

Modernism or Modern *ISMS*?

Notes on an Epistemological Problem in Design History

Kjetil Fallan

This article addresses an epistemological problem best described as the insufficiently scrutinising use of *ism*-suffixed terms as categorising and analytic tools in the fields of architectural and design history. It seeks to explore the enigmatic nature of *isms* and proposes methodological frameworks for their reading and interpretation.

One of the biggest theoretical challenges when studying design history is that of navigating through the terminological mine field. Subjects related to design and the 20th century are saturated with terms and phrases which are vague, complex, ambiguous and biased. Terms like “modern”, “design” or “functionalism” are incredibly intangible. In today’s public sphere this becomes evident whenever you flip through a newspaper and are hit by ads for cars with “modern, yet classic lines” (make up your mind!), “design furniture” (as opposed to what?) and newly built “functionalist” houses (In the 21st century!). But also in more professional and academic settings these terms are quite troublesome and their meanings and contents are certainly not thoroughly consolidated.

What is modern? What is modernity? What is modernism? Studying 20th century design demands a closer investigation of these somewhat blurry notions. We need to map the field in order to facilitate scientific distinctions between terms describing the whims of the latest fashion and those describing the philosophy of recent centuries. Terminological discussions are an important part of the epistemology and meta- theory of any scientific discipline.

In the case of architectural and design studies there is an abundance of classifying and analytic terms which are largely taken for granted. Of these, a little explored but yet commonly used is the phenomenon of *isms*. In much architectural and design history literature, the nature of *isms* is taken for granted and rarely debated explicitly. As Omar Calabrese has pointed out, terms constructed as tools of classification, like *isms* generally are, are troublesome in that they often make use of key words designed to unify and connect their subject matter. But to function this way, these denominators have to be extremely simplifying and abstract, and thus become obstacles to any rewarding comprehension of history.¹

In the quest for a more nuanced and dynamic understanding, I find this situation utterly troublesome. Thus,

further inquiries into this field of research seem highly opportune. And in embarking on this work, we might build a more solid foundation for an academic discipline with a self-expressed lack of theoretical tradition and methodological tools.

In taking on such a task, numerous questions spring to mind. What is an ism? In order to find out, we must determine how it is constructed, negotiated, mediated, consolidated and decomposed. How is an ism formed and then transformed? Is there room for negotiations and temporal changes? Isms are often portrayed as discrete entities, but experience still shows evidence of one ism encompassing other isms, overlapping each other, or even running parallel to each other. Are isms equivalent, comparable phenomena, or does each ism operate on a separate level? We also need to explore the relations between isms describing systems of beliefs or epistemes and those describing aesthetic movements or styles.

To undertake a fundamental critique of the (mis)use of these meta-terms is difficult. In order to make sense, it must to a large extent take place within the realm of design discourse, which itself is infested by these very meta-terms. Comprehensive analysis of the core issues of design can hardly be achieved without using the terms and language of the design discourse. In other words: we set out to discuss and criticise elements which are indispensable for design history. This problem seems to correspond with Otto Neurath's metaphoric story of science as a ship undergoing reconstruction in mid-sea.² The only materials available are those already on board, plus whatever might be found at sea. The ship in its present condition is the academic tradition in which we stand. This can only be developed and reconstructed by reconfiguring and rethinking existing terms and ideas, e.g. by profiting from work conducted in related academic disciplines. The additional help (driftwood) – which Neurath might be underestimating – can, in our case, come from design practice. So, like Neurath, we must reconstruct the language of the design discourse in order to question and discuss the fundamental terms and notions of interest for further inquiry.

In the following I will discuss some of the above mentioned questions and their application to design history. First, we need a brief historical outline of the fundamental terms modern, modernity and modernism. This part is by no

means any attempt to conduct a comprehensive investigation of this vast philosophical subject matter, but a brief outline is nevertheless essential as a backdrop for the subsequent discussion. Moreover, a clarification of the relation between aesthetic ideologies and the structures of society is required. My main focus will then be to investigate the nature of isms as tools of classification and analysis, especially when applied to 20th century architecture and design – i.e. in the context of modernism and its etymologically derived isms. Then I will discuss the problems and challenges posed by reading isms in the context of research.

Concise definition-type answers to these questions are of course mere utopia, so my aim is rather to suggest a framework for improved comprehension in further studies.

Modern, modernity, modernism

Understanding 20th century architecture and design is inconceivable without somehow relating to modernism and its etymologically derived isms such as e.g. proto-modernism, late-modernism, post-modernism, neo-modernism, etc. All these ideologies and modes of thought, and consequently the entire field of study, becomes tangible only after a closer examination of the stem of these terms – *modern* – even though, within the limited space available in this context, such an etymological history must be brief and incomplete.

