Militant Modernism

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Retracing

Erase the Traces. Destroy, in order to create. Build a new world on the ruins of the old. This, it is often thought, is the Modernist imperative, but what of it if the new society never emerged? We have been cheated out of the future, yet the future's ruins lie about us, hidden or ostentatiously rotting. So what would it mean, then, to look for the future's remnants? To uncover clues about those who wanted, as Walter Benjamin put it, to 'live without traces'? Can we, should we, try and excavate utopia?

To do so might be a final, bitter betrayal of Modernism itself. Although there have always been several strains in Modernism, one of the most dominant has always been based on the demand, made by Bertolt Brecht in his 1926 *Handbook for City Dwellers* to *'erase the traces!'* Benjamin's gloss on this refrain is in a fragmentary 1933 piece, 'Short Shadows'. Straightforwardly, what Benjamin wanted to 'erase' was the stifling pile-up of historicist detritus that made up the bourgeois aesthetic. Benjamin writes of

Weston Shore, Southampton

their interiors that 'living in these plush apartments was nothing more than leaving traces made by habits. Even the rage expressed when the least little thing broke was perhaps merely the reaction of a person who felt that someone had obliterated 'the traces of his days on earth'. The traces he had left on cushions and armchairs, that his relatives had left in photos, and that his possessions had left in linings and etuis and that sometimes made these rooms look as overcrowded as halls full of funerary urns.'[2] But this is exactly what Modernism sets out to ruthlessly rub out: 'the new architects, with their glass and steel (have) created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces.'

In 'Experience and Poverty' later in that terrible year, Benjamin cites the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos, all now exemplars of what tends to be called the 'heroic age' of modern architecture, as exemplary architects of erasing traces, and expresses the hope that their new world will survive its enemies. We find the traces effaced again, with added drama, in his portrait of a man who has internalised Modernism into the fibre of his being: 'The Destructive Character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred.'[3] Yet Benjamin's praise here is dialectical, double-edged. It's the master-criminal, after all, who excels at erasing the traces, and this conception of an outlaw aesthetics of modernism coexists alongside an obsession with collecting the traces, the waste-products and detritus, of exactly the oppressive thing-world that 'the new glass-culture' wants to wipe out – in order, as in his excavation of the Paris Arcades, to blow open the historical continuum, to reveal the latent utopia in the covered glass walkways of the recent past. The aim is to wake up out of this dream, with its proliferation of phantasmagorical commodities, into an entirely new world; one shaped by the promises of the dream itself.

There are countless Modernist communiqués and pronouncements that exhibit a sharp distrust of the dreamlike, fantastical city that came about from the hoarding, replication and preservation of the old, something which extends as much to the European streetscape of today as it does to the interiors of the late 19th century. El Lissitzky wrote of his Wolkenbügel 'horizontal skyscrapers' that 'the city consists of atrophying old parts and growing, live new ones. We need to deepen this contrast.'[4] This would heighten the contradictions between the new and the old 'atrophied' city, a battle inevitably ending with the death of the latter. Modernism dedicated itself to fighting the old city tooth and nail, as in the famous pronouncement in Marinetti and Sant-Elia's *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* – 'our houses will last less time than we do, and each generation will have to make its own', a call for 'constant renewal of the architectonic environment'.[5] There's a gulf, certainly, between Benjamin's concern for a revolutionary redemption and the Futurist fetish for inbuilt obsolescence, but both are Modernisms equally hostile to 'heritage'. This is what is meant by erasing the traces – outrunning the old world before it has the chance to catch up with you.

Wyndham Court, Southampton

If we want to preserve what remains of Modernism, then we're necessarily conspiring with the very people that have always opposed it: the heritage industries that have so much of Europe in their grip. In the sequence from permanent revolution to preservationism, Modernists have become, according to the late Martin Pawley, 'Quislings'. Pawley wrote in the late 1990s that Modernist Conservation organisations like DOCOMOMO were obliged to 'surrender their modern heritage and agree to its absorption into the art-historical classification system as a style, when it never

was. In return they received museum status for many modernist buildings, converting their once-proud revolutionary instruments back into monuments for the delectation of the masses alongside the palaces of the ancien regime...for the promise that part of heritage largesse would in future be spent on the patching up of modernist ruins.'[6] Illustrating Pawley's old believer scorn, DOCOMOMO's chairman Hubert-Jan Henket wrote in their 2000 *Selection from the Registers* that 'Modern buildings belong to the continuity of our civilisation and varied cultures, and must be retained in one form or another for the enjoyment of future generations.'[7] Well, Modernism, in many (if not all) of its manifestations, had no interest in the continuity of our civilisation and the uninterrupted parade of progress. That's why the break in barely ten years between 19th century encrustation and the stark, bare concrete wall was so brutally short and sharp. Not merely 'progress' but an interruption, a rupture, a break with the continuum altogether, regardless of how much it would be slotted back into it later.

