

# POSTMODERNISM

(Article by Suzanne Waters British Architectural Library, RIBA)

Postmodernism describes a style or styles of architecture and the decorative arts that were a reaction to Modernism and the Modern Movement and the dogmas associated with it. By the 1970s Modernism had begun to seem elitist and exclusive, despite its democratic intentions. The failure of building methods and materials (shown in the collapse of Ronan Point, a tower block in east London in 1968) and alienating housing estates was a focus for architects and critics in the early 1970s. A book published in 1966 by the American architect Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, was a key influence on the development of Postmodernism. Venturi extolled the ambiguities, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies of the Mannerist and Baroque architecture of Rome, but also celebrated popular culture and the ordinary architecture of the American Main Street.

A later work, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), deconstructed the signs and symbols of the Las Vegas strip and divided buildings into 'ducks', the sculptural buildings that embodied their message within the structure, and the 'decorated shed', which used signs to communicate its message. In practice, it meant the rediscovery of the various meanings contained within the mainly classical architecture of the past and applying them to modern structures. The result was an architecture that embodied historical allusion and dashes of whimsy.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A POSTMODERNIST BUILDING:

Classical motifs

Literary allusions

Bright colours

Structural variety

Variety of materials and shapes