The first known use of the term modern originates from a papal letter from ad 494. The adjective was used to distinguish the new decrees from the old. Even though the meaning of the word has varied and been used both as positive and negative descriptions of phenomena, persons and things, the fundamental understanding has always been dominated by the distinction between the new, the present and the former, the past.³ Today, this is still the dominating opinion. The Longman Dictionary defines modern as

- 1 time belonging to the present time or most recent time [...]
- 2 made or done using the most recent methods [...]
- 3 using or willing to use very recent ideas, fashions, or ways of thinking⁴

To our ends, this understanding of modern is not very helpful, because of its time- relative character. It implies that all times has once been new, present, and hence modern. It is more or less synonymous with contemporary.

What is modern today, will not be tomorrow. Thus, modern does not bring us any closer to our task.

A term derived from the adjective modern, is the noun *modernity*. The latter shows up in the French culture debate of the mid-nineteenth century, and is often connected to the poet Charles Baudelaire. He made it a key-word in his program for a new aesthetic. The term's time of conception is crucial to its understanding. The development in technology and science since the renaissance and the rational division of labour which followed the industrial revolution had resulted in a permanent change in the entire social life and a dissolution of the traditional culture. Add to that population growth, urbanization, and the rapid development of communication and information infrastructure. In times like these, some elements of society and culture seem to prevail by means of tradition and conservative forces, while other elements tend to facilitate alterations through upheaval, innovation and instability.⁵

Baudelaire's visions of modernity are complex, and more often than not characterized by equivocations, sometimes even contradictions.⁶ According to one of his more enigmatic visions of modernity, the modern aesthetic is dual: On one hand, modern art contains an element of relativity regarding the epoch's fashion and distinguishing features. On the other hand, it contains an eternal, constant element of beauty. Baudelaire considered it the artist's task

to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory. [...] In short, for any 'modernity' to be worthy of one day taking its place as 'antiquity', it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it.⁷

But modernity's concept of novelty is essentially different from what we today conceive as the ephemeral novelty of fashion.⁸ The latter is an abstract, discontinuous novelty, while the genuinely new and present which is strived for in Baudelaire's modernity always contains tradition – also when it takes form of negation. Because with fashion's change for change's sake, any substantial value is lost and any wish for true rupture is rendered impossible. Change as formal play abolishes completely the idea of progress which is embedded in the concept of modernity.

The literary historian Matei Calinescu identifies the existence of two distinct and at times contradicting modernities.

The first is modernity as a rationale of society, or a field of experience – characterized by scientific and technological progress, the industrial revolution, and the enormous social and economic revolts which followed capitalism. The other is modernity as aesthetic concept.⁹

The first type of modernity is described by Calinescu as bourgeois and characterized by the doctrine of progress, faith in technology and science, pragmatism, and the idolizing of action and success. The other type of modernity he describes as anti-bourgeois and characterized by radical attitudes, the wish for a rupture with the established order, idealism, and a focus on the new role of art and culture. This dual concept of modernity becomes essential when we move on to discuss its manifestation in industrial design, but first we shall present a third related term – *modernism*.

There is a strong consensus that modernism describes an international tendency implemented in literature, music, theatre, painting, and other cultural expressions from the late nineteenth century onwards. The first known use of the term originates from the author Rubén Darío in the early 1890's. And it was within the Hispanic culture it first took shape of a large, relatively synchronized movement for aesthetic renovation.¹⁰ Modernism can be seen as a constant quest for modernity, or the wish to establish an anti-traditional tradition.

This is what has led many scholars to deem modernism an applicable term in historical analysis. Modernism, as opposed to modern and modernity, describes (although in a bafflingly vague manner) a movement or tendency which, it is often claimed, can be defined as an epoch in history and is unrelated to the constantly changing present. Because in modernism, the synonymity between *modern* and *contemporary* ceases. But here the consensus ends and the epistemological challenges pick up momentum.

Modernism is a surprisingly comprehensive and thus imprecise term. In architecture, for instance, it is used to describe practices as diverse as e.g. Spanish art nouveau and the world-wide suburban brutalism of the 1970s. In design, the ambiguity of modernism might be exemplified by pointing to the correspondence between the two opposed modernities identified by Calinescu and the two most distinct directions of modernist design – North American *styling* or *streamlining* seems to build on the pragmatic, progress-oriented type of modernity, while Central European *functio-*

nalism seems to build on the idealistic, radical type of modernity. Taken to extremes, these two design ideologies might even be labelled kitsch and avant-garde respectively.

To complicate matters even further, we should note that the meaning of the term differs considerably by variables such as geography, languages, and time. The *Modernismus* of 1920's Germany does not have the exact same meaning and content as the *Modernism* of 1960's USA.

The vagueness of the term notwithstanding, modernism is an important and adequate term, because it itself was an integral part of the items and cultural reality it is used to describe. Thus, the term participated in creating the history, and was not, like so many other comparable terms, created *post facto*.¹¹

By virtue of its sheer impact on 20th century architecture and design, the term modernism can not be done away with. But due to its complexity and comprehensiveness, an adequate theoretical foundation and corresponding methodology is needed to tackle its appearance in situations subject to our analysis. I will return to some of the properties and characteristics of modernism in the next sections, within the discussion on that intriguing phenomenon called *isms*.

