

William Mark Pimlott

The term, "New Wave", which seems to suggest a sweeping transformation of something previously non-existent, was coined in the late 1950's to describe a new, vital group of French film directors, notably François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard.

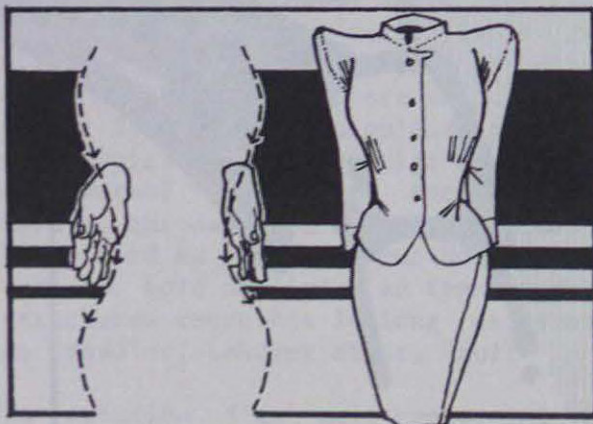
The meaning and the substance of the term has changed markedly over this period of twenty years. New Wave has become a banner phrase for the trendy masses to pledge allegiance to, rather than a poignant description of a brash cultural movement by its pioneers.

The whole New Wave phenomenon has become readily apparent enough to allow any layperson coming in contact with the city ease in analysing its outward expression. It is seen on the backs and haunches of those young people (but not always young people) who are able to afford a new Mexican Pink, Bahamian Turquoise or Purple article of clothing. This facile and superficial abstraction of tenable elements of the broad New Wave manifesto has certainly hindered an understanding of the various strains of the movement.



For the sake of coherence, this article will deal simply with those elements of a *new wave* which one can see. Specifically, it will attempt to trace origins of the aesthetic and find their repercussions in fashion, graphic design, and architectural design.

One must first begin with a broad look at the *pure* aspects of the new popular aesthetic expression. Fashion is perhaps the largest of the branches, and certainly the most difficult to define, because of its transient nature and its inherent variations. Like all fashion trends of the last ten years, it has *roots* and obtains its meaning from other fashion periods and cultural influences of the twentieth century. Movement towards an appearance that we now consider to be New Wave could be anticipated in an allusion to styles of the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's which occurred five years ago. Elements which fashion designers chose to elaborate on were those which dealt with a kind of kitsch formality. The classical and neat lines of skirts pinched to a focus below the knee and flared at the hips became at once not only the stereotype of the efficient businesswoman, but at the same time a caricature of the 1930's sidewalk bird watcher's view of the female form.



Kitsch accessories such as the peak-brimmed hat, the slim handbag, pleated blouses and the designer scarf all fit in a calculated way into our image of an airline stewardess; that somewhat humorous, but always *willing to please* hostess.

The hapless reception of what is essentially a clever sexist joke on sexual role playing was paralleled in male fashion by the classical *man of the world* businessman look, and its flamboyant, pitiful disco version, popularized by the well-known image of a boogying John Travolta.

The clever designers--laymen must be included in this group--who were responsible for the burgeoning New Wave aesthetic, were all too keenly aware of the notion of sexual caricature, and were willing to exploit it to its logical conclusion. Thus, the image of the airline stewardess was propagated into a blatant, willingly abstracted expression of the streetman's view of the female form. The designers took their cues, and some are still deriving them, from populist views of women and men expressed in advertisements of the 1950's and 1960's. It was the views of women with permed hair having just happily scoured their kitchens with Brillo pads, or wreaking havoc on Bigelow carpets with their high-heeled shoes; of men in business suits with ludicrous hats and ties landing comfortably into Hertz cars from the sky that prompted much of the *new* fashion design. A notably different path was taken in the re-birth of these images, and that was the avenue of humour, of poking the nerve of our *modern* culture along its critical path of evolution. It was not a sly re-introduction--the wearers of the *look* were completely sympathetic to what it was trying to say.



Other strains of the New Wave fashion aesthetic derive their impetus from cultural inputs of the 1950's and 1960's which tended to be directed more towards the youth of these periods, and indeed grew out of youth's own expression during that period. The latter, personified in the 1950's by girls' sweater fashions and by boys' extravagant and aggressive hairstyles; in the early 1960's by the coexistence of both *greaser* and *beatnik* fashion bear the most profound influence.



