

Father of the New Urbanism

Léon Krier, *The Architecture of Community* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Michael Camacho

I decided to abandon university, not to have kids, not to engage in building, but rather to think, to draw, and to generally find out what was so wrong with contemporary architecture and urbanism and how to right it . . . not because I felt I had a special gift in that direction, but because of an absurd realization that nobody else, not even those I most esteemed, seemed inclined to do what I imperatively felt had to be done.

This, in a nutshell, is the moving force behind the work of Léon Krier, an architect and urban planner who has built comparatively little but has had a large influence on the profession, especially in regard to contemporary urbanism. Krier is often pointed to as the intellectual father of New Urbanism, a current movement in urban planning that advocates for cities made up of close, walkable communities, in which places for living, working and leisure are built side by side and integrated with one another rather than partitioned into separate areas. Krier is well known as a strident critic of “modernism” and a strong supporter of a return to traditional principles in construction and design. *The Architecture of Community* presents an almost-complete collection of his writings, illustrations and designs from over the course of a lifetime.

Krier’s architectural sense is strongly informed by the community of his childhood. As he relates in an essay called “Why I Practice Classical Architecture and Traditional Urbanism,” he grew up in Luxembourg, “a small capital city of 70,000 souls” that was “a miracle of traditional architecture.” “My father’s tailoring workshop occupied the ground floor of the townhouse, and for my primary education I hopped across the street when hearing the school bells chime from our garden,” he recalls, in a sentence that captures neatly some of the principles of urban planning that Krier would later champion, such as diversity in building use and walkability in city planning.

On holidays, Krier would go with his parents and three siblings to visit beautiful locales in nearby Switzerland, France and Italy. Given the chance to pick the destination for one such trip, Krier chose to go and see the “Radiant City” of modern architect Le Corbusier, in Marseille, France. Growing up, Krier had in fact been enthralled with modern architecture, despite – or, perhaps, because of – the fact that he had never actually encountered it except through books. He goes so far as to claim that “Le Corbusier had become for me a second messiah . . . I fantasized of white Cubist volumes adorning my favorite places . . .” But his visit to his messiah’s twelve-story concrete block of apartment units in Marseille, in all its “tawdry reality,” proved to be an “unavowable disappointment.” Krier points to this experience, together with the destruction of large parts of his hometown as a result of the war, as what alienated him completely from modernism. “I took it personally and decided to fight back,” he recounts, “not clearly knowing who the enemy was.”

The Architecture of Community represents, in part, Krier's lifelong attempt to come to grips with this enemy. In fact, the book outlines both "a diagnosis and a cure, a critique and a project." It is valuable not only as Krier's attempt to get to the heart of what he senses is wrong with modernist architecture and urbanism, which he understands as a particular instantiation of what is wrong with modernity more generally, but also as an outline or general theory, in text and in drawing, of his own approach to architecture, what he calls the commonsense art of making places. In this regard, Krier's book is as much concerned with first principles – the *archai* of archi-itecture, as it were – as with what concretely follows from them in the building up of our towns and cities.

A Diagnosis and a Critique Krier is careful to distinguish between modernity as a chronological concept, and modernism as an ideology. (While he does not expressly define what constitutes "modernist" architecture, we get a sense of what he means in his reproof that "Modernism represents the negation of all that makes architecture useful: no roofs, no load-bearing walls, no columns, no arches, no vertical windows, no streets, no squares, no privacy, no grandeur, no decoration, no craftsmen, no history, no tradition. Surely," he continues, "the next step must be to negate these negations.") At the same time, Krier thinks that there is something fundamentally "modern" that unites and underlies current "modernist" practices. The closest he gets to pinpointing what this may be is in his indication that it concerns "our understanding of the universe and of nature . . . whether we believe that progress and evolution have a finality or not."

For Krier, then, modernity is perhaps best defined by a certain conception of change and of finality. More specifically, Krier accuses modernism of making change or innovation an end in itself, rather than a means toward a stable, finished goal. As a result, the planet we inhabit has become a perpetual building-site, rather than a solid and permanent home for mankind. We also see the elevation of industrial or utilitarian methods and imperatives to supreme principles trumping ethical or aesthetic categories. Finally, in what seems to me an insightful critique, Krier argues that modernity's *tabula rasa* approach, its defining itself *over and against* tradition, as the negation of everything that came before, signifies a kind of reactionary move that in fact reveals a *lack* of autonomy – which is ironic, since autonomy is one of modernity's most-cherished ideals. The goal of ever-new, never-ending progress, in contrast to the classical ideal of a completed maturity or finality, "corresponds to a negation of adulthood, to a childish dream of never-ending adolescence."

Krier sees all of this manifesting itself concretely in the problems of modern urbanism and architecture. In regard to the former, Krier especially critiques the "runaway entropy" or "hyper-growth" which characterizes the typical city of today. The vertical congestion of the city proper, expressed in the omnipresent sky-scraper, finds its corollary in the horizontal dilution of the suburb, many buildings of which, as Krier points out in one illustration, are essentially sky-scrapers turned on their side, or "land-scrapers," as it were. Both are "reifications of the futureless frenzy" of modern society, and point to a fundamental loss of any positive sense of limit in city planning.

