

A future turned sour

We now see the bare steel, glass, and concrete blocks of 'modern' architecture as epitomising capitalism and bureaucracy. Yet the 'modern' style was originally associated with the left. What went wrong? Martin Thomas looked at the Hayward Gallery's exhibition 'Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century'

No city today looks like the plan for a "Contemporary City" which Le Corbusier drafted in 1922. Every major city, however, is marked by its ideas.

Offices should be in sixty-storey skyscrapers, housing in big 12-storey blocks. Buildings so tall would allow a dense population but a lot of open space. Each building would be surrounded by air and light and greenery.

To allow even more air and light, open space and rapid traffic, the buildings would be erected on concrete stilts. Modern construction methods should be exploited to the maximum, and not smeared over with styles and decorations derived from old construction methods. Windows should be in great horizontal strips. Everything should be clean, crisp and in straight lines. Roofs should be flat.

Le Corbusier's ideas were part of a whole 'modern movement' in the 1920s. Before modern industry, architecture had been concerned only with temples, cathedrals, palaces and monuments. Houses were just built, not designed. But 20th century architects wanted to be designing factories, offices, mass housing – indeed, whole cities. In the 19th century architects had improvised, designing banks and museums on the model of classical temples, schools and town halls to look like medieval cathedrals, and so on.

The 20th century should produce a new unity of art and technology; indeed, that was the only way to save the cities from mounting chaos and squalor. Houses should be designed (in Le Corbusier's phrase) as "machines for living in", and indeed whole cities should be planned as "machines" for human society, with the same sober elegance that the best 19th century industrial design had had.

Modern architecture was vaguely but

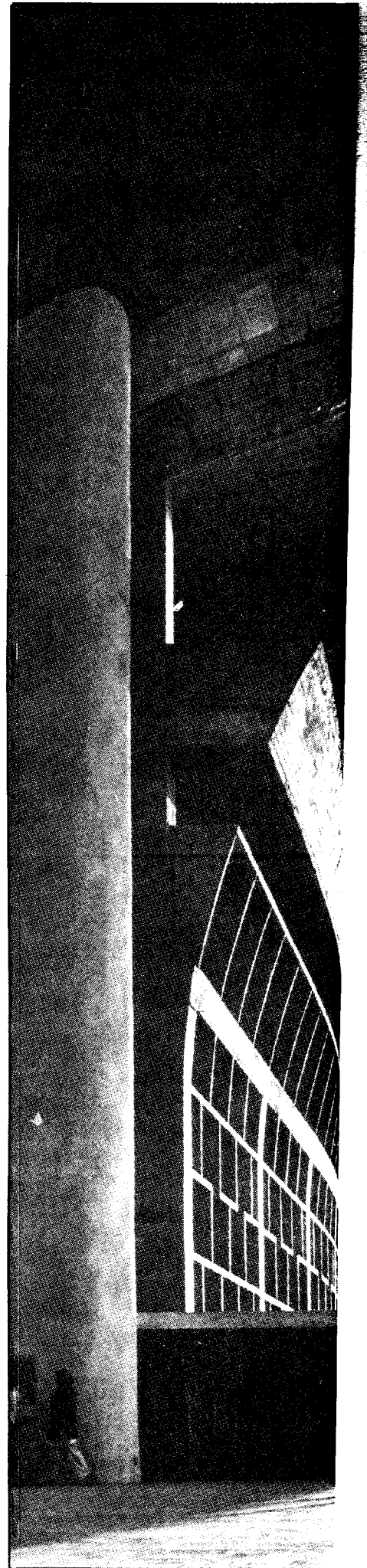
unmistakably linked to the left. It was the Bolshevik government in the USSR, and left Social-Democratic local authorities in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, who commissioned big blocks of flats for workers in the spare, clean-cut modern style; and the Nazis who denounced this style as 'cultural Bolshevism', promised individual houses with gardens instead, and condemned the flat roof as 'un-German'.

