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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reyner Banham and modern design culture

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Abstract

What is modernity in architecture? In English speaking world, the question is likely impossible to answer without considering the works of Peter Reyner Banham (1922-1988). Regardless of his polemic and disparaging style in his critical writings, this study argues that Banham offers a constructive renewal for the body of knowledge on history and theory of modernity in architectural design. Accordingly, he posits and disposes architectural profession with scientific and technological vision in the front line of struggle for environmental betterment. For him modernity in architecture comprises triad components: function, technology, and aesthetics by which historical milestones come into being. A study on Banham's engagement with modernity is considerably necessary regarding his conviction that history of architecture happens as the consequence of interactions of technological innovations and design creativities, and in response to socioeconomic circumstances as well.

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1. Banham and modernity

Modern design is a phenomenon of the rationally industrialized system that concerns about the integration of form, material, and function for mass production. Modern culture concerns every idea, action, product and service that values and cares for the conditions of contemporariness, in the context of human needs for safety, security, health, and comfort. Modernism can

be described as a sociocultural movement, which was originally arising in the Western world in the late 19th century; it encompasses all human endeavours such as arts, architecture, literature, science, technology, philosophy, faith, and politics. Like any other ideologies, modernism produces and establishes something concrete that we call modernity. In many ways, modernity shows its capacity as a phenomenon of civilization that is based on the consciousness of contemporary circumstances and thinks as well as acts accordingly by optimizing the available resources and tools. In such a way, modernism can reject any old fashioned way of thinking or past faiths, values, and customs.

In architectural context, modernity is defined more often by examples than by theories. Consequently, there are idiosyncrasies in its movement. Functionalism stands out

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from such idiosyncrasies (Sharp, 2002: 4; Benevolo, 1977: 436; Dean and Zevi, 1983; Birkert, 1994: 3). Reyner Banham is one of many architectural historians who unveils and supports functionalism. He recalls the 1850s decree of Horatio Greenough: “Beauty is the promise of function” (Whiteley, 2003: 295). In this sense, the history of architecture is neither a record of stylistic development nor a chronicle of most celebrated buildings. With this position, the notion of architecture at that time is in question. Banham quotes this to challenge for a reformulation of history of architecture in dealing with contemporary circumstances.

In respect to his vision on history, this study argues that rethinking modernity through Banham’s works is worthwhile for architectural profession and education. One important reason to do this is the fact that Banham’s contribution to history, theory, and criticism of architecture is undoubtedly constructive and inspiring; his vision goes beyond the conventional boundary of architecture. Accordingly, functionalism is not enough, but technological enthusiasm must be aware of the dangers of mindless mechanization and its environmental consequences. His works that explore interdisciplinarily the spirit and meanings of modernity, especially in the context of the built form and urban landscape that leads us to scrutinize the spiritual relationship between design and technology for humanity.

What is modernism in architecture? Studies on modernism in architecture have been presented in several publications. Rykwert (1983) argues that the essential idea of modernism had been posed since the 18th century in French Academy. Accordingly, the French intellectuals and architects ranging from Claude Perrault to Nicholas Louis-Durand, have already put the Vitruvian Greco-Roman architectural doctrine in question; here, modernism is understood in the broadest sense of the words as the awareness of the contemporary world in the context of practice and technique. For Banham, the question on modernity is neither rhetorical nor prophetic, either in content or in tone. He takes the question seriously, which leads to an intricate investigation into the possibility of technology. History and theory of architecture in Banham’s mind are indispensably inquisitive rather than a dry, dispassionate, and uncritical narrative. As far as the history and theory of modern architecture is concerned, no one is idiosyncratically able to talk and write about it without going through Banham’s positions and expositions.

As one of the most profound theorists and historians on functionalism in the Age of Machine Aesthetics, the relation of Banham to modernism in architecture is seemingly neither a “father and son” relationship nor a “subject and object” binary, but it might be properly said as a co-existential pair of the 20th century architectural history. To certain extent, Banham is more than just an observer and a witness of historical movement of modern architecture. Properly speaking and regarding his rigorous scholarship, Banham is probably one of the best references of knowledge, power and subject of modernity in architectural history. As an editor of *Architectural Review* (1952), Banham is the man in action in polemics and debates on contemporary architecture in Western world.

This paper is intended to explore the relationship between Banham and modernism in theoretical and historical context of humanities and social sciences. The focus of investigation is to dismantle and unfold concepts and phenomena of modernism, which have been discussed, studied, and proposed by Banham. The purpose of the study is to unveil the virtue of

architecture and its modernity for architectural education and profession. In doing so, this study is expected to make a contribution to architectural discourse on modernity based on Banham’s texts. The limitation of the study is Banham’s textual works in terms of his publications, letters, interviews, and other writings on his works and his person.

The approach to Banham’s works in this study is considerably hermeneutical by which Banham’s concepts and its modern contextuality will be necessarily dismantled and unfolded for their intrinsic and explicit meanings and significances. By nature, the study is to make modernism a case based upon Banham’s passion in the dynamic relationship between technological innovations and artistic endeavours that happens and makes a history for the presence of architecture. This study will emphasize its analysis in an explorative way that enables one to see the interplay between power, knowledge, and subject in Western industrial and capitalist cultures. The goal of this study is to uncover and to unfold Banham’s vision on history of architecture as the immediate future of comprehensive ecosystems, instead of dated works in classified styles by names of architects (Banham, 2009: xxxiv). In order to achieve this goal, this study will handle three categories of architectural presence: function, technology, and aesthetics. These threefold presence will be studied with respect to Banham’s thoughts, positions, commentaries, notes, and unspoken messages.

Furthermore, the nature of analysis in this study is an interdisciplinary investigation in the context of sociocultural reality. Banham’s concepts and prepositions will be scrutinized from its origin to its broadly contextual form. In doing so, the study is neither to enhance nor to criticize Banham’s works. Rather, this study is to explore the problems, constraints, and opportunities of Banham’s vision on modernity and its pertinence for the future of architectural profession and education.

As a public thing, architecture is never immune from power play that shapes, constructs, sustains or demolishes its presence. Accordingly, architecture as observed by Banham is human condition that moves always with the time because it helps to create the time (Banham, 1974: 3-4). For him, professionally, architects are believed to be capable of being form-giver, creator, and controller of human environment. In the light of *Zeitgeist* (Eisenman in Hays, 2000: 529. See also Nesbitt, 1996: 217; Tournikiotis, 2001: 154), architects are morally responsible for the quality of the built environment because they are trained and educated for making places, instead of destroying them into pieces. The thing of architecture for Banham is one of the thinkable modes of design that for some reason had come to occupy a position of cultural privilege in relation to construction industry (Banham, 1999: 294). As a thinkable thing, architecture, by its design, presents functional environment, attractive form, and truthful construction, which qualifies it as a cultural artifact. In this respect, design does make a difference for the built environment to be qualified as architecture. In doing so, architects as designers are morally due to perform their best effort for a well-designed building by which human needs are well accommodated with safe, healthy, and beautiful environment.

Since his interest in history is what happens along the shifting frontier between technology and art (Whiteley, 2003: 407), this study will be focused on Banham’s critical assessments, positions, and thoughts on three main categories of architecture as a thinkable thing: function, technology, and

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