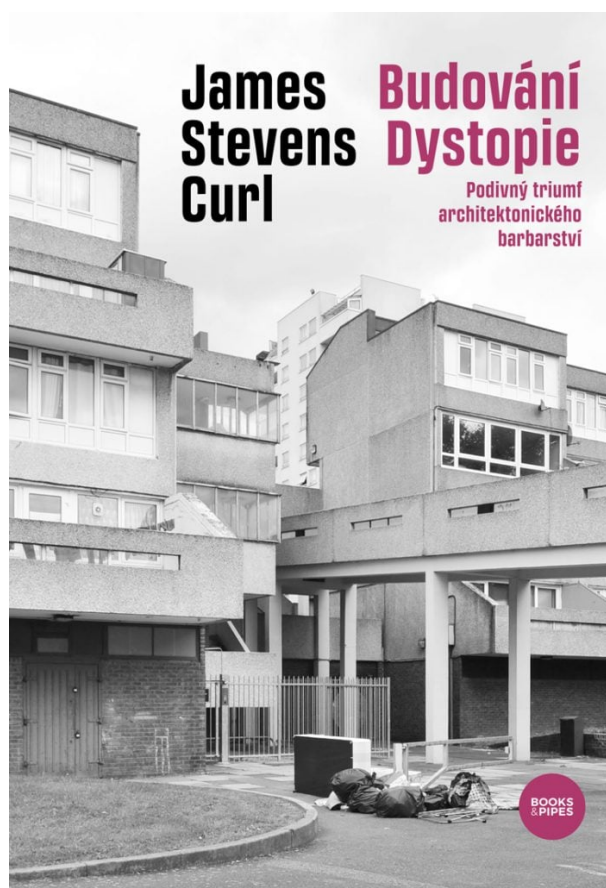


# Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism translated into Czech



'A storm is brewing in the world of architecture thanks to James Stevens Curl's lightning bolt of a book, *Making Dystopia* ... although Curl's polemic is fierce, and well-written to boot, it is far from a blinkered rant. As one would expect from the author of previous revelatory books on the art and architecture of freemasonry, the Egyptian Revival, and the Victorian celebration of death, Curl's research has been forensic. ... Where Curl's heroes ... produced beautiful, crafted work that was both original and steeped in the classical tradition and did not talk a lot of nonsense about "morality", "objectivity", or other drivel obsessed about by Modernists,

the architecture created by Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and their acolytes today has resulted in a “nightmare world of waste, inhumanity and uninhabitable buildings and cities”. And this will only get worse as banal global architecture, together with a woeful lack of town planning, spreads. Essentially what he is saying ... is that smooth talkers and various freaks, thugs and oddities with no design abilities managed to destroy a continuous tradition of history and craftsmanship’ Jonathan Glancey in *The Daily Telegraph* reviews section (28 July 2018) 15

*‘Making Dystopia*, the most gripping and complete account of how architecture and urban planning were corrupted in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century leading to a catastrophic deterioration of the built environment, is a brilliant, thoroughly researched, and completely novel book. It is full of information about architects and buildings which will be unfamiliar to many readers, and at the same time has a topical theme in that it is fired throughout by a convincing onslaught on the devastation of countless towns and cities by architects whose buildings are analysed in chapters with titles such as “Dangerous Signals” and “Descent to Deformity”. It records that a great British architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, foresaw this decline when he wrote that “the experience of 3000 years of man’s creative work cannot be disregarded unless we are prepared for disaster,” and points to the damage caused by “the obliteration of history” that is “high on the agenda of Modernist architects”. Much of the blame for this can be placed on the absurdly narrow, wrong-headed, biased, but unaccountably influential rhetoric of Nikolaus Pevsner. This book, surely the greatest of the many written by Professor Stevens Curl, should be read by staff and students in all schools of architecture who are still pursuing destructive, irrelevant, outdated paths, as well as by everyone concerned about the erosion of civilisation itself’ The Late David Watkin, Emeritus Professor of the History of Architecture at

the University of Cambridge, and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

‘Indefatigable in his ninth decade, Professor Stevens Curl has penned a magisterial *tour de force* that exposes the conceits and folly of architectural Modernism. It exhibits the work of a scholar at the height of his perceptive powers and provides a penetrating and judicious interrogation into one of the greatest shams in the history of architecture. Having already made outstanding contributions in many unexplored tributaries ranging from Freemasonry to Egyptian Revivalism, Curl turns his discerning gaze to what he duly calls a “Catastrophe” in contemporary architecture and design. This indispensable volume highlights the numerous misconceptions about the Modern Movement and illustrates the gross fallacies perpetuated by CIAM and Corbusianity. But make no mistake, this is no mere revisionist account of twentieth-century architecture; it is a surgical takedown of the juggernaut of Modernism and unmasks its baleful manifestations on streets as far as Milwaukee to Brasília while providing dire warnings about the growth and health of our cities and townships. Curl opens our eyes to the cult-like fundamentalism of the Modern Movement and the blind devotion accorded to its chief propagandists, namely Gropius, Mies, and Le Corbusier, who we discover was a self-promoting Fascist ideologue with a puritanical obsession concerning personal hygiene. The myth that the Athens Charter would engender an egalitarian utopia and offer a panacea for the ills of twentieth-century urbanism is closely examined and demolished by Curl, whose unsurpassed combination of wit and erudition shines through on every page. Every subject in this cornucopia of scholarship is scrutinised with superb fluency and élan. Curl’s brilliant text is a timely marvel, and nothing previously published comes anywhere close to this careful dissection of a century of deceit and destruction. The reader will be completely engrossed with the author’s masterful command of primary sources and sage insights about the life and works of neglected figures, including Baillie

Scott, C.F.A. Voysey, and Erich Mendelsohn. This is not a work to be read passively but instead must be mined as a vast repository of rich cultural learning about the failures and hubris of modern architectural education, theory, and design. With this invaluable study, Curl solidifies his place as the *nonpareil* among scholars unafraid to challenge received opinion and the 'almost Mosaic authority' of luminaries such as Pevsner, Ruskin, and Philip Johnson. *Dystopia* is unquestionably a major contribution to the history of architecture and quite possibly the most important publication in Curl's enormously prodigious *oeuvre*' Dr Frank Albo, Adjunct Professor of History, University of Winnipeg, [www.frankalbo.com](http://www.frankalbo.com)

'James Stevens Curl, a veteran architectural historian with a string of big books to his name, certainly tells us what he thinks, and doesn't spare the presses either. This massive *cri-de-coeur* must run to more than 250,000 words, including nearly 200 pages of footnotes, glossary, bibliography, and index. Argued with a pathological attention to detail, ... it is intended primarily to shock and awe the architectural establishment itself ... Curl's blistering broadside would be a fabulous read for the non-specialist ... entertainingly apoplectic ... his book reads like an outpouring of pent-up anger, contempt, revulsion, and despair accumulated over decades. He traces what he calls "the Catastrophe" of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century architecture back to its roots in the Bauhaus group of architects, gathered together by the devious Walter Gropius in Germany just after the First World War. They were a dodgy bunch, exhibiting a cult-like adherence to dubious ideas—and not just about architecture ... Curl's thesis is that modernist architecture is not far removed from Nazi ideology. Both ... shared the same thread of "ruthlessness and sense of superiority", as well as a "curious remoteness from any sense of reality; a rejection of the world as it existed and a desire to destroy it; and a fanatical adherence to some

'radiant' future world that only had its reality in minds from which all compassion had been eradicated". At the "dark irreligious heart of modernism", he concludes, was "unfeeling authoritarianism, even totalitarianism" ' Richard Morrison in *The Times Saturday Review* (18 August 2018) 13

