Reyner Banham: Signs and Designs in the Time Without Style

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Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design In The First Machine Age* of 1960 was the first revisionist history of modernism, written at a time when the style had become broadly accepted. Banham was a student of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, whose 1936 *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* may be considered the original narrative of architectural modernism. Pevsner's text was as much advocacy as history, an argument for a new style symbolizing a new age of industrial mechanization, while Banham's book exposed a gaping logical flaw in that argument and, in the process, developed a new understanding of modernism not as a style but as a way of thinking about design. It offered a theoretical vocabulary that allowed architectural history to go beyond style to encompass the subtleties of technological evolution.

Although Banham already was an accomplished critic, his first book, based on his dissertation under Pevsner, reveals some traits of his mentor including a focus on the relationship between modern art and architecture, and a view of certain movements—such as Art Nouveau—as art-historical "dead-ends." But he departs from Pevsner in the way he looks at art, producing not only a very different history, but a new critical framework that anticipated the technology of interactivity of the twenty-first century.

On its face, *Theory and Design* is a rejection of Pevsner and his *Zeitgeist,* just as the facade of the Villa Savoye rejects nineteenth century design. But Banham showed us the picturesque Victorian composition underneath Le Corbusier's facade, and similarly, we can see behind his own Pop aesthetic an architectural historian extremely adept at chronicling the spirit of his age. Banham built on the work of Pevsner, and where he departed from it he did so to uncover the potential of modernism in the later twentieth century. By looking at his methodology, narrative strategy, and perceptual outlook, we can see the value of *Theory and Design* as both a link to the past and a new set of theoretical tools for the future.

Methodology: Texts, Not Forms

Pevsner began his book with the comic spectacle of architect Gilbert Scott deciding between Gothic and Renaissance facades for a new government building, thus indicting the "academic" architect, whose facility with historical styles ignores the new formal possibilities of industrial engineering. In direct contrast, Banham starts by

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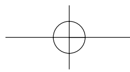


looking at how architectural design was taught in the academy. He opens *Theory and Design* with the French academic architectural theories of Charles Blanc (formalist), Antoine Guadet (functionalist), and Auguste Choisy (rationalist). These set the tone and touchstone for the entire book, which becomes an exposition of various aspects of these theories. Pevsner is highlighting difference, while Banham is exploring "a design philosophy that was common to academics and moderns alike." [1]

The most significant methodological break between Banham and Pevsner is evident in Banham's title—*Theory and Design in the First Machine Age.* Banham is concerned not simply with the designs of modernism, but with the theory—and the theory comes first. His narrative is largely constructed around significant texts, and only brings in works of architecture and design to supplement the main story.

Banham gives more energy and rhetorical weight to Loos's famed treatise *Ornament und Verbrechen* (*Ornament and Crime*) than to his buildings. Likewise, his two chapters on Le Corbusier include several buildings, but are epistemologically organized around the Swiss architect's theories as expressed in *L'Esprit Nouveau and Vers Une Architecture.* The latter book is very closely analyzed, in conjunction with Le Corbusier's actual built works, in order to place him within the narrative that began with Guadet and Choisy. Buildings supplement the theories espoused in books and articles. Banham's history is organized around rhetoric, not built reality. It is not a history of architecture so much as it is a history of ideas about design.

This is why Banham "rescued" Futurism and de Stijl from the shadows of architectural history. While the architectural output of these movements was minimal, their theoretical production, especially in the latter case, was profuse. Banham's investigation of De Stijl quotes the movement's magazine at length, and he grows animated when analyzing a letter or text:

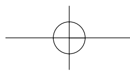
> Mondriaan opened the first paragraph of the first article in the first issue of *de Stijl* with the assertion "The life of contemporary cultivated man is turning gradually away from nature; it becomes more and more an a-b-s-t-r-a-c-t life," and practically every word in this simple-seeming statement is loaded with accessory meanings. The confrontation of *abstract* to *nature* is vital to the whole argument.[2]

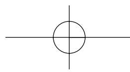
One of the key figures in Banham's narrative—Antonio Sant'Elia—built nothing, but his *Messaggio*—a 1914 text that later was reworked by Marinetti into *The Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* —is quoted in its entirety in a detailed exegesis that has a significance equal to or exceeding the architect's visionary renderings.[3] Banham labors to uncover the sources of Sant'Elia's rhetoric, and

1 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age,* (London: The Architectural Press, 1960), 20.