Eldorado for the Working Class

> *'What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often in a certain strain in their dissemination, their 'enshrinement in the heritage'. – They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure that runs through them. – There is a tradition that is catastrophe.'*
> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress'[8]

However, Postmodernism's stylistic eclecticism and tendency towards the replica and simulacra complicates memory, to the point where admiring a modernist ruin doesn't just mean filing it away into the historical continuum. I was born in the heavily

Tecton, Bevin Court, London

bombed port of Southampton in the early 1980s, and the city's post-war Modernist buildings would have been finished at least a decade earlier. I can recall looking at its mainly 1960s skyline from the walkway of a bricky pomo Asda, thinking how excitingly modern it all seemed by comparison, a shabby version of the glittering towers of science fiction. Sticking up out of a mass of blandness were extraordinary buildings like Lyons Israel Ellis' Wyndham Court, a council housing block which took the city's contribution to architectural history – the Ocean liner – and Brutalised it into a glorious Concrete Cunard. There were decidedly strange places like Weston Shore, a terminal beach caught between cool 30s pavilions, six monolithic blocks lurking behind scrubland and meadows, all looking out over a gigantic oil refinery. The Weston towers were by the highly prolific city architect, one L. Berger, whose work was singled out for praise in *The Buildings of England* as some of the best post-war building in the country. These varied from the modest and scaled, as in the Northam Estate, to the incongruously enormous Shirley Towers.[9] The mysterious L. Berger also designed the glass and concrete of

my secondary school, recently demolished and reconstructed in the PFI style.

It took a while to actually realise the actual age of the city's most recent buildings, as the 1980s were so keen on replicating the 1890s. The environment built before 1979, often being bulldozed and dynamited, seemed so much more futuristic than the houses and interminable shopping malls being built in front of me. Perhaps because of that, concrete walkways and windswept precincts have always seemed to me to have a sharp poignancy. What might be at work here is the common contemporary phenomenon of nostalgia for the future, a longing for the fragments of the half-hearted post-war attempt at building a new society, an attempt that lay in ruins by the time I was born. These remnants of social democracy can, at best, have the effect of critiquing the paucity of ambition and grotesque inequalities of the present.

Caught in the grim paradox of nostalgia for a time yet to come, the utopian imaginary that lies behind any project to remake the world has atrophied. Nevertheless, the word Utopia, after decades of denunciation, has started to re-emerge lately. Not just as a distant, misty-eyed admiration/disdain for the failed ideals of the past, but in the desire to set up perfect, untainted communities of one sort or another. Every gated community dreams of itself as a little island untouched by the hostile, dangerous outside, and the theme park urbanism of Disney towns like Celebration in Florida, abolishing the future in simulation of a fantasy past, aspire to the Ideal.[10] 'The Ideal Home', as the British phrase has it. And appropriately, in London's Docklands, there is now an estate agent called 'UTOPIA'.

The problem, for those who would gladly create a new, if rather less inspiring Modernism on the model of the luxury developments that clog up the banks of the Thames or the Irwell, is that Modernism, in Britain especially, is seen as a remnant of a very different historical conjuncture to that of our own – that embarrassing recent past, the 'interregnum' of Socialism or Social Democracy that we're constantly reminded ended in late-70s chaos. The association was made by many Modernist architects too, although they meant something quite different with it than the much-mytholgised statist dystopia with which it is now eternally linked. In Moscow, there are three council housing blocks which have emblazoned upon them signage which, when read out in full, declares *Glory to the Working Class*.

Ignore for a moment the gauche *Ostalgie* of this, the shabbiness and lies of its political context, and imagine a society where the building of social housing was intended to be exactly that 'glory': an eldorado for the working class, as Berthold Lubetkin once, only half-facetiously put it. The National Housing Service once envisaged by Aneurin Bevan. Then consider the place of council housing in Britain today. As Lynsey Hanley points out in her fine, melancholic history/memoir *Estates*[11], it's now used as shorthand for general lumpenproletarian venality and violence, something for a celebrity to mention when laying out their rags-to-riches credentials. The intriguing thing is that there are two real survivals in present-day Britain of the brief rush of Bevanite Socialism that followed the war: one, the National Health Service, is considered so sacrosanct that even while dismantling it, Tories or New Labour have had to pay it fulsome tributes. The other is the council blocks that still stand all over Britain's cities, monolithically making their point about its essential failure.

