

## Postmodern landscape architecture: theoretical, compositional characteristics and design elements with the analysis of 25 projects

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**Abstract:** This paper endeavours to highlight three aspects of postmodern landscape design: theoretical basis, composition and design elements. Postmodern theories, philosophy influenced the language of the postmodern landscape architecture and got materialized in the use of narratives, eclecticism, the Rhizome-principle. Postmodern landscape composition can be associated with anti-hierarchy, unusual structures, landforms, and playful moods. Postmodern design elements consist of the strong graphical use of colour and pavements, bizarre water features, unusual structures and buildings, postmodern sculptures and thematic garden details. 25 analysed projects try to capture the essence of postmodernism in landscape architecture as well as to reveal points of intersection within these projects.

**Keywords:** landscape history, landscape design, comparative analysis

### Introduction

There are numberless works discussing postmodernism, but, if we view these in relation to landscape architecture, we will soon realize that there are many gaps to be filled. This fact is even more intriguing since one of the best known theorists of postmodernism, C. Jencks, whose famous gardens, landscape designs have made him one of the leading figures in British landscape architecture, discusses postmodernism in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* solely from the perspective of architecture [1]. Scientific publications regarding postmodernist landscape architecture of the 1980s and 1990s are almost non-existent.

Our research was inspired by descriptive modern–postmodern opposite pairs such as *romanticism–dadaism*, *form–antiform*, *purpose–play*, *hierarchy–anarchy*, by I. Hassan [2] and *utopist–popular*, *isotropic space–varied space*, *simplify–complexity*, and *integration–collage* by C. Jencks [3]. In addition to this, aspects of analysis were determined by postmodern philosophical ideas.

## Material and methods

This paper is based on the analysis of 25 landscape architecture projects established between 1974 and 2000, which can be discussed parallel with postmodern architecture. We examined these projects through three main aspects in 19 subcategories: postmodern *philosophy* (7), *composition* (8), and *design elements* (4). The goal of the comparison is to get quantitative results, how much these aspects describe postmodernity in landscape architecture, and which examples can be clearly defined as postmodern masterpieces.

### 1. Postmodern philosophy: narratives, indeterminacy, self-realization, pluralism, rhizome principle, playful

In the following part, we introduce 7 basic theoretical issues, which are deeply discussed in various postmodern theories (reference mentioned below). Each of these is represented in the quantitative analysis (*Table 1*) with 0-1-2-3 points.

**a, Narratives** | Lyotard talks about the end of ‘*grand narratives*,’ or *metanarratives*, which characterized the history before postmodern. He professes a preference for this plurality of small narratives that complete each other. Postmodernists attempt to replace metanarratives by focusing on *specific local contexts* as well as the diversity of human experience. [4] Lyotard recommends replacing grand, universal narratives with small narratives what is also visible in some landscape architectural compositions.

*Examples:* One of them is the most well-known postmodern icon: *Piazza d’Italia*, which has some small narratives from renaissance to baroque as well. Next to the past, there are some local narratives to the Italians who live there, and there is an ironic personal narrative aspect: a sculpture about Charles Moore, the designer itself. A. Isozaki designed the *Tsukuba center*, which carries several levels of small narratives. In the middle of the public space, there is the Daphne tree from the Greek–Roman mythology. The space context is the pattern of Rome’s Campidoglio and, what is more, it follows the model of Ledoux’s Ideal city. *Jacob Javits Plaza* would be demolished during the waterproofing construction; the opportunity was seen to revitalize the plaza. During the time that R. Serra’s “Tilted Arc” inhabited the plaza, this 14-foot-high sculpture was an obstruction both

visually and physically to pedestrians. This performance determined the history of the plaza's place that M. Schwartz evokes again with the green snake-formed benches.

**b, Indeterminacy** | Critics have more or less reached a consensus regarding Modernism; it has become a well-defined aesthetic concept with clear-cut definitions and characteristics, and hence easily recognizable. However, according to I. Hassan [5], while modernism is characterized by *centring*, postmodernism is characterized by *dispersal*, by deconstruction and it is based on the view of the world devoid of a centre. To describe it, Hassan has introduced the concept of "indeterminacy: by ~, or better still, indeterminacies, I mean a combination of trends that include openness, fragmentation, ambiguity, discontinuity, decenterment..." These trends are presented in the particular examples of the elements of landscape design as well as on the level of conceptualization.

