

Urban theory in postmodern cities: Amnesiac spaces and ephemeral aesthetics

Teoría urbana en la ciudad postmoderna: espacios amnésicos y estética de lo efímero

Bárbara Barreiro León

Universidad de Oviedo
barbara.b.leon@gmail.com

Abstract. The study of Postmodern architecture demands freedom from any pre-conceived rule or traditional stylistic analysis. Because of this dogma, urban transformations have been brought to postmodern cities in recent decades. Some of these are chaotic and are not related to the urban experience of the individual. Thus, the modification of space and time in a city generates a brand-new architecture – a reflection of a renewed society, freed from the philosophical, aesthetic and social concerns of the central decades of the twentieth century. A formerly attempt to establish a quaint and recognisable typology of “local architecture” is now discarded, then refusing the sense of unique identity of the city and which in the past, promoted the urban memory of the inhabitants. Urban spaces are created far from historical centres, built deprived of both history and memory. The individual, therefore, is unable to find a relationship between these “anti-cities”, familiarity and daily life. The citizen appears nowadays as seemingly detached from these new and disproportionate constructions, spaces that show no architectural personality. Urban models are presented as the assimilation or systematic copying favors of interaction with the individual. This new city model is based on the copy, in the simulacrum of reality itself.

Resumen. El estudio de la arquitectura posmoderna exige la libertad de cualquier regla preconcebida o análisis estilístico tradicional. Debido a este dogma, las transformaciones urbanas han sido llevadas a cabo en las ciudades posmodernas en las últimas décadas. Algunos de estos planteamientos son caóticos y no están relacionados con la experiencia urbana del individuo. Así, la modificación del espacio y del tiempo en la ciudad genera una arquitectura completamente nueva, reflejo de una sociedad renovada, liberada de las preocupaciones filosóficas, estéticas y sociales de las décadas centrales del siglo XX. Un antiguo intento de establecer una tipología pintoresca y reconocible de la “arquitectura local” es descartado ahora, rechazando entonces el sentido de identidad única de la ciudad y que, en el pasado, promovía la memoria urbana de los habitantes. Los espacios urbanos se crean lejos de los centros históricos, privados de historia y de memoria. El individuo, por lo tanto, es incapaz de encontrar una relación entre estas “anti-ciudades”, la familiaridad y la vida cotidiana. El ciudadano aparece hoy en día como aparentemente separado de estas nuevas y desproporcionadas construcciones, espacios que no muestran personalidad arquitectónica. Los modelos urbanos se presentan como la asimilación o copia sistemática permite la interacción con el individuo. Este nuevo modelo de ciudad se basa en la copia, en el simulacro de la propia realidad.

Keywords. Postmodernity; architecture; urbanism; aesthetics.

Palabras clave. Postmodernidad; arquitectura; urbanismo; estética.

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Introduction

Postmodern culture was born as a way to combat the Modern Movement, overtaking the severity of the International Style regarding its architecture. Hence, postmodern architecture proposes not to be bound to any rule or style aspects. Because of that, urban transformations have been brought to postmodern cities. Some of these are chaotic and are not related to the urban experience of the individual. Thus, space and time are modified into this new city.

Postmodernism intends, from the outset, to create a new expression not only in artistic, but also in cultural terms, which will bring a new and contradictory aesthetic experience that seeks to represent contemporary society. As a result, the new architecture is now reflected generating a new society, freed from aesthetics, philosophical and the social budgets of the mid-twentieth century. However, the term “postmodernism” has raised many debates in order to find a clear meaning covering all variants of this cultural wave. Thus, Postmodernity is not an artistic movement in the strict sense, but rather, an expression of the crisis of Modernity, understood as a critique of modernity itself.

Nevertheless, at some point, it is difficult to overcome this given solution. This plurality makes community views –the society as a whole– considering, therefore, the problem of creating basic and

fundamental laws on society. The Postmodern city hence relates itself to urban imaginary, which is composed of a conglomeration of ideas and images. These are built through the visual memory of the individual and imaginary creations that have to do with the use of the visual intelligence form - space.

