

Schmods + Mockers



ROCKERS AND MODS: WHO IS CLEANER? PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

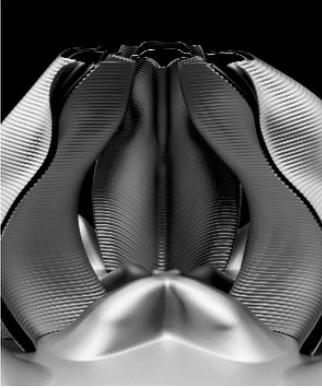
Being an architect in what the media has glibly dubbed the “digital age,” it sometimes feels like we roam in packs – gangs of architects subscribing to very specific methodologies for generating form on the one hand and space on the other. I am reminded of Claude Levi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*, in which he describes the sociology of games as a mode of differentiation similar to that of early human tribes that competed with, yet married one another to ensure a diverse genetic pool for the survival of each. (Think of the Aztec game of *Tlachtli*, in which the losers were killed.) Architectural discourse today seems to be degenerating into bickering over software programs and modeling techniques (status symbols), which differentiate each group and ensure survival in a market-driven economy. One person’s suburb-infested universe contrasts sharply with, say, another person’s blindingly white field of foamcore. But are the differences, like in a game or a gang, real or imaginary?

Do the myriad symbols of differentiation actually have meaning in the discourse of design practice, or are they chimera intended to convey to other tribes (like developers and museum curators) that one side is more virile than the other, or at least less prone to disease? Let’s consider some analogic evidence offered by one “historic” struggle for differentiation: the battle for *cool* between Britain’s mods and rockers:

*The Mods and the Rockers were two British youth movements of the early 1960s. Gangs of mods and rockers fighting in 1964 sparked a moral panic about British youth. . . . The Rockers adopted a macho biker gang image tending to wear such clothes as black leather jackets. The Mods adopted a pose of scooter-driving sophistication. It was believed that Mods were cleaner and tidier than Rockers. They often wore colorful clothes considered outrageous by the standards of the time. In Britain during the 1960s most teenage boys could not afford a motorbike or a motor scooter. These bikes/scooters were a status symbol perhaps equivalent to a car today.*¹

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mods_and_rockers.

Consider young architects today: between form and space (function being a long-lost cousin of the discourse, a sort of “flapper” to our mods and rockers) lies an



TEAPOT FOR ALESSI, GREG LYNN,
2003.

2. Fred Bernstein, "Hi Gorgeous, haven't I seen you somewhere?", *New York Times*, August 28, 2005.

architectural fashion battlefield, strewn with bad hair, obsolete software, impractical vehicles, and, of course, ostentatious eyewear.

Starting with Madame Pompadour herself, the pompadour has been a bold fashion statement since the rococo period (her portrait was painted around 1745). She is the patron saint of all rockers. It takes courage to be a trend-setter in such a visible way, and the risk of becoming a self-caricature looms heavily. Without this kind of brazen individualism, however, there is no James Dean hair and no Greg Lynn teapot.

The problem for us lies, as it did in the 1960s, with the conformity of nonconformity. In architecture today, those most in danger of becoming self-caricatures deal heavily in the currency of form. As visual media propagate images of highly formal work, architecture becomes increasingly identified with its visuo-iconic exchange value, and through commodification is transformed into "installation" (a linguistic abuse that does a great disservice to actual installation art). Furthermore, as noted in *The New York Times* this past summer, architects are increasingly exposing themselves to lawsuits for alleged "architectural plagiarism."² True plagiarism of architecture's intellectual property is impossible, as it involves site-specific factors and other elements that are hard to duplicate; but one might well contend that formal plagiarism is possible. The fact that the suit against David Childs' Freedom Tower design has been allowed to proceed is evidence of a larger cultural mutation toward a reading of architecture in purely formal terms.

From pompadour then, we move on to the bowl cut. This hairstyle has a much less glamorous history, first becoming popular during the Great Depression as an easy and economical way to cut a boy's hair. Both in terms of its utilitarian methodology (place bowl on head, cut what hangs below) and lack of stylin', the bowl cut is an apt metaphor for architecture that eschews formal preoccupations of ornament and affect, and is preoccupied with elevators, space, and gravity. And yet, the bowl cut also became a style, just like "midcentury modern" became a new real-estate term. How did this happen?

By the time The Who released the film *Quadrophenia* in 1979, the whole mod/rocker opposition had washed over itself in a wave of post-'60s nostalgia. Although The Who is really the premier mod band, it was the proliferation of the music and style through groups such as the Small Faces that really announced a new trend. Similarly, from the bowl cut,



a style evolved that was at times called the “Beatle haircut,” but which I prefer to call “square hair.” Square hair is actually a long bowl cut that cannot be cut using a bowl at all, but rather requires a trip to the barber or coiffeur, and is therefore a middle-class contrivance, along the lines of the modern residence in Jacques Tâti’s film *Mon Oncle*, which is so meticulously composed and choreographed, one fears that Madame Arpel might wander out at any moment and turn on the fish fountain.

