

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 2006/Winter 2007, Number 25. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

© 2006 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher: hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu.

The Morals of Modernist Minimalism

A Provocation

by Tom Spector

If the simple fact of being Modern is no longer enough to bestow moral superiority on a building, then cannot Modernism be practiced more modestly today as a matter of personal and artistic preference, as one style among many? Certainly, a flip through the pages of *Architectural Digest's* annual "Architecture Issue" would suggest that it can: Coverage in May 2005 includes a severely minimalist glass house in Chicago, followed by a capacious Sardinian hillside home in Greek vernacular style, a "Cape Cod" compound on Lake Tahoe, and a Ricardo Legoretta's museum-like house before the finale of a cozy — but predictably spacious — shingle-style Long Island vacation home. All this is presented as a matter of taste and choice, of alternate and equally beguiling visions of the good life. Indeed, if you were wealthy enough, you might own one of each, and so much the better. The haute bourgeois audience sought by *Architectural Digest* seems willing to accept even the most reductive versions of Modernism as, indeed, just another style, and architects seem willing to accept and even applaud these attempts by forces outside the profession to broaden Modernism's appeal. Culture critic Virginia Postrel thinks this move from morality to style is a done deal: "Modern design was once a value-laden signal — a

sign of ideology. Now it's just a style, one of many possible forms of personal aesthetic expression."¹

But a glance at the pages of *Architectural Record's* April 2005 (or 2004 or 2006) "Record Houses" issue, the architecture profession's closest counterpart to *Digest's* "Architecture Issue," reveals that somehow this news hasn't gotten through to the American architectural subculture. A "Record House" must be Modernist. Yet the great majority will not be Modernist in the broad sense: They will adhere to the narrow spectrum of design motives springing from a minimalist sensibility in their erosion of the boundary between interior and exterior, and in their revealed preference for "pure," "spare," "floating," "box" forms, limited color palette, and exclusion of signs of middle-class habitability.² The urge to cast off mainstream conventions, to reduce things to their essentials, and to make a virtue out of the resulting simplicity — an urge that allowed Modern architecture to aesthetically and morally distinguish itself from bourgeois 19th-century styles — is apparently felt so deeply that it still stands as the basis for distinction between those who can hope for validation (and career boosts) through architects' own publications and those who will be obliged to seek recognition from

On Design

outside the field. If Modernism were felt to be “just a style” by *Record's* editors and readership, then this sort of culling based merely on taste would seem to be either presumptuous king-making or irrational Puritanism.

Modernists' willingness to accept inclusion by *Architectural Digest* but unwillingness to grant it to others in *Record* is symptomatic of a deep ambivalence Modernism inspires among its adherents over its own popularization. Although appearances of Modernist works in venues such as *Digest* are often hailed as harbingers of its *finally* going mainstream, of a general elevation in popular taste, the prospect of true popularity is also unnerving for Modernist architects and believers in the press and the universities. This ambivalence stems from the fact that although the Modernist urge — considered a vehicle for social justice by Le Corbusier and Gropius, and as the only way to escape decadence by Loos — has long been discredited as a moral imperative. In its minimalist sensibility it is still a potent cudgel for enforcing the superiority of the pursuit of the timeless essentials Modernism is thought to offer against the self-indulgent pleasures of bourgeois conventions and comforts. The Modernist aesthetic vision, despite the lessons of Jane Jacobs and Robert Venturi and the criticism of David Watkin, for architects at least, still has a moral bite. Its persistence suggests that it still exemplifies some admirable qualities.

Ranking among its admirable *moral* qualities are these: In an age of indulgent subjectivism, Modernist minimalism embraces idealism, an intelligent search for essential truth and the demand on oneself to forsake transient and shallow pleasures to pursue goods of lasting value. It gives expression to the Protestant ethic of self-restraint, deferred pleasure, and a preference for the hard work of refinement over the ease of embellishment. By rejecting displays of opulence, often making the most out of humble materials and thereby maximizing resources available for all to enjoy, it is able to embrace the spirit of egalitarianism and democracy. These same qualities also impart the (sadly underexploited) ability to resist consumerism. The minimalist urge to pare things down to

their basics is also conceptually efficient and eco-friendly; it seeks to maximize the impact of the resources it uses.