2 Ibid., 150.

3 Ibid., p. 127. Banham claims that "no buildings designed under his own name appear to survive with any certainty." Randall J, Van Vynckt, ed., *The International Dictionary of Architects and Architecture* (Detroit: St. James Press, 1993) credits Sant'Elia with a 1911 Villa in the style of Klimt, a 1913 cubist tomb, and two building decorations prior to his death. Attilio and Giuseppe Terragni built a 1933 war monument based on Sant'Elia's sketches.





only analyzes the drawings later as the visual expression of that rhetoric. Sant'Elia is important because he anticipates not the forms but the ideas of Gropius and Le Corbusier. Again, Banham is at his most animated in dealing with text:

> This kind of revaluation of older bodies of ideas, accepting much of what they had to say as true, but recasting them in new frames of reference that often completely altered their meaning, was to become the common ground of mainstream ideas in the Twenties....[4]

Similarly, Banham's treatment of the Bauhaus begins with a search for an outline of the school's *Vorkurs,* followed by a detailed intertextual analysis of documents from Gropius and other Bauhaus masters. Passages from these documents are then categorized by Banham as reflecting the influence of Futurism, cubism, or de Stijl, and he meticulously traces the influences of one set of ideas on another in order to lay out the correct chronology of the Modern Movement. His assessment of the Bauhaus is presented in these terms:

> Much of its historical interest lies in the manner in which it reflects the changing aspect of German architectural thought in the Twenties, though its ultimate historical significance will always lie in the effect it had on international architectural thought in the Thirties and Forties.[5]

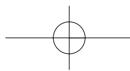
Banham's focus is not architecture but architectural *thought.* In this regard, his history of Modernism is a history of ideas, while Pevsner's is a history of forms. Banham is analyzing the theory of modernism, and since theory most often is found verbally, texts become more important. They provide the structure for Banham's story, and while buildings and designs have significance, it matters little to him whether they are built or not, only that they fit his *argument.* Garnier's *Cité Industrielle,* Sant'Elia's *Città Nuova,* and Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* and *Ville Radieuse* are the dominant expressions not only of modernist city planning but, to a large extent, of modernist architecture as well. And they were never constructed, nor even fully designed. They are visual expressions of theoretical ideas and, as such, they play a major role in Banham's narrative.

Texts resound through Banham's oeuvre. *The New Brutalism* begins with the chapters "In the beginning was the phrase" and "Polemic before Kruschev," and sets out a social and political context for the ideology of the New Brutalism before launching into a discussion of the buildings. Not only is the construct Pevsnerian, but Banham introduces a sort of ideological determinism in framing his argument:

> Even if the New Brutalism as such did not really exist in December 1953, the situation which made it necessary did exist, a situation which needs to be examined in order to

4 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design,* 130.

5 Ibid., 277.



understand how it was that a Swedish phrase dropped into an English context should become a slogan with worldwide echoes.[6]

Theory and theoretical designs were extremely important for the Modern Movement. These manifestoes, journals, books, and utopian visions had an impact. Banham not only chronicles the certain influences where one artist or designer reacted to an earlier thought or design, but also spends no little energy deducing influences where they *likely* existed. Thus, in *Theory and Design* we learn that Erich Mendelsohn's 1919 exhibit at Cassirer's gallery in Berlin caused T.H. Wijdeveld to invite him to lecture in Amsterdam; that only J. J. P. Oud's broad definition of cubism allows one to see a cubist influence on architecture; that Marinetti brought Sant'Elia to the attention of *de Stijl;* and that Le Corbusier's "hammering of the importance of the plan" reflects the likely influence of Guadet and the presentation traditions of the *Ecole de Beaux-Arts.*[7]

