

What Happened to the Social Agenda?

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Leading modernist architects once wanted to improve the lives of everyday people; now they hope to astonish and amuse their elite clients

By Nathan Glazer

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Seven years ago, I was asked to address the 1950 class of the Harvard Graduate School of Design at their 50th reunion in Cambridge. One sentence in the invitation from Robert Geddes, the distinguished architect and former dean of the Princeton School of Architecture, suggested why an urban sociologist, who had only a layman's knowledge of architecture, would be asked to speak at such an event: "Our formative years as professionals were, as you know, during a period of optimism and a modernist faith in a social agenda." The unstated question was, what happened? We are still in the epoch of modernism in architecture, even if we call it postmodernism or some other variant of modernism. But what happened to the social agenda?

to the amelioration of social problems. That was indeed an essential dogma of modernism in architecture, a movement that began with social aims as strong as, or stronger than, its aesthetic orientation. Social objectives and interests have fallen away almost entirely, however, and aesthetic interests and judgment, ever more sophisticated and theory-based, have become predominant. The social objectives of leading architects in the 20th century were sometimes incorporated into designs for whole cities, as in the case of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. One of Le Corbusier's—Chandigarh in India—was actually built. Brasília, a new capital for Brazil based on a modernist plan by Lúcio Costa, was also constructed.

It is hard to imagine that the architect stars of today would dream of devising a plan that expressed their vision of what a city should be. They do not think about or design utopias, an endeavor that was current in the middle of the last century. Consider the role of the book *Communitas* (1947) by Paul and Percival Goodman—Paul, an influential social and literary critic, and Percival, an innovative modern architect. I read *Communitas* when it was first published and was impressed by its ideas, which reflected a socialist tradition in which architecture, the physical form of buildings and a city, was linked to a social vision. Some of the Goodmans' ideas were rather wild, but they all emerged from a clear sense of how a city could contribute to the good life.

When I met David Riesman in the late 1940s, at the beginning of the work that led to the writing of *The Lonely Crowd* (1950)—a book on which I collaborated and that ends with a description of a possible future social utopia—we were agreeably surprised to discover that we both knew and admired *Communitas*. Riesman had reviewed it at length for the *Yale Law Review*. A few years later, when I became an editor of the new Anchor Books, I was able to get the Goodmans to revise it and put it back into print. I wonder whether anyone in schools of architecture is now aware of it. No one is much concerned anymore with the kind of social utopia that seriously weighs the relationship between physical forms and social consequences.

I responded to Robert Geddes's implicit question because I had shared the faith in modernism at a time when it was inextricably combined with a social agenda. Modern architecture, it was expected and believed, was indeed essential in promoting important social reforms to overcome the misery of the poor and the working classes in the industrial city. The dominant figure of the time in the United States in spreading the modernist faith and its social agenda was Lewis Mumford, a polymath who on occasion called himself a sociologist, thus emphasizing how seriously he took the social reform aims of modernism. The link, so potent in the 1950s and 1960s, between a social or sociological critique of society on the one hand and architecture and planning on the other is

now reduced to the thinnest of threads.

Mumford's case is a good example of this transformation. As the architecture and urban-design critic for *The New Yorker*, he appeared much more often and at much greater length than his successor, Paul Goldberger, reviewing housing projects and new housing communities as well as important new buildings. We do not expect his successor to deal with such subjects today. Two of Mumford's books, the magisterial *Culture of Cities* (1937) and *The City in History* (1961), poured scorn on all historicist and classicizing architecture, from the grand apartment buildings of Park Avenue to the Federal Triangle in Washington. He urged an architecture in which urban form was stripped of extraneous ornament and historical reference or symbolism, provided light and air and greenery for city dwellers, and was adapted to the needs of families and children. He denounced as inappropriate for a democratic society the formal urban planning of the Baroque period (17th–18th centuries) and the American City Beautiful movement at the turn of the 20th century. For Mumford, the grand architecture of the past, from the pyramids to the great tombs and memorials and monuments of our day, celebrated death. The New York Public Library and the Lincoln Memorial did not escape his scorn.

Another inspiration of my generation was the wonderful movie *The City*, made by Pare Lorentz for the New York

World's Fair of 1939. It contrasted the crowded and noisy industrial and commercial city with a future that could then be glimpsed in a few planned communities inspired by the Garden City enthusiasts of England. These communities were designed to remove family life from impinging business and commerce and industry and to separate the roads that carry heavy traffic from the paths on which children and mothers walk from home to school and shopping.

