

Constructive Postmodern Architecture: A Paradigm for Sustainable, Culturally Embedded, and Human-Centric Design

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Abstract: Constructive Postmodern Architecture, a significant architectural trend emerging in the late 20th century, draws its theoretical underpinnings from Constructive Postmodernist philosophy. This movement, building upon critiques of Modernist functionalism and Postmodernist semiotic tendencies, strives to establish a more inclusive, ecologically conscious, and culturally nuanced approach to architectural practice. This article systematically examines the theoretical roots, core characteristics, and representative case studies of Constructive Postmodern Architecture. Furthermore, it differentiates this approach from general Postmodern architecture in terms of philosophical stances, value orientations, and design methodologies. The research argues that Constructive Postmodern Architecture, characterized by its constructiveness, ecological holism, cultural embeddedness, and humanistic concern, provides an insightful response to the modern challenges of ecological crises, cultural fragmentation, and spiritual nihilism.

Keywords: *constructive postmodern architecture; process philosophy; ecological architecture; regionalism; cultural heritage*

In the latter half of the 20th century, the architectural world, having navigated the functionalist principles of Modernism and the semiotic tendencies of Postmodernism, gradually gave rise to a more constructive, integrative, and transcendent design ethos: Constructive Postmodern Architecture. Distinct from the view that simply categorizes

Postmodern architecture into specific stylistic schools, this article defines it as a value-driven design philosophy, designed to address the profound issues of cultural fragmentation, ecological crises, and the loss of spiritual belonging that arose during the modern era.

Based on this, the article systematically explores the theoretical origins, core characteristics, and the evolutionary trajectory of Constructive Postmodern Architecture in practice. By analyzing its philosophical foundations and theoretical frameworks, the article reveals the inherent logic of this architectural trend in the construction of cultural identity, the response to ecological challenges, and the reshaping of human living environments. Through representative case studies, the article further investigates the practical manifestations of Constructive Postmodern Architecture within diverse geographical and cultural contexts, assessing its effectiveness and limitations in addressing key issues in contemporary architecture. Based on this, the article provides an in-depth reflection on the academic significance of this trend, and envisions its potential value and possible directions in future architectural development. It seeks to promote a deeper understanding of Postmodern architectural thought and to provide a theoretical framework for the construction of architectural practices that are more sustainable, humanistic, and culturally resonant.

Theoretical Origins and Philosophical Foundations

The theoretical roots of Constructive Postmodern Architecture can be traced back to Constructive Postmodernism, championed by American philosopher David Ray Griffin and others. This philosophical movement explicitly rejects the deconstructionist dissolution and subversion of meaning, instead emphasizing “construction,” “reparation,” and “transcendence.” It aims to critique the fragmentation and alienation caused by modernity and seeks to construct a new paradigm that is more inclusive, ecologically conscious, and spiritual. As Griffin stated, “Constructive Postmodernism is not simply a denial of modernity, but an attempt to restore the spirituality and wholeness of the world through reconstruction and integration.”¹

In the realm of architectural theory, this movement extensively draws upon diverse theoretical resources such as process philosophy, ecological philosophy, phenomenology, and post-structuralism, emphasizing that architecture should be understood as a “dynamic,

¹ David Ray Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 16.

generative process”² rather than a static material object. It resolutely rejects the mechanistic worldview held by Modernism, advocating for an organic holism that asserts that “architecture must be embedded within the overall system of nature and culture to achieve a harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment.”³ For example, Whitehead’s proposition in *Process and Reality* that “reality is essentially processual and relational”⁴ provides a philosophical foundation for architecture as a dynamic practice of an ecological-cultural complex. Simultaneously, architectural theorist Kenneth Frampton emphasizes that “regionalism and ecological responsiveness are not merely formal strategies, but an ethical and ontological imperative.”⁵

Core Characteristics

Constructive Approach over Deconstruction: Unlike the often-used strategies of satire and irony employed by Postmodern architecture, Constructive Postmodern Architecture maintains a positive and constructive attitude. It not only critiques the limitations of Modernism but also strives to “remedy its deficiencies, exploring a more humanistic, ecological, and culturally rich architectural language.”⁶ This attitude “is not a simple negation of modernity, but a reparation and transcendence of its inherent flaws.”⁷ The concept emphasizes that architecture should serve as a bridge connecting the past and the future, propelling architecture from criticism towards construction.

Ecological Holism and Sustainable Development: Constructive Postmodern Architecture emphasizes the organic connection between architecture and the natural environment, advocating for green technologies, local materials, and passive design strategies to achieve energy conservation and ecological balance. Architecture is no longer viewed as an isolated “object,” but as an integral part of the ecosystem.⁸ “Design must follow the laws of natural systems, and architecture should integrate with, rather than confront, the ecological environment.”⁹ This perspective has propelled the exploration of sustainable development practices in contemporary architecture.

² Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 4th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 314.

³ P. G. Berg and M. Das, *Ecological Philosophy and Architectural Theory: Towards a New Ethics of Building* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 89.

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 27.

⁵ Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 314.

⁶ David Ray Griffin, *The Rise of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 4.

⁷ Griffin, *Rise of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, 32.

⁸ Ian L. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992), 67.

⁹ McHarg, *Design with Nature*, 89.

Cultural Rootedness and Historical Continuity: This architectural trend opposes the hegemony of Modernism's "International Style" and also rejects Postmodernism's superficial appropriation of historical symbols. Instead, it advocates that architecture should genuinely return to its historical context, drawing inspiration from regional culture, traditional craftsmanship, and the spirit of place, thereby achieving a "rooted modernity."¹⁰ "The regionality and cultural identity of architecture must be re-evaluated in the context of globalization."¹¹ This stance demonstrates respect for cultural continuity and regional identity.

Humanistic Spirit and Emotional Experience: Constructive Postmodern Architecture places significant emphasis on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of architecture, seeking to transcend the functionalist simplification of architecture as a "machine for living," and instead creating spaces that possess beauty, sacredness, and poetry to respond to the spiritual needs of users. "Architecture is not only a visual art, but should also be a carrier of physical and emotional experience."¹² This concept has propelled architecture towards a more humanistic direction.

Multiculturalism and Community Building: This architectural trend advocates for diversity, emphasizing the social function of architecture in promoting community interaction and enhancing cultural identity. It embodies respect for multiculturalism and a concern for community building. Léonie Sandercock, in *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities*, writes: "Inclusive cities should promote dialogue and coexistence among different cultural groups through architectural and spatial design."¹³ Therefore, Constructive Postmodern Architecture not only pursues diversity in form but also strives to construct more cohesive community spaces in terms of social function.

Relationship with Postmodern Architecture

Within the architectural theoretical framework, Postmodern architecture and Constructive Postmodern Architecture, although sharing the "Postmodern" prefix in their timelines, exhibit fundamental differences in their philosophical stances, value orientations,

¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton, *Constructive Culture: Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 112.

¹¹ Frampton, *Constructive Culture*, 118.

¹² Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 78.

¹³ Leonie Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2013), 102.

and design methods. The following provides a systematic comparison of the two from multiple characteristic dimensions:

In terms of core attitudes, Postmodern architecture tends towards “deconstruction, mockery, and satire,” with its rhetorical strategies focusing on revealing the inherent contradictions of Modernism and the fragility of authoritative narratives. Constructive Postmodern Architecture, on the other hand, emphasizes “construction, reparation, and transcendence,” striving to “propose alternative solutions based on criticism.”¹⁴ “Constructive Postmodernism is not about denying modernity, but about transcending its limitations, and rebuilding meaning and value.”¹⁵

Regarding the attitude towards history, Postmodern architecture often adopts “symbolization and superficial collage,” detaching historical elements from their original context and imbuing them with ironic meanings. Constructive Postmodern Architecture, however, pursues “internalization and spiritual integration,” emphasizing that architecture should “establish a sincere dialogue with the local context and spiritual traditions.”¹⁶ Frampton in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* clearly points out that this “‘critical regionalism’ rejects superficial historicism and seeks instead a ‘rooted constructive culture.’”¹⁷

In terms of expression, Postmodern architecture often presents “exaggerated, conflicting, and dramatic” characteristics, with its formal language often being self-referential and playful. In contrast, Constructive Postmodern Architecture tends towards “humble, harmonious, and organic” expression, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of architecture with the environment and society. Venturi et al. in *Learning from Las Vegas* hinted at “the parody of popular symbols and commercial imagery by Postmodernism,”¹⁸ while Constructive Postmodernism is closer to Alexander’s advocacy of “organic order” in *The Nature of Order*.¹⁹

From the perspective of its relationship with nature, Postmodern architecture often regards nature as a “background or decoration,” continuing the instrumental attitude of Modernism towards the environment. Constructive Postmodern Architecture, however,

¹⁴ David Ray Griffin, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 45.

¹⁵ Griffin, *Spirituality and Society*, 56.

¹⁶ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 314.

¹⁷ Frampton, *Modern Architecture* (1992), 327.

¹⁸ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 105.

