



Humanum

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Making Dystopia: Modernist Architecture Refuted

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Stevens Curl, James, *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Language: A body of words and methods of combining words used and understood by a considerable community.

—*Webster’s International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed., unabridged (1949)*

Architecture: A body of building forms and methods of combining building forms used and understood by a considerable community.

—*A paraphrase of the definition of the word “Language”*

Architecture—the arts of designing and building conjoined—has been with us created human beings since the fall of man. Implicit in the need for God to fashion clothing for Adam and Eve

was the need for the couple to fashion a dwelling for themselves. Since then, mankind has been at great pains making buildings for human use.

For millennia, we got it mostly right and that is no small feat, for the design of buildings is as difficult as their construction is laborious. Great architecture, like any example of excellence, is and always has been fairly rare. That said, it used to occur with greater frequency than it does now.

The built record of our cities, towns, villages and hamlets, our churches, capitals, train stations, and houses provides ample demonstration of the fact that beauty and nobility in architecture used to be much more common. The same record also shows that when it comes to our buildings and cities, for some set of reasons in the early twentieth century, things started to go sideways, quickly, and with lasting effect.

The onset of the twentieth century was welcomed by a coterie of central European and Russian thinkers as the opportunity to supplant the benefit of humanity with “progress” as the true end of all human endeavor. Unfortunately for the arts and architecture, much progress was made advancing that false notion. Houses were no longer homes but “machines,” and as machines they required a machine aesthetic. Architects were no longer to look to excellent examples of previous architecture for inspiration, but to current and futuristic examples of manufacture and transportation. Materials used to build buildings would need to be the same materials used in manufacture and transportation: steel, glass and concrete. Applied also to city planning, these ideas have rendered great damage to once-beautiful cities the world over.

While there are currently signs of a coming reorientation, architecture’s center of gravity, attracted by the dictates and fashions of Modernism and Postmodernism, has shifted so far away from society’s that the profession is a regular source of popular derision and even contempt. Yet the architecture profession and, even more critically, most schools of architecture, remain obstinate in their waywardness. In view of a growing societal discontent with architects, and perhaps in reaction to it, there has been in recent years a “doubling down” by the architecture and planning establishment on the irrefutable errors of Modernism and the undeniable havoc it has wreaked on our buildings, towns, cities, and landscapes.

Into this arena of Modernism’s over-confident self-denial strode James Stevens Curl, a British architect and architectural historian, an accomplished scholar whose love of language is evidenced by his authorship of two dictionaries and one encyclopedia on architecture. Here is a man committed to the truth. He carried into the arena his most recent book *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*. In this remarkable work he sets the historical record straight by demythologizing architectural Modernism, its progenitors and heroes. He removes the century of filth swept beneath its rug by the same individuals, points his straightened finger at the ongoing non-sense, and advises for better approaches that eschew the manifest errors of Modernism and lead to better architecture and better places for human beings to live.

Curl has been carefully choosing words for nearly a half-century. In his title, he pulls out two heavyweights, “Dystopia” and “Barbarism,” utilizing them to indict Modernist architecture and planning that has left the most fortunate places badly pock-marked while destroying the skylines, streetscapes, and especially the habitability of entire cities worldwide. These words

both carry meanings relative to a *good*. “Dystopia” is an antonym of sorts to Saint Thomas More’s neologism, his imaginary *Utopia*; and “Barbarism” denotes an activity outside the pale, beyond the boundary of civilization and therefore unacceptable to it. Curl uses “Dystopia” in response to the “Utopia” that Modernists both profess to draw inspiration from and promise to supply to civilization. “Barbarism” is what Modernists actually produced and the ways and means by which they operated and continue to operate.

To no small degree, this is also where Modernism has carried us: to a very real state of self-evident ugliness, placed well outside what any civilization could rationally recognize as its own. Curl uses the bare facts to show that yes, what Modernism has wrought was and remains, truly, that bad.

