

# In less is more (or is it?)

**I**spent Easter in Istanbul - not a bad place to consider gluttony. Last home of the infamously gluttonous Roman Empire, later, host to the lavish Byzantine Emperors and their feast-loving courts; conquered and ruled for half that time again by the Ottoman Sultans and their portly Pashas. Still today a culture where your waistline can reflect your position in society, investments such as Baklava, kebab and Lokum (Turkish Delight) are worryingly easy to come by (and hard to resist).

Consider that throughout all history, first as Constantinople and then as Istanbul, this city has been one of the richest meeting points of the world's cultures anywhere on the planet - as a trading hub on the overland spice routes, a stop off on the Crusades (in 1204 with devastating consequences), a key port connected to the Mediterranean Sea and the physical divide between the cultural and religious East and West, Europe and Asia. Equally, it is the city which divides North from South; the Southern seas of the Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean and, in the North, the Black Sea, its Slavic peoples and valuable natural resources.

Today a single glance across the Bosphorus (the strait which runs like a giant river through the middle of Istanbul, marking the point at which Europe ends and Asia begins) will probably present the viewer with more oil tankers, at one glance, than they will ever see in the rest of their life. With all these influences the city is, unsurprisingly, awash with a profound culinary, artistic and architectural culture that oozes out of every pore, at all times. If you haven't visited, you should.

With all this in mind, and being in Istanbul, I had decided that a suitable topic for this month would be a review of the newly reopened kitchens at the famous Topkapı

Palace in the historic old town; said to be wondrous to behold and intrinsically linked with gluttony.

Unfortunately, I never quite made it to the kitchens. I'm sorry to admit that, in the spirit of research, I ate a little too much wonderful local cuisine, went to too many exotic food markets, drank a tad more delicious Turkish red wine than I should have and we eventually turned up on our last day to discover the palace closed for renovation.

Wino note: If you like, as I do, a syrupy, dark, heavy red wine then look out for the Turkish grape Boğazkere - it was a revelation.

Istanbul didn't disappoint, even if the plan did somewhat collapse for this article - similarly, I suppose, to the epic, historic empires which defined modern Istanbul and which each eventually collapsed, often as a result of greed, excess, and corruption; what you might describe (in the interests of an article) as moral gluttony.

We all know that consuming 'too much', is bad; it makes us fat and unhealthy and we're taught that, other than on special occasions, it should probably be avoided. In the same way, in the world of architecture and design, too much of a good thing can be bad.

This can particularly be the case when it comes to ornament and decoration. With architecture, as with an outfit, too many 'accessories' or ornaments can become gaudy, crass and kitsch, often devaluing the end product. Think J.R.'s parents' Dallas ranch, Middle-Eastern hotels, gaudy footballers' mansions, the Portokalos Family's (My Big Fat Greek Wedding) suburban bungalow (replete with Greek temple façade).

Most architectural styles pre the turn of the Century incorporated decoration and ornament to some degree (as too have some from the 20th Century: The Beaux Arts, Neo-Gothic and Art Deco for example). Some of the designs created in

these periods have stood the test of time, others have not. Some styles remain ever popular; Regency and Victorian town houses with their high ceilings, large windows, ornate coving and ironmongery remain incredibly popular in the UK. Medieval farmhouses, so desirable in Guernsey, have often prized 'historic features'; carved stone fireplaces, beautiful stonework, exposed wooden beams and intricate stone door arches. All over Europe and the world many of our favourite civic and religious buildings are massive, complicated, ornate constructions built in the Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque or Neo-Classical styles with minute detailing throughout.

In fact, it was partly as a reaction to this issue of indulgent (and costly) ornamentation and decoration, that in around 1901 what we now know as Modernism was born. Not just in Architecture but in Art, Theatre, Literature, Engineering and even Politics. At a very simplistic level Modernism was a response to Industrialisation and the 'modernisation' of society into something more like how we live today.

It reacted to modern ideals of democracy and individual freedom, utilitarianism, anti-elitism. The modernists were not only trying to engage with the modern era of manufacturing but also these social notions. The ornamentation and decoration of the past seemed dishonest in its concealing of the true structure of the building (concrete columns with fake stone stuck to them) and elitist in its availability to the people. They were big ideas and, despite in many ways being exposed as flawed, they have gone on to drastically inform our lives today.

In the end, a lot of it simply comes down to taste, which in turn is intrinsically linked to fashion (many of us don't like to accept that this is the case but it's unavoidable).

