



## Amanda Levete

Now is a great time to be an architect, with liberated aesthetics, resurgent creativity, rethought modernism - and a welcome new distraction ...

### Now is good

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I've got a sexy new boyfriend. This means I've had my eye substantially off the ball. That does not mean to say I have abrogated my responsibilities in the office, but it does mean I've dealt with things differently. As is often the case, when routines are disrupted it leads to better things, new ideas, greater creativity, more experimentation, and different people taking greater responsibilities. I've always believed that being allowed to make mistakes is good, and this past two months has proved me right.

For some years we've had only minimal structure within the office because it creates maximum flexibility, but I realise now we will benefit from a little more structure and hierarchy. Management is not something we are trained in at architecture school and I don't think for one moment we should be - it's far too boring - but it does affect the quality of what you produce. I'm looking forward to a bit of happy management.

The modernism show at the V&A has made me think again about the ideals underpinning that movement. There was a thrilling vision of the future: a belief that design and art had the power to transform society, to affect the daily lives of many, and improve the quality of life. It was a quest for a just society, and a liberated way of living, where art and work came together.

When you look back it is easy to be cynical and call the modernists' vision naive. It is true that the rhetoric was ahead of the actual products, it was over-ambitious, the infrastructure was not in place and the economy not strong enough to implement their ideas on a grand scale - but in any vanguard movement you need to overstate the case in order to make the point.

The work itself was boundary-breaking. From teapots to cities, there was a passion for the synthesis of form and function. Despite their insistence on a polemic of design inevitability that resulted from a supposedly mechanistic culture, the aesthetic language was beautiful, glamorous and fluent.

It is this language that is the lasting legacy of modernism; a language that appears fresh and modern to this day, although ironically it is one adopted by the privileged few rather than the masses it was intended for. So the rhetoric failed. But we have failed, too. In the UK it took 30 years before diluted and misguided attempts were made to implement modernist ideals on any kind of scale, and it took the form of over-cheap and over-quick mass housing.

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To blame the failures of our housing on modernism is absurd. The failure lies more with the commissioning of lesser architects who produced lesser work for an audience that did not accept apartment living. But the real shame is that more than 70 years later we have still not cracked the housing issue. Instead modernism became the scapegoat, and the midwife to the quaint garden suburbs and cul-de-sacs that sucked the marrow out of our cities. This show is a timely reminder of our failures. And our collective responsibility to address them.

Now is a glorious time in architecture. The rule book has been torn up. We are liberated from the need to justify our work in functional and rational terms. Instead, the surface of a building has taken on a new significance. This is not superficial; it affects the way we conceive buildings and results in a more fluid way of imagining. The only necessities are beauty and authenticity - plagiarists please note.


We have moved on from structure vs ornament. When surface becomes structure you can have both. It is a more bodily approach, less technological, more animate. Surface is not about camouflage or concealing but about exposure, wearing the zone of vulnerability as a badge of honour.

The boundaries between wall and floor, landscape and building, roof and park are being challenged giving new significance to texture, grain, colour and repetition of motif. It is in this area of surface materials research that we need the support and resources of the manufacturing and construction industries. The glorious time will not last for ever so let's exploit it to the full.

Postscript :

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