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BOOK REVIEW: MAKING DYSTOPIA — THE STRANGE RISE AND SURVIVAL OF ARCHITECTURAL BARBARISM, BY JAMES STEVENS CURL, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2018.

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Nikos Salingaros

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Abstract

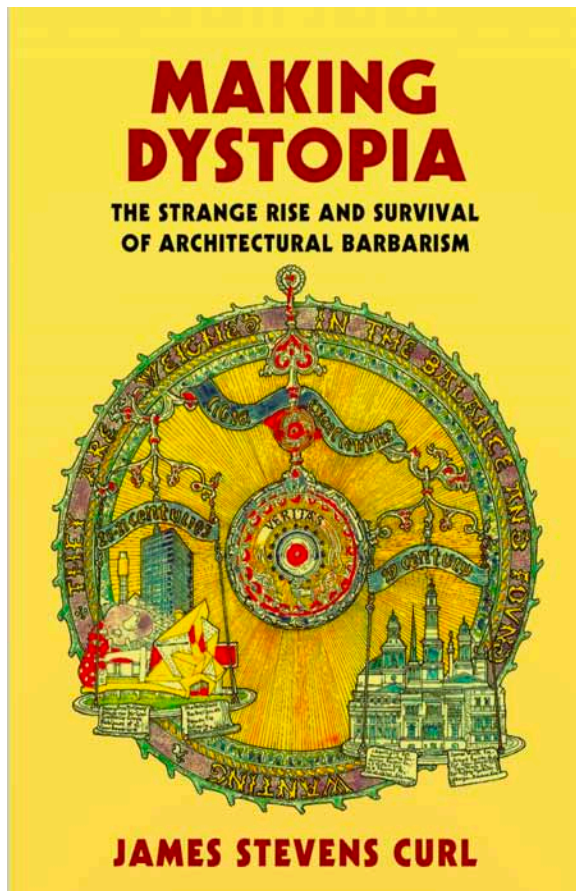
This is a review of the scholarly book “Making Dystopia — The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism”, by Professor James Stevens Curl. The book is severely critical of the Modernist movement in architecture, holding it responsible for the loss of historical, traditional, and vernacular building cultures. It goes further to associate the loss of other valuable aspects of culture with the erasing influence of modernist thought. The obvious transformation of the built environment influenced people subconsciously away from older compassionate, humane design practices, and towards a cold, inhuman industrialism. Today’s unsustainable Industrial-Modernism is not the inevitable consequence of a natural process of architectural evolution, while the Bauhaus was not an enlightened architecture school. Professor Stevens Curl’s work is an invaluable resource for academia, the public, and professional practitioners. It could help to trigger a massive re-orientation of the building industry, helped by forward-thinking legislators. An enlightened and interested public has to come to grips with what happened, and try and fix it for a better society in the future.

N. Salingaros, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Texas at San Antonio

Dr. Nikos A. Salingaros, Ph.D. (Physics), is Professor of Mathematics at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and author of ten books and over one hundred papers on Architecture and Urbanism (in addition to his purely scientific publications). He shared the 2018 Clem Labine Award for Architecture, and is the recipient of the 2019 Stockholm Cultural Award for Architecture. Salingaros is a Member and on the Committee of Honour of the International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture & Urbanism, member of the Scientific Committee of the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia, member of the World Architecture Community, and member of the Environmental Structure Research Group. Dr. Salingaros directs Masters’ and PhD theses on Architecture and Urbanism at Universities throughout the world.

*Corresponding Author’s email address: salingar@gmail.com

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This scholarly book makes several startling claims: 1. Today's unsustainable Industrial-Modernism is not the inevitable consequence of a natural process of architectural evolution, but rather the result of dishonesty, greed, and manipulation by special interests. 2. Cult movements and mass psychology defied human physiology and commandeered cultural and economic forces to define our contemporary built environment. 3. What architecture schools teach students bears no relation to what actual users (as opposed to real-estate speculators) want in their buildings. 4. The history of architecture in the Twentieth Century has been falsified to promote this goal.

A prospective reader might too hastily surmise that this is a strictly polemical book, interesting if one dislikes modernist and contemporary architecture (although there are many people in this category). Is it conceivable at this late date to reject the dominant building and design styles we have inherited? Wouldn't that discredit the founding principles of modernity? Yes, it indeed condemns its cult aspects and

differentiates those from real technological progress. The controversial points above are strongly substantiated, and even a sceptic will find the extremely detailed supporting arguments fascinating.

Professor James Stevens Curl's admirable new book details the origins of modernism and its controlling influence on world architecture. Meticulously researched, it presents the key events and driving ideas that resulted in modernist typologies substituting for traditional ones. The account includes uncomfortable information normally concealed from public knowledge. Enjoyably enough, whenever a skeleton in the architectural closet is revealed, that unpleasant fact is presented with inimitable British understatement and wry humour rather than with indignation.

