Clothes, conventions and modernity. Rudofsky´s exhibition at the MoMA

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the debate on the formulation and the original proposals regarding Bernard Rudofsky´s 1944 exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art of New York. Through the analysis of the original letters sent by the architect during the research and curatorship of the exhibition, the research history, and the objects that did not make it to the show, it is possible to conclude that the exhibition ends up conforming to the conventions that modern architecture posed, exactly those that Rudofsky aimed to criticize. The exhibition established a dialogue between clothes and rationalized body, that turned out critical specifically among the difficult times after the end of Second World War.

ARE CLOTHES MODERN?

In November 1944, the first exhibition on clothing was held at New York's Museum of Modern Art, organized, designed, and curated by Moravian-born architect and designer Bernard Rudofsky. The exhibition, which opened until March 1945, brought to foreground some fundamental issues related to fashion and the body, and was an interesting snapshot of what was going on in processes that related clothing and the war. The central problem argued by Rudofsky in the exhibition aimed at certain conventions that hadn't been contested about the relations between function and body proportions. Especially regarding the standardization and normalization of measurements, the use of decorative elements, and the actual efficiency in the use of manufacturing materials.

The exhibition was the result of fourteen years of anthropological studies (MoMA, 1944), and in it Rudofsky exposed his theory on clothing, demonstrating its relationship with habits and human behavior. In the words of Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions for the museum, Rudofsky analyzed the superstitions and conventions to which we are unconsciously attached, and did so to clarify the fundamental principles that should govern clothing in a democratic age and country (MoMA, 1944).

Rudofsky first approached the museum in 1941 thanks to an invitation by Phillip Goodwin, then head of MoMA's Architecture Department, as he was arriving in the United States after winning the Organic Design contest. At that time, Goodwin requested from him a proposal for an exhibition on modern aesthetics. Rudofsky's reply was a portfolio of photographs of vernacular architecture, mainly from the Mediterranean (Scott, 1999). The differences between the museum's vision and Rudofsky's proposal could not be negotiated. In a second attempt, however, clothing would help Rudofsky evince his views regarding functionalism, as well as his particular reading of the abandonment of the anthropological lessons about the human body in the contemporary processes of architecture and design.

The hypothesis posed by Rudofsky was that modesty, the covered body, and nudity were the drivers in the search and transformation of the human body conducted from within clothing. However, this search did not succeed in establishing a clear relation with the liberation and rationalization of the body from the perspective of its actual organic functioning, because absolute transparency, understood as a nude, would not necessarily involve a knowledge of the body's personal needs (Rudofsky, 1986).

This argument was related precisely to the renowned Modern Architecture International Exhibition that MoMA had organized in 1932, in which it has proposed an approach to modern space conceived in terms of volume, planning, and flexibility. For Rudofsky, despite the changes imposed by modernity, there still remained an imposition in taste dictated by fashion that did not cater to real human needs or behavior, but rather could be as irrational as the reading that was done of the body deformations or ornaments in primitive cultures.

However, the phrase in Modern Architecture's catalogue that Rudofsky problematized the most was the one that Barr wrote in the foreword: "But just as the modern architect has had to adjust himself to modern problems of design and structure, so the modern public in order to appreciate his achievements must make parallel adjustments to what seems new and strange" (MoMA, 1932, p. 14).

For Rudofsky, the dilemma was centered around the forced artificiality between the real body and the overlapping layers of clothing. For him, individuality and independence of thought mattered too because according to him, fashion simply placated personal instincts and molded individuals. This is why the questioning of patterns, sizes, and unnecessary elements was regarded as a loss of individual instinct.[1] *For Rudofsky, the relation body-object had contextual conditions that were specific to each human group and was based on adaptation rather than rationalization.*

The exhibition opened to the public on November 1944 occupying the first floor of the museum. It was subdivided into ten sections itemizing the relation between the body, symbolism, vernacular tradition, and the rationalization of clothing. The sections were named as follows: Unfashionable Human Body, Excess and Superfluity, Trousers versus Skirts, The Desire to Conform, Posture: Causes and Effects, The Abuse of Materials, Wisdom in Period and Folk Dress, The Revival of the Rational, and Domestic Background of Clothing.

