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BA Product Design – Level 5

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Question 5: From the series of ‘Thinking Making’ research strand lectures,

Choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Word Count: 2314

Introduction

This essay shall discuss the prevalent themes found through the work of the Memphis Group, as well as covering the group's ideologies, the various members. Furthermore, the investigation will also cover the similarities and contrasts with the Bauhaus. Both artistic movements have been selected for their motivations within a political period of upheaval and the content of their work as the designers in both groups experimented with the limits of visual impact, materiality, scale of manufacture functionality and target market.

Interestingly, some of the members of the Memphis Group had been a part of Ettore Sottsass's earlier organisation, "Sottsass Associati [...] founded in May 1980", (Burney, J. 1991, p143). The members of this organisation apart from Sottsass, were Marco Zanini, who Sottsass had met "at a Global Tools workshop in 1975", Matteo Thun, a student friend of Zanini and Aldo Cibic, who "studied design in Vicenza". It is interesting to note that there was "an age difference of over 30 years" between Sottsass and his other three partners of the Sottsass Associati, (Burney, J. 1991, p.144). Sottsass was keen on giving younger, yet inexperienced designers a chance to fulfil their design ideas as his previous experiences when he first started out left him bitter and disappointed. He also encouraged newer members into the group, feeling that younger members were "more honest and sensitive" (Sottsass, 1988).

According to the book, *Ettore Sottsass* (1988), the Memphis Group began forming during December 1980. The artists who took part in these discussions would be the founding members of the Memphis Group, who were "*Michelle De Lucchi, Marco Zanini, Matteo Thun, Aldo Cibic, Martine Bedin, Georgee Sowden, Natalie du Pasquier, Barbara Radice and Sottsass*" (Burney, J. 1991, p145). The Memphis Group was formed in a response as Ettore Sottsass desired to revitalise design as well as an examination of "the radical years" (Rice, B. 1993, p.216). These "radical years" that came before Memphis was founded, must have been unpopular, as people were "saturated and tired by the debilitated and debilitating structures of "real design"" (Radice, B. 1993, p.216). If the public were "saturated and [...] debilitated", then this could imply that the time period was stagnant before Memphis was founded.

The dynamics of the group can interestingly draw similarities between The Memphis Group and the Bauhaus Movement in the early 20th Century as both groups were experimental in the use of materials and design itself. These parallels include how members worked together, as well as to challenge design, yet in contrast there are also areas which highlight that the Memphis group were more successful, despite the shortened time period that Memphis was available.

Regarding the collective individuality of each group and working practices, similarities are evident with both having relatively short artistic movements, the Bauhaus functioned between 1919 and 1933 and was politically influenced by the Russian Revolution and the interwar period, yet it was brought to an end and evicted due to Nazi-influence, this is in stark contrast to 'Gropius' original dream of a communal and harmonious ensemble' (Hockman, 1997, p. xi).

The Bauhaus, like most institutions was founded in the quick sands of post-war Europe and was caught up in the competing ideologies epitomised by the Russian revolution. On the one hand, there were artists fired by the collective ideals of collectivism and on the other, there were artists investing in the individual with power to transform society.

(Hockman, 1997, p.x).

Both groups shared the same ideals, as the artists within both groups worked collectively, yet an individual member could produce their own work, as long as it followed the ideals that each group was trying to convey to the public.

In contrast, Memphis who operated from 1981 –87, was a group founded during the radical years of the 1980s, where there were a lot of social changes in the western world, as capitalism and consumerism became dominant. This was also a period of unrest as the governments of Reagan in the United States of America and Thatcher within the United Kingdom, came to power. This led to miners strikes, civil disobedience and increased trade union momentum, although it was also a time of increased pop culture. "in the cultural pessimism of Horkheimer and Adorno (1989) who argue that mass-produced popular culture erodes the capacity for individual thinking, generates conformity, and cripples innovation and intellectual refection" (Daenekindt, 2018). This refers back to the stagnation of this time period previously highlighted. In response, Memphis was created to use elements of popular culture although when applying them to high culture objects or artefacts, high culture can be "used to denote forms of culture, such as visual arts, opera, classical music, and literature. Based on widely shared beliefs, these forms of culture are, in contrast to more popular forms of culture, deemed valuable and worthy of appreciation" "(Daenekindt, 2018). This was evident through the individuality of pieces and the prices given, with many pieces collected by those with appreciation for their individuality and who could afford the unique styling such as David Bowie who collected numerous pieces in his lifetime.