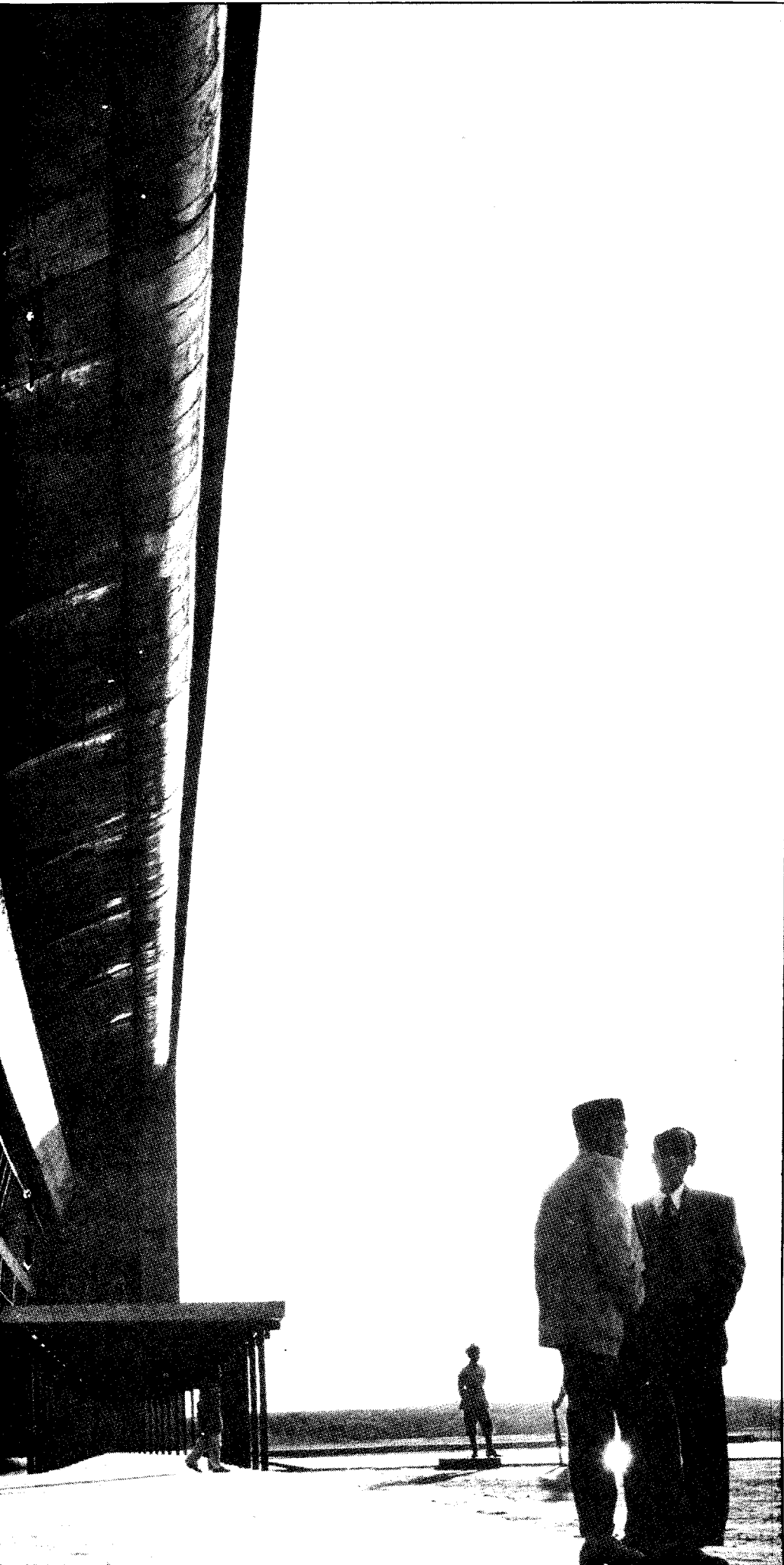
Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Fascist Italy all rejected modern architecture, and for their major buildings preferred instead a stripped-down classical style, ponderous and monumental.

