

[DESIGN](#)

Why A Once-Hated 1980s Design Movement Is Making A Comeback

Alissa Walker, Gawker Media

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Although you know it when you see it, it's hard to accurately describe Memphis design without resorting to specific 1980s pop cultural references. It's *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* meets *Miami Vice*. It's *Saved By The Bell* plus *Beetlejuice*. And it's all coming back, in a very big way.

There's an American Apparel line featuring those squiggly graphics. New furniture directly inspired by those outrageous postmodern vibes. An entire show during New York's Design Week that seemed to be ripped from a 1986 copy of *Vogue*. The world is looking a whole lot more like Delia Deetz's living room these days.

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Ettore Sottsass, Carlton Room Divider, 1981. Plastic laminate. Private collection, courtesy Dixon Gallery and Gardens

Michele de Lucchi, Flamingo (bedside table), 1984. Plastic laminate and lacquered wood. Private collection, courtesy Dixon Gallery and Gardens

The Memphis Group was founded by Ettore Sottsass, an industrial designer you might know best for his [lipstick-red "Valentine" Olivetti typewriter](#). In 1980 he gathered a group of a dozen designers in Milan to form a new collective. The name "Memphis" was supposedly derived from the Bob Dylan song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" which played during that initial meeting-it had nothing to do with Memphis, Tennessee. Or Memphis, Egypt.

In the short-lived official period that the Memphis Group was active-technically 1981 to 1987-their work was influential... and polarizing. Memphis was inspired by a few converging, if not particularly similar movements: Art Deco, Pop Art, and the emerging postmodernism (PoMo) which would come to pervade everything from furniture to film to music. The signature Memphis piece combined overtly geometric shapes from a variety of materials in bright, contrasting colors. Graphic patterns-usually black and white-were not unusual. It was a striking departure from the understated modern design that had ruled for decades.

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Marco Zanini, Dublin (sofa), 1981. Plastic laminate, metal, and synthetic fabric. Private collection, courtesy Dixon Gallery and Gardens

A show that closes this weekend at the [Dixon Gallery and Gardens](#)-in, yes, Memphis-has collected over 150 pieces of Memphis work, roughly half of the number of pieces that were officially produced by the movement during their short reign. Although many of the period's designers like L.A.-based [Peter Shire](#) (below) continue to produce work aligned with Memphis ideals, for the most part, this was a fleeting moment in design history.



Peter Shire, Bel Air (armchair), 1982, Wood and cotton fabric. Private collection, courtesy Dixon Gallery and Gardens

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What's funny about looking back at the Memphis work today is that, more than any other pieces of furniture from any other period, it unmistakably evokes a particular moment. It just *looks* like the 80s. But even back then critics and commentators loved to poke fun at it.

REAL-LIFE POSTMODERN STUFF: WHERE IS IT? WHAT IS IT?

This being the Late Postmodern Era, it follows that we must be surrounded by postmodern artifacts, heaps of them. *But which ones are they?*

Why, here we are now at an East Village art gallery. Look at that sculpture of Jackie Kennedy in her bloodstained, Dallas death-day ensemble—and a video monitor showing cartoons where her face should be! Sure, it's hip. But is it postmodern, or just exuberantly tasteless?

We think we know postmodernism when we see it—yes, the Jackie sculpture looks pretty PoMo to us—but perhaps the question is best tackled on a case-by-case basis. After scouring the worlds of fashion and art on both coasts, we have compiled a list of concrete, easy-to-recognize criteria.

ARCHITECTURE:

- ▶ Does the building have pilasters or pediments or the same color scheme as the 1984 Summer Olympics?
- ▶ Is it a cube with a peaked roof?
- ▶ Does it look like something futuristic—as conceived by Sir Christopher Wren?
- ▶ For a building, is it funny?
- ▶ Is it funny but not a Las Vegas hotel or a fast-food stand in Los Angeles?
- ▶ Is it easy to like?

MUSIC:

- ▶ Does the piece make use of old TV themes or Malcolm X speeches?
- ▶ Does it sound like a combination of Philip Glass and Richard Wagner, or Ornette Coleman and Ennio Morricone?
- ▶ Are you listening to it at BAM?
- ▶ Is it easier to like than Milton Babbitt but harder than Tchaikovsky?

PAINTING:

- ▶ Does the work combine naked figures and old advertising characters in a cryptic, arbitrary manner?
- ▶ Is it painted on broken china?
- ▶ Does the gallery owner call it *neo*-anything?
- ▶ Is it a photocopy?
- ▶ Do you look at it and say, "My 23-year-old could do that?"

TELEVISION:

- ▶ Do the characters talk to the camera sometimes?
- ▶ Does the program have a "look"?
- ▶ Does it remind you of an old TV show, only it's insincere and has better production values?

INTERIOR DESIGN:

- ▶ Does the room sport suspiciously well

placed water stains, rust marks and peeling paint?

- ▶ Was it designed by Daryl Hannah's character in *Wall Street*?
- ▶ Is there more than one piece of furniture in the room with spheres or other geometric shapes for legs?
- ▶ Would you really want to live there?

LITERATURE:

- ▶ Does the text contain shopping lists, menus and/or recipes?
- ▶ Does it contain a novel within a novel that has the same title as the novel?
- ▶ Does the cover feature a bunch of little geometric shapes and a quote from Robert Coover?
- ▶ Does it remind you of Céline, if Céline had drunk a lot of Tab and watched a lot of TV?
- ▶ Is it easy to hate?

