

From Adolph Loos to DIY: An Alternative to Modern Design's Emphasis on 'Being' over 'Becoming'

Introduction

Adolph Loos is best known for his provocative 1908 essay 'Ornament and Crime.' However, by 1900 he had already written an essay titled 'The Poor Little Rich Man,' detailing the woes of a client who was not allowed to make choices or change anything in their own house (even the particular style of their bedroom slippers), because to do so would destroy the perfection of the designer's creation.¹ Scholars may disagree on Loos' exact intentions for the 1900 essay, but the essay nevertheless serves as a prescient comment on Modernist ideology's role in the development of constraints against an interior becoming something new over time. If a design cannot be altered without destroying it, then change and flux can only be accommodated by starting over with a new design.

More recently, over the last thirty years the DIY (Do It Yourself) movement has progressed from a counter culture endeavor to a vibrant mainstream subculture. A core DIY value is the rejection of professional assistance for making choices about things such as design; the DIY ethic holds that everyone can teach themselves enough expertise to enable them to design and fabricate a broad range of items and experiences throughout daily life. If change and flux can be accomplished without a designer, this casts doubt on the importance of design as a profession.

The juxtaposition of Adolph Loos and DIY illustrates both a problem and a possible solution; Modernist ideology's emphasis on complete design precludes 'becoming,' while a DIY approach empowers users to envision what interiors might become and then make that vision happen. This paper first considers aspects of Modernist design ideology that push interiors to be static and that work against allowing interiors to transform over time. Discussion next moves to an analysis of the unintended consequences of these Modernist ideologies. Next, an overview of DIY-related subcultures such as Steampunk discusses their transformation of Modern design into something that is the raw material for manipulation of form and meaning. The concluding discussion touches on ways that designers can apply DIY principles.

A brief overview of Modernist ideology and flux

A focus of this paper is to set up a framework that can lead to a beginning understanding of DIY as a theoretical system rather than to establish new insights into Modernist ideology; Modernism has been discussed extensively over the last century. However, an overview of ideas and writings about Modernism's impact on the idea of interiors in flux is important to this discussion. Additionally, to respond to those who might say that resistance to change was something confined to the seminal Modernists, it is important to show that recent scholarly writings continue to critique embedded Modernist values that can impede the development of designs that allow for or embrace flux.

Beginning this overview by looking back at seminal or 'pure' Modernism, Modernist ideology does not let designers just set out to solve a pragmatic problem. In one view, 'The rise of modern design is profoundly linked to the project of redesigning the old man into the New Man.'² At the same time, 'The termination of style becomes synonymous with the repudiation of formal speculation as a possible generating force for a new beginning in architecture.'³ 'Modern architecture provided neither a new treatise nor a new style.'

Instead, it brought about a radical break in the continuity of history. This radical form of critique indicated the possibility of an irreversible termination of style.⁴ With style dead, 'In a sense, it could be said that modernism substituted the design of the corpse for the design of the soul.'⁵

Since one aspect of style is that style changes, Modern design is locked into a recursive argument, staying the same as a way to show that it truly has done away with style. Thus, interior architecture becomes timeless, changes the world, and rises above criticism, but at the same time pays a price by being unable to enter a state of flux or to look to the future. Since Modern design is most powerful when it is transcendent and operates in the realm of ideas rather than the realm of the soul, an ideal interior gives no opportunities for contamination by the everyday world. 'But one didn't paint *on* Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building.'⁶

If a design could be improved through modifications or flux, then that design was obviously not perfect to begin with. 'Le Corbusier, having learned a bitter lesson at Pessac, where his only decorative gesture had been the relatively impermanent and sparing use of paint, in later works such as the Monastery at La Tourette, manipulated the individual spaces of the building to achieve highly particularised forms and experimented with crudely-finished and rough-textured concrete, so defying the user's ability to affect change.'⁷ While Le Corbusier himself acknowledged that ultimately people would change his designs, this does not mean that he designed in a way that would encourage or support change.

Following this line of thought, Modern design holds out the promise of immortality to practitioners who can find ways to insulate their designs from any contamination. 'In his Art and Architecture Building at Yale, Paul Rudolph, taking lessons from Kahn and Le Corbusier among others, pushed and pulled all the elements of the building, combining corrugated concrete walls, boldly articulated mechanical, stair and toilet towers and a plan with forty-three different levels on seven floors to produce a building that is, in a certain sense, a total work of integral decoration.'⁸

A building seems to have the ability to attain an undead immortality as a functioning corpse that will never grow older but that also lacks a soul. 'The introduction of super-graphics by Moore and his associates at Sea Ranch has become a standard decorating response to the inarticulate modernist interior.'⁶ This description almost conjures up images of the Modern interior as a walking zombie wearing makeup to hide its progressive stench and decay.