Class and politics are inextricably bound up with how a Modernist building is perceived. There is a general conviction that the working class were slotted into a world of concrete walkways and towers when all we ever wanted was the old back-to-backs, with perhaps a little more space, more gardens, maybe without the damp and the dysentery. What can't be imagined is a context in which we might have *welcomed* Modernism, and in fact approached it as part of a specific collective project. The pervasive class hatred only slightly below the surface of British life (what

else does the word 'chav' signify?) centres on the feared or ridiculed estate dweller. Yet this decline works both ways. Modernist urban planning could be seen as one of those moments where the workers – the Labour movement – got ideas above its station, the period where , as per Bevan or Lubetkin, nothing was too good for ordinary people.

I lived in a large Estate when growing up, and it was by no means a Modernist one, so the sociologist's links between dehumanised, denatured form and inhuman social effect have always seemed rather too neat, when the same could be produced in a far more traditionalist context. The place in question was a 'cottage estate'; one of those built on the outskirts of cities by councils in the 30s in woolly, vaguely vernacular fashion, with *real homes* featuring *gardens* and *pitched roofs*. Every road was named after a different flower, from carnations to lobelias, in true garden-suburb style. This didn't stop it from being one of the more impoverished, violent and desolate places in Southampton, feared most of all by the students of the nearby University. Proper streets and houses, good old fashioned barbarity – the Flower Estate was much like what is currently being planned for London's Thames Gateway. It couldn't have been further from a Modernist project like Denys Lasdun's Keeling House, laid out as an angular 'cluster block' in order to preserve East End community in the air. Before the block was sold to developers, residents tried to save the building from a demolition threatened by Hackney Council, praising, funnily enough, the 'community' created by the form of the cluster block itself.[12] It's now a *gated* community, a carefully guarded little middle-class utopia.

The absence of events like this from so much Left(ish) urbanism in favour of eulogies to brick is increasingly peculiar, as is the persistence of the belief that because houses were made a certain way in the 19th century, they should continue to be so. Ventures outside of English empiricism just reinforce this, such as in the occasional citing of the Situationists, and specifically their

theory of the *dérive*, the 'drift'. A *dérive* was most often in an area that was labyrinthine, inhabited by society's rejected, full of odd corners, frowned upon in Baron Haussman's militaristically planned Paris, a place where you ought to look after yourself: and if there was a certain *nostalgie de la boue* in that, there was also a solidarity with these lost places. If one were to *dérive* anywhere in most British cities, then surely it would be along the concrete walkways of the 60s rather than the gentrified Victoriana?[13] *Estates*, for instance, complains that the complex designs of estates made people get lost, and then that you can't lose yourself in them. 'Too channelled, too labyrinthine to make wandering an enjoyable experience. There's the risk of looking like an intruder, an outsider, or more likely, a wally. You can't be a *flâneur* of the estate, though you are welcome to try'.[14] Ideas above the station again. But from the earliest manifestations of pop culture in the late 40s onwards, working class culture's avant-garde has always been totally, gleefully unafraid of looking like a wally. Ridicule is nothing to be scared of, as Adam Ant so wisely pointed out.

The Tecton group, founded by the Anglo-Soviet architect Berthold Lubetkin, had more organic connection with real rather than imagined working class politics than most, whether working for the miners in Peterlee, with the Labour and Communist councillors of interwar Finsbury, or forming the straightforwardly agitational Architects and Technicians Organisation in the '30s as some kind of aesthete-urbanist's wing of the International Brigades. Lubetkin is one of the handful of 'British' Modernists that few have a bad word for, yet his council housing schemes are strangely obscure. These patterned essays in Modernist baroque, such as Spa Green, Bevin Court[15], and Priory Green in Finsbury, Hallfield in Bayswater, or the Cranbrook, Lakeview and Dorset Estates in Bethnal Green: all are as peripheral as their Penguin Pool and Highpoint flats are central to 'classical Modernism'. The Dorset Estate, with its fantastic public areas, such as wild Piranesi staircases, a pod of a library, and a not especially Modernist little

boozer, was named after the Tolpuddle Martyrs; among its flats is a block named after the Utopian Socialist Robert Owen. Was this the New Jerusalem for which they had all fought and suffered and died, defeated? Lubetkin claimed, late in life, that 'the philosophical aim and orderly character of these designs are diametrically opposed to the intellectual climate in which we live...my personal interpretation is that these buildings cry out for a world that has never come into being.'[16]