Clothing as an element of historical analysis opened at that moment different possibilities of reading. On the one hand, it threw into question the conventions that were being drawn from early 20th Century discussions, specifically with publications like Neufert's from 1936, about stereotyping in architecture. On the other hand, it was an active part of the debates that related the modern with social and moral values.

Many examples emerged in this debate, notable among them figures such as Oscar Wilde and Adolf Loos, who in parallel complemented the discussion on the need to improve women's clothing, aligned in turn with demands for rights promoted by groups like the Rational Dress Society (Green, 2013) in London, who opted for the search for a political posture along values such as beauty, grace, comfort, and convenience, continuing thus with the symbolic fight of the Bloomers.

And, finally, in the early 20th Century, machine-related values overlapped those of fashion, specifically in relation to concepts like movement, speed, and repetition, which finally had an impact in the way clothing was portrayed in the early fashion houses and magazines. According to Caroline Evans (2013), the repetition of a type of body will be revealed in the models, highlighting a phenotypical similarity among the women in the catwalks and, finally, the body set in motion will be stressed, which corresponds with the incorporation of mirrors and the multiplication of the body. This last issue possibly has its best-known example in the stairs of Coco Chanel fashion house in Paris, where models' dresses got multiplied and, likewise, different views were shown at the same time.

In the case of clothing, Rudofsky argued that the concepts of modesty and decency, established largely by a conservative and dominant society based on masculine criteria and values, had blurred the natural features and characteristics, altering the shape of the body just as primitive societies had done before. The elements superimposed on the body had no organic justification, and the body itself was still subject to adjustments such as the slimming and masculinization of women's clothing during the First World War, religious rites such as circumcision, and the still prevalent use of the corset to exaggerate the waistline.

> *Our civilization keeps alive the fascination with monsters and, at the same time, expresses disdain for the normally built human body. The female figure is redesigned from time to time, like furniture or automobile bodies. The specimens of past days fascinate us with their zoological garden variety rather than with their erotic charm. (Rudofsky, 1947, p. 49)*

Rudofsky's thorough search during the preparation of this exhibition left behind a series of evidences about the issues

(1) "The individual whose mind is molded under the pressure of urban or suburban environment with its lack of privacy, its noises and nuisances, develops and insensitivity which cushions the impact of the offense" (Rudofsky, 1946, p. 156).

that really mattered to him. In his letters he left traces of his real concern for the relation between the standardization of patterns, manufacturing materials, the relation between woman, work, and industry during the Second World War, and the transformations of the body through fashion.

THE LETTERS OF THE PREPARATIONS. THE OTHER EXHIBITION

The promotion of the exhibition done by the museum tried to separate it from the subject of contemporary fashion. In fact, it was presented by Wheeler as a fundamental approach to the problem of dress (MoMA, 1944). The press release indicated as follows:

> *Although the exhibition does not specifically offer a reform of clothing and it isn't, by any means, a fashion show (...) the hope of the museum is that the exhibition, by stimulating a re-examination of the subject, may have a beneficial effect on dress comparable to that already accomplished by the modern analysis of function in the field of architecture (MoMA, 1944, p. 1).*

Not creating a design or art exhibition, Rudofsky cleverly moves the analysis of the history of dress as an independent object to a relation of it with society, contextualizing the different ways in which the object is utilized and its symbolic and social significance, endowing clothing also with the condition of being an art form. As Wheeler stated in the press release, it was strange that clothing had been denied the status of art when it lacked the limitations that painting, sculpture, and dance have; and whose relation with the original source of aesthetics, the human body, should elevate it to a paramount place among the arts (MoMA, 1944).