Professor Stevens Curl argues that established architecture continues to promote something that has manifestly failed humanity. Building typologies such as flat roofs, transparent/reflective glass curtain walls, cantilevers (overhanging, often menacing structures), houses raised on *pilotis* (columns that look too thin to support weight), featureless, plain, smooth white walls, polished metal façades, and long horizontal strip windows are revealed as deliberately non-adaptive stylistic devices. This contradicts what every architecture student has been taught for decades: that these are absolutely necessary features for the architecture of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Well, they certainly became dominant features, but the polemical arguments used to promote them are without any architectural foundation.

I have already reviewed this iconoclastic book for *Traditional Building Magazine*. I discussed how the wave of modernism devastated adaptive, traditional architecture, leading to the worldwide collapse of local supporting industries after World War II. Here, I focus on the religious cult aspects of the modernist movement. Professor Stevens Curl develops my thesis presented in *Anti-Architecture and Deconstruction* (for which he wrote the Foreword) that twentieth-century architecture is a cult. The cult implemented social engineering to substitute our biological senses of health and beauty with modernism's peculiar visual constructs.

Although the discussion of cults comes late in the book (p. 311), it offers an explanatory framework for otherwise inexplicable phenomena: how people were seduced to abandon emotional comfort and healing environments for cold, sterile ones that create anxiety and might even make them sick. Some frightening deceptions are responsible for architectural dystopia: "It is therefore important to grasp the simple fact that the *tabula rasa* demanded by modernism has close links with manipulation, a programme of destruction, a fanatically held belief in a cult, and a burning desire to change the world" (p. 315).

A writer of fantasy novels, Paul Scheerbart, was commissioned by the German glass industry to dream up messianic, evangelical slogans touting the spiritual advantages of building with glass walls. Those phrases were publicized in Bruno Taut's 1914 'Glass Pavilion' in Cologne, an iconic building of architectural modernism (p. 88). Architecture schools teach those slogans today as unquestioned truths, and contemporary architects repeat them whenever they propose a giant glass building. However, "The universal application of glass could hardly be described as 'functional', 'rational', or 'scientific': it was just packaging, an illusion of 'Modernity'" (p. 372).

This book is essential reading because it helps us to understand what happened to erode the world's rich cultural inheritance. Professor Stevens Curl correlates the loss of art, culture, music, and even the sacred, with the dominance of architectural modernism. Its implications therefore go far beyond what buildings look like. He explains how cult allegiance to the modernist movement drove intelligent people (who had written otherwise excellent scholarly essays and books) to become transmogrified into propagandists. Their extremely biased and highly selective texts advocate industrial modernism as the *only* acceptable architectural expression for our times. Those authorities convinced generations of people of a misleading 'inevitability' for modernist architecture and urbanism.

Well-loved architectural pioneers such as C.R. Mackintosh, L.H. Sullivan, C.F.A. Voysey, O. Wagner, and F.L. Wright disliked what was to become the *International Style* and wanted nothing to do with it (p. 69). This background story has not stopped architectural historians with an agenda from (falsely) including those names among the founders of the modernist movement. The second revelation is that the abolition of ornament was merely the imposition of a stylistic *Diktat*. The widely and uncritically accepted narrative about ethics — used to condition students psychologically to reject ornamentation — simply falls apart.

Professor Stevens Curl traces the complicated story of architectural style in Europe as it became more and more influenced by industrial production. Long before arriving at the *International Style*, this change towards austere *Bauhaus* modernism resulted in the stripped



classicism that became the official architecture of both the Third Reich and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Another shock, then, is to discover this long-suppressed and uncomfortable parentage.

The book documents a very disturbing, altogether different history of the German *Bauhaus* school (1919-1933). The *Bauhaus* teachers come across more as charlatans than enlightened pioneers of a new way of teaching and thinking about design. Their unsavoury crossover into National Socialism (“Gropius wrote to Goebbels in 1934 claiming that the new Modern architecture was Germanic”, p. 181), as well as unhealthy connections with weird quasi-religious cults, skipped over in official histories, leaves one with a bad taste. *It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that our building styles and educational system for architects are descended directly from this source.*

“The claim of Walter Gropius, for example, to have been influenced by Ruskin’s writings, would have surprised, even shocked, the Englishman himself” (p. 20). And the story that the Nazis closed down the *Bauhaus* because they were against true innovation is simply not true. Hannes Meyer, the *Bauhaus*’s director prior to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, turned the school into an institution for teaching Marxism-Leninism, which naturally alarmed the government. But it was Mies who actually decided to close the school, and then tried to ingratiate himself (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) with the Nazi regime.

The sad fate of Erich Mendelsohn casts a damning light on some modernist heroes. Gropius and other members of the *Bauhaus* were nasty to him, most probably out of anti-Semitism. The same could be claimed of Philip Johnson, the impresario who established the *International Style* (and later, Deconstructivism) in the United States, and who promoted almost every one of the European modernist immigrants, except Mendelsohn. Thus the extremely talented Mendelsohn saw his international career dwindle to designing three Synagogues in the US.

