the built forms of the city remain in the vicious race merely to establish a noisy identity. High-rises with glass *pajamas* seldom create a distinction between buildings, let alone cause built-form mutation. The social divide has resulted in isolated living. The anomaly is that, instead of striking a balance between co-existence and identity, by cracking the concerns “leading to a fragmented landscape that contains glaring [social] inequalities” (Chatterji, 2013), the development has been perceived to enhance a peculiar built-form culture best suited for the ignorant (Goel, 2018).

To logically establish any design idea, one must at least avoid self-contradiction (Morton, 2015). It is not unusual that, in the design process, one often becomes the victim of the mutation and perception paradox, the anomaly, yet remains unable to deal with it. The problem arises when a design motivation supported by a system of logic (reasoning) does not find a fitting natural setting. Take, for instance, the justification of glass facades of the high-rises of Gurugram, especially in the setting of the tropical climate. The glass facades invite sun and help to keep the building interiors warm, reducing the heating cost. Therefore, built forms with glass facades in cold regions are justifiable. Self-contradiction becomes prominent when designers apply these glass facades to the tropical built forms. The additional cooling costs make living and working in these built environments unsustainable from various perspectives. The mutation and perception paradox in modern designs of tropical regions is straightforward, yet designers remain unable to deal with it as they often continue to follow self-contradictory ideas.



The sociocultural context brings a different paradox. Anderson (2014), in his take on Derrida's arguments on deconstruction and ethics, notes that ethical paradox (Harries, 1998) doubles up in and through the individual paradox. What is logical, scientific, and perhaps ethical to a few might appear an irresponsible outcome to many (cf. Harries, 1992). The opposite is a mere possibility. In aesthetic appreciation, the tug of war between the perceptions of a few and the population mass is undeniable. The question is: what should be the basis of a design then? A design that is stimulating or a composition that is accepted by many? Should one not perceive design mutation through the nature-centric lens along with anthropocentric terms, with nature given the limelight for being a major stakeholder in the postmodern era and later? Then, what is pressing and what is rational – a unique and stimulating approach or a populous policy?

## 10. Stimulus vs. populous

Does aesthetics hold any relationship with the built-form function at all in the modern world? Or is it just a noise? The first question falls in the discussion domain of Harries (1988), which is that aesthetics is an integral part of the building and its functions. The second question seeks justifications from the argument (Eisenman, 1988) of organizing aesthetics on the built-form envelope to fix the limitations of the modernists.

Jennath and Nidhish (2016) have attempted to find the relationship between the reading comfort of the library buildings (the functional component of the design) and the aesthetic appeal of the inside environment. The analysis reports the relationship to be directly proportional or linear. In this case, aesthetics appears to be a by-product of functionality. Also, Nia (2015) has carried out a systematic review while dealing with over 140 qualitative studies to understand the various aesthetic constructs. Nia has concluded by showing that aesthetic judgment is associated with the contradiction or complexity or both in the urban built-environment configurations (Figure 19).

According to Berleant and Carlson (2007), "... the aesthetics of the city is an aesthetic of engagement." Nia



**Figure 19.** Configurational attractor. Trafalgar Square, London (source: University College London, 2003)

(2015) writes, "Aesthetic quality, in our concept, goes beyond an external visual appearance and should be observed through a more comprehensive approach related to other dimensions," such as economic, political, social, environmental, cultural, and even legal aspects of the urban landscape. Investigating further what constitutes a built environment and how it works leads to a more profound understanding of the aesthetics-function system – an ecosystem per se, in which both aesthetics and function benefit from each other and co-exist. Morton (2015), to critically examine the work of Derrida on ecology, brings the push-pull scenarios, giving examples of reading sentences about how some words attract and some repel. Ecology is not only the engagement of life forms alone but the engagement of life forms with non-life. The environment is what merely veers around it, Morton (2015) adds. Similarly, aestheticism is not conditional to functionality alone but to both functionality and context, with the latter often playing a role in creating push-pull scenarios that aid in setting a judgment of how stimulus and populous could mutually blend.

## 11. Aesthetics production and aesthetic generation

Let us backtrack to the history again. After the Industrial Revolution, a dramatic change in the built-form design emerged due to the high demand for shelters near the industrial zones. Like industrial objects, buildings were then mass-produced to meet the massive shelter demand. Emphasis was given more on the design efficacy, economy, and temporality than on what aesthetic value these designs would add to the built environment. Spaces were labeled to define the functions assigned to them. Glow signs came to attract customers to commercial buildings. The fight between analytical knowledge and social knowledge started mounting.