Post-modern culture and its cities

Postmodernism is presented as an anti-Modern movement seeking to escape from everything that had so far represented modernity: negativity, contradiction and contrasts. However, there are times when it is difficult to overcome this established solution. Postmodern architecture is understood as the culmination of a social and technological transformation. In this way, the individual moves to a new city, understood by means of expression of the society that had until then inhabited the empty and meaningless buildings of the Modern Movement and the International Style.

Over time, the International Style was outpaced with the help of architects who sought freedom from the rigid dictates of this school. Buildings somehow abandoned the slavish adherence limits to modernist geometry, replacing it with new designs (for instance, a return to external decoration). Instead of symbolically encountering the surrounding landscape constructed with rectangular buildings, in the Postmodernity, we observe buildings with protruding corners, a number of different levels and substantially more ornamentation on the outside (Gottdiener, 2005).

The planning of the city, according to the Modern Movement encouraged the spatial segregation of social functions, the death of suburban sidewalks and the city's grid system. Instead of that, the new Postmodern urbanists aspired to integrate previously separate elements. They conceived a more relevant urban life for the visitor, guiding neighbourhoods to gain easy access to all transport service. The promoters of this style were "anti-modernists" in their belief – society should return to a more community and environment-friendly model. For instance, some traditional designed elements of houses, such as porches and sidewalks, were remarkably favoured in order to allow people to socialize, closing ties with the community (Gottdiener, 2005).

In this sense, to eventually appreciate these cities as "art", we must submit them to aesthetic study. In order to view it this way, we take real cases of cities constructed in the form of architectural elements, under the ideological and Postmodern social theories as an example. Thus, the dream of Postmodern cities –utopic and unrealistic entities that are not intended to accommodate the individual– is to approach Marc Augé's "non-place", making these cities a mere place of transit and leisure, resulting in amnesiac spaces for the public with ephemeral aesthetics.

Post-modernism succeed thanks to a willingness to change, with the aim of creating a new expression. This manifestation was not only artistic but also cultural, which, in return, will bring a new and contradictory changing aesthetic experience that seeks to represent contemporary society.

The creation of the Postmodern city primarily depends on the association between symbols and signs, and which follow the demand of society itself. Postmodern cities are not intended to accommodate the individual, but instead, aim to distract the society. The succession of different Postmodern, dream-like, unreal spaces distract society, making them believe that individuals are living in a utopia created in their image and likeness. It will be necessary, in turn, associate all these representative symbols of Postmodern ideology –architectural materialization itself– in order to meet the basic objective of these constructions, that is, to create a city that conforms an image of Postmodern culture. The city and Postmodern architecture are, therefore, object of a detailed study where architectural theory comes into play, together

with philosophy and aesthetics, to result in a critical review of its emergence and development as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

During Postmodernism the desire to create larger cities grows, impersonal and empty of architectural content, but which, in turn, can be fully identifiable by individuals through symbols and images. In order to value Postmodern cities and put them in open relation to the society that rules them, it is necessary to understand the symbols, signs and icons that appear in the viewer's eyes. Thus, the architects of these cities work from these symbols to construct a new architectural representation for the city. It is, therefore, an urban framework, set by the signs given by the company itself and the new socio-cultural claims.

Hence, Habermas (1984) refers to the problem of container, empty and meaningless buildings, as a problem of the Modern Movement and the International Style, rather than Postmodernism itself. The latter gives character to these flat and soulless buildings, providing them with a new character without resorting to actual architectural elements, but filling them instead with representative signs of our society. These signs may even serve to provide an empty object with artistic and aesthetic category – a sign made of neon lights is the height of Postmodern society.

