BUILDING ON TRUTH

Philip Bess argues for a return to metaphysical realism in architecture and urbanism.

Building is a willful act of symbolic import, sometimes intended and sometimes not, and all architecture expresses the power of its makers and their aspiration to legitimate authority. This is true of individual buildings, public spaces, and all human settlements. Temple, forum, cathedral, city hall, town square, primitive hut, urban townhouse, suburban ranch burger, LEED-platinum office building, interstate highway interchange, urban landscape installation, medieval town, hypermodern metropolis—all require and represent the ability to bring them into being and sustain them over time. Their very existence requires *power* in the most elemental sense of the word. More than this, we attach moral significance

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to buildings and landscapes. *Legitimate authority* is that moral "more than" mere power, more than the human capacity to will something and make it so. Legitimate authority is power wed to moral virtue in service to a shared ideal. In the realms of architecture and urbanism, aspiration to legitimate authority entails an ambition to unite beauty with goodness and truth. The act of building has metaphysical implications.

This aspiration is clear in the case of premodern architecture and urbanism. It is evident in modernist architecture and urbanism as well, though in accord with a very different aesthetic and moral vision. And it is even present in what can be called hypermodernist architecture and urbanism, though hypermodernism's moral content more often than not goes unstated. The aesthetics and ideals of each bespeak different understandings of both nature and human nature.

In general, traditional societies and their architecture are founded on several substantive metaphysical assumptions that Western culture has articulated explicitly. The first is that reality is real, is what it is, and is fundamentally sacred. The second is that human beings are able to know reality truly, even if all human knowledge is necessarily partial and mediated to us through narrative traditions. The third is that although human beings are constrained by reality, we are rational agents capable of ordering our lives materially as artisans and morally as members of communities; from this it follows that we can flourish only by using our freedom to better conform ourselves to reality truly understood. These three assumptions—that reality is real, we can know it, and we flourish when we accord with it—constitute the metaphysical realism foundational to traditional architecture and urbanism.

Three cities in the ancient world both contributed to this metaphysical realism and themselves came to symbolize legitimate authority: Athens, Jerusalem (old and New), and Rome. From Athens came two seminal ideas: that the best life is the life of moral and intellectual excellence, and that a good city makes the best life possible for its citizens. From Jerusalem came the idea that a city's excellence is also measured by the care it exhibits for its weakest members, and for much of Western culture after the triumph of Christianity, the heavenly New Jerusalem represented the transcendent end toward which creation is oriented. Finally, from Rome came the full development of an idea originating in Athens: that a city's beauty is warranted by and represents its greatness.

The West's oldest extant architectural treatise, the *De Architectura* of Vitruvius, specifies the canons of this metaphysical realism as they pertain to architecture and cities. Vitruvius characterizes durability, comfort, beauty, and decorum as virtues necessary to the art of good building. These architectural virtues are so self-evident that even today most nonarchitects are surprised to learn that for the most part they are neither taught nor prized in architectural schools nor rewarded by the architectural profession—and have not been for quite some time. But that does not prevent ordinary people from recognizing them as desirable or even hypermodern architects from enjoying them.

Think of almost any pre-1940 European or American city or town—Rome, Venice, or Pienza; New Orleans, Savannah, or Boston [**FIGURE 1**]. Traditional towns and cities such as these exhibit a recognizable hierarchy of building types. The siting, size, and cost of buildings are proportioned to their public significance. But just as important, traditional urban buildings act in concert to *define* an urban spatial realm. This urban spatial environment is one in which space is neither vague nor ethereal nor a formless void but rather exactly the opposite: a void

FIGURE 1: Copley Square, Boston, fronted by Trinity Church: outdoor rooms, urban spaces defined by buildings.

with form. Architectural and urban spaces are artifacts, something human beings shape into places we occupy, whether a private room or a public street or plaza. The urban spaces of the traditional city are integral to traditional civic culture—sites of religious and political ceremony, where laws are promulgated and public punishments meted out, as well as sites of commercial exchange—and over time these urban forms acquired names: the plaza, the square, the boulevard, the avenue, the street, the alley, along with the semiprivate urban spaces such as the courtyard, the cloister garden, and the transitional forecourt. In the traditional city, just as there is a hierarchy among building types ranging from public to private, there is a similar hierarchy among spatial types. In a traditional city or town, one can even today take a pleasant walk from a *room* to a *foyer*, through a *forecourt*, down a *street*, up an *avenue*, and into a public *square*—and from there into a church or courthouse, library or museum, post office or store.