This served as the origin for "Punk" fashion, which was born in England, and set its principles on caricatures and hybrid caricatures of all types of British boys and girls in the Fifties and Sixties; from Eton Boys to East End London toughs and the Mod Kids. Punk essentially gathered all of these elements together, and turned them out in a particularly violent and brutal pot-pourri, which with such notorious accessories as the safety pin puncturing various areas of the human body, also took on such latent qualities as sadism and masochism; physical outlets for expression of the grand satire. The violent colour rhythms and juxtapositions of fragmented caste imagery was reflected in Punk Rock Music, whose brutal, rudimentary guitar chords and anarchistic lyrics not only paralleled those qualities of Punk fashion, but inspired some bizarre and anarchistic modes of behaviour. Stories of female punks beating up on innocent individuals were not uncommon in Britain in the late Seventies, nor were new varieties of gang battles between punks and toughs. Overall, the Punk Movement seemed to bear a massive Angry Young Man complex.

One might say that what evolved from Punk Fashion and Punk Rock--what came to be called New Wave--was a more *civilised* re-interpretation of these images of society revitalised by Punk and by the methods mentioned previously in this paper. The notion of *civilised* almost implies *intelligence* and when the British and North American presses first caught light of the changes in attitude that Punk was going through, a new intelligence and a direction in purpose was what was

first noted, and this was what inspired the new term. The clever, satirical lyrics of such musicians as Elvis Costello (compare to earlier lyrics of such groups as The Stranglers, et al) and fashions developed from social cues mentioned earlier, proved that New Wave expressed itself more eloquently than Punk and that it was neither violent nor obnoxious.

Obviously, New Wave isn't (or wasn't) simply the civilised version of Punk. Poignant interpretations of images from cultural signs scattered throughout the twentieth century fill New Wave's bag of goodies. The marvelous vitality of it all, of course, is that the cultural signs it cherishes and expounds are those we would all rather forget in the first place. The American tourist in Hawaii, for example, in that wardrobe of awful shirts, resurrected by New Wave fashion designers in England, and the tacky Spaceman of even tackier 1950's comic books and "B" movies exploited by designers in America, are two characters we would rather keep out of sight and out of mind. However, dressing up like them is essentially fun, for both the wear-

er, who is making a satirical social statement, and for the observer, who really enjoys seeing tacky things, because he can laugh along with them or at them.

It is this sense of deriving pleasure out of *tacky* design, out of kitsch that also moves much of present graphic design, and is supposed to make our lives better.

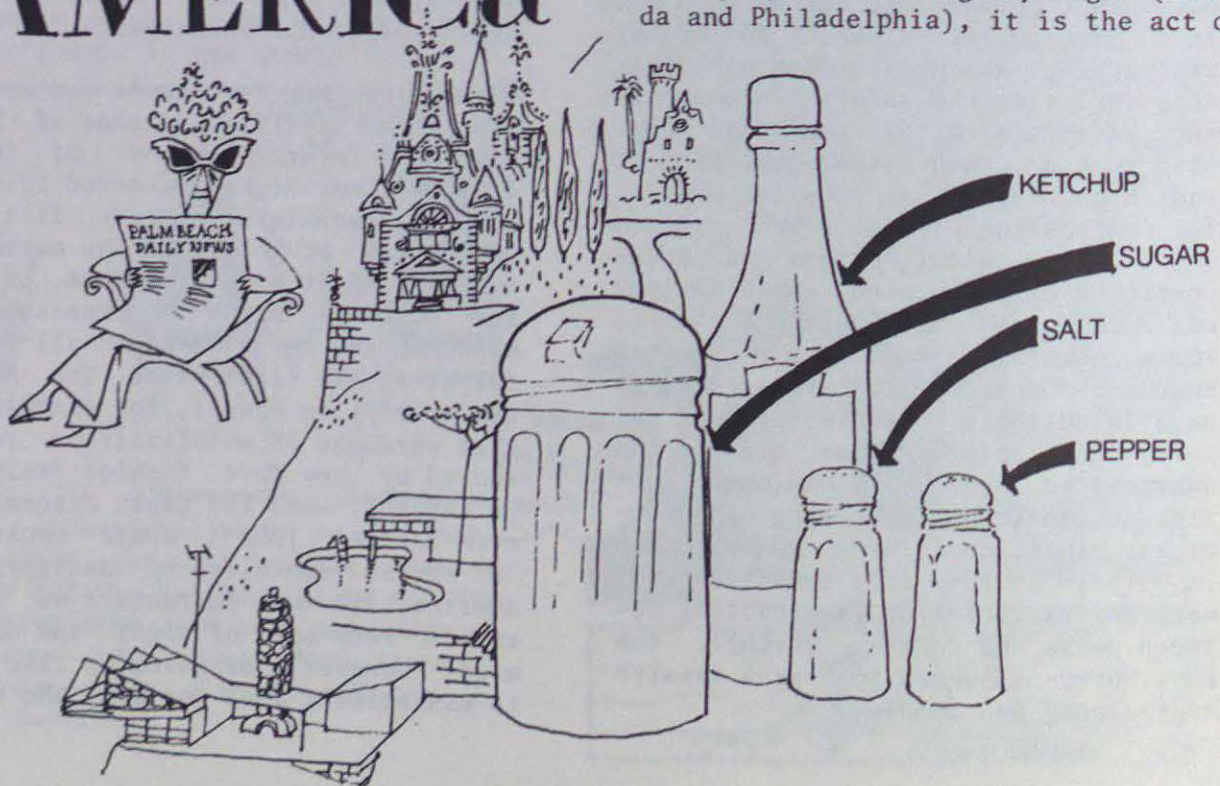
From the appreciation of the tacky object, it is not a particularly long or difficult step towards the appreciation of the *audacious* tacky object. In fact, what true New Wave fashion (and thereby, New Wave design) owes to its immediate predecessor, Punk, is its measure of audacity and absurdity. This, at last, seems to be the mainstay of the aesthetic. For example, those touches which truly bear both the qualities of audacity and satire are the following, which incidentally, are remarkably similar to illustrator/artist Saul Steinberg's satirical/documentary drawings of Americans and their way of life:

