Modern, a Clarification

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

A structure erected yesterday could be classified as modern in chronological terms, but doesn't necessarily possess the architectural qualities that make it contemporary when it comes to style or critical thought. A piece like the "Mona Lisa," devised over five hundred years ago still baffles critics and the general public, making it an excellent example of an innovative piece of work. I will attempt to shed light on the common misconception of what it means for architecture to be "modern" in the hopes of future recognition of pioneering inventions and a push towards authentic modernization, especially within the field of design. An analysis of several examples of novel architecture will be made to form a set of characteristics that tend to accompany these innovative design ideals. In addition, a small project implementing some of these concepts and exploring separate ideals will be designed and displayed.

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I would like to thank Ana de Brea for advising me throughout this project. Her help during this project was only a small fraction of the help and guidance I received from her throughout my time at college. She inspired me to think critically, to question, and to defy the notion of the typical so as to stray away from labels.

I would also like to thank my parents for their constant support of my creative endeavors and goals, and Stephanie for always providing a helpful outsider's perspective and a critical eye.
One of the words used most often when talking about today's architecture is 'modern.' The not-so-infamous pairing of stainless steel appliances and granite countertops in residential applications almost always yields a response that includes this word (at least from those lacking architectural backgrounds). However, when talking about contemporary design, modern is an almost limitless notion that exists far beyond the current kitchen trends. The idea of modern first became popular in the early 20th century when rapid urban advancement and technological inventions sparked a way of thinking about the built environment that completely contrasted preceding styles. At its foundation, it was a rejection of the ornamental so as to praise simplicity. Ultimately, some of the thinkers and works that arose at the time of these modernist movements defined what it meant to be modern in design terms. They were one-of-a-kind, without the preconceived notion of what it means to be a building. It's compositions like these that deserve the recognition of being dubbed modern, contemporary, novel, and expressive of critical thought. The following is an exploration and study of true modern architecture and design that sets the standard for this honorary distinction.

SANAA’s Rolex Learning Center in Switzerland is a perfect example of architecture that lacks the assumptive characteristics of a building. Looking for a floorplan of the second floor, for instance, would only leave one disappointed – the floor of the complex is quite literally fluid in nature. The floor undulates from ground level to substantial heights, kissing the base plane and then raising itself into the air. In addition, the contrast between the seemingly limited potential of concrete and its actual manifestation in this project is stunning. It creates an elevation unlike any other – "While
the building is a perfect rectangle when seen in a plan view, the curves and slopes which define the interior space give the building a totally organic look." (Basulto, David)

The philosophy behind the form of the building is also a novelty, as spaces dedicated to education can tend to be more constricting, thus working against the objective of learning. "The role of architecture is to suggest ways to use the space, rather than to prescribe. Nishizawa pushes the analogy with landscape: ‘When people find valleys, they tend to settle there and build villages. When they find a hill, they like to build a beautiful cafe on the hill. When they find slopes, they cover them in terraces.’ In the same way, they think their artificial hills will prompt different kinds of occupation: ‘We hope students can find nice places for themselves.’ " (Moore, Rowan) The building’s plan is astoundingly simple while being incredibly complex, redefining what it means to fulfill the program of a contemporary educational structure.
Modern ways of thinking about materiality are also crucial in the pursuit of groundbreaking design work. MVRDV’s Crystal Houses in Amsterdam use a glass brick façade to achieve visual and conceptual transparency. The clients also demanded an influence of Dutch history in the design, requiring a balance on the designer’s end. Humorously, the lead architect incorporated the city’s typical terra cotta brick into the top of the buildings front wall as a compromise – the result is a fusion of traditional and glass brick to form a store that defies the now mainstream commercial store design. Winy Maas says of the design: “It enables global brands to combine the overwhelming desire of transparency with a couleur locale and modernity with heritage. It can thus be applied everywhere in our historic centres.” (mvrDV.nl)

Praised for its seamless fluidity and striking aesthetic splendor, Zaha Hadid’s Heydar Aliyev Center in Azerbaijan qualifies as a contemporary structure in a multitude of global contexts.
of ways. The skin of the building appears to emerge out of the ground at several points on the site, flowing, swooping, and arching like a piece of fabric. No other movement in architecture has ever achieved a feat like this – it is only through modernistic ideals that one can achieve this sensational beauty. Not only that, but the shape is a unique reference to the equally exceptional cultural heritage of the surrounding area. The skin even takes advantage of the problematic site, which has a large height differential that essentially divides it into two sections. Instead of manipulating the site, Hadid designed the building to take advantage of this natural feature, connecting the interior and exterior to public spaces and circulation. The building is sculptural while permanent, fluid while strong, grounded while arching, and fascinating while functional. It is truly a trophy of contemporary design.