Theoretical methodologies that address flux and Modernist buildings

During the century since Loos wrote his essay, a number of theoretical approaches have taken an alternative oppositional stance to seminal Modernist theory. These include ideas found in the Situationist International's anti-capitalist call for revolution during the 50's and 60's, Hundertwasser's somewhat anarchistic ideas as expressed in his Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture that was conceived in the 50's and applied up through the 80's, and Stuart Brand's book 'How Buildings Learn' during the 90's. However, these approaches seem to have been more influential outside the daily practice of design professionals while recent writings indicate that flux continues to be problematic.

The Situationists saw Modernism and its object oriented approaches to architecture and urbanism ('being') as a tool for capitalist oppression, using Marxist analysis to support their views. The concept of the New Babylon, a city that would be infinitely adaptable to the needs of its inhabitants rather than the needs of corporations, was a central part of their theoretical stance; foreshadowing DIY, the need for flux that was directed and controlled by the average person was seen as a way to reshape our world.⁹ The Situationists

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proved to have a powerful impact on society in the 1960's, serving as the intellectual force behind upheavals and rioting in Europe. However, while they transformed society, they did not succeed in making a lasting mark on the public built environment or leaving a legacy of design theory. Guy Debord, a central Situationist theorist, himself acknowledged this in 1972 while suggesting that perhaps the best that could be hoped for was to change one's own small piece of the world.¹⁰ Although the Situationists were adept at engaging in theory, their ideas were difficult to apply in practice, as they essentially advocated killing the patient in order to save it. DIY has perhaps ended up in much the same place without the benefit of a theoretical foundation.

Friedensreich Hundertwasser clearly saw Modernism as dangerous to humanity. Following up on various manifestos (dating from the early 1950's) advocating an architecture coming from every day people rather than from architects, Hundertwasser's 1968 Vienna speech ironically titled 'Loose from Loos' went so far as to blame many of society's ills on architects and, among other things, to advocate that people refuse to enter Modernist buildings.¹¹ Whether right or wrong, Hundertwasser's analytical methodology remains problematic as it is more about destroying the mainstream rather than creating something new.

Stewart Brand's book, titled *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*, develops a theoretical framework about how buildings are continually in flux after the initial design and take on an autonomous life of their own.¹² However, this stance is problematic for designers in that it essentially calls for the elimination of 'high' architecture in favor of building shells that lend themselves to constant flux. Similarly to DIY, Brand's theoretical framework essentially dismisses the practice of architecture as something that is irrelevant to the ongoing life of buildings.

Unintended consequences of Modernist ideology

While the timeless nature of Modern design could conjure up disturbing images for some people, there are others who will always be drawn to its inner beauty and logic. While timelessness is an intended goal, there are also unintended consequences of Modernist ideology. The ideological need to keep a Modern building perpetually young can lead to constant decision making about where to expend resources for upkeep and maintenance. 'Must a Modernist building always appear brand new? Must a pre-Modernist building always appear old? On what would such discrimination be based?'¹³ Decisions about whether to maintain only Modern buildings while allowing other buildings to fall into decay become constant dilemmas, and if the resources are not there for maintenance, should a Modern building undergo euthanasia rather than be allowed to fall into disrepair? Furthermore, if a space is in a position where it needs to be restored or maintained for ideological rather than practical reasons, it might be that '...buildings chosen for preservation are memorials to failed collective architectural endeavor.'¹⁴

Modernist thought in some ways pits Interior Architecture against Architecture. Altering the interior of an existing building, even if it is not a Modern one, can mean more projects for interior architects, while for architects, '...the threat of alteration is the entropic skid, the promise of demolition is of a new building. For the architect, the last course would seem the most fruitful.'¹⁵ Following this line of thought to its conclusion, Architecture might look with favor on destruction from natural disasters, wars or other calamities, while Interior Architecture is tempted by opportunities to abandon Modern principles and design spaces in pre-Modern buildings because there are a lot more opportunities there.

Hundertwasser rejected Modern design outright because of his perception that it had excluded human needs at the expense of ideology. 'The material uninhabitability of the slums is preferable to the moral uninhabitability of functional, utilitarian architecture. In the so-called slums only man's body can perish, but in the architecture ostensibly planned for man his soul perishes.'¹⁶ Since Modern design's emphasis is on

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attaining purity in the design itself, there is no mechanism for assessing what effect a design has on the emotional wellbeing of a design's users. Perhaps the perceptive designer might wonder whether to start designing slums.

