

Architectural Dystopia: A Book Review

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (October 2018)



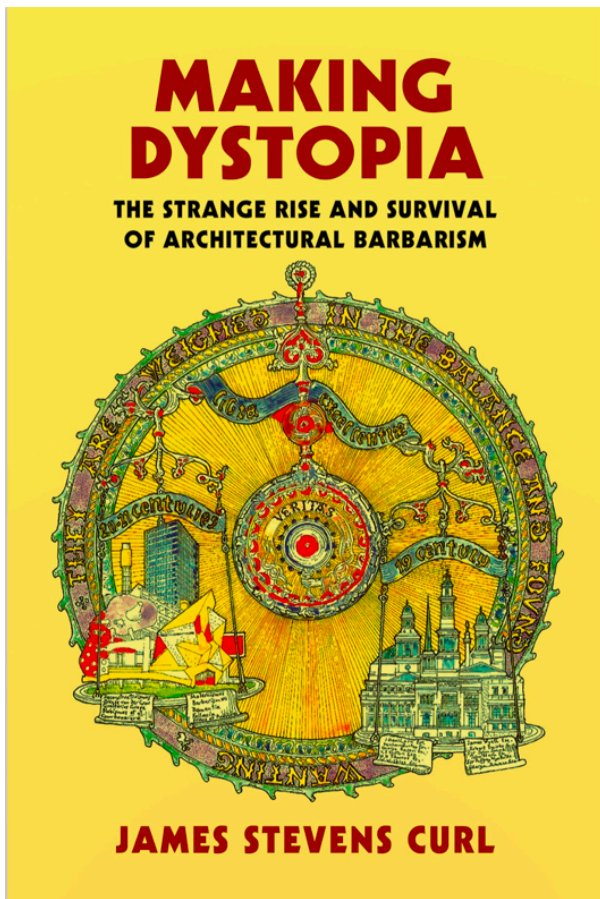
1968 photo of Tower East Building in Shaker Heights, Ohio, designed by Walter Gropius (from his archives)

There is no more evanescent quality than modernity, a rather obvious or even banal observation whose import those who take pride in their own modernity nevertheless contrive to ignore. Having reached the pinnacle of human achievement by living in the present rather than in the past, they assume that nothing

will change after them; and they also assume that the latest is the best. It is difficult to think of a shallower outlook.

Of course, in certain fields the latest is inclined to be best. For example, no one would wish to be treated surgically using the methods of Sir Astley Cooper: but if we want modern treatment, it is not because it is modern but because it is better as gauged by pretty obvious criteria. If it were worse (as very occasionally it is), we should not want it, however modern it were.

Alas, the idea of progress has infected important spheres in which it has no proper application, particularly the arts. It is difficult to overestimate the damage that the gimcrack notion of teleology inhering in artistic endeavour has inflicted on all the arts, exemplified by the use of the term *avant-garde*: as if artists were, or ought to be, soldiers marching in unison to a predetermined destination. If I had the power to expunge a single expression from the vocabulary of art criticism, it would be *avant-garde*.



Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism
James Stevens Curl, 592 pages
Oxford University Press, 2018

In this scholarly, learned but also enjoyably polemical book, Professor Curl recounts both the history and devastating effects of architectural modernism. In no field of human endeavour has the idea that history imposes a way to create been more destructive, or more importantly destructive: for while we can take avoiding action against bad art or literature, we cannot avoid the scouring of our eyes by bad architecture. It is imposed on us willy-nilly and we are impotent in the face of it. Modern capitalism, it has been said, progresses by creative

destruction; modern architecture imposes itself by destructive creation.

As Professor Curl makes clear, the holy trinity of architectural modernism—Gropius, Mies and Corbusier—were human beings so flawed that between them they were an encyclopaedia of human vice. They spoke of morality and behaved like whores; they talked of the masses and were utter egotists; they claimed to be principled and were without scruple, either moral, intellectual, aesthetic or financial. Their two undoubted talents were those of self-promotion and survival, combined with an overweening thirst for power.

Their intellectual dishonesty was startling and would have

been laughable had it not been more destructive than the Luftwaffe. When they claimed to have no style because their designs were imposed on them by history, technology, social necessity, functionality, economy etc., and like Luther proclaimed they could do no other (which soon became the demand that others could do no other also), they remind me of the logical positivists who claimed to have no metaphysic. But if no given style or metaphysic is beyond the choice of he who has it, to possess a style or a metaphysic is inescapable in the activity of artistic creation or thought itself. And even my handwriting has a style, albeit a bad one.