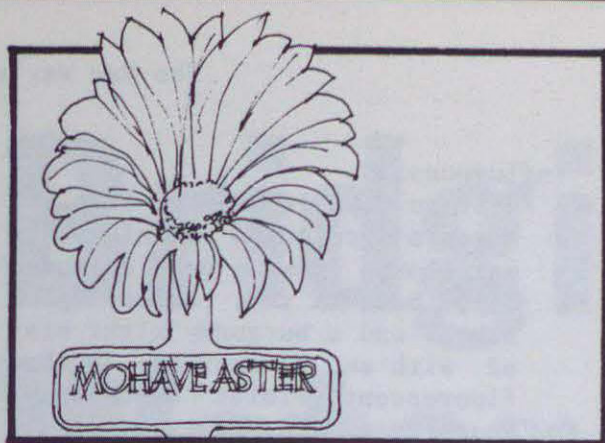
New Wave graphics also feature that same audacity, and again, the Steinberg vision is echoed by their composition and aesthetic.

It was Robert Venturi who forwarded the notion that most North Americans are more comfortable in environments which appeal to their sense of *happiness*: i.e. architecture and design through the use of symbols which people have grown up with and which are therefore immediately identifiable. Monster hamburger chains like McDonald's and their designers are keenly aware of the fact that people will like eating their meals on Arborite counters and plastic chairs, surrounded by tropical plastic plants and the sounds of a babbling brook, not to mention the features like *Moderne* lighting and pseudo-stained glass windows, because they like all these things on their own (the plastic furniture is considered to be *decorated space age*), and having them all together in one place is that much more wonderful.

Indeed, in Venturi's Faculty Club, the interiors of the Vanna Venturi House, the Brant-Johnson House, and his various projects for highway signs (Nevada and Philadelphia), it is the act of

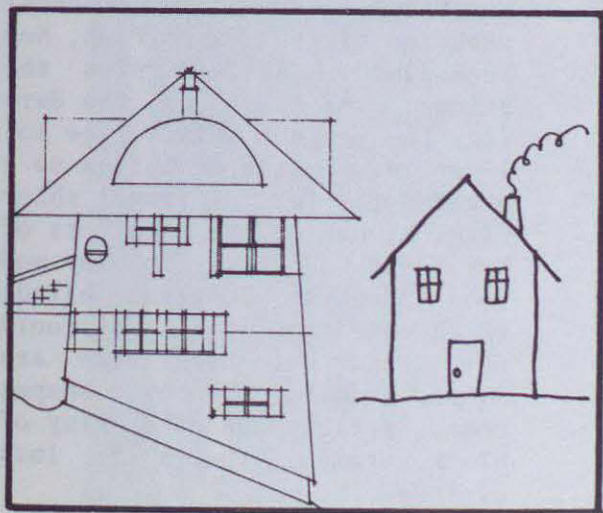
# AMERiCa





creating recognizable symbols, which often tend to be caricatures, that make these projects so successful in the eyes of their clients. The chandelier in the dining room of the Vanna Venturi House evoked an atmosphere of elegance without cladding the room in travertine marble or black onyx. The Brant-Johnson House evoked images of a child's drawing of a house.

