



Brazilia is home to one of the purest examples of modernist design

# The New Nostalgia

The modernist movement is under assault from the Right. A new era of pastiche and nostalgia has descended upon us. But David Edgar asks is it all bad?

**T**he sudden emergence of post-modernism as a buzz-concept for the Left is long overdue. For me, the long-prevailing attitude of socialists to culture is contained in bitter memories of conferences at which leftwing theatricals would painfully adumbrate their aesthetic and its relationship to their ideology (dredging the *Grundrisse* for suitable quotations, fixing their position on the Brecht-Lukacs axis to the nearest thou), only to be confronted by questioners who began by agreeing that, yuh, sure, we should use theatre in our propaganda more. Nor is this tunnel vision restricted to the far Left (though the SWP did hone it down to a fine art). At last year's *Marxism Today* 'Common Pursuits' conference, a large and representative grouping explored almost every aspect of the GLC's arts policy - from funding to access and back again - without once addressing the issue of what kind of product socialists should be promoting, encouraging or defending.

Now, of course, the Left has been woken by the thunder of hooves from the Right. As in so many other arenas of controversy, the reactionary attack on the contemporary arts has been

energetic and muscular; it has also displayed a typical ideological schizophrenia. During the ascendancy of pure economic liberalism, the main emphasis was on the baleful effects of subsidy, and the prospects of a renewed vibrancy if the arts were returned to the market (or, more realistically, if they were consigned to the vagaries of private patronage: in 1978 the Selsdon Group produced a pamphlet starkly entitled 'A Policy for the Arts: Just Cut Taxes').

But as Thatcherism Mark I gave way to Mark II, the emphasis shifted from economics to cultural politics, from finance to content. Predictably, a number of newly-ascendant Tory MPs demanded that leftwing theatre companies be axed (Teddy Taylor, Norman Tebbit and Kingsley Amis among the market leaders in this field.) But much more significant was a growing chorus of people who saw the modern movement as a whole - what the *Spectator's* Colin Welch called the 'avant-garde reign of terror' - as its enemy. So having disposed of socialist economics and politics, Mrs Thatcher's thinkers turned their attention to what they saw as socialism's cultural form, that complex of movements in the 20th century arts that sought to challenge and break



Hyde Park, Sheffield: the new modernist urban landscape



The brightly coloured post-modernist Portland building: a sensation when it was first built

down traditional vocabularies (figurative painting, rhyming verse, conventionally melodic music) in the name of Modernity.

The most obvious assault on modernism has been in the realm of architecture, spearheaded by journalists like Christopher Booker (who, grasping at least the etymology of the word 'conservation', has sought to recapture the environment for the Right) and academics like David Watkins, fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge (whose alumni include Peregrine Worsthorne, John Vincent, Roger Scruton and indeed both Colin Welch and Kingsley Amis). The reason is partly that architecture is the most public of the arts (or, as the jaundiced might put it, the most difficult to avoid: there is no off-switch on the street where you live). But it is also that architecture provides the most blatant example of what the Right sees as the essential modernist project, which is the imposition by discontented, declassé intellectuals of an unrealistic and Utopian vision (based on a mechanical and one-dimensional reading of human nature) on ordinary people who did not ask for it and do not want it, a vision which for that very reason degenerates quickly into totalitarian uniformity, or

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decaying squalor, or both.

At its most grandiose, this model is exemplified by Brazilia, constructed on a pattern so complete, self-contained and rational that nobody thought to accommodate a cemetery. At its most painful, it is the grimy desolation of the new urban landscape, from Ronan Point to Broadwater Farm.

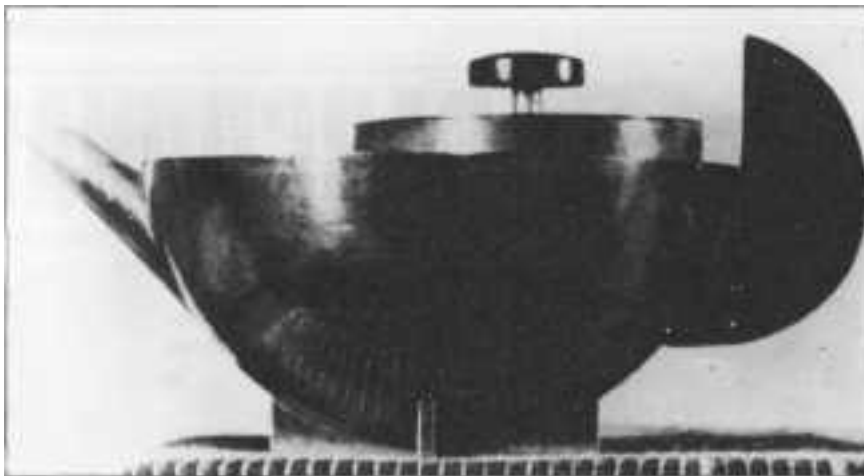
So it's not for nothing that cultural historians date the beginning of the end of the modernist endeavour from the famous destruction of St Louis' Pruitt Igoe high-rise project on July 15, 1972. But architecture is by no means the only site of struggle. In a piece on what he dubs the 'modern art joke', (again in *The Spectator*) Auberon Waugh accuses 20th century painters and sculptors of trying 'to establish their superiority over the common man by producing work which he neither understands nor enjoys'. And in his notorious Disraeli lecture of November 1985, Norman Tebbit cited as evidence of the baleful effects of the permissive society the notions that 'grammar and spelling were not important', that 'to be clean was no better than to be filthy', that 'good manners were no better than bad' and indeed that 'bad art was as good as good art'.

