

## Theory and Practice on One of a Kind Furniture in Postmodernism

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored contemporary furniture theory and practice in Postmodernism mentioned as one of a kind furniture based on ideas from the tradition since Modernism. Qualitative conceptual analysis as the principal methodology was used to explore the postmodern furniture adopting or reflecting ornament from the tradition presented as postmodern furniture designers' point of view differently and variously. Thus, the examples about one of a kind or one-off furniture were dealt with Postmodern ideas appeared in the doubt over Modernism, Post-Modern furniture ideas from the traditional and Modern architecture, ornamentalism, Postmodern theorists, Postmodern furniture and the criteria. As a result, although one of a kind furniture design appealed newly from and based on the ornament of the tradition has been identified as new design like one of a kind furniture which shows lack of function, the piece with the meaningful ornament makes people happier in their daily life. Hence, one of a kind furniture, a work of art, has been required as striking a balance both function or comfort and aesthetics or beauty which makes the people more enjoyable.

**Key words:** One of a kind or one-off furniture, Postmodernism, Ornament, Anti-modernism.

### INTRODUCTION

Furniture theory and practice in Postmodernism mentioned as 'one off' appear anti-rationalism and anti-modernism and are based as ideas from the tradition. The postmodern furniture adopting or reflecting ornament from the tradition expresses postmodern furniture designers' point of view variously. Contemporary furniture in Postmodernism has been presented in one of a kind or 'one off', limited edition, smaller scales, short batch or small batch, mass production, and so on. Literally speaking, one of a kind furniture is to work on only a piece of furniture at a time. The pieces have represented ornamental furniture appealed newly in Postmodern era like all pieces of furniture in the tradition which is one off furniture. In the furniture produced by one of a kind processes, there is no constraints needed in other productions mentioned. As the designers presents the shape, color, material, and technique ornamentally and meaningfully in the pieces, 'one-off' furniture has made the people be satisfied more and happier in using it in their daily life. Thereby, even though one-off furniture would rather not be useful, many contemporary furniture designers try to create one of a kind furniture as a work of art.

Thus, I will focus on one of a kind furniture based on the ornament of the tradition by investigation through content analysis with related literature materials in Postmodern era. Thereby, I will explore 'one off' furniture in Postmodernism by following topics, which are the doubt over Modernism, Post-Modern furniture ideas from the traditional and Modern architecture, the ideas in

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Received for publication: August 17, 2007.

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Ornamentalism, Postmodern theorists, Criteria on Postmodern furniture, Postmodern furniture design, one of a kind furniture.

## BACKGROUND

### *The doubt over Modernism*

Generally speaking, one of the Modernist ideas that had promoted the emergence of Postmodern philosophy was the doubt over whether there is ever a neutral or universal truth. Those revolutionary thinkers such as Friedrich Neizsche, Martin Heidegeer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, or Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty all held a very skeptical attitude toward the faith in scientific objectivity advocated in Modernity. These great thinkers have all held “a much more cautious and limited perspective on truth and knowledge, stressing that facts are simply interpretations, that truth is not absolute but merely the constructs of individuals and groups and all knowledge is mediated by culture and language”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, postmodern advocates aggressively criticized the culture, theory, and politics in Modernity where logic and rationality dominated the way the human mind perceived the world and nature. Postmodernists have attempted to appropriate new discourses and positions. Thereby, in terms of postmodernists’ views, the individual is decentered and “the self is merely an effect of language, social relations, and the unconscious”; the ability of the individual to effect change or be creative is deemphasized.<sup>3</sup> Postmodernists focus on semantic projects, believing that “language, signs, image, and signifying systems organize the psyche, society, and everyday life”.<sup>4</sup> In terms of art, Postmodernists both reject and continue to elaborate ideas of Modernism simultaneously. However, postmodernism is more complicated than Modernism in its attempt at philosophical inquiry and, because for the most part it denounces Modernism, Postmodernism can not be adequately understood without an understanding of Modernism. It may be somewhat extreme to say so, but, according to Barrette (1994), “postmodernists set themselves apart from all or most Modernist beliefs, attitudes, and commitment”.<sup>5</sup>

