

The contemporary significance of modernist design ethics

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Abstract: *The populist ethical concept of “design for the people” transformed the attitude of modernism towards machinery, ultimately contributing to the development of the modernist design style. However, as society progressed, this concept gradually deviated from its original intention and became an excessive pursuit of form, abandoning design ethics in the process. The development of modern design in China can be seen as a leapfrogging process, resulting in a gap in its historical trajectory. This paper aims to review and critically reflect on the ethics and purpose of modernist design, with the goal of stimulating a reevaluation and learning from the ethical principles of modern design. By doing so, it aims to provide a foundation of ethics to address the contemporary design dilemma.*

Keywords: *Modernism, design ethics, people, thought tracing, problem reconstruction*

1. Introduction

In their designs, ethics are the guiding principles and values for designers. The development of modernism design ideology has established a solid foundation for design ethics. Modernism emerged in Europe at the end of the 19th century, coinciding with the industrial revolution and the growth of capitalist society. These changes led to significant transformations in production and lifestyle, which in turn impacted the field of design. Modernism, from its inception to its development, focused on the conflicts that existed in the social environment at the time. These conflicts included the tension between handicraft and machine, individual and group, and Romanticism and functionalism. Modernism aimed to reconcile these contradictions, resulting in a populist design ethic that catered to the needs of society.

The concept of “design for the people” emerged as a populist ethical value, laying the foundation for modernism’s shift from opposition to support towards machines[3]. However, this ethical question has been subject to ongoing debate at both ethical and political levels. The ethos of “design for people” requires a deep understanding of both machines and people. The emergence and development of modernism in China mirrors its global trajectory. However, it is commonly believed that Chinese modernist design has experienced a developmental gap and, like other Western imports, has undergone a rapid leap-forward. Consequently, this rapid development has led to a range of issues that have gradually eroded and alienated contemporary design ethics.

2. The ethical connotation of modernist design

The earliest consideration of moral factors and social issues in modern design can be traced back to William Morris and John Ruskin. Morris advocated for the idea of “art for everyone”, while Ruskin emphasized the importance of truth, goodness, and beauty in design. Their ideas sparked concern and reflection in a society dominated by utilitarianism. It wasn’t until the energy crisis outbreak in 1970 that the focus of design ethics shifted towards the earth’s limited resources. Victor Papanek took social interests as the foundation of design ethics and introduced the concept of green design and the 3R principle (Recycle/Reuse/Reduce) to emphasize energy conservation and environmental protection. Papanek also highlighted the moral responsibility of designers towards users and the social environment, which falls under the category of responsibility ethics. However, some scholars argue that there is a lack of tension in Papanek’s concept when applied in actual design practice.

2.1 Research status of design ethics

Design ethics is a vast theoretical framework that has evolved over time. Chen Jie provides a brief

overview of the development of modernist design ethics, categorizing it into four periods: the absence of ethical consciousness, the emergence of design ethics, the unilateral focus on the right of use, the expansion of the right of use, and the reintroduction of the right of participation. The author argues that ethical thinking has primarily revolved around two aspects: “the right to participate in the design process” and “the right to use the design outcome.” By comparing traditional and modern ethical concepts in both Chinese and Western contexts and analyzing the relationship between humans and materials, Jiang Mu identifies key elements that modernist design ethics should encompass. Through conceptual analysis, Zhao Jianghong proposes that design ethics serve as a foundational principle for design. Hu Hong, Shu Qian, and others analyze the evolution of ethical concepts in Western design and discuss the relationship between design ethics and contemporary design. Examining the historical connection between machines and humans, Chen Anying explores the roots of modernist design ethics.

Based on the research of the aforementioned scholars, it can be concluded that the central value concept of modernist design ethics is “design for the people,” as social development becomes increasingly interconnected. Although this populist perspective has always been present, it has transformed over time into formalism and reductionism within modern society’s evolution. The disregard for ethics and purpose among modern individuals has betrayed the original intentions of modernist design, resulting in significant consequences. Consequently, doubts arise regarding the reasonableness of this way of life, prompting a long-overdue examination of design ethics.

2.2 Modernist design ethics

Functionalism and rationalism are the defining characteristics of modernist design, as seen in the principles of “form follows function” and “less is more” advocated by Mies van der Rohe. These principles reflect a clear concept of design ethics and ideology within modernism. [5] Central to this ethical framework is the democratic nature of design, emphasizing the importance of creating designs that cater to the needs of the people. Over time, the ethical implications of “design for the people” have evolved, adapting to the changing needs and historical context. This concept can be further divided into two aspects: the consideration of the target audience and the sustainability of design. The former builds upon the legacy of Morris’s “Design for everyone,” while the latter reflects the growing global awareness of environmental issues in modern times.

