

## Critical cultures essay: Sophie Morgan.

‘What did modernist architects and designers mean when they announced ‘less is more’ and is that claim still relevant today?’

‘Less is more’ is a saying that is heard quite often in everyday life. It can be used in many different situations such as deciding ‘what type of jewellery to wear with a cute outfit?’ or ‘how should one decorate their living room?’. ‘Less is more’ means that only having the essential, necessary things is much better than having the inessential and extravagant things. This essay will attempt to examine if the claim ‘less is more’ declared by modernist architects and designers still rings true today and what exactly these architects mean by this proclamation. In this essay I will discuss modernist architecture and how it came to be, while giving some examples of today’s current architecture, this claim’s relevance today and hopefully at the end, see if this declaration still holds its significance.

### Modernist Architecture:

Modernism materialised around the early 1900’s and continued until the early 1940’s. Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and Walter Gropius were prominent figures of the Modernist Architectural Movement (1). The modern movement in architecture believed that the essence of modernist buildings could be found within its form, structure, materials and functional accommodations(2). One of the main principles of modernism is that ‘form

follows function', it is taught by Walter Gropius who told students that form holds purity at the Bauhaus school(3). This belief advocates that the form of architecture is the most important factor and should be simple with no unnecessary ornaments to distract from it. The sense of purity and the removal of ornamentation are foremost characteristics of modernism. This is shown through Loos' words 'I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use'(4). During this stage of modernism, decoration and art was seen as provocative and that it diminishes the true purity of a building as said by Loos 'all art is erotic'(5). As we can see these modernist architects believed that buildings only needed its raw essential ingredients and that any ornamentation would distract and take away from the buildings character and some may agree. However, does this ideology apply to all types of buildings such as houses, are these buildings efficient and sustainable?, does modernist architecture create comfortable environments to live in and call a home or can this style of architecture be seen as arrogant and overly ambitious?

One very well known example of modernist architecture is the Farnsworth House. The Farnsworth House, a one-room, glass and steel house, designed by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and commissioned by Edith Farnsworth is located in Plano Illinois and was built between the years 1945-51. While the Farnsworth house is now a museum, it is seen as an exemplary example of

the Modern Movement(6). Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe believed that there should be a balance between his architecture and nature and that his work should not hinder the beauty of nature, he stated that 'Nature should live its own life, and we cannot disrupt it with the colour of our houses and interior fittings'(7). One can see how the Farnsworth house respected its surroundings through its use of white paint to neutralise the house and the use of the surrounding area's colour palette as a composition(8). Another method Mies used to incorporate nature into the house in such a harmonious way was the use of the floor to ceiling glass windows. Mies was able to allow nature to come into the house and be observed by the house's inhabitants through the glass walls(9), he concluded 'that it would be a pity to erect an opaque wall between the outside and inside'(10). He was able to integrate the inside and outside of this structure in a seamless way without the atmosphere becoming too congested and clashing with one another. While some may find Mies architectural work to be imposing and brilliant, some do not hold this same notion at all, this can be seen through Edith Farnsworth's hasty departure from the house due to its suffocating atmosphere as she once said 'the truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass, I feel like a prowling animal. Always on alert. I am always restless'(11).

I believe I have to agree with Edith Farnsworth's opinion as while Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe has created an archetype of modern architectural houses and to a great degree has had considerable influence to the International style of

architecture, he has created a distinguished work of art and perfection but not an actual home! A house that is not suitable to live in and that calls for an extremely demanding mindset that is exceedingly critical and begs for nothing but perfection. One can not become comfortable and settle into a building like this due to its fixed and rooted space(12). While I believe the Farnsworth house to be a beautiful, clean-cut building, that is in actuality a sterile, empty husk that is devoid of any character and personality and can not be dirtied by the growth and presence of its occupants. It is as Elizabeth Gordon said 'nothing more than a glass cage on stilts'(13), one can not retreat to the comforts of their home in the Farnsworth house as it is constantly on display with its large glass barriers that entrap its occupants. I find the claim 'less is more' while used in architecture is pushed to its extreme limits, it is an unfathomable conceptualization. As said by Elizabeth Gordon, 'they're promoting unlivability, stripped down emptiness, lack of storage space and therefore lack of possessions'(14). These modern architects advocate for desolation in pursuit of purity, however I believe this mindset makes these buildings become vacuums that consume its occupants and show how insignificant life can be. Maybe that is the importance of this claim to show how trivial life can be and to humble oneself, but I believe that our homes should be a safe haven from that and not reminders. Our homes should be efficient in that it provides to our needs such as a roof over our head but it should also be a memorial in how we lived our lives and experiences through its decor, our tidbits and possessions.