He is clear in the book’s preface that his work is not “an attack” on the Modern movement and that his purpose is simply “to explain, expose and outline the complex factors that have managed to create so many Dystopias in which, arguably, an ‘architecture’ devoid of any coherent language or meaning has been foisted on the world by cliques convinced they knew or know all the answers, yet demonstrated or demonstrate an incompetence with buildings that fail as architecture at almost every level and by almost every criterion.” A Modernist will undoubtedly feel “attacked” by the book’s contents, but Curl’s success is in allowing the facts to do the heavy lifting. The situation really was, and remains, that bad.

Curl’s scholarship must be lauded here. This is a book that needed to be written and that was extremely difficult to write, for the task presents the scholar a daunting challenge in defenestrating the Modernist movement. Clearly, he rose to the challenge, surpassing it with his superb writing and meticulous research. Both are evidenced by his:

1. 18-page preface necessitated by the fact that what follows is too unbelievable to be started in upon without sufficiently developing the absurdities that make the body of text so necessary;
2. 27-page epilogue containing warnings and advice, because we are still in the Modernist mess;
3. 60 pages of notes required because, after more than a century, Modernists still ignore and deny their works’ manifestly horrible origins and legacies;
4. a helpful 16-page partly illustrated glossary needed to clarify architectural terms in general and modernist jargon in particular;
5. a 43-page bibliography that demonstrates the author’s labors and negates any credible charge of partisanship against him from the

Modernist establishment. And because after 140 years of modernist hegemonic management of the myths of its own origins, narratives, histories and results, documentation is necessary in setting forth the truthful contrary;

6. 111 plates and figures illustrating things that simply cannot be described in writing;

7. a 41-page index that assists in making the book the indispensable reference for other scholars.

The body of the book sets forth the nineteenth-century “Origins of the Catastrophe.” It negates Modernists’ assumptions of their movement’s virtuous motivations and conduct. It further describes architectural Modernism’s early growth, its internal struggles, and strong affinities to atheists, Bolsheviks, National Socialists, and Italian Fascists. It describes Modernism’s spread in Europe between the World Wars, as well as its “surprising” global metastasis and “Universal Acceptance” after 1945. Following is a description of Modernist architecture’s inevitable “Descent into Deformity.”

Curl closes the body of *Making Dystopia* with a brief chapter called “Dangerous Signals” in which he reveals the unhappy truth that, to this day, civilization remains obligated to bear the burden of the buildings and towns that architects continue to “design” and “build” for us. As he asserts in his preface, “[t]his is not a history of Modernism in architectural or urban design.” Indeed, it cannot be a history for we are still in it. Rather, Curl uses history to show where we are now amidst Modernism’s “deformities” and to present civilization with a remarkable lens through which to recognize its current predicament. There is not yet any aftermath of Modernism, though reading this book makes one long for it.

That societies worldwide are gripped in Modernism’s quagmire is why the remainder of the book is necessary. In his final chapter “Some Further Reflections” and in his epilogue, Curl has reserved for us his very best. Here he addresses those non-architectural matters that are profoundly impacted by architecture and urban design, and which matter most to society. In a section titled “Measurable & Unmeasurable Aspects,” he contradicts the central Modernist notion that buildings are “machines for living” and that cities are collections of mere “function.”

Buildings and cities, very much like language, are the highest and best manifestations of culture. They both arise from and give substance to that culture in ever more sophisticated, beautiful, and meaningful ways. They draw on the best of what has come before so as to point to what can come to be. Thus, architecture and urbanism are *necessarily* aspirational, transcendental, and *not* Utopian. What Curl shows us is that “Modernist dogma . . . foreseen by many, seems to be an ever more hideous Dystopia, leveling always downwards.”

Making Dystopia is a tremendously well-written and vitally important book that places history and truth at the service of civilization while calling for architects and urbanists to place

themselves anew in that same service. Modernists and those they purport to serve should have ears to hear and eyes to see.

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