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**Nathan Glazer: From a Cause to a Style**

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, the Prince of Wales, who has adopted a number of surprising causes for a prince in the course of his life, became for a time the most influential critic of architecture, urban design, and planning in Great Britain. Both modernist architecture and modernist city planning had been very successful in Britain—as indeed they have been almost everywhere—in shaping new towns and rebuilding the centers of old cities and towns. But ordinary people often looked on the results with dismay. The prince's interventions and criticisms received wide publicity, and were effective in derailing some high-profile projects by modernist architects.

Leading architects, who by the end of World War II had pretty much been fully captured by modernism in architecture and urban design and planning, were outraged by the prince's unprofessional intervention in their work and practice. They had been criticized before; but never by someone whose comments had such resonance in the public media.

The architects, to their disgruntlement, were portrayed as arrogant, unresponsive to what ordinary people wanted, indifferent to their interests, as they pursued

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their own visions as to what was appropriate and suitably contemporary or advanced in the design of major structures and in the shaping of town and city. Ordinary people, it seems, endorsed the prince's taste for more traditional features in major public buildings and more traditional layouts of towns and cities.

But what was most shocking to modernist architects was how easy it was to portray them as distant from the people and their interests. For at the origins of modernism in architecture and urban design and planning, the visionary architects and planners were, in their minds, leagued with the people against what they saw as archaic, overblown, extravagant, and inefficient architecture and design, the taste of princes. Some of the architects who launched modernism were socialists, close to the movements of the working class. Modernism in architecture and planning spoke for the people and their interests—in good sanitary housing, in green space, in access to air and light, in more living space, in an urban environment adapted to their needs and interests—and against the interests of princes, or merchant princes, or profit-minded developers. Modernism, in its origins, was a cause, not simply another turn in taste. What, then, had happened, that a prince could better represent the people, their interests and tastes, than the architects?

Something odd and unexpected seems to have happened to modernism in architecture and planning: it had broken free from its origins and moorings, drifted away from the world of everyday life, which it had hoped to improve, into a world of its own. From a cause that intended to remake the world, it had become a style, or

a family of styles. Modernism had, it is true, produced masterpieces, but it had been incapable of matching the complex urbanity that the history of building, despite its attachment to the historical styles decried by modernism, had been able to create in so many cities. As the older parts of cities were swept away in a wave of urban renewal, as nineteenth-century courthouses and city halls were demolished for modern replacements, more and more people wondered whether what they had lost was matched by the new world being created by modernism. The essays collected in this book reflect the growing disenchantment of an early enthusiast of modernism in architecture and planning—and who when young is not?—with the failures of modernist architects and planners in dealing with contemporary urban life. Of course it is giving architects too much power, too much credit, to ascribe the ills of urban life to them; architects are only one player in shaping urban life. What becomes of our cities is a matter that in varying degrees involves us all: developers, elected officials, government agencies, the variety of interest groups among "the people" and what they will tolerate or protest in urban development.

But the architects and planners also have a role. Major architects—like Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Rem Koolhaas, Richard Meier, Santiago Calatrava, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Liebeskind, and some others—have recently attained remarkable prominence in popular perception and popular media. These "starchitects" are often presented as potential saviors of declining cities through exciting advanced design, and their role is well worth exploring.

## II

Disaffection with the precepts and practice of successful modernism, following its triumph over traditional approaches to architecture and urban design after World War II, surfaced early. Catherine Bauer, who had first brought the news of how European cities after World War I were building a new kind of housing for the working classes—government subsidized or built, with more access to air and light and greenery—and who played a role in launching our own public housing, was disappointed by the results as early as the late 1950s. Robert Venturi, a modernist architect, launched the first effective blast against the chief design precepts of modernism in 1966, with his *Complexity and Contradiction in Modern Architecture*. "Less is more," one of the shapers of modernism, Mies van der Rohe, had sagely pronounced; Venturi indicated his displeasure with modernism's rejection of historical architecture's complexity by countering memorably, "Less is a bore." He became even more outrageous, finding some virtue in garish popular architectural taste, when he wrote, with Denise Scott-Brown and Stephen Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972. (After the Prince of Wales denounced a proposed modernist addition to London's National Gallery of Art, the gallery turned to Venturi to design the new extension.) Peter Blake, another modernist architect and architectural critic, spelled out his disappointment at length in 1974 in *Form Follows Fiasco*, turning another precept of modernism—"Form follows function"—on its head. The French translation was intriguingly titled *L'Architecture moderne est morte à Saint-Louis (Missouri) le 15 juillet 1972 à 15h 32 ou à peu près*