'There is no more evanescent quality than modernity, a rather obvious or even banal observation whose import those who take pride in their own modernity nevertheless contrive to ignore. Having reached the pinnacle of human achievement by living in the present rather than in the past, they assume that nothing will change after them; and they also assume that the latest is the best. It is difficult to think of a shallower outlook ... In this scholarly, learned, but also enjoyably polemical book, Professor Curl recounts both the history and devastating effects of architectural modernism. In no field of human endeavour has the idea that history imposes a way to create been more destructive ... for while we can take avoiding action against bad art or literature, we cannot avoid the scouring of our eyes by bad architecture. It is imposed on us willy-nilly and we are impotent in the face of it. Modern capitalism, it has been said, progresses by creative destruction; modern architecture imposes itself by destructive creation. As Professor Curl makes clear, the holy trinity of architectural modernism—Gropius, Mies, and Corbusier—were human beings so flawed that between them they were an encyclopaedia of human vice. They spoke of morality and behaved like whores; they talked of the masses and were utter egotists; they claimed to be principled and were without scruple, either moral, intellectual, aesthetic, or financial. Their two undoubted talents were those of self-promotion and survival, combined with an overweening thirst for power. Their intellectual dishonesty was startling and would have been laughable had it not been more destructive than the Luftwaffe ... Architectural modernism has a pre-history just as it has its baleful successors. Professor Curl traces both with panache and erudition and shows that the almost universally accepted

history of modernism is actually assiduous propaganda rather than history, resulting not merely in untruth but the opposite of the truth ... The widely accepted narrative of modernism ... is that it was some kind of logical or ineluctable development from the Arts and Crafts movement ... it is like saying that Mickey Spillane is a logical or ineluctable outgrowth of Montesquieu ... Moreover, claiming respectable ancestors is somewhat at variance with equal claims to be starting from zero (as Gropius put it), but such a contradiction is hardly noticed by the grand narrative history of modernism that Professor Curl attacks and destroys. ... Curl has written an essential, uncompromising, learned ... critique of one of the worst and most significant legacies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... His book has a wonderful bibliography, the fruit of a lifetime of reading and reflection ... It is a loud and salutary clarion call to resist further architectural fascism' Anthony Daniels in *The Jackdaw: Independent Views on the Visual Arts* 141 (Sept/Oct 2018) 14-15

'In *Making Dystopia*, distinguished architectural historian James Stevens Curl ... issues a call to judgment among architects, art and architectural historians, urban planners and educators to reverse over a century of cultural demise inflicted in large part through architecture's failure to exercise its civilizing role and societal purpose. Juxtaposing *dystopia*, a condition of dysfunction, with *utopia*, a region of ideal happiness, he develops the case that the concept of the ideal city as an expression of social order characterized by a symbolic design and formal pattern, has been debased and profaned, mutilated if not annihilated—with modernism's minimalist, utilitarian tendencies and historical erasure having an alienating, disruptive impact on society at large. Curl thunderously argues that the once respected art of architecture has become "tragically corrupted" owing particularly to economic special interests and surfeit of urban skylines proliferated over the course of the twentieth century that obliterated local identities, historical memory,

and social concourse. With particular invective levelled at Corbusianity, CIAM, and American architect Philip Johnson, he derides the crude simplicity of the modernist aesthetic, the abandonment of ornament and sculptural elaboration, the looming dominance and exaggerated scale of towering behemoths, severance of relationality to life and natural surroundings, and the theoretical dogmatism, pervasive global reach and persistence of the Modern Movement in architecture and planning. The role of the past looms large in a narrative in which modernism is viewed as a prodigal that has squandered its inheritance. He condemns the movement for the debasement and denunciation of centuries of esteemed tradition, contributing, not to a centered sense of humanistic belonging within the flow of time, but to dislocation, to an historical vacuum in which swank banter and glib eclecticism replace time honored standards of construction and emblemized ideals. He decries the loss of accumulated knowledge integral to the future of Western civilization, of qualified marks of experience and expressions of higher learning aimed at human betterment. But the more trenchant purpose of Curl's analysis is to reaffirm the meaning and role of architecture itself, its import to civic conduct, communal relations and cultural identity. He attributes to architecture the ability to orient social purpose through visual models, animate design and inspired embellishment; he stresses the psychological importance of symbolism and spirituality resonant signage; and he regards the edificatory import of architecture, its capacity to orient the spirit, elevate the mind, ennoble daily enterprise, to encourage social consciousness, enshrine values, memorialize and honor fundamental to human endeavour. ...Encyclopedic in scope and meticulously documented, the text reflects a prodigious breadth of knowledge and impeccable scholarship. ... Written with passion and eloquence, *Making Dystopia* is a work of rare intellectual magnitude, to be recognized as an important, imperative contribution to the culture of our times. It promises to be essential reading to [all those] concerned with cultural heritage, with the quality

of human life within a built environment, and with architecture's enduring legacy to the higher aims of civil society' Giovanna Costantini in *Leonardo Reviews Archive*  
<https://www.leonardo.info/review/2018/09/review-of-making-dystopia-the-strange-rise-and-survival-of-architectural-barbarism>

'It is one thing to loathe what modernist architects and planners have done to our cities, and another to understand why they did it. This book digs down to the unsavory roots of the Modernist movement. It finds a mixture of pseudo-moralism, cosying to high finance, contempt for the past, for spiritual and aesthetic values, and for the humans compelled to live with its ideals. In short, the whole movement is as rotten as the Grenfell Tower of recent (2017) and tragic memory. Curl rightly calls it a "catastrophe". Whereas the arts and music of Modernism are a choice, to be ignored at will, avoiding its architecture is impossible. The destruction of the urban fabric touches everyone; the necessity of living in such towers touches those unable to object, except by vandalizing them. The one bright side (except financially) is that many Modernist buildings are being demolished. But the damage done by destroying older buildings and urban areas that could have been renovated is irreversible. Curl's own demolition begins, surprisingly, with Ruskin and Pugin, who promoted neo-Gothic as the only morally acceptable style. "This moral disapprobation to justify an aesthetic stance has been a dangerous weapon in the hands of International Modernists..." (p 20). Some Modernists boasted its clean break with the past. Others, like Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, whose *Buildings of Britain* has endeared him to every amateur of architecture, created a false genealogy for it. This pretended that it started with the German enthusiasm for English domestic architecture and for late 19<sup>th</sup>-century architects such as Voysey, Baillie Scott, and the Arts & Crafts movement. Curl's second chapter, "Makers of mythologies and false analogies", shows that the products of this period have almost nothing to do with Modernism as it appeared after World War I. This summary, which is intended to



encourage reading of the book itself, must skid quickly over the chapter on the origins of the Bauhaus. What began by blending Arts & Crafts training with transcendent ideals (in Itten, Klee, Kandinsky) ended with Gropius' embrace of technology and an "aesthetic straitjacket, limiting creation, and in the end failing to make a new world that was worth the effort". (p 106-7) The next chapter, which introduces Mies van der Rohe, unravels the politics of Modernist architecture in the 1920s and 1930s. Any simplistic attributions of it to Left or Right dissolve among the complexities of shifting political climates in Germany and the Soviet Union. But although those tyrannies have passed, their principles have not: "Intolerant dogmatism, lip-service to 'scientific' principles without understanding what science is, and pretences to be 'objective' have begotten an inhumane world: they threaten to impose a global Dystopia on us all." (p 170) Philip Johnson, Alfred Barr, and New York's Museum of Modern Art dominate Chapter 5. Curl sees the effect of German émigrés fleeing Nazism as far from benign. Although Modernism's Teutonic beginnings were now downplayed, a close examination of them "induces a deep sense of unease: there can be no doubting the unfeeling authoritarianism, even totalitarianism, at the dark, irreligious heart of Modernism, something that generally has been ignored." (p 182) None better fitted this mindset than the Swiss-born 'Le Corbusier', perhaps the chief villain of Curl's history. His simplistic slogans, his "propaganda manual for destroying humane architecture and coherent, civilized urban structures" (p 194), and his "monstrous egotism...and infatuation with unsustainable consumerism" (p 198) lead to another major theme of this book. That theme is the "strange survival" of the Modernist movement: in brief, that "it was intimately linked with commerce, with planned obsolescence, and with vast financial and industrial concerns, without which it could never have been so universally embraced." (p 222) After 1945 it posed as the moral alternative to the Nazis' grandiose 'stripped Classical' buildings. Ironically, it was countries like Poland and Germany itself, which had suffered

most destruction in the Second World War, that rebuilt their city centres in traditional style. In the succeeding chapters, Curl illustrates the consequences of the Modernist hegemony, as he had done on a smaller scale with his early book *The Erosion of Oxford* (1977). Oxford has survived, but more workaday cities like Coventry, Birmingham, Glasgow, and the City of London have not. Curl does not mince words: "A colossal crime has been committed against humanity and common sense", and, quoting Charles Jencks, "half of Europe was destroyed due to the alliance of the [Corbusian] dream of Mass Culture and greed." (p 302) He is equally unsparing of "Deconstructionist" displays by "star architects" like Gehry and Hadid, which play on the public disaffection with rectilinear Modernism. Some evidently find London's new towers, the Gherkin, the Shard, the Cheese-grater, and the Walkie-talkie, exciting and cool, if not "camp". This could only happen when high culture, meaning that "autonomous reality in which ideas, aesthetic values, and works of art and literature connect with the rest of social existence," (p 341, paraphrasing Vargas Llosa) is rated no better than popular or mass culture, which rests on spectacle, image, propaganda, and commercialism. And it is cold comfort to those condemned to life in "bog-standard" flats. The Modernist rejection of ornament deliberately excludes meaning, symbolism, and the religious dimension, frequently mentioned in the book. But as Curl admits, "All monotheistic religions are essentially intolerant" (p 315). How can one have the spiritual benefits of religion (and the art and architecture that it has always inspired) without the downsides of fanaticism, fundamentalism, and superstition? This question hovers over Curl's "Further reflections", and it has to be answered before any real remedy can be undertaken. The book will enrage those with a vested interest in building Dystopia, while predictably living in pleasant suburbs or luxurious apartments. Obviously this reader has agreed with it from the start. What he hopes is that it will penetrate the middle ground, especially architectural students, and help them to see the fraud that

has been perpetrated on them and on all of us' [Amazon.co.uk, Making Dystopia, 1 customer review, read more](#)