*Examples:* The red follies of *Parc de La Villette* [6] are the best-known elements, which represent the deconstruction theory of French philosopher J. Derrida. The separation of elements, structures and re-form meant new experiments in design. The indeterminacy is based on the contrast between the park's old and futuristic buildings and between the conventional and unconventional forms, elements. In the design of the *Parc André Citroën*, these contrasting trends envisage bringing together six small themed "Serial Gardens," and a big unified central space. The manifestation of indeterminacy in the *Millenáris Park* (Budapest) can be found in the duality of *interactivity and passivity*, in the designed programme of the park which creates the effect of annihilating one another.

**c, Self-realization** | S. Freud dwelt on the unconscious aspect of the human psyche: the conscious is a smaller part of the psyche, while the unconscious is where our instincts, desires are at work. [7] The tenet that human beings are unable to grasp what goes on in their unconscious mind contributed to the change in how humans are viewed. Human beings are not pre-determined; each human being contains the germ of becoming more "than they are, of becoming 'special' ". Thus, creativity acquires paramount importance: the impossibility "to know thyself" goes hand in hand with the possibility of the existence of hidden talents, and postmodernists have taken up this idea by putting emphasis on self-fulfilment.

*Examples:* The essence of self-fulfilment within landscape design can be best grasped through the works of M. Schwartz. It is no coincidence that her statement "Anything goes!" has become the slogan of postmodern landscape architecture. Two of her creations underline this free, open-minded attitude: the *Whitehead Institute* [8], which is based on the distorted Siam-joint of a French Renaissance and a Japanese Zen garden. The elements that compose these gardens have been distorted. All the plants in the garden are plastic. The clipped hedges, which double as seating, are rolled steel covered in Astroturf. The green colours, which are the

strongest cues that this is a garden, are composed of coloured gravel and paint. The intent was to create for the scientists who occupy this building a visual puzzle that could not be solved. The garden is an ode to “better living through chemistry”. At *Jacob Javits Plaza*, the benches swirl around the “topiary,” or 6-foot-tall grassy hemispheres that exude mist on hot days. P. Walker’s works are very individual as well: the *South Coast Plaza Town Center*, the *Children’s Pond and Park*, and the *M. Luther King Promenade* have a particularly strong personal-taste design.

**d, Pluralism** | The clarification of postmodernism begins with rejecting the universal models, the a priori values, and by publicly accepting pluralism as the main goal. Postmodernism bypasses the distinctiveness which has been a characteristic of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art: postmodernism accepts several conceptions, even those which contradict each other and urge to accept the coexistence of different styles [9]. The projects examined display the elements of the old, traditional style as well as those of the contemporary one.

*Examples:* The *Parc de Bercy* displays the coexistence of the old and postmodern building styles and the landscape is a projection of this pluralism in the architecture. Consciously cumulated historicism appears in the case of the *Tsukuba Center* and the *Whitehead Institute*, the common element being the use of Asian landscape design elements together with those belonging to the classic European styles. The *Bürgerpark Saarbrücken* also combines the ancient Italian elements of style with those of the local industrial premises. The park of the *Hotel Kempinski Munich* is a wonderful example of how the parterre of the French Baroque castles is rethought in an up-to-date way.

**e, Rhizome principle** | Rhizome takes its name from plants that spread via a connected underground root system. As a metaphor, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari [10] used rhizome to refer to a non-hierarchical form of organization. They used the term “rhizome” to describe theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. A rhizome works with horizontal and trans-species connections, while an arborescent model works with vertical and linear connections. In our research, it can be translated more than anti-hierarchy because there is a strong connection between elements, components.

*Examples:* The *Piazza d’Italia* is a famous outdoor stage, and the elements of the scene have a very strong connection. It is the same situation with the elements of *Whithead Institute* (the light green forms and surface continue in vertical direction as “a vertical garden”) or the *DNS Garden* with the five human sense organs, where elements are integrally connected to each other.

**f, Playful** | The principal characteristic of formal and thematic experimentation – and the other important drive in postmodernism – is playfulness. Playfulness is not to be viewed purely from a formal standpoint; it has acquired a deeper meaning with the postmodern [11]. This key-expression has to be viewed as

an answer to doubt. Postmodernists create their own independent worlds (exactly as in a game), which in their elements resemble the real world (they use the elements of the real world) and are at the same time very different from it. We have reached the conclusion and want to shed light on the intrinsic connection between playfulness and the design based on self-fulfilment.

