Moss, Mud, and Architecture

Supermannerist Movement

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Each new era brings with it avant-garde theories in everything from the arts through philosophy and politics. Architecture isn't immune either. Some progressive designers have come up with an architectural answer to the way-out thinking today in other fields. This latest in-thing by vanguard designers is what the trade publication, Progressive Architecture, refers to as "Supermannerism."

Characterized by wild, bold patterns of paint, photographs, alphabetic symbols and anything else the designer can think of to expand or otherwise alter or destroy the integrity of the original space, Supermannerism is a blatant system of decorating otherwise sensible building forms. So far, it has not extended itself into the area of designing total buildings, which is after all, the architect's primary concern. Rather, it is the imposition of bizarre and exotic decorative forms on existing buildings.

Traditional Forms
Supermannerism, so called in reference to the period immediately following the Renaissance (mannerism) in which architects had the temerity to use traditional forms in which were then considered untraditional ways, has also been referred to by various writers as Supergraphics, Hippie architecture, LSDesign, Megadecoration and Campopop (after camp, op, and pop art).

In Supermannerism manifestos, one word keeps cropping up, the newly coined word, "lifestyle." Nobody seems to know exactly what this means, but it is the objective of the Supermannerists to express the "lifestyle" of the buildings' inhabitants.

Supermannerism seems to be a totally visual art, with the immediate objective of destroying with trompe-l'oeil any semblance of the original shape of the place. Thus, we have rooms with three dimensional painted patterns running across floor, walls and ceiling, with no regard for the traditional boundaries of each. Another room may be furnished with upholstered furniture which completely covers every square inch of the floor. You simply walk around, up and over hills and hummocks of foam padded floor—furniture and sit down wherever you want to and can fit. Colored lights can be used to change the appearance of a space by taking advantage of contrasting interior colors and reflective walls have been used to repeat the patterns of the room on into infinity, a la clothing store mirrors. Sometimes supermannerism styling seems to be a rebellion against the right angle design of much of our current furniture. Some of it resembles sheet-covered furniture in appearance at first glance and with the mounds and humps, seems symbolic of the moonscape or Space Age.

Is this just another crazy fad? Perhaps a visual extension of student anti-establishment activities in other areas? It appears not. Of course, some of the Supermannerists are in it just because it is the thing to do; but others are deadly serious. They are not saying to us that we must all live in houses with Upside down rooms. What they are saying is that perhaps there are better ways of doing things, and as students, they are in a better position than anybody else to do the experimenting necessary to discover new expressions. After all, the Baroque, one of the loveliest of all architectural periods was developed by the Post-Renaissance mannerists. Much of our present day painting, cinema and stagecraft is a direct out-growth of the turn of the century Dadaists (non-sense school) and Fauves (wild beasts).

Practical Applications

Already, Supermannerism has found some very practical applications in the work of some very substantial designers. The Quickborn Team, a German interior design group, has invented a system of office interiors which they refer to as "Office Landscape" in which curved partitions of varying heights, movable furniture and lots of potted plants are used to subdivide large offices, in lieu of partitions. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects, have created in their new Illinois State Bar Association Headquarters in Springfield, a Supermannerist atrium-lounge. A number of the smarter shops in New York and San Francisco are making use of Supergraphics as an effective public relations tool. To make up in style what they lack in floor space, the trend seems to be continuing in different places.

Where will all this lead? Nobody knows. Even the popular press has taken up the cry. In the May issue of American Home magazine, there are articles on Supermannerist furniture and lifestyle. Maybe it's not so avant-garde after all.

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