

Twentieth-Century Architecture as a Cult

by [Nikos Salingaros](#) (March 2019)



Broken Brutalism I, Mandy Payne, 2015

New preface to this essay

When this essay first appeared it created—and continues to create—very hostile reactions from the dominant architectural

culture. I stated what I thought was obvious, but it disturbed many of those who had gone through architecture school. Nevertheless, many people from both inside and outside academia and the profession found it thought-provoking. One eminent architectural historian, James Stevens Curl, liked it enough that he wrote the Foreword to my book *Anti-architecture and Deconstruction*, within which this article is included as a chapter.

Fast-forward several years, and Professor Curl's magisterial book [*Making Dystopia*](#) has now hit the world like a bombshell. In it, Professor Curl documents how a strange type of inhuman and non-adaptive architecture came to take over building activity following World War I, and then to completely dominate the profession after World War II. He has found a use for the cult thesis to explain the remarkable tenacity of this movement, and also how and why it took possession of architecture schools all over the world.

In light of recent events, especially considering the furor that *Making Dystopia* has provoked (and which is building up into a genuine architectural revolution), it might be good to have this essay widely available. It would appear—and I truly hope it is true this time around—that public reaction against the dismal qualities of officially promoted architecture has reached a tipping point. I am very happy to offer this essay separately from my book *Anti-architecture and Deconstruction*, which, of course, remains available in several languages.

1. Introduction

I have found, to my surprise, that architects are not

interested in laws of architecture. They prefer to design buildings on the basis of artistic fashion and ephemeral philosophical concerns. The same reaction greeted the efforts of my distinguished colleagues, Christopher Alexander and Léon Krier, to reform architecture as a discipline. Another recent attempt was initiated by Prince Charles. Despite having the vast majority of the British public in agreement with his humane vision of architecture, the Prince's attempt ultimately failed.

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How does the architectural profession so successfully repel attempts at reform? I believe that the answer is to be found in a system phenomenon. Architecture is a cult, and the last thing a cult wants is to be transformed into a proper scientific discipline. The reason is that the two types of system have very different internal structures, which in turn generate a form for the controlling power structure. There is no smooth transition from a cult to a discipline based on logical precepts.

Architecture is not set up to be stable to received input in the same way that science is. In science, there exists large-scale and long-term systemic stability. By contrast, contemporary architecture, like any other belief system not founded on rationality and experiment, is susceptible to catastrophic system collapse because it cannot tolerate minor changes.

The moment when society decides to abandon architecture as a

cult, and replace it with architecture as a field based on logical reflection, the present architectural power structure will cease to exist. A new power structure composed of new people will be supported by a new educational system. Establishment architects realize that their continued prosperity depends on prolonging the current system, and are doing a marvelous job of reinforcing its hold on society.

2. Defining a Cult

A system may be identified as a dangerous cult if it has the following characteristics, combining aims with techniques:

1. It aims to destroy
2. It isolates its members from the world
3. It claims special knowledge and morality
4. It demands strict obedience
5. It applies brainwashing
6. It replaces one's world view
7. It has an auto-referential philosophy
8. It creates its own language, incomprehensible to outsiders

I will show here that contemporary architecture satisfies these criteria.

3. Architecture and Cults

Few people today connect architecture with religion. And yet, up until about the last two centuries, architecture could not be distinguished from religion. Today, architecture has broken away from religion in forming its own cult. Architecture competes with religion because it promises transcendent

pursuits to its practitioners. It offers mystical enchantment, with insights left to be discovered purely by the power of creativity, and thus an opportunity for any initiate. The architect sees a chance for transcendental expression beyond the utilitarian uses of a building. Despite the modernists' proclaimed insistence on functionalism, they too were enchanted by their own ideas of formal expression.

From this, it is not surprising that architecture misused the workings of religion to further itself.

