

IN PERSPECTIVE

SUMMER 2026

LESS IS A BORE

Modernism, as it developed in early 20th century architecture, was characterized by a simplification of building forms, uniformity and a lack of decorative detail. Prominent modernist architect Mies van der Rohe (1886 – 1969) captured the idea in the expression “less is more”.

But, attitudes change and by the second half of the 20th century alternatives to the simplicity and monotony of modernism were emerging, leading architect Robert Venturi (1925-2018) to coin the phrase “less is a bore”.

POSTMODERNISM

Venturi espoused principles such as the adaptation of buildings to their environment, creating contrast by the use of various scales, basing motifs on everyday objects, the meaningful separation of spaces and a return to ornamentation.

The first postmodern building was, arguably, the Vanna Venturi house, completed in 1964 by Venturi himself.

Evolution of the style over the next few decades led to the emergence of specific characteristics:



The CMA's model of Mississauga City Hall, as it was built in 1986. Compare the roof line to that of the Vanna Venturi House. Scale 1:200.

In fact, Venturi, in his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, proposed a basis for a new direction in design, launching the early development of the style that came to be known as postmodernism. This style is portrayed in the CMA's model of Mississauga City Hall built by Aida Farokhyar.

- Peter Brueckner

- Historical references – the inclusion of structural forms from unrelated contexts.
- Ornamentation and symbolism – non-functional details for visual interest or as a reference.
- Playfulness and irony – the whimsical arrangement of features and use of bright colours.
- Human scale and visual complexity – avoidance of monumentality and of large-scale uniformity.



Vanna Venturi House. Note the unexpected scale and placement of windows, a split gable, unconventional configuration of the front entrance and the suggestion (only) of a curved porch roof.

- Bold geometric compositions – applied as building shapes or decorative patterns.
- Relativism – Use of various and contrasting elements to recognize diversity.

MISSISSAUGA CITY HALL

Mississauga City Hall came about through an architectural competition that drew 246 entries. Unlike a conventional modernist glass and concrete tower, the winning design by Edward Jones and Michael Kirkland for the civic complex was in the postmodern style.

The plan addressed the stated requirements to consolidate scattered municipal offices, provide a civic square and accommodate future growth, in a form that referenced not only the farming community that had previously occupied the land but also incorporated a variety of allusions to historical architecture. The execution of this stylistic choice resulted in a distinctive building that has been widely praised and has received numerous awards, including a 1990 Governor General's Award of Merit.

From a distance, the most prominent feature of the building is a 70 m tall clock tower based on an old farm windmill. The cylindrical council chamber derives its geometry from a grain silo while the use of a light tan brick is intended to recall the grain fields that once covered the land. Brightly coloured window frames, roofs and struts complement the building. The large public plaza leading to the entrance draws its lines from an Italian piazza. It includes a performance space reminiscent of a Greek amphitheatre. The juxtaposition of unrelated details and geometric forms are integral to the character of the building.

The motifs continue in the interior of the complex with strong colours, unusual shapes and historical references.

MORE IS MORE

Emanating from the cauldron of philosophical ideas in the mid-20th century, postmodern philosophy questioned objective truth and eschewed the idea of an absolutely rational universe. Its application to architecture, initially in North America and Europe and then in other parts of the world, led to a wide range of expression of the style generating significant controversy.

SOME EXAMPLES



1 Poultry Lane by James Stirling, 1993.

Hotel Zaandam by WAM Architecten, 2010.



The more florid instances of postmodern designs have occasionally been referenced as “more is more” for their bold use of primary colours, extensive detailing and strongly contrasting historical elements. But it may have been all too much and the use of postmodern architectural design is now in decline.

- Aida Farokhyar

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