

# **A Comparative Study of the Modernism and Postmodernism based on the Design Philosophy of “People-oriented”**

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**Keywords:** People-oriented; Material needs; Spiritual needs; Modernism; Postmodernism;

**Abstract:** Both modernism and postmodernism are the most thorough design movement implementing the “people-oriented” design concept in the history of western design. From a practical point of view, modernist design emphasizes the functionality of design and satisfies people's material needs. As an amendment and supplement of modernist design, postmodernism pays more attentions to meeting people's spiritual and emotional needs.

## **1. Interpretation of “people-oriented” design concept**

In the ancient Greek mythology story of “the bed of Proctor Joust”, it is said: a fierce bandit named Proctor Joust often intercepts passers-by, and sets on the side of the road of two iron beds, one is long and another is short, also forces all passers-by to lie down on the two iron beds, asks short man sleep in a long bed and tall man sleep in short bed. Lastly, the longer part of tall men than the short bed will be cut off and the short man will be pulled as long as the long bed. So he was often called the “iron bed bandit”. As an ancient Chinese document of “Huai Nan Zi say Lin Xun” [1], it is said: “injuring one's life for the sake of health is like cutting one's feet to fit one's shoes, or cutting one's head to wear a small hat.” It is also said in the Book of the Later Han Dynasty: Biography of Xun Shuang [2]: “It is very foolish to cut toes to fit one's shoes”. Obviously, both ancient Greek myths and Chinese idioms reveal the most basic principle of human creation: all designs should be based on people. If people are judged by things, it will lead to the failure of design and even pay a painful price.

The book of “shuo wen jie zi” written by Xu Shen said [3]: “Man is the most expensive in the nature of heaven and earth. “There is a saying [4] in the book of “Shang Shu” that “Heaven and earth are the parents of all things, and man is the spirit of all things.” The great Greek philosopher of Protagoras famously said [5]: “Man is the measure of all things.” The famous American designer of Pross said [6]: “People always think that design has three dimensions: aesthetics, technology and economy. But the more important is the fourth dimensions-humanity.” Danish furniture designer of Kai Boesen also said [7]: “We make things that have life and a heart in them. They should be human, alive and warm.” Therefore, the core of all designs should be human, and should be based on human scale or needs.

The need hierarchy proposed by Maslow divides human needs into five levels, from low to high, including physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, respect needs and self-actualization needs. Physiological and safety needs belong to lower level material needs. Social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs belong to high-level spiritual needs. Therefore, the design concept of “people-oriented” contains two meanings: one is to meet people's material needs and another is to meet people's spiritual needs. However, in the history of western modern design, there are different interpretations of the “people-oriented” design concept between modernism and postmodernism design movements.

## **2. Modernist design movement**

### **2.1 The emergence of modernist design**

Modernist design is a new thought trend of design that appeared simultaneously in European and

American countries in the 1920s. It can be traced back to the outbreak of the industrial revolution. Before the industrial revolution, design activities in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries mainly served the aristocracy. In order to cater to the aesthetic taste of the upper class and to meet their luxury requirements, the design was full of obvious class characteristics in this period, such as cumbersome decoration, geometrical symmetry structure and symbolic layout, and was inevitably of religious nature and court nature. However, since the outbreak of the industrial revolution in 1750, the social form of industrial society has changed a lot from technology and production mode to people's behavior mode and ideology compared with the handicraft era. Designers in this period reflected and criticized the idea that design should serve the dignitaries, and clearly put forward that design should serve the general public. The modernism design movement is an omni-directional, democracy and socialism design movement serving truly for the public from theory to practice. As the core of modern design in the 20th century, it has profoundly influenced people's ideas, lifestyles and exerted a decisive impact on the design activities in the whole century.

## **2.2 Aesthetic features of modernist design**

Le Corbusier, a leading exponent of modernist architecture, famously said [8]: “houses are machines of habitation.” He said that the build houses should firstly meet the needs of living, and then beauty and decoration. Louis Sullivan, a representative of the Chicago school of architecture in the United States, also put forward the famous view [9] that “Form follows function.” He said that “decoration is a spiritual luxury, not a necessity, and the form of design should be determined by the function it has.” The church designed by Le Corbusier, the apartment designed by Yves, Peter byrne, the light, electric kettle and electric fan designed by Peter Behrens, the Barcelona chair designed by Mies Van Der Rohe and Mondrian's “red yellow blue” composition, etc., all these designs completely abandon trivial adornment, use simple geometric shapes, and use the new industrial materials such as steel, cement and glass, abandon the traditional architecture and the traditional design method, has created the new style which is concise and practical. It is clear that in modernist design, no matter architecture, products or graphic design, the cost of products has been greatly reduced, which adapts to mass and standardized production, conforms to the characteristics of the industrialization era. Therefore, from a practical perspective, modernist design emphasizes the functionality of design, which not only realizes the democratization of design, but also pays more attentions to exploring and meeting people's material needs.