The historical exploration of clothing, and the dialogue with the contemporary, led Rudofsky to search for elements that would bring him closer to museums and fashion magazines, such as the Brooklyn Museum and Vogue *magazine. One of the first persons he contacted, in July 1944, was Aline Bernstein,[2] who he consulted for special mannequins in size and proportion to showcase some designs. He also asked her about the possible influence of the war on fashion. Bernstein, who was the founder of New York's Museum of Costume Art, replied referring to the problem of material rationing that affected fabrics in particular. A relevant fact that she presents Rudofsky has to do with the number of women that were working in industries, a fact that, for her, had undoubtedly changed the parameters of fashion. For, as Bernstein writes, although there was money to spend, there wasn't much material to buy and women were asking for evening dresses to wear after working in the industrial plants, because after a long day's work, "they come home and put on the fanciest things they can buy" (Bernstein, 1944).*

Bernstein's words responded to the particular restrictions of the time. In May 23, 1941, the Women´s Bureau – U.S. Department of Labor published a report on clothing for working women. This catalog, which was also among Rudofsky's documents for the exhibition, was not directly included. Written as an official report by Margaret T. Metter, it established the relations between function, work, and dress, and explained how the textile industry should respond to it. This brochure manifested the growing participation of women in the industry and explained, with a tone similar to that of a fashion magazine, what were the different tasks to carry out, and which was the relation that dress should offer for a perfect coupling, because "the well-dressed woman in industry is a safe worker" (Women´s Bureau – U.S. Department of Labor, 1941, p. 1). Its pages also contained an interesting specification regarding the incorporation of pockets, which should only respond to needs related to the proper performance of the work. The brochure not only established the conditions of clothing and its making for women in the work environment, but also responded to the restrictions imposed by the war and rationing of materials, which also affected designers and stores, because specific orders regarding manufacturing modes were also directed to them. Two specific examples are named in Rudofsky's letters: J.C. Penney and Neiman Marcus. The department of design at J.C. Penney was already incorporating the design requirements for the industry, and it's Neiman Marcus who points out to Rudofsky the economy that laid behind the simplification of the designs.

In a letter addressed to Rudofsky, Neiman Marcus quotes his own article published by Fortune *magazine. In it, the designer explains to the architect the logics behind the simplification of the designs and the savings in production costs, emphasizing that they were designing for an anonymous public with which they didn't interact, and that the reduction in pockets and buttons implied great savings in massive garment production:*

(2) Aline Bernstein and Irene Lewisohn founded in 1937 the Museum of Costume Art, which will merge with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946, becoming the Costume Institute, a successful independent curatorial department.

> *Our manufacturers must make dresses for an unknown public (...) they may bring forth a few new ideas, but they must make sellers, and they must limit their cost so that the garments may be sold profitably at a predetermined wholesale price. A button less here or a pocket less there means a saving of possibly hundreds of dollars. They don´t know the people for whom they design, and they certainly get no inspiration from them. (Nieman, 1940)*

The textile industry and the development of work clothes, together with the rationing of fabrics, were undoubtedly source of concern for Rudofsky, who paid strong attention to innovation in materials. It's worth recalling that rationing of fabrics was very strong during the war. In the U.S., regulation L-85 was decreed by the War Production Board (Edwards, 2018, p. 156), while England decreed the rationing of fabrics and the Make-do and Mend *policies. This led to assemble important design houses such as Worth or Molineux in producing dress patterns that were sold in stores with the purpose of making clothes in an efficient manner, without losses or superfluous decorations (Wood, 1989). This was called* Utility Clothing, *a tendency that popularized among women a type of working clothes of simple cut, as well as the incorporation of trousers in their wardrobe. The designs got simplified and were of a timeless cut. For this, the fabric used pointed at the notion of durability over any other attributes (generally, a resistant type of tweed was used). The media will take on a highly relevant role in this scenario, because women's fashion magazines distributed dress patterns on a weekly basis to disseminate, in the face of rationing policies, specific fashion, and facilitate its manufacture.*

It is possible that the scarcity of fabrics and its rationing may have led Rudofsky to search for other materials and technologies that were in full development for the war. Among his letters we find two remarkable petitions, one to Allan Murray Laboratories and another to Dupont Company, the chemical firm that had invented Nylon few years earlier. As Rudofsky points out in the letter he sent Dupont in June 1944, goods produced by the firm (which were featured in an article in the New York Telegram) had caught his attention. However, as the firm representative replied, Dupont only produced the Nylon thread and did not produced any items with that material, which at the time was exclusively destined for military use. Concretely, due to its high resistance as synthetic fabric, one of its main uses was in the manufacturing of parachutes.