Design ethics encompasses both profound truth and practicality. By examining the ethical principle of “design for the people,” we can discern that the essence of modernist design is realized through four key elements: function, rationality, objectivity, and technology. Modernism prioritizes function over form, and the function itself is intrinsically linked to human needs, highlighting its humanistic nature. Respect for reason does not entail the complete disregard for sensibility; rather, the two coexist harmoniously. However, in certain instances, humanism takes precedence, leading to an extreme development that gave rise to postmodernism. Objectivity serves as a guiding principle in modernist design, rejecting gratuitous expression and requiring designers to think rationally, aligning with Marxist philosophy. Modernism also emphasizes the integration of science and technology, advocating for the convergence of art and technology. The advancement of design is thus propelled by the rational framework and emotive elements of contemporary design.

The connotation of modern design is not a fixed definition but an ever-evolving expression. It is rooted in the concept of “modernity” and continually seeks to adapt to the current era in order to achieve a sense of modernity. The development of modernism has progressed from a focus on functionality to considering local contexts and integrating science and art. Currently, it is moving towards embracing and accepting diverse cultures. It is important to reflect on the essence of design within this connotation, as understanding the connotation alone is not enough without ethical considerations.

3. The decline and alienation of the ethical spirit of modernism

Modernist design has gradually devolved into formalism due to a lack of ethics. This reductionist approach is characterized by a focus on form, neglecting ethical considerations. Ethics is an individual, subjective and historical enterprise. To whom is the ethical enterprise addressed? To the abstract universal? But then it loses all its meaning and becomes abstract and formal itself, since the concrete – that is, social – situation may change. [1]The democratic ideals advocated by Bauhaus, which emphasized inclusive design, are no longer prominent in today’s design education system. This absence of ethical guidance in modernist theory has allowed commercial culture to dominate the field, resulting in design prioritizing practicality, commercial value, and aesthetics. Consequently, the global design community has embraced

an “internationalist style” that lacks ethical principles and instead emphasizes form and commerce. As a result, ethical concerns have been neglected, and design has become solely profit-driven, leading to a proliferation of disposable products during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the numerous crises caused by this lack of ethics, there has been little focus on incorporating design ethics into practice. In fact, moral values have often been intentionally or unintentionally disregarded, further distancing modern design from exploring new ethical concepts relevant to contemporary life. The 20th century witnessed various dilemmas, including challenges from postmodern design, all of which exposed the serious flaws of modern design stemming from its disregard for ethics.

3.1 The gap in the development of Chinese modernist design

The reason for the existence of modern design in modern Chinese social history is complex and debatable. China was in a marginalized state during the rapid development of modernism, resulting in a time gap between Chinese and international modernism. Therefore, the question of whether Chinese modernist design existed in the first half of the 20th century was met with negativity. The development of modern architecture in China before liberation was insufficient, with the first generation of designers returning from studying abroad mostly being architects from the 1920s and 1930s. It is challenging to definitively affirm the true sense of modern design in China during this period or deny the lag in Chinese modernist design. Even today, there are still gaps in the study of early modern design in China.

As Chinese modernist design has developed rapidly, certain issues have emerged alongside societal progress. Ideological contradictions and distorted ethical concepts are inevitable consequences of leaps and faults in development. Thus, it is crucial to reflect upon and examine the ethical connotations of modernist design, addressing the drawbacks of contemporary design ethics. A critical perspective is required to review modernist design ethics, allowing for the reconstruction of old problems and the exploration of new concepts.

3.2 Alienation of Chinese modernist design

3.2.1 Alienation of the subject

The design subject is influenced by the capital market and the demand for machinery production, leading to the alienation of the design subject. This is evident in the erosion of the design subject’s status, the diminishing of conscious awareness, and the disruption of the design process. As a result, design activities have increasingly become oriented towards the capital market. The original intent of design for the people has been distorted, resulting in a misguided notion of “humanization” and industrial products that no longer align with human nature, instead catering to various groups. With the expansion of the group concept, the specific meaning has become blurred, causing modern design to stray further from its inherent connection to human nature. Design has transformed into a means to increase profits, design thinking has become commodified, the existence of design has become commercialized, and design spaces have become consumerized.

In contemporary society, the standardization and homogenization brought about by modern technology have caused numerous problems in the field of design, resulting in awkward situations. Simultaneously, a significant amount of resources has been wasted, and many modern design “works” have become mere “rubbish”. The modernist ethical concept of “design for the people” has undergone a reinvention. The idea of benefiting people through mass production has devolved into the creation of thousands of similar forms and singular structures manufactured by machines. The excessive reliance on technology has reduced designs to assembly-line replicas, making it challenging for people to make choices.

Revised paragraph:

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3.2.2 Alienation of the function

The alienation of function is evident in the prioritization of functionality over human logic, resulting in the formalization of use functions, cognitive dysfunction, and the emergence of innovative functions. The original purpose of functionalism has transformed into operational inconvenience, with a multitude of functions incorporated into products, causing difficulties for consumers. Some functions are challenging to comprehend and operate, while only a small portion of the functions genuinely serve a practical purpose. [4] The utilization of new materials has devolved into the erroneous notion of “newness.” Materials no longer prioritize human needs, but instead gain the label of “new” by attaching arbitrary concepts to the design, even if these concepts are false and irrelevant, merely serving as superfluous additions to industrially manufactured products. In other words, modern technology, among other attributes, has precipitated the nihilism of absolute instrumentality. [2]

3.2.3 Alienation of the aesthetic

In terms of aesthetic alienation, the original artistic aesthetics that served users has transformed into market strategies and consumption behaviors, with “profit” becoming the primary design objective. This has led to a materialistic approach and a lack of cultural characteristics in modernism in China. However, this phenomenon is an inevitable result of the development of modernism in China.