The Futurist Manifesto and Werkbund Exhibition of 1914, the Bauhaus of 1919, the *Weissenhofsiedlung* of 1927, and the foundation of CIAM a year later—each had a distinct political and ideological flavor. Even contemporary histories of modernism put great weight on theory—not only architectural theory but also social theory and theoretical designs that were never built-such as Tatlin's tower—yet continue to inspire.

Paradoxically, Banham later lauded Hitchcock and Johnson's *International Style* for being "the first book of propaganda for modern architecture which contains no visionary projects or renderings of uncompleted works."[8] Just as the European modernists were astounded not simply by Frank Lloyd Wright's designs but by the fact that he was able to *actually build* so much by 1910, Banham was impressed by Hitchcock and Johnson's assemblage of an architectural history based solely on executed works. But he does not let go of his ideology. This ideology "drove the style in Europe" and without it the movement is incomprehensible to Banham.[9]

Why does this aficionado of things American—this lover of Pop and Las Vegas long before they were intellectually fashionable—hang on to a European frame of mind that even Walter Gropius lamented as being so tied to theory as to inhibit practice?[10] He does so for three reasons. First, he needs the European predilection for theory and ideology to structure his narrative. Second, he uses this theoretical emphasis to shift the focus from form to symbol. His third reason for focusing on theory is to expose a logical flaw that paralyzed modernism, and prevented it from transcending issues of style.

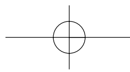
6 Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism, Ethic or Aesthetic* (Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag, 1966), 10.

7 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design,*. The examples cited are from 167, 153, 155, and 225, respectively.

8 Reyner Banham, "Actual Monuments," from Mary Banham, et al, *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 284. The essay originally appeared in *Art In America* 76 (October 1988).

9 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design,*130.

10 Walter Gropius, *The Scope of Total Architecture* (New York: Collier Books, 1962). In his introduction of 1953, he states: "When I came to the USA in 1937, I enjoyed the tendency among Americans to go straight to the practical test of every newborn idea, instead of snipping off every new shoot by excessive and premature debate over its possible value, a bad habit that frustrates so many efforts in Europe."



Primacy as Agency in Constructing a Historical Narrative

Banham's narrative structure in *Theory and Design* bears a close resemblance to that of his predecessors. As much as Banham desires to surpass his mentor in *Theory and Design,* he is a student of Pevsner, and has not completely given up the *Zeitgeist*. Pevsner was defining modernism in *Pioneers* and Banham was consciously investigating its theory. Their narrative methods were quite similar. Both were concerned with innovators—who was "first." For example, Banham assures us that Mart Stam invented the tubular steel chair, edging out the nearly contemporary completion of one by Mies. He recognizes that "it soon appeared almost an anonymous, automatic creation of the *Zeitgeist,* like Choisy's flying buttress." [11] This passage reveals Banham's concept of historical agency, at least in his concern with the history of design and ideas about design.

> It (a text by de Marle claiming the chair as a collective invention) could only have appeared plausible at a time when it was general practice to suppress or ignore the actions that generate history (such as Stam's invention of the integrated chair) and make history the generator of the actions....[12]

On the surface, Banham is challenging the notion of the *Zeitgeist* as a motor force in history, although a closer look at this section of *Theory and Design* shows him incorporating elements of the *Zeitgeist* method:

> This spirit of the times in the plastic arts was largely the creation of an interaction of Cubist forms and Futurist ideas, as was *de Stijl,* as were most of the movements it encountered or allied itself to. Much of *de Stijl's* importance lay in its being first in the field with an organized body of ideas, a magazine, and an energetic impresario.[13]

It is important to Banham—as it was to Pevsner and Giedion—who was first to invent or espouse or design something. By establishing a primary action or invention, all subsequent actions are more likely to have been influenced by the primary one. Firsts are elevated to a more significant role in the narrative, and later actions, even if more popular and widespread (like Mies's chair), are lowered in estimation or seen as derivative.