. . . (Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 p.m. or thereabouts . . .). The reference is to one of the most poignant dates in the history of architecture, when the towers of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in Saint Louis, designed by a leading modernist architect, were demolished by dynamite charges. In 1981 the ingenious journalist and novelist Tom Wolfe published his satirical send-up of modernism in *From Bauhaus to Our House*. And there were more.

Noel Annan, in his masterful account of postwar British intellectual and cultural life, *Our Age*, set out the problem well:

Perhaps no profession faced the future [after World War II] with such confidence as did the architects. The destruction of wartime bombing gave them their chance. . . . The modernists captured one after the other the university architectural schools. . . . The Oxbridge colleges became their patrons.

Yet it was among Our Age [he means those who fought World War II and became the leaders of British art and thought in the postwar years] that the movement emerged that was to undermine the reputation of . . . the leading architects. [John] Betjeman evoked on television the beauties of Victorian churches and commercial exchanges and denounced the vandalism of planners and property developers who blithely demolished them. . . . The conservationists . . . hunted the modernists in full cry, demanding an end to concrete fortresses, glass boxes and tower blocks approached by windswept walkways, an arena for prowlers and muggers. Why design buildings of elephantine

dimensions that neglected their unobtrusive neighbors? Why did so many buildings, specifically designed to meet the functions which those who were going to use them were going to perform, end being inhuman?<sup>1</sup>

The story, of course, was the same in the United States, and in varying degrees in all the countries recovering from the war and participating in the great postwar expansion. In time modernism was to dominate all contemporary building, erasing traditional design in countries with grand architectural and planning traditions of their own.

It may seem odd and out of time to tell this story when major architects and their amazing productions—museums, concert halls, office towers, striking residential and academic complexes—seem to herald a new age of architectural creativity and achievement, and perhaps that age is at hand. Some of the remarkable architecture we now see may well have been influenced by the barrage of criticism I have referred to, which early gave rise to the term "post-modernism," a word first used in connection with architecture, subsequently naturalized without its hyphen. One of the implications of postmodernism was to favor a looser stance in regard to the sober and radically stripped-down and dehistoricized forms demanded by early, we might say "classic," modernism. Postmodernism suggested that one could perhaps accept the incorporation in contemporary buildings of hints of architectural elements used in the past. Postmodernism also fostered, if the client could be persuaded, an extrava-

<sup>1</sup> Noel Annan, *Our Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 291.

gance in forms and materials—if you will, a sensation-  
alism—that has made stars of many architects, and that  
is far from the sober unornamented surfaces of modern-  
ism's greatest practitioners. Style has become more per-  
sonal, idiosyncratic, sometimes fantastic, and that cer-  
tainly has attracted attention.

But the central issue in modernism was not really, to  
begin with, style. Modernism was not simply a new style  
in architecture, succeeding neo-Gothicism, neoclassicism,  
Art Nouveau, or what you will. Modernism was a move-  
ment, with much larger intentions than replacing the  
decorated tops of buildings with flat roofs, molded win-  
dow frames with flat strips of metal, curves and curlicues  
with straight lines. It represented a rebellion against his-  
toricism, ornament, overblown form, pandering to the  
great and rich and newly rich as against serving the needs  
of a society's common people. But when architects com-  
pete with each other in imposing forms on museums and  
concert halls and residential towers that bear no resem-  
blance to their functions, the movement in its larger sense  
is dead. One element of continuity with early and classic  
modernism persists, the proscribing and elimination of  
reference to the history of architecture. Modernism in ar-  
chitecture has abandoned its early intentions and hopes.  
It is the promise and the fate of that movement, as it deals  
with cities, and buildings, and monuments, that are the  
subject of this book.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Anatole Kopp titles a book on the early history of modernism *Quand le  
moderne n'était pas une style mais une cause* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure  
des Beaux Arts, 1988), and I have adapted that title for the title of this  
book. Of course others have noted the shift in what "modernism" means.  
A concluding caption for the large exhibit on modernism at the Victoria