### *Post-Modern furniture ideas from the traditional and Modern architecture*

Many architects and furniture designers in Postmodernism continue to extend the modern tradition, and pay homage to the International Style or adapt it into high technology. The continuation of the Modernism revivals and products includes “nearly all the famous ‘Modern’ chair designs of Mies Vander Rhode, Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand, Eileen Gray, Marcel Brucer, and Guiseppe Terragni, to mention only a few”.<sup>6</sup> Today, unlike Postmodern furniture, industrial furniture design of Neo-and Late-Modern styles, Continues to be mass-produced by evolving technology. The furniture tends to focus more on function or comfort than modern furniture.

Hence, for example, in comparing modern ideas to Post-Modern ideas, according to Collins & Papadakis,

One of the cliches of the Modern Movement had been the flat roof, which Le Corbusier had suggested was a better use of space than the traditional pitched roof. The responding cliché of

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, T. 1994. Criticizing art: understanding the contemporary. p. 110

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, T. 1994. Criticizing art: understanding the contemporary. p. 111

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, T. 1994. Criticizing art: understanding the contemporary. p. 112

<sup>5</sup> Barret, T. 1994. Criticizing art: understanding the contemporary. p. 118

<sup>6</sup> Collins, M. & Papadakis, A. 1989. Post-Modern design. p. 69

Post-Modern is the return of the pitched roof in architecture, or a reference to it in 'micro-architectural' design. Modernism had mostly relied on one solid, the cube; Post-Modernism reapplies others, such as the cone, pyramid and cylinder. Much Post-Modern design is mimetic of housing typologies which are urban, including the pitched roof house common to many cities before the Modern Movement.<sup>7</sup>

Bringing this concept along, most of the Post-Modern architects have turned their attention toward furniture design, and their decoration expressed in Postmodern furniture has reminded people of the tradition.

Thereby, like Postmodern architecture, Postmodern furniture explore ideas from the tradition of craft. Postmodern furniture represents an eclectic and pluralistic approach based on Postmodern ideas.

### *The ideas in Ornamentalism*

Postmodernism is the appearance of anti-Modernism and anti-Rationalism in the architecture of the Modern Architects themselves. Collins and Papadakis (1989) state that Postmodern architects, including Robert Venturi, Hans Hollein, and Leon Krier, "have reestablished eclecticism, pluralism, decoration, and what in America is called 'ornamentalism.' Ornament is no longer a crime, and strictly speaking, Post-Modernism is an architectural term for the reaction against the international Modern work of architects such as Mies Vander Rhode, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier" (p. 69). The Postmodernists began to explore ornament in their architecture. They saw ornament as reflecting the web of human beings' thoughts and feelings. According to Peter Fuller (1988), "the destruction of ornament within the Modernist movement revealed the underlying emptiness of the aesthetic, ethical and spiritual life of that age. No arbitrary 'New Ornamentalism' can fill this void".<sup>8</sup> As a result, Postmodernists have emphasized a new dictum against the principal 'less is more' of modern furniture. The concept that 'less is boring' by Robert Venturi has been recognized and applied not only by architects but also by furniture designers in Postmodernism (Collins and Papadakis 1989). In their work, they explore the idea of ornament from traditions such as Gothic, Renaissance, etc.

