
FIRST THINGS

CRIMES IN CONCRETE

by
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Making Dystopia:
The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism

BY JAMES STEVENS CURL

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In a recent debate in *Prospect* magazine on the question of whether modern architecture has ruined British towns and cities, Professor James Stevens Curl, one of Britain's most distinguished architectural historians, wrote as his opening salvo:

Visitors to these islands who have eyes to see will observe that there is hardly a town or city that has not had its streets—and skyline—wrecked by insensitive, crude, post-1945 additions which ignore established geometries, urban grain, scale, materials, and emphases.

This is so self-evidently true that I find it hard to understand how anyone could deny it, but modern architects and hangers-on such as architectural journalists *do* deny it, like war criminals who, for obvious reasons, continue to deny their crimes in the face of overwhelming evidence.

This is true not only of Britain but of many, perhaps most, other countries that have or had any towns or cities to ruin. Anyone who rides into the center of Paris from Charles de Gaulle Airport, for example, will be appalled at the modernist visual hell that scours his eyes as he goes.

Nor is this visual hell the consequence of the need to build cheaply. Where money is no object, contemporary architects, like the sleep of reason in Goya's etching, bring forth monsters. The Tour Montparnasse (said to be the most hated building in Paris), the Centre Pompidou, the Opéra Bastille, the Musée du quai Branly, the new Philharmonie, do not owe their preternatural ugliness to lack of funds, but rather to the incapacity, one might say the ferocious unwillingness, of architects to build anything beautiful, and to their determination to leave their mark on the city as a dog leaves its mark on a tree.

Professor Curl's magnum opus is both scholarly and polemical. He has been observing the onward march of modernism and its effects for sixty years and is justifiably outraged by it. British architects have managed to reverse the terms of the anarchist Bakunin's dictum that the urge to destroy is also a creative urge: Their urge to create is also a destructive urge. I could give many concrete examples (no pun intended).

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Making Dystopia is not just a cri de coeur, however. It is a detailed account of the origins, rise, effect, and hegemony of architectural modernism and its successors, and of how architecture became (to a large extent) a hermetic cult that seals itself off from the criticism of hoi polloi—among whom is included Prince Charles

—and established its dominance by a mixture of bureaucratic intrigue, intellectual terrorism, and appeal to raw political and financial interest. If success is measured by power and hold over a profession rather than by intrinsic worth, then the modernist movement in architecture has been an almost unparalleled success. Only relatively recently has resistance begun to form, and often all too late:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone

That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude.

Professor Curl's book is particularly strong on the historiographical lies peddled by the apologists for modernism, and on the intellectual weakness of the arguments for the necessity of modernism. For example, architectural historians and theoreticians such as Sigfried Giedion, Arthur Korn, and Nikolaus Pevsner claimed to see in modernism the logical continuation of the European architectural tradition, and Pevsner even recruited such figures as William Morris and C. F. A. Voysey as progenitors of the movement. Pevsner was so enamored of Gropius and the Modernists that he wanted to claim a noble descent for them, as humble but ambitious people were once inclined to find a distant aristocratic forebear. Yet Voysey could hardly have been more hostile to the movement that co-opted him. The Modern Movement, he said,

was pitifully full of such faults as proportions that were vulgarly aggressive, mountebank eccentricities in detail, and windows built lying down on their sides. . . . This was false originality, the true originality having been for all time the spiritual something given to the development of traditional forms by the individual artist.

Pevsner (to whom, incidentally, Curl pays tribute for his past generosity to young scholars, including himself), with all the academic and moral prestige and authority that attached to his name, was able to incorporate Voysey—unable to speak for himself or protest after his death—into the direct ancestry of modernism, even though the merest glance at his work, or at that of William Morris, should have been sufficient to warn anyone that Pevsner's historiography made a bed of Procrustes seem positively made to

measure.

One of the Holy Trinity of architectural modernism, Le Corbusier, often presented himself in his writings as being in apostolic succession to the great architects of the past, and he littered his texts with little worthless sketches of the Parthenon and other great buildings to prove it. He accused those who did not accept the connection as being unable to see—as a mathematical physicist might say of a layman that he did not understand quantum theory—thereby beginning a campaign of intellectual terrorization of the laity that has lasted to this day.

While claiming to be continuators, the modernists also claimed to be revolutionary, wanting to rebuild the world from a blank slate. Considering what they actually achieved, this was a more accurate representation of their activities; and Le Corbusier hardly saw a city that he did not want to knock down and build again, as if no one had ever thought of anything before him, as a Muslim believes in the *jahiliyyah*, the ignorance, that existed before the advent of Muhammad. He saw the world's cities as composed solely of disgusting shantytowns or bidonvilles.