Isms vs. epistemes

Before any further investigation into the enigma of isms can take place, we need to make an important distinction. Some of the more comprehensive isms of the 20th century denote much more than “just” a more or less consistent set of aesthetic beliefs or styles. The most prominent ones I have in mind are modernism and post-modernism. These terms are used in a far more complex and far-reaching manner than e.g. cubism or neorationalism and by a far more comprehensive array of academic disciplines than studies of art, architecture and design. They are used extensively in e.g. philosophy, sociology, and history, where their meanings are constituted by factors of a completely different nature than within the aesthetic disciplines, although some overlapping of course can be found. But the fact remains that we are faced with two qualitatively distinct phenomena which share terminology. To avoid confusion, a closer definition of the two is needed.

When a philosopher or a historian uses the terms modernism or post-modernism he or she normally does not primarily refer to modes of aesthetic thought or artistic

movements. What he has in mind is usually a much wider and profound socio-historical phenomenon – a system of beliefs, a world view, or an *episteme*. The philosopher Michel Foucault sees these epistemes as society's structuring conditions, made up of discursive *formations* which are specific for any given epoch.¹² What is possible to do and think at any given time is at the mercy of these underlying formations and their structure. He exemplifies by comparing the premises of 18th century science:

[T]he naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is these rules of *formation*, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in wildly differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological.¹³ (my italics)

Foucault continues:

what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge... manifests a history... of its *conditions of possibility*... Such an enterprise is not so much a history... as an 'archaeology'.¹⁴ (my italics)

So, by conducting an archaeology of science, we may identify and understand the formations structuring the intellectual and creative achievements of different times and cultures. According to Foucault it is the episteme which both restricts and affords the discussive and visual possibilities of any given society.¹⁵ The modes and themes of discussion, appreciation, comprehension and thought are governed or facilitated by the episteme in force.

In other words we are dealing with two different types of change which take place on different levels and in different contexts. The first type is the aesthetic movements or isms which shift relatively frequent and are said to supersede each other, the next seemingly revolutionary and utterly distinct from the prior. The second type is the epistemes – the deep, fundamental sociological structures and more lasting views and modes of thought and comprehension. From now on I will reserve the term *isms* to denote the first type of phenomena, and refer to the second type as *epistemes*.

The two are interdependent in a double hermeneutic sense if we consider isms as social actors or actor networks

and epistemes as society or world.¹⁶ The sociologist Anthony Giddens describes this relation as double hermeneutics. The epistemes or world we all share is interpreted and shaped by the actor networks or isms themselves. But at the same time the isms are not autonomous entities. They are shaped by the formations which constitute the world or episteme. Thus, to understand any sociological phenomenon, we need to regard the actors' own view of themselves and the world, but also interpret their actions and beliefs within the larger framework of world or episteme.¹⁷

It is first when isms are reflected against their time's conventions, established rules and dominating debates, and their material manifestations in form of new art, architecture, and design become visible against the existing, that isms become apprehensible and feasible. The epoch's ever slowly changing episteme both restricts and affords what is possible to say, think, comprehend, and do at any given time. This is where the rules which constitute our actions come into being. Here, the situations in which our intentions are embedded arise. This is the background against which every new ism takes shape.

The fundamental nature of architecture and design is decided by conventions and traditions as well as how actors choose to interpret it; whether it is considered as art, utensil, aesthetic phenomenon, technological system, social statement, symbol, or communication tool. Thus, architecture and design can portray vastly different properties, depending on the actors' choice of perspective and interest.

However, any such choice of perspective is unavoidably a result of the knowledge, experiences, conventions, and debates which constitute the governing episteme. The dominating values, established modes of thought, and accepted opinions restrict and afford these choices.¹⁸ Every ism is embedded in and dependent upon the episteme in force, whether it expresses celebration and exploration of the episteme's core values or rather rebellion and negation of the same.

What is an *ism*?

Art history, architectural history, design history and all other academic disciplines concerned with aesthetics in one way or another, has no choice but to deal with the phenomenon of isms. Even historians of science and technology have to cope with isms, although in a somewhat different manner.

But what are these creations? What do they include/exclude? How are they constructed? How do they develop? And how do we relate to them from a scientific standpoint?

Colloquially, isms are often seen as theories (of art, architecture or design). Isms and theories might have some common denominators, but the two terms can hardly be considered synonymous. A (scientific) theory is normally defined as a logically and/or empirically based set of terms, methods and explanatory systems designed to structure or explain a given phenomenon. Bearing this definition in mind, it seems obvious that an ism can not be regarded as a theory.

First of all, isms differ very much from each other in terms of to what extent they promote a holistic view, an objective scope, a rational approach, and an empirical foundation. Some pretend to supply the answer to all the problems of the world and promise world peace and happiness for all, while some operate on a more internalistic and subjective level.