The second major problem Krier finds in contemporary urban practice is functional zoning laws, which create a segregation of sorts between what happens in the city, where we work, and in the suburb, where we live or recreate. These laws are expressions of a typically modern preference for "clear and distinct ideas," for which Descartes finds an analogy in the abstract geometry of

straight lines, which serve to divide things cleanly from one another. In this regard, zoning laws are “the technical and legal tool for fragmenting our social lives,” preventing the creation of true, or truly diverse, communities. In the structurally atomized society that results, more and more time and energy is spent simply in moving people and goods from one place to another.

In regard to modern architecture, Krier argues that the structural form of most buildings today, such as the skyscraper or the suburban shopping mall, indicates a confusion in architectural symbolism or type, one which in turn reflects a more fundamental confusion of the difference between what he calls *res privata* or *res economica*, on the one hand, and *res publica* or *res sacra*, on the other. According to Krier, economic activities are, or at least should be, essentially particular or “private,” in the sense that they are not at the center of what really unifies a community. The form of the building that houses these activities should be an architectural reflection of their place within society, in its size, for example, or its style. As Krier puts it, “single utilitarian functions [such as houses or businesses] quite simply do not constitute adequate typological material to create buildings of monumental significance.” “The utilitarian character of their obese volumes [today] humiliates the dignity and rank of public buildings,” such as libraries, schools, town halls or churches.

Finally, Krier contends that the very construction of modernist buildings, in their use of primarily synthetic materials and in their separation of load-bearing structures from external facing, exhibits “an ontological rupture between appearance and reality.” The end result of what is apparently a quicker, more economical practice is in fact, at least according to Krier, buildings that are more structurally vulnerable, with shorter overall life spans and higher long-term maintenance costs. At any rate, he says, cheap and ugly buildings tend not to have a long life expectancy: no one really cares to see them preserved, and people may even take active steps to see them torn down. Unfortunately, the current prevalence of synthetic construction materials and techniques means that traditional practices are no longer handed on in any official way. As a result, modernism continues to reinforce itself as the dominant architectural style, since what we can envision and build is de facto limited to what can be accomplished by synthetic means.

A Cure and a Project

What is Krier’s alternative? If at the heart of what is wrong with modernity is the ideal of never-ending progress, what Krier champions instead is limit or definition as a positive good. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that Krier thinks that what is missing in modernist architecture and urbanism, if not in modernity as a whole, is a real and robust sense of form.

According to Krier, there is a defined and nameable typology (*typos*: mould, model, pattern) to architectural objects. Houses, churches or railway stations, like roofs or windows, have in general a certain “look” or “shape” to them, one that has been discovered and perfected over the course of history and that corresponds to both the needs of their use and their symbolic place within society. In Krier’s view, while there is room for differences and creativity in architecture, arising from the need to respond to the demands of one’s particular geographic and historic locality, there is no inherent need to reinvent the wheel. “As is the case with all good things in life – love, good manners, language, cooking – leaps of genius are required only rarely. The poet

does not excel by inventing new words or languages but when, by subtle arrangements of otherwise familiar terms, he reveals human predicaments in new and poetic ways.”

One of Krier’s basic points, then, is that traditional architectural designs and solutions work, in a way that most men and women find not only find satisfactory but beautiful. The latter is not something trivial: “excessive hunger will in the end kill the body . . . we have to ask ourselves what beauty-depletion kills in us.” The way in which the built environment impacts and influences us, while often unnoticed, is real, and according to Krier it is too public and too important a thing to be subject to experiment at the whim of modernist architects: “The city is not a laboratory.” Without some kind of grounding in typology, the composition of buildings will end up degenerating into what is ultimately an arbitrary arrangement of shapes and volumes. The use of synthetic materials only exacerbates the problem, insofar as they “make even abstruse, illogical structures stand up.” By contrast, on traditional principles, just as composition should be typological, so construction should be “tectonic,” or grounded in and attuned to the “logic” of the materials from which it is made. The forms of buildings should be derived, at least in part, from their matter, and the need to build this matter in such a way as to support the building’s mass. The arch or column is not only beautiful but needful, and beautiful not least because of its structural place within the whole. The result is an intrinsic connection, an “honest” relationship, between a building’s form and its matter.

For Krier, the idea of form has a central place not only in architecture but also in urbanism. In the first place, this regards the relationship between a city’s various parts. As we’ve seen, Krier argues for an architectural distinction between private and public buildings, akin to the distinction between prose and poetry. The former should be simpler, informed by a kind of “vernacular” style arising from the geoclimatic conditions and local materials of a place. The latter builds on this, expressing it in a more “classical” style, with a corresponding contrast in scale, dimension and artistic elaboration. In describing a plan he drew up for a school campus, Krier points out how, in contrast with the more “sober buildings” that house class or exercise rooms, “those with a more important civic function such as the library, assembly hall . . . and sports hall are distinguished by their larger volumes, higher ceilings, and more elaborate articulation.” The result is that “each building can be located . . . and identified with utmost ease because its individual building type can be recognized and understood at a glance, the architecture reflect[ing] its relative hierarchical and symbolic status” within the whole.