¹⁹ Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe, Book One: The Phenomenon of Life* (Berkeley: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002), 75.

regards nature as a “partner,” emphasizing ecological holism and sustainability. Berg and Das in *Ecological Architecture* stress that “true sustainable design is not to introduce nature as an external element, but to view architecture as an intrinsic component of the ecosystem.”²⁰

Regarding its philosophical foundation, Postmodern architecture is deeply influenced by deconstructionist philosophy and Pop art, emphasizing the uncertainty of meaning and the free play of symbols. Constructive Postmodern Architecture, on the other hand, is rooted in Whitehead’s process philosophy and deep ecology, advocating for relational thinking and value reevaluation. Jencks in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* clearly defines Postmodern architecture as a “double-coded”²¹ symbol system, while Griffin points out that Constructive Postmodernism “rejects nihilism and is committed to constructing an ecological and just form of civilization.”²²

In summary, the following analogy can be made: Postmodern architecture is like a “caustic critic,” skilled at criticism but lacking in construction; Constructive Postmodern Architecture, on the other hand, is more like a “responsible engineer and poet,” who both perceives problems and provides solutions. This analogy not only figuratively summarizes the role differences between the two but also implies two different paths that architecture might take in the Postmodern context.

Practical Case Studies and Analysis

Hassan Fathy: Vernacular Culture and Ecological Wisdom in Adobe Architecture – A Pioneer of Constructive Postmodernism

Hassan Fathy’s adobe architecture practice in impoverished regions of Egypt can be considered an early example of Constructive Postmodernism. Fathy’s designs did not simply remain at the technical level, but deeply integrated respect for vernacular culture and ecological wisdom. His works not only adhered to the local traditional building materials in material selection, especially the inexpensive and readily available adobe; moreover, in construction techniques, he also revived the traditional Egyptian construction techniques, thereby realizing the inheritance and innovation of local cultural heritage. The combination of these two strategies constitutes the core characteristic of

²⁰ Jonas Berg and Priya Das, *Ecological Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 118.

²¹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 5th ed. (London: Academy Editions, 1987), 39.

²² David Ray Griffin, *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 84.

Fathy's architectural design: a comprehensive consideration of the local environment, social needs, and cultural traditions.

Specifically, Fathy's adobe architecture, through the utilization of local materials, effectively reduced construction costs and improved affordability, providing a practical solution to the housing problem in the impoverished areas of Egypt. In addition, the good insulation properties of adobe itself also help to reduce dependence on energy, reflecting a positive response to the ecological environment. Therefore, Fathy's design practice is both a reflection on and transcendence of the limitations of Modernist architecture in the social and ecological dimensions, and it also foreshadows a path of architectural development that respects the local context, focuses on sustainable development, and takes into account social equity and environmental ethics. In summary, Hassan Fathy's adobe architecture, through the innovative application of traditional architecture, provided an important case and inspiration for the practice of Constructive Postmodernism in the field of architecture.

Geoffrey Bawa's Regional Modernism

The works of Geoffrey Bawa are celebrated as exemplars of regional modernism; his design practices in Sri Lanka demonstrate the skillful fusion of Modernist principles and the characteristics of tropical regionalism. Bawa's designs are not simply the localization of modern architectural language, but rather reflect a profound response to Sri Lanka's unique natural environment, climate, and indigenous culture. For example, in the design of the Lunuganga Estate (1948-1998), Bawa combined Western landscape design concepts with Sri Lankan native plants and topography, creating a space that is "both geometrically regular and full of natural wildness."²³ Furthermore, the Kandalama Hotel (1994) fully utilizes the characteristics of Sri Lanka's tropical climate, "integrating architecture with the surrounding forest environment, achieving a harmonious coexistence between architecture and nature."²⁴

Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional architectural elements, Bawa created an architectural style that is both modern in spirit and rich in regional characteristics. As David Robson points out in *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, "Bawa's architecture is a revision and reflection on Modernism; he rejected pure functionalism, instead emphasizing the connection between architecture and the environment, culture, and human emotions."²⁵ This design philosophy is not only

²³ David Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 123.

²⁴ Robert Powell, *The Tropical Modern House* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2012), 86.

²⁵ Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa*, 15.

reflected in the form and spatial layout of the architecture, but also permeates the selection of materials and the treatment of details, making Bawa's works outstanding representatives of Sri Lankan regional modernism.

Wang Shu's Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art

Wang Shu's design of the Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Art (CAA) is far more than a superficial reproduction of traditional architectural forms. Instead, with a more critical and constructive posture, it actively explores the development path of contemporary architecture. In terms of material selection, he adopted a large number of recovered bricks and stones from the demolition of old urban areas in the Jiangnan region. In terms of construction methods, he deliberately preserved and revived almost-lost hand-laid bricklaying techniques and organically integrated them with modern structural systems. This strategy of "coexistence of the old and the new" not only achieved sustainable material and process cycles, but also constructed a deep dialogue between tradition and modernity at the architectural language level.