So Modernism is proclaimed, again, to be too good for the worker (or the 'underclass'), and is left for the affluent to play with. Accordingly, in the more prestigious sectors of the neoliberal world, the proclamation of the death of Modernism has proven to be much exaggerated. At least, it has been in architecture, after a 1980s in which everyone from Architectural Association pedagogues to Princes and town planners victoriously put in its place Postmodernism's aesthetic of pastiche, historical reference, cosiness and conservatism. Charles Jencks famously declared Modernism dead on the demolition of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St Louis, while in Britain it tends to have been dated to the collapse of the shoddy, prole-stacking Ronan Point tower block in East London, in 1972 and 1968 respectively.[17] Regardless: in the first decade of the 21st century, nobody actually designs postmodernist buildings, although they do get built. Urban architecture is dominated by the 'signature' architecture of the Supermodernist star designers, ranging from the Expressionism of Zaha Hadid to the glassy, glossy International Style redux of Norman Foster.[18] However, what most make do with today is building, and in houses, schools and hospitals the choice is between an ultra-timid Ikea Modernism or the semi-Victorian developers' vernacular of Barratt Homes and their ilk. Modernism might have resurged, but in much the same way that a Labour government is no longer a *Labour* government, it isn't quite the same Modernism. This is a Modernism that is based on the distance between itself and the everyday. While the Modern

design of the 1920s (in Germany, or the USSR) and the 1960s (in Britain) was immersed in the quotidian, their equivalents today are the designers of corporate skyscrapers, museums and art galleries.

There is another Modernism well worth rescuing from the dustbin of history and the blandishments of heritage. This book is written in the conviction that the Left Modernisms of the 20th century continue to be *useful*: a potential index of ideas, successful or failed, tried, untried or broken on the wheel of the market or the state. Even in their ruinous condition, they can still offer a sense of possibility which decades of being told that 'There is No Alternative' has almost beaten out of us. 'Modernism' here is a rather elastic term, as it always is. It is used here to refer to 20th century arts applied, reproduced and 'fine' (which is why architecture and film, rather than painting and poetry, are central), and an aesthetic deeply immersed in the problems of socialism and psychoanalysis. This isn't to claim that the familiar English Lit 'Right Modernism' is somehow a misnomer, and the two will overlap somewhat in part one's discussion of Wyndham Lewis. The Modernism argued for here is one hostile to the locking of art into the text and the gallery. The distinction this creates between 'high' and 'low' forms is useless for our purposes.

Although much of it will be a study in the aesthetics of architecture and urbanism, the book will digress into film, politics and design, abandoning architecture altogether in the last part. After an opening chapter on the UK, it finds itself in a semi-imaginary Soviet Union, then in Sweden, Yugoslavia, the USA, Germany. The book is divided into four parts, each of which attempts to respond to, attack or play games against a particular critique of Left Modernism. First: *brutality*, via a discussion of the 'brutalist continuum' in Britain. Then onto Modernism's alleged *totalitarian* aspirations, seen through the disparity between the ruined and the futuristic in Soviet Constructivism. The sexlessness that Modernism has so often had apportioned to it is estranged

through a reading of the theories and products of *Sexpol*, which, it will be argued, was a key and overlooked element. Finally, the *alienation*, 'detachment' and 'baring of the device' so (over)familiar as a Modernist methodology will be tackled in a piece on Bertolt Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt. The four essays can be read in any order, although the common threads running through should be clear.

The phrase 'erase the Traces' comes from Brecht. Yet in his 'Solidarity Song' he articulated that socialism, though it wants to create a new society, 'lives in traditions', as Leon Trotsky put it. It remembers the defeats, the failed attempts, and with revolution, it enters a world 'already familiar to us, as a tradition and as a vision'[19] Brecht and Eisler's syncopated 'mass song' remembers the pile-up of failures, brutalities and corpses that is politely called history, yet harnesses the memory of those defeats for the purposes of a different world. 'Forwards! Not Forgetting', it implores. This is the outlook that this book tries to maintain.