*Examples:* Playfulness is generally present in landscape architecture on a smaller scale – as in the wavy motif of the finishes, winding paths and the wavy pattern of the space in the *Jardin Atlantik*. Benches, lighting, and their unique design are gaining ground and they also contribute to the playful mood. The red crane-like lighting fixtures in *Schouwburgplein* can be operated by remote control and are a good example to illustrate this statement. Statues in the open space also belong to the elements that are able to conjure up the world of playful design: the big red amorphous statues of the *Parc de Coudrays*.

## **2. Postmodern composition: brown field, collage, antihierarchy, thematic garden details, diagonal, different ground levels, unusual water architecture, unusual structures, landforms**

Postmodern landscape architecture tended to find new forms of expression, new visual methodologies. A significant number of these projects are experimentations. This period has served as an ‘experimental lab’ in landscape architecture, bringing forth new compositional issues and new elements. We highlighted 8 physical characteristics referring to the composition of the whole.

**a, Brown field, based on industrial area** | In the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to post-war urbanization, former huge industrial territories lost their original functions; so, they became potential areas for city-developments around the 70s-80s.

*Examples:* *Park la Villette* built on former cutlery – as the main halls reminds us; *Park Citroën* on a former car-industry plot, where the spatial arrangement of the building refers to the factory halls; *Park del Clot*, *Jardin Atlantik*, and *Millenàris* are on former railway industrial sites, stations. This fact corresponds with historicism and past narratives, while conserving some of these industrial heritages helps to display collage compositions.

**b, Collage** | The collage as a spatial-orientation compositional method tries to demolish the inner coherence, the unity. Details will individualize themselves. The collage space can be reflected horizontally as well as vertically.

*Examples:* *La Villette* might have been the first design consciously using this collage structure: the three layers (areas, directions, and points) overlap vertically. *Parc des Coudrays* is a good example for horizontal collage: the first layer is the vegetation, the second one the edge-border-relief, third are the areas, and the fourth

is the network. A flat, one-level collage can be seen on *Cambridge Center Garage Roof Garden*, the *Piazza d'Italia*, and the *Tsukuba Center*.

**c, Anti-hierarchy** | One of the key characteristics of modern design is the hierarchical organization, the order. Postmodernism denies this by emphasizing the co-ordination and coequality of each compositional element. Almost all the examples underline this feature.

*Examples:* As early examples, the *Franklin Court* and the *Welcome Park* show late-modern characters (symmetry, hierarchy, centre-located house-imagination sculpture of P. William). Both examples are designed by R. Venturi, who determines the key feature of postmodern architecture in his book [12], but he can hardly realize these aspects on his open-space design, which will be clearly visible on the evaluation table.

**d, Thematic garden details** | Topic/theme-oriented park parts bring something new to the former sports and leisure activities. The concept can refer to philosophical, aesthetical, and esoteric content or can imply the local (industrial) history of the location.

*Examples:* The boscé garden enclosures of *Park Citroën* have metaphoric relation to the days, planets, colours, and therefore to the planting schemes. *Jardin Atlantik* also has a *Wavy plant room*, a *Humidity room*, a *Blue and mauve room*, a *Room of mirrors*, a *Silence room*, and a *Stone pavilion*. The planting with its character and colour refers to the Atlantic Ocean. At *Parc del Clot*, the former hall was transformed into a mediaeval Islamic inner courtyard as a silent meditative part in between the park zones.

**e, Diagonal** | Great, long diagonals are a counter-reaction to the orthogonal and perpendicular calmness of Modernism. It gives tension and asymmetry to the space, while it allows a simple, fast cross-cut for pedestrians. This feature is a classical postmodern invention and has been taken over by the contemporary design.

*Examples:* The most well-known great diagonal is present in the “classical” Parisian postmodern public parks as *Parc de La Villette*, *Parc de Citroën*, *Bercy Parc*, and in *Parc del Clot*, but it is absent in many other cases.

**f, Different ground levels** | The raised-lifted and recessed-sunken platforms are also contradictory to the horizontal editing of modern architecture. This playful spatial feature of elevated walkways, promenades, terraces, or sunken sports grounds creates a higher variety of spatial experiences by multiplying the view, vistas, and orientation points.

*Examples:* The prototype was again the hanging promenade of *Park la Villette* along the channel, but the two main diagonal axes of *Parc del Clot* also underline this complex elevations by varying its height circumstances from the floor, mounds, and fencing. A nice sunken space is the amphitheatre of *Tsukuba Center* or the southern entrance zone of *Parc Citroën*.

**g, Unusual water architecture** | The modern design rather used relaxed mirroring pool surfaces as horizontal forms or gentle water jets, but in postmodern design the unusual, shocking water features are often associated with astounding sculptures, open-air installations, where the dynamic of the water has strong emphasis.