Most of the modern architects were left wing only in the vaguest sense. Le Corbusier himself disavowed all politics: "This work...is not dedicated to our existing Bourgeois-Capitalist Society nor to the Third International. It is a technical work". He supported the Popular Front in 1935, but later tried to collaborate with the pro-Nazi Vichy regime.

But there were logical links between the ideas of modern architecture and collectivist and egalitarian politics. The modern movement wanted architecture to concern itself with mass, industrialised building for the many, not monumental constructions for the rich few. They demanded city planning, which meant overriding the interests of individual property-owners. They wanted publicly-provided housing for the working class, rather than the squalor generated by the free market. Their housing schemes aimed to create large communities, living together and sharing common services, with housework socialised. Le Corbusier himself borrowed ideas from the great utopian socialist Charles Fourier.

After World War 2 it looked as if modern architecture, or at least the main drift of its ideas, had triumphed in many





Chandigarh in India – a city designed by Le Corbusier, but failing as a 'machine for living'

countries. In Britain, council housing increased from 0% of the total in 1914 to 13% in 1947 and over 30% in the mid-'70s. But today, 40 years on, the triumph has turned to ashes. Councils are tearing down the big blocks of flats which not so long ago won architectural awards.

The right wing still proclaims the same ideal — "Everyone having their own house and little garden", as Margaret Thatcher puts it — but now the left, from Peter Tatchell in Bermondsey to Militant in Liverpool, adopts this aim too, differing only on the means of achieving it.

The much-vaunted open spaces between the tower blocks or in housing estates have become scrubby and desultory expanses of grass, serving only to give a cold, dead appearance to their area. The steel-and-glass blocks which dominate city centres are universally resented as signifying callous bureaucracy, and little liked by those who work in them.

What went wrong? Jane Jacobs, Oscar Newman, and Alice Coleman have analys-

'Modern design has made streets and other public or semi-public areas dead — therefore repellent and unsafe...'

ed the problems of the modern architects' city.

It is on the *streets*, argues Jane Jacobs, that cities must make themselves into communities. For streets to be safe, lively and attractive they need to be used densely and throughout the day; to be overlooked by the buildings along the street, but to have a clear division between public and private space; and to have points of easy, casual public contact between people, like corner shops, bars and cafes. They need to have a proportion of *old* (i.e. cheap) buildings in them, to generate the necessary diversity of uses.

Modern design has made streets and other public or semi-public areas *dead* — therefore repellent and unsafe. Strict zoning, with public buildings, shops, housing, industry and offices all parcelled off into separate areas, creates thoroughfares which are crowded for a small part of the day and empty the rest.

Big areas — the grounds, entrances, landings, lifts and walkways of housing estates — are neither clearly public nor private. The public authorities cannot or will not keep them clean and safe. Worse: these areas have neither the density of use nor the visibility to surrounding dwellings and workplaces to create and enforce social norms there. The individual in those areas is usually alone and unobserved in a bleak world.

So they become at best grubby and lit-

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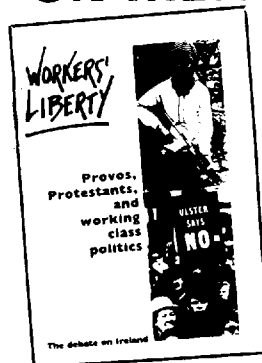
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tered, at worst foul and unsafe.

Shops within estates, or in separated-off shopping centres, stand shut and silent in emptiness for most of the 24 hours, away from the life of the street. Thus they become prey to litter and vandalism. The surrounding streets, 'blind-eyed' because the flats or shops are set back or walled off from them, become equally bleak.