Secondly, isms are, more often than not, based on a compilation of (pseudo-) scientific and (pseudo-) philosophical fragments collected in order to act as indisputable facts in support of the ism. Thus, they can not be said to represent any holistic view or logically based system.

Moreover, isms are dogmatic, evangelistic, and programmatic by nature, and hence a far cry from the (alleged) objectivity of scientific theories. This is, of course, a too rigid and schematic outline. Even though scientific theories often pass for objective systems of logic, one need not wander too far off track to accept the notion of theories (facts) as results of social construction in the same way as artefacts are.

We are now at what I believe to be the core of the nature of isms. They are normative, pragmatic, instrumental, and they are contemporary. Their normative character is quite obvious. They tend to propose or dictate how art/architecture/design *should* be. While theories are structural or explanatory – i.e. pretend to tell us how things *are*, isms preach the gospel of how things *should* be. This important property poses fundamental challenges for research into the domain of isms. I will address this in the next section.

Erik Nygaard has also pointed out these normative, dogmatic and evangelistic functions within the field of architectural theory, but without abandoning the term theory like I suggest to do for the sake of terminological intelligibility.

He has, however, tried to diversify and distinguish between different types or levels of theories – identifying a field consisting of manifestoes, architectural theory, and architectural science, flanked with architectural criticism and history.¹⁹ This is an important distinction which can help improve the tangibility and level of precision in the history of ideas. But because the construction of design ideologies, just like that of artefacts and scientific theories, is a collective action, they are transformed over time. Isms can not be comprehended by studying exclusively their origin and what is commonly perceived to be their authors, because their faith really is in the hands of future mediators and users.²⁰ And in order to cope with this flexible and dynamic nature of isms, we need additional theoretical frameworks and methodological tools.

As a prolongation of its normative nature, isms are highly pragmatic, or instrumental. Not only do they suggest how things should be, they normally also supply the methods with which to achieve the desired state. This instrumentalism gives isms a dualistic character. An ism may be considered a set of properties common to a body of buildings or artefacts – i.e. a *style*, a practice of designing. Or, it can be considered an ideological superstructure which in turn evokes buildings or artefacts more or less corresponding to the ideology.

The most common and rewarding stand to take is somewhere in between these two extremes. An ism can, as shown above, be characterized as an ideology. But it can not consolidate, develop, transform, or be preserved without the active participation of the buildings or artefacts in question as well as human actors. Isms are thus taking the form of systems consisting of complex actor networks, and should be treated as such. This position again, draws our attention to the relation between ideology and practice. The discrepancy between ideology and practice is an intriguing phenomenon which might pose interesting questions regarding the formation and transformation of isms. (e.g. the role and nature of *canon*). This fascinating and intricate relation deserves far more attention than what is feasible here. But I will suggest that there is a transitional aspect to this relation – an ism as a style can hardly exist until an ism as an ideology has been proposed and to a certain extent disseminated. So, to keep from losing track and to conform with the methodological problems of the next section, I will for the time being mainly consider isms as ideologies.

The other core property of isms is their contemporary connection. Isms are products of the time, society and episteme they arise in. An ism is formed as a response or reaction to the existing praxis and governing ideas within the prevalent episteme. In other words, a new ism depends on both contemporary society and history. The episteme in force poses restrictions and affordances on what is possible to think, mean, say and do at any given time, and thus also on the nature of the ism under formation. But we must not forget that this relation is reciprocal – the isms in their turn are actors in the ever continuous development of society and episteme.

A striking characteristic of many – if not all – isms is their claim of novelty and revolution. Although both arguments, methods and rhetoric differ vastly, an ism arises from the believed need for an abolition, or at least a thorough revision of the old and existing order in favour of a brand new order more in step with present beliefs and ideas. But this claim of novelty suffers from lack of dynamics. Due to the normative and programmatic nature of isms, they tend to legitimize the need for revolution which they proclaim by passing judgement on history and contemporary society in a remarkably prejudiced manner. The old and existing order is seen as a static, monolithic entity, and so is – strangely enough - the new envisioned order as well. But the rhetoric notwithstanding, any new ism is always a change of the existing order and always change in relation to the existing order.

This is also a reason why revivalist isms like neoclassicism or neomodernism never are just replicas of the original, referred isms. Any neo-ism arises in a time, society and episteme vastly different from the original and must therefore be of a completely different nature and based on an ideological foundation which may even be in direct conflict with that of the referred ism. The prefix *neo* implies historic revival. Neomodernism is thus based on a revival of or at least an *hommage* to an earlier ism. The pioneers of modernism would never have accepted such a thought. To modernist missionaries neomodernists would be thoroughbred heretics.

