

BOOK REVIEW: MAKING DYSTOPIA – THE STRANGE RISE AND SURVIVAL OF ARCHITECTURAL BARBARISM, by JAMES STEVENS CURL

Sir Roger Scruton*

Brinkworth, Wiltshire, United Kingdom

Abstract. The latest book by James Stevens Curl, a distinguished architectural historian, revises the commonly-held conception of twentieth-century architecture. Rather than accepting the ubiquitous forms bequeathed by the Bauhaus, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, an argument is made to abandon them because they could be unhealthy. This book could well provoke a worldwide architectural revolution, re-orienting the practice towards more human-centered design. At the same time, the world's historical and local architectures are given powerful support against being destroyed by a rampant wave of contemporary "international-style" buildings.

Keywords: 20th Century design, architecture, Bauhaus, urbanism, traditional culture, building traditions.

Corresponding Author: Prof. Nikos A. Salingaros, Department of Mathematics, The University of Texas at San Antonio, One UTSA Circle, San Antonio, Texas, USA, e-mail: salingar@gmail.com

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When people make mistakes and are distressed at the result, they will as a rule retrace their steps, discover where they went wrong, and try to correct the matter. That is what it means to be rational, and rationality is an evolutionary advantage, enabling our hypotheses to die in our stead, as Karl Popper famously put it. However, when decisions are made for others, by people who do not pay the cost when things go wrong, error has a tendency to become programmed into the system, since nobody has the incentive to rectify it. This is what happened with the rise of totalitarian government in the 20th century. And, as James Stevens Curl shows, in this powerfully argued polemic, it is what happened when a handful of egotistical charlatans imposed modernist architecture on the rest of us, accompanying their cold-hearted and alienating forms on the people whom they despised by means of loud fanfares of self-applause.

Although modernist architecture has been hated by the mass of mankind from its first inception in the brains of Le Corbusier, Gropius, Miës van der Rohe and the rest of the gang, nobody has been able to put a stop to it, or to act on the obvious conclusion that we had better retrace our steps. A critical orthodoxy has arisen, animated by the very people who most need to be criticised, according to which the modern movement in architecture was historically necessary, uniquely functional, uniquely honest, and in any case morally correct. With a zealotry equal to that of the 17th century puritans the modernist took over the schools of architecture, the architectural press and the channels of critical communication, shouting their message to the heavens, and condemning as ignorant and reactionary all those who showed the slightest hesitation in accepting it.

The case against the modernists has certainly been made, by David Watkin in *Morality and Architecture*, by Tom Wolfe in his brilliant satire, *From Bauhaus to Our*

House, and by many others, myself included. But it is never listened to, because the minority interest represented by architectural modernism has seized control of the mechanisms whereby errors might be recognized and corrected. In this way the architectural establishment has made the very same error as the totalitarians — the error of Lenin, Mao and Hitler — which is the error of destroying the process whereby errors can be corrected. By eliminating opposition, and driving dissenters from all the institutions that would grant them a voice, the Nazis and the communists made sure that their mistakes (which they alone denied to be mistakes) would be programmed into the system, which would thereafter proceed down the chosen avenue to destruction with no one capable of reversing its progress.

What is interesting, and what comes out very clearly from this thoroughly researched account of the history and ideology of the modernist movement, is that the modernist pioneers were involved to a man (there were no women) in the communist and fascist ideologies of the day. The Bauhaus under Hannes Meyer was an explicitly Leninist institution, while Le Corbusier, in his urgent desire to destroy some major city — preferably Paris — and leave his mark on the ruins, cultivated first the leftists of the Bauhaus and then the Vichy government of war-time France. Indeed, he persuaded the latter to appoint him as their architectural advisor, and thereby to carry out his plan for the destruction of Algiers which the elected mayor of that city, and the people whom he represented, had until that point resisted.

Fortunately the war ended before the plan could be put into effect, but this did not deter Le Corbusier from moving from municipal government to municipal government in order to impose his will on the people. In the post-war period this was easy. It was the period of social housing, in which the battered countries of Europe had to make provision for people displaced by war and military service, and in which an ideology that proposed whole-scale solutions naturally appealed to the bureaucrats. Almost all the post-war ministries in charge of social housing were in the hands of modernists and their acolytes. Before the combined assault of the self-declared geniuses, crying ‘*c'est moi l'avant garde*’, the bureaucrats could put up no resistance. And all around Paris today you see the result.

Curl tells the story with passion and conviction, and fully justifies his judgment of the modern movement and its aftermath as a catastrophe. The only reservation I have is that he does not examine in detail what *kind* of catastrophe he is dealing with. The crime-ridden and dilapidated estates of the Parisian *banlieue*, the ravaged cities with their centres destroyed, without streets, squares or residents, the destroyed sky-lines in which only blocks can be seen, the social and spiritual desolation of the Soviet concrete monotowns — all these things deserve a commentary. Equally important, however, would be to explore the *aesthetic* errors of modernism, and to see just how they connect to the disorientation and alienation that is the near universal response to life in a modernist city. Why is it that we need streets, with vertically composed facades, as opposed to blocks built up from horizontal layers, surrounded by waste-land? Why do mouldings, edgings, mullions and string courses matter, and why are they so soothing to the eye? Why is the skyline important, and why does it matter that buildings should rest firmly on the ground, and not float above it like Le Corbusier's nautical *Villa Savoye*? These and a hundred other questions were left hanging in the air at the end of the book. But thank heavens for an author who is prepared to raise them.

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Reference

Curl, J.S. (2018). *Making Dystopia - The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. ISBN-10: 0198753691 — ISBN-13: 978-0198753698.

Biographical Note

Professor Sir Roger Scruton is widely considered to be the greatest living British philosopher. He is the author of many distinguished books, including *The Aesthetics of Architecture* and *The Classical Vernacular*, on architecture. He was recently appointed by the British Secretary of State for Housing to chair a new commission to champion beauty in the built environment.