

The Illiteracy of Modernism

James Stevens Curl has a cutting yet thoughtful piece in [The Critic](#). He writes:

In the early 1950s the American, Henry Hope Reed (1915-2013), had the temerity to suggest that most contemporary architecture then was fraudulent, empty of intellectual content, ugly, illiterate, and meaningless. Convinced that Classicism embraced an architectural language capable of modern use, he aired his views in *The Golden City*, courageously published by Doubleday & Company in Garden City, New York, 1959.

✖ Reed argued that an architecture based on a ruthlessly reductionist interplay of ground-plan, construction, and materials – what he called “a form of structural dialectics” – is not an æsthetically viable proposition. Furthermore, he explained why we do not admire or like the overwhelming majority of Modernist buildings we see: as Catesby Leigh observes, in his cogent essay:

“When failure is the rule rather than the exception, the enabling dialectic must be rejected. Modernist architecture emerges in this book as the unsightly remnant of an art that, in cutting itself off from its ancient heritage, has effectively dismembered itself... Iconoclastic, pseudo-scientific architecture purportedly enshrining creative genius became morally correct”.

Reed perceptively saw the new dispensation as a disastrously successful public-relations confidence-trick:

“Originality, the abstract, false progress, fear of the past, and the sense of impermanence have become one, packaged in a wrapping called Modern... The wrapping called Modern ... professes

not to be a style at all, let alone a fashion. It aspires to perpetuity. What is obviously temporary is made to appear inviolate by means of the label, an... attempt to make fashion immovable, and to transform it into taste, a very different article. Today's [architects] are under the illusion that they can preserve their hegemony thanks to a name".

Quite so, and such self-regarding monsters probably never knew of the cutting remark by Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821-67) that "Progress" is a "Doctrine of Idlers and Belgians". Reed soundly denounced the absurdities of mid-twentieth-century Modernism's "metahistorical pretensions": since *The Golden City* first appeared, Modernist architecture has displayed a "pathological stylistic instability". As Leigh shrewdly points out, "the unending succession of fads or fashions betrays a common trait – an allergy to emulation of the great works of the past": indeed that fear of the past is a cardinal expression of current cultural dispensations, "in which the Self is the highest reality".

The United States of America was the first nation in history to rise to world pre-eminence while its public realm experienced inconceivable degradation. All that is truly frightening, for, before America swallowed whole Modernism's shallowness and totalitarian rigidities, it was producing a great architecture based on Classical principles: one of its finest buildings was the majestic Pennsylvania Station, New York City (1902-11), a masterwork of ennobled architecture, engineering, and organisation that put the dismal products of the Modern Movement to shame.

That was probably why Georg Walter Adolf Gropius (1883-1969) termed it a "monument to a particularly insignificant period in American architectural history ... a case of pseudotradition".

It showed up the shoddiness of much of Modernism to a painful degree, notably the enormous, crass, PanAm Building (1958)

with which Gropius's name will always be associated, as it will be with the disgraceful demolition (1963-5) of Penn Station, a particularly low point in American cultural life. America is the poorer for its loss.

When Reed wrote his great book, he thought the perversity of Modernist architecture would ensure its demise: what he did not realise was how heavily invested were the cultural élites in fallacious notions of creativity, how successfully and completely they have mangled the history of art and architecture, and how complete is their iron grip on key institutions which permits them to batter public opinion and shape its preferences by bullying and vulgar abuse.

. . . Make sure to read the rest [here](#).