Some specialists have focused their attention on the creation of themed environments as an example of the most important aspects of Postmodernism in cities and regions alike (Gottdiener, 2005). It is an ironic architecture –a parody as a cynic society– represented with a strong personality, not only in individual terms, but history and changing societies in equal measure. Thus, utopic cities, where individuals feel protected by society as a whole and an ideal environment around them, make them live in a lie.

There is, therefore, a desire to create a city almost as a “Postmodern carnality”, as it does not seek to solve the problems of the individual who inhabits it. Its aim is not to be functional. Its willing is to create the illusion of a city, a scenario that represents a proper city. Sociologists and architects called it “city-fiction”, falsifying the individual to the most extraordinary level. It is, once again, the society of the spectacle, creating its own “city-show” (Popeanga, 2009).

According to Guy Debord in *La Société du spectacle* (1967), the *spectacle* –or show– concentrates the whole attention of this new society. However, this does not refer to images, but to the relationship that is established between individuals and images. They create images that present a reality so that at no time will represent a lie. The purpose of the show is to make these images more visible and noticeable. These images can be admired anywhere (Debord, 1995). Debord presents the example of the *vedette* to introduce the concept of apparent experience which is in agreement with the postmodern banalization; an apparent life, without depth, a world totally commodified where the objects tend to lose value. The individual is increasingly linked to consumption, turning these urban centres into purely commercial spaces. This is one of the most characteristic features of postmodern cities; urban spaces that are far from the traditional concept of cities.

Amnesiac spaces

Time and space are presented as basic issues when developing an urban space. Thus, we might speak of urban space as temporary – corresponding to the memory and previous experiences of the individual. For the same reason, spatial models are built by memory elements. However, the individual is bewildered before the Postmodern urban landscape, transforming him into a mere spectator of the city. The result is clear – the individual does not recognise his own city because of the changes that it has undergone.

Deteriorated urban centres are rehabilitated as a lure for tourists. They become now ideal “non-places” – copies of the city itself. The centrality of cities is now lost, as families inhabit the periphery with the leaving the centre almost as a thematic park for tourists. The city is now rife with museums, leisure centres and hotels, in addition to the historical centre itself with its unpolluted architectural heritage.

The main difference between a place and a “non-place” is that the former is the set of elements that coexist in space with a certain order. The place is somewhat of a geographical place where individuals walk. However, the geographical elements disappear when the signs come into play; if the signs disappear, so do the geographic features that define the place. Thus, the place is not only understood by its inhabitants, but by tourists and visitors as well. These, relate to the basic concepts and commonalities of cities while others fail to establish that familiarity with space. Here, we can understand the Postmodern “non-places” due to the space they occupy in the contemporary city – planes, trains, automobiles, airports, stations, hotels, supermarkets, amusement parks, and so on. Therefore, “non-places” correspond to the spaces designed for specific purposes and the relationship between the individuals and such spaces. The “non-place” does not confer identity to the individual. On the contrary, it is what truly disturbs and distracts him from what is outside the “non-place”. The individual is now unable to be found in time or space – he is alone in a room full of people who are experiencing the same feeling. We lose, once again, the relationship between space and place that we had already experimented with the concept of post-modern city, a full timelessness settling here. Regarding the search space, the visitor only has the “non-place” as a benchmark of their place of origin that may experience a mechanical social attitude, not individually but innate to all individuals in non-places (Tudoras, 2006).

The architectural materialisation of these Postmodern cities has to do with noise, the lights and the succession of dark and bright spaces which, in turn, distracts the individual, inviting him to wander from side to side, without a predetermined direction. Thus, the basic object of these constructions is to create a city like image of Postmodern culture. The city is now understood as a shopping mall, where symbol refers to consumption, corresponding, in this sense, with a “non-place” – an amnesiac, ephemeral and dependent on the consumer society space, losing its place as an anthropological category and so, the identification of individuals. Now urban spaces are created away from historical centres. An example of this situation is the development on the outskirts of large cities that are purely built in a functional sense. It is identified with a “non-place”, as we can see how they develop beyond the local identity of the place, the community itself.