The ideas of the modernists were generally expressed in the imperative mood and were frequently of a pseudo-mystical nature. Professor Curl's description of some of the practices prevalent in the early Bauhaus make for hilarity; cranks are always a source of fun. In the early days, the modernists of the Bauhaus tended to a form of health mysticism involving vegetarianism, garlic paste, and regular enemas. Far more important, however, was their early and inherent attraction to totalitarianism. As the author points out, Gropius and Miës van der Rohe had no objection to Nazism other than that the Nazis failed to commission work from them. Gropius was an opportunistic anti-Semitic snob who espoused communism until it was no longer convenient for his career. Miës sucked up to the Nazis as much as he was able. The fact that both of them emigrated from Germany has done much to obscure their accommodation with the Nazis and even allowed the modernists to pose as anti-Nazi—though the most important proponent of modernism in America, Philip Johnson, had for some years been a rank Nazi in more than merely nominal terms. Moreover, as Professor Curl points out, the Nazi aesthetic, like the communist, had much in common with modernism.

The most startling instance of the modernists' elective affinity with totalitarianism is of course Le Corbusier. To call him a fascist is not to hurl all-purpose abuse at him, but to state a literal truth. But, as Curl wryly remarks, you won't hear any of this in a British architectural school—let alone a French one, despite the fact that in 1941, only a year after the *Exode* (the flight of eight million Frenchmen before the advancing Germans), Le Corbusier wrote a booklet, *Destin de Paris*, proposing to deport a large proportion of the population of Paris to the countryside, since in his elevated opinion they had no business living there in the first place.

To what kind of man could such a thought even have occurred, much less at such a time? Le Corbusier had the sensibility of a totalitarian dictator, as is evidenced by his *Plan Voisin*, by which he planned to turn much of Paris into a kind of Novosibirsk-sur-Seine. He loathed streets and street life, because for him they represented disorder and spontaneity instead of discipline, strict hierarchy, and what he considered, in his highly limited and autistic way, rationality. Personally, I do not see how anybody could fail to detect his essential authoritarianism just by looking at his designs, even without knowing that he aspired to lay down the law for the architecture of the whole world—which, to a horrible extent, he managed to do.

Although Le Corbusier's fascist sympathies, outlook, and sensibility had been a matter of indisputable public record for years, they were forgotten as soon as the war was over, and it came as something of a shock when they were revealed (yet again) in two books published in France in 2015. The shock passed, of course, and he is still regarded in architectural circles as the architectural knight *sans peur et sans reproche*. To utter criticism of Le Corbusier in architecture school is apparently like criticizing the character of Muhammad in Mecca. The French architect Marc Perelman ruined his own academic career in 1986 by publishing *Urbs ex machina: Le Corbusier; le courant froid de l'architecture*.

What accounts for the survival of this cold current of architecture that has done so much to disenchant the urban world—the original modernism having been succeeded by different styles, but all of them just as lizard-eyed? According to Curl, the profession of architecture has become a cult. It is worth quoting him *in extenso*:

A dangerous cult may be defined as a kind of false religion, adoption of a system of belief based on mere assertions with no factual foundations, or as excessive, almost idolatrous, admiration for a person, persons, an idea, or even a fad. The adulation accorded to Le Corbusier, accorded almost the status of a deity in architectural circles, is just one example. It has certain characteristics which may be summarized as follows: it is destructive; it isolates its believers; it claims superior knowledge and morality; it *demand*s subservience, conformity, and obedience; it is adept at brainwashing; it imposes its own assertions as dogma, and will not countenance any dissent; it is self-referential; and it invents its own arcane language, incomprehensible to outsiders.

Anyone who thinks this is an exaggeration has not read much Le Corbusier. (His writing is as bad as his architecture, and bears out precisely what Curl says.) Nor is it difficult to find in the architectural press examples of cultish writing that is impenetrable and arcane, devoid of denotation but with plenty of connotation. Here, for example, is Owen Hatherley, writing about an exhibition of Le Corbusier's work at London's Barbican Centre (itself a fine example of architectural barbarism). According to Hatherley, Le Corbusier was:

the architect who transformed buildings for communal life from mere filing cabinets into structures of raw, practically sexual physicality, then forced these bulging, anthropomorphic forms into rigid, disciplined grids. This might be the work of the "Swiss psychotic" at his fiercest, but the exhibition's setting, the Barbican—with its bristly concrete columns and bullhorn profiles, its walkways and units—proves that even its derivatives can become places rich with perversity and intrigue, without a pissed-in lift [elevator] or a loitering youth in sight. . . . [T]hese collisions of collectivity and carnality have no obvious successors today.

This, by the way, was written by a man who has traveled extensively through Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and who could conclude from his travels (in 2015!):

Revolution might be a rather exciting thing, one that would transform the world, and transform space, for the better. Worth doing. Why not try it.

One is left open-mouthed by such callowness. Even if we disregarded entirely the millions starved and killed as a consequence of the exciting thing called revolution, and the decades of oppression and impoverishment that followed it as the night the day, and just concentrated on revolution's architecture and urbanism, one would have the kind of response Karl Kraus had to the rise of Hitler: When it came to Hitler, Kraus said, I can't think of anything to say.