'The author of *Making Dystopia* ... a spirited, scholarly assault on the tin gods of Modernism ... seems about to explode. His rage against the orthodoxies of modern architecture, which has done such a disservice to British cities, is constantly at boiling point ... Don't expect impartiality, therefore, from this analysis of the "Catastrophe" wrought by Modernism ... Whatever you may think of its argument, this book's scholarship is precise. Prepare to be shocked. Not all the gods of Modernism were very nice ... Modernists ... were authoritarian. Dissent was not tolerated. Experimental ideas became mainstream. The British establishment embraced this Continental trend with a convert's zeal. German cities such as Nuremberg were restored for their cultural importance; many here, as Coventry was, were flattened ... In 1979, a diplomat noted that Britain's decline was obvious in the seedy appearance of its towns, airports and hospitals. "Unfortunately," glosses Curl, "things have not improved since then" ' [Clive Aslet 'Modernism's feet of clay' in Country Life ccxii/36 \(5 September 2018\) 112](#)

'When I was younger, one of my favourite books was James Stevens Curl's *The Victorian Celebration of Death*. His latest is much less cheerful ... 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. Curl's ambition is to compose the critique of all critiques, joining a tradition of anti-modern alarm which has included E.M. Forster, Orwell, Vonnegut and Prince Charles. And, of course, Evelyn Waugh. In *Decline and Fall*, Margot Beste-Chetwynde commissioned a new "clean and square" house from Professor Otto Silenus. Dismayed by the result, she soon has it demolished, saying: "Nothing I have ever done has caused me so

much disgust" ' Stephen Bayley in *The Spectator* (25 August 2018) 28-9

'Modernism died – or so Charles Jencks claimed – with the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe slab blocks, and yet it continues its grip ... today, an abandonment of the past unprecedented in architectural history, and despite sweeping social and political change. What is the secret of its allure? James Stevens Curl has an answer: his new book, *Making Dystopia*, pulls no punches in describing the ... logical incongruities that were embedded into the origins of the "cult" of modernism. It outlines the numerous and ironic failures of many of the figurehead buildings of the functionalist style, the damage caused to urban planning and development, and modernism's eventual metamorphosis into deconstructivism, parametricism and the " 'iconic' but flaccid erections" of many stararchitects. *Making Dystopia* is meticulously researched and convincingly argued: it is an undoubtedly controversial book that empties out the contents of modernism for all to see and holds them up to the light for judgement. Curl describes its conceptual origins with CIAM and the Athens Charter, its improbably successful rise through sloganeering; and the unscrupulous tactics of some of its high priests. [He] criticises the modern movement for its conscious anti-historicism, something he likens to the burning of books or destruction of idols. In his view, it is only with careful study and appreciation of the past that we can design buildings that are not only sensitively conceived but also actually appreciated by the public, which "not only has a right to judge [architecture's] quality, but has the only right so to do". He urges contemporary design to see itself as a continuation of the past, not a denial of it. Professor Curl's credentials are undoubted: he compiled *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture*, ... and is the author of over 40 books as well as numerous articles. This book draws on all this knowledge, and its weighty judgement is not to be taken lightly. Here, finally, is an authoritative critique of the

all-pervasive nature of modernism. [It] is a must read for students of architecture: a contentious, highly thought-provoking study, ... a call for an appreciation of contextuality and historicism, urging architectural education out of the "compound". Despite this weighty theme, it is also in places very funny ... Not everything in this book will be agreed with, and no doubt many feathers will be ruffled, but, armed with an appreciation of the views it outlines, we might avoid what Curl describes as the "flabbiness, shallowness, and superfluties of so much 'modern' architecture" ' Patrick O'Keefe in *Architecture Today* 291 (September 2018) 6

'This ... book ... revises the commonly-held conception of twentieth-century architecture. Rather than accepting the ubiquitous forms bequeathed to us ... an argument is made to abandon them because they could be unhealthy. [It] could well provoke a worldwide architectural revolution, re-orienting the practice towards more human-centred design. At the same time, the world's historical and local architectures are given powerful support against being destroyed by a rampant wave of contemporary ... buildings ... Curl shows, in this powerfully argued polemic, ... what happened when a handful of egotistical charlatans imposed modernist architecture on the rest of us, accompanying their cold-hearted and alienating forms on the people whom they despised by means of loud fanfares of self-applause. ... [He] tells the story with passion and conviction, and fully justifies his judgment of the modern movement and its aftermath as a catastrophe ... [There are] a hundred other questions ... left ... at the end of the book. But thank heavens for an author who is prepared to raise them' Sir Roger Scruton, translation of his original review, '*L'architecture moderne au banc des accusés*' in *Phébé* lxi (22 September 2018), in *New Design Ideas* ii/2 (2018) 133-5

'James Stevens Curl reignites the critique of Modernism, its protagonists and its acceptance in the aftermath of the First World War ... There is certainly no attempt to sugar the pill ...

Curl –noted as a historian of Georgian and Victorian architecture, and for a series of pioneering studies of building types involving pubs, death and freemasonry–has opinions in common with most of the opponents of Modernism ...he seems to be unloading a lifetime's frustration at the narrow tyrannies of uncritically accepted cult figures, as exercised in architectural schools ...' Alan Powers in *The Architectural Review* 1458 (February 2019) 56-7

'As this book makes beautifully clear, the modernists were adept at claiming both that their architecture was a logical development to and aesthetic successor of classical Greek architecture and utterly new and unprecedented. The latter, of course, was nearer the mark: they created buildings that, not only in theory but in actual practice, were incompatible with all that had gone before, and intentionally so. Any single one of their buildings could, and often did, lay waste a townscape, with devastating consequences. What had previously been a source of pride for inhabitants became a source of impotent despair ... The sheer megalomania of the modernist architects, their evangelical zeal on behalf of what turned out to be, and could have known in advance to be, an aesthetic and moral catastrophe, is here fully described ... They combined the bureaucrat's lack of imagination with the tyrant's thirst for power. Never in world history had such technical incompetence been so powerfully allied with such total aesthetic insensitivity ... Only someone who sees with an ideology rather than with his eyes could conclude anything other than that modernism has been overwhelmingly a disaster. Professor Curl's is a very painful book to read ... He conducts us deftly through the thickets of ... one of the worst ... legacies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' Theodore Dalrymple in *The New English Review*

[https://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm?frm=189422&sec\\_id=189422](https://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm?frm=189422&sec_id=189422)

'James Stevens Curl is the author of many distinguished

volumes of architectural history, including *Georgian Architecture in the British Isles 1714-1830* (2011), *Classical Architecture: An introduction to its vocabulary and Essentials* (2003), and the vast and compelling account of Plantation architecture in Northern Ireland, *The Londonderry Plantation 1609-1914* (1986). These, and a range of other prodigious undertakings, are mostly positive in tone; but now Stevens Curl gets his teeth into “the disaster that has been post-1945 British architecture and town planning”, tackling the thorny subject with verve, wit, and tremendous erudition. *Making Dystopia* is a challenge to the architectural orthodoxy of the present time. It deals with wrong turnings and unpleasant outcomes. The overwhelming presence of “aesthetically indefensible developments”, in Britain and elsewhere, is a cause for lamentation; and the roads by which it arrived at a culmination in the mid- to late twentieth century are here expertly evaluated. The label “Modernism” first came into general usage in the 1920s and denoted an absolute break with the past and all its suspect creeds and coteries. Proponents of the new minimalism, or functionalism, envisaged a bright, streamlined, harmonious environment of the future, with buildings devoid of embellishments of any kind of historical allusion. It didn't quite work like that, indeed, but the ideas of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and others took hold on a vast scale and, as Stevens Curl shows, caused enormous aesthetic, economic and psychological damage. [His] primary villain is Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, better known as Le Corbusier, whose ... architectural innovations were wrongly interpreted as a blueprint for radicalization ... [and] filtered down and down. The end result was municipal rigidity and the poisonous housing estate—something along the lines of the Hulme Crescents in Manchester (completed 1971), not only ugly and dispiriting, but ill-constructed as well as ill-conceived. Structural defects shortened the lifespan of this and similar developments. But new structures continue to proliferate, filling the spaces gained by the demolition of historic buildings. The cult of Modernism “has created a new