## III

Modernism in architecture and urban design, emerging from theoretical proposals and some impressive achievements in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Italy at the turn of the century, proposed one big and all-embracing ideal for buildings and cities: building should be functional, rational, directly accommodating specific needs, and should eschew the forms and elements that had dominated architecture in the West since the Greeks. It rejected the sculpted, ornamented architecture of major public buildings, and the use of the details and conventions of some past epochs, best expressed in the buildings designed for princes and potentates, secular and sacred. But one could see the modest reflections of these historical styles of the past in the structures that housed families, businesses, manufactories: some columns here, a pediment there, some swirls of classicist ornament. Modernism rejected any use of the styles of building of the past. Modernism called for "the machine for living," as against the home, or the machine for manufacturing, or selling, or praying, or governing, as against the architecturally elaborated factory, or department store, or church, or capitol. And the city was also to be a machine, in which all these forms of action were to be efficiently and directly accommodated.

Modernism responded to very strong forces: the huge scale of growing and expanding cities, and the buildings

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and Albert Museum in London in 2006 (*Modernism: 1914–1939*) asserts that by the thirties modernism, "stripped of its social ideals, . . . became identified as a style, one among many that designers and consumers could choose from." I would date the shift from cause to style a few decades later, for the social ideals of modernism dominated city rebuilding in the post-World War II period until perhaps the 1970s.

and infrastructure they required for their expanded populations; the new materials and new technologies for building and construction that became available; new forms of transportation, and in particular the automobile; the new power in society of technical economic analyses as against the uneconomic and boundless demands for glorification of state and church. Alongside these pragmatic adaptations to technological change and scientific advance, there were some large cultural changes, the revolution of modernism in the arts, in which symbols, icons, and forms that had served varying Western societies for twenty-five hundred years began to lose their power to communicate.

Modernism approached the growing city of industrial and commercial complexity with the same powerfully rationalizing turn of mind with which it approached building. It expressed and called for direct functional adaptation. When modernists thought of the city, they envisioned ideally an empty expanse of space on which a new conception of the city could be erected without the hindrances of the past. And if the city already existed, the first step was to efface a large stretch of it. In the most extreme version, Le Corbusier's proposal for central Paris in 1925, all its complexity and idiosyncrasy and historical remains were to be swept aside for the great roads and skyscrapers that a new age demanded.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps early modernism's greatest difficulty was when it came to monumental and memorial architecture. What, after all, was the function of a monument, and did not the monument inevitably have to resort to symbols to move,

<sup>3</sup> See Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 258. Le Corbusier proposed the same for Moscow in 1930 (pp. 315–16), but he was less sweeping in his proposals for other cities.

to speak to, a general populace? How could modernism's precepts accommodate what monuments needed? And yet the world demanded monuments and memorials—perhaps more in the wake of the unexampled disasters of the twentieth century than in previous periods—and some response was necessary (see chapters 4 and 5).