Still others assert that the idea of timelessness is flawed because once designers step outside of time they also lose sight of ways that the world around them is in flux. '...for the past fifty years, architects have understood design as the product of some oversimplified form-follows-function formula. ... However, the continued substitution of moral criteria for those of a more formal nature produced a situation which now can be seen to have created a functionalist predicament, precisely because the primary theoretical justification given to formal arrangements was a *moral* imperative that is no longer operative within contemporary experience.'¹⁷

An example of a new moral imperative that displaces older imperatives is the emphasis on sustainability, which in many ways is more compatible with pre-Modern hierarchal design ideas such as frontality, which encouraged dense urban areas that are more efficient in terms of resources. 'Frontality itself equally implies both a front and a back, whereas Modernist composition aims to deny such a hierarchy, and instead tends to give an equality to all sides, which, because of this, wants to be freestanding whenever possible so as to make this evident.'¹⁸ The sustainable nature of adaptive reuse is at odds with Modern design, because '...according to the precepts of functionalism, buildings would either fulfill their purpose or be demolished... Alteration would be unknown.'¹⁹ 'In addition, as Modernist belief has spacemaking matched to specific uses, the fitting of new uses into existing spaces would seem to preclude this deeper motive for the implementation of Modernist form.'²⁰

Modern design can give designers a license to strive toward goals that are at odds with the continually evolving moral imperatives of society. While this may give designers the opportunity to create more designs, it might not be the best thing for society. While some would look backwards and resurrect historically based approaches to design as a way to incorporate flux, DIY offers the promise of new ways to look at design.

The do-it-yourself ethic and the creation of meaning

DIY shares many of the attitudes and methods espoused by previous critiques of Modernist ideology, and in many ways DIY appears to signal the validation of oppositional theories. However, while previous critical stances engaged with and were a part of the Modernist dialogue (reminiscent of feuding family members), what makes DIY especially interesting is that it has to date managed to sidestep longstanding discourse about design and proceed without substantial awareness of past theoretical oppositions. DIY at present has no formal leaders, manifestos or theories, and operates outside of both institutional and media spheres of influence. By ignoring and remaining unaware of discourse and focusing instead on creating personal meaning, DIY almost eliminates 'being' and shifts the focus to 'becoming' with an approach that embraces constant flux.

As current social movements, Steampunk and other DIY subcultures touch on the nature of becoming; among other things, the average person might be encouraged to reverse engineer Modernist objects such as Apple computers and reassemble them as objects that have a more direct relationship with human needs and emotions. DIY could be seen as a spontaneous reaction by large groups of people who share the Poor Little Rich Man's distress at the power of professional designers and at being held captive by a designed world that does not help those people to create meaning in their daily lives, unknowingly echoing Hundertwasser's manifestos of the 1950's. 'No inhibitions should be placed upon the individual's desire to build! Everyone ought to be able and compelled to build, so that he bears responsibility for the four walls

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within which he lives.’²¹

In contrast with the elite status of Modern designers, an opposing ideology is that ‘...everyone becomes an artist-designer who has ethical, political, and aesthetic responsibility for his or her environment.’²² In particular, this is being put into practice by a growing Steampunk movement. ‘Steampunk artists create an alternate world not bound by the millennial conventions of physics, science and convenience technology. Artists reject the sleek and plastic world we have come to rely on. Steampunk is a chance for artists to build with their hands and their imaginations, just as the great innovators of the industrial revolution did.’²³

Jacob von Slatt is a prominent Steampunk designer whose designs mix cutting edge technology with Victorian ‘soul.’ ‘The belief in Steampunk is something beyond a way of dressing, writing or creating. The people who come to see Abney Park play and to hear von Slatt speak might have found their way into Steampunk through the music or the fashion, but they stay, in von Slatt’s opinion, ‘because of that DIY impulse in a world where, today, you can’t even fix your own car if it breaks down.’²⁴ Rather than a nostalgic look at an idealized past, Steampunk may be like a canary in a coal mine, signaling the dangers of Modern design’s inability to allow for flux or change by the average person. At the same time, Steampunk allows people to create their own meanings through the designs that they live in and with.

Designing with opportunities for ‘becoming’ in mind

The author’s own professional experience has included numerous insertions and alterations, especially for high concept International Style buildings in Chicago designed by architects such as SOM, Philip Johnson, C. F. Murphy and Perkins + Will. In particular, involvement in major alterations to the iconic John Hancock building sparked a longstanding search for ways to link theories about flux with practical applications.

While DIY is especially appropriate for private home design, it does not necessarily lend itself to public interiors that may be larger and more complex. However, there are a growing number of Steampunk influenced interior designers who are rethinking the relationships that people have with their workplaces, and one important design attribute is the users’ ability to substantively customize their space. This is one of several strategies that lend themselves to promoting interiors that become. Other strategies include collage and the use of controlled decay or ruins as a metaphor for changeable, richly overlaid designs. These strategies are employed without reflection by those involved with DIY, even though they may have been articulated and employed more formally by design professionals.