These desirable qualities should make Modernism in architecture an easy matter to champion and justify to the world at large, but instead the opposite is more often the case. Justification generally founders either by insincere attempts to promote its popularity³ or else by going underground with a coded language meant for the already initiated.⁴ As a result, how often have we heard the refrain among architects that the public needs to be educated to the value of good design? This lack of public appreciation seems odd, since physicians, for example, seem not to need to convince anyone that good health is valuable. It's only when “good design” is elided with “Modernist design,” which requires education of one's taste, that the public's inappreciativeness makes sense.

MINIMALISM AND STOICISM

The easy conventions of bourgeois good taste — like adherence to local aesthetic traditions and use of crown mouldings, period furnishings, and familiar materials, which combine to create something comfortably recognizable — are rejected in Modernist minimalism as nonessential. In this attitude, it displays a strong philosophical affinity with ancient Stoicism. The Stoics keenly felt the loss of community following the decline of the city-state. They compensated for this loss by cultivating indifference to community. For the Stoic philosopher Zeno, the pursuit of self-perfection transcended the accidents of one's local circumstances. Zeno emphasized the importance of distinguishing between what is valid for an individual state, or “*polis*, and the one, natural law which applies to the entire human community, *kosmopolis*, and which by nature makes all men equal.”⁵ Thus, in classical scholar A.A. Long's words, “Throughout the history of the Stoa we find an emphasis on *indifference* to externals, on rationality as the sole source of human happiness, on ‘cosmopolitanism’ and moral idealism.”⁶ Modernism, especially in its minimalist moments, takes the “voluntary relinquishment”⁷ of Stoicism and turns it into an

aesthetic outlook.

Individualism and the erosion of community are commonly observed hallmarks of our age too. When true community feeling is nearly nonexistent as a reference for the rightness of one's actions, asceticism's stoic reliance on inwardness and asceticism may seem the only moral possibility. But when ideals such as spare, simple, minimal, pure, and chaste are repeatedly invoked (as they are in “Record Houses”) to the exclusion of other, more sociable sensibilities, the very nature of these sorts of ideals — transcendent and Platonic — tends to leave one blind to the fact that even commitment to Platonic abstractions gains no small part of its impetus, as it did for the Stoics, from socially situated desires. The desire to transcend the social and the conventional is itself grounded in a social struggle for cultural legitimacy, but this social grounding goes unacknowledged or denied, which makes its exclusionary tendencies all the more difficult to dislodge.

The minimalist urge, as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes it in his work on taste, receives its strongest support in a subordinate subgroup of the class that commands economic and cultural dominance. In this class some members possess both forms of dominance, and others — the subordinate fraction, of which we can safely count most architects and architectural academics — possess (and can only realistically struggle for) only cultural capital that they use as best they can to secure a say in what counts as legitimate, important, meritorious, and the like. Bourdieu found that “the most ascetic form of the aesthetic disposition and the culturally most legitimate and economically cheapest practices . . . are likely to occur particularly frequently among the fractions (relatively) richest in cultural capital and (relatively) poorest in economic capital.”⁸

Lacking the material means of the dominant, the dominated or subordinate fraction therefore ingeniously and counterintuitively constructs an ethos around the superiority of making do with fewer means as a way to get at deeper and more profound truths. To the degree that the reductive urge can make adherents among

the dominant wealthy portion of the dominant class, it triumphs. But to the degree that Modernist minimalism can't secure such adherents, it can continue to push its own agenda with the consolation that the rich are philistines. Bourdieu cautions, however, that artistic and intellectual causes dare not become too well received: "Intellectuals and artists are thus divided between their interest in cultural proselytism (that is, winning a market by widening their audience, which inclines them to favor popularization, and concern for cultural distinction, the only basis of their rarity) and their relationship to everything concerned with the 'democratization of culture' is marked by a deep ambivalence which may be manifested in a dual discourse on the relations between the institutions of cultural diffusion and the public."⁹ This helps explain the ambivalence that allows architects to accept overtures from *Architectural Digest* and others outside the orthodoxy of Modernism but prevents them from initiating similarly inclusive gestures. Those gestures from the outside, even if only meant to validate Modernism as one approach among many, are taken instead as evidence that widespread recognition of its aesthetic and moral superiority is just around the corner. But architects taking the aesthetic olive branch in this way only obscures the social basis for their attitudes, and of course this is part of the point. By regarding public acceptance as evidence of capitulation instead of generosity and accommodation, architects can cling to the ultimate righteousness of their attitudes and ignore their ambivalence about Modernism's popularization.