## THEORISTS

### *Postmodern theorists*

Theorists in relation to Postmodernism furniture are best explored in the book by Jencks, Downey, Collins & Papadakis, etc., such as *What is Post-Modernism?* (1986), *Postmodern design* (1989), and *Neo-furniture* (1992), respectively. They stress that, like Postmodernism architecture, Postmodern aesthetics of contemporary furniture intends to communicate on various levels. New Designer furniture designers, including Postmodern architects, have developed their ideas from Jencks' doubling-coding concept. The criteria of Postmodern aesthetics through contemporary furniture are referred to as ideas from the aesthetics of Postmodern architecture. Most of the Postmodern architects have created Postmodern furniture which is in harmony with the aesthetics of their Postmodern architecture. In Modernism, "ornament, polychromy, metaphor, humor, symbolism and convention were put on the index and all forms of decoration and historical reference were declared taboo".<sup>9</sup> However, Postmodernists accept and adapt these elements as the message of their art. Jencks (1986) stresses that definers of Post-Modernism were "connected with

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<sup>7</sup> Collins, M. & Papadakis, A. 1989. Post-Modern design. p. 79

<sup>8</sup> Fuller, P. 1988. The search for a postmodern aesthetic. P. 117

<sup>9</sup> Jencks, C. 1986. What is Post-Modernism? p. 35

semantics, convention, historical memory, metaphor, symbolism and respect for existing cultures” (p. 35). These architects differentiate Postmodernism from Late-modernism, which involves more technical and economic aspects in solving problem.

Charles Jencks, an architect and critic who has been one of the most prolific commentators on Postmodernism, has offered a useful definition of Post-Modernism in terms of double coding:

To this day I would define Post-Modernism as I did in 1978 as *doubling coding: the Combination of Modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects*. The point of this double coding was itself double.... Modernism failed to mass-housing and city building partly because it failed to communicate with its inhabitants and users who might not have liked the style, understood what it meant or even known how to use it. Hence the double coding, the essential definition of Post-Modernism, has been used as a strategy of communicating on various levels at once.<sup>10</sup>

Jencks (1986) mentions that Postmodern architects tend to emphasize contextual and cultural additions to their inventions in their architecture. Thus, many Postmodernists, who are involved in allegory and narrative, adapt and invent mythology. Renewed concern for symbolism and meaning is focused on semantic aspects. Jencks symbolic furniture is usually “designed to be placed in many different contexts”.<sup>11</sup> Collins and Papadakis (1989) maintain that “a symbolic furniture, still somewhat general but capable of specific meaning and furniture, might reassert its rightful place and give anonymous space a place and location” (p. 24)

#### *Criteria on Postmodern furniture*

Contemporary furniture in Postmodernism is referred to as revival, reintroduction and reinterpretation of ideas from historical references as in the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco, and as an adaptation of fine arts.

According to Efland et al. (1994), a single, generally accepted definition of the Postmodern theory has not yet emerged. A description of Postmodernism involves multiple perspectives. The term “*Postmodernism*” as used in most arts represents

Aesthetics that oppose concepts fundamental to modernism, such as genre, as a discrete style with distinct boundaries... However, the term is located in the past and present rather than the future. Bits of the past are placed together in a collage like fashion. The new conception of time and place suggests the way in which a fragmented past continues to exist in the future.<sup>12</sup>

This aspect of the Postmodern theory has particular relevance for Postmodern furniture.

Contemporary furniture in Postmodern has been represented as reactionary, in opposition to Modernism, and neoconservative. Postmodern furniture designers have attempted to return to symbolism, metaphor, wit and reference. These elements are referred to as Postmodern aesthetics of communication in Postmodern furniture. Contemporary furniture styles in Postmodernism embrace ideas from historical references and the new technology of the current culture. Thus, contemporary furniture styles are expressed not only in Postmodernism, but also in Neo-Modernism. Collins & Papadakis (1989) mention that “both Post - and Neo - Modernism have a high ‘art’ content that can be applied to the exterior of industrial design”; both Post - and Neo - Modernism are subject to “an