Establishment, controlling architectural education, and even the architectural media". An "aesthetic dictatorship" ... prevails. The conclusion is inescapable: the architectural imagination has lost its focus. The utopian aspirations which came to the fore in the early twentieth century deteriorated into a kind of straitjacket for planners and builders, with no leeway for grace, discernment, charm, or individuality. This great book, in showing categorically, and cogently, what went wrong, makes an unarguable case for the conservation of what little remains' Patricia Craig in *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) 6028 (12 October 2018) 31

'Curl exposes ... immoral theories and practices of [modernist] proponents. He reveals damning facts about the founding modernists and their proclivities. He drags the truth from hidey-holes maintained by generations of design clerisy quite aware of how bad it would look if their secrets ever saw the light of day. *Making Dystopia* is their worst nightmare ... Curl's book lets a thousand cats out of a thousand bags ... Published by Oxford University Press, this volume should inspire a major rethink, a re-evaluation of values, a revival of home truths ... A review cannot but scratch the surface of the excellence of a great book. Its publication ... imparts a credibility that cannot be gainsaid' David Brussat: *Architecture Here and There* <https://architecturehereandthere.com/2018/11/02/review-making-dystopia/>

'This centenary of the foundation of the Bauhaus is a good moment to rid ourselves of the influence of a school from which a tiny number of cranks waged a successful campaign to turn the great majority of architects into losers and failures. Since that time, or at any rate since Walter Gropius reinvented his own history, architecture has been presented as an unfolding series of triumphs as one great genius after the other pulled his conceptual rabbit out of a hat (as James Stevens Curl and Jane Stevenson have recently reminded us, the



cult figures of Modernism were all male, very male, as was the language used to describe their works and to attack their opponents) ... the idea that the architect of a non-conforming building is an enemy who must be destroyed, that sentimental references are worthless rubbish, that designers who deviate from the cult's concept are effete or unmanly. The idea that history died. The idea that "concepts" trump everything else. Only the experience of working in practice, or engaging with historic environments or landscapes, has tempered the bizarre, anti-cultural effect of this alternative universe of conceptual rabbits, which still prevails to an astonishing degree in most architectural schools' Timothy Brittain-Catlin 'OUTRAGE' in *The Architectural Review* **1458** (February 2019) 74

'Any non-specialist who nevertheless has a strong perception that the European urban environment has been comprehensively wrecked (nowhere to a greater extent than in Britain) by modernist architecture, and a suspicion that this has been done knowingly and deliberately, will find chapter and verse in this polemical, amusing, alarming but scholarly book by the author, a summation of more than sixty years' deep study of architecture' *Claremont Review of Books, Books of the Year, Online edition*

'There is a curious phenomenon in Western intellectual life, namely that of being right at the wrong time, ...far, far worse than having been wrong for decades on end ... There was never a good time, for example, to be anti-communist ... Something similar is true of opposition to modernist architecture: there has never been a good time to oppose it. This is illustrated by some of the critical response to ... Curl's *magnum opus* just published ... This book is a polemical, but deeply scholarly, history of architectural modernism, its antecedents and its results, practically all of which have been baleful, especially in Britain ... Of modernist architecture in Britain, it might be said that it has left scarcely any town untouched, and touched none that it did not ruin ... Curl is a very

distinguished historian of architecture, and his book is the summation of a lifetime's study. Though polemical, it is far from a rush of blood to the head. He has examined the intellectual foundations of, and supposed justifications for, modernism very closely, above the call of duty, for it cannot have been very pleasant work. The word *intellectual* does not imply high intellect, which the holy trinity of modernism, Gropius, Mies, and Corbusier, certainly did not possess. What they possessed instead were psychopathic ambition, ruthlessness and a talent for self-promotion ... As George Orwell intimated, there has been so much deliberate intellectual obfuscation in the recent past that seamlessly unites the vicious with the absurd that it is the obvious that it now takes real intellect (and courage, alas) for an intellectual to see and enunciate ... Curl has done for architectural criticism what the late Simon Leys did for Sinology' Anthony Daniels in *Quadrant* (4 November 2018) <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2018/10/expensive-institutionalised-poverty/>

'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. 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 ... This book is essential reading because it helps us to understand what happened to erode the world's rich cultural inheritance. 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 ... An incredibly high level of scholarship distinguishes *Making Dystopia*, so that its critics will have a hard time shrugging off its message. This makes 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' Nikos Salingaros in ArchNet-IJAE: International Journal of Architectural Research xii/3 (November 2018) 327-32  
<http://www.archnet-ijar.net/index.php/IJAR/article/view/1828>

'This is a book to be read, discussed and debated by anyone with an interest in our built environment ... In his latest book, Professor Curl develops his case for the pernicious influence of Modernists and Modernism. This is a full-blooded, no-holds-barred, scholarly treatise stemming from a lifetime of study and experience and an unwillingness to bow down to popular but often unsubstantiated opinion. Curl traces the effect of the Modernist architectural revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and argues that the movement has led to a disastrous deterioration in the quality of the urban environment with the needs of ordinary mortals being sacrificed on the altar of high finance and iconic architecture ... [He] ramps up the debate with a passionate argument meticulously backed up by detailed notes and a vast range of source material much of which is new. Not everyone will agree with the thesis but those such need to look to their laurels and marshal their evidence as Curl has undoubtedly marshalled his if they are to hold their own in the debate ... No-one can accuse Professor Curl of being pusillanimous. This scholarly and challenging book deserves to be widely read and what better time to digest strong fare than over the long winter nights leading up to the festive season' Karen Latimer in Perspective: The Journal of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects xxvii/6 (November 2018) 117-8

'This angry but erudite polemic, enlivened by the author's own pen and ink drawings, is, near as dammit, Stevens Curl's 50<sup>th</sup>

book and it reads like the fury of a man now in his eighties who has had enough. Heaven knows that Modernism's initial effect on most historic settlements was a "catastrophe". The indictment has multiple charges ... Curl's target is ... hugely vulnerable. He attacks relentlessly and goes in for the kill ... He puts great store by the reform of architectural schools where he calls for far less blue sky thinking and much more concentration on the study of history, local architecture, climate, good manners, reticence and a sense of place ... Modernism at its most robotic and crude and indeed at the hands of the system builder ... has a great deal to answer for. And too much modern architectural criticism and journalism kow-tows to the tricky and meretricious. [There] is a scholarly solidity to the book and a relentlessness to the argument that means ... you won't so easily throw off the memory of its message. It sticks in the mind ...' Newsletter of The Ancient Monuments Society (Autumn 2018) 69-71

'Curl is an internationally renowned scholar, an architectural historian whose work over the years has spanned areas including Freemasonry and the Enlightenment, Funerary Monuments, Spas and Gardens and, of course, his two seminal studies of the history and architecture of the Londonderry Plantation and the Livery Companies behind it. An acute observer and analyst of both physical and intellectual landscapes, he has cast a cold eye over architectural developments in Europe and America, from the late-19th century through to the present day. In *Making Dystopia*, he has produced a series of scathing criticisms of the theory (and theorists) behind the Modernist movement in all of its forms, its insistence on soulless "functionalism" and its disdain for the human condition – amongst its many defects. The book has a broad-ranging reference section and bibliography, full index and, as is usual with Curl's writings, meticulous and comprehensive chapter notes.

While it might seem strange for an archaeologist to review a

work on modern architecture, there is much to parallel between the dogmas that beset both disciplines. One of the key strengths of Curl's writing is that it highlights how "trends" become "fads" which become almost cult beliefs, attracting their own weird and wonderful terminologies. This is something that this reviewer's generation will recognise from the sudden eruption of "processual" archaeology in the 1960s, and the rise almost to the status of a religious certainty of "ritual" interpretations of each and every unexplained feature on an excavation. It is more than interesting to compare recent archaeological thinking with those (longer-term) trends in architectural theory.