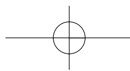
Primacy also ensures that the human actors remain in the story, which is of even greater value to the creation of a strong narrative. By establishing a primary action or invention, the actor or inventor maintains control of the narrative, as has been the case since Vasari's ***Lives.*** Banham, like Pevsner, is writing a history with a series of heroes—***Pioneers's*** subtitle was ***From William Morris to Walter Gropius,*** and Banham later wrote the hero-laden *Age of the* ***Masters.***[14] While Pevsner and his generation saw those heroes as limited or influenced by the *Zeitgeist,* theirs was still a very human

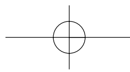
11 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design,* 198.

12 Ibid., 199.

13 Ibid.

14 Reyner Banham, *Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1975.





and, therefore, compelling narrative. And one might argue that an older, more superstitious generation was more comfortable with a sense of destiny or *deus ex machina* as an agent of history than the self-absorbed, self-reliant generations emerging after World War II. Banham was in the latter group and, for him, individuals are even more important.

In 1966, Banham opined that:

> History has not been shaped solely by deep social groundswells, inexorable economic forces, new sources of power or improved means of communication. It has also been decisively shaped by unforeseeable individuals (Lenin, Gandhi, Martin Luther King—but also Christian Dior, Elvis Presley, and Jackson Pollock) whose power to utter the right word and turn the necessary gesture has made great trends conscious and comprehensible, and defined the forms in which history, and their contemporaries, could recognize the drift of events.[15]

While Banham prefers individuals as the motive forces of history, he clearly sees ideas and forms as influential. *De Stijl* occupies the role of "the true founders of that enlightened Machine Aesthetic that inspired the best work of the twenties." [16] The difference between Pevsner and Banham is that, for Pevsner, the *Zeitgeist* lends an air of inevitability to the narrative, whereas, with Banham, we see stifled possibilities, missed chances, and the force of personality giving us one result when many were historically possible.

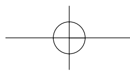
Today, we see limitations to primacy. The Altair was the first personal computer, but what was its historic impact in light of the Apple and IBM PC? Or, even more to the point, what is the impact of the personal computer as *objet* in relation to the impact of Microsoft's interactive software? People still sell Mies chairs and Breuer chairs—not so with the design by Stam. Banham is playing an old historical game—one that rewards the scholar with fame if not fortune—by looking for primacy. But if this is a weakness in *Theory and Design,* it is one that Banham remedied later, notably in his 1969 history of building systems, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment,* in which he ventured beyond traditional sources, and thus beyond the emphasis on primacy:

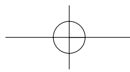
> ...the art of writing and expounding the history of architecture has been allowed—by default and academic inertia—to become narrowed to the point where almost its only interest outside the derivation of styles is haggling over the primacy of inventions in the field of structures. Of these two alternatives, the study of stylistic derivations now predominates to such an extent that the great bulk of historical research is little more than medieval disputation on the number of influences that can balance upon the point of a pinnacle.[17]

15 Reyner Banham, "The Last Formgiver" in *Design by Choice* (London: Academy Editions, 1981), 42, originally appeared in *Architectural Review* (August 1966).

16 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design,*153.

17 Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; London: The Architectural Press, 1969), 12–13.





Banham here recognizes the limitations of primacy on a field so tied up with the economic and culture predispositions of the user, and rejects the "platonic absolute" found in Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command,* which emphasizes "legal primacy of invention." [18] Banham's investigation of building systems reinforced his ideas about interactivity, since system designers work in a sort of feedback loop with system users.