The importance of almost all the

contemporary critiques of contemporary art lies in this association between modernism and the Left. From abstract painting to atonal music, from expressionist drama to free verse, from (as Tom Wolfe put it) 'Bauhaus to Our House', the modern movement is seen as being part of the 20th century socialist project of imposing on society a preconceived rationalism that neither could nor attempted to accommodate the infinite variety of actual human experience and aspiration and desire in the real world. As American neo-conservative Irving Kristol once trenchantly argued, the rational is by no means the same as the reasonable. The 12-tone scale, blank canvasses and glass-and-steel monoliths may well be rational, but what most folks appear actually to want - reasonably enough, you might think - is stories with plots, pictures with subjects, houses with porches and music with tunes.

**The Right, then, is clear on its position:** it has seen the future and it knows it doesn't like it. Why, then, has the Left been so muted in its response? The reason is surely clear from the above. Many of the populist demands of the cultural Right echo current feelings on the Left, feelings which are also part of

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Classical Bauhaus incorporated into a teapot

its tradition. Many leftwing Labour councils, for instance, would have considerable sympathies with the Right's position on the elitism of much of the avant garde, and in doing so, they would echo criticisms of formalism and decadence in the arts which have characterised the actual cultural policies of most socialist countries most of the time.

When Edinburgh puts community art above opera, or Bristol prefers adventure playgrounds to symphony orchestras, these councils are not just making a point about resources. They are pointing the finger at both historical and contemporary high art - Schubert and Shoenberg, Henze as well as Handel - they are asserting that it is the proper business of a socialist cultural politics to make the arts accessible not just by price and location but also in form.

Most importantly of all, there is both a current and a longstanding view on the Left that the connection between the political and the cultural avant garde is by no means as self-evident as the Right would like to pretend. It is after all in capitalist America that the market in modernist art and sculpture is centred, it is from capitalist America that the most profound formal challenges to linear fiction and poetry have proceeded, it is American capitalists themselves who have thrown up the 'monstrous carbuncles' of contemporary architecture. On the other hand, it is socialist countries which have sought to restore and preserve the best of the past, and it is by and large socialist artists in the West who have revived and promoted traditional popular forms, from the folk ballad and the mystery play to the patchwork quilt and the union banner. Surely then, the artistic avant garde should join liberal penal policy, first-past-the-post elections, leaving the EEC and pornography in the list of causes that the Left has no need (or business) to be attached to.

I consider this view to be profoundly misguided, but before arguing why, it's necessary to acknowledge that the Right's conflation of modernism and marxism is for most of both highly

questionable. There have in fact been only two, short periods this century when the political and the artistic avant garde have walked anything like hand in hand; for most of its short life, the project of modernism has been not so much the mapping of the New Jerusalem as the exploration of the wasteland, not the expression of unbounded faith in the powers of the human mind to construct a rational future, but rather the often futile attempts to contain a seemingly limitless confusion and despair. And even where modernism's vitality has overcome its complementary tendency to atomisation (for example, when the vibrancy of 60s pop art confronted the atrophy of existentialism), can we really argue that the energies thus released push necessarily, or even partially, towards the finality of a communal Utopia? As Marshall Berman argues in his definitive apologia for modernism *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 'if bourgeois society is really the maelstrom that Marx thinks it is, how can he expect all its currents to flow only one way, toward peaceful harmony and integration? Even if a triumphant communism should some day flow through the floodgates that free trade opens up, who knows what dreadful impulses might flow along with it, or in its wake, or impacted inside? ... Marx's communism might launch the liberated self into immense unknown human spaces with no limits at all'.

But in fact, it is precisely this 'teemingness', this lack of restraint, which gives art its unique political function, not as a weapon of propaganda (the form a sort of funnel through which ideology is poured down the throats of the proletariat) but rather as a kind of laboratory for the testing of ideas, through the medium of metaphor, a testing that because it is not actual can (in the manner of many experiments) take ideas to their logical conclusion, try the limits of tolerance, see where they snap. The notion of art as a free zone of human experimentation has been present throughout history - its function as a tester of limits, as a bold goer-where-none-has-gone-before, is

perhaps exclusive to periods of conscious aesthetic challenge, of which the most dramatic (certainly since the Renaissance) has of course been the modernism of our own time.

