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Post-Modernism post-Brexit

Terry Farrell, with Giuseppe Parita of Farrells see London as a testbed for a post-postmodern approach



ABOVE:
Marylebone and Euston Roads
RIGHT:
Regent's Place, London – Design from masterplan through to interiors

Many have questioned the future of the architectural profession following Brexit but very few have enquired about the direction architecture itself might take in a post-Brexit scenario. In order to compete on a more international platform, British architecture will have to respond to a broader market, with new investors, new needs and potentially a new creative workforce. It is likely that London – the least European of the big EU cities – will become even less European and more international.

From an urbanism perspective, this might be considered a natural evolution, as London has always been the antithesis of its consciously planned European counterpart, an eclectic atlas >







ABOVE: Giuseppe Parita
BELOW: Sir Terry Farrell

>>> composed of many characterful and distinctive places. High Streets coexist with the magnificence of the monumental intervention of the Crown, the fine grain of the villages sits alongside the vastness of the City, and its intimate public spaces are side by side with big parks. All these very different places live together in an equilibrium that could be considered itself as postmodern – if not in its aesthetic, then in structure; a structure where the distinctiveness of the urban artefacts prevail on both the sovereignty of planning and the logic of the individual architecture.

This structure has made London one of the world's most interesting and beautiful cities but it is not without its problems. As proved by some of the successful projects completed in London over recent years, some intrinsic features of the Postmodern approach give an exhaustive response to the architectural matter, adding value from the social, the economic and the environmental perspectives. Postmodern has yet to be considered in its broader sense and cleansed of the clichés that the stylistic phenomenon we are now referring as "PoMo" has been labelled for many years. But from the 1980s onwards, the broader culture of Postmodernism has evolved and continues to add value to contemporary projects.

Among the many criticisms made towards Modernism, the main objection was the complete lack of respect for the context in which Modernist architecture was built. As such, the real legacy of Postmodernism is contextualism and its contribution to both architecture and urban design. In the attempt to react to Modernism dogma, the Postmodern approach operated a paradigm shift, as it clearly demonstrated that the design process begins with the city, proceeds inwards and then returns to the urban scale. In the London of the late 1980s, PoMo projects such as Embankment Place, Alban Gate and Vauxhall Cross, all started with an urban gesture and managed to operate through architecture on the city.

After many years of experience in London, more recent Farrells projects can be read as the result of a more advanced version of the same process; the attention to the meso-scale of the urban environment has led to a loop where architecture, urban design and planning achieve the regeneration of big portions of the city. The masterplan for Euston Road and Regent's Place redevelopment are two projects that illustrate this success. The Euston Road Masterplan set a strategic framework to improve the existing pattern of spaces in order to create a linear civic infrastructure Though the masterplan helped initiate a number of key public realm projects, the noble ambition to shift the perception of this important axis of the city as urban motorway to a distinctive liveable place would not be possible without architectural-led interventions like Regent's place. Here, the architecture responds contextually to each frontage of this mixed-use redevelopment, activating spaces at street level and drawing people to the internal spaces whilst protecting them from the passing traffic of Euston road.

Triton Square – a little masterpiece of placemaking – creates the appropriate linkage between the high-density residential buildings and the main road, allowing a threshold between public and private, vehicular and pedestrian spaces, the linearity of the road infrastructure and the fabric of the northern settlements. Regent's Place illustrates at a smaller scale the broader vision set in Euston Road masterplan and serves as an urban les-

BELOW:
Farrell's Home Office





ABOVE:
Earl's Court masterplan

son for future local projects. Now that Euston is expected to host HS2 terminus, for example, the flexibility of the original masterplan and its conception as a process rather than a defined design exercise appear almost prophetic and will be extremely useful.

Another important feature of the Postmodern contextualism is related to the idea of the city as a source of design inspiration in itself. Through their experimental approach, Postmodernists have demonstrated that the design process progresses through both logical and analogic thinking, using analysis and rationality to explain the underlying structure of a city as well as a set of analogue pictures to interpret and evolve that same structure with.