Modernism, especially in its minimalist sympathies, has turned out to contain a durable aesthetic for architecture because it makes a virtue out of the diminished means available to the subordinate fraction of the dominant culture (including architects), yet does so without any real prospect of the obsolescence and loss of distinctiveness brought on by mass popularization. The minimalist urge incorporates a sense of conviction toward ideals that become more than a mode of production; these ideals turn into an ethic. Minimalism is not just a compositional game, it

becomes a driving force in a way of life. As Bourdieu observes,

The games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living; that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness. The artist's life-style is always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois life-style, which it seeks to condemn as unreal and even absurd, by a sort of practical demonstration of the emptiness of the values and powers it pursues.¹⁰

This sense that Modernist minimalism still inspires "an art of living" is something Virginia Postrel simply misses or would find hopelessly quaint. As an art of living, it asserts more than mere preference. It still traffics in ideals. Discarding the idealistic content of Modernist minimalism would rob it of its stuffing in a way that would not deflate more decorative modes. Postrel may be free to enjoy it as just a style, but that doesn't preclude its practitioners from feeling otherwise. Today's practitioners may be somewhat more modest than the early Modernists, but they haven't altogether given up their moralism.

AMBIVALENCE AND JUSTIFICATION

The "deep ambivalence" about popularization that Bourdieu speaks of takes many forms. It can be seen, for example, in the *ALA Code of Ethics*, which instructs architects to reach out to the public to "educate" it, to raise its level of taste. Note that such less-conflicted art forms as mainstream film and music succeed by reaching out to and connecting with public taste, not by requiring it to be elevated.

The full extent of this ambivalence is most telling, however, when the profession tries to market itself within more popular modes of approval, for here it wants to succeed, but not too well. The "Good Design is Good Business" awards issue, also in *Architectural Record* annually, provides

an excellent example of the ambivalence toward public acceptance embodied in Modernism. This awards program seeks to marry something architects crave — recognition of their artistic skills — with a revenue-enhancing strategy of demonstrating that artistically meritorious buildings (which in *Architectural Record* must be Modernist) enhance business success. The deep ambivalence reveals itself not so much in the type of popularization it solicits, which appears to be straightforwardly attempting to redress the stereotype that architects are hostile to business values, but in the fact that, according to the best evidence, "Good Design is Good Business" is usually false.¹¹

The beneficial impact of exemplary design on the business bottom line is illusory primarily because it grossly underestimates risk. While the two major studies on the subject acknowledge that an increase in rent and occupancy rates accompany perceived increases in design quality, one study concludes that the higher rents "may represent nothing more than the risk premium necessary to compensate owners for gambling on architectural quality,"¹² while the other lays out the bitter conclusion that profitability is "predicted to actually decline on average with increases in design quality"¹³ due to heightened risk. Although *Record* has had no difficulty piling-up anecdotal evidence of quality Modernist buildings that help the business bottom line, it is also equally unproblematic to come up with celebrated examples of quality buildings that failed to do so, or worse, helped push their owners into economic failure. The fate of real-estate developer Olympia & York after its embrace of design quality and of the *American Center in Paris* after it commissioned its high-profile building from Frank Gehry provide cautionary examples, as does the dismantling by IBM of its celebrated commitment in the 1980s to high-quality, high-profile architecture when the corporate giant flirted with bankruptcy during the economic downturn of the 1990s.

"Good Design is Good Business" allows its promoters to appear to be reaching out to the marketplace without doing so in a way that would seriously impact the status quo, which is that Modernism is

primarily responsive to high cultural aspirations. Dominant practitioners disdain the profit motive and pursue their artistic integrity on a diet of commissions relatively resistant to the business cycle. The upward aspirations of subordinate practices closely tied to and therefore most vulnerable to the ups and downs of the for-profit economy and bourgeois taste are made all the more elusive by the internally inconsistent fiction that the Modernism of the architectural upper class — which, as Bourdieu explains, derives its impetus in antagonism to perceived bourgeois values — can, if properly marketed, be sold back to those it criticizes. If they make concessions to bourgeois taste, subordinate practices will never reach the architectural upper class. Yet if they refuse to engage their clients' taste, they place their firms' viability in jeopardy. Thus, many architects are consistently marginalized in their communities, hoping years on end to find a true patron or developing schizophrenic practices in which one side quietly pays the bills while the other pursues artistic integrity. Ironically, the untruth that good Modernist minimalist design is good business is what saves it from cultural obsolescence. If it were to truly become popular — because it paid such handsome economic returns — it would be discarded by the culturally influential within the profession in favor of another mode of design capable of preserving its creators' sense of distinction.