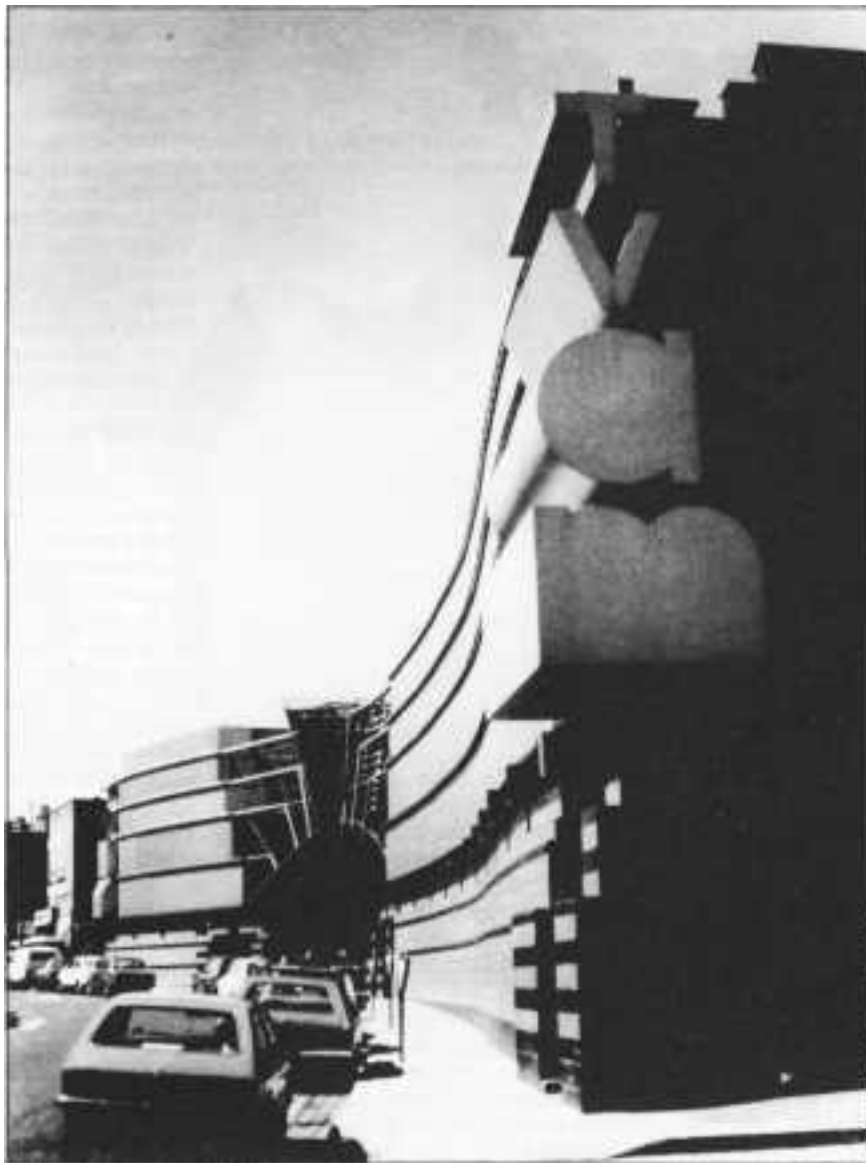
This characteristic of the modernist project can be best seen by citing and comparing the two brief, shining moments when radical art and politics could be seen barking up roughly the same tree, which were, of course, the early 20s and the late 60s, periods characterised both by an extreme testing of the limits of painting, sculpture, literature and music (provoking typically horrified reactions from cultural conservatives) and by a sense of commitment to some kind of future Utopia of which their art was a prefiguration.

What is fascinating, however, is how different those Utopias were, and, moreover, the way in which the vision of the 60s can be seen as a response to the ambiguous success of its precursor. As Walter Gropius himself put it, in defining his Bauhaus project in 20s' Germany: 'Just as the Gothic cathedral was the expression of its age, so must the modern factory or dwelling be the expression of our time: precise, practical and functional, free of superfluous ornament, effective only through the cubic composition'. Gropius' first successor at the Bauhaus, the marxist Hannes Meyer, took this idea even further, into the realms of constructivism, where the image of art-as-machine provided a potent (and, in the fledgling Soviet Union, recognised) metaphor for the actuality of politics-as-science.