Another characteristic of modern architecture is that it has tended to lean towards a focus on the conceptual. Underlying inspiration from history, research, discussions, organic forms, etc. have established themselves in built form through modernism. Daniel Libeskind’s addition to the Jewish Museum was one of these configurations, centered on an emotional past in a controversial location. The basis was on Jewish culture in a place where Jews haven’t always been welcome. The building, as a result, marks the acceptance of this notion, and acts as a reminder of the realities and hope for the future. “A void cuts through the zigzagging plan of the new building and creates a space that embodies absence. It is a straight line whose impenetrability becomes the central focus around which exhibitions are organized. In order to move from one side of the museum to the other, visitors must cross one of the 60 bridges that open onto this void.” (libeskind.com) Lines, light, and abstractly distorted spaces unite in the
overwhelming interior, forcing visitors to confront the truths of the past. The museum bends in what seems like an infinite number of directions, moving its inhabitants further into its depths and making them uneasy. It is architecture of emotion, achieved through the details of thought and procured by an understanding of history.

Other modern architects have captivated occupiers of space in this century through movement. Santiago Calatrava, trained in the rivaling field of engineering, is arguably the greatest designer of operational modern architecture. Buildings like the Milwaukee Museum of Art and the Florida Polytechnic Science, Innovation and Technology Campus literally move. Not only that, but these are massive structures defying the stereotype of stability which often implies a static nature. He directly challenges his own profession's capabilities, asking how architects can improve spaces through transformation. That's a modern way of thinking.
Through my research on the contemporary, I was inspired to implement some of these findings through the second half of my thesis. In partnership with Professor Ana de Brea and colleague Alan Dang, I decided to explore how the notion of modern could transform simple, everyday materials into beautiful, useful pieces. The result was a project called "ucy," a multi-purpose piece made of recycled boxes that ultimately seeks to redefine the function(s) of objects in our lives. Since material has become so important in modern design applications, it's also important that we start to think about repurposing. Many designers in today's world will quickly jump to the newest, shiniest, most technologically savvy textile in the hopes of achieving contemporary status.
Reusing materials, especially materials not initially intended for building or designing purposes, is an utterly modern way of thinking about the world. It's a clear defiance of the typical 2x4 wood construction house, brick and masonry build, or steel columns with a shiny glass façade. The piece can function as a shelf, coffee table, or even a piece of artwork using only recycled boxes, polycarbonate sheets, and corner guards. Nails and washers are elegantly placed at some locations on the edges of clear sheets to connect the materials. The inherent strength of the boxes and sheets combine to make for a structurally solid piece of work. It represents a way of thinking differently about our lives – how can we, as designers, create without destroying or wasting? How can we utilize what we have to create something uniquely beautiful? How can we make the building process easier through critical thought and simplicity of design?

Ucy is a partial answer to all of these questions and studies, a stepping stone for further development and potential inspiration to the world of creative thinkers.
Many questions arise when thinking about modern architecture (and architecture, in general, for that matter). ‘Why does architecture matter?’ and ‘what makes architecture beautiful?’ tend to be two of the most often asked. I am currently on the search for the answers to these questions and others like them. Studying historical precedents, consulting with present-minded thinkers, and experimenting on my own are all a part of the journey to discovery. One thing I do know is that modern architecture has played and will play a vital role in the development of design. It is the mark of the age where the rulebook was thrown out the window, as they say. It is the architecture of questioning, challenging, defying, and innovating. Most importantly, it seems to be the architecture that most fulfills the meaning of the word architecture. Ultimately, the concept of modern will always be relevant to the present, but its structures like the ones talked about here that will transcend chronological boundaries and attain true modernity.
Works Cited


