

Hans Hollein
and the
Materiality of
Postmodernism



Hans Hollein

Hans Hollein was a Viennese architect, artist, designer, teacher and author, he thought radically and was not afraid to disrupt the norms of architecture of the time. Hans was a form driven architect who believed architecture had been 'confined by what he saw as the functionalist dogma of modernism'¹. He was inspired to create buildings where form did not necessarily follow function and that work beautifully as well as practically. Hollein went to the academy of Fine Arts school of Architecture in Vienna, graduating in 1956. He then took graduate work at Illinois Institute of Technology and completed his masters at Berkley California in 1960. After this he worked in architectural firms in the US and Sweden before moving back to Vienna to start his first commission 5 years after he got his masters. Hans also worked with and met some of his idols while in the US, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe and Richard Neutra. These very prominent modernist architects who were very successful and led to Hans's ideas about a reaction to modernism in a style later known as post modernism.

Post Modernism was a style coming to prominence in the 1960s, it was bringing back ornamentation and the importance of form in buildings, and it was a reaction to the very modernist idea that form must follow function. Hans and other post-modernists were worried that Modernism was too boring and generic. Modernist architects such as Le Corbusier wanted to maximize utility and were less concerned about the aesthetic of a building, concerning themselves primarily with how the building worked. Hans was also opposed to the 'international style' (linked to the modernist movement) that would make the world and its architecture too generic. Hans wanted to create an Austrian identity and sense of nationalism. To bring this individualism you need more than exposed structural elements and lots of glass. Hollein wanted materiality, interesting, new and intriguing materials to be incorporated into his designs. Having been so exposed to rapidly advancing technology and materials in the USA during his time there he was keen to bring those elements of the future home to Austria. Another reason for his profound desire to bring about this future of Austrian architecture was because of the great risk of a generic European or American imposed style coming to Austria. Which was under significant threat because of their stance in the second world war leading to their identity being morphed and twisted by the Nazis leaving the Austrian people unsure of their identity in this new world. Hans didn't want them to fall to the American or European imposed generic styles, such as much of Germany and in particular Berlin did after 1945.

Hans confirmed his stance in 1965 with the Retti Candle Shop, his first notable work. Despite the miniscule scale he made a big impact with the project before the construction had even begun. Hans plastered the walls covering the construction site in a poster, pointing towards the future, showing the inspiration and idea behind the design; it was not an informative advertisement about the project, but an aesthetic tribute of what he wanted to achieve when the building itself was complete. Hans was creating an excitement and 'hype' about his building an incredible marketing strategy still used heavily today.



Retti Candle shop : While Under Construction



Retti Candle : Shop Facade

Once the project was built it was even more extraordinary, a major focal point, the anodized aluminum of the entire façade, a very futuristic, lightweight and strong material. Described by Hans to have been “a true material of our century”². The interior space was equally fascinating; an important focus on materiality, a futuristic, space age interior with lots of aluminum and a simple color scheme. He did all this without losing the emphasis on the candles, through small shop windows, which created a prominence on what was being sold, the candles. Hans felt that he did not need a large window presentation as “once you have seen one white candle, you have seen the whole shop”³. He kept this theme of simplicity inside where simple, elegant curved walls with just two small presentation areas showed candles. He also works with mirrors this along side his futuristic aluminum possibly created a sense of going into infinite. This incredible design won him the Reynolds memorial Award, being worth more than the cost of the project itself.

Many of his other projects also featured incredible materiality. Two particularly interesting projects were the Christa Metek Boutique (1966) and the Schullin Jewelry store (1972). Both projects have very different images; The Christina Metek Boutique is a tribute to futurism and the modern and space ages with a more interstellar inspired design. Using a lightweight look, a more pure, white and clean aesthetic to the boutique. Looking as though it has come directly out of a space ship’s cabin. This look no doubt influenced by the political and scientific backdrop of the American and Russian space race, which Austria sat in the middle of. While on the other hand the Schullin Store effortlessly combines classic luxury in the dark marble with an incredible futuristic addition of modern cheaper and synthetic materials. This apparent disregard for the value of materials is extremely interesting and is perhaps a message that modern cheaper materials can be as beautiful as luxurious more classic materials. For example while the floor is real marble, the back wall is a synthetic. This conjunction of new and old and expensive alongside relatively cheap and futuristic materials is immensely important and shows how the old world of architecture could change while still incorporating the fine details and luxury of ornamentation. Hans was “Appropriating the experimental materials as well those that had been part of building since the earliest times”⁵ and he was doing it with incredible success.