But even *The Well-Tempered Environment* did not abandon the human agent so much as broaden architectural history to include engineers, systems and appliance designers, and to extend the understanding of primacy to include the subtleties of marketing and distribution. As Banham notes: "In the practical arts like building, it is not so much the original brainwave that matters as much as the availability of workable hardware, capable of being order ex-catalog, delivered to the site, and installed in the structure." [19]

Symbolic Content

Theory and Design is a narrative of the fast-paced, ideologically charged and quickly changing milieu of architecture and design between 1910 and 1930. This was an era when theorists derided ornament, sought temporary architecture, and co-opted every image of technological newness they could find, from the aeroplane and motor car to the ball bearing and radio. What Banham did was expose the nineteenth century academic logic underlying the fashion of architectural modernism. *Theory and Design* telegraphed a critique of architectural ideology that underlies Banham's subsequent work, a view that architecture must go beyond forms to incorporate systems—those elements of design which are interactive between designer and user.

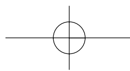
Herein lies the second reason for Banham's emphasis on theory, one that takes him further from his dissertation advisor. He was shifting the focus of art historical research from form to symbol. Pevsner and Giedion had so concentrated on the physical attributes of this new modern style—albeit as an expression of the modern, mechanized world—that it lost its theory and thus its ideology. By 1960, the excesses of modernism were apparent as this new academic style defined postwar corporate culture, stripped of its socialistic symbolism. Banham found that the reason for this loss lay in the modernist's own emphasis on form as opposed to content.

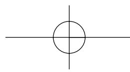
Certainly, art historians who spoke of the *Zeitgeist* valued the symbolism of forms, which represented the social, cultural, and economic world. And there was much in Giedion and Pevsner about engineering and materials and structure. But these writers did not prize content—that was Banham's innovation. As summed up by Nigel Whiteley, Banham's view was "that the emphasis in design criticism should not be the modernist one of an appreciation of abstract and disinterested form, but an examination of meaningful content." [20] And that examination of content was not made from the

18 Ibid., 15ff. Banham is openly frustrated with Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command,* calling it a "shallow and unconsidered" study.

19 Ibid., 15.

20 Nigel Whiteley, "Olympus and the Marketplace: Reyner Banham and Design Criticism" *Design Issues,* 13.2 (Summer 1997): 33.





moral position that imbues the language of Pevsner and Giedion, but from the essentially amoral, even hedonistic position of an enthusiastic consumer. The language of high art is deliberately gone by 1966:

> Architecture, that staid queen-mother of the arts, is no longer courted by plush glossies and cool scientific journals, alone but is having her skirt blown up and her bodice unzipped by irregular newcomers which are—typically—rhetorical, with-it, moralistic, misspelled, improvisatory, anti-smooth, funny-format, cliquey, and art-oriented but stoned out of their minds with scientific visions of alternative architecture that would be perfectly possible tomorrow if only the Universe (and especially the Law of Gravity) were differently organized.[21]

As hard as it is to disregard the form of this rhetoric, its content flows clearly out of *Theory and Design.* It is about theory and texts—new, with-it, wild texts and designs that always aren't about buildings. Banham was chronicling "the erupting of underground architectural protest magazines" and in the middle of his rant you hear again and again the call for "relevance." [22] The meaning—the content—of the architecture is what is most important to him. When Banham talks about "An architecture relevant to the whole scene that's going" he has, in one sense, found another way of saying "the spirit of the age," only it is ascertained not by a Pevsnerian judgment on formal qualities but by a Banhamian take on content. At another level, he has started to deconstruct the one-way *Zeitgeist* of art history and replace it with the social and interactive approach of nascent design history.

