

Postmodernism.

This essay is about an architectural sensibility that favours complexity over simplicity, representations over the original, decoration over minimalism, colour over monochrome, fragmentation over singularity, contingency over universality, context over introspection, doubt over certainty, and in which more(not less) is always more. Although this sensibility has arguably existed at all times and in all places, it returned to prominence in British architecture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and was described as Postmodernism.

Postmodernism is a contentious concept now, and has many different manifestations in many different countries. Is it a style or a sensibility? Clearly, it is both and unlike many stylistic labels that have been imposed retrospectively, it was in use at the time. Many architects, however, have rejected the term and its application to their work.

To further complicate matters, Postmodernism has a meaning beyond architecture, used to describe a whole body of thinking, from philosophy to art, film, social studies and even geography.

In Britain, Postmodernism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s at a time of political and economic transformation of one system, neo-liberalism, supplanting the mixed economy of the post-war years.

Modernism had itself emerged in an equivalent moment of upheaval: the end of the First World War and the emergence of a new global order; its early moment saw diversity of approaches, and, with Le Corbusier arguably the most notable, an architect who was constantly shape-shifting over his career.

So, it may be that in our own moment of social, economic and political change and uncertainty it is helpful to understanding the present reawakening of the Postmodern sensibility and its return to centre stage.

Whilst one should always be cautious about how signs and symbols are used, the answer surely is not retrenchment back to the certainties of yet another rehashed neo-modernism, but to more plurality, more permissiveness and more stylistic promiscuity, in other words to Postmodernism.

Keith Roberts.

September 2018