Postmodern architecture must be studied as a discourse. In this way, it is possible to consider architecture as something participatory in terms of consumption and production. The consumption of architecture must be theoretically developed in two ways: both seeing it as a sign or symbol and as a spatial experience (Rampley, 2005). The city of Las Vegas, in particular, is relevant in relation to this kind of attributes. As Gottdiener and Budd put it: “One can say that Las Vegas has become the «Sin City» and the «Sim City» at the same time” (Gottdiener, 2005, p. 124).

Thus, space and time fade away as we discuss the subject within the Postmodern city; the preconceived notion that the individual has of the city is now lost among Postmodern elements. The individual cannot distinguish between the real image and the image that is manipulated. The Postmodern city corresponds, therefore, with an urban imaginary configured by a conglomeration of ideas and images constructed through the visual memory of the individual (Narváez, 2011).

The city of Las Vegas is hence experienced as an amnesiac space. This status is not only conferred by the visual memory of the individual, but because the individual is equally dealing with timeless elements that

initially would not correspond to this place, neither in time nor in space. For instance, iconic elements collected from other parts of the world – symbols of the history of civilizations as if they were archaeological treasures individualised, yet exhibited as a whole in one place.

These Postmodern cities are amnesiac spaces where people feel almost out of their own. Time is not important anymore; all what really matters is to be found along the Strip, in a certain casino or in that chapel. The individual feels abstracted from this world. The sensation is similar to living in a parallel world, where whatever you do will not carry any consequence or retaliation outside it - “*What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*”.

This situation is not exclusive to a city like Las Vegas. Other clear examples of these spaces are shopping malls, fairs and thematic parks, like Disney World. This symbolic city becomes an unreal and transit place, not intended for everyday life or to house workers. It refers rather to an escape from society itself, a desired city in which the visitors find everything they need. The visitors become familiar with every element, even if they have not been there before. This is certainly due to the widespread presence of signs, symbols, which guide the traffic of the individual.

Hence, Las Vegas is the only city in the world where the landscape is not shaped by buildings or trees, but by signs (Hall, 1995). This condition transforms the city into the sign of contemporary society, in a sense that the city produces its own icon, which represents all aspects of society in a single street – the Strip. City signs are now launching an almost vulgar iconography of the city. The potential ambivalence, violence and urgency of these signs are exemplified along the Strip (Vinegar, 2008).

“We can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower, they revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art is helpless” (Hall, 1995, p. 273).

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, the authors discuss the temporality, the ephemeral, the blatant and extraordinary planning of the Strip, which should be regarded as such an important and valid architectural phenomenon as Ancient Rome (Rampley, 2005). The cityscape of Las Vegas leaves aside the façades and walls of buildings, replacing them with neon signs and symbols iconizing, once again, the city. This process involves the display of the images, raising them to a new way of decoration or ornament, detail or sign, which is now to the maximum (Rampley, 2005).

The city is now endowed with artistic and architectural category, with elements that previously lacked. Thus, a new idea is originated, with new “changing, ambiguous and temporary” (García, 2008, p. 148), concepts that approach the banal aesthetics, very typical of the Postmodernism. The landscape full of signs of Las Vegas is the exaggeration of the fact that all statements are vulnerable to deception (Vinegar, 2008). This trend in architecture shows a development of the architecture category beyond the conventions of architecture as art and which includes all types of buildings not previously related as such (casinos, for instance). This leads to different interpretations and to what is called a “Postmodern architecture”, which from the point of view of Charles Jencks, comes as a “double code”. In other words, these are dual reference symbols – one for interpretation by experts in architecture, and other for the general public (Rampley, 2005).

