

Book review:

***Making Dystopia* by James Steven Curl**

I recently attended the launch in Belfast of James Stevens Curl's new book *Making Dystopia* which included a talk by the author. Having just bought a copy of this quite chunky volume, I expected he might need some time to deliver his thesis that Modernist architecture has been and continues to be a disaster for our towns and cities.

However, just minutes into the talk, in a blink, the demolition of Modernist architecture had been achieved.

Professor Curl turned to a slide of Erich Mendelsohn's *Columbushaus* (constructed 1931-2) on Potsdamerplatz in Berlin. The façade was one of the first to use alternating layers of continuous horizontal glazing and masonry which became one of the characteristic features of the new International Style. The author simply pointed out that the whole façade, because glass cannot support masonry, was architecturally speaking only split seconds from total collapse. Demolition took just a few words.

'What is missing from much debate about architecture today is empathy, respect for culture in the widest sense, understanding of history... and understanding of the importance of expressions of gravity and stability in building design to induce calm and ease in those who have to live with the realised works of an architecture that denies gravity, that deliberately sets out to disturb, and that only respects itself.' *Making Dystopia*, p.333



Mendelsohn's *Columbushaus*, 1931-1953

Making Dystopia is shot through with references to the irrational structural logic of Modernist building designs, from large areas of glazing which seem to be supporting panels of brick or stone, to matchstick concrete legs (pilotis) which if they were really made only of concrete would immediately snap under the weight of the substantial white boxes that they apparently hold up. The book also refers to the Modernists' preference for non-loadbearing curtain walling hung on a structural frame. This however, hides all of the real structure, denying the resultant building any sense of how it is held up.

This fatal flaw in Modernist architecture is not a matter of opinion. It is a fact. Just look at any Modernist creation in your area and you will see, for example, 'brickwork' façades with window and other (sometimes huge) openings with no expressed lintels (i.e. brick wallpaper). You will see heavy-looking sections of masonry 'attached' to curtain walling, the only aim of which is to produce some overall decorative pattern or 3-D graphic effect. You will see (dating from around the 2008 crash) what seem like external piers wilfully vertically mis-aligned floor to floor which do not truthfully express how the building's loads are being transferred to the earth. And so on.

Professor Curl's point is that all this creates environments that feel unstable and are intuitively disturbing to people, whereas traditional architecture, which people love to be around, expresses stability and is restful to the eye. It never ceases to amaze that Modernist architects are still deliberately setting out to design buildings that provoke, that make you feel you constantly have a stone in your shoe.

This issue has been commented on by others in the past but, having studied his subject for over 60 years, James Stevens Curl's book homes in on it. But how could such a fundamental defect have been allowed to form part of and indeed feature central to any new style? How could the pioneers of Modernism (Mies van Der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier *et al*), given their constant talk back then of 'purity' and 'honesty of form', have accepted this deficiency? Could it have been that these pioneers simply had no architectural scruples? Or could it have been that they did not think things through and missed a mammoth problem that was staring them in the face? And how is it that many of today's architects perpetuate these practices?

Making Dystopia, meticulously researched, provides answers to these questions. The author has thoroughly investigated the backgrounds and personalities of the pioneers of the Modern Movement. He concludes that they were self-serving ideologues who had no respect for the c.4,000 years of knowledge that the history of architecture has to offer.

The author delves into the development of the Bauhaus and uncovers that it was decided there that the new architecture must emulate fast-moving machines such as aeroplanes and ocean-liners, even though buildings are invariably static, with foundations. The idea that architecture should celebrate the forces of gravity in its outward form, as all previous buildings had done, was consigned to history, just as history itself was consigned to history. So from the start, it was dictated by these pioneers that structural and constructional readability should be sacrificed to a new kind of horizontal and kinetic aesthetic. Slabs of masonry could and indeed should be placed upon strips of glass simply because (a) technologically it could be done (with hidden fixings) and (b) this created the strong horizontal look that they were after. No regard was given as to how this might be interpreted by the onlooker. The concerns of the

onlooker of course did not matter, the author points out, because architects had moved on from being professionals serving the needs of society to becoming social engineers who ought to be trusted by the people to deliver them into a new future.

Curl is not surprised that this outlook survives and persists to this day. This is directly due, he argues, to the schools of architecture teaching the very same Modernist creed; they view the history of architecture prior to Modernism as a curio and demand that students at least produce projects in the ways of the International Style or impossibly pluck designs, never before seen, from the future.

So how have Modernists reacted to *Making Dystopia*? So far some have decided to ignore it and some have attacked it. Stephen Bayley writing in the *Spectator* said that '*Modernist principles, misunderstood by unimaginative planners, often led to atrocious results. Le Corbusier's "vertical gardens" became vertical slums, And there is only a sliver of difference between Walter Gropius's lofty Bauhaus ideals and a crap council estate.*' That is almost exactly what Curl states in his book, yet Bayley '*threw the book away*'. I am surprised that people do that sort of thing with books these days.

The *RIBA Journal* very disappointingly did not put forward a balanced view but instead tweeted that *Making Dystopia* '*just lacks objectivity*', referring readers for further information to a review by Hugh Pearman (the journal's Editor) who called it '*an anti-modernist diatribe*'. For '*RIBA Journal*' you might be forgiven for substituting '*RIBA*', as the *RIBA Journal* states that it is '*published for the Royal Institute of British Architects*' and the *RIBA Bookshop* makes clear that it is '*the official magazine of the Royal Institute of British Architects*' - so doubly disappointing in terms of fostering inclusivity, diversity and open debate.

Making Dystopia is a wonderful book, written with great care and wit. It really is unputdownable. Until someone comes along with a considerable body of new evidence that conclusively proves James Stevens Curl wrong, this book currently stands as the definitive history of the Modern Movement and its pioneers. This being so, every student of architecture, every practising architect and every architectural journalist and historian should read it.

So the position remains that it is over to the Modernist apologists now to respond objectively to it; either they accept it or painstakingly demolish it (scientifically, please), and that includes justifying the apparent dishonesty of expression of the typical Modernist façade. No pressure!

John Smylie, November 2018

The views and opinions expressed in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views or position of INTBAU.