

Dystopian Architecture

Esteemed architectural historian James Stevens Curl, a contributor at NER, has written a fascinating book on architecture, [*Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*](#). The site Architecture Here and There discusses the book and a recent review [here](#). Make sure not to miss it!

From the site:



“Witold Rybczynski on architectural PTSD and what James Stevens Curl gets wrong (and right) in his controversial new book” is the sub-headline of [Rybczynski's review](#) of [*Making Dystopia*](#), the magisterial history of modern architecture by Britain's most accomplished architectural historian.

The opinion of this book by America's most celebrated architecture critic in Architect, its most notorious

architecture journal, is decidedly surprising. Though Rybczynski's editors (I suppose) have used the subhead to give the critic a little bit of cover, his review is mostly, and most importantly, about what *Making Dystopia* gets right. He starts out by describing the beautiful old buildings he walks past in Philadelphia, where he lives, and how dreadful most buildings became after 1932. "What happened?" he asks. "According to Curl, what happened was 'architectural barbarism.'" The author "does not mince words," the critic states, and then he goes on to quote the book's thesis, starting with how modern architecture emerged in the 1920s:

It became apparent that something very strange had occurred: an aberration, something alien to the history of humanity, something destructive aesthetically and spiritually, something ugly and unpleasant, something that was inhumane and abnormal, yet something that was almost universally accepted in architectural circles, like some fundamentalist quasi-religious cult that demanded total allegiance, obedience, and subservience.

"Curl's language may be immoderate," Rybczynski responds, "but he is not wrong." (Actually, to anyone who understands what modern architecture has done to the world, the language of *Dystopia*, published by Oxford University Press, seems diplomatic, albeit often engagingly witty.) He continues:

In its banning of ornament, which had characterized every epoch since the Egyptian pharaohs, the International Style was an aberration. Without ornament to provide meaning, buildings did appear inhumane. The result of enthusiastically embracing industrialization and mass production, and especially using exposed concrete, was often ugly and unpleasant. (The ancient Romans built in concrete, but they clad it in marble.) And there was something fundamentalist about the Modern Movement's intolerance, its rejection of the past, and its narrow-minded—not to say puritanical—insistence

on adherence to a narrow set of aesthetic norms.

But Rybczynski, despite his natural reactions to the buildings he walks by in his Logan Square neighborhood, normally tries to toe the company line when it comes to modernism. So he cannot be expected to write a review that applauds *Dystopia* without reservation.

He says the book is too long, that it is “gossipy,” that it has two personalities (David McCollough and Hunter S. Thompson), and fails to mention some eminent non-Bauhaus modernists, supposedly including Frank Lloyd Wright, who is “inexplicably ignored,” although he is cited in the index six times. (He does not criticize the book’s extensive notes, index and bibliography, as some critics have done.) He notices Stevens Curl’s supposed “soft spot” for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who led the Bauhaus school in the 1930s; my candidate for Stevens Curl’s soft spot would be architect and modernist impresario Philip Johnson, but the author disclaims any such feeling. After curating the famous 1932 MoMA exhibit on International Style, Johnson spent almost a decade as a Nazi in Germany and the U.S. The book goes deeply into the collaboration of the founding modernists with totalitarian governments in Europe, including Le Corbusier, founding Bauhausler Walter Gropius and Mies, but none of this is mentioned in Rybczynski’s review.

Here is his major objection to Stevens Curl’s explanation for the “strange rise” of modern architecture (from the book’s subtitle “The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism”):

[World War I] opened the door to radical change—whether it was political (Nazism), economic (the New Deal), or architectural (Modernism). This, rather than Curl’s theory of a quasi-religious cult, is a more convincing explanation for the “strange rise” of modern architecture. As the title of

his book suggests, the author assumes malevolence on the part of Gropius, Le Corbusier, et al., but what if the International Style was instead the result of a sort of postwar architectural PTSD?

Read the rest of the article [here](#).