For Venturi (2008), all cities communicate functional, symbolic and persuasive messages. However, being Las Vegas, once again, the exaggeration of all of these messages, the city in Nevada represents the architecture of persuasion. Las Vegas becomes, therefore, the signifier and the meaning of a mass culture to the extreme, exemplified as an “anti-city” and permitting the observer to consider Las Vegas as an exaggerated icon, as a social “atopy”.

The city is now understood as a shopping centre, in which every symbol refers to consumption and leisure as a theme park. It corresponds in this sense with an amnesiac space, ephemeral and dependent on the consumer society, losing its category of place as an anthropological space. Rem Koolhaas (2002) calls this phenomenon *junkspace*, an urban space built as a conglomeration of ideas, concepts and places. This space aims to please the individual through feigned and exaggerated elements: neon, casinos, and constructions that mix architectural elements of all ages with the intention of creating a new architectural style.

Ephemeral aesthetics

In the architectural culture of the Postmodernism “anything goes, everything has interest”, due to the plurality and diversity. In turn, however, it does not allow any legitimizing action regarding its architecture (García, 2008). This situation is certainly caused by the experience of the subject in the Postmodernism, where the urban environment is more important than architectural language itself.

Thus, space and time fade away as we discuss the subject within the city; the preconceived notion that the individual has of the city is now destroyed (Rodríguez, 2012). We therefore understand the consumption of architecture as a distraction and leisure, and so the architecture acts as a discourse in visual culture, leaving aside technical facts and going deeply into the philosophical path (Rampley, 2005).

Frederic Jameson (1998) supports the theories of adapting previous styles, referring to it as *pastiche*, something typical of the Postmodern condition. Thus, during Postmodernity, different characteristic elements are collected from other historical, artistic and cultural moments in order to interpretate them as the reflection of contemporary society. As a result, Jameson’s *pastiche* shows that stylistic innovation is no longer possible, and so the only way through is by trying to imitate previous styles, mixing them in a way that they would look completely new for us, but at the same time perfectly recognizable. Postmodernity expects to strengthen the message of these “dead styles” as Jameson (1998), in fact, refers to them. For him, the purpose of this architecture on the Postmodern city is to expand our own senses to new spatial dimensions, to almost unreachable levels.

Postmodernity intercedes here for an environment where the previous aesthetics take part, producing an amalgam of every kind of styles. Even though this process does not surprise the new Postmodern consumer society at all, it certainly destroys the “trans-aesthetic” aspiration of the previous Modern Movement (Jameson, 1998).

It is precisely what Frederic Jameson (1998) relates to the “death of the subject”, in terms of the new impersonal subjectivity that is now orientated towards a new aesthetic, organized around banal media entities. These entities brought a brand-new changing and contradictory aesthetic experience that primarily seeks to faithfully represent contemporary society. At this point, we can observe how the “death of the subject” relates, together with the addressability that Postmodern cities have on the individual, forcing him to live in a world prefixed with a completely changing and ephemeral aesthetic to which the subject must adapt by himself. A clear example of these partnerships is Disney World – an utopian and idyllic place where any contemporary subject is represented.

People particularly enjoy experiences that come as something they recognize from their collective imagination and fantasies. Experiences from some other place can be created by a “virtual capital” (Holtford, 2005) which consumers indeed derive from the media, such as film and especially, television.

One way in which Disney creates its magic is by using precisely these stereotypes. People respond without thinking – although no one has lived in the past, everyone knows how it looks like. Fred Beckenstein, Senior Designer of Euro Disney, commented during an interview: “We do not try to design what really existed back in 1900, but we are designing what people think they remember what existed” (Holtford, 2005, p. 141). In other words, for theme parks to work, their issues must be strictly consistent with the pre-conceived knowledge of potential consumers.