Modernity has changed all that. It is important to remember that modernist architecture and urbanism were also born of explicit ideals and implicit assumptions about nature and human nature. They too were metaphysical in their own way. Modernism burst on the scene in the first half of the twentieth century, the architectural and urban equivalent of the French Revolution. Modernism succeeded in large part because it gave built expression to a secular gospel at a moment of acute cultural crisis in the aftermath of World War I. In the modernist telling, the Great War was a purging fire, and the good news of modernism was simultaneously one of progress, inevitability, scientific rationality, and the coming of a secular and imminent utopia.

The late architectural theorist Colin Rowe described these converging circumstances in his book *Collage City* (1984). Modern architecture, he writes, "was the great idea that it undoubtedly was precisely because it compounded and paraded to extravagance the two myths which it still most publicly advertises." These are "fantasies about science—with its objectivity—and fantasies about freedom—with its humanity," which together gave modernism an aura of inevitability. "The new architecture was rationally determinable; the new architecture was historically predestined; the new architecture represented the overcoming of history; the new architecture was responsive to the spirit of the age; the new architecture was socially therapeutic; the new architecture was young . . . but—perhaps above all—the new architecture meant the end to deception, dissimulation, vanity, subterfuge, and imposition." Modernist urbanism promised "a city in which all authority was to be dissolved, all convention superseded; in which change was to be continuous and order, simultaneously, complete; in which the public realm, become superfluous, was to disappear and where the private realm . . . was to emerge undisguised by the protection of façade."

Gone were the church and the town hall as the monumental buildings of modern city plans, replaced by monumentalized electrical power plants, workers' housing, and office buildings. Where tradition was hereditary and organic, modernism would be rational; where tradition was ornate, modernism would be spare; where tradition was corrupt, modernism would be pure; where tradition served princes and popes, modernism would be for the people. For all but the most innocent modernist fellow travelers, modernism was never so much about function as about aesthetics and the new moralism of modernity, with the language of function used as a club to batter the architecture that symbolized the supposedly decadent culture of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe. "A house is a machine for living in," wrote Le Corbusier, in an apparent endorsement of functional rationality. Yet few if any modernist masters were more concerned than he was about the aesthetics of architecture and urban form.

As with modernist buildings, so with modernist space. Architect Steven Peterson, a student of Colin Rowe's, has characterized modern space as *anti-space*, not to suggest that anti-space is bad but rather that anti-space is the opposite of the organization of space that characterizes traditional architecture and urbanism. Where traditional architectural and urban space is particular, ordered, formed, discrete, discontinuous, sequential, and clearly man-made, modernist anti-space is correspondingly universal, unordered, unformed, undifferentiated, continuous, and similar to *found* nature. There are no sequences of spaces, because there are no discrete spaces. For traditional urbanists, space is unapologetically an artifact, designed consciously and simultaneously as part of a reciprocal process that includes building design, and in making space, the architect as an artist "imitates nature" as if nature is an artisan.

In contrast, the attention of modernist architects is less commonly focused on shaped space than on buildings as freestanding objects in an anti-spatial landscape. The modernist design intention is to "imitate nature" by preserving or simulating that part of nature that is *not man*. This is pursued for explicitly

therapeutic purposes, an ambition that in historical context cannot be divorced from the disruptions to traditional urban life and health that followed the advent of the industrial revolution. Notwithstanding the benefits of the industrial revolution, for more than two centuries these disruptions engendered pessimism about what man can make of the world. This ran parallel to the rise of nature romanticism, the attempt by modernists to design landscapes that appear "natural," suspicion of the formal organization of space, and the rise of a suburban ideal of the good life.

The difference between spatial and anti-spatial formal sensibilities is especially clear when we compare classical Italian or French garden design with the proto-modern English Romantic landscape tradition of garden design associated in America with Frederick Law Olmsted and today's neo-Olmstedian landscape urbanists. In the former tradition, architects order and shape a variety of plants for *spatial* purposes, not unlike the way they order buildings in cities to shape streets and squares. In the latter (modern) tradition, architects order and shape flora to look as though they have always been there.

The resulting landscape is anti-spatial. We anticipate the piazza fronted by the cathedral in a traditional Italian city, or the county courthouse in the town square of a traditional American town, because these are traditional ways of organizing urban space. By contrast, one "comes upon" a prairie or pond or grove of trees or pavilion in a large American urban park. The same aesthetic characterizes the modernist urban emphasis on buildings as freestanding objects against an unformed anti-spatial background. The most dramatic modern image of this is Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* [**FIGURE 2**], his 1925 proposal to demolish a good portion of Paris's Right Bank and replace it with a grid of freestanding modernist towers in an anti-spatial, park-like landscape. Corbusier's plans were not realized, but his general approach has been influential nonetheless. In the strict sense, there is no civic space in the ideal modernist city, only an anti-spatial context for freestanding object buildings. Today, a Frank Gehry building is exactly that: an objet d'art that needs no distinctly organized space around it.