Do things have to be this way? Cannot the values and motifs of Modernism be incorporated into modes of design that are more dialectic, that recognize and account for more complex human motivations than the desire for purity, to elide the distinction between inside and outside, to scorn molding and overhangs, and to reject sentiment? Instead of thin ideals, can we not have a fuller expression of human existence in our architecture? Can Modernist minimalism ever tap into its largely nascent egalitarian sympathies? While Bourdieuian sociology provides an important source of explanation for the attitudes driving the minimalist aesthetic in architecture, it would be a mistake to reduce the impulse behind it entirely to socioeconomic motives. Indeed, the unique way it

engages the ethical and the aesthetic may lead to its more robust justification.

MORALITY AND AESTHETICS

Although the alignment of aesthetic and moral purpose through Modernist minimalism does not lead directly to social improvement (for instance, none of the “Record Houses” is meant to be “affordable”), it may, in more Aristotelian fashion, impart unique opportunities to develop moral virtues or “excellences of character.” Minimalism’s most familiar motifs simultaneously take on aesthetic qualities and moral virtues. Elegance allies with self-restraint and bareness with freedom from trivial desires, lack of finish with rejection of pretense. Unadorned expanses of glass denote openness and love of nature. Aesthetic aloofness suggests a rejection of shallow pleasure. Thus, a preference for a minimalist aesthetic need not rely on mere personal preference or on indemonstrable social benefits, but instead may seek to justify itself and its place in the world as character-building and character-revealing. Devotees and practitioners of Modernist minimalism do not have to seek to change the world to claim that it might be good for character development.

Commitment to a minimalist aesthetic can therefore lead to profound personal struggle and growth. In an individualistic age, one supremely suspicious of the corruption of politics, this is minimalism’s greatest potential source of moral strength, as well as its vulnerability. Community is its missing virtue. At its best, as with the *Vietnam Memorial*, minimalism provides a backdrop against which community can grow in its own way, but stepping up to providing it direction is another matter. And even with the *Vietnam Memorial*, it should be recalled that community is the sum of the loss of thousands of *individuals*.¹⁴

The shortcomings of Stoicism apply in equal measure to minimalism. Stoicism doesn’t require a turn away from the public and the political life in principle, but the combined effect of its requirement for self-cultivation and its easy conclusion that, as historian Adolph Friedrich Bonhoffer observes, the “prevailing corruption . . . makes fruitful political work of the

wise man impossible”¹⁵ characteristically lead it down that path. “The perception that the human being as a rule could fulfill his universal intended purpose as a human being only precisely as a member of his nation and state and in the individuality of this national thinking and feeling seems to have been foreign to the Stoics. . . . Yet a further reason for their aversion to the public life lay side by side with the . . . idea of cosmopolitanism in their idealistic disregard of all external goods which prevented them from showing a real interest in the economical and cultural problems of the community.”¹⁶

Though Modernist minimalism can often seem mute about social life, its stripping of conventions can lead to works of thrilling immediacy and profound personal effort. Certainly these traits apply to the “Record Houses.” Most are exquisite and engage artistic matters more profoundly than do those in *Digest*. When the narrow list of ideals this sort of work permits becomes the only game in town, however, it then becomes anything but personally risky, anything but character-building. Instead, it becomes the style of the architectural aristocracy — a sign, as Bourdieu diagnosed, of certain social aspirations. This is why it comes as a particular disappointment when its motives take on the air of orthodoxy and exclusion, as surely they must when they so thoroughly crowd out and preclude alternatives.¹⁷

The Modernist minimalism dominating the pages of “Record Houses” will never willingly allow itself to be considered “just one style among many.” Such an attitude would constitute false modesty. But when the search for the pure shades over into the puritanical, what purpose is served? While minimalism’s rigor is undeniable, its rigor doesn’t produce a complete image of a fully and well-lived life. The Stoic philosophers faced just this dilemma. Stoicism is not an ethics of relationships but of individual character. It gains traction where loss of community is most acutely felt. Stoicism compensates for this loss by turning inward, cultivating self-perfection. If the proposition that Modernist minimalism’s admirable qualities are primarily concerned with character-building is at all convincing, one needs to be aware that

minimalist sympathies are also incomplete representations of character and to make room for other traits, especially the social ones, that help round out a fully human existence. □

The author would like to thank David Hanser for his comments, suggestions, and encouragement and William Saunders for his judicious editorial guidance during the writing of this article.

