

FUNCTION ON FORM

Testament to its resilience, modernism continues to receive both hate mail and love letters. The much-maligned architectural genre will forever prove divisive yet its influence on every aspect of contemporary culture is impossible to ignore

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Last year, the alt-right website, Infowars – one of the chief perpetrators of the infamous Pizzagate sham during the 2016 US presidential election (a discredited conspiracy theory connecting Democratic officials with a child-sex ring) – posted a 15-minute-long video entitled 'Why modern architecture SUCKS'. [👉](#)



BRUNO FIORETTI
MARQUEZ DIRECTOR'S
HOUSE AND MOHOLY
NAGY HOUSE, BAUHAUS,
DESSAU, GERMANY, 2010

What is it about modernism that has made it so resilient to our evolving tastes and needs? What has equipped it to be impervious to an unending welter of criticism?

Ⓢ The piece vented its spleen upon modernism, the architectural movement of high rises and reinforced concrete that had its origins in the First World War, and apparently ended, according to architectural historian Charles Jencks, '... on July 15, 1972 at 3.32pm or thereabouts when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite.'

Apparently dynamite wasn't enough. The principles of modernism, bundled up with social justice theory, are continuing to influence architects to this day. Homes expressing modernist elements continue to be in high demand along America's West Coast, while modernist apartments have accrued a cachet in Shanghai. Emblematic designs such as the Noguchi coffee table and Breuer chairs have become ubiquitous. And if frothing alt-right fascists weren't enough to convince one that modernism is possibly more relevant than it's ever been, Phaidon has recently published *Ornament is Crime* – a gorgeous, minimalist tome brimming with monochrome images of flat-roofed, boxy houses to be enjoyed in the comfort of your Eames lounge chair.

'The purpose of this book,' writes co-author Matt Gibberd, 'is to identify its key aesthetic characteristics and show how this most trailblazing of architectural styles is still thriving in the 21st century. If Modernist architecture were a family tree, then contemporary architects such as Smiljan Radic, Tadao Ando, and John Pawson would all have inherited limbs, ears and noses from the Modernist masters Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.'

The purpose of the book might also be to act as a brochure-of-a-kind for Gibberd's other job, that of founding director, along with his co-author, Alfred Hill, of The Modern House estate agency. That this agency, which specialises in homes reflecting modernist principles, has flourished since 2005 is proof that the desire for these kind of design-led homes remains robust.

But what is it about modernism that has made it so resilient to our evolving tastes and needs? What has equipped it to be impervious to an unending welter of criticism, as scathing as that levelled at it by Prince Charles in 1987 who said of the modern towers springing up in London: "You have to give this to the Luftwaffe. When it knocked down our buildings, it didn't replace them with anything more offensive than rubble."



SOU FUJIMOTO
ARCHITECTS: HOUSE NA,
TOKYO, JAPAN, 2010 ©
IWAN BAAN STUDIO



ŠEBO LICHÝ
ARCHITECTS: HOUSE
AMONG THE TREES,
BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA,
2013 © TOMÁŠ MANINA

AS HONEST AS RUBBLE

'To be a modernist,' wrote Deyan Sudjic, director of London's Design Museum, in *The Guardian*, 'was to have a point of view about everything from music to psychoanalysis. It was to take a moral stand about the "honest" use of materials, and to believe in the designer's duty to build a better world.'

Little surprise that such a philosophy was born out of the carnage of the First World War. Visionary architects including Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (aka Le Corbusier), Adolf Loos, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Gropius were inspired by the geometry of Cubism and the potential of new technology to help rebuild what those same advances had just so efficiently transformed into rubble (this would later be directly exemplified in the metal frame military technology employed in furniture and structures designed by Charles and Ray Eames).

In Berlin, Gropius founded the German art school known as the Bauhaus (translation: 'construction house'). Its aim was to tie together all of the arts under a single umbrella sensibility that combined design with new technology, an ambition that flowered into the language of modern design.

'What distinguished modernism was its vociferous rejection of history and tradition,' writes Sudjic, '[The modernists] were driven by the urge to design every Ⓢ



You'll find the architectural imprint of modernism everywhere.



The movement's vision of elegant, light-filled living spaces built



of the most up-to-date materials remains simple in its appeal



⊙ chair and teacup as if no such thing had ever been done before.'

In Vienna, Loos lectured that "ornament is crime", formulating a new architectural commandment; the white walls and bare ceilings of absolutist modernist buildings were the blank standards born by this new modern army. Also arriving with this aesthetic revolution was a sense of space delivered in small rooms through its bright, airy aesthetic. The sense of renewal was emphasised by the use of chrome and reinforced concrete, modern materials that, as Sudjic has it, "offered an unadorned truth".