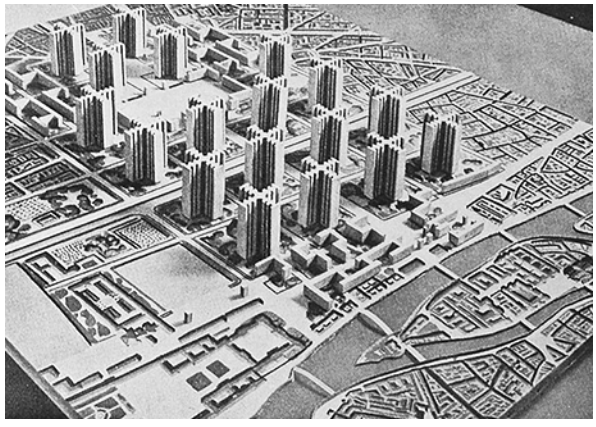

FIGURE 2: Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* for Paris; modernist urbanism is rational and ordered, but not spatial.

It is for this reason that nothing in the modernist city successfully corresponds to the Mall in Washington, D.C., or to Piazza San Pietro in Rome as spaces at the large scale of traditional baroque urbanism, or for that matter to the quotidian plazas and squares of ordinary premodernist European and American cities and towns. Citizens do not regularly assemble in the barren anti-spatial planar plains before the mute modernist buildings of Albany or Brasilia for inaugurations, funerals, and the redress of grievances.

What underlying assumptions about nature and human nature informed the modernist revolution that overthrew the West's long tradition of classical humanist architecture and urbanism? The short answer: somewhat contradictory modern ones. Compared to the tradition it overthrew, modernism was and was not grounded in metaphysical realism. It was insofar as many modernists seemed to understand themselves as mystical Platonists promoting objective human goods, and they believed their work embodied moral truths that promote human freedom; but it was not insofar as it increasingly came to be divorced from any transcendent grounding and reference and increasingly became more professedly utilitarian.

As Rowe notes, what emerges with modernism in the early twentieth century is a notion of cities shaped by impersonal historical forces. Increasingly, the creation of cities and human well-being itself came to be defined in economic terms derived largely from Marx's dialectical materialism and the Hegelian historicism that Marx adopted and inverted. By the time modernist architecture emerges full-blown in the early 1920s, writes Rowe, "an irresistible, coercive and logical 'history' seems to have become quite as real as anything equipped with dimension, weight, colour, texture." The architect has become "a sort of human ouija-board or planchette, . . . a sensitive antenna who receives and transmutes the logical messages of destiny." Thus did modernist architects come to understand themselves as avant-garde. The rest of humanity is passive and manipulable, their good understood and defined in materialist terms, while the architect partakes of the zeitgeist and answers to the future.

For the generation that came of age in the mid-twentieth century, the Holocaust and Hiroshima discredited the authority of "the future." At a more mundane level, the triumph of modernism inevitably undermined its revolutionary claims. When modernist office towers dominate cityscapes and modernism is the default style of the global corporation, how can one think modernism is avant-garde? This has not encouraged any widespread rethinking of the nature and purposes of architecture, however. Instead, today's mainstream culture of architecture, in the schools and in the profession, is overwhelmingly and effectively *hypermodern*, a condition that outside the discipline of architecture is usually just called "postmodernism." But for architects, the term *postmodernism* resonates in a distinctive and peculiar way.

Most architects today would describe architectural postmodernism (or "po-mo") as an embarrassing two-decade transitional period of dabbling in historical architectural forms that occurred in the 1970s and '80s, in the aftermath of 1950s and '60s "urban renewal" and the triumph of corporate modernism represented by iconic works such as Manhattan's Lever House, the Seagram Building, and their worldwide knockoffs. To the unintended irony of this devolution of an architectural movement (modernism) so pointedly moralist in its origins, architectural postmodernism responded with intentional irony. But irony has a short lifespan, and after about twenty years of po-mo meandering, the architectural profession moved on to and through a period of "deconstructivist" and then "parametric" formal experiments that are now standard features of today's hypermodernism, the future of which purports to be dense, tall, green, international, and endlessly novel.

My take is different: that hypermodernism is essentially modernism shorn of its confident consensus and moral and rationalist agendas. This means that not po-mo but modernism itself is the important transitional period in the history of architecture and urbanism, spanning some eighty years and midwifing today's hypermodernism. Put another way, hypermodernism is modernism unmasked. It is subjectivism, relativism, and individualism writ in and at the scale of buildings and cities. Hypermodernism is the architecture of the global economy, taking as premises certain modern material conditions and construction practices, and therefore certain aesthetic possibilities that follow from them.