Ornate metal work, detailed stone carvings and heavy rich fabrics once used to display wealth and success are no longer necessarily desirable or fashionable. These

features are now often regarded as naff or tasteless - overly ostentatious, even vulgar.

Instead the modern world, understandably and inevitably I think, has primarily embraced modern ideas of design. 'Modernism' these days is perhaps best epitomised by Ikea furniture, German flat roof kit houses and the often lampooned 'glass box'.

In fact 'glass boxes' are very, very complicated to realise, perhaps more so than any other style as, somewhat ironically, the devil really is in the detail. There is no room for error, no ability to cover an expansion crack or a rough edge with a skirting board or wallpaper. They are by nature pared down, slick and often clinical designs. Many aspire to this, it's perceived as 'classy', high design, and it is high design - it is not easy to do well and is very often done badly, in fact.

These modern ideas/ideals, in an architectural sense, come from the basic tenets of Architectural Modernism, very basically summarised in 5 points (handily on Wikipedia) as:

1. "Form Follows Function" - (this is the big one) - the purpose of the thing dictates the shape/form of it.
2. Clarity of Form - no unnecessary, wasteful detail.
3. Expression of Structure - don't hide the structure of the building, embrace it and use it aesthetically.
4. "Truth to Materials" - use the materials in their natural state, that's not to say straight from the ground but not so they appear as something else - no faking it!
5. The Machine Aesthetic - use modern/ industrially produced materials and allow this to inform the aesthetic.

In the case of the 'glass box' (the apparent antithesis of glutinous ornamentation) it is actually, more specifically, about Minimalism. Minimalism's ultimate aim is to be as 'pure', honest and thus timeless

as possible. It seeks aesthetic perfection. This is the same in food - think expansive (and most likely expensive) white plates with a morsel of something tasty balanced artfully in the centre. Art and architecture's early proponents believed Minimalism to be literally the pinnacle, a pared down representation of perfection, without the excessive fuss of anything ornate.

Many argue, however, that over the years minimalism has become nothing more than a style fad and a camouflage word for 'not much'. In fact in Architecture specifically, by aiming for 'purity' and integrity, minimalism (with its secret cupboards and shadow gaps) is often more stage design than architecture. Huge amounts of time and effort are spent hiding the detritus of life in a cupboard that's waiting to explode once the guests leave. It suits art galleries but not always homes. Generally we want cushions on our sofas, and we want comfy

sofas! In our kitchens we want to be able to grab a bottle of olive oil quickly off the work surface in front of us, we don't want to have to root around for it in a hidden cupboard exposed via hydraulics. Often function is relegated to following the form.

Despite this, to many Minimalist design has come to mean 'contemporary design'. This isn't at all the case. The internet revolution actually makes 'contemporary' less and less easy to define as various trends happen simultaneously and so much information whizzes to and fro in an instant. In the words of Grayson Perry "Everything is now happening all at once" - i.e. there is no longer a ruling style or taste, no common agreement on what is avant-garde and what is retrograde. Whereas previously, there have always been definite movements and styles. Today the 'happening' thing is simply what is happening. "We have reached the end of 'isms'."

For designers of any kind the options as such are limitless, without 'isms' there's no need to adhere to any particular set of rules, it's incredibly exciting. Yet somehow the solution which is often resorted to is what's sometimes called Historicism (in fact this term isn't strictly accurate) perhaps it's better described as 'Repeticism'. Basically "let's just copy old buildings", often in a 'Disney-esque' manner. I love old buildings, far more than most modern buildings if truth be told, they're the basis of my understanding of architecture, but simply repeating them is actually to go against what makes (the good ones) so great. Nearly all the best were forward looking at the time, taking what had gone before them and twisting it into something new.

The thing is many relatively ornate, heavily decorated, ornamented design typologies (Classical, Baroque, Gothic, Regency, Arts & Craft and Victorian) continue to be some

of our favourite styles. There is thus some logic to this, I admit, (if it ain't broke... etc) but it's also sometimes simply lazy or

short sighted. The best of both can easily be combined; the classical and historic (including Modernism now 100 years old), with the pioneering, creating simply 'New', 'The Happening'. It just takes creativity and confidence.

So with the death, at the hand of technology, of the 'isms' where are we to go next? In the end 'The public' will always dictate the work of Architects and designers. Those willing to take risks with their designs will become increasingly valuable in an attempt to prevent the stagnation of development in design, and those clients willing to be enthused and look forward, as well as back, will benefit the most.

Oliver Westgarth is an architect at [www.ccd-architects.com](http://www.ccd-architects.com)  
Comments to [oliver@ccd-architects.com](mailto:oliver@ccd-architects.com)