An architectural design needs to bear analytical and social knowledge of the built environment (Hillier & Hanson, 1989). The former adds uniqueness to the built forms, even if derived from a universalistic thought – a much more individualistic way of engaging with a built environment. The latter strives to make a design contextually relevant – a complex process because of its collective nature that is preordained to accommodate both density and diversity while drawing a blend of design objectivity and subjectivity.

In the classical era, architecture emerged as a subject of art – a sculpture having internal beauty along with external magnificence. Modernism dismantled and replaced the notion of classical uniqueness, authenticity, and orthodoxy that characterize built forms with the motivation of mass production to cater to the shelter needs generated by the Industrial Revolution. Postmodernism sought to bring back classical aestheticism while retaining its connection with modernism. In finding a middle ground, the approach had to count on the decorative



**Figure 20.** Production and generation of aesthetics. Holocaust Memorial, Berlin (source: Halbe, 2015)

surface application referring to the production of aesthetics rather than its depth of involvement for the generation of aesthetics – aesthetics that ensure a unique and genuine sense of classical beauty (Figure 20). The consequence, however, did not turn out to be less radical. Postmodernism became responsible for blurring the distinctions between high and low culture while challenging a wide range of traditional values, many of which even correlated to the theory of the Economy of Violence (Anderson, 2014), preying on the disadvantages.

There is a need factor for built-form mutation. It involves the local economy, time, and physical manifestation. The problem is that the supply part of mass production produces only ordinary objects – ordinary built forms. And on the other hand, there is also the want factor that strives to create something artistic driven by the quests like originality, authenticity, and identity. The want factor constantly takes a toll on being transformed into a reality. These two factors together change the entire game of aesthetics understanding. Without establishing a theory or a basis that offers a judicious compromise between the two factors, one cannot understand the meaning of aesthetics in the postmodern era or even after, let alone the aesthetic connection with deconstruction and deconstructivism. The idea of social co-existence in defining aesthetics in the postmodern era, divorced from reality – the presence of the different layers in the social fabric and their relationships among themselves – only invites chaos without drawing a solution to the problem.

## 12. Conclusions

While decoding aesthetics associated with the built environment, the contradictory yet competing views of Harries (1988) and Eisenman (1988) emerge in architectural studies and practices. Harries resonates with the Classical approach to understanding aesthetics by nurturing the image of authenticity, orthodoxy, and established identity. Eisenman revolves around the impulse of modernism and its connection with deconstruction, focusing much on

built-form flexibility and temporality. The dilemma, whose viewpoint holds a direction in current times and the future, demands careful exploration through the assessments of how designs are perceived and consumed in real scenarios characterized by society, economy, culture, and environment. The critical examination of the puzzle brings in the arguments supporting the classical notion of built-form aesthetics and then moves on to understand their relevance in the postmodern era and later.

Built-form aesthetics before modernism has remained a part of conventional aesthetics, which comes from the inner spirit of building structures – authentic or genuine. The modern movement has taken a toll on monotony and forced, as a reaction to it, to bring back the sensation of classical aestheticism in a composite way – the postmodernism way – but without establishing much connection with spatial relations as understood conventionally. On the one hand, the need for mass production of built forms has emerged obligatory like any other regularly used goods and objects to cater to a high shelter demand. On the other, these built forms have sought to reflect a taste of natural aestheticisms to retain the sense of architecture culture in the built environment – a culture that abandons designs labeled with modernist repetitive and monotonous built forms.

The conflicting and competing arguments of Harries and Eisenman point to the deficiency that without establishing a basis or theory – connecting the density and diversity of a mass with the prevailing sense of aestheticism – the study of decoding aesthetics in the postmodern era can only run in frivolity. It is worth noting that density and diversity are the two forces that remain dynamic in nature. The former grows over time and drives a small built-form agglomeration to transform into a town, then from town to a city, and finally to a megacity. The latter extracts the behavior, often understood as custom (Nia, 2015; Berleant, 2005; Berlyne, 1970; Balling & Falk, 1982; and many others) of the former, reflecting its social existence (Banerjee & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019). Diversity, when its components are universalized through common expressions (referring to how people express identities and thoughts) and practices (referring to the way people perform basic and regular activities), starts showing customs and eventually turns into a culture. Culture also varies from place to place and from time to time because expressions and practices differ and change (Harries, 1984). The contrasting expressions and practices intensify when the diversification of the density proliferates. The blending invites mutation, and cultural change takes place. Now, considering this cultural change and its connection to both architectural and urban contexts, the spontaneously developed aesthetics, the sense of it – reflecting the inner spirit – become much more complex than one tries to examine from the perspective of an art movement alone. Personal manifestations and endeavors divorced from reality do not let designers even come close to the problem, let alone find its solution, but at best help to generate exhilarating materials for their design portfolios.



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