What Banham did over the course of his career was to add a new level of understanding to Pevsner's art historical tradition, one that reflected the experiential and ephemeral nature of popular culture. In looking at design, Banham focused on "use" and "symbolic expression," much as Pevsner and Giedion did. But, as Nigel Whiteley has shown, Banham invested these modernist terms with a new sensibility. [23]

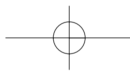
> Use was a decidedly human aspect of design, not just a quasi-ergonomic one in which an object's "nature"—by which modernist designers tended to mean the graspability of a handle or pourability of a spout, for example—helped shape well-proportioned and handsome form. Whereas, for Banham, even as early as 1951, "aesthetic value is not inherent in any object, but in its human usage…"—a thoroughly post-modern claim.[24]

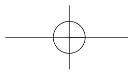
21 Reyner Banham, "Zoom Wave Hits Architecture" in *Design by Choice* (London: Academy Editions, 1981), 64, originally in *New Society* (3 March 1966).

22 Ibid.

23 Nigel Whiteley, "Olympus and the Marketplace."

24 Ibid., 26. The Banham quote is cited from "The Shape of Everything," *Art News and Review* (November 28, 1953): 3.





In another essay, Whiteley offers up a "third machine age," which Banham obliquely defined in later writings. In this age, "The emphasis shifts from 'hardware' to 'software,' from *things* to situations and events." [25] Banham the critic reveled in the ephemera of Pop because it was *interactive*—because the consumer also was a participant, and use helped determine design—perhaps to the point of excluding any concept of an artistic absolute. As Gillian Naylor has observed: "To bowdlerize Baudelaire, he is the historian/proselytizer/champion of 'the transient, the fleeting, and the contingent' in modern life." [26]

Banham grew up loving American culture, and devouring cheap westerns, science fiction, and television. These inspired the lively critical articles he wrote from the 1950s through the 1980s. In 1968, he trumpeted the virtues of the "software" of the camp film *Barbarella* in opposition to the "yech...*hardware"* of the overly serious film *2001: A Space Odyssey.* [27] *Barbarella* was not only ephemeral, it was experiential in both form and content, and even better, it was art-historical because it was derivative from earlier ephemera, a third-generation comic book translated back and forth from American. "Both *Barbarella* in its original French cartoon-strip form, and *Archigram's* plug-in city project are half-jokey European intellectual derivatives from basic U.S. pulp S.F." [28] The serious, high-culture outlook of art history is gleefully disregarded by Banham, but the methods are not. Concerns of form and style are still there—he has simply added a populist, consumerist and, ultimately, *interactive* approach to form and style. He not only allowed, but indeed reified, ephemera as he sought to define a discourse of design for the throwaway economy of the post-World War II West. Reyner Banham saw purely symbolic forms as *useful* for purely symbolic social actions—something the need-based rationalists of the First Machine Age would not or could not admit.[29]

Modernist Storytelling

With this understanding of Banham's method of assembling evidence and constructing a narrative, the next question is where the story in *Theory and Design* leads us and why Banham is telling it. And this brings us to the third and final reason for his reliance on theory. Banham is focusing on the theoretical basis of modernism because he senses a flaw in its construction, a fundamental logical error. In the 1950s, he was faced with the question: How did a movement with such a body of theory become just another style? By tracing the development of that theory, Banham identified a split inheritance that was never resolved—the tension between rationalism and composition.

The split is seen most clearly in the theories and designs of Le Corbusier, who adopted the theoretical braggadocio of Futurism while following the compositional tenets of Academicism. This left him, in Banham's view, a prisoner of style, if also a genius of style as

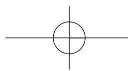
25 Nigel Whiteley, "Design and the Theory of Four Machine Ages" in *Desire, Designum, Design: Proceedings of the Fourth European Academy of Design Conference* (Aveiro, Portugal: Universidade de Aveiro, 2001), 360.

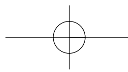
26 Gillan Naylor, "Theory and Design: The Banham Factor," *Journal of Design History* 10:3 (1997): 245.