<sup>10</sup> Jencks, C. 1986. What is Post-Modernism? p. 13-14

<sup>11</sup> Collins, M. & Papadakis, A. 1989. Post-Modern design. p. 24

<sup>12</sup> Efland, A, K, Freedman, K, & Stuhr, P. 1994. Postmodern theory p. 28

evolving technology” (p. 246). The pluralistic and eclectic approaches to furniture design in Postmodernism are characteristic of the work of the 1980s and 1990s. This is exemplified in a simultaneous multiplicity of styles such as New Baroque, New Modern, and Post-Punk, also known as new design in contemporary furniture styles. Furniture designs of these styles reinterpret and reintroduce the motives of decoration and craftsmanship. This new pluralism is possible in the decorative arts and in furniture. For example, some furniture designs in new design are highly decorative and individualistic; others include many dualities wavering between functionality, comfort, and aesthetics. Eclecticism is marked by the furniture designers’ working across some aesthetic lines. Downey (1992) maintains that this work remains unencumbered by the multiplicity that some call chaos. She observes that some furniture designers tell those who consider functionality the most important element that “they have remained in the most primitive stage of their design development”.<sup>13</sup> Overall, with the blurring of art and craft distinctions, today’s furniture designs tend to be characterized by chaos, bias, and disparities, which are largely expressed in one-of-a-kind works with high art content. This type of furniture is considered anti-furniture because of “its use of decoration, quirkiness of form, and towering scale”.<sup>14</sup> It appears that furniture designers of the 1980s and 1990s have stressed aesthetics over functionality or comfort in their furniture designs. This concern for formal aesthetics has made it difficult for the general public to use the Postmodern furniture.

#### *Postmodern furniture design*

Contemporary furniture design has been called new design, one of a kind. Dormer (1987) observes that today there are two areas, new design and art-craft furniture as product design, or industrial design furniture mainly associated with new technology, are developing in opposing directions. In fact, New Design furniture represents Postmodern furniture in reflecting the 20<sup>th</sup>-century traditions of political art, the modern movement, surrealism, expressionism, and the imagery of ethnographic collections. In other words, each designer is following his or her own inspiration, apparently outside the normal principles of design or craft but within the accepted territories of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in distinguishing furniture produced mainly in one-offs or limited editions from industrial furniture mass-produced mainly by an evolving technology, I identify contemporary furniture design in Postmodernism as new design like one off.

As a matter of fact, one of a kind furniture lacks comfort or function for everyday use in our daily lives because of the emphasis on aesthetics in ideas from the traditions of craft and fine arts. Therefore, in making furniture accessible to a broader public, there are some problems associated with the balance between the comfort and aesthetics of New Design furniture. First, one off furniture is difficult to mass-produce for a broader audience. The work is associated with decorative, crafty, narrative, descriptive, imaginative, and metaphorical elements, including various colors and patterns. Second, some furniture designs are roughly finished in materials from found objects because the designers have adapted the concepts of the fine arts. Finally, such furniture may be isolated from the public after exhibition in galleries and museums because the objects are regarded as fine arts like painting and sculpture. As a result, in these aspects one of a kind furniture does not strike a balance between comfort and aesthetics. The lack of comfort or function can discourage the masses from enjoying a piece of furniture daily life.

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<sup>13</sup> Downey, C. 1992. Neo-furniture. p. 155

<sup>14</sup> Fiell, C. & Fiell, P. 1991. Modern furniture classic since 1945. p. 146

<sup>15</sup> Dormer. 1987. The new furniture: Trends and tradition. p. 130

## ONE OF A KIND FURNITURE

The new design furniture like one off has been characterized as a product of Postmodern aesthetics. In fact, communication elements in new design furniture have the effect of making the furniture accessible to a broader audience. On the other hand, new design furniture has shown the problems of mass-production, materials, and viewer accessibility as stated previously. Thus, some designers of new design furniture are exploring, rethinking, redefining, and redesigning elements communicated through furniture for everyday use and for appreciation in everyday life. Through rethinking, redefining, and redesigning new design furniture, a piece of meaningful new design furniture, which has to strike a balance between comfort or function and aesthetics, can be created by one of a kind furniture designers. Hence, I will take a look at the pieces which include meanings in terms of my point of view to be able to make people happier and more enjoyable in their daily life.