The Bauhaus and Taliesin—two “compounds” upon which contemporary architectural education is based—followed a cult structure. Walter Gropius established a strict, authoritarian cult regime for resident Bauhaus students. Johannes Itten, a follower of a cultish offshoot of the Mazdaist (Zoroastrian) religion, indoctrinated Bauhaus students into its mystical practices. Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Theo van Doesburg (all Bauhaus teachers at some point) belonged to the Theosophist movement led by Helena Blavatsky. They subscribed to the mystical cosmology of fellow Theosophist Dr. M. Schoenmackers, whose astrological theories compelled that only the primary colors yellow, blue and red could be used.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the cult practices at Taliesin were organized by Olgivanna Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's third wife, who was a disciple of the Greek-Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff. Gropius put into place his anti-traditionalist principles as soon as he became head of the architecture department at Harvard University in 1938, providing the model for postwar architectural education. Schools around the world soon copied what he and Wright had done.

It is irrelevant whether the spiritual groups mentioned above represented beneficial, benign, or harmful cults. Cult methods were applied to make architecture into a new cult, and an extremely dangerous one because of its virulence and destructive aims. A key aspect of modernism was an absolute belief in the necessity of eliminating all pre-modernist architecture.

The point where architecture turned into a cult can be identified with the abandonment of traditional building culture. Like science, architecture has a vast store of practical knowledge and technical skills that one needs to master before making original contributions. By throwing all of that away, the modernists could offer instant gratification to those who joined the cult. They attracted followers using the myth of the creative genius. Young architects still had to train for several years, but their time was spent very differently. Instead of learning and absorbing a core body of knowledge, they trained for allegiance to the architectural cult.

4. Brainwashing

Cult indoctrination begins by tearing down a person's confidence and self-esteem; i.e., one's emotional equilibrium as established via the childhood development of one's intuition and senses. Tactics for achieving this include mental and physical humiliation to discredit what are already automatic and natural responses. After one's major point of internal stability and referential attachment to a world view is effaced, that candidate is open to any kind of indoctrination.

For several decades, architectural novices have been conditioned by the message that sensual gratification from ornament and architectural forms, surfaces, and colors is a criminal act. It is asserted that such sources of pleasure are fit only for primitive peoples and social degenerates. Indeed, a cultivated non-response to sensually emotive architectural elements is supposed to characterize the intellectually advanced individual. As a psychological and physiological reaction to those forbidden elements is normal, however, this message induces feelings of guilt and worthlessness, as required to break down a student's spirit. Self-esteem is then rebuilt using the modernist repertoire of alien, hostile forms and surfaces—and, from then on, only the cult's reality is considered valid.

One of the slogans of the Bauhaus was "*starting from zero*". Its aim was a radical restructuring of human consciousness. Every incoming student was subjected to intense psychological conditioning designed to cleanse every preconception regarding architecture, so as to re-wire the student's neuronal circuits.

The studio method of architectural training lends itself perfectly as a technique for cult indoctrination. A student's project is judged—without having a basis of proven logical criteria—as to how closely it resembles currently fashionable buildings. The student's grade is entirely up to the whim of the teacher. It is no wonder then that, despite the widely-pronounced aims of limitless creativity, all students' projects tend to look the same and to conform to stylistic dogma. Students who don't adopt the cult's beliefs are eliminated before they can get their degrees, so they never join the architectural profession.

5. The Cult of Deconstructivism

In a devastating hoax, the two physicists Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont have exposed some of the most prominent French deconstructivist philosophers as charlatans.

Charlatans are not protected in the scientific world. The society of their peers would expel them from

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positions where they could continue to do harm. Science needs to protect its foundation more than its individual members, something that will not occur in a power-driven discipline that lacks a scientific basis. In the architectural arena, deconstructivists are unassailable because the discipline is based largely on cult beliefs. Those who use deconstructivist philosophy to justify their bizarre constructions are now at the top of their profession.

There is something dangerously wrong with a society that ignores the exposure of intellectual impostors. If part of a system is pathological, this puts the entire system at risk. Systemic connections will eventually infect the rest of the system (in this case, society as a whole), and thus destroy it. Our civilization appears to be so complacent with its recent technological progress that it does not recognize threats to its very existence. We are distracted by technological toys and are not applying our scientific knowledge to keep our society in healthy working order. More traditional cultures are aware that something is dreadfully wrong, but they don't know how to react in a constructive manner.