Le Corbusier comes in for a thorough castigation for his personal failings (he was absolutist and totalitarian), but also especially for his architectural and urban ideas. Contrary to what gullible students are universally taught, his design schemes are almost all faulty, and not only by a little bit. Using numerous explicit examples, Professor Stevens Curl exposes Le Corbusier’s principles of design to be odd and impractical dogmatic assertions. He asks, “Why Corbusier is still ‘rammed down’ the ‘throats’ of architectural students today?” (p. 204).

The history of architecture is quintessentially political; however, this book is decoupled from any imagined partisan slant. People sympathetic to Marxism automatically accept a modernist architectural ‘look’ as superior because it rejects the past. This association has long kept architectural modernism dominant, as belief in the modernist cult replaced traditional religions. Fashionable but uncomfortable architectural expressions are shielded by branding criticism of them as ‘reactionary’, thus loading the question politically and preventing debate. This book exposes manipulation by special interests of both Left and Right in promoting an agenda that ignores the health and lives of common citizens.

Forces hidden from public notice continue to shape our built environment. The story of entrenched power mixes up architecture, government planning, the US CIA’s covert



manipulation of Art and Architecture to undermine that of the Soviets, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) acting as a front for CIA operations, General Motors sponsoring its 'Futurama' exhibit to gut urban downtowns and promote car sales and suburban sprawl, and oil and rubber companies gearing up into immense production to supply the new motorized city. These 'Extractive Global Imperialist' forces found modernist design schemes wonderful.

Professor Stevens Curl rails against the powerful minority segment in society that has profited from implementing this type of inhuman environment. Those forces destroyed perfectly sound urban fabric, housing stock, historic city centres, and irreplaceable monuments. In the UK, "There was hardly a squeak of objection from a populace cowed and browbeaten by Modernist rhetoric" (p. 254). Big money (never too concerned with ethics) allied itself with criminal elements in the government to produce dystopia. Among the very few who actually went to jail were architect John Poulson and government bureaucrat T. Dan Smith (named 'Man of the Year for 1960' by *The Architects' Journal*) (p. 278). But not before they had enriched themselves having wrought immense devastation across the UK.

This book shows how, by becoming expert in manipulation, power games, and propaganda, the modernist cult cornered all the major architecture prizes and took over the journals. Architects who did not wish to join were made into 'non-persons'. Thus the building sector rejected human nature and what the market previously craved — comfortable, healing environments — in order to impose the peculiar desires of a small cohort of architects. Real-estate speculators were pleased. But many people were also caught up in utopian promises, ready to sacrifice their inherited humanity for 'progress'.

Society turned away from several generations of architects who knew how to build commercial and domestic structures having long-established life-giving qualities (incidentally, destroying their careers) to adopt instead an alien aesthetic disliked by much of the population. Despite criticisms from a large number of people, architectural culture never turned again to humane buildings. Architects who create adaptive, sensitive buildings today have to buck the mainstream, regardless of where they are located.

As one of Britain's foremost architectural historians, Professor Stevens Curl naturally goes into great detail on British architecture during the modernist period, and rehabilitates important British architects who were shamefully marginalized by cult propagandists. The cowed architectural establishment stood by and allowed the profession to marginalize those members. "A great language capable of infinite variety of expression, a mighty and expansive vocabulary, a vast resource based on two and a half millennia or more of civilization, was superseded by a series of monosyllabic grunts, foisted on the populace with a totalitarian disregard for the opinions of those who had not been drilled to conform" (p. 370).

Some commercial developers nowadays try to satisfy popular taste by badly copying older typologies. Unfortunately, that turns out poor quality design, since the profession lost the knowledge of how to properly implement traditional compositional rules. Our cult-dominated schools resolutely refuse to teach young architects the craft of building healing, humane living environments. Generations of instructors don't know those techniques, which re-use adaptive solutions discovered in pre-modernist eras. Adaptive design contradicts, hence



threatens, modernist abstraction. We consistently find hostility towards designs that generate human comfort, despite research showing the health benefits of experiencing them.

“Students’ ‘projects’, produced in ‘studios’, were largely graded on the basis of how closely they resembled whatever ‘architecture’ illustrated in the magazines was currently fashionable (p. 366) ... ‘Architectural education’ for far too long has been hermetically sealed from reality, a form of navel-gazing, irrelevant to the real world outside” (p. 372). After this book gains a wide, well-deserved readership, the current practice of imposing modernist ideology on architecture schools as a condition for accreditation will have to be discontinued and a more sane, humane, and reasonable approach to architecture and town planning adopted.

An incredibly high level of scholarship distinguishes *Making Dystopia*, so that its critics will have a hard time shrugging off its message. This makes Professor Stevens Curl’s work an invaluable resource for academia, the public, and professional practitioners. It could help to trigger a massive re-orientation of the building industry, helped by forward-thinking legislators. An enlightened and interested public has to come to grips with what happened, and try and fix it for a better society in the future.

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