Mumford's writings and Lorentz's film represented a pastoral fusion of social reform and modernist architecture and design. A big-city version of this fusion was more influential among architects. The greatest of them—Wright, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius—pondered what they could do to solve city problems. Their designs had as one objective the creation of settings that contributed to a more satisfying civic and communal life. Major modernist architects of the time also designed housing projects. William Lescaze, an early modernist architect, designed Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, the first large project of the New York City Housing Authority. It set the model and style, to a degree, for public housing that was to transform vast sections of New York. Twelve blocks of tenements were demolished to build the Williamsburg Houses, and superblocks were created, as the modernist urbanists advocated, on which the new buildings were placed. After all, who needed all those streets when the acreage they occupied could be

turned into green spaces and provide light and air to slum dwellers deprived of both? The buildings were spaced regularly and formally, ignoring the lines of the uniform street grid, and placed, so we thought, to get the most sunlight or best views.

A 1940s aerial photograph of Williamsburg Houses, reproduced in books on modern planning and architecture, shows a regular array of light-colored buildings set amid a sea of tenements filling the surrounding blocks. The tenements, built on relatively small city plots, are dark and somewhat varied, in contrast to the regular and identical buildings of the new housing development, and they surround straggling scraps of open space that seem deficient compared to the regular large open spaces of the housing project. Looking at that picture 60 years ago, we thought how wonderful it would be when that model spreads over the entire city, bringing its benefits to more than just the lucky few who could live in Williamsburg Houses.

Minoru Yamasaki, the designer of the World Trade Center, also designed a major housing project, the 57-acre Pruitt-Igoe houses in St. Louis. Again, one could see the freestanding towers, 33 of them, 11 stories high, on the superblocks of modernism, giving greater access to light and air, allowing more open space around them for greenery and recreation, as had been proposed by Le Corbusier. Yamasaki drew from other parts of Le Corbusier's repertoire, such as the communal corridors

within the building where the residents could gather—a kind of town square in a high rise.

The figures I have mentioned—Wright, Le Corbusier, Lescaze, and Yamasaki—were first of all architects, and as architects they were also—and primarily—form makers and image creators. But unlike their heirs and successors today—Frank Gehry, Daniel Libes-kind, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenman, and add who you will—they eschewed extravagance, sensation, and shock in form and image in order to create what they hoped would become a normal, accepted, and reproducible urban environment. In contrast, their successors design walls that cant and lean, roofs that bubble and heave, buildings that look as if they are instantly ready to take off into space or collapse in a heap of tin. They are not models for a city, but rather embodiments of ideas for what the architect hopes will astonish and that he or she can exploit.

Of course all architects are form makers, as Robert Gutman—the leading sociologist to study how those who use buildings respond to them—has reminded us a number of times. “People and their satisfactions,” he has written, “are not the principal concern of architects. . . . The main thrust of architectural endeavor, the subject matter of architectural theory, has been architectural form itself. . . . [But] the evaluation of form by the designer and the justification of it to other architects and to the community at large have involved the discussion of user requirements.” The relative weight of utilitarian and

social concerns, as against aesthetic concerns, rises and falls over time; we are now in a period when leading architects have a very reduced interest in the social and utilitarian aspects of architecture.

Today's architects lack interest in what sociologists and behavioral scientists have to say. So-called building evaluations were once a matter of great interest among architects. At the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s, architects responded fervidly to Erving Goffman's classic 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. When I arrived at Harvard in 1969, a sociologist was a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Design; but this hasn't been true, I believe, for the past 30 years. In 1974, Gutman could still write, "It is common knowledge that architects have become increasingly concerned with building evaluation in recent years. The growth of this concern probably stems from the architect's new interest in the user; instead of measuring his building against aesthetic standards, he now wants to measure it against utilitarian standards." But the tide was already turning toward postmodernism and modern architecture's ability to startle. Only 15 years later, Gutman observed, perhaps sadly: "We social and behavioral scientists must recognize that many of our intellectual orientations are not popular among architects now. Architects are less interested in designing buildings around user requirements and programmatic concerns."

Very different theories drawn from the social sciences

and the humanities then interested architects. Gutman described them as “traditions that emphasize the universality of social structural and mental forms (e.g., Gestalt psychology and structuralist thought), that investigate the role of symbolism in culture and society (e.g., symbolic anthropology and religious sociology), or that examine the impact of social change on culture (e.g., Marxist humanism and critical sociology).”

I think Gutman was being too kind in describing those theories. They were often (and remain) scarcely comprehensible, and the less comprehensible, it appeared, the more they engaged architects' interests. But in any case they were not theories that envisaged architects as enablers who improve the lives of ordinary people and their communities, as early modernism had. Despite the influence of quasi- and pseudo-Marxist thinking in these advanced contemporary theories, they gave little consideration to the circumstances of the working class or low-income families or to the social reform that is consistent with some kinds of Marxism. They showed much more interest in the catastrophism, the apocalyptic character, that is a more important part of Marxism. The theories in favor today among advanced architectural theorists and students are those that emphasize, indeed celebrate, breakdown in society and meaning, often in obscure and contradictory language.

Why this change? Architecture's early efforts to design better housing turned into a failure, not necessarily in

terms of design or even usability, but a failure nevertheless of architects to improve the city. Modernist architects and city planners believed they could do better than the profit-inspired builders of housing for the working classes who crowded as much building as they could onto the land available. It seemed to make sense, and indeed it made some sense.