From these inquiries we may deduce that isms are not theories as this term was defined above, but rather, like Finn Werne proposes, ideologies.²¹ They are more or less consistent sets of beliefs and arguments about what is correct, important and possible at the given time within the given

episteme. By treating isms as ideologies instead of theories, we also facilitate our analysis by rendering their normative, doctrinaire, and relative nature more evident.²²

A rather common misconception, whether seen as theories or ideologies, is that isms are considered as more or less static and homogeneous entities. They thus become building blocks, clearly defined and with uniform content, which are placed after each other to make up the chronological history of art, architecture or design. If this were the case, historical research would be deceptively easy, but also utterly uninteresting and unnecessary. Fortunately, this is not so.

Ismos change over time and in space. Like any other social phenomena, they undergo changes and develop constantly from their conception to their eventual passing, and also through their crusades through different regions and societies. Christian religion is not the same in ancient Rome as in tv-evangelized Hollywood. Nor is modernist design the same at Bauhaus as at the XII Triennale di Milano. This transformation takes place through a process of negotiation between all the involved actors. It is also a part of the change society at large undergoes restlessly, and it all develops in an intertwined relation to the episteme in force.

But how, and where does an ism arise? There is a dogma which says that art is created in the studio, while isms are created in the galleries. Whether the first part of this assertion is true for fine arts is out of my scope, but it is in my view certainly not true for architecture and design. Art has traditionally been seen as relatively autonomous – although this myth has been challenged lately with reference to the artist's relations to market, conventions, etc. Architecture and design, on the other hand, is far from autonomous – the creative process is entangled by such an array of actors with different agendas as to prevent any notion of autonomous “studio creation”. But the second part of the assertion – isms are created in the galleries – is interesting if we interpret galleries in a broad sense. By galleries, we should understand the network of social institutions, actors, and mechanisms involved in the socio-cultural reception, interpretation, and domestication of art, buildings, and products.

One artist, architect or designer does not create a new ism by himself. It is first when an array of actors agree on attributing a more or less consistent set of properties and qualities to a group, school or generation that an ism is constituted. These actors can be, in addition to the artists,

architects and designers themselves, gallery owners, commissionaires, cultural critics, journalists, writers, editors, academics, and many others. In some cases, the artists, architects or designers who are assigned to an ism by this powerful actor network themselves flat out refuse to be associated with the ism constructed for them or on their behalf.

Pierre Bourdieu has criticised society's need to label its cultural production in the above described manner fiercely. He even claims that this vulgar quasi-intellectual media frenzy is what every aspect of cultural production has in common.²³ Quite an extreme point of view which turns all attempts at public cultural criticism into fashion statements and tactical positioning, but it is an interesting perspective to bear in mind when dealing with isms. I believe the actors involved in the forming of an ism, at least when considering architecture and design, to be of a more varied character than just media clowns, and their agenda to be more nuanced than mere self-promotion and tactics. The function of these midwives of isms lead us to a related theme; that of an ism's upbringing and aging.

Bourdieu also attacks the labels themselves – he claims that the names that are assigned to groups, schools, etc. (i.e. also isms) are false terms and merely practical tools of classification which create similarities and differences simply by naming them. The only reason why they have become important and powerful is because their function is to identify persons, objects and interests – to separate those inside from those outside, the existing and outstanding from the oblivion of ordinariness.²⁴ Again, I find Bourdieu's criticism a bit too drastic and harsh, but not without important insight. It points to a critical problem in architectural and design studies, namely that isms tend to be viewed as homogenized entities and thus create similarities and differences which might not really exist or at least not as distinct as the artificial boundaries of isms lead us to believe. It also raises the question of whether the practical tool of classification which isms represent really is the most adequate tool we possess, or if it is time to search for new instruments in our analytic work.

After the initial, struggling phase, the new ism is either fought off and marginalized or it is accepted by a sufficiently large community so that it can flourish. In both cases it takes its place in history, either at the junk yard of ideologies and forgotten intentions, or at the centre court of

society's ideological entrepreneurs. But since all new isms are so closely tied to the *Zeitgeist* of their own times, they are also doomed to become *passé* sooner or later. This is rather intriguing considering the fact that every new ism must insist on its own novel, ground breaking character at the expense of the existing order's wrong, obsolete arguments in order to succeed. But even the most revolutionary ism eventually loses its provocative abilities and becomes tradition. The most striking example of this paradox is probably the proliferation of functionalism during the interwar years commented by Theodor Adorno in the most severe manner; "the absolute rejection of style becomes style."²⁵

In order to explain this transition of an ism from avant-garde to mainstream tendency or forgotten obscurity Finn Werne uses the terms intentional context and extentional context. By extentional context he refers to a project's relation to the world at large, to the governing episteme of the time. By intentional context he refers to a project's relation to the architect's world of ideas, to his will to novelty. He elaborates:

The type of intention I speak of here reveals itself through deviation, both in discussive and in visible form, from what is generally accepted at a given time. The extentional reveals itself through the common, the accepted, through use, custom and tradition, while the intentional reveals itself through the special, the novel, the diverging and marginal. (my translation)²⁶