The Bauhaus was inspired by the Russian avant-garde and focused on having a minimalist approach. The movement's approach of design was through the experimentation of materials, which include tubular steel inspired by handle bars, plywood, plastic, canvas and glass. The forms were shaped based; including triangles, rectangles and circular arcs. Hues used on products were minimal, using monochrome and primary colours, which became the school's trademark, as supported by Natashah Hitti for dezeen in 2018, who states that the Bauhaus design methodically was "Stripped down to their basic elements, fundamental components like table tops and legs were typically reduced to geometric forms." Also, "Their designs were created for mass production."

This contrasts with the Memphis group, whose visual style included "The exuberant patterns, lurid colours and fake textures of tower block kitchens were valid as an expression of contemporary culture, as the minimalist subdued surfaces of classic, 'modern functionalist design' (Burney, 1991, p151). Furthermore, Memphis were not interested in mass production, as they saw the "communication of ideas to a wider environment, was more important than the mass production of objects" (Burney, J 1991, p150).

The Bauhaus had decided to prioritise function over form in their designs, in order for the school workshops to begin mass production. To achieve this, the designs produced by Bauhaus artists had to follow the school's design methodically, which has been discussed.

The target markets for both groups differ, as Memphis offers the objects it produced for sale at art galleries, their design was "transplanted from a realm of vulgarity and 'bad taste' to a world of refinement and 'good taste', upsetting a number of orthodoxies and preconceptions in the process" (Burney, 1991, p.150), while the Bauhaus were targeting a variety of buyers as they wanted to use mass production.

However, during 1922, the workshops inside of the Bauhaus were asked “to produce prototypes for mass production” (Hockman, 1997 p.x). This differs from Memphis, as “Memphis Prototypes are handmade [...] but the materials employed [...] are industrial materials, well suited to production in mass” (Sparke, P. pp.76-77). However, the mass production of designs that Bauhaus wanted to implement did cause some trouble, as it ended up causing a divide between designers in Bauhaus, as “the school was [...] divided into two distinct camps: those [...] who pursued the creation of model household objects suitable for industrial production and [...] older painters [...] who opposed such commercially mediated creating” (Hockman, 1997, p.200). The manufacturing process is linked to the materials used.

“In producing luxury living room furniture finished in plastic laminates associated with kitchens and bathrooms, they were indirectly drawing the attention of the public to a hierarchy of materials” (Burney, 1991, p.149). By using a variety of plastic materials to clash against more traditional materiality, the Memphis group was fighting against the idea that certain resources have to be allocated to certain areas of internal design. This was also a political decision, in that Sottsass “wanted to take away the defence given by the conventional scale of values to a certain political group” (Burney, 1991, p.149). The Memphis Group were therefore making a decisive action to reverse the roles and semiotic responses to particular materials. An example of this concept would be having the Memphis group producing a sideboard or table, that used traditional materials like wood, metal and glass, then different sections of the wood which are finished a non-traditional colour lacquer, while a piece of colourful plastic would be added as well, that could potentially have a printed design pattern on top.

Culturally, this impacted the juxtaposition of materiality with the reassembly of both cheaper and expensive materials, being applied into a design ethos, which was both significant and culturally important in representing that time period of the 1980s. The Memphis design ethos that utilized the amalgamations of materials is still relevant to this day.



Fig.1: 118 chair designed by Marcel Breuer at Bauhaus in 1928.