Architecture schools are training graduates who are indoctrinated into deconstructivist philosophy, yet are unable to design a simple building fit for human sensibilities. Deconstructivist buildings, moreover, have been shown to remove life from the environment. Life here is defined in mathematical terms as a measurable degree of organized complexity that is characteristic of biological forms. None of this is even remotely perceived by either practicing architects, or students who would become architects, because the discipline has become entirely self-referential. There is no contact with outside reality, which is arrogantly stated to be the deconstructivist's principal aim.

The deconstructivist agenda is to destroy the logical foundations of knowledge and reasoning, in a way that would make it impossible to reconstruct it afterwards. For deconstructivist architects, there is no more utopia, only nihilism.

6. Architectural Cult Symbols

As psychological conditioning is used to reformat the minds of architecture students with an "approved" set of images, this indoctrination develops negative associations for "disapproved" images of traditional buildings. A remarkably effective propaganda campaign has successfully linked traditional architecture with all the ills of history. To many, a Classical building now stands for something evil, and a building in local vernacular style as a serious impediment to progress. Just as experimental animals and human prisoners-of-war are conditioned to react automatically to a particular stimulus, architects have been conditioned to feel a physical revulsion for new buildings in traditional styles. They have been brainwashed by the cult to identify the cult's "enemy"

without reflection.

Modernism's cult symbol is an empty rectangle, with the concept of emptiness expressed by its interior being just as important as the sharp rectangular edges. Since modernist dogma strictly forbids ornament on the human range of scales 1cm – 2m, there exist no true modernist symbols on those scales to which human beings can connect. The imposition of modernism's alien aesthetic is achieved by creating a void. Its symbol is precisely the absence of symbols. The mental image of "pure" form erases living structure from our world.

Theo van Doesburg (of De Stijl and the Bauhaus) is credited with saying that: "*The square is to us as the cross was to the early Christians*". Here we encounter a philosophical shift of levels, from visual symbols to an abstract ideal. The modernists worshipped the unattainable abstraction of geometrical purity, and this displaced all visual and architectural symbols of the past. This indicates the transference of values from traditional symbols and rules (which could *express* religion) to an abstract ideal (which therefore *competes* with religion).

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Deconstructivism is an offspring of modernism that retained many of its parent's cult symbols; for example their sharp edges and high-tech surfaces. Seeking novelty from within a severely limiting style, deconstructivist architects abandoned early modernism's horizontally-aligned rectangular geometry to create broken straight lines, diagonals, and curves.

Modernism's ideological aim of eliminating the copying of historical forms and symbols was achieved via severe geometrical abstraction. The only possible direction to move from empty abstraction—without returning to the ordered complexity of traditional architecture—is to destroy forms altogether. Because modernism as a thought system denies organized complexity, it could only evolve into disorganized complexity.

Architectural cult symbols act like viruses to infect the built environment. They have even parasitized established religions, with the consequence that postwar religious buildings are spreading the cult's ideology rather than their clients' spiritual values.

7. The Solution

Now that the architectural cult has become the establishment, it controls architectural education and the media. Deconstructivism today permeates the arts, literature, philosophy, and the social sciences, so where are we to find sanity and support? There are two disciplines that are opposed to cults, and which will provide the natural allies for a humane architecture of the present and future. These are *science*, and *religion*. A destructive cult's weakness is that it is cut off from both science and God.

Unfortunately, modernists misused science atrociously, and now the deconstructivists' considerable propaganda machine is taking over terms like "fractals", "nonlinearity", "chaos", and "emergence". We need to tell the world the truth: that the new sciences point unequivocally to traditional architecture as being rooted in the same generative processes that create

the rest of the universe. A new, humane architecture can bridge the gap between science and religion, and this alliance will generate a better world.

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