It was easy to attack modernism's approach to building and the city, and such attacks on its principles, practices, and outcomes accompanied modernism from its origins. But as the history of architecture and urban design during the half century since World War II has shown us, it was not easy to replace it. It was eccentric to propose alternatives that did not express the ethic and aesthetic of modernism, for what else was there, aside from the return to a discredited past, with its columns and pediments and men on horseback? Those who fought against modernism in architecture and urban design had in the end very few victories to point to. The greatest successes of the critics of modernism had less to do with building something new and counter to modernism than with preserving what existed, what had been created in the ages before modernism, when historical styles were innocently copied, revived, revised, adapted to different uses, used even for factories and office buildings, and were allowed to cluster together messily and incongruously in the city. In the most recent decades, we have seen a movement for a "new urbanism," proposing a more traditional arrangement for new residential developments. But its target is less modernism than developer-built suburban housing, which in both design and arrangement has owed little to modernism, but which has rather reflected primarily adaptation to the automobile.

In the United States, as in Britain, modernism captured the schools of architecture and planning. The courthouses and city halls of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were demolished to be replaced by more efficient and rationally designed modernist structures. City centers were leveled and their historic street plans erased for an urban renewal that promised more efficient layouts for traffic and living and work. Working-class quarters were demolished to be replaced by projects that city planners asserted would mark a great improvement in the living conditions of the poor and working classes. We had no Prince of Wales or equivalent public figure to take up the cause against modernism, but in Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), we had a powerful critique of modern city planning that became enormously influential, not only in the United States, but in Britain, Canada, Germany, and elsewhere.

The critics of modernism in the United States made very much the same points that Noel Annan reports were being made in Britain. Yes, the architecture of the past, despite its aping of historical styles, had much to commend it and was being thoughtlessly destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s. The architecture and urban design of modernism—in particular, the publicly subsidized high-rise housing projects on large cleared sites that became, along with the flat-topped glass and steel skyscrapers of the city center, the very emblems of modernism—soon revealed themselves as inferior in some respects to the working-class housing and commercial districts they replaced.

The challenges to modernism did not lead to its replacement—only to new kinds of modernism, with new

labels, a preference for somewhat different shapes and materials every few years. Modernism was so powerful because it had both aesthetic and social roots, working in tandem. Its aesthetic rejected the use of historical styles as models: the world was to be made anew, responsive to new technology, new materials, new ways of living and thinking. It decreed, in the powerful slogans that became the emblems of modernism, "ornament is crime," "less is more," "form follows function." But these canons of modernism were so powerful because they reflected, more than just a commitment to a simpler aesthetic, a commitment to social reform, moderate or radical. Simplicity and directness, the rejection of ornament, the most rational accommodation of needs, would better serve the poor and the working classes. Simpler design would mean easily reproducible forms, suited to the needs for which they were designed, perhaps eventually to be manufactured in factories rather than shaped by skilled craftsmen, and so reducing the cost of housing and making more available for less.

This connection between the aesthetic and the social was shaped early. Hendrik Berlage, a major Dutch pioneer of modernism, called for "material and labor economy, in keeping with the forces pushing toward social equality." The Italian pioneers of modernism were, of course, more extravagant. Antonio Sant'Elia's manifesto of 1914 declares that "the world of the twentieth century demands a reformulated modern city, one devoid of monumentality and decoration. It opposes . . . historical preservation, static lines, and costly materials inconsistent with modern culture." He calls for "the architecture of cold calculation, fearless audacity, and simplicity; the

architecture of reinforced concrete, or iron, glass, cardboard, textiles, and all those surrogates of wood, stone, and brick that allow us to obtain the maximum elasticity and lightness." Futurist architecture is to be marked by "obsolescence and transience."<sup>4</sup>

In effect, modernism decreed that decorated or ornamented architecture, and historic systems of ornamentation, had come to an end. Indeed architecture, if viewed in these terms, had come to an end, for henceforth architecture would accommodate functions rather than impose itself on them. The transition to modernism was at first marked by efforts to create new systems of ornament and decoration that did not directly copy or evoke some past historic style, as in Art Nouveau and Art Deco. This transition was reflected in the United States in the work of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, but that, too, came to an end in the face of the power of the fully developed modernist ideal. In any case, to create new systems of ornamentation not dependent on historic styles was beyond the talents of any but geniuses.