This is a work that ... is of the greatest importance for anyone involved in viewing and analysing physical landscapes past and present, highlighting as it does the disfigurement of cityscapes and ugliness of dystopian estates that are such an unhappy feature of the urban planning of the post-war 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is merciless in its criticisms of the "rock-star" architects whose cult-status allows them to do no wrong ... Indeed, beyond the sphere of architecture, it provides also a case-study of the evolutions of numbing theoretical dogmas and impenetrable jargons that blight so much of historical and archaeological "thought" today. In his introduction, Curl writes:

the strange thing about the almost universal embrace of architectural Modernism and Corbusier-inspired town planning is that it occurred at all. ... Architecture itself, once a respected art, was tragically corrupted by the industrialization of the human habitat, serving not society and the betterment of the human condition but the interests of enormous conglomerates and financial/commercial corporations only concerned with ever-greater profits and ever-increasing production.

Chapter 1 describes the severing of links with the

architecture of the past under the influence, in particular, Miës van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and their collaborators. Curl notes that mankind is naturally at home with architectural “forms responding to gravity, not to predominantly horizontal ones”, illustrating the point with sundry images showing how much the Modernist approach can mar the cityscape.

The Modernist notion that the architecture of the past, its orders and adornments and achievements, should no longer have any influence on building or urban layout may seem bizarre, and Curl condemns in no uncertain terms:

... 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.

In Chapter 2, having discussed the benign influence of Hermann Muthesius, Curl removes the cut-throat razor from his sock to slash, but with surgical precision, at the views and positions of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and his seeming uncritical adulation of Gropius and his work. And in discussing the work of Baillie Scott and others, he remarks mordantly, “those who claim that the work of humankind throughout the ages is of no importance to us today are guilty of fatuous vanity.” Curl castigates Pevsner for his treatment of the trio of Comper, Dykes Bower, and Voysey, noting how the sage deliberately misrepresented Voysey’s work, despite Voysey’s own violent objections.

Chapter 4 opens with the career of Miës van der Rohe, tracing the evolution of his architectural style, from sound design rooted in history, to that of a radical Modernist. Curl notes (gleefully one suspects) that part of this transformation was

the addition of the diacritic over the “e”, since his original name, “Mies”, has unhappy overtones in German of “poor, rotten, awful” (and in Dutch, “nasty, ugly”, etc.). He draws attention to the *Weißenhofsiedlung* project of 1927, realised by Miës in collaboration with a number of architects, including Gropius and Le Corbusier, describing it as “a propaganda coup” and, with its dominating horizontals, flat roofs and bland concrete and glass exteriors, as “the image of the cult of International Modernism”. This came too with the notion that spaces should be arranged to reflect how proletarian life *should* be lived; it was extended by some to the idea that architecture should be used to wean the working class onto “desirable lifestyles”!

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the wide-ranging influence of the wealthy American architect Philip Johnson, described as the “slickest salesman” of Modernism, and damned with faint praise in his obituary as

“...a second-class creative figure with a first-class brain...and the second to do everything.” In Chapter 6, Curl analyses how the origins of the Modern Movement, which he describes as consisting “largely of theories and loud slogans” developed into the “International Style”, to be treated as that “best suited” to the twentieth century. His wrath is directed nowhere more sharply as when he writes that as a result of policies enforced in the 1960s:

...there were orgies of destruction of town centres, shaping urban skylines, obliterating streets and huge numbers of perfectly sound buildings that were capable of adaptation (but which, because of their unacceptable “Historicism”, were regarded as irrelevant, or worse), and creating Dystopias on a massive scale. In Britain, the destruction of hundreds of thousands more houses than had been flattened during the war was partly due to Modernist theories about the “clean slate”, but there was also a visceral, blinkered desire to reject the past...The 1950s and 1960s saw the universal adoption of a

cheap, all-purpose, banal, badly-executed Modernism that not only obliterated local identities and memories, but led inexorably to Dystopias that were nevertheless lauded by their protagonists as “excitingly modern”, but were nevertheless hated by the uprooted people who had to live there.

This stark dismissal encapsulates all that Curl sees wrong in the theory, application and lack of appreciation of the human condition in Modernism. And he is scathing in his debunking of the idea that somehow there is a familial relationship between Modernism and mediaeval architecture, a notion that would have the Abbé Suger rotating in his crypt. The inexplicable contradiction between claims of a Classical ancestry and the demand for severance of all linkage with the past is summed up in gobbledygook nonsense (from Le Corbusier’s 1946 *Towards a New Architecture*) that Curl quotes regarding the Doric and Corinthian “states of mind”.

Chapter 7, the chillingly-titled ‘Descent to Deformity’, takes up again the career and influence of Johnson, along with Alfred Barr and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, showing how, along with the *Bauhäusler* émigrés and the likes of Pevsner, and using manipulative publicity (and some murky links to the CIA) they “...engineered the widespread acceptance of what became a global phenomenon.” Curl bluntly accuses the theorists and apologists of wittingly or unwittingly becoming agents for the military/industrial complexes and the promotion of “western values”. The result was that major industries realised the profit-making potential of the Modern style for manufacturing, real estate manipulation, and the reshaping of the urban fabric to suit rampant capitalist interests. One result, stemming from Le Corbusier’s hatred of the traditional street, in the USA was its replacement where possible by the now-ubiquitous freeway. And the rise of the motor car – the ultimate symbol of the American dream – required more and more space for car parking.

Curl notes the European response to the Cold War in the rise



of Welfare States which required, amongst other things, social housing. This need was hijacked by the Modernists who – instead of creating “living” spaces – allowed developers to create spaces in which people lived. Whether in Chicago or London or Paris or Belfast, tower-blocks stacking families like battery fowl in dismal concrete crates proliferated. But, as Curl remarks, with fully-justified acidity, claims that Modernist planning somehow was connected to the towns of the Mediaeval or Renaissance periods, “...failed to make a convincing case why *history* ...mattered one hoot to ...Modernist planning schemes...”. The rest of the chapter illustrates clearly the bankruptcy of vision of the city architects of London, Coventry, Canterbury, Glasgow, Belfast *et al.* (all bombed mercilessly) compared to those of Köln, Nuremberg and Dresden (bombed with even greater ferocity by the victorious allies) and Warsaw and St Petersburg (assaulted with equal ferocity by the Germans), all of whom sought to remember – and to show appreciation of – past elegance, history and architectural excellence.

The demolition in 1972 of the Pruitt-Igoe, St Louis Missouri, development of thirty-three dysfunctional tower-blocks and the collapse of the Ronan Point block in Canning Town, London, are highlighted at the start of Chapter 8. These blocks – and the reader can examine his or her own surroundings to find similar examples – effectively created dystopian environments in which a lift failure, or power outage, could isolate families, especially the elderly and disabled, where children were reduced to playing on stairwells and landings, where dimly lit stairwells created breeding grounds for crime (in particular drug dealing), where lifts became pissoirs, and in which – it goes without saying – architects and developers did not have to live!

Curl shows that the minimalist vocabulary of Le Corbusier, Miës *et al.* failed to provide visual definition of function to structures, so that “...a building used for teaching looked like

a factory, and a chapel looked like a workshop." The seemingly inexplicable cult of ugliness (which, for this reviewer, the working environment created by the "concrete brutalism" of the nasty, 1968–9 extension to the old Belfast Museum [praised to the skies by the architectural Establishment, of course] forms an indelible memory) incorporated elements of structural and environmental instability. For example, the alkaline dust from untreated concrete walls were a major headache for artefact (of all kinds) storage and conservation in the (renamed) Ulster Museum. And the general disregard for the potential for corrosion of steelwork in concrete walls is a major structural concern to this day. Additionally, Curl pulls no punches when he remarks that

many much-praised works of the Modern Movement were designed and built for clients who became multi-national corporations. All the claims for "social responsibility" trumpeted by Modernists in the 1920s lie uneasily with the realities of how architects of the Modern Movement served vast corporations, and imposed vast CIAM- and Corbusier-inspired mass-housing blocks of the Pruitt-Igoe variety on the hapless "proletariat".

Having dealt summarily with the "Deconstructivists" and "Parametricists", Curl returns to the question of religion and cults, and the role of religions both in stimulating great art and in the destruction of the works of "others". He notes the truth that, by destroying the past, the future can be controlled. And he argues cogently that seeking to impose "Western" standards of architecture on those of other cultures, particularly in the Middle East, ignoring the religious symbolism of their houses of worship, is a factor in the hostility to the West that has developed in many Muslim countries.