### *Examples of the pieces*

For example, according to Downey (1992), the Santa and Suspisal chairs, by Luigi Serafini, create a characterization of humor, which is narrative in design and minimal in line along with fully animated spirit. Serafini's ability to animate his furniture, to guide it from pure function to fiction, produces communication through a harmony of simplicity and provocation (p. 169) (Fig 1, 2). The furniture serious called the "Fluid City," by Massimo Losa Ghini, emphasizes a city connected by communication rather than physical intention. The furniture designer's communication is fluid. The line of furniture design ease movement and erase friction, making themselves flexible, sliding, and flowing. Ghini intention is to animate his chair, to render the sedentary active. His designs structure a phenomenon of communication in New Design furniture (pp. 173, 175). The "Libabel" bookcase by Jeannot Cerutti is ornamented with stainless steel stars, spearheads, an accordion-fold arm, a real book and wood supports, which are covered with Greek and Roman letters. The bookcase has the appearance of a modern warrior supported by a little mysticism (p. 171) (Fig 3).

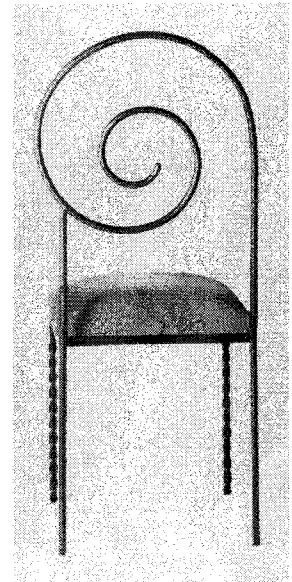
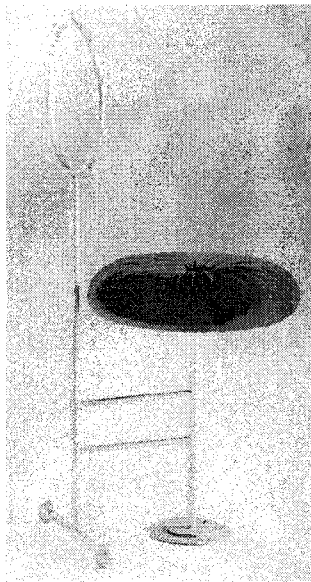


Fig.1. Downey, 1992, Santa chair. Fig.2 Downey, 1992, Suspisal chair.

As narrative chairs, the giant, soft flower chairs of Masanori Umeda are attractive, seductive, and communicative. The natural image is strongly felt even in manipulated plant life by Umeda. His Rose chair "is in full bloom, with just enough space within its layers of plump and plush petals to support one person in an interaction with an object is at once unnatural because one does sit on flowers and magical" (p. 103)(Fig 4). Umeda's flowers speak in a poetic imagery beyond chairs' function. The flower-shaped chairs embrace natural forms and colors, which might create a poem

naturally. Downey (1992) claims that Umeda's chairs have attempted a new dimension in the narrative of New Design furniture, "one which infuse interior space with memory and poetry, one which infuses interior space with memory and poetry, one which understands the interior impressionistically rather than structurally, as a stage for the event of living" (p. 103). These flower-shaped built with elaborate craftsmanship also show a willingness for reinterpretation in the tradition of craft: "the invitation to sit on the flowers is evident in the form. If one is still hesitant to do so, it is because of the old injunction not to touch" (Fig 5).<sup>16</sup>

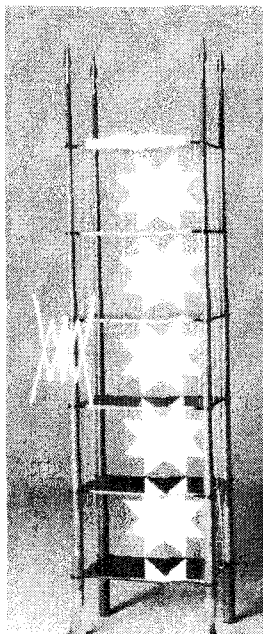


Fig.3. Downey, 1992, Libabel bookcase.