In like fashion, as this book makes beautifully clear, the modernists were adept at claiming both that their architecture was a logical development to and aesthetic successor of classical Greek architecture and utterly new and unprecedented. The latter, of course, was nearer the mark: they created buildings that, not only in theory but in actual practice, were incompatible with all that had gone before, and intentionally so. Any single one of their buildings could, and often did, lay waste a townscape, with devastating consequences. What had previously been a source of pride for inhabitants became a source of impotent despair. Corbusier's books are littered with references to the Parthenon and other great monuments of architectural genius: but how anybody can see anything in common between the Parthenon and the *Unité d'habitation* (an appellation that surely by itself ought to tell us everything we need to know about Corbusier), other than that both are the product of human labour, defeats me.

But of course, nothing will come of nothing: architectural modernism has a pre-history just as it has its baleful successors. Professor Curl traces both with panache and erudition and shows that the almost universally accepted

history of modernism is actually assiduous propaganda rather than history, resulting not merely in untruth but the opposite of the truth. Thus both William Morris and C F A Voysey were claimed by apologists for modernism as progenitors of it, though this is fantastically unlikely to anyone with eyes to see, and Voysey explicitly detested modernism, among other things saying that it was pitifully full of faults and vulgarly aggressive. Nevertheless, Pevsner, the great architectural historian, who once called for architecture to be totalitarian, insisted that Voysey was a precursor of modernism, thus implying that he knew better what Voysey was about than Voysey himself knew.

The widely accepted narrative of modernism à la Gropius is that it was some kind of logical or ineluctable development from the Arts and Crafts movement. This seems to me utterly fantastic: it is like saying that Mickey Spillane is a logical or ineluctable outgrowth of Montesquieu. It is true that in the work of certain artists, for example Mondrian, one can see a gradual change which might be considered logical, starting from figurative landscapes and ending, via ever greater abstraction, to purely geometric shapes. But even where there is such a development, it is ultimately beside the point: it does not prove that what came later was better. Each artistic product has to be assessed aesthetically on its own merits (which in architecture includes its harmony with an existing townscape), and only someone who sees with an ideology rather than with eyes could conclude anything other than that modernism has been overwhelmingly a disaster.

Moreover, claiming respectable ancestors is somewhat at variance with equal claims to be starting from zero (as Gropius put it), but such a contradiction is hardly noticed by the grand narrative history of modernism that Professor Curl

attacks and destroys.

He is not unable or unwilling to praise where it is due, though it is due rarely enough; and he is particularly effective in tracing the opportunistic ideological divagations of the modernists, whose one constant predilection was for absolute power over others. Mies, for example, was attracted to socialist totalitarianism, and his only objection to Nazism was that the Nazis eventually rejected his desire to have everything built according to his prescriptions. He left Nazi Germany because he feared his previous pro-leftism made him permanently suspect in its eyes, not because he was appalled by its brutality. If only they'd let him build! But contrary to apologists for Mies, and to a legend constantly repeated, it was not the Nazis who closed the Bauhaus but Mies himself, and he left Germany only four years after their assumption of power.

Finding refuge in America, Mies quickly perceived that the power of patronage of megalomaniac building lay with giant corporations rather than with fascists or communists and persuaded many of them to build his preternaturally inhuman and uninspired monstrosities. By a strange quirk of history, and because of mankind's perpetual propensity to make logical errors, Mies was able to pose dishonestly as anti-totalitarian and even as a friend of freedom precisely because he had fled Nazi Germany where they hadn't patronised him. He was fortunate that soon afterwards the United States had another totalitarian enemy, the Soviet Union. Mies and his allies were thus able to claim that his totalitarian modernism was actually a manifestation of western freedom. There are many such ironies pointed up in this book that would be delicious had they not had such appalling consequences.

Corbusier was a fascist in the most literal sense of the word, and early during the Occupation advocated the removal by force of the majority of Paris' population because it had no business to be living there. Can one wonder that a man with thoughts like that built monstrosities?