Werne then ties the extentional context to the term *style* and the intentional to isms. A style refers to a certain part of the extentional context, to an already established ism which serves as legitimatizing identity for the project. But the ephemeral character of the avant garde necessitates a transitional process:

The ism is thus characterized, more or less, by a number of criteria which are specific for a particular complex of ideas which only *during a relatively limited period* can remain intentional but which subsequently transforms into an extentional context as the ideas win general approval, become what we call general knowledge, or are passed on to history's eternal hide-outs of lost and forgotten intentions. (my translation)²⁷

This part of Werne's argument is interesting because it points to a crucial, but insufficiently examined property of isms – the inexorable transformation of ideology as it moves

through society. Avant garde isms become conservative styles even when their most prominent and powerful arguments are based on the rejection of such a development. The pioneer revolutionaries of a movement soon enough become the reactionary clergy condemning any development of the isms which exceed or transcend their own original intentions.

I do not subscribe to Werne's strict connection between the avant garde ism and the intentional context. If this argument should hold, it would require a situation where an intentional context could take form segregated from any extentional context. Based on the former discussion of the relation between epistemes and isms, I find this premise infeasible. In my view, an ism takes form as a sort of dialectic negotiation between the intentional and the extentional contexts. As shown in the previous section, an intentional context is afforded and restricted by the episteme in force. An ism is thus both intentional and extentional from the very conception.

But still, the proposition of isms as changing entities is a strong and useful one. It can also, I believe, successfully be extended to follow the ism's further development. We must not fall into the trap of believing that an ism is consolidated and homogenized once it has lost its avant garde status and is disseminated as the prevalent ideology. An ism never stops changing. It is therefore of great importance to study how an ism develops after it has passed through the transition from intentional to extentional, from avant garde to conservative, from ism to style. This development should be seen as a reciprocal process of domestication, where society and the actor network shapes and transforms the ism, and the ism shapes and transforms society and the actors. Society does not consist of a continuous row of avant garde intentions. Thus by analysing an ism's coming of age, and not exclusively its origin and conception, we might gain important, new knowledge we would otherwise miss out on.

It should now be clear that isms are far more complex and dynamic phenomena than they are often portrayed as. In addition to the issues under discussion here, the biggest problem in my opinion is that the varying nature of the different isms make it difficult, if not impossible to relate to extensive, holistic isms like e.g. modernism in the same way as to more particular, narrow isms like e.g. neorationalism. But if we are aware of this challenge, we are much better equipped to search for its solution.

Reading *isms*

Architectural and design history is often dangerously close to the writing of myths. It is my belief that much of this hazard can be attributed to the mythical character which has been assigned to the phenomenon currently under debate; *isms*. The origin of this mythical character of *isms* can be found in the texts which – together with the canonized works – constitute the primary sources of knowledge on the *isms'* nature for historical research.

When approaching the phenomenon of an *ism*, or more precisely the texts embedded in it and the texts describing/explaining/interpreting it, one immediately comes across the insider/outsider problem. By texts embedded in a given *ism*, I mean texts which are contemporary with the *ism* at hand and which take part in the construction and consolidation of it, or – if of negative nature – form antiprograms to it.

The most common examples of such texts are manifestos, magazine and newspaper articles, programmes, exhibition catalogues, etc. – all programmatic and evangelistic in form and content. Such texts are most prominent in the initial stages of an *ism* when architects and designers oppose conventional practise and must seize the pen in order to express their beliefs. The most famous examples of such texts are probably the early modernist manifestos, which Peter Collins describes as “pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo”.²⁸ (Based on the modernists' fascination for science and technology) Finn Werne proposes a paraphrase of Collins to characterise the equally hazy post-modernist writings; “pseudo-philosophic mumbo-jumbo”.²⁹ (Based on the post-modernists' fascination for philosophy)

These texts and their authors are often leading actors in the formation of an *ism*, and their roles and performances are for the most part vigorously polemic and flamboyant, and their stand in the drama is either that of believer or nonbeliever, *avant-garde* or *arrière-garde*.

I find the theatrical and religious metaphors utterly suitable here. The debates are often staged much like a play; the actors act their parts with dramatic gestures and intense pathos. Also, most *isms* are surprisingly similar in structure to religions. You will find priests, congregations, Scriptures, relics, missionaries, pilgrimages, crusades and the lot in any self-respecting *ism*.

These actors/missionaries and texts/relics are fundamental keys to understanding *isms* as sociological, aesthetic, historical

and philosophical phenomena. But the above mentioned is extremely important to bear in mind in our interpretations. The embedded texts are dangerously alluring, deceitful and misleading if read out of context and without proper analytic tools.

This contemporary believer/nonbeliever dichotomy is one aspect of the insider/outsider problem. Another intriguing aspect of it is found in the texts describing/explaining/interpreting *isms* historically. Here, the believer/nonbeliever dichotomy fuels heavily biased writings on *isms* which often take form as chronicles, falsifying or legitimatizing history. The historiography of architecture and design in general and of modernism in particular is saturated with such writings.