*Examples:* In *Jardin Atlantik*, the sculpture *Ile des Hesperides* (J.-M. Llorca) is not only a mythological reference but a fountain as well, which provides space for meteorological equipments. In the sunken courtyard, *Parc del Clot*, the water channel sculpture of B. Hunt is to be seen, while the façade of the former industrial building has been transformed into a huge rapid waterfall.

**h, Unusual structures, landforms** | A kind of collision (contraposition) is also typical next to the experimental-attempting approach of postmodern design. The listed examples have various strange and extraordinary (built) structures, landforms. This is also a crucial compositional invention of this time, which is in a common design tool of the contemporary palette.

*Examples:* Turf sculptures of Jencks' Portrack House, the huge turf-mounds of *Parc des Coudray*, the smaller hemispheres of *Jakob Javits Plaza* or the long linear dam-dune forms of *Millenáris* are great examples longing for new space-, material-, and colour-use [13].

### 3. Postmodern design elements: graphical colour use, geometrical pattern, Various materials

The design elements are easily correlated with specific developments or movements within the postmodern. Although there has been a strong tradition from the early nineteenth century, postmodern has changed and showed a surprising transposition of their radical ideas onto the three-dimensional space.

**a, Graphical colour use** | There is one individual colour of *Piazza d'Italia* (brown), the *Whitehead Institute* (white-green), and *Jakob Javits Plaza* (light green) too. Postmodern landscape architecture was brave to use red or other surprising vivid colours and high contrasts.

**b, Geometrical pattern** | Some postmodern examples have an inspiring collection of geometric patterns on the pavement or on the surface. At *Tsukuba Center*, after using geometrical grid shapes with vivid colour, the design becomes a simple yet wholly striking work. *Piazza d'Italia*, *Cambridge Center Garage Roof Garden*, *Children's Pond and Park*, *Martin Luther King Promenade*, and *Schouwburgplein* also have individual geometric surfaces.

**c, Various materials** | Next to unusual materials, the most important character of postmodern material use is the industrial choice of material. The unusual structures and sculptures are often made out of metal: red follies in *Parc de La Villette*, Daphne's trees at *Tsukuba Center*, white cubic pavilions at *Cambridge*



*Center*, *Hesperides fountain at Jardin Atlantik*, or outdoor lighting at *Schouwburgplein*. All of these strengthen the effect of indeterminacy, playfulness, and unusualness.

## Results and discussions

After the visual, design-oriented description of the sites, we deeply examined the 25 listed projects with simple evaluation according to the listed characteristics (0: *not typical* – 3: *very typical*, see Table 1.). The complex database sheet underlines and disaffirms our hypothesis.

**Results of theory characteristics:** From the average of these aspects (15.7/21), we can conclude that all of these aspects are very typical for the projects (20 out of 25 examples have above 66%); moreover, we can state that *Indeterminacy*, *Self-Realization*, and the *Rhizome Principle* were the most characteristic categories of philosophy (2.9). This leads to the conclusion that the theoretical background of postmodernism can be very clearly observed in all cases. These aspects are excellent expressions for deeper qualitative description.

**Results of composition characteristics:** The assumed compositional aspects are more or less characterizing (14.2/18) the compositional guidelines. At some cases, only 0/3 answers were given (diagonal, diff. ground level). Anti-hierarchy (2.8), unusual water and terrain features, collages and different ground levels (2.8) are mostly common characteristics.

**Results on design element characteristics:** Results underline that these subcategories are typical of the projects (10.2/12). Especially the graphical pavement and different materials (2.9) are most common.

**Results on projects' final score:** Finally, 15 examples have results above 66% (40.1/54), 8 even above 80%: *Park de la Villette*, *Park Bercy*, *Park A. Citroën*, *Parc del Clot*, *Tsukuba Center*, *Piazza d'Italia*, *Parc de la Espanya Industrial*, *Getty Centre and Millenàris*, *South Coast Plaza*, *Children's Pond and Park*, *Bürgerpark Saarbrücken*, *Portrack House*, *Schouwburgplein*, and *Jarden Atlantik*. These are all large complex compositions with various design aspects which provide the chance to adapt more features of the era. They were built around 1988. Only 4 of 25 examples did not reach the 50%: *Heritage P. Plaza*, *Welcome P. Franklin P.*, and *Moody Gardens*. Many of them were built at the beginning of the era, so they rather show signs of Late Modernism (symmetry, order, clearer compositions).