By the 60s, however, a new Left has grown disillusioned with the idea that all political experience could be defined in such deterministically positivist terms. If in the 20s the socialist Utopia was to be reached via the metamorphosis of the external environment by mechanics, then in the 60s the perceived failure of scientific socialism (and a disenchantment with industrialism *per se*) led the new radicals to look to the transformation of the internal environment through changes in consciousness.

In a perceptive chapter on the 60s, Marshall Berman notes indeed how the decade saw a conflict of two modernities. On the one hand, there was the continued reign of steel-and-concrete, smashing and remaking the urban environment at bewildering speed, a movement which had its roots in, and was an extension of, the technological utopianism of the 20s (Gropius' second successor being Mies van der Rohe). But on the other hand, there was the 60s of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, of art *trouve*, graffiti, poster art and the rock song - the art of those very streets throughout which the excavators, pile drivers and pneumatic drills were ploughing - an art which was about metaphors of personal authenticity and identity which expressed themselves artistical-

The struggle to rescue post-modernism from the reactionaries and young fogies is part of the project to revitalise socialism'



TV AM, one of the best known examples of post-modernism in London

ly through the work of Ginsberg, Burroughs and the Living Theatre, theoretically through the writings of thinkers like Marcuse and R D Laing and politically through the assertion of the collective identity of blacks, gays and women.

If one political vibrant epoch saw an upsurge of a political art which was in dialogue with that of a previous (but also vibrant) epoch, how are we to judge what is going on in the present, an age for which the phrase 'politically vibrant' is hardly appropriate? The conventional, left view of the contemporary, so-called post-modernist movement was eloquently articulated by Richard Gott in *The Guardian* last December. It is that post-modernism's obsession with the second-hand, the cute, the rococco - its cloying concern with pastiche, nostalgia, eclecticism, self-reference - reveal it as nothing more than the artistic effervescence of a bleakly bland and superficial time, art fit only for a society (in John Lahr's words) 'winded, demoralised and afraid'.

It's my belief that in its most heroic periods (particularly, the two I have

mentioned) modernism not only articulated but amplified the deepest and truest aspirations of 20th century humanity for a better and more rational society. In that sense, post-modernism, with its over-developed irony, its nervousness of commitment, its profound untruth to form, indeed represents a headlong retreat.

But if the Right is wrong fully to conflate the modern movement with the egalitarian social project, then it may be that there is a complementary error, which is an over-easy identification between post-modernism and reaction. As Richard Gott himself acknowledges, the alliance between anti-modernist conservatives and 'genuine after-modernists' seeking to recover something from the rubble is not an easy one, and it will get less easy as it is seen that any genuine contemporary cultural manifestation (apart, that is, from pure pastiche of the repainting Rembrandt and rewriting Hayden variety) will have to start from its actual position in history, and work with the vocabulary which modernism has bequeathed.

Marshall Berman argues that, in the

1960s, 'one of the crucial tasks for modernists ... was to confront the expressway world', and to show the world of urban brutalism 'was not the only possible modern world, that there were other, better directions in which the modern spirit could move'. Is there in post-modernism's dialogue with what preceded it room for a similar intervention? Is there inside all the triviality and cynicism at least a point of departure for serious artists who accept that (at the very least) the modernist project is in need of renewal?

It seems to me there are several aspects of what is generally held to be post-modernism which fit more than coincidentally into the general project of refashioning a social and political vision of progress which can take us into the next century. The first is indeed the implied critique of much of the modernist project as tending to the monolithic and the soulless; the second is post-modernism's rejection of the elitism of much of the 20th century avant garde, its belief that what people say about what they want to see, read and hear (and the kind of places in which they want to live) has a validity not always acknowledged by the high priests of modernism over the last 70 years.

But, third, there is hope in the fact that post-modernism is not always just a matter of new things that look like old ones, that the best of contemporary art and architecture implies a *comment* by the new on the old. So in Dennis Potter's unexpectedly successful *Singing Detective*, for example, instead of there being no linear narrative nor recognisable genre (the modernist solution), several comprehensible narratives within recognisable story-forms are intercut and interwoven in a way that at one and the same time expresses and challenges both the narrative principle and the chosen forms.

Almost every socialist accepts that what is presently going on in both the industrialised West and the socialist countries is a necessary reappraisal of centralist, totalist marxism and an attempt to forge a new socialist programme which embraces, but does not extinguish, the new social and political forces clustering round feminism, the black movements, the changing cities and the movements variously daubed 'green'.

Even the most fervent modernist acknowledges that the radiant future prefigured by today's committed artists will be a less rigidly ordered, predictable and indeed monochrome place than may once have been imagined. The struggle to rescue post-modernism from the reactionaries and young fogies is thus part of the project to revitalise socialism, and rescue us all from the vale of conservative despond. Its outcome will influence more than the shape of the buildings, the look of the pictures and the sound of the songs. •