The last "decorated" or "ornamented" style in architecture was the Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s. It bowed to modernism in rejecting classical and established forms of ornament and decoration in architecture, but transgressed the full doctrine of modernism in creating a new style of decoration better suited, its practitioners thought, to the age of electricity and the automobile. It created some of the most widely recognized images of what it meant to be modern, in such icons of New York City as

<sup>4</sup> As in *ibid.*, pp. 219, 226. Some of the quotations are in Mallgrave's paraphrase.

the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. Paradoxically these icons of "modernism" do not reflect classical "modernist" architecture, the more rigorous and rational modernism of the "international style." Its practitioners and proponents saw the international style not as a style, to be succeeded by others, but indeed as the end of style in architecture, the conclusion of the history of architecture as style. The last burst of decorated or ornamented architecture was eliminated in the early post-World War II period. Then the full program of modernism came into effect, particularly in the design of commercial office structures, the most characteristic form of building of the modern city. But it soon spread to public buildings, and indeed to almost all building except for private homes, the one major area of construction that has for the most part escaped modernist strictures.

For housing built under public authorities, modernism became the dominant influence after World War II in the United States. It dictated the superblock instead of the repeated blocks of equal size and shape that characterized the common gridiron plan of the American city. The superblock would provide more space for greenery, less for streets, as would the concentration of functions, whether for living or working, in high-rise buildings rather than in low-rise building taking up more ground. The modernist elimination of ornament and decoration suited the economic requirement that public housing for the lower-income classes should be of low cost. But public housing, as I describe in chapters 2 and 11 below, also became the Achilles' heel that undermined the social aims of architectural modernism, and led eventually to a complete di-

voice between the originally joined social and aesthetic sides of modernist architecture.

Modernism's proposals for the city, and their realization in various urban renewal schemes in the United States and in Britain, also came under severe attack. Reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were horrified by the city that industrialism had created, and saw no virtue in a city built up in history of varied elements responding to varied needs jumbled together. Some theorists of urbanism saw in the city not the mess that modernists decried but an adaptation to human needs evolving through time. But modernism had no sympathy for such views. That city was a contradiction to what modernism proposed. Modernism put forth one big and all-embracing idea: the city as the functional envelope of urban needs, which can be designed and implemented in one grand plan. Just as modernism calls for "machines for living," or for manufacturing, or selling, as against the architecturally elaborated structures of the age before modernism, so it calls for the city to be the newly made proper envelope for all these machines.

The historical city suggests something very different. It is not of one time, but of many times, not of one style but of many styles, not of discrete functions accommodated in specific areas but of a jumble of functions that may crowd together in the same area. As an early nineteenth-century writer on the city put it, "the [city] plan must be designed with taste and verve, so that order, whimsy, eurythmy and variety may co-exist in equal measure." Or, another writer of the period: the city "should be a varied picture of an infinity of chance occurrences, with great order in the details and confusion, chaos and tumult

in the whole."<sup>5</sup> A twentieth-century architect in Paris gives us a powerful image: "Build the city on top of the city"<sup>6</sup>—do not wipe out its physical history for some presumed modern advantage; save its past, build in the interstices. What was there should remain and should not be fully effaced. That is quite different from modernism's view of the city, which called for a clear slate on which to build anew.

#### IV

So we struggle today with how to build capitols, churches, universities, civic centers and gathering places, theaters and opera houses and concert halls and monuments with the new language of modernism. (We struggle less when it comes to homes: as I have indicated above, there the traditional prevails for the most part against anything modernism has to offer.)

We know that a great deal has gone wrong. We ponder today the heritage of the buildings of the half century following World War II, and on the whole we are dissatisfied, despite the excitement that extravagant elaborations of modernist ideas have been able to generate for the last decade or so. The structures of modernism offer tremendous problems of maintenance or restoration as their once-new materials for building have aged and been removed from catalogs, and we argue about whether it is

<sup>5</sup> Manfred Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology," in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 7, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Grumbach, in *Survival Strategies: Paris and New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979).

not simpler to demolish them or strip them down to the anonymous steel so we can hang onto them a currently less objectionable and more presentable curtain (often today of more traditional materials replacing a metal that we now generally find too shiny or vulgar). The variants and offshoots of modernism that prevailed for a few years—brutalism, postmodernism, minimalism, and the like—have come and gone.