Christina Metek Boutique



Schullin Jewelry shop

This focus on ornamentation while still keeping ahold of the other aspects, challenges and use of the building is a classic showcase of post-modernism. However, Hans was also making a statement about the future with his use of materials. He was not only focused on making these projects look good, as may have been the case with other post modernists, but Hans was making his architecture a political viewpoint. Showcased in his book 'Everything is Architecture' which he announced in 1968, in between these two projects. He was opening the spectrum of architecture as to what can be used what is a building material and what should a shop/store/boutique look like. For to Hans this was not as basic a question as it may seem. Particularly before modernism there was a particular set aesthetic for almost any store or building, which had a similar function to one another. While modernism opened up the question about what a building 'should look like' - and changed the answer from basic on the inside with ornamentation and design, to practical and whatever works well on the inside with less regard for lavish design. Hans took the question and flipped it on its back, creating beauty and elegance in his designs without having to ask what should it look like, whether there is a set parameter for the design or what should he use to build it. As these were ever changing and the same questions would not be asked for different projects. He perhaps would instead ask himself what would work best with this project, or what materials could I use to best achieve what I have set out to achieve in this project.



Hans Hollein with his project : "Mobile office"

Perhaps the most notable influence on Hans Hollein's work was the Cold War and the incredible technological advancements throughout this period. Hans was in the USA during the beginning of this period and stated that the USA had "a profound effect" on him possibly, and particularly because of the fact that Hans was in the USA during the Apollo Program. Once he moved back to Vienna he was hardly distanced from the scene as Austria was on the border of the Iron Curtain, with the other side of former Austro-Hungary on the other side of the curtain. This meant the cold war would always be of great prominence in this period of Austrian history, art and politics and nearly everything else (of course including architecture, as after all everything is architecture. This cold war is what led to a lot of new technologies and materials being produced, as nothing inspires more technological advancement than countries preparing for war. Perhaps out of this cold war, what was far more influential to Hans than certain zeniths such as the Vietnam War, Korean wars or Cuban missile crisis was the space race. The need and desire for the USA or USSR to dominate space over the other. This race into the 'final frontier' is where a ridiculous amount of advancement on both sides was instigated. Which directly corresponded to Hans' Architecture. One aspect, which particularly seduced him, was the space suit. The connectedness without going anywhere, the idea that you are always within architecture and that you are forever connected to what you wanted to be connected to. This would not be possible without the lightweight and incredibly durable materials used by space agencies. This materiality could lead to a revolution of architecture. Similar to this was his idea for expanding a university, was not to do it physically on site but to create TV learning, to be able to sit in a telephone box or an astronaut suit and be at your lecture. This is truly incredible and forward thinking.

Other incredible instances of Hans Hollein's Materiality are included in his "Mobile Office" project. Proving you can carry around architecture, as a mobile element, and that you don't need classically associated aspects of buildings for something to be architecture. Made out of a thin lightweight plastic this truly modern material can be architecture on its own.

The materiality of post modernism in the eyes of Hans Hollein is one of the future, there is no set materiality, using the old and the new in conjunction, using extremely forward thinking methods and ideologies. Hans Hollein was an incredible architect and his use of materiality is extremely impressive and inspiring, particularly in the way in which he uses this materiality to bring an end to the practical modernist architecture. Hans Hollein not only "Crossed the Atlantic to learn from the Modernists and then moved beyond them"⁴ but he did it so successfully, generating a new movement in Architecture, and much more, as Hans undoubtedly had influence many things outside of post modernism such as in fashion, art and the future of interconnectedness. Which is why this essay focused on his earlier designs and how they fit into the postmodern world. However, the conclusion is fairly dim, with Hans stating "Architecture is in exile now on the moon or at the North Pole" he is worried about the future and that we may once again slip into the "international style" or something equally generic. Focusing too hard on making buildings that work and forgetting about how to create architecture that brings beauty and can change the world. That the only real architecture where people are moving forward and thinking freshly are in the extreme climates of the moon or poles. That elsewhere housing is being constructed, efficiently but without consideration for the future or how to look at the problem differently, because this apartment block is a building certainly does not mean it is architecture as any building may have a door and four walls, without meaning it is anything resembling architecture. Architecture can create fear, happiness, loneliness, intimidation; architecture is an idea not a set script. Architecture is everything.



Hans Hollein (right) and a model (left) in his glasses designed : promoting Austrian Identity

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