In The Beatles’ first film, *A Hard Day’s Night*, a reporter in the press conference scene asks Ringo “Are you a mod or a rocker?” He replies “I’m a mocker,” making a joke of the mods and rockers conflict. It is not surprising that this poppy witticism came from the stealth Beatle, the one who was ignored, the drummer, as it were. While the other band members carried the burden of defining the band’s popular image, differentiating the Fab Four from, say, The Kinks or the Strawberry Alarm Clock, the drummer could really just sit at the back and play. This is an enviable position, and one that many architects might naturally prefer. To be unburdened by the need to differentiate one’s “polemic” could be a relief in a profession struggling to define its very utility to the consumer-public.

Besides haircuts, mods and rockers also differentiated themselves with the bikes they chose. Rockers rode full blown motorcycles, such as Harley Davidsons, full of muscle, horsepower, and speed. Mods rode scooters, full of agility, comfort, and brand. So what can be said today about the Furnicycle by Atelier Bow-Wow? It is neither hog nor scooter, bike nor chair, but rather a kind of hybrid vehicle patched together from impetuous “needs,” with neither formal intention nor elegant functionality. The Furnicycle is a vehicle for mockers.

MVRDV, WOZOCO. PHOTO
COURTESY THE ARCHITECT



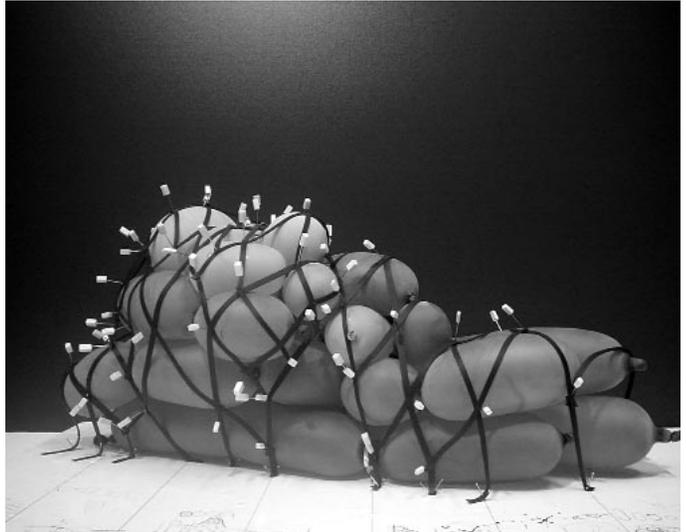
SANAA, MODEL OF 21ST CENTURY
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART.
PHOTO COURTESY THE ARCHITECT

MOCKERS

Mockers include SANAA, MVRDV, and the aforementioned Atelier Bow-Wow. Diagram is not actually king, but more of a petulant despot. Form is conspicuously irrelevant to these practices, which have more in common with the choreographed space of Tâtiville than the sober modernism of Unité d’Habitation. This work exposes the diagram as the hypochondriac that it is, yet affords the freedom of movement and dwelling promised by modernism but rarely delivered. Space is a game of silly adjacencies and farcical events. Details are painstakingly concealed so as not to give the secret away.

Today, as trends split off and subdivide, Ringo’s mocker has a new counterpart. Copping a similar attitude of blended genes and self-deprecating humor, the word *schmod* has been floating around in informal social discourse for some time now. I propose here to assign a definition that rescues the term from its linguistic instability. Schmod can and should mean more than “person who is sick of *Dwell* magazine.”

NOX, BALLOON MODEL FOR CENTRE
POMPIDOU TWO. IMAGE COURTESY
NOX/LARS SPUYBROEK



R&SIE, RENDERING OF MNBA
MUSEUM. PHOTO COURTESY THE
ARCHITECT

SCHMODS

Schmods include NOX, R&SIE, and servo. This is form conspicuously pretending to follow function while in fact it chases it's own tail through elaborate digital structures and methodologies. It is always busy, always exploring, always seeking the shortest path, the longest span. It's EZ-Form (like an EZ-Pass, Form 1040-EZ, EZ-Bake, etc.), making the fastest connection, the most seamless transition. Form in this context is a verb (to quote Buckminster Fuller). The program diagram, the technological skin, the web-net structure, all make an appearance in a design process ostensibly unconcerned with formal outcome, but somehow it always looks like its own dernier cri. It is wavy hair blown out with intense heat to resemble Jennifer Aniston's monumental "blowout" from *Friends*.

In the final analysis, the insularity of our tribe becomes more and more hysterical, and its discourse increasingly desperate. My wealthy grandfather, a retired drummer, screenwriter, and all-around entertainment opportunist, suggested that I hire an agent in order to obtain architectural commissions. The very absurdity of the suggestion gave me pause. My mother talks about the importance of satisfying "customers" as if I sold cars (as she once did), which just makes me angry, because, like most architects, I am looking for the customers that satisfy me. In a country where 95 percent of the population answers affirmatively to a love for architecture with the statement that a) they almost became an architect, and b) they appreciate the modern architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (or is it that other Frank something?), one wonders what cause is served by fracturing the profession

into increasingly diaphanous slivers of differentiation. Seen from the outside, these discussions of form, space, method, and diagram must seem truly incomprehensible. If a broader public were resuscitated beyond the cultural plague of nostalgia and its addiction to cheap and plentiful space, the narcissistic preening of architects in front of each other might actually spread into popular discourse at large and become an interesting cultural discussion. But for now, even if Marie was a little bit country and Donny a little bit rock 'n' roll, will we ever remember them as anything but The Osmonds? It's a lesson worth learning from.

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