The matter, however, was not so simple. I have not referred to Williamsburg Houses and Pruitt-Igoe in all innocence. The housing project from one perspective seemed the fulfillment of modernism in planning and design, but from another it was the Achilles' heel in the link between social reform and modernism. The environmental argument was sound. But there came along with it a social expectation that the lives of the poor and working classes, removed from dwellings deficient in light, air, and greenery, and in newer housing that repaired these defects, would improve in other respects too. Albert Mayer, architect and city planner, wrote in 1967: "We all naively thought that if we could eliminate the very bad physical dwellings and surroundings of slums, the new sanitized dwellings and surroundings would almost per se cure social ills. We know better now."

Sociologists interested in studying this hoped-for transformation were not skeptics to begin with; indeed they appreciated architects and urban designers and worked with them, but they found in their empirical

investigations that there were significant losses in the programs of large-scale clearance and rebuilding. Two sociological classics—*Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, and *The Urban Villagers* (1962) by Herbert Gans—drew attention to these losses. Both books pointed out virtues in what urban planners and their political supporters had labeled slums. Whatever their origins as housing for workers or downgraded middle-class housing, they were places where the poor and the working classes could, despite the constraints of their economic weakness, create communities. People who were closely related lived close to each other and had access to institutions—churches, social-help agencies, and small businesses—that served them. Clearance for rebuilding destroyed these communities, and the bureaucratic requirements that had to govern large projects built under public rules made it difficult to re-create them.

And there were other rumblings from sociologists. In 1957, Catherine Bauer Wurster, who had first brought the news about working-class housing in Europe to the United States in the 1930s, wrote an influential article for *Architectural Forum* on the social problems that were developing in public housing. The following year, I wrote an article in the same magazine for one of the editors, Jane Jacobs, that bore the provocative title “Why City Planning Is Obsolete.” There I criticized the Corbusian approach to city rebuilding, as exemplified (in debased

and corrupted form, if you will) in the public-housing towers of American cities. And in 1961, Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which became the coup de grâce to the modernist approach to the improvement of cities. Mumford's attack on Jacobs's book in *The New Yorker* could not save the alliance between the social agenda and modernism. The architect could then conclude that if modernism could do nothing for social problems, if the expectations of architectural determinism were naïve, why bother: Let us devote ourselves to architecture alone—to building design and form—instead of to architecture and city planning.

Architectural determinism, which focused on the physical features of the modernist aesthetic as either a means of ameliorating social problems or a cause of them, ignored how class affects the varying influences of planning and design on users. Upper-class people were often quite happy in high rises, and even lower-middle-class people without access to summer homes in the country for release could find high rises quite congenial. Co-op City in the Bronx may look like New York public housing, but it has had few of public housing's social problems, because teachers and firemen and accountants live there rather than indigent families headed by single mothers. Further, those who argued from the standpoint of physical form ignored factors that affect the fate of a modernist urban environment (as of any environment) quite independent of its design characteristics. Financial

considerations for public housing projects did not take seriously enough the costs of maintenance. Politics influenced projects' locations and often resulted in their being sited in undesirable areas or the neighborhoods from which public-housing tenants were drawn. And tenants' needs for stores and community meeting places could not be met.

The attacks on high rises and housing projects generally as the root of social problems were naïve but effective, and they removed architects from the social agenda in other ways. Public funds that formerly drew major architects—despite the inevitable limits imposed on expenditure in building public housing for the poor—now began to flow in other directions, such as to voucher programs that left the poor to fend for themselves in the private sector.

In 1972 the St. Louis Housing Authority imploded Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe project. It was only two decades old. Other cities followed suit, and by the 1990s government had long since given up the effort to design communities for low-income and indigent residents.

A relationship between architects and the design of cities that dates from the Renaissance, and perhaps before, is for the moment in suspension. Whatever remained of a social agenda in the cities became divorced from high modernism and from the frontiers of architectural thought and practice. And so we had the community-

architecture movement, an era in which architects suppressed their tastes and sophistication to favor un-educated clients. Today we have building rehabilitations and contextual make-overs, tenant vouchers, and New Urbanism trying to reproduce the form and look of traditional neighborhoods. None of this owes anything to modernism.

Modernism no longer provides an architecture for normal, quotidian urban use and life. Present-day modernism expresses itself in advanced and experimental architecture that has become reserved most typically for museums or cultural centers or concert halls where the architect can count on a sophisticated, elite client. Characteristically, it has become an architecture that we associate with world's fairs, the kind of building that looks as if it should be taken down after a year or two. The architecture of ordinary life has gone into permanent opposition against modernism.

And can one argue with this stance? From attempting to design an environment that reflected rationality and good sense and economy, modernism evolved into something intended to surprise, to astound, to disorient, perhaps to amuse. It was not an architecture for ordinary life, and ordinary life has fled from it. .

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