Thus, for example, in our Earl's Court masterplan, while the logic responds to the need of regenerating an isolated area through providing a network of new connections and centres, the analogic thinking establishes that the main connection will be shaped as a High Street, the new settlements will be as traditional villages and the answer to the problem of density and height will be a reinterpretation of the mansion block. "Four villages and a high street" proposes on a tighter scale two very well-known archetypes of London. As a result, the new street layout is a loose grid with perimeter blocks surrounding green spaces, which echoes the urban structure of adjacent Kensington.

The open and accessible character of contextualism, which allowed PoMo architects to play with historical elements of the city in a flexible way, is strongly related to eclecticism. To the very strict canons of Modernism, Postmodern architects made variety one of the main drivers for a qualitative approach to architecture and city-making. What we are now considering as quite an obvious premise has to be read as a key result of this eclectic approach, of which the much criticised pastiche was only an aesthetic expression of the 80s style.

The Eagle – a residential-led mixed use city centre scheme – sees Farrells following an approach that embraces diversity and harmonises difference. This is the logic behind the decision of retaining and restoring the existing Art Deco buildings, whilst building a new landmark tower alongside. The project takes inspiration from the history of the site and goes further to gain the first consent for a taller building in the area, demonstrating through an exhaustive study how the tower will be strategic to the future of the high-tech quarter of Old Street. An unusual challenge was restarting completion of the building after the original developer ceased to trade; this meant that part of the building was already there, not constructed exactly as the planning consent and with some structural inadequacies, which effectively led to a conversion of the building. This added another different element that had to be integrated and combined within the design solution. Despite the challenges, the elegant result demonstrates the ability of this pioneering approach to create once again a contemporary version of Venturi's "both-and" scenario.

In addition to this complexity, on top of the restoration of >



>>> the 1930s building, a rooftop sculpture tangibly projects the eagle imagery. Apart from being part of an integral arts strategy, this celebrates the history of the site through a further quotation, yet another feature of Postmodern legacy. At the height of the movement, the quotations – particularly when historical – were meant to provoke by deconsecrating architectural structures and elements that were supposed to be inviolable. Farrells approach on quotation has always been more playful than provocative, disseminating pieces of art throughout its architecture as coded messages to its audience.

Our Hatton Street Studios display on its facade a series of wings, which allude to urban stories; they pay homage to the past of the building, which once used to host an aircraft factory. This use of memory make this approach particularly important in the Information Era, fulfilling the architecture of both denotative and connotative meanings by using the same playful code of current mass-media.

There is no doubt that playfulness is a characteristic that PoMo inherited from the pop culture. Like pop culture, Postmodernists appealed to a broad popular audience without trivialising the quality of their products, proposing a "double coding" that continues to stimulate the debate on architecture at an advanced level while offering democratic solutions. For the Home Office, the collaboration between Farrells and artist Liam Gillick created a better place, using art not as an add-on but as an integral part of the architectural expression itself. At the same time, this intervention has become well-known from the urban perspective as it has been able to demonstrate the feasibility of a low-rise intervention with a high capacity for office, residential and retail uses. By clearing the area from the previous intrusive towers, the design solution has provided an invaluable contribution to the urban district of Westminster and its residents by creating an inclusive, civic community.

The pluralism and openness of PoMo have been declining in many ways until now, giving some very appropriate responses to the ever-changing needs of a city like London. Its principles have been unconsciously absorbed into the daily practice of architecture, to the extent that we can now all be defined as post-postmodernist. However, those who have been pioneering the Postmodern approach are more aware that these very few principles – if rightly declined – offer pertinent solutions in critical conditions and stimulate innovation in times of crisis.

We strongly believe that the more international the market becomes, the more contextualism can help design solutions that meet local needs and that eclecticism is still the key to response to the complexity of reality and response to multiple needs. We also believe that shapes, archetypes and historical images of cities should be considered as valuable "big data" to develop smarter cities and that architecture should preserve multiple codes in order to be accessible to different stakeholders. In addition to this, we believe that the city has to be considered as the ultimate client and democratically be transmitted to future generations. All this considered, Brexit's uncertainty is only one of the many challenges that the Post-Modern Era will have positively faced. ■



ABOVE:
Farrell's offices, Hatton Street

RIGHT:
The Eagle, City Road