We are largely dissatisfied with our efforts to build a new urbanism using the instruments of modernism. The scale is too big, it is too hard to introduce a distinctive (or quirky) detail of more human scale, and the traditional city built up in history seems better suited for the aspects of urban life that involve human contact, entertainment, distinctively urban pursuits. When artists and moviemakers picture the city built by modernism, it is to evoke the alienation and anonymity of city life, rather than those aspects of urbanism that bring people of different walks of life together in some common pursuit or in sociable interaction. Most current efforts to create a more interactive and attractive urbanism, to bring life back to the city, revert to traditional elements of design—a smaller scale, a degree of irregularity, a multiplicity of uses, the reuse of older buildings, and even traditional architectural elements in new buildings. The difficulties in producing an attractive urbanism constitute perhaps the greatest problem for modernism.

Most of the essays I have collected here on architecture, civic design, and urbanism were written before the recent burst of enthusiasm over some new directions in the history of modernist architecture. We are now in an age of new daring in forms and materials—the post-Bil-

bao effect, it has been called—that attracts wide public interest and excitement. But one suspects it will hold that interest only a little longer than did the striking forms of the World's Fairs of the past that these new and more personal elaborations of modernism resemble. World's Fair buildings were meant to be taken down after a year or two. These forays of late modernism into the city, while they can create a sensation, cannot create a city: whatever the character of any one of the greatly admired buildings of the last decade, we would not want another like it to be put up right next to it. This latest development of modernism transgresses at least one key dictum of modernism, "form follows function": in contrast, the architect often determines a form, and shoehorns the necessary functions into it. The forms do adhere to modernist dicta in that they are no longer classical or historical or reminiscent of one or another historic style. But the new iconic buildings also maintain another key dictum of modernism, "ornament is crime." The forms themselves become the ornament. Some remarkable buildings have indeed resulted, as they did from the same strategy in the early days of modernism: consider Utzon's Sydney Opera House, or Saarinen's TWA Terminal.

Whatever the virtue of these buildings, and some are indeed masterpieces, the earlier logic and rigor of modernism are cast aside. The city cannot be built of individual masterpieces, though certainly it should have its masterpieces. No model for building the city has emerged from the current excitement over star architects, as it did from the work and thought of the early masters of modernism. That task has been abandoned. Leading archi-

pects no longer write about the city, or about what it can and should be.<sup>7</sup>

These essays deal with aspects of the problems modernism presents: in public building, in building working-class housing—once a central mission of modernism—in creating monuments and memorials in an age of self-referential art, and the like. I have also included a group of essays on an old and various city, New York, which evokes the contradiction between modernism and the city, in this case the very archetypical city of modernity. New York for the most part eschews modernism in planning (aside from the public housing and middle-class housing projects built under state auspices). It has not leveled, as other cities have, large sections of the central city for a presumably better, more functional and efficient replacement. It is criticized by advanced architectural critics for its reluctance to embrace the latest variants of modernism in its building. Its housing projects tell us what was wrong with modernism, and its most successful gathering places tell us what was right with the city before modernism. Its central icons, themselves emblems of an earlier modernity, paradoxically predate modernism in architecture and design. I conclude with two essays on the state of two key professions, city planning and architecture.

Some of these essays date back fifteen years or more, and reflect responses to modernism in urban design and in architecture much earlier than that. They have appeared in various journals. The earlier ones have to some

<sup>7</sup> But note Moshe Safdie, *The City after the Automobile: An Architect's Vision* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

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degree been edited to delete references to contemporary events now forgotten. Others have been extended and rewritten. On the whole, they stand as they were written, recording the observations of an urbanist confronted by the revolutionary onslaught of modernism.