

The Surrealist Movement and its Influence on Modern Architecture

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As the early part of the Twentieth century heralded a move from Cubism and Dadaism to Surrealism, it also represented a time when architecture was beginning to embrace new concepts and forms. As surrealism became entrenched in popular American culture the art critic Matthew Josephson declared that, “the movement is destined to great fortune in America”, and went on to say that he looked forward to surrealist furniture, newsreel theatres and skyscrapers, supplanting ‘modern art’. (Tashjian 40)

As is true of many emerging art forms, both architecture and surrealism were committed to the notion of avant-gardism, and each school had its own approaches to how their work should be perceived by the public. Andre Breton, in his second manifest of surrealism, stated, “the approval of the public is to be avoided like the plague”, and he encouraged artists to believe that “an avant garde movement should be seen as intrinsically volatile, threatening the very sense of community that it fosters”. (Tashjian xix) Similarly, the architect Hiroshi Hara suggested that architects, “regain control of the post-modern spatial order that is opposed to the surrounding homogenous space outside” (Blake 138) And even the noted architect Le Corbusier said, “Dissonance has always been an aesthetic strategy”, indicating that buildings should present an image contrary to populist culture. (Blake 163)

Surrealism had its first forays into the art world in the form of poetry, which quickly led to painting and works of collage. For many surrealists, the combination of a variety of materials and forms from a variety of sources defined the sense of pastiche that was central to surrealist thinking.

At the same time the architectural industry began to address multi-valent approaches and dual coding, embedding two or more meanings or systems into a building design. From the period of 1870 to 1910 there were roughly fifteen different styles of architecture being employed, whereas the period from 1920 onward brought with it the notion of Radical Eclecticism, a mish mash approach, taking from 400 design systems. (Jencks 163)

If surrealism was a form of intellectual bricolage, then architecture was certainly experiencing a similar commitment to mixing a variety of influences, metaphors, styles and systems. There were a number of new styles emerging in architecture to reflect this thinking, among them the “schizo” style, which used popular clichés and neologism, responding to changes in art, technology and the avant garde. (Jencks 130) When architects went too far and created hideous looking structures from an abundance of contrasting styles, their buildings were often ascribed the term “brutalism”.

But, despite some failed attempts to create dramatic new buildings, there were a number of exciting new architectural forms emerging in buildings around the world. Initially, we began to see popular culture influencing architecture in a variety of ways, with metaphors used in buildings that looked like egg cartons,

beehives and all manner of icon symbols. (Blake 40) At the same time we had an abundance of organic forms showing up in the architectural world, and soon we had “pneumatic buildings” which were described in terms of being, squishy, pudgy, cuddly, sexual, etc... (Blake 76)

The architectural forms of Gaudi, Le Corbusier (with his Chapel at Ronchamp) and Frank Gehry all reflected a biomorphic influence, taking cues from a variety of organic forms found in nature. It’s likely these architects were responding to works by artists like Dali, De Chirico, Ernst, as well as many others in the surrealist movement. The most noted, and widely promoted, of the surrealist painters was Salvador Dali, whose images were often laden with distorted human and organic forms, and most likely had an impact on a generation of architects.



Salvador Dali
“Premonition of Civil War”



Le Corbusier
“Chapel at Ronchamp”

As can happen with any new and energetic movement, the world of architecture may have been a little too enthusiastic about drawing from the world of modern art in building designs. Robert Venturi, a noted architect, acknowledged the influence of the art world by stating that “postmodern classicism is a free, eclectic manner to be used where it is appropriate on public buildings”, but also warned that we seemed to be entering an era of “fast food architecture”. (Jenks 147) The danger of embracing modern art when designing building was perhaps most aptly expressed by Harry Weese, a Chicago architect, who claimed ‘we have neglected the ground, the sky, and most of all, the user’. (Blake 100)

Regardless of the outcome of some of our modern art and architectural pursuits, the idealism has always reflected an ambitious and positive approach, and many artists and architects have great hopes for the continually evolving worlds of art and architecture.

One of the more interesting and forward-thinking concepts that emerged in the twentieth century is the definition of 4d (four dimensional) art and imagery. 4d space is defined as a highly imaginative treatment of forms that gives a sense of intervals of time or motion. (Stinson 211) One surrealist painter, James Guy, supported this notion by stating that “surrealist imagery offered a way to express various times and various spaces in a single canvas”. (Tashjian 120)

An example of artwork that addresses this concept is the Duchamp painting entitled, “Nude descending a staircase” as the super-imposition of form connotes a sense of time, movement and gesture in the image. And while there are a number of architectural examples that might support this notion, the “Dancing Building” by Frank Gehry, perhaps best connotes the concept of movement in the sense of gesture it describes though the imitation of the human form as a dancing figure.



Marcel Duchamp
“Nude Descending a Staircase”



Frank Gehry
“Dancing Building”

Perhaps the most important aspect of modern art and architecture is the willingness to experiment, and this type of thinking is evident in the following quote from a surrealist painter by the name of Arshile Gorky, who would often attempt to urge both himself and his fellow painters on to greater things; “Try to allow your mind to think in terms of constant motion or flux instead of paralysis. Replace stillness with movement. I am breaching the static barrier, penetrating rigidity. I am destroying the confinement of the inert wall to achieve fluidity, motion and warmth in expressing feelingness, the pulsation of nature as it throbs” . (Tashjian 276)

The noted photographer Man Ray was quoted as saying, “Surrealism is an image whose strangeness and reality stirs our subconscious to its inmost depths”. (Tashjian 115) It’s clear that twentieth century architecture has attempted to embrace this sentiment, as we have a number of examples in the buildings and structures that now adorn the skylines of major cities around the world.

References

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