Believers of modernism, such as Nikolaus Pevsner and Sigfried Giedeon have in elaborate and ingenious ways tried to show and explain the unavoidable victory of modernism, albeit from vastly different origins.³⁰ Nonbelievers like Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi, on the other hand, have tried fiercely to discredit and dismantle modernism with the same, but opposite directed, strategy – arguments based on historical necessity and determinism.³¹

These approaches all share a massive flaw: They are based on a static, contemporary (with the author) notion of the idea they set out to analyse (in this case modernism), and extrapolate backwards in time grasping at fragments of data which can confirm their predetermined views and thus legitimize or falsify the idea. The unscientific nature and unrewarding outcome of this kind of history has long been common knowledge within the realm of general historiography. Panayotis Tournikiotis has made a timely and intriguing contribution to the transfer of this critique to the field of architectural historiography.³² His mapping and critique of the long tradition of writing genealogic, projecting, deterministic architectural history is important as a potential corrective in the further development of this field of studies.

Tournikiotis' examples include Henry-Russell Hitchcock's view of history as the great procession of styles, Reyner Banham's use of history for legitimatizing purposes, Peter Collins' notion of the historian as a supplier of architectural precedents, and Manfredo Tafuri's political crusade. But though he patently shows how the writing of history is subject to the same transformative processes as any other

cultural phenomena, even Tournikiotis regards modernism as a “relatively immobile object”.³³

This is another common and even less scrutinised problem – the lack of room for or will to a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of modernism. Openings for an interpretation based on plurality and development within the idea are rare. The ism is sealed, homogenized and generalized. It is turned into what Bruno Latour describes as a black box; an impenetrable and unintelligible unit.³⁴ In order to understand the inner workings and dynamics of the ism, the black box has to be re-opened and examined. The black-boxing of isms also turns these ideologies into myths. This problem has been raised and debated within the history of ideas, with Quentin Skinner as one of the chief critics.³⁵ But, as Clive Dilnot has pointed out, it is high time to rid design history as well of the writing of myths.³⁶

Modern ISMS

Modern Architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite. [...] Boom, boom, boom.³⁷

This statement from Charles Jencks’ book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* refers to the demolition of a housing project constructed in 1952–55, designed by Minoru Yamasaki, and is intended to demonstrate the failure and fall of modernism. It is a punch line of dimensions and it is so marvellously tabloid that even the father of New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, genuflects Jencks’ proclamation of death in his crusade against modernism; *From Bauhaus to Our House*.³⁸

Jencks’ rhetoric and arguments do of course not satisfy even the less stringent demands of academic studies – the book is a polemic manifest. They do, however, make up an excellent example of the need any emerging ism (in this case post-modernism) has to ridicule and falsify the dominating ideas and practices of the present in order to portray its own ideas as new, revolutionary, seminal, and true. They also represent the seemingly obsessive desire to view isms as a string of strictly chronological consecutive entities, like a line of kings.

In light of these last remarks, it becomes obvious – however strange – that Jencks (and most writers of his kind) has

not given much critical thought to the very nature of the phenomena he so passionately debates. Jencks writes off modernism without bothering to ponder on what an ism is, or, for that matter, what is modern about modernism (or post-modernism). His act is that of a true modernist – because, like Arnfinn Bø-Rygg has pointed out:

When today – from an allegedly postmodern vantage point – we historicise modernity or declare ourselves to have reached a postmodern state, this is itself a modern impulse.³⁹

Unfortunately, this sort of unscrutinised demagoguery here represented by Jencks is disturbingly common in writings on architecture and design. As I have tried to demonstrate on these pages, taking terms and phenomena such as modern and isms for granted is prejudicial and results in biased writing. Some of the most important findings of this inquiry can become helpful guidelines for any endeavour into the world of 20th century architecture and design.

Isms are ideologies – not scientific theories – and must be treated as such. Studying the way the gospel is preached might teach us more about the nature of architecture, design, and society at large than attempting to verify or falsify the different denominations.

Isms are not necessarily comparable entities. Some, like modernism, are extensive, ambiguous and long-lasting, while others, like futurism, are more concise, articulate and short-lived. Thus, they most certainly do not make up any consecutive, chronological line. Isms may occupy different spaces of society, they may coexist in parallel or overlap.

Due to their differing extension and scope, one ism may also encompass other isms. Modernism is doubtlessly the most extensive, ambiguous and long-lasting ism of the 20th century, and may be said to encompass a vast array of other isms. Based on a more thorough understanding of modernism’s etymology, this comprehensive and prevailing character of the term is only strengthened.

The distinction between isms and epistemes is crucial to bear in mind, and it becomes increasingly so when the two appear under the same term, as they often do in the case of modernism. The waves of the isms must not be confused with the tides of the epistemes. This intriguing fact does most certainly complicate any study of modernism, but it might also be the essential key to understanding the phenomenon and explaining its comprehensive and prevailing character.