We see this, for example, in the way hypermodernist architects employ, with little if any fanfare, the standard modern constructional practice of differentiating a building's structure from its enclosure, which means separating what holds the building up from the exterior building "skin" attached to it. This practice makes buildings inherently less durable, but it is simply a taken-for-granted assumption of the modern construction industry. When the technologies that made this practice possible were new, the modernist pioneers made it a part of their ideological agenda. But hypermodernists simply presume these modern conventions; and although their agenda includes promoting today's new technologies, this is undertaken not in service to any utopian ideal but rather for the sake of experimentation and (above all) novelty. Proclaiming in 1995 the death of both classical humanist and modernist urbanism, the Dutch hypermodernist Rem Koolhaas writes that

> if there is to be a "new urbanism" . . . it will be the staging of uncertainty. . . . To survive, urbanism will have to imagine a new newness. Urbanism redefined as a way of operating on the inevitable . . . will attack architecture, invade its trenches, drive it from its bastions, undermine its certainties, explode its limits, ridicule its preoccupations with matter and substance, destroy its traditions, smoke out its practitioners. The seeming failure of the urban offers an exceptional opportunity, a pretext for Nietzschean frivolity. We have to imagine 1,001 other concepts of city; we have to take insane risks; we have to dare to be utterly uncritical; we have to swallow deeply and bestow forgiveness left and right. The certainty of failure has to be our laughing gas/oxygen; modernization our most potent drug. Since we are not responsible, we have to become irresponsible. In a landscape of increasing expediency and impermanence, urbanism . . . can lighten up, become a Gay Science—Lite Urbanism.

For hypermodernists, architecture and urbanism no longer serve even the future. They seem instead a way for architects to pass the time, to stave off boredom and despair, and perhaps to achieve some fortune and fame in their lifetimes.

The aspiration to novelty serves well a contemporary urban condition that is this-worldly, secular, pragmatic, utilitarian, contractual, virtual, therapeutic, somewhat hedonistic, and effectively amoral. But the hypermodernist urban agenda is not so "lite" in its consequences. Especially in Western capitals of capital and in today's exploding cities of Asia, Africa,

and South America, hypermodernist architecture and urbanism are practiced by architects on behalf of autocratic governments, multinational corporations, and international developers and financiers as a de facto Nietzschean artistic enterprise in which there is not even the pretense of making cities that serve human flourishing and promote civil society—the historic ends of humanist urbanism.

Classical and humanist urban forms legitimated a civil society of multiple authoritative institutions in a sacred order that promoted a shared understanding of human flourishing. Modernism rebelled against authoritative institutions, but it too had legitimating intentions, in this case to order the built environment in accord with the progressive movement of history toward a politically prescribed utopia. Today we have hypermodernism, which both embodies and seeks to legitimate—in Philip Rieff's suggestive formulation—the freedom of individuals "to live an experimental life" in the context of a consumer-oriented global economy. In the hypermodernist universe of discourse, the *only* moral qualifications to the primary theme of aesthetic innovation are professions of environmental concern. But even this gesture toward moral ideals is unconvincing, because high-profile hypermodern projects and proposals depend on modern global-industrial methods of manufacturing and transport of materials that, taken all together, are of dubious long-term economic and environmental sustainability.

The hypermodernist inward turn toward novelty for its own sake isn't surprising. Nobody today believes in the modernist view of history or in modernist utopian teleology. Although modernism remains a prominent architectural idiom, there can be no doubt that modernism is a failed ideology. Over the course of its intellectual tenure, modernism ran into and was beaten down by modernity itself, both as a practical experience and as a theoretical proposition. Architects in every age work within constraints provided by nature, the specific sites on which they build, and the tastes, temperaments, and budgets of their patrons and clients. But contemporary architects are also and especially constrained by modern zoning ordinances and building codes, by the organization of labor and the production of modern building materials, by contemporary traffic-engineering standards and banking practices, by cultural expectations established and reinforced in the news media, by environmental and NIMBY organizations that have arisen largely in reaction to pervasive and perverse modernist architectural practices, and (of course) by the contemporary culture of architecture itself and its fashions. These constraints frustrate utopian ambitions. When we combine them with contemporary society's minimal institutional regulation of private life and ambition, we can see why Jack or Jill Architect has come to view modernism's social agenda as both impossible and superfluous. The solution is obvious: Let the social agenda go in the interest of more-achievable hypermodernist aesthetic ambitions. And so today's most famous (or infamous) new works of architecture generally are not buildings of civic or sacred communal intent. More often, they are large-scale sculptural novelties that appeal to a culture of spectacle **[FIGURE 3]**.