NOTES

1. Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 9.
2. In the 2005 "Record Houses" issue, floating or weightless appears on pages 117, 161, 173, 175, 180, 192, 208, 209; box or cube appears on pages 119, 120, 149, 153, 155, 157, 172, 207; pure or purity on 163 and 174; spare on 165 and 181; and blurring boundaries between inside and out on 177 and 197.
3. See the discussion of "Good Design is Good Business" Awards later in this paper.
4. From the 2005 "Record Houses" issue: A residential library by Peter L. Gluck and Partners in rural New York has "a purity and elegance to the form" as opposed to the "false premise of a natural, 'woody' building to fit into the forest" (116). Rick Joy's set of three-square steel-clad pavilions in Arizona employs "Platonic" geometry with a "hard, taut skin" (153). In Japan, a house by Urban Fourth is an "elegant composition of abstract white boxes, wafer-thin planes, and taut lines" (155) that achieves "remarkable crispness" with "coolly precise forms" (163). Brian MacKay-Lyons' Hill House in Nova Scotia features a "spare, light-filled interior" and an exterior of "spare forms" (169) that achieves "a level of poetry" out of "plainness, frugality, and regionally grown or manufactured materials" (165). Brazilian "minimalist" Marcio Kogan sees "no need to explain or excuse a simple box" (172) in a house "outfitted in the standard Minimalist garb of white-painted concrete and hardwood floors" (174) and "quietly rational geometry" (175). A house by Pugh + Scarpa in Venice, California, while more exuberant than other of their minimalist residential designs, still employs the vocabulary of a "spare, almost floating staircase" along with much "concrete, steel, and glass" (181). At Big Sur, Fougerson Architecture designed "an astringently linear glass-and-wood rectangle" (188) that achieves a "crisply attenuated, understated whole" (192) that is both "chaste and subtle" (192). The Shark Alley House by Fearon Hay in New Zealand is a "glassy, Minimalist, one-story structure" (195). In Switzerland, Aldo Celoria's house, "minimalist in its landscaping," whose design had to be promoted against the "din of protest" of the neighbors, "stands within a spare composition of grass and black-pigmented concrete" (207).
5. Villy Sorenson, *Seneca: The Humanist at the Court of Nero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 30.
6. A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 111.
7. Ben Kimpel, *Stoic Moral Philosophies: Their Counsel for Today* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985), 105.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 267.
9. Bourdieu, 229.
10. Bourdieu, 57.
11. Douglas E. Hough and Charles G. Kratz, "Can 'Good' Architecture Meet the Market Test?" *Journal of Urban Economics* 14 (1), 1983, 40 – 54. Kerry D. Vandell and Jonathan S. Lane, "The Economics of Architecture and Urban Design: Some Preliminary Findings," *AREUA: Journal of the American Real Estate & Urban Economics Association*, 17 (2), Summer 1989, 235 – 260. Kerry Vandell, "Economics of Office Design," *ULI Research Working Paper Series, Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute*, paper 603, July 1992, 51.
12. Hough and Kratz, 51.
13. Vandell and Lane, 257.
14. This is equally true of Peter Eisenman's recent Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, where "individual experience override(s) all else" ("The Body Politic," *Architecture*, June 2005, 37). Visitors "are drawn in by curiosity and soon find themselves alone among the stelae" (Max Page, "Memory Field," *Architecture* June 2005, 42). Describing the experience of the memorial, Suzanne Stephens observes, "Soon the visitor may feel lost, or at least removed and isolated from the rest of the world" (*Architectural Record*, July 2005, 126).
15. Adolph Friedrich Bonhoffer, *The Ethics of the Stoic Epictetus, An English Translation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 133.
16. Bonhoffer, 135.
17. In the letters to *Architectural Record* following the 2006 "Record Houses" issue, one architect observes, "I simply cannot see how this group of eight houses can be considered a diverse representation of quality, modern residential architecture" (Victor Thomas, AIA, May 2006). Another observes, "The houses . . . are simply exquisite. . . . But there's more to life than joints. The photos depict volumes and partitions and shiny finishes that are devoid of any feeling, life, or passion" (Ray Iloi, May 2006).