27 Reyner Banham, "The Triumph of Software" in *Design by Choice* (London: Academy Editions, 1981), 136. Originally appeared in *New Society* (October 31, 1968).

28 Ibid.

29 Nigel Whiteley, "Olympus and the Marketplace," 29.





Banham willingly admits when confronted with the sheer formal beauty of the Villa Savoye. But this formal beauty is neither functional nor rational. At Savoye, Banham finds that the windows run without regard to internal function:

> The feeling of the arrangement of parts within a predetermined frame is heightened by the continuous and unvaried window strip—the ultimate *fenêtre en longeur*—that runs right round this floor, irrespective of the needs of the rooms or open spaces behind it.[30]

Similarly, he finds the curves in the grid plan more picturesque than rational:

> Not only are these curves, on plan, like the shapes to be found in his [Le Corbusier's] *Peintures Puristes,* but their modeling, seen in raking sunlight, has the same delicate and insubstantial air as that of the bottles and glasses in his paintings, and the effect of these curved forms, standing on a square slab raised on legs is like nothing so much as a still life arranged on a table.[31]

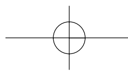
Other theorists and designers also reveal this flawed inheritance. Gropius sought not rational and functional design without style, but "forms symbolizing the world." Banham allows ultra-engineer R. Buckminster Fuller to call the modernists to the carpet on their supposed devotion to Rationalism:

> The "International Style" brought to America by the Bauhaus innovators, demonstrated fashion—inoculation without necessity of knowledge of the scientific fundamentals of structural mechanics and chemistry.[32]

Banham then delivers the *coup de grace* in a most Pevsnerian manner by comparing the design of Fuller's Dymaxion car to Gropius's hopelessly Edwardian car body for Adler. The Fuller design is a complete liberation from style occasioned by a focus on engineering, while Gropius's is a competent form but hidebound in style and concept. Banham then finally reveals where modernism failed itself: by abandoning the concepts of Futurism and falling back on its other, academic tradition.

> ...the theory and aesthetics of the International Style were evolved between Futurism and Academicism, but their perfection was only achieved by drawing away from Futurism and drawing nearer to the Academic tradition, whether derived from Blanc or Guadet, and by justifying this tendency by Rationalist and Determinist theories of a pre-Futurist type.... In cutting themselves off from the philosophical aspects of Futurism, though hoping to retain its prestige as Machine Age art, theorists and designers of the waning Twenties cut themselves off not only from their

30 Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design*, 325.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 327.
33 Ibid.



> own historical beginnings, but also from their foothold in the world of technology.[33]

While one might argue with the true weight of Futurism as modernism's "historical beginnings," one cannot dispute that Banham exposed the movement's Achilles heel: a pretense to scientific rationalism that is more concerned with form and appearance than with technology. Le Corbusier trumpeted the "mystique of mathematics" in *Vers Une Architecture* but, as Banham notes, mathematics was "the only important part of scientific and technological methodology that was not new."[34] In 1961, Jane Jacobs would take this critique a step further in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* her attack on modernist urban planning. Scientific thought has three phases, notes Jacobs, the first—from the Enlightenment to 1900—dealing with two-variable problems. The second phase, marked by physics and social statistics, deals with problems of disorganized complexity. The third phase, after 1930, is the biological and genetic phase that can deal with problems of organized complexity. Modernists tried to use the first and second methods to deal with cities, which are clearly, in her view (and Lewis Mumford's) *organic* problems.

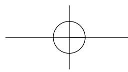
Banham further developed his critique of modernism in his later works. *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* revisits the theoretical limitations of Le Corbusier and CIAM.