In these areas children are more unsafe, and more vandalistic, than they were playing on the pavements of the old streets. There is nowhere where they can play within sight of adults who know them.

Many of the problems have been caused by the cheapskate way modern cities have been developed. Modern architecture was adopted in the 1950s not because of any of the ideals associated with it in the 1920s, but because it suited big corporations, property developers, and governments. Big integrated developments — blocks of flats, office complexes, or shopping centres — suited financiers and construction companies better than piecemeal jobs. But the basic ideas of modern architecture also made their contribution to the debacle.

In its days of exuberance after World War 1, the modern movement tended to try to leap into the future in a utopian way. Trotsky commented on the Russian modernists: "To tear architectural construction out of the future is only arbitrariness, clever and individual...beyond a practical problem and the steady work of solving this problem, one cannot create a new architectural style. The effort to reason out such a style by the method of deduction from the nature of the proletariat, from its collectivism, activism, atheism and so forth, is the purest idealism..."

As the exuberance faded, and the modernists' meagre links with the workers' movement were broken, the utopianism hardened into a technocratic, formalistic attitude.

Le Corbusier, who was never politically-minded, represented this technocratic and formalistic view most clearly. His book 'The City of Tomorrow' praises the cities created by Oriental despots — Istanbul, Peking — and condemns the chaotic capital cities of freer societies like Paris and New York.

Although all the characteristic features of Le Corbusier's designs were supposed to be functional — serving the "machine for living in" — he often commends his plans by claiming how splendid they would look as one sped through the city on the great motorways, rather than looking at what they would be like for day-to-day living.

There was a sort of utopian socialism in modern architecture in its early days. As it became just a stylistic fashion, that utopian socialism mutated into bureaucratic regimentation. The great state bureaucracies and the giant corporations then adapted those modernist ideas to their purposes when they needed some no-

tions about how to redevelop their cities rapidly, drastically and cheaply after World War 2.

Thus an approach to architecture which set out to be simple, straightforward, and close to human needs, breaking with the puffed-up, pomposity of the 19th century, found its main expression in modern office blocks which with their uniform blank, glaring glass walls give signals of blandness, impenetrability, anonymity, and inhumanity. Traditional 19th-century public buildings seem almost human by comparison in their vanity and pretentiousness.

The early modernists had thought that working class people should live in large communities, and in any case *would* do so after the soon-coming revolution. As the modern style became standard for working class housing, the ideas about community living were reduced to perfunctory assumptions or disregarded altogether. Blocks of flats were like office blocks — only with balconies, slightly smaller windows, and, in place of grand entrance halls, dark holes next to overflowing rubbish skips. It was not so much a case of "machines for living in", as of "living in machines" — Marx's ideas about the domination of the machine over the worker in the capitalist factory were borne out in housing, too.

On the rebound from this debacle, the right wing has claimed the initiative. Alice Coleman calls for an end to public intervention in housing and a return to the free market. Jane Jacobs, too, wants no more housing built by public authorities. A slum area, she says, is better improved by its residents becoming a bit better off, and doing up their houses or rebuilding piecemeal, than by being replaced with a desolate array of concrete slabs.

But under a free market, the poorest sections of the working class — the jobless, the irregularly employed, the young, the single parents, the immigrants, all those who cannot offer the necessary cash deposits and guarantees to get better housing — will always end up in slums. They will pay rent even for overcrowded, decaying accommodation to have shelter and be near their work (or where they might find work). Big city centres thus tend to polarise into luxury dwellings and overcrowded slums — both offer landlords a high return per house — while the middle class and better-off workers go out to sprawling suburbs.

Socialists need to develop new ideas about city planning, architecture, and housing. The left today places great stress on democratic consultation with tenants about the design of housing, and rightly so. But that isn't enough. A mass meeting of tenants can choose between different designs, but it can't sketch a new one.

New designs will develop only if the alliance of creative talents with a mass radical labour movement which so briefly and precariously existed in the 1920s can be established again ●