On one hand, during that time, Chinese design concepts were conservative and techniques were lagging behind. Therefore, there is no reason to reject the distinctive characteristics of modernism. China’s recent modernization is based on the rejection of traditional culture, and modernist design reflects the spirit of the times and addresses the needs of the times. National characteristics or context cannot be used as an excuse to criticize modernism.

On the other hand, when the modern urban landscape has been established, designers are influenced by automated and structured methodologies and become overly reliant on technology. This ultimately leads to the loss or even alienation of aesthetics. In China, the concepts of context and territoriality gradually emerged alongside the development of Western postmodernism. While the essence of context is important and the promotion of national characteristics is undoubtedly significant, reflecting the needs of the times should be the primary value concept in design.

Therefore, China should not just passively adopt modernism, but should also reclaim its lost voice. This means that the first step is to break down the national psychological barriers and enhance people’s awareness of design and aesthetic appreciation. This way, modernism can be viewed from a developmental perspective rather than being seen as a conservative outcry.

4. Contemporary thinking on modernist design ethics

If there are concerns about the development of Chinese design, there are numerous negative factors prevalent in society today. Tracing the origins of modernist design’s moral standards, the slogan “design for the people” transformed modernism’s attitude towards machinery. Similarly, this remains a crucial approach to addressing the current design situation. Although the discourse of “design for people” continues to prevail, its underlying ethical concept should be reconsidered and examined.

4.1 Science and technology materials for the people

In the transition from industrial society to post-industrial society, the pace of production has accelerated, new technologies and materials continue to emerge, and social virtualization has increased. This has resulted in significant changes in people’s lifestyles. However, the development of science and technology has also led to serious issues in the relationships between humans and machines, humans and other humans, and humans and society. On one hand, there is a growing sense of alienation within society, which undoubtedly affects human emotions. Design, in combination with science and technology, should aim to provide convenience for people while also emphasizing rationality and ethical considerations in production behavior. Design can play a role in rectifying the lack of ethical concepts in reality. On the other hand, the depletion of natural resources has been widely discussed, making environmentally

friendly design more important than ever. This includes considerations such as the use of materials and the energy efficiency of designs.

4.2 Value orientation for the people

Following the popularity of postmodernism can lead to a disregard for ethical considerations in design, which goes against the original intention of design ethics. The current trend of individualism in China may contribute to the illusion of consumerism. The excessive pursuit of fashion reinforces the belief that anything outdated is obsolete, leading to a misunderstanding of people's values and a lack of design ethics. It is evident that our society is filled with negative factors and wasteful design practices. "Disposable" designs prioritize formal innovation over functional improvements. Consumers are attracted to the novelty of these designs, and businesses profit greatly. This societal demand greatly influences the mindset and values of designers, resulting in environmental pollution and ecological damage. The establishment of design ethics should provide a way forward for society, disregarding personal preferences and commercial interests, and encouraging people to produce and consume in a rational manner. Just as Le Corbusier designed for the masses to avoid revolution, design today can still be used to rectify the alienating lifestyle and change the mindset that everything becomes obsolete. Through design, we can play a positive role in guiding and educating society's value orientation.

4.3 Design responsibility for the people

For designers, ethical values should be the foundation of design, and the principle of "design for the people" should be the guiding standard, reflecting the designer's sense of responsibility. Design ethics and the awareness of responsibility should be integrated into modern design education, but unfortunately, this aspect is still lacking. Only by instilling designers with a sense of historical mission can we prevent irresponsible, unattractive, regressive, and uncivilized design in society. When there is a conflict between local interests and the greater good, designers must navigate this conflict through ethical consciousness, which is a crucial aspect of rational design.

The ethics and ideological consciousness of design are inevitably influenced by the characteristics of the era, but the cultural traditions of a country or nation also subtly influence them. In this regard, we are excessively conservative and lack principled ideas, which are integral to the design profession. It is disheartening that the awakening of design ethics seems to be lagging behind in the face of the overwhelming array of modern products. The purity of modernism is insufficient in dealing with the complexity of contemporary cultural levels. The rapid pace of scientific and technological development makes it challenging to strike a balance between ethical concepts and progress. However, the silver lining is that the virtue of self-questioning still persists. By reevaluating the concept of modernist design ethics, we can anticipate a new path of development and achieve a self-revolution and self-correction of modernism. It will require tremendous effort to restore spiritual equilibrium through design.

5. Conclusion

In today's world, where both sensibility and reason hold equal importance, it would be careless to dismiss modernism as outdated or dead. On the contrary, it is crucial to reflect on the ideas and wisdom of the past and reframe them to address the challenges of the present. The rapid changes and developments of our times may have caused modernism to lose its way, but exploring different perspectives can provide us with fresh insights. While the influence of modernism may have diminished, it cannot be replaced by mere trends. This journey is far from over.

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