At the high end of the market, modernism brought striking individuality to the adoring gaze of an avant-garde crowd. But it was in low-cost housing where the modernists believed their work could really have an impact; a new concept of social housing, cheap to build but utopic in scope.

Today, Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles remains one of the movement's outstanding successes – a block of 337 interlocking duplex apartments that open up to an enclosed and complete world structured like an ocean liner: interior streets lead to built-in nurseries, shops, and gyms. Le Corbusier envisioned that this Brutalist tower block – constructed of moulded cement in a post-war France where steel was scarce – and others like it would be the solution to rehousing the masses displaced by the Second World War (today, of course, the apartments are in high demand by well-off design fanatics).

On the continent, modernism in all of its forms flourished. Which isn't to suggest that it was ever without its detractors. Chief among those were the Nazis who, with their traditionalist values, drove the modernists with their dangerous, new ideas to take refuge in the US and Britain.

ARCHITECTURE for ARCHITECTS?

While Prince Charles's remarks are uniquely crass, his reaction to modernism echoed a response shared by many. Evelyn Waugh lampooned Gropius in his *Decline and Fall* with his creepy and cold Professor Otto Silenus who believed that, "the problem of architecture as I see it, is the problem of all art; the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form". In the US, the journalist and author Tom Wolfe took aim at housing concepts from the Bauhaus, describing them as looking like "insecticide factories", while attempting to sit in Le Corbusier's signature chaise longue was to "invite a karate chop to the back of the neck".



THIS PAGE ABOVE LEFT: JUAN O'GORMAN: HOUSE AND STUDIO FOR FRIDA KAHLO AND DIEGO RIVERA, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO, 1932 © LEONARDO FINOTTI

ABOVE RIGHT: PAUL RUDOLPH: BASS RESIDENCE, FORT WORTH, TX, USA, 1976 © GRANT MUDFORD

OPPOSITE PAGE: APRIL 1972. THE DEMOLITION OF A BUILDING WITHIN THE PRUITT-IGOE URBAN HOUSING PROJECT IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI FIRST OCCUPIED IN 1954. THE COMPLEX WAS DESIGNED BY ARCHITECT MINORU YAMASAKI, WHO ALSO DESIGNED THE WORLD TRADE CENTER TOWERS.



When Jencks sounded the death knell of modernism with the televised dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe, the style was meant to be giving way to postmodernism, the ironic revival of historic motifs (a veritable copycat crime wave, from Loos' perspective). And yet enthusiasm for modernism persists, flourishes even. In the US, modernist landmarks such as Marcel Breuer's Snower House and the Walter K. Harrison House are being snapped up and lovingly restored to their former clean-lined glory. In the UK, meanwhile, the architect Neave Brown was awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal, British architecture's highest award, for the Alexandra Road housing scheme in north London.

SHINING A LIGHT

You'll find the architectural imprint of modernism everywhere. The movement's vision of elegant, light-filled living spaces built of the most up-to-date materials remains simple in its appeal and broad – a sketch easily adjusted to individual tastes. For architects, stripping down a design to its essentials to ensure that everything included has a reason to be there has become simply a matter of good practice. However, changes in the way we live – kitchens for one have opened up from the modernist's functional galley (although the built-in cabinets remain) – have tempered Le Corbusier's dictum that the house is a "machine for living in".

With smooth lines like that one, the modernists demonstrated how they could be their own worst publicists to the masses. But criticisms of modernism are often a matter of blinkered perspective more than anything else, frequently forgetting the housing failures of the 19th century that the movement was a response to – tower blocks, for example, sought to concentrate density in better buildings and open up space for green areas that previously there had been no room for.

Says Christopher Wilk, the V&A's Keeper of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion: "We live with the legacy of modernism. The buildings we inhabit, the chairs that we sit on, the graphic design that surrounds us have all been created by the aesthetics and the ideology of modernist design. We live in an era that still identifies itself in terms of modernism, as postmodernist or even post postmodernist. It is simply not possible to work in ignorance of the most powerful force in the creation of 20th-century visual culture."

Just ask Apple's chief design officer Jonathan Ive. And to the alt-right's question of "Why Modern Architecture sucks? Because it represents truth. Which, for some, isn't always pretty." 🗨️

Ornament is Crime, £29.95, Matt Gibberd and Albert Hill, Phaidon, phaidon.com