In the Epilogue, Curl reaches once more for his cut-throat razor, slicing at the dystopian aberrations in the development of housing stock in the late 1950s and 1960s, describing "...one

of the worst professional crimes ever inflicted on humanity...”, singling out for particular opprobrium the Hulme development in Manchester. With short lives, these represented both a huge misery on those stuffed into them, and a huge waste of resources.

The final Chapter is a series of thoughtful and critical reflections on the philosophy of the well-being that can be promoted by good architecture and urban planning. Curl notes also the converse; architecture and planning based only on “projections” and dubious “cost-benefit analyses” of requirements simply dehumanise. He points out also that a hospital ward designed around patients – not mechanistic measurement of room size – which provides pleasant views, can help significantly with lowering of levels of distress and in speeding up patient recovery. Against this is deliberate lowering of the values of cultural and religious roots in the interests of crass commercialism, so that the values of the past are diminished by “the spectacle” and through persuasion of the need to consume. He suggests, however, that there is growing resistance to the Modernist “future”.

The Epilogue opens with a simple truth – Modernist dogma has effectively wiped clean the surfaces of structures, removing all of those symbols and colours that made buildings of the past so interesting and fulfilling. But in highlighting the defects of the current system by which architects are trained, he produces a comprehensive scheme to overhaul their education and eliminate current mismanagement of a vital resource – the student and future creator of design. And as a final illustration of the Dystopias created by the “taint of Corbusianity and its priesthood”, Curl points out that to recreate the Dystopia of Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, Stanley Kubrick chose the Modernist wasteland of Thamesmead in Woolwich, London, designed by the GLC Department of Architecture and claimed to be “progressive”, remarking that “...the scenes in that film sum up the failure of the Modern

Movement.”

In short, *Making Dystopia* appears as a book written as much in sorrow as in anger. Its author makes swingeing cuts into the mythos of Modernism, but without descending into mere abuse. Every criticism is backed by solid fact and in-depth research, and he is equally ready to praise as to damn. And if a “pre-processual” (*sic*) archaeologist who remembers fondly the elegant, jargon-free language and logic of past years may be permitted to opine, it would seem that there is a strong parallel between the rise of Modernism and its excesses with that of the “New Arch(a)eology” (or “Processual” archaeology, as it is now more commonly known), in terms at least of the embrace of impenetrable jargon to disguise woolly thinking. As Chippendale wrote “...the then-radical insistence [of the late 1950s/1960s] that nothing valuable had been written in archaeology before 1960, matched the hippie belief that anyone over 30 was too ancient to be intelligent...”!

Without writing a substantial essay that enumerates and analyses Curl’s detailed descriptions and theses, it is not really possible to do full justice to his work, but the reviewer hopes that these notes will whet the appetite for what is a fascinating study’ Brian G. Scott  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330183754\\_Review\\_of\\_Making\\_Dystopia\\_The\\_Strange\\_Rise\\_and\\_Survival\\_of\\_Architectural\\_Barbarism\\_James\\_Stevens\\_Curl](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330183754_Review_of_Making_Dystopia_The_Strange_Rise_and_Survival_of_Architectural_Barbarism_James_Stevens_Curl)

‘Oxford University Press has just published a controversial new assessment of the Modern Movement ... by the British historian, James Stevens Curl [who] has spent his career researching architecture ... with an emphasis on monuments, cemeteries, and freemasonry. His scholarly output is prolific. As its pithy title suggests, this new book doesn’t look kindly on the narrative presented by the major historians who chronicled the emergence of Modernist architecture in Europe and America during the last century. It does, however, present a cogent and well-argued history of the period before 1945

that should revise our understanding of how the “International Style” was invented and mythologized. Curl first underscores the fact that [Nikolaus Pevsner](#), [Henry Russell Hitchcock](#), [Sigfried Giedion](#) and [Philip Johnson](#) were not disinterested scholars looking objectively at the architecture of their time, but rather had good reason to proselytize for a style of building that would transform the world according to the *zeitgeist* of a machine age, one that saw mechanized warfare destroy half of Europe ... Using 1914 as a starting point, *Making Dystopia* shows how economics and politics influenced the careers of leading architects in Germany, allowing some to prosper and others to fade into obscurity ... Curl did a lot of primary source research to unearth this material, but he did not have to look hard to find truly critical, scholarly views of the lives of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, or Walter Gropius. Recent scholarship has unearthed a raft of new evidence showing these figures to be much more complex and unsavory than any twentieth century biography might have revealed. Significantly, the historians who wrote about the “form givers” of the Modern Movement were complicit in hiding some unpleasant facts about European architects working for Fascist regimes, as long as they fit the correct account of the rise of avant-garde art and architecture that was seen as “modern.” ... More damning than these revelations about the leading architects of the Modern Movement is Curl’s history of the p.r. campaign that was unleashed in Europe and the U.S. following the First World War to create a false inevitability for the emergence of a new style of building that featured flat roofs, white stucco walls, strip windows, and pilotis instead of columns ... Curl has particular disdain for the misinterpretations of English Arts and Crafts architecture that appeared in Pevsner’s influential book, [Pioneers of the Modern Movement](#) (1936), later reissued as *Pioneers of Modern Design*. The German historian now lionized for his *Buildings of England* series was a fierce promoter of Walter Gropius, whom he identified as the leader of a new movement in Europe by virtue of his teaching at the Bauhaus in Dessau. Connecting

the Bauhaus, through the Werkbund, with English followers of Ruskin and Morris was an absurd distortion of reality, but one that Pevsner accomplished with aplomb. C.F.A. Voysey “became cross” with Sir Nikolaus for associating him with a style which he “disliked.” M.H. Baillie Scott and C.R. Mackintosh wanted nothing to do with German modernism ... This challenge to the prevailing narrative is not trivial, nor is the record presented in *Making Dystopia*, with its large bibliography and careful endnotes. Once a lie is told, its proliferation becomes a matter of citation, a reference to the work of one of the four pillars of Modernist historiography. We cannot know that their feet were made of clay unless someone unravels the web of falsehoods that were spun decades ago. Curl’s book does this, and more, to set the record straight on how Modernism came to dominate world architecture by the mid-twentieth century ... Unfortunately the architectural establishment has already tried to discredit Curl’s efforts with vituperative reviews in a number of publications. Critics ... have carped about Curl’s colorful, sometimes hyperbolic send-ups of contemporary trends in design, such as Parametricism and Blobitecture, ignoring the virtues of his scholarship and failing to refute his assertions. Mainstream writers cast him as a cranky, conservative stone-thrower, when in fact he has spent his life as a diligent researcher ... Like so much that has been dumbed down in contemporary education, architectural history has not fared well ... That is no excuse for the proliferation of false histories that defend untenable positions and faulty ideas, because there are many fine historians who are well aware of defects in “standard” texts ... a complete reckoning of the complex history of Modernism requires a clear-eyed, critical examination, something not found in Frampton’s *Critical History* or William Curtis’s highly praised text on twentieth century architecture. If we ignore books like Curl’s our cities and landscapes will continue to get the same insipidly abstract designs we have lived with for decades, and our profession won’t advance to meet the challenges of this troubled century. Putting flat

roofs on a building in Bangladesh or central Africa to get kudos from critics in New York or London is as silly as wearing a grass skirt to go whale watching in Nome, yet many young architects will do just that in the name of Modernism—at least until they understand what that term really means' Mark Alan Hewitt 'Was Modernism Really International? A New History Says No' in [http://commonedge.org/was-modernism-really-international-a-new-history-says-no/?fbclid=IwAR2aKUvUVmH9PDA\\_8\\_eLTsWEN\\_F6URTt0toDCvKvW-7-BrvOKMj6aol8gw0](http://commonedge.org/was-modernism-really-international-a-new-history-says-no/?fbclid=IwAR2aKUvUVmH9PDA_8_eLTsWEN_F6URTt0toDCvKvW-7-BrvOKMj6aol8gw0)

'In 1949 Osbert Lancaster published *Draynflete Revealed*, a cartoon history of an English town. The final image was of the place in the future, dominated by Modernist buildings, and a few isolated and solitary relics from the past surviving, such as a gateway to an Augustinian priory marooned on a traffic-island and a parish church as a lonely museum piece. It was a terrible warning of what was to come, what was already coming. James Stevens Curl pursues the theme, less pithily, though, with 426 pages of text and 162 pages of apparatus. He describes how Modernism came about, its baneful effects and suggestions for alleviation by education. It is encyclopedic in its range and it is a powerful and passionate indictment. The dogs of anger are always straining on the leash' Bernard Richards 'New styles of architecture' in *Oxford Magazine* 401 (Week 5 Michaelmas term 2018) 17-19