### Today's Relevance:

Today's Architecture and Design;

Nevertheless a current design movement is rising through and is testing the modern architecture style and minimalism, going by the name of 'New London Fabulous'. Nathaniel Furman classified it as 'design and architecture as a visual and cultural pursuit, which is highly aesthetic, sensual and celebratory of mixed cultures'(15). Design education students are encouraged and pressurised into rejecting pattern, colour and ornament(16). Colour, pattern and ornamentation is painted in a negative light, as it is regarded as non-serious and frivolous. Design and architecture are closely related on the grounds that architecture is the plan for the structure of something and design is the plan to create something(17), thus designers are exhorted not to use colour and ornamentation. Nonetheless many popular designers pay no attention to minimalist architecture(18). Some of these designers include Yinka Ilori, Camille Walala, Morag Mysercough and Adam Nathaniel Furman himself.

One piece of work that is a representation of the 'New London Fabulous' movement is Camille Walala's public mural in Leyton local high street.

Leyton's residents crowdfunded £40,000 to commission this artwork as part of an appeal raised by street art collective Wood Street Walls, it spread across

the expanse of eight buildings, causing it to be one of London's largest public artworks(19). 'When public art is approached in a collaborative spirit with good intentions and passion, it can have a significant and positive effect on the communities, residents and businesses it inhabits', said Mark Clack of Wood Street Walls(20). This riot of colour was highly collaborative as not only was this permanent feature of Leyton high street community-funded it was also community-designed, seeing as residents were allowed to vote online regarding the final design (21). This engaging process of creating public art is extremely successful as it creates a sense of communal pride and causes the residents to interact more so and raises their spirit and hopes especially when emerging from a very long lockdown. 'We believe art and culture is a great way to engage the community and brighten up public space, instil a sense of civic pride and also attract more people to the area and increase footfall' said Deeney's co-founder Patrick Dwyer, a local shopkeeper on Leyton's high street(22). The example of the 'New London Fabulous' movement has met the conditions that Adam Nathaniel Furman said it would 'it is an expression of urban pride, chromatic joy and architectural complexity'(23).



Imagery from Wood Street Walls(24).

### Today's Relevance:

#### Today's items and their value:

One of our most central issues in our point in history is excess, this can be seen in colossal amounts of pollution, immense overpopulation and our thirst for knowledge(25). In today's age of mass production and consumption, we tend to lose sight of the value objects hold. Due to objects being made in mass and becoming easily accessible, we lose our connection with the object and dismiss it as something that is highly replaceable( which it often is),and therefore we take these items for granted. People have inherited a nurtured development known as material intelligence, meaning that people have an insight and intimate connection towards particular items, allowing them to better understand these objects, to use them to their full potential and to fully appreciate them(26). However recently, materials have become more complex and specialists are some of the only people to understand the intelligence and process behind these materials, so while the knowledge and complexity has expanded and magnified, it has become more constricted in who this information is available to(27). Meaning people can not develop a healthy appreciation towards these materials.

Excess and scarcity has always been a topic of discussion in the western society, and while excess is something that is extremely present in our society,

many still question and debate if excess is bad or good(28). Can excess be controversial, or are only certain aspects of excess troublesome? Excess insinuates sufficiency, can something be problematic if it is sufficient and there is not a lack of the product(29)? Since the industrial revolution, our greed and need for overabundance has caused the extinction of numerous species of plants and animals, a tremendous increase in sea and temperature levels and for weather patterns to become sporadic and abnormal and a colossal amount of various types of pollution(30). While most of the damage is irreversible, our society could look for a solution to help remedy this. That remedy would be scarcity, to use fewer products and to use them well. To achieve sustainability, we need to reduce our overconsumption and foster an awareness of sustainable practices.

One can see that the claim 'Less is more' has less relevance in today's society in both architecture and daily life. While the phrase is often used in everyday language, it has less significance and is taken lightly. Many believe that when using this saying, they sound refined and sophisticated, and that they have no need or want for material goods. However very few people live with only the essential and necessary things and I must congratulate the people who do, as I believe you must withhold a particular mindset to enjoy that type of lifestyle. However I believe I would have to agree with the great craft reformer William Morris, 'have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful', and while beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I



believe that my clutter and possessions are what add beauty to my home. In this essay I have discussed what modern architects such as Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and Walter Gropius meant by the declaration 'Less is more', what modern architecture is and how it arose. I also spoke about current architecture and the claim's relevance in today's society.

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