> The whole generation (Corbu and CIAM) was doubly a victim; firstly of an inability of its apologists and friendly critics to see architecture as any more than a cultural problem, riding upon a conventional view of function that had not been related to twentieth-century needs; and, secondly, of its own (apparently willing) submission to a body of theory more than a half a century behind the capabilities of technology, still preoccupied with problems—such as the use of metal and glass in architecture that had been propounded by the generation of Sir Joseph Paxton and Hector Horeau in the 1850s, and so effectively solved by those mid-Victorian masters....[35]

Banham's own interests in technology looked to the intersection of humans and machines in a more organic way, if we can judge from his "activist" roles outlined in recent essays by Gillian Naylor and Nigel Whiteley. Banham was an engineer who respected the sublime design of a device for human action and interaction. His *Theory and Design* examines how a design *movement* failed to live up to its ideology of engineering and became yet another formalistic style, preoccupied with Phileban solids and primary colors when it should have been attacking design problems. As an art critic, he was paving the way for his own machine age to redress those problems,

34 Ibid., 328.

35 Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment,* 143.



focusing on design without formalism, in hope of finally achieving the dream enunciated in the futurist manifestoes.

Interactivity, and "soft" designs that not only "moved" but in fact were "designed" by the user became the focus of much of Banham's work in the 1960s and 1970s. His method retained some links to the old formalisms of *Kunstgeschichte,* but his subject matter literally exploded, incorporating everything from automobiles (an obvious fixation given his interest in Americana) to electric shavers. Nigel Whiteley has correctly identified Banham's great contribution as "the shift from design as a satellite of fine art to design as a social discourse." [36] Banham threw open the walls of art history to encompass a world of design that Pevsner would have sniffed at. But he did not give up on Pevsner.

Conclusion

Banham found himself defending Pevsner in 1978, when David Watkin's iconoclastic *Morality and Architecture* savaged him. He veritably leapt to the defense of his mentor's method, claiming that "that *Zeitgeistical* approach had, perhaps still has, and may have again, a special usefulness." [37] Mercilessly attacking Watkin, Banham supports Pevsner's own primacy in architectural history:

> Pevsner nailed his colors to the Bauhaus even earlier than Sigfried Giedion did. Some of their intellectual maneuvers, both Pevsner's and Giedion's, in the cause of demonstrating that the Bauhaus/International Style must triumph seem as doubtful to me as they do to Watkin. But it is evident that he picked a winner.[38]

He goes on to say that modernism not only "won," it "encapsulated the architectural ambitions of our powers-that-be as surely as High Gothic, or Anglo-Palladian, or any other dominant style…." [39] Banham may have found the logical fault in modernism, but like finding fault in the use of the atomic bomb, the reality of the event and its effect on history is in no way reduced or diminished by its rational or moral weakness.

His final defense of Pevsner's *Pioneers* follows from this power of "fact" to rescue not only Pevsner, but his whole idea of style, so cavalierly discarded in *Theory and Design.* "The discovery and delivery of such generalizing patterns (as the *Zeitgeist*) is one of the services that historians render to the lay members of society." [40] Can we then see *Archigram's* walking cities and *Star Wars* as examples of the *Zeitstil* for Swinging London or Disco Death America? Yes, I think we can, but only if we recognize the next level that Banham gave us. After burying the form-givers, Banham the content-giver promised us a future of design, a triumph of interactive "software" that would have the flexibility and rhetorical force of futurism without the baggage of style. I would characterize *Theory and Design* as the first salvo in this effort, not so much a revisionist

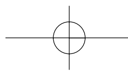
36 Nigel Whiteley, "Olympus and the Marketplace," 33.

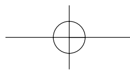
37 Reyner Banham, "Pevsner's Progress" in Mary Banham, et al, *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (University of California Press, 1996), 217. The essay originally appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* (17 February 1978).

38 Ibid., 221.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.





history that rejected modernism but a narrative that advocated the *ideas* of the Modern Movement, not the buildings or styles that evolved out of those ideas. So much of Banham's work sought what modernism promised but could not deliver: designs that went beyond forms and styles. In *Theory and Design* Banham was trying to reset the logical parameters to make that quantum leap possible.