## **3. Postmodern design movement**

### **3.1 The emergence of postmodern design**

The emergence of postmodernism design is closely related to the development of modernism design. Modernism gradually became mature in the Bauhaus period in Germany, and reached its peak in the United States in 1960s and 1970s after the World War II, and also formed the internationalist design movement that influenced all countries in the world. However, due to the overemphasis on function and rationality, internationalism went to the extreme and became a pure formalism design movement for form's sake. The Seagram Building designed by Mies Van Der Rohe is a typical representative. It is the first high-rise building with glass box in the world. It has no any decoration at all. The world trade center tower, designed by Yamazaki Bin, is the tallest building in New York and was once the symbol of the financial center of Wall Street. It has a similar design style with the Seagram Building. The design principles of “form follows function” proposed by Louis Sullivan and “function first, form second” proposed by Gropius were replaced by Luce's “decoration is evil” and Mies van der Rohe's “less is more”. In his book of “from Bauhaus to our house”, Tom Wolff, an American writer, argues angrily that [10] “Mies van der Rohe's principle of less is more has changed the skyline of the world's largest cities by two-thirds”. After the 1970s, this emotionless design in internationalism gradually aroused widespread dissatisfaction. Yamazaki Bin in the central U.S. city of ST. Louis designed low-income housings of “Prudie Iago”, which have the characteristics of the form of indifference to the extreme, no emotion, liking a prison building.

When it was finished, even the low-income poor, they were reluctant to move in. In 1972, the housings of “Prudie-Iago” were bombed. Its disappearance marked the death of internationalist design and the birth of postmodernism.

### **3.2 Aesthetic features of postmodern design**

The Sydney Opera House is a classic postmodern architecture. It is the iconic building of Australia and the most beautiful building in the 20th century. Some people call it one of the Seven Wonders of the World. As the soul of Sydney, the charm of this building lies not in its antiquity, but in the fact that it reflects the satisfaction of people's higher spiritual and emotional needs.

The Sydney Opera House is based on the geographical features of Bennelong island, which three sides face sea and the south is connected to the land. The design of three groups of thin shell roofs over the opera house makes the whole building not only have four facade shapes of southeast and northwest, but also obtain the fifth facade shape effect from the top down. This novel and unique design makes the Sydney Opera House look like a set of white sculptures, like huge white shells on the reef from a distance, like a lotus flower from the top down, like a white crane that is about to fly, and like a white sailboat that will be about to set sail. This elegant and noble design achieves the integration and unification with the surrounding environment. There is a saying in Lao Zi [11]: “The tao is supreme, the heaven is supreme, the earth is supreme, and so are the people. There are four supremes in the universe, and people are one of them. Man must conform to the earth, earth to heaven, heaven to Tao and Tao to nature.” Wang Bi, a representative figure of the metaphysics of Wei and Jin dynasties, also said [12]: “The sage achieves the law of nature and the feeling of all things.” Dong zhongshu, an ancient Chinese philosopher, said in the “Spring and Autumn-More Dew”, “Heaven, earth, man are the foundation of all things. It is born by heaven, raised by earth, and finally grown into a man. People are born with filial piety, raised with food and clothing, and grown with rites and music. The three like brothers and feet, and they together form a whole and are indispensable.” Frank Wright, a famous American architect, once put forward the theory [13] of “Organic architecture” and advocated that modern architecture should be in harmony with the surrounding environment.

As a representative of postmodern design, the Sydney Opera House skillfully makes use of the environment to integrate the architectural space, landscape and environment. It not only realizes the ecological view of architecture, but also achieves the harmony and unity between architecture and human, architecture and environment, and embodies the aesthetic idea of “the unity of man and nature” in which human and nature live in harmony.

## **4. Conclusion**

As the most thorough design movement implementing the “people-oriented” design concept in the history of western modern design, the emphasis of modernism is different from that of postmodernism. The former pays more attentions to meeting people's material needs, while the latter pays more attentions to meeting people's spiritual and emotional needs. In the history of western modern design, postmodern design is not a rebellion against modernist design, but a modification and supplement to it.

## **Acknowledgement**

In this paper, the research was sponsored by the general topics for universities and vocational colleges in the 13th five-year education scientific planning of Gansu province in 2018 (Project No. GS (2018) GHBBK098).

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