The interest of the architect for this fiber was quite right. The synthetic fiber, which had been developed since the thirties, was one of the strongest drivers in the massification of garment manufacturing and helped create women's clothing during the rationing period, which would last until the end of the war. Paradoxically, despite the firm declining to provide items for the exhibition, the recycled parachute was one of the most frequently used fabrics in the manufacturing of clothes during the war, demonstrating the originality elicited by the war economy and, above all, the flexibility in all aspects that the material allowed.

In the search for new materials, there was a concern for the relation between body, economy, and the formal possibilities provided by these synthetic materials that traditional materials didn't allow, and pattern standardization restricted. The different graphic analogies between dressed body and deformed body, present in the exhibition, may have had a positive prospection in the relation between new materials and the reading of real body shapes. Undoubtedly, Rudofsky's interest was in the balance between technologies and the individual, seeking an approach to the body in which plasticity, individuality, and the particularities of the human form were related to efficiency, use, and above all, history or the inherited knowledge.

It is thus how, for Rudofsky, a fundamental aspect would appear, which is learning from experience and not from imposed rules or conventions such as those that modern architecture synthesized in concepts like planning, efficient design or mass production, which tended to standardize the everyday aspects of living over the particularities of each individual or community.

CONCLUSIONS

The letters that Rudofsky left as evidence of a lengthy curatorial process, where he left aside various dialogues and processes of the fashion world, are evidence that his aim was to construct a critique and a parallel that demonstrated that the modern, as aesthetic convention, was not too far away from other conventions throughout history, specifically demonstrated in elements of dress, fashion, and ornamentation for the body. Clothing has been used historically in the theoretical discussion about architecture to install debates, and Rudofsky joins in with a critical reading in regard to issues of symmetry, ornamentation, and functionality, to which he adds, establishing the debate, the human body.

With his merely anthropological and comparative reading between primitive cultures and what was

happening in modernity, he tried to judge the position of rationality or the human thought superimposed over natural forms, just as primitive cultures had done superimposing moral beliefs to the understanding of the natural body. For Rudofsky, these moralist approaches were being resumed during this period where the body, liberated and rationalized, was still incapable of undressing and emancipating from past manifestations altogether, demonstrating that there was incoherence between container and content in achieving the expected harmony between rationality, matter, and form. Rudofsky's critiques pointed at the aesthetic conventions that the museum had adopted regarding the modern and the international style, in the same way that for him, clothing had positioned fashion and modesty over the real needs of the body, which was evidenced by the standardization and programmatic flexibility of uses in the spaces.

With his work, Rudofsky managed to resuscitate the human body in the discussions about the transformations of design and architecture from an anthropological perspective, where the social and territorial context, matter, and traditional knowledge were involved. After World War II, in 1946, he would publish the book about the exhibition, entitled The Unfashionable Human Body, *managing to push his argument towards a more interesting point (which is visible in its conclusion). What concerned him was fashion at the service of totalitarian ideas and the lack of real democracy that lied behind the mass production of garments, both for the precarization of labor as for the loss in individual ideas that must have been reflected in dress. For him, it was pointless to use machines or technology to manufacture thousands of items of clothing without having understood the real value of the body and the human being. Patterns perpetuated mass production and thus kept the masses from having a critical attitude, something that was perpetuated and incremented by publicity. Besides, there was a debt with the word democracy, given that until then it was misunderstood and associated merely to mass production processes, which, for Rudofsky, had been used by totalitarian regimes that invisibilised the individual, putting as negative example the role of Italian fashion industry in Turin (Rudofsky, 1947). Rudofsky's later exhibition, 'Architecture without Architects', from 1964, will address directly the critique of an architecture defined by readings biased by geographic positions, in the quest for an architecture open to different ways of living, from which lessons beyond aesthetic or economic considerations could be extracted, done only with the wisdom of human experience.* m

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