The sheer megalomania of the modernist architects, their evangelical zeal on behalf of what turned out to be, and could have been known in advance to be, an aesthetic and moral catastrophe, is here fully described. The story is more convoluted than I, not being an historian, had appreciated; Professor Curl conducts us deftly through the thickets of influences of which I, at least, had been ignorant. But the rapid rise and complete triumph of modernism throughout the world, so that an office block in Caracas should be no different from one in Bombay or Johannesburg, is to me still mysterious, considering that its progenitors were a collection of cranks and crackpots who wrote very badly and whose ideas would have disgraced an intelligent sixth-former. I do not see how anyone could read Corbusier, for example (and I have read a fair bit of him), without conceiving an immediate and complete contempt for him as a man, thinker and writer. He has two kinds of sentence, the declamatory falsehood and the peremptory order without reasons given. How anyone could have taken his bilge seriously is by far the most important enquiry that can be made about him. I could not help but recall the words of Gibbon's famous fifteenth chapter, which I have here slightly adapted:

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means architectural modernism obtained so remarkable a victory over the established architectures of the earth. To

this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the architectural doctrine itself, and to the great intellect of its originators. But as truth and wisdom seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to improve the standard of architecture, we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid spread of architectural modernism?

To the question of the secondary causes Professor Curl returns a complex answer. Secularism and the loss of all religious sentiment has favoured the meretricious. Modernism was from the very first a cult, a substitute religion, but one with political *nous*, such that it insinuated its believers, à la Gramsci, into architectural schools and architectural publications and would brook no opposition or criticism once in control. This control persists: still in France, and no doubt elsewhere, a man can risk his career by expressing a doubt about Corbusier's genius, let alone by criticising his manifest nastiness and incompetence. The modernists and their praise singers such as Pevsner instituted a kind of intellectual reign of terror in which those who did not share their views were regarded as reactionary bumpkins or even cretins. But who can look at Lutyens' buildings in New Delhi, for example, and think that?

There was the loss of cultural confidence after the Great War that favoured the adoption of novelty for its own sake, for everything that seemed to be a mere continuator of tradition was retrospectively tainted by the slaughter on the Western

Front, which was treated historiographically as if it were the inevitable outcome of the civilisation that wrought it. The travails of the post-war world seemed to call for total rather than piecemeal solutions; and in Britain at least, where of all western European countries the damage wrought by modernism was worst, the bomb damage was almost welcomed by the urban planners and modernist architects as a pretext for doing what they had already long wanted and planned to do, namely pull everything down and start again from a *tabula rasa*, eventually even contemplating the total destruction of Bath. Much that could have been restored was demolished with demoniac glee. The planners and architects thought they were rational because they planned so many cubic metres of living space and so many amenities per person, forgetting that man does not live by cubic metre or creature comforts alone, and that reason is the slave of the passions, themselves included: they forgot even that there was obviously more than one way to provide creature comforts. They combined the bureaucrat's lack of imagination with the tyrant's thirst for power. Never in world history had such technical incompetence been so powerfully allied with such total aesthetic insensitivity.

There is another factor that Professor Curl rightly emphasises: corporate corruption. Architects who presented themselves as building a revolutionary brave new world were also lining their capacious old pockets, while they served the interests of the building and car industries, among many others. In the post-war world, the car became the measure of all things, and moving by car unimpeded was a proxy measure of efficiency, wealth and modernity. Roads became more important than houses, streets or amenities, which were destroyed in the worship of this new golden calf. The Corbusian dream of speed swiftly evolved into the nightmare of traffic jam, one of the many blights of modern existence.

Eventually, the deeply impoverished language of Bauhaus or Corbusian architecture became evident even to architects, possibly the most obtuse professional group in the world (though educationists are not far behind). But their turning away from the dreariness of what Professor Curl calls Corbusianity has hardly improved matters. They discovered the delights—for themselves—of originality without the discipline of even a reduced vernacular, of giving buildings outlandish shape simply because it was possible to do so, the more outlandish the more attention being drawn to themselves. Thus the skyline of the City of London has been adorned with Brobdingnagian dildoes and early mobile telephones, turning the city into a damp, overcrowded cut-price Dubai; and Paris—the City of Light—has been the dubious distinction of having built three of the worst buildings in the world, the Centre Pompidou, the Musée du Quai Branly and the Philharmonie, the latter two by the architect who dresses like a fascist thug, Jean Nouvel. I cannot pass these buildings without thinking *au bagne!*