The re-introduction of semantics into



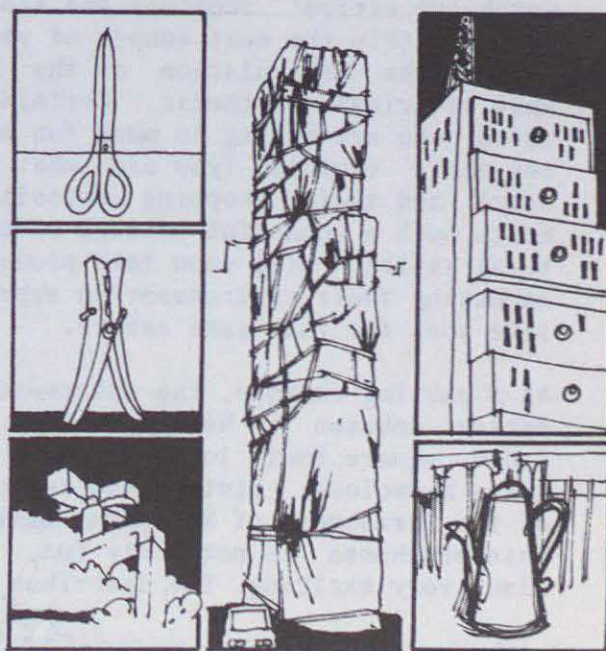
our architectural expression certainly puts us back in touch with what is the fulcrum between the success or failure of any architectural creation; the reaction of the user.

The groundwork laid by Robert Venturi in "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture", by Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour in "Learning From Las Vegas" and by Izenour and Hirshorn in "White Towers" is an obvious push for us to be more receptive to cultural messages and clues from our past. Obviously, Quebec has its own symbols, as do the rest of North America, Europe and so on.

A marvellous kitsch experience (much like that felt at Tom's Bus Diner in Lakefield, Ontario) can be found in Robert Venturi's Grand Restaurant, where the tacky diner symbols such as the ketchup bottle, the sugar container and the common coffee cup became the most identifiable pieces of *architecture*.

Where architecture, if it is to be New Wave architecture, must obtain its social vitality in the glorification of these somewhat tacky everyday objects, it must bear the quality of audacity.

The earliest traces of this glorification can be seen in the drawings and montages of Claes Oldenberg, Christo and Saul Steinberg.



Oldenberg's work has taken, in the projects shown above, advantage of objects that appear somehow in our lives everyday yet are taken for granted, and has elevated them to the forefront of our consciousness, occasionally making a relevant statement about our society with them. In today's architectural context, Aldo Rossi's "Domestic Architecture" is its satirical parallel.

Satire, of course, is the link between

all of these "architects". (Saul Steinberg graduated from architecture in Milan in 1940). Christo's Wrapped Buildings at once glorified the most commonplace sign of our throwaway society--the green plastic garbage bag--and condemned the attitude of that society towards objects which should be cherished, or for that matter, the repression of the society's creative expression, past or present.

Saul Steinberg's views of both Manhattan skyscrapers and the homes and gardens of America's Northeast and Midwest often strike a raw nerve in the American (and Canadian) sensibility about the recent past. If Steinberg had his own way, we would assertively build that way.

It would be considered prudent to watch our cities' rooftops and storefronts within the next couple of years to see the articulation of the New Wave satirical aesthetic. Certainly, those who are having so much fun making their clothes (you are what you wear) and their shopping establishments such a wonderful montage of cultural satire, will soon take pleasure in making their environment an expressive tool for this same satire.

As a parting example, the apartment of Betsey Johnson in New York City (a 3,000 square foot loft) is, by all means audacious, riotous and symbolic of the brashness of New Wave design. This brashness is not only fun, but also very exciting. She describes her

influences...

"...ten days in Mexico with its magenta coloured mornings, a marvelous chewing gum coloured day, bazooka red, a deep pink sunset and a burgundy night mixed with an aquamarine lavabo, fluorescent violet handtowels, chartreuse, black eyes, and after ten whole days my return home bubble gum lulu pink, my favorite..."

Ahem. As she describes her apartment, which is predominantly shocking pink, lime green and black...

"...The bath is green for John and that's O.K. but the rest is all wrong. Suddenly all the rest just had to be black. Rock and Roll notes, the dresses I was making were Rock and Roll pink and black, my days at high school pink and black. Mexico Pink, New York Black. The calm plus the strong, the frivolous, the daring, the serious, black like solidarity. I like opposites so I decided for lots of enamel shiny black alongside the happiness of brilliant colours. Too many and too expensive Venetian blinds which some time ago I just could not stand but which here are simple geometric planes, shapes come straight out of a spray of black varnish. That's it, lots of love..."

Kerpow! You are all now *with it*. Welcome to the 1980's.