This idea of form, applied to the city, not only concerns the organic relationship between the parts and the whole, but also indicates a need for proper limit or definition. Rather than the city conceived as a “continuous open field populated by individualistic freestanding buildings,” Krier thinks of the city as an organism, which can only grow so far before becoming a monstrosity. Once it reaches maturity, it should increase through reproduction. Similarly, each city, as it grows, should become “polycentric,” composed of an ensemble of distinct city centers or “quarters,” each of which is relatively self-sufficient. The quarter has a size that is defined in reference to the human person, rather than in abstract metrics or in reference to the automobile: according to Krier, it should be as wide as a person can walk in ten minutes’ time. Each quarter should “comprise all urban activities, functions and uses,” by which it achieves a kind of “richness . . . based on the proximity of and dialogue between the greatest possible variety of private and public uses.” The urban quarter should be “autonomous with respect to . . . primary

schools, daily grocery shopping and markets, and also in terms of employment . . . health services, and cultural activities.” So many quarters form a borough, which has its own autonomy in terms of secondary schools, more irregular shopping, administration, and the like. A city is in turn composed of so many boroughs.

The proper way to achieve this kind of urban environment, without either artificially constructing a community, on the one hand, or resigning oneself to fate or market forces, on the other, is through the use of a master plan, which Krier likens to the constitution of a nation. It is simultaneously “an ethical and artistic vision” and “a legislative and public framework” for the development of a city or town. It would include, for example, the basic network of streets and squares and the size of various plots. Without indicating specifically what will be built where, it could plan for larger, more industrial buildings to be situated on the borders of the community, for example, where faster thoroughfares built for heavier traffic loads would also run. It would also specify such things as maximum building height and plot-ratio. Krier argues that building heights should actually be limited by a maximum number of floors (ideally, three to five), rather than numeric measurement. This would set a limit without imposing unnatural uniformity, since floor-to-ceiling height could differ from building to building. Because public buildings typically have higher ceilings, they would naturally have more prominence. It would also be an easy way to reduce overcrowding, since the higher a building can be built, the more expensive each plot becomes, which results in developers trying to get more out of each plot, leading to over-congestion.

Conclusion

It is hard to gainsay most of the principles which Krier lays out. The most obvious objections would be that he is not realistic, or that he is essentially stuck in the past. In regard to the first, Krier argues that the apparent “realism” of modern, utilitarian methods in architecture is not in fact more economical or more efficient, *when viewed in the long run*, and that these methods unnecessarily result in places of ugliness rather than places of beauty. As regards realism in urban planning, his response would perhaps be that we tend to concede too much to “fate” or “the way things are,” instead of thoughtfully imagining and implementing alternative solutions. In regard to the second objection, Krier argues that what has been subsequently historicized by modernity as “traditionalist” style or practice is traditional only in the sense of timeless (as opposed to most modernist architecture, which “has its sell-by date engraved on its front”), and that there is no reason why these timeless principles cannot continue to inform our practice of architecture and urbanism today.

One of the shortcomings of Krier’s work is that, despite his concern with first principles, he moves too quickly to a moralistic critique. Throughout the book, there are numerous variations on the theme that “a modernist bias harboring ideological and psychological blockages causes traditional solutions to be ignored, discarded, and even discredited.” Krier essentially accuses architects and urban planners of bad will, in their “determined and stubborn pursuit of wrong ideas” or their “willful degradation of the human environment,” instead of (in line with the whole thrust of his book) showing something of why these ideas have such a hold on us. At the same time, part of his point, I suppose, is that the “modernists” have essentially convinced themselves

of an ideology that is at odds with the desires of men's hearts. This is why, he claims, the general public tends not to understand or prefer modernist architecture.

More generally, Krier seems to overlook many of the complexities that go into architecture and especially into the development and growth of cities. Many of the projects which he has been involved with, such as the towns of Seaside, FL (featured in the movie *The Truman Show*) or Poundbury, UK, are planned communities in the wrong sense. They feel contrived, and most of the architecture which Krier has actually built conveys a similar sense. As true as the principles he elucidates may be, it would seem that they have to come to expression "from below," in an organic and incarnate way, in a specific time and place and people. Insofar as they are lacking to us today, then, insofar as they are not "in our bones," so to speak, it may not be possible to give them adequate expression. Ultimately, it is not possible to engineer community through good architecture or urban planning. Although doubtless good architecture and urbanism has a shaping influence on good community, it must also, and firstly, arise *from* this community. If it is lost to us today, it will take time to recover it in any genuine way. In this regard, however, Krier does help educate us toward what it is we may be missing.