For example, the "Wa Shan" (Tile Mountain) building complex and the library within the Xiangshan Campus used millions of recycled old tiles for the exterior facade, which were hand-stacked to form a facade with a strong texture. These materials, weathered by time, not only carry regional memories and traces of life, but are also reactivated in the new architectural context, forming a spatial narrative that is both simple and poetic. This practice vividly demonstrates Wang Shu's architectural philosophy of "rebuilding cultural rootedness"—he rejects the idea of viewing tradition as a static symbol, but understands it as a living resource that can be continuously translated and recreated. As he says in *Building a Dwelling: Things You Should Know About Architecture*, "Architecture should become a medium, connecting the past and the present, connecting humans and nature."²⁶ Through the Xiangshan Campus, a work with a Postmodern constructive significance, Wang Shu not only reshaped the regional identity of architecture but also provided a culturally rooted and future-oriented cultural path for contemporary Chinese architecture in the context of globalization.

Yu Kongjian's "Ecological Security Pattern" and "Big Foot Revolution"

Yu Kongjian's landscape design practice can be considered an important development of Constructive Postmodernism in the Chinese context. His theories of "ecological security

²⁶ Shu Wang, *Building a Dwelling: Things You Should Know About Architecture* (Yinchuan: Livable Publishing, 2017), 56.

pattern” and the “Big Foot Revolution” not only critique the disregard and destruction of natural systems in the process of Modernist urbanization, but also actively construct a landscape creation path based on ecological processes, regional adaptability, and public participation. His works reflect a subversion and reconstruction of traditional engineering thinking in terms of materials, techniques, and spatial strategies, aiming to achieve a harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural system.

In the renovation of Zhongshan岐江Park (2001), Yu Kongjian preserved the industrial relics of the original shipyard, such as the railroad tracks, cranes, and docks, and used ecological restoration technology to transform brownfields into urban green spaces with rain-flood management functions. He did not remove the “ugly” industrial traces, but through minimal intervention design, made the “abandoned” facilities become the carriers of collective memory and the display interface of ecological processes, reflecting the postmodern ethic of “respecting the native land and returning to the wisdom of survival.” As he points out in *The Art of Survival: Recovering Landscape Architecture*, “We need a new aesthetic, an aesthetic based on ecology and survival, rather than decoration and power.”²⁷

In addition, Jinhua Yanweizhou Park (2014) integrates flood control infrastructure with citizen activity spaces through “adaptive flood control design” and “submersible landscape” strategies. The project uses native plants and porous materials to build a resilient waterfront, allowing the site to be seasonally inundated by floods, thereby reconnecting the city and the river in terms of function and emotion. This practice not only transcends the single technological logic of modern water conservancy engineering but also demonstrates the values of “ecological priority, coexistence of humans and land” advocated by Constructive Postmodernism.

Yu Kongjian’s practice, with ecological holism at its core, uses landscape as a medium to mediate social, environmental, and cultural conflicts, responding to the loss of regional identity in the context of globalization, and providing an operationally meaningful paradigm for the sustainable development of Postmodern architecture and landscape.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

Although Constructive Postmodern Architecture has achieved significant progress on both theoretical and practical levels, its development still faces multiple challenges while also showing a clear future direction.

²⁷ Kongjian Yu, *The Art of Survival: Recovering Landscape Architecture* (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2006), 72.

In terms of controversies and challenges, firstly, the risk of formalism still exists. Some projects, in their pursuit of cultural expression, rely too heavily on the accumulation of symbols and superficial treatment, failing to achieve an intrinsic integration of cultural tradition and modern function, resulting in an architectural language that is superficial. Secondly, ecological technologies and local materials are often constrained by economic and technical conditions in practical applications, especially in areas with limited resources, where their promotion faces real obstacles. Third, the level of theoretical integration remains difficult, and how to systematically integrate diverse ideas such as process philosophy, ecology, and cultural theory into architectural practice still requires further theoretical innovation and methodological construction.

Looking to the future, with the continuous intensification of the global ecological crisis, the crisis of cultural identity, and technological changes, the value of Constructive Postmodern Architecture will become increasingly prominent. Its development should focus on the following directions: first, promoting deeper interdisciplinary integration, especially the cross-integration with fields such as ecology, digital technology, and sociology to expand the boundaries of design theory and methodology; second, developing more flexible and adaptable design strategies to respond to the diverse needs of different regions, cultures, and climate conditions; third, advocating for broader social participation, promoting the transformation of architectural practice from “designer-led” to a model of “co-construction by users and communities”; fourth, constructing a more systematic architectural evaluation system, encompassing multiple value standards of ecology, culture, society, etc., to achieve the construction of a comprehensive and sustainable human living environment. Constructive Postmodern Architecture represents a positive attempt to transcend the limitations of Modernism and Postmodernism. With its multi-dimensional integration of constructiveness, ecological consciousness, cultural relevance, and humanism, it provides contemporary architecture with a more responsible and hopeful path of development. Despite the challenges that remain, its ideas and practice have already pointed us towards a more sustainable and human-centered architectural future.

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