'Curl ... is not wrong. In its banning of ornament, which had characterized every epoch since the Egyptian pharaohs, the International Style was an aberration ... *Making Dystopia* ... is an encyclopedic study of how the Modern Movement, which began as a minor bohemian diversion in the 1920s, came to dominate contemporary architecture ... [It is also] an impassioned bomb-throwing jeremiad, the work of an 81-year-old traditionalist who has seen his world overturned by what he perceives to be a malevolent force ... It contains underlying truths ... The ultimate

failure of modern architecture ... is that while the Modern Movement effectively suppressed an architectural language that had taken hundreds of years to evolve, it proved incapable of developing a successful substitute' Witold Rybczynski 'Modernism and the Making of Dystopia' Architect, The Journal of the American Institute of Architects Architectmagazine.com (website) (5 February 2019) [https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/modernism-and-the-making-of-dystopia\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/modernism-and-the-making-of-dystopia_o)

'Curl is a distinguished architectural historian and Fellow of the RIAS specializing in Georgian and Victorian architecture. In this book he decries the advent and growth of Modernism and its successive movements ... Curl rages against the dearth of craft in architectural design and building, pointing out the high cost, short lives and unpopularity of many of the buildings [Modernism] produced. He refers to a long catalogue of social failures, demolitions and existing works of unquestionable ugliness. While Jencks sees Pruitt-Igoe as a symbol of a fresh start, Curl sees it as an excuse for more self-indulgent frippery. Post-Modernism comes in for a blasting, rivalled only by the vituperation Parametricism and Starchitects receive. "Iconic" buildings, blobs and crystals are condemned ... This is a scholarly work, as befits both subject and author, refuting the notion that design has made progress towards greater benefit. Curl has reconsidered the history of Modern Architecture ...' Doug Read in *RIASQuarterly* 37 (Spring 2019) 76

'*Making Dystopia* ... has done much to puncture Modernism's "fabricated narratives that were swallowed whole by the gullible"... [Yet] rather than grapple in any meaningful way with the arguments being advanced ... defenders of the architectural *status quo* seem to have settled for a particularly clumsy application of *reduction ad Hitlerum* ... It hardly needs to be stated that any search through ... *Making Dystopia* ... will produce absolutely no mention of *Blut und*



*Boden*. Lumping preeminent figures like ... Curl together with negligible fringe [movements] ... is a particularly egregious sleight of hand, and bad faith disputation of this type rather puts one in mind of the proverbial hit dog hollering ... As this civilizational dementia becomes more and more in evidence – a collective sinking giggling or scowling into the sea, as the case may be – at least there remain those like Curl, who rightly urge a “complete change of direction in architectural education” and architectural awareness’ Matthew Omolensky ‘The Architecture of Self-Hatred: Brutalism, Barbarism, and the Making of Dystopia’ in *The American Spectator* (13 April 2019) <https://spectator.org/the-architecture-of-self-hatred/>

‘*Making Dystopia* should stand proudly beside *De architectura* ... by the ancient Roman architect and military engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, dedicated to his patron the emperor Caesar Augustus, and *I quattro libri dell’architettura* ... by Andrea Palladio ... Some reviewers of Stevens Curl’s book have produced fiery hatchet jobs: coming from the mainstream, from (indoctrinated) representatives of the élites who have festooned the world with such aberrant architecture, these confirm how great and valuable, not to mention profoundly informed, this book is’ Guido Mina di Sospiro in *New English Review* (April 2019) [https://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm?frm=18640&sec\\_id=189640](https://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm?frm=18640&sec_id=189640)

‘In a recent debate in *Prospect* magazine on the question of whether modern architecture has ruined British towns and cities, ... Curl, one of Britain’s most distinguished architectural historians, wrote as his opening salvo that there was hardly a town or city that has not had its streets—and skyline—wrecked by insensitive, crude, post-1945 additions which ignore established geometries, urban grain, scale, materials, and emphases. This is so self-evidently true that I find it hard understand how anyone could deny it, but modern architects and hangers-on such as architectural

journalists *do* deny it, like war criminals who, for obvious reasons, continue to deny their crimes in the face of overwhelming evidence ... Curl's *magnum opus* is both scholarly and polemical. He has been observing the onward march of modernism and its effects for over sixty years and is justifiably outraged by it ... he is particularly strong on the historiographical lies peddled by the apologists for modernism, and on the intellectual weakness of the arguments for the necessity of modernism ... Curl's book is a gauntlet thrown down before a powerful establishment. Its publication has caused a stir among those who are, for professional reasons, unable to admit the obvious, for to accept any of its criticisms would be to admit to decades of architectural incompetence if not outright criminality, inasmuch as modernism was party not only to the destruction of all previously existing townscapes but to profiteering of the crudest and grossest kind. *Making Dystopia* is very much more than a detailed critique of a building or two here and here. It is an angry criticism of an entire worldview—the worldview of a type of person who much prefers his word to the world, and in doing so causes untold ruination. The editor of the *RIBA Journal*... wrote a scathing but inaccurate review, whose very subtitle was a flagrant misrepresentation. *If it's not trad, he ain't glad*. In fact, in criticizing modernism and its successor movements, Curl is promoting no particular type of architecture ...The fury against Curl, I suspect, was an implicit admission that he was right' Theodore Dalrymple 'Crimes in Concrete' in *First Things* (June 2019)  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/06/crimes-in-concrete>

' "Rationalism" and "functionalism" are mantras repeated by architectural historians for almost a century, with supposed parentage in people like Berlage, Otto Wagner, William Morris, and Charles Voysey ... but ... Curl makes short work of this sort of stuff, and will have none of it. Modernism has no fathers, as he shows convincingly: Modernism was a revolution ... What Curl regards as "the last religion of the western

intellectual” has led to architectural barbarism ... He deplores the distinction between high and low culture and the loss of real tradition and religion ... [His is] a sharp and merciless analysis of Modernism’ Bernard Hulsman translated by Petra Maclot ‘Historical city centres have to make room for failed housing complexes’ in *NRC Handelsblad* (16 May 2019) <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/05/16/bauhaus-barbarij-a3960484>

‘Curl has dug behind and chiselled away at the details of a history veneered over by decades of received modernist mythmaking. The picture he exposes is, by turns, fascinating and depressing ... *Making Dystopia* is also unique for its wealth of wiser souls who saw through the dangerous folly of modernist theory and practice right from its beginnings ..., voices that were largely drowned out at the time by the emerging groupthink ... and have been ignored ever since ... This is, however, no crudely polemical work; the appraisal ... is always nuanced and always thorough, if tart ... We are taken, in exhaustive detail, through the long, dispiriting catalogue of verbose twentieth-century proselytizing from so many Bauhaus-influenced, self-appointed radicals with their arrogant “we must do this or that”, “needs of the masses”, “machine for living” rhetoric ... Curl has had to devote ... many pages to the examination of a vast accretion of pseudo-intellectual theorizing that in itself is (and always was) almost entirely worthless ... [He] is good on more recent architecture too ... I myself enrolled at a British school of architecture in the 1980s ... It became clear the first week of the autumn term that a central tenet of the course was that we should all be eternally grateful to the great “Corb” for showing us the way in architecture ... As it happens, the architectural history lecturer on my course was Professor Curl. His weekly lectures were an island of clarity and substance in a sea of arcane abstraction ... from [him] I learned to differentiate the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime ... From some of the [other lecturers] I learned nothing at all except that once you have a sinecure in a British university you can be as

lazy-minded as you like without fear of being sacked ... For Professor Curl to have endured this intellectual climate must have taken much fortitude ...' Graham Cunningham 'The dystopia we made' in *The New Criterion* xxxvii/4 (December 2018)  
<https://www.newcriterion.com/issues/2018/12/the-dystopia-we-made>

'Like Émile Zola's *J'accuse*, James Stevens Curl's *Making Dystopia* deploys passion, erudition and an enraged sense of social justice to devastating effect ... For Curl, architecture has for too long embraced the proselytising doctrines of a secular faith in an age of uncertainty and trauma. His list of the blameworthy extends back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and includes John Ruskin, a high-minded commentator who (lest we forget) advocated the demolition of Edinburgh's neoclassical New Town. The invective can be pretty unsparing when it comes to assessing the damage ...' David Black in *The Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland* (Spring 2019) 34-5

