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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?¹

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-

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

gance in forms and materials—if you will, a sensation-ism—that has made stars of many architects, and that is far from the sober unornamented surfaces of modernism's greatest practitioners. Style has become more personal, idiosyncratic, sometimes fantastic, and that certainly 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 movement, with much larger intentions than replacing the decorated tops of buildings with flat roofs, molded window frames with flat strips of metal, curves and curlicues with straight lines. It represented a rebellion against historicism, 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 compete with each other in imposing forms on museums and concert halls and residential towers that bear no resemblance 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 architecture 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.²

² 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

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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

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.³

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,

³ 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.