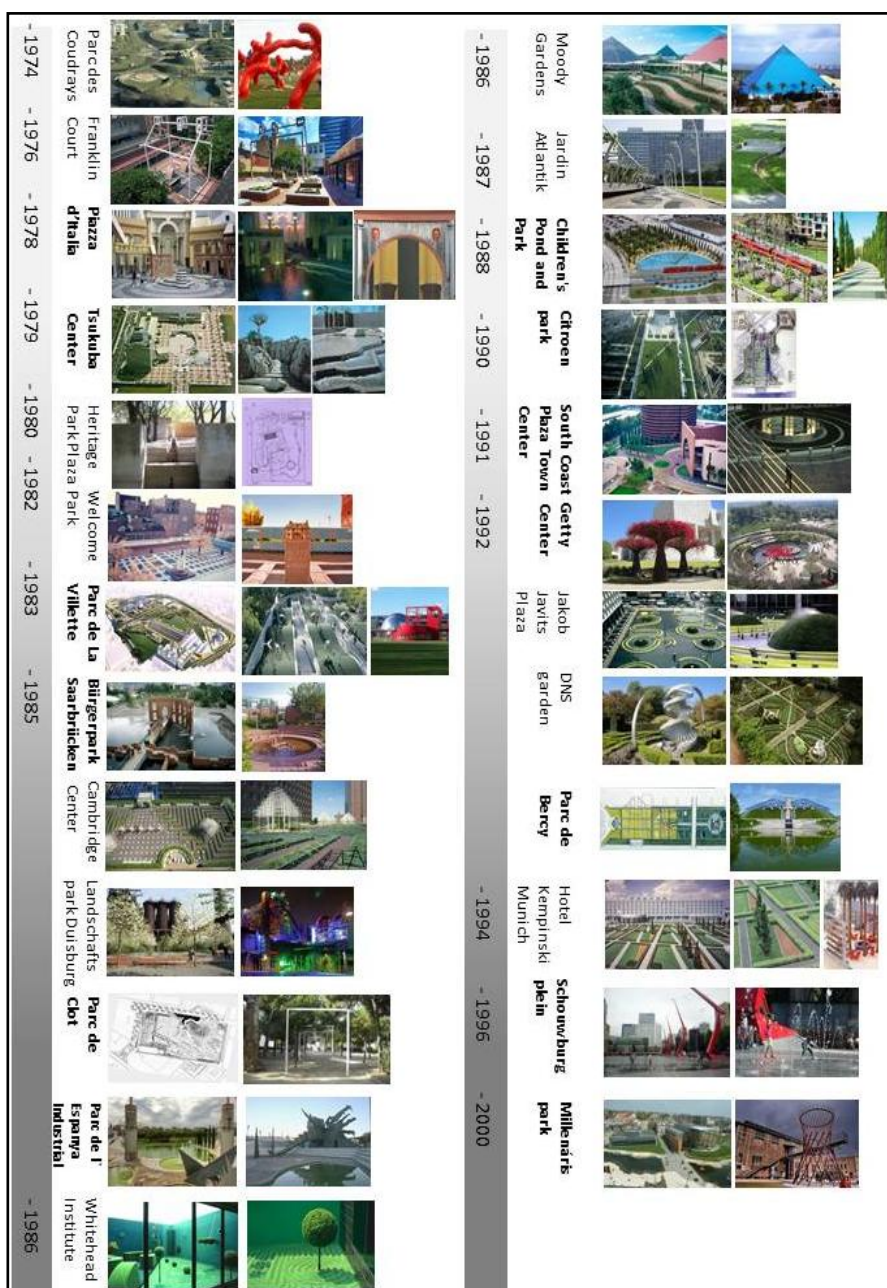


Fig. 1. Chronological order and visual introduction of the examined 25 projects



## Conclusions

Postmodern theories are all reflected in the postmodern credo of landscape architecture. The design of open places, squares, as well as parks built between 1980 and 1990 can be best characterized by such terms as narratives, indeterminacy, and the rhizome principle. The famous quotations “Anything goes” and “Less is more” are reflected tangibly in these compositions. The postmodern landscape’s stylistic language is determined by experimentation and self-realization, unusual personal solutions. To sum up, we can state that postmodern theories manifest themselves not only in art, philosophy, and architecture but emphatically in the landscape design as well. By a simple quantitative grading, the personal aesthetic judges could have been objectified. The study underlined that there is a coherent design language of the era, and the majority of these big design sites can be claimed as examples of postmodern landscape architectural style. The finer details and features of the singular parks require further finer analysis.

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