Soviet modernism, in fact, was no different from British or French, except in the minor matter that the construction in the Soviet Union was even shoddier than in Britain or France. The affinity is self-evident from a comparing glance at a Soviet block of apartments and at a British or French one constructed in the 1960s or '70s. Just outside the Porte de Bagnolet in Paris, for example, one could be in the suburbs of Moscow (except for the ethnic diversity). The same is true of public buildings. At the Cité des Sciences in Paris, one could easily believe oneself in the monumental part of some Soviet provincial capital: the same vast and irredeemably hideous inhuman concrete mess.

Curl's book is a gauntlet thrown down before a powerful establishment. Its publication has caused a stir among those who are, for professional reasons, unable to admit the obvious, for to accept any of its criticisms would be to admit to decades of architectural incompetence if not outright criminality, inasmuch as modernism was party not only to the destruction of all previously existing townscapes but to profiteering of the crudest and grossest kind.

Making Dystopia is much more than a very detailed critique of a building or two here or there. It is an angry criticism of an entire worldview—the worldview of the type of person who much prefers his worldview to the world, and in so doing causes untold ruination. The editor of the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, Hugh Pearman, wrote a scathing but inaccurate [review](#), whose very subtitle was a flagrant

misrepresentation: *If it's not trad, he ain't glad*. In fact, in criticizing modernism and its successor movements, Curl is promoting no particular type of architecture, any more than if I criticize McDonald's hamburgers I am saying that all cuisine should be French or Italian or anything else. Of course, Mr. Pearman has a right to his private opinion of the book, but as editor of the Institute's *Journal* he must have known that he was, in effect, speaking ex cathedra for the British profession as a whole. This impression was reinforced when he printed no criticism of his own review but tweeted instead,

I'm getting loads of letters (mostly written on paper from elderly men with no email address) supporting the deranged recent writings of James Stevens Curl . . .

The fury against Curl, I suspect, was an implicit admission that he was right. A review by Stephen Bayley in the *Spectator*, titled *Modernist architecture isn't barbarous – but the blinkered rejection of it is*, claimed that Curl's own views are dystopian (unlike, presumably, Le Corbusier's plans for Paris, Algiers, Stockholm, Moscow, Antwerp, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro). Bayley wrote:

Yes, modernist principles, misunderstood by unimaginative planners, often led to atrocious results. Le Corbusier's 'vertical garden cities' became vertical slums. And there is only a sliver of difference between Walter Gropius's lofty Bauhaus ideals and a crap council estate.

This, indeed, is the burden of Curl's complaint, minus the ineffable vulgarity with which Bayley expresses himself. Bayley does not attempt to tell us which old city has been rendered more beautiful, more civilized, by architectural modernism and its successors, for a very simple reason: No such city does, or could, exist. A few decent buildings cannot redeem an aesthetic (and social) disaster.

Curl knows that he is arguing not against an aesthetic, but against an ironclad ideology. The architectural Leninists have been determined so to indoctrinate the public that they hope and expect a generation will grow up knowing nothing but modernism, and therefore will be unable to judge it. (All judgment is

comparative, as Doctor Johnson said.) In Paris recently, I saw an advertisement on the Métro (a few days before the fire in Notre-Dame) to the effect that Paris would not be Paris without the Centre Pompidou—which, of course, has a good claim to be the ugliest building in the world. In the face of such an advertisement promoted by the cultural elite, what ordinary person would dare demur?

Yet people do demur, however quietly. Earlier this year, the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* published an article on architecture in children's books that complained:

The researchers were looking for familiar modern architecture elements such as flat roofs, open plan living, ribbon windows and expanses of concrete, glass and steel. Instead, they found that the stereotypical pitched roof house still prevails, with schools and libraries likely to be shown in a classical or neoclassical manner. . . . "On the other hand, when it [modern architecture] is present, it can sometimes also have a negative connotation—and then it's almost replaced the dark forest as a scary, dangerous place. . . . Modern architecture is then cast as a supporting villain."

Needless to say, there is not the faintest hint of self-examination as to why this might be; and although Curl's book has been criticized as unnecessary because it reiterates old arguments against modernism (though it provides a huge amount of new evidence for such arguments), the above shows that it could hardly be more timely.

That the Leninists look forward to the extinction of criticism so that they can dominate the world and, without opposition, cover it with glass, concrete, and steel in ever more bizarre shapes is demonstrated by a reply to Pearman's tweet by Catherine Slessor, a well-known writer on architecture and former editor of the *Architectural Review*:

Never mind. They'll all be dead soon, evaporating in splenetic puffs.

This is fully in the tradition of moral grandeur exemplified by Le Corbusier, as was the removal of Sir Roger Scruton from his honorary position as adviser on architectural beauty to the British government, brought about by a craven surrender to lies and innuendo.

Could anyone imagine a worldwide outpouring of genuine and heartfelt grief, such as that which greeted the burning of Notre-Dame de Paris, if *any* building of the last seventy years burnt down? Indeed, the destruction of many would be a cause almost for rejoicing. Modernist buildings will never age as Notre-Dame aged; they will merely deteriorate, and usually do deteriorate even before completion.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is Grief and Other Stories.

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