The 118 chair is out of a series of chairs that were designed Marcel Breuer during his time at Bauhaus, with 118 being designed in 1928. The materials that Breuer used in order to produce this chair were tubular steel, beech and cane for the seat. Due to the materials needed in order to construct this and the simplicity of its form, this chair is purely about function over form.

However, it is interesting to note that before Breuer designed this model, he had developed concerns about the direction Bauhaus was going, as Breuer “complained to Gropius that the school’s commercial pursuits were impeding its artistic inventiveness” (Hockman, 1997 p.191). This statement suggests that the Bauhaus were putting an emphasis on making its in-house designers focus on profitable products.



Fig.2: *"Mandarin" Table was designed by Ettore Sottsass for Memphis in 1981.*

The image above is of a piece of furniture that was produced by Memphis in 1981. The materials used for its construction were "lacquered wood, print laminated, metal and plate glass" (Burney, J. 1991, p163).

Regarding the design of the legs in this piece of work, it is difficult to tell which materials have been used, as initially, it seems that the entire legs are covered in plastic print laminations, but upon closer inspection, the red areas on each leg is actually lacquered wood. The striking differences in colour on each of the individual legs and feet bring forth vivid imagery of a part in 1950's American pop culture, with connotations of the fast food diner, with chequered flooring and the predominant use of the colour red or other primary colours.

One of the interesting features to note about this piece of furniture is the fact that the glass plane is seeming resting on top of the metal frame. This could potentially mean that if a buyer/owner knocked against the glass, then it would probably slide off.



Fig.3: *Volga*, designed by Matteo Thun for Memphis in 1983.

Volga is a flower vase, made from porcelain and can only hold a single flower, this was created by Memphis member Matteo Thun, sometime in 1983. Upon viewing this image of *Volga*, it partly brings forth phallic imagery due to the form and would be easily to perceive if the vase did not have strips of triangles, which could make it harder for a consumer to carry it around in their hands, and the large cone at the top of the piece. However, due to the sounding pronunciation of the name and the overall form, this may have been the entire intention from the start because this work challenges the traditional imagery of flower vases, being simple and easy to carry, so this work fits in with ideals of Memphis with their furniture being an experience.

Sottsass had initial concerns about Thun as a designer, when Sottsass Associati was first being founded. The reason that Sottsass was so concerned, was because Thun had been "" doing awful things"" – seagulls in flight and tree-trunks dripping tears and blood, all in ceramic"" (Radice, B. 1988), so these concerns that Sottsass had about Thun at the time may have been valid, but upon re-inspection of *Volga*, Thun understood the ethos that Sottsass was trying to convey through the Memphis group.

Conclusion:

Reflecting on the information which has been researched, it would appear that although at very different time periods and with contrasting political influences, Bauhaus through the Weimar Republic period and Memphis through the governments of Reagan and Thatcher, there are similarities in terms of their working methods. However, whilst Bauhaus sought to market their designs to the masses, the products designed by the Memphis group were highly exclusive, as they were generally obtained from art galleries and exhibitions. Bauhaus products were accessible to a wider spectrum of society, whereas Memphis designed products were more individual pieces, but these came at an elevated price. The Bauhaus group were about experimenting with new materials instead of the more traditional: function over form. Whereas, the Memphis group focused on hand crafted design using industrial materials and methods.

It has been interesting to note that, both groups ended up being disbanded. In relation to Memphis, the negative affect on Ettore Sottsass was due to its unexpected success and fears of stagnating, only being associated with this design movement and it was by choice that this movement ceased. However contrary to Memphis, Bauhaus was forced to disband as Nazi Germany regarded their work as degenerate, which led to many Bauhaus designers choosing to flee the country.

Bibliography

Illustrations

Fig.1: <http://www.desmol.com/Designer-chairs-made-in-Italy/Bauhaus-Chair-Cesca-118--by-Marcel-Breuer-1928--classic.html>

Fig.2: <http://koenigandclinton.com/exhibitions/group-exhibition-the-memphis-group/>

Fig.3: <https://www.memphis-milano.com/products/volga>

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Additional Reading list

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