‘It is suggested that a collage approach, an approach in which objects (and attitudes) are conscripted or seduced from out of their content is-at the present day-the only way of dealing with the ultimate problems of either or both Utopia and tradition.’²⁵ Collage allows for incremental change where the past, present and future can coexist and evolve without having to start over or destroy anything. Collage has already become a standard approach to music and visual art, and is supported by digital overlay methods that make the design process straightforward.

The problems noted above about the way Modern design is insulated from critique due to its consciousness as a timeless, untouchable state could also be addressed through collage. ‘...because collage is a method deriving its virtue from its irony, because it seems to be a technique for using things and simultaneously disbelieving in them, it is also a strategy which can allow Utopia to be dealt with as an image, to be dealt with in *fragments* without our having to accept *in toto*, which is further to suggest that collage could even be a strategy which, by supporting the Utopian illusion of changelessness and finality, might even fuel a reality of change, motion, action and history.’²⁶

In a mixture of stunted collage and Modern determinism, Rem Koolhaas has ‘...proposed as a solution that the city should be zoned in strips within which would be built new architecture which would remain unaltered and be demolished after a century and replaced with new buildings, their timetable syncopated with their neighboring strips to sustain a sort of urban continuity.’²⁷ While this addresses the conceptual problem, however, it does not seem to address the moral problems associated with sustainability in particular. For the interior architect, it would probably be better to leave the buildings and just alter the interiors at a minimum of once every 100 years, although if people need a law forcing them to recreate their interior space to meet their needs then the designs might not have needed to change in the first place.

The idea of the interior as a ruin also offers opportunities to design interiors that change over time and that could at the same time rise above differences between Modern and historical ideologies. ‘...there are certain affinities between the nature of ruins and Modernist aesthetic: for instance, in both there is an explicit architectonics, a loss of decoration, and an inherent transparency. A ruin, however, may also contain the traces of a Classic plan, composed as it is of axes and rooms. In a ruin, therefore, they may both co-habit. This might suggest that the idea of ruination may be a key element in allowing a deeper integration of new and existing built form...’²⁸

Another aspect of an interior as a ruin is that it allows for new vantage points, encouraging new ways to think about space. One can move as in a ruin, in a way previously accessible only to the intruder or the thief, seeing the building from new and privileged points of view.’²⁹ Gordon Matta-Clark cut buildings up with a chain saw as a way to create new spatial relationships in the interior. Also, ‘Through its progressive destruction, a ruin creates room for new spatial configurations in the future. It is a form that adapts to a temporal rhythm in the course of its decay. And the processual nature of time conversely finds its own visible form through the ruin. As it allows different spatial and temporal configurations to confront each other, the ruin also has the potential to overturn established hierarchies and provoke a redistribution of value within space.’³⁰

Going even farther, Hundertwasser advocated for a decaying state as the preferred state. ‘When rust settles on a razor blade, when mould forms on a wall, when moss grows in the corner of a room and rounds off the geometrical angles, we ought to be pleased that with the microbes and fungi life is moving into the house, and more consciously than ever before we become witnesses of architectonic changes from which we have a great deal to learn.’³¹

One strategy for introducing change in interior space seems to have been embraced by Modern design, but on closer inspection proves problematic. Demountable partitions and panel systems have the appearance of allowing for alteration, but when looked at more closely are ways for the designer to continue to maintain some control of the design even as the design is being changed.³²

One other strategy is that of the palimpsest. A palimpsest was a Roman system of writing on a piece of vellum or suede with a stylus and then erasing the writing so that something else could be written in its place.³³ This gave a rich overlay of past references where the past was always mingling with the present as an overlay. A contemporary corollary is found in graffiti art, where painters add new work on top of old work. A similar approach is used in some bathrooms in new buildings, where one wall is a chalkboard and people overlay chalk writing and drawing to create a type of palimpsest. This gives opportunities to create common meaning in a visible, tangible and fluid way while tying into the ethics of DIY.

Future study

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The DIY movement and related genres such as Steampunk seem to operate as both a symptom of, and a cure for, Modern design's emphasis on being over becoming. DIY is all about becoming, and its simultaneous embrace and reconciliation of the past with the future can serve as a model for designers who wish to do the same thing. In spite of the strength and momentum of Modernist design, approaches such as DIY, especially in conjunction with design approaches involving collage and ruins, offer alternative approaches to designing interior spaces that are meant to change, grow and evolve over time. While this paper focuses narrowly on issues related to buildings, DIY is a comprehensive social movement that also integrates music, art, fashion and aspects of daily life, so that standard disciplinary methods of analysis are problematic. To move beyond this paper, a comprehensive Material Culture approach would place DIY designs, and buildings in particular, within their context and show how the ethos of 'becoming' is woven throughout DIY culture.

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