'Curl argues that the preferred style in which many new buildings are created is ill adapted to the human senses, generating a permanent condition of stress from our environment ... in this scholarly, well-documented book ... he demonstrates that contemporary architectural culture ... has created a dystopian environment for users; explains how a tiny group was able to impose on the world an abstraction ... devoid of sense; shows that the global homogenization of architecture ignores local conditions of climate, culture, and evolved traditions; documents how biological aspects of architecture necessary for healing environments were expunged; and examines the historical, political, and psychological reasons why the shaping of our environment in this manner was accepted. Curl is Britain's most distinguished architectural historian: he has carried out decades of research into the origins of contemporary architectural culture, and finally brings all this information together in *Making Dystopia*, convinced that something is terribly wrong with the way buildings look today,

assaults on human senses ... A serious challenge has been thrown to our complacent society to consider the very real dangers posed by dominant architectural culture. The threat is an existential one, because it not only involves human health but also unexplored questions regarding the effects of environmental stress on fecundity, pregnancy, and children's intellectual development. Those frightening possibilities have been totally ignored while cult dominance has been allowed to grow and permeate the globe. Let us hope that the world hears the wake-up call courageously launched in *Making Dystopia*. 'The Rise of the Architectural Cult' in *Inference: International Review of Science* 5/1 (13 December 2019) <https://inference-review.com/article/the-rise-of-the-architectural> ...

'a scholarly, encyclopaedic, meaningful, and exceptionally frank book that is lucidly written, meticulously researched, and draws on some sixty-three years' astute observation of buildings. At the root of Curl's dystopia is the correlation between the decline in architectural expression, language, and meaning, and the "destructive Modernist-inspired urban planning of the post-war years"... *Making Dystopia* is an angry polemic, yet it is balanced with erudite humour; it could never be described as dull, and as such more than warrants shelf-space alongside its eminent forebears ... [it is] a gratifying and thought-provoking read ... it pulls forcefully on our own relationship with buildings and design, and raises our consciousness as to whether modern architecture lacks empathy and fails to respect its surroundings. It is much more than the age-old pilaster vs pilotis debate, and as such it should be mandatory reading for all students of architecture or design. [It] lets a thousand cats out of a thousand bags. Of that there can be no doubt' Paul Holden in *The Antiquaries Journal* **xcix** (2019) 469-71

'One of the strengths of this book is reflected in the fact that a traditional review format is not a fitting one to

communicate either the scale of the authority on offer here or the challenges laid down ... [the book focuses] on a polemic intent on overturning a century and more of received and part-digested ideas of form, taste and style, a legacy promulgated by a contemporary and interested majority as universal solutions to society's (and societies') manifest failings ... [The] author forensically dissects [his] target and mercilessly promotes [his position] across a raft of informed, erudite and insightful historically led deconstructions of the dominant architectural languages of [his] day. His position is boldly stated and argued in depth. The scale of scholarship is easily recognisable ...' Seán O'Reilly in *Context: Institute of Historic Building Conservation* **163** (March 2020) 53-4

'*Making Dystopia* ... a book that will stimulate and provoke, and also inform through its awe-inspiring scholarship. James Stevens Curl, our foremost architectural historian—whose *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* is indispensable to anyone who loves buildings and wants to know more about them—has now produced a very substantial volume running to some 550 pages, which is designed to make us aware of what devastating damage was done to the built environment in the years between the Wars and immediately after the Second World War. It has all the punch and immediacy of the best of campaigning eighteenth-century pamphlets and at the same time is an intellectually forceful work of scholarship. It is a lament for lost opportunities and a coruscating denunciation of what Stevens Curl considers a cult of ugliness which has defaced so many great towns and cities, not least in the United Kingdom, during the last century. He proclaims that [his book] is not a history of Modernism—which he defines as an architecture from which all ornament, historical allusion, and the traditional [have] been expunged. The prime villains of the piece are Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius, though they have a multitude of disciples and third-class imitators to some of whom we owe the disfigurement of historic towns and cities like Gloucester and Worcester and Lincoln ... I commend

this book unreservedly. Those who rejoice in the glory of our mediaeval cathedrals and parish churches and of our country houses ... will be both angry and inspired. Angry at what has been done to so many of them and inspired by what remains, and what could still be done to glorify our environment. For instance, Stevens Curl writes that "much ink has been spilled over northern powerhouses and similar slogans, none of which carries great conviction, and all are flavoured with short-termism ... [Travelling] ... from the River Mersey near Birkenhead to Manchester along the Manchester Ship Canal ... reveals not only massive dereliction, but a huge wasted resource providing a great opportunity for imaginative development". He argues that the great Ship Canal "cries out to be considered as the spine of a vast linear city, linking Birkenhead and Manchester: the expanded waterway would be properly embanked and connected to a comprehensive linear public rapid-transport system". Forget garden-bridges, and even a bridge over the Irish Sea, and [change] instead what has become a depressing and degenerating urban sprawl [creating] in its place something that [could] make [those alive] in 2120 rejoice at the vision of their ancestors. Now there's a real challenge to transform the Boris slogan of "build, build, build" into something of tangible and permanent worth' Lord Cormack in *The House magazine* of the House of Lords (14 December 2020) 62

'Into the arena of Modernism's over-confident self-denial strode James Stevens Curl, a British architect and architectural historian, an accomplished scholar whose love of language is evidenced by his authorship of two dictionaries and one encyclopaedia on architecture. Here is a man committed to the truth. He carried into the arena his most recent book *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism*. In this remarkable work he sets the historical record straight by demythologizing architectural Modernism, its progenitors and heroes. He removes the century of filth swept beneath its rug by the same individuals, points

his straightened finger at the ongoing nonsense, and advises for better approaches that eschew the manifest errors of Modernism and lead to better architecture and better places for human beings to live ... Curl's scholarship must be lauded here. This is a book that needed to be written and that was extremely difficult to write, for the task presents the scholar a daunting challenge in defenestrating the Modernist movement. Clearly, he rose to the challenge, surpassing it with his superb writing and meticulous research .. *Making Dystopia* is a tremendously well-written and vitally important book that places history and truth at the service of civilization while calling for architects and urbanists to place themselves anew in that same service' James C. McCrery II in *Humanum: Issues in Family, Culture & Science* (2020 Issue Two [www.humanumreview.com](http://www.humanumreview.com))

'Professor James Stevens Curl's new book represents a milestone in architectural history. It details the origins of Modernism and its dominant influence on world architecture. Meticulously researched, key events and driving ideas are presented in an admirably even-handed manner. The account also includes uncomfortable information I have also discovered for myself, but which is normally concealed from public knowledge in the interests of continuing to promote something that has manifestly failed. 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 confronts the religious cult factors driving the Industrial-Modernist movement, and explains how intelligent people (who had written otherwise excellent scholarly essays and books) became transmogrified into propagandists: their extremely biased and highly selective texts were widely and, until recently, uncritically accepted, convincing generations of a misleading 'inevitability' for Modernist architecture and urbanism.



Going far beyond cleansing and clarifying a murky and falsified history, this marvellous book also suggests that study of the past (denied in Modernist ideology) can liberate the present from what has been a damagingly restrictive straitjacket. Design approaches, sensitively attuned to human life, are not only possible, but also absolutely necessary for a sustainable future, for Modernist propaganda, in the course of a century, corrupted a great discipline, obscuring how biological processes extend to create healthy living environments. This book is the first and only authoritative scholarly treatise that sets the story straight: other accounts are inevitably hostages to pervasive ideologies in our society, and ultimately serve them, whether intentionally or not, rather than humanity and the fate of the planet.

A truthful and unbiased history of how and why the Modern world feels and looks like it does is an exceptional gift to civilisation. Bravo! Only someone with Professor Stevens Curl's academic stature could have pulled off this feat, using his vast knowledge of architects and architecture built up over six decades. As one of Britain's foremost architectural historians, he naturally goes into great detail on British architecture during the Modernist period, and rehabilitates important British architects who were shamefully marginalised by the cult propagandists. Yet the British architectural establishment, cowed by aggressive assertion rather than considered argument, stood by and allowed that crime to happen.

There are, moreover, deep consequences for education: after this book gains a wide, well-deserved readership, the despicable 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' Dr Nikos A. Salingaros, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Texas at San Antonio. 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. Member of the Environmental Structure Research Group

***Making Dystopia* is available on [Amazon](#) and wherever books are sold.**