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

Alissa Walker, Gawker Media

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 d'uring 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.

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.
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.

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.

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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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.
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 Khemsoy 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 undoubtably 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.
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.

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