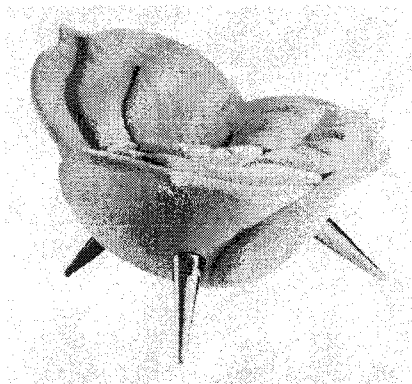


Fig.4. Downey, 1992, Rose chair

Volker Albus has also moved further into interior furniture design. Albus' imaginative places for communication become reality through color, light, and pattern. Albus' message is about animation in place, which is shown through a red folding screen, moody chandelier, and red puffy stool in the "Molto Decadente" installation. In another similar interior, Albus incorporates furniture with jewelry, through a partially inflated wall, a lively flower, and an S chair in his accessory boutique shop. His interiors harmonize color, light, and pattern for his imagined places (Fig 6).<sup>17</sup>

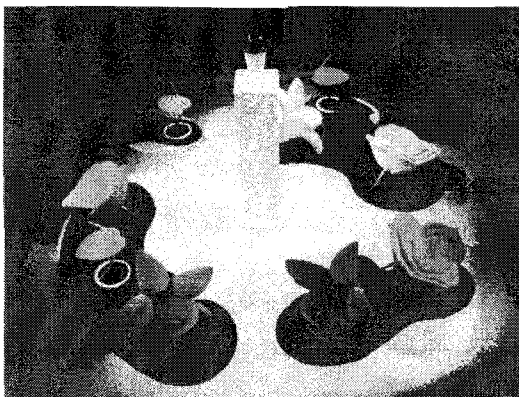


Fig.5. Downey, 1992, Flower chairs.



Fig.6. Downey, 1992, Interior of Accessory boutique.

<sup>16</sup> Downey, C. 1992. Neo-furniture. p. 103

<sup>17</sup> Downey, C. 1992. Neo-furniture. p. 187

Hence, these installation spaces, including restaurants and shops, are perfect examples of the new design works which have been created to explore the spaces in our every day life. The new design furniture designers encourage people to approach, appreciate, and enjoy contemporary furniture in daily use.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study explored contemporary furniture theory and practice in Postmodernism mentioned as 'one off' based on ideas from the tradition since Modernism. The postmodern furniture adopting or reflecting ornament from the tradition presented postmodern furniture designers' point of view differently and variously. Postmodern ideas appeared in the doubt over Modernism and influenced Postmodern art including postmodern furniture with ornamentalism which comes from 'less is boring' and 'ornament is no longer a crime' addressed as postmodern theories. Theorists in relation to Postmodernism furniture are best explored in the book by Jencks, Downey, Collins and Papadakis, etc., such as *What is Post-Modernism?* (1986), *Postmodern design* (1989), and *Neo-furniture* (1992), respectively. Postmodern ideas appeared in the doubt over Modernism and influenced Postmodern art including postmodern furniture with ornamentalism which comes from 'less is a bore' and 'ornament is no longer a crime' addressed as postmodern theories. Hence, contemporary furniture designers with their point of views who reinterpreted ornament from the tradition have tried to do their best in exploring 'one-off' furniture, a work of art.

As a result, the contemporary furniture design appealed newly from and based on the ornament of the tradition has been identified as new design like one of a kind furniture which showed lack of function or comfort. However, the pieces have made people satisfied more with and happier in their daily life. Therefore, one of a kind furniture, a work of art, has been required as striking a balance both function or comfort and aesthetics or beauty which makes the people more enjoyable. Through the balance, one-off furniture will give more satisfaction and happiness to the people who will use it in their life spaces.

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