GRAPHIC DESIGN:

- ▶ Is it like MTV?
- ▶ Do the layouts look like this one?

CUISINE:

- ▶ Does it look like graphic design?
- ▶ Is it carpaccio?
- ▶ Does it have a purplish element?
- ▶ Is it slightly bitter—or extremely sweet?

From the [April 1988 issue of *Spy*](#), via [Chappell Ellison](#)

This guide to postmodernism from a 1988 issue of *Spy* magazine is hilarious but also frighteningly accurate when it comes to identifying exactly what postmodern design looks like, particularly Memphis: "Is there more than one piece of furniture in the room with spheres or other geometric shapes for legs?"

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Photo via [Dennis Zanone](#) of his [private collection of Memphis design](#) in his home

Yep.

Although Memphis officially faded from prominence, the pieces are still prized by collectors. But these are not just seen as novelty items anymore. The look itself has seen a revival in recent years, signaling that something about Memphis still speaks to our culture today.



Nathalie du Pasquier for American Apparel

The return of Memphis was heralded earlier this year when [Nathalie du Pasquier](#), one of the original Memphis designers, designed a line for American Apparel. The prints are inspired by the work she created in the 80s, although her work has taken a different tack since. She's since been tapped by furniture manufacturer Hay to [design 80s-inspired textiles](#), as well. [du Pasquier told Dezeen](#) that she was surprised by the demand to bring back her old style. "I have started from where I stopped and I now have put the machine in motion again," she said. "I'm going to design other things, textiles. If I have requests I am more than happy to do it."

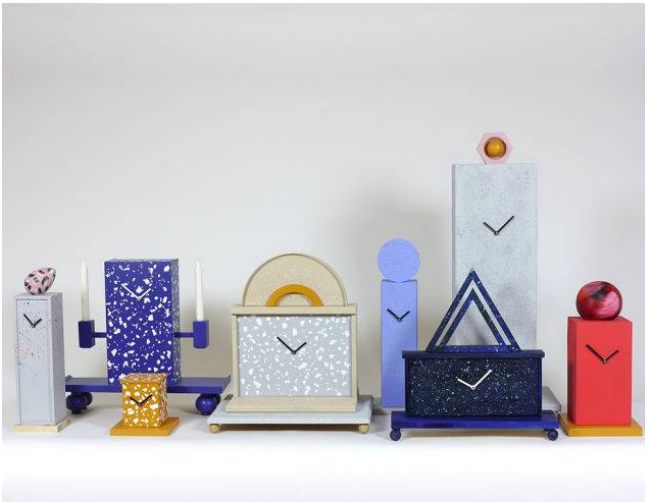
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The Valis table by [Matthew Sullivan](#), who was featured at the LA x Milano Project in 2014

It's not just textiles that are seeing a Memphis revival. At the annual Milan furniture fair in the spring—widely considered to be the premiere design event on the planet—Memphis was in the air this year, especially where a group of Los Angeles designers debuted their brand-new works at the [LA x Milano Project](#). Here, in the birthplace of Memphis, more than 30 years later, young designers from halfway around the globe were taking heavy cues from PoMo style. The designers played with extravagant colors, accentuated shapes, and pedimented detailing that riffed on the more-is-more aesthetic.



Clocks by [Jenny Nordberg](#), an industrial designer from Sweden, at the Sight Unseen Offsite

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The slow drift of Memphis back into everyday culture was best evidenced by the New York Design Week opening of [Sight Unseen's Offsite show](#) (which I should mention was curated by two friends of mine, Monica Khemsurov and Jill Singer). As leaders in the design world, Sight Unseen has a track record as a spot-on trend forecaster, so this means what they show will undoubtedly soon be trickling into your living room-and your closet. This year, the show could have almost had Memphis as an unofficial theme.



Lamps by [Ladies & Gentlemen Studio](#) at the Sight Unseen Offsite

Dizzying graphics, contrasting colors, and abstract shapes ruled the showroom. Impossible sculptures balanced precariously over chairs that might have been drawn in geometry class. The shades were a bit different-fewer primary colors, more neon and pastels-but the spirit was the same.



[Kelly Behun's](#) furniture at Sight Unseen

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What was the most fascinating about Sight Unseen's show was that it wasn't just the furniture and accessories that screamed Memphis, it was also the attire of the show's attendees. A sea of graphic-printed sweatshirts, spatter-painted dresses, polka-dotted pants (all worn together, of course) swarmed the space.

And over in the corner, Sight Unseen seemed to provide its own approved style guide with a collection of artist-designed, custom-printed clothing created with [Print All Over Me](#).



The [Sight Unseen + Print All Over Me](#) collaboration with contributions from Camille Walala, Louie Rigano, Saskia Pomeroy, Damien Correll, Fort Standard, Ellen Van Dusen, Eric Trine, Santtu Mustonen, Dot/Dash, and Will Bryant; photo Mark Vorrasi

Memphis is back but it's coming from a different place now. There's a whole new generation of artists and designers, born in and of the 1980s, just now coming into their own, who are nodding to snippets of graphics and flashes of colors gathered from their youth, and also branding *themselves* with this era. Memphis style has become somewhat of a lifestyle itself. True, these Memphis homages are more like clever winks to the way we think we remember the 1980s—a hazy, nostalgia-tinged Saturday morning cartoon version of the original. Maybe it's even more about nodding to Memphis's pop culture touchpoints—*Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, *Saved By the Bell*—than a nod to Memphis itself. Which, if you think about it, is about as postmodern as you can get.

Top image: Michele De Lucchi sofa via [Artfinding.com](#)

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