Isms are not solid, monolithic blocks. They are constantly formed, transformed and reformed throughout their lifespans by way of unceasing negotiations within the actor networks. These processes of domestication show that isms are dynamic, changing phenomena in constant development. Only by appreciating this core property can isms stop being categorizing strait jackets and become interesting and fruitful objects of study.

These observations make for two fundamental and challenging claims. First, it seems to me that isms do not justify their position as the primary categorizing and analytic tool in the writing of architectural and design history. They may, however, constitute important fields of study if analy-

sed by methods which take into account the diversity and dynamics inherent to isms. Second, I find it hard to accept the proclamation of death of an ideology of such vast and comprehensive character as modernism. Modernism, from its very conception and onwards through all its formations, transformations and reformations, encompasses so many ideas, beliefs, facts, structures and manifestations which most certainly did not die on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 p.m. (or thereabouts). Jencks might have witnessed the death of a modernist building, he might – although doubtfully – also have witnessed the death of a sub-(modern)ism derisively called brutalism, but he did not witness the death of the modern isms.



Kjetil Fallan, Cand. Philol.
 Research Fellow & Doctoral Candidate
 Department of Architectural Design, Form and Colour Studies
 Faculty of Architecture and Fine Art
 Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)
 kjetil.fallan@ark.ntnu.no

Notes

1. Omar Calabrese, *Letà neobarocca* (Bari: Laterza, 1987) p 4–5
2. Otto Neurath, “Foundations of the Social Sciences” in Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap and Charles Morris (eds.), *Foundations of the Unity of Science: Towards an International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Vol. II (1938) p 47
3. Tore Eriksen, “Modernitet” in Knut Ove Eliassen and Thomas Brandt (eds.) *Maskinkultur – Utsnitt fra fabrikkens tidsalder* (Trondheim: NTNU/Fabrikken, 2001) pp 60–61
4. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, (London: Longman, 1995)
5. Arnfinn Bø-Rygg, Modernisme, antimodernisme, postmodernisme – *Kritiske streiftog i samtidens kunst og kunstteori* (Stavanger: HiS, 1995) p 78
6. For a concise and intelligible introduction to Baudelaire’s many visions of modernity, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air – The Experience of Modernity* (London & New York: Verso, 1983) p 131–171
7. Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1964) p 12–13
8. It seems to me that Baudelaire viewed the novelty of fashion in a more general sense, like the aesthetics characterizing the present time. In the quotidian language of our day, the novelty of fashion seems to denote a much more frequent and haphazardly type of change. It has now also taken on a rather derogatory meaning which I suspect did not bias Baudelaire’s use of the term.
9. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (2. ed.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) p 41
10. *Ibid.*, p 69
11. Arnfinn Bø-Rygg, *Op.Cit.*, p 77

12. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972) p 147–149, 193–194
13. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things – An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973) p xi
14. *Ibid.*
15. It should be mentioned that while Foucault uses the term *episteme*, this has by others been translated into *stratum*. See e.g. the Swedish translation of Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Stockholm: Symposion, 1990)
16. On *actor network* as analytic tool, see Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987)
17. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London: Hutchinson, 1976) p 79
18. Finn Werne, *Arkitekturens ismer* (Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 1998) p 11–12
19. Erik Nygaard, “Arkitekturteorien – mellem manifeste og videnskab” in *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 2002: no. 3, p 41
20. Bruno Latour, *Op. Cit.* p 29
21. Finn Werne, *Op. Cit.* p 124
22. For a review of Werne’s book, see Sten Gromark, “Arkitektur – ett samhälles själsliga tillstånd i sten och bruk... Om två aktuella tolkningar av nutida arkitektur. Erik Nygaard: Arkitektur i en förvirret tid: Internationella strömningar 1968–94. Finn Werne: Arkitekturens ismer” in *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 1998: 1–2, p 161–163
23. Pierre Bourdieu, *Kultursociologiska texter i urval av Donald Broady och Mikael Palme* (Lidingö: Sala-mander, 1986) p 227
24. *Ibid.*
25. Theodor Adorno, “Functionalism Today” in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997) p 10
26. Finn Werne, *Op. Cit.* p 27
27. *Ibid.* p 28
28. Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture: 1750–1950* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) p 293
29. Finn Werne, *Op. Cit.* p 24–25
30. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design – From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (2. ed.) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949) and Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The growth of a new tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Oxford University Press, 1949)
31. Charles A. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1978) and Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966)
32. Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999)
33. *Ibid.*, p 221
34. Bruno Latour, *Op. Cit.* p 131
35. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988) p 29–67
36. Clive Dilnot, “The State of Design History, Part II” in Victor Margolin (ed.), *Design Discourse: History, theory, criticism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989)
37. Charles A. Jencks, *Op. Cit.* p 9
38. Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981) p 63–64
39. Arnfinn Bø-Rygg, “What modernism was – Art, progress and the avant-garde” in Mari Hvattum and Christian Hermansen (eds.), *Tracing Modernity – Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City* (London: Routledge, 2004) p 23