Symbols and Substance

An excellent reassessment of postmoderism and architecture's popular turn lacks only the popular voice, finds Hana Loftus

'Revisiting Postmodernism'
Sir Terry Farrell and Adam Nathaniel Furman
RIBA Publishing, 200pp, £35

Left
De Barones shopping centre, Breda, The Netherlands, designed by CZWG, 1997 (ph: Morley von Sternberg).

Below
Denver Public Library by Michael Graves & Associates, 1996.

In 1993, the Royal Fine Art Commission published a short book, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Heritage, called 'What makes a good building?'. The first page contrasts the high-PoMo Marco Polo House unfavourably with Grimshaw's Financial Times printing works, and continues to use it throughout the book as the archetypal bad building. It concludes damningly that "the grand porticoes... make a travesty of representation because they monumentalise the mundane activity of office work".

Terry Farrell and Adam Nathaniel Furman's excellent new survey, 'Revisiting Postmodernism' doesn't mention Marco Polo House — one of the most iconic and controversial buildings of London's PoMo decade, and now demolished. But it does make a convincing case — from contrasting personal and scholarly perspectives — that monumentalising the mundane is perfectly legitimate, and that a grand smoked glass portico is no more monumental than the elaborated detailing of Grimshaw's supposedly functionalist building.

In doing so, Farrell and Furman draw together the wider movements that informed the PoMo flowering of the 1980s, and cast the practitioners of International Style Modernism and its high-tech successors as an elite who were irreversibly altered by postmodernism's embrace of vernacular and popular culture. The claims for this populism is founded in the idea, as Furman puts it, "that through style, form could become active and communicative in manifold ways, speaking to audiences and occupants, clients and communities in a manner that abstract codes of meaning could not".

This makes the omission of the public's voice from this otherwise thorough, readable and fascinating book, a curious one. We miss the plurality of non-architectural voices — speaking about the "narratives, meaning, pleasure and freedom" that they find in architectural form. Even the voice of the client is only represented in the third person. Farrell and Furman are keen to distance themselves from the adoption of "postmodern architectural tropes... by developers all over the world who stuck them onto fundamentally terrible buildings", but the very nature of PoMo surely needs to accept, and embrace, the vernacularisation of 'high' architecture into everyday culture. Farrell writes that "it is the architect's job to be able to raid the dressing-up box when needed", but it occasionally sounds as though he would rather only his intellectual equals had the key.

Nevertheless, the box is open and raided from all sides. After all, it is now not unusual for the consumer to buy a Queen Anne-pastiche house, and fit it with a minimalist kitchen, shabby-chic bedrooms, and pop art on the walls. No wonder that Farrell sees postmodernism's most important legacy as the establishment of urban design principles, not stylistic ones — the refutation of the CIAM tabula rasa approach to city planning. Farrell and Furman make the case that postmodernism's "urbanism of collage, juxtaposition, layering and growth" has become fully mainstreamed through the practice of historical and contextual analysis as the foundation for contemporary urbanism. But when a housebuilder uses an analysis of the local vernacular to justify the use of imitation weatherboarding on a field of scattered blockwork boxes, this legacy can seem as problematic as the consumption of style.

This necessary book rightly reinstates the best of postmodern architecture as a serious design response to an increasingly diverse cultural context. But while postmodernism fundamentally challenges the idea of a 'good' or 'bad' building, Farrell and Furman's narrative shows that this discrimination still matters, while implying — slightly troublingly — that it can only be made by those with the intellectual capacity to engage with the theory. In our uncertain and subjective, but undeniably postmodern culture, the question of how architecture is understood, consumed and claimed by the public remains enticingly unanswered.