Although the Disney heritage is evidently not real, it possesses the virtue that, as a matter of fact, much of the public loves it. People are not fooled into believing that these worlds are somehow alternative to reality. The public is not led to believe that there are more historical periods than the present. Instead of insisting on themed environments providing illusions and hyper-reality, it is more appropriate therefore to consider these worlds as “quasifications”, as sociologists Alan Beardsworth and Alan Bryman have put it. They invite the visitors to experience the surrounding atmosphere, in the illusion of being something and somewhere else. The customer can pretend and simulate, being embroiled in an experience that is outside the modern context. This theory implies that themed environments work so well due to the fact that the public acknowledges that it is an artificial and ephemeral environment, saturated with metaphors. The visitors particularly enjoy this atmosphere when they recognize the created experience and the general way in which it is made (Holtford, 2005).

In this sense, Disney World does not represent the mere fantasy of a theme park – it cannot be false, a lie. The well-known Disney Park is the model of a real idea, an idealized model – an image of society itself (Perry, 1998). According to Baudrillard (1991), the mass society is unable to resist the manipulation of the media. However, the media is not intended to oppress or repress society. The society remains rather passive, accepting the manipulation as lawful. American society emerges, in this sense, as a cultural leader that drags the rest of the world, which understands its culture through television and film. Thus, society accepts the manipulation of Disney World – it is a closed, limited and ideal community where nothing bad can happen. Consequently, we not only accept this world, but we also consider it an idealized model of society, parallel to the one that actually exists. The quality of the images copied from reality, becomes, in fact, sometimes better than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1991).

“The process of creating successful places is only incidentally about property development. It is much more like running a theatre, with continually changing attractions to draw people in and keep them entertained” (Hall, 1995, p. 350).

The value of the image in this respect has gone beyond the basic scope of reproducing reality. Thus, our society is now ruled by these forms and images, which are conceived away from their own model (Ayllón, 1996). This is the true success of Disney World – the actual appearance of an invented world. We can take the discourse further and state that the resemblance of Disney World bears similarity to American society itself (Baudrillard, 1991).

In open contrast to this assimilation, the viewer finds a new way of representation that goes beyond the idealization set above. It is a brand-new critique of society, through a grotesque and inhumane world. In this sense, we witnessed the creation of Banksy’s “Dismaland” – an ephemeral city that presents itself as a criticism of Disney World and its imaginary familial values and social happiness. The architecture that Banksy represents is related to a post-Apocalyptic Disney World, where a pure universe and a clean architecture are gone. This concept gives way to a partially destroyed and blackened place, where all characters become grotesque and attractions are a mere skeleton of the original constructions.

“Dismaland” represents an entirely Post-modern image, to the point of becoming sheer *post-Postmodernism*, overcoming all the prejudices of contemporary society and taking it a step further. This project becomes a banal criticism of what it represents, exposing its signs to the highest degree. The grotesque element becomes a new aesthetic category. Hence, with this representation Banksy seeks to openly identify contemporary society, where individuals participate in it without realising.

Conclusion

The architecture of the Post-modernity is characterized by the use of certain symbols that give meaning to precise artistic elements. However, these architectures can also provide the public with a banal, everyday-life element of artistic category. Thus, surface and odd elements found in the contemporary city of the Post-modernity are understood, not only as artistic elements, but also taken as representative elements of society itself.

This new cultural expression brings a new, contradictory changing aesthetic experience that seeks to represent contemporary society. Hence, cities like Las Vegas are the epitome of extreme freedom, becoming so, an antithetical social “atopy”. It is precisely this idea of Disney World, a peaceful universe where nothing bad can happen, is created. This is the society of the spectacle – copying and improving the society in which we live, the society in which we believe. The creation of this process is encouraged by the emergence of a Post-modern architecture that meets the needs of the individuals as social mass, hence creating cities that are not so, but that create their own reality.

As a result of this new conception of city and architecture, we, as active participants, face timeless, amnesiac spaces with ephemeral aesthetics that trap the visitor into a new dimension. Nothing else makes sense, only what is around these spaces makes sense. It is an absence and meaninglessness in daily life terms, but truly necessary for the individual in order to disconnect and escape from the obligations of the everyday experience state.

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