But there are more than practical reasons for why well-meaning modernists have, at least professionally, forsaken the social concerns that gave modernism its high moral purpose. Here Nietzsche is germane. He contended that the morality of Enlightenment-era philosophers was an error born of cultural habit, and that the original error itself was to believe that morality is anything other than a mask for the will to power. In this view, the good life is maximizing one's own will to power, whether by strength, guile, rhetoric, or skill. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Nietzsche must be seen therefore as both the foremost critic of Enlightenment rationality and its culmination; he both unmasks it as will to power and announces the will to power as inevitable.

The post-humanist, post-rational, hypermodernist abandonment of modernism's utopian teleology and social agenda operates in the same way. Just as both traditional humanist urbanism and modernist urbanism had their respective characteristic spatial and anti-spatial conditions, so too does hypermodernist urbanism. It is what Rem Koolhaas calls "junkspace," the "new flamboyant, flexible, forgettable face

FIGURE 3: Jay Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park, Chicago, by Frank Gehry.

of architecture." Junkspace is "the residue mankind leaves on the planet. . . . Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout. Modernization had a rational program: to share the blessings of science, universally. Junkspace is its apotheosis, or meltdown." Good Nietzscheans all, the hypermodernists unmask the social idealism of modernism as a fanciful delusion—and deem fanciful delusions our fate.

Junkspace is jargon for architects and academics. But there is a more pervasive contemporary junkspace, a condition distantly prophesied by Tocqueville in his concern that modern democracy has a tendency to promote individualism and to inculcate among citizens the desire for equality (and luxury) over liberty. The most popular and extensive physical expression of contemporary individualist culture is the post–World War II American suburb, which manifests the ideal of a freestanding house in a natural landscape. This ideal has a long history in Western culture, but until the eighteenth century it was an aristocratic ideal valued as a temporary respite from urban life. However, in the modern era, when this ideal became democratized *in opposition to* the industrial city—and, by incorrect inference, all cities—it set off a series of historical events. The result has been not an agricultural landscape dotted with grand or modest villas immediately proximate to towns and cities but rather a "middle landscape," neither rural nor urban, that practically everywhere looks like contemporary Long Island or suburban Phoenix.

This is not a gratuitous swipe at suburbia, even less at suburbanites; nor is this the place to explore in detail the connections between hypermodern urbanism and postwar suburbia. Nevertheless, there are affinities between the stylized "high-culture" individualism of hypermodernism and the "low-culture" individualism of the suburban ideal. And though it remains a long-term multigenerational project, a partial antidote to individualist cultural breakdown is the forward-looking tradition of the classical humanist urban ideal, of which there are new stirrings.

A renewed culture of classical humanist architecture and urbanism will require architects, patrons, and citizens to be formed by true and coherent theories of nature and human nature. That is to say: a more humane built environment will require us to reestablish *as normative* an art of building that embodies—even if only implicitly—metaphysical realist assumptions. It will require us to understand and embrace the truth that man is an intermediate being: simultaneously part of, different from, and responsible for nature (and that the latter, stewardship, follows from the former two). It will require us to challenge and break free from the aesthetic constraints of the hypermodernist fetish for "the new."

It will require architects in particular to articulate a coherent account of what buildings are for and what a city is for—and then to design and plan accordingly. Such an account will require a theory of construction as it relates to the durability and sustainability of the built environment, a theory of architecture's relationship to the natural and cultivated landscape, a theory of architecture and the city that has a place for but is not subsumed into economic exchange, and a theory about architecture and urbanism's aesthetic, symbolic, and sacramental content with respect to beauty, moral order, and sacred order. I think it also likely that most architects themselves will, for the sake of a humanist urbanism, need to be members of the communities for whom they design and build.

Perhaps the most egregious error of modernism was its effort to escape from and end history by imagining that it could treat the world as a blank slate on which it could impose its vision. Modernists dreamed of a world of rationally ordered pure forms that would make human beings good. But human nature is not so pliable, reality moved on, and the built environment that resulted from the modernist error has proven problematic. There is no substitute for and no good alternative to a living and self-correcting tradition oriented toward genuinely good ends, and we gain no benefit from avoiding a deeper knowledge of our own history and all its entanglements, missteps, and opportunities. Once this is understood, we can turn again to those fundamental urban questions falsely answered by modernism and now largely suppressed by hypermodernism: What is a city? What is a city for? What makes a city good? What makes a city beautiful? FT