Building for bleakness

Every single caller after Prince Charles's recent TV programme criticising modern architecture supported him. The architects are on the defensive. Should they be? Why? And what's the alternative? Belinda Weaver discusses the issues.

Some architects defend hated modern buildings by saying "The Eiffel Tower (Crystal Palace, etc.) was hated in its day!" However, many modern buildings were not hated or protested about in their "day". It's *now*, after years of looking at them, that the outcry has come against soulless tower blocks and ugly offices. In their day they were praised.

In his book 'Heroes', journalist and filmmaker John Pilger shamefacedly quotes a 1968 article he wrote praising Sheffield's Hyde Park Flats "great glass towers...that face, not blades of soot, but trees and green." He believed these "multi-storey flats, planned to retain something of the neighbourly warmth of the old rotten rows" would be communities in the sky, where "no child need sit forlorn in his boxed isolation, but instead play all around and up and down."

Alas, he sees now that these "jerry-built human pigeon lofts" have "disfigured much of the landscape and life of Britain." How true.

Let me state right off that I'm not just a stuffy old cultural conservative (I hope). Modernism as a style and as a method has been distorted and misrepresented. It didn't set out to blight people's lives.

On the contrary, many early Modernists, particularly those of the Bauhaus movement in Germany, were socialists, anxious to use new materials like concrete, steel and plastics, and new methods of industrialised building, to provide cheap housing for workers, then living in slum conditions all over Europe.

The new materials and methods meant that taller buildings could be built, housing more people, faster. A lot of bold talk about building "machines for living" was floated about. Strip off all the unnecessary and expensive ornament, cried the architects. Let the function define the form!

In hindsight, we know that was a flop. But it wasn't obvious then.

The (German) Bauhaus and (Dutch) De Stijl architects wanted to break from the 19th century mould of building copies of Greek temples for the few; they wanted to create a totally new architecture, one that would be human in scale, rather than overwhelming like the cathedral/temple replicas. It would be architecture for the common man, not for the rich. The new materials and methods would be the basis for this totally new style of simplicity and integrity.

Many designs resembled the flat roofed white cubes that Mediterranean people inhabited. These were simple, functional structures. The flat roofs were for sitting on or sleeping on in hot weather. The white reflected the sun and kept the houses cooler. The lack of eaves did not matter in a dry climate.

But a stark white cube with a flat roof didn't belong in northern Europe. Snow and rainwater tended to collect on flat roofs, causing them to weaken or collapse. Without overhanging eaves to protect them, windows leaked in wet weather. In turn, this encouraged damp and mould in many buildings. And rain also created ugly streaks and trails on concrete. White soon became dirty white or grey. Under a grey sky, these buildings soon began to look bleak and cheerless.

And people didn't want these machines to live in. They didn't want small rooms, cramped hallways or low ceilings. They wanted nests. Inside their cubes, they tried to create cosiness and clutter. Stark interiors are cool; no-one wants to be cool in northern Europe winter.

Many people won't accept tower block flats now. They form part of many councils' hard-to-let accommodation. Generally it is single people who are prepared to take them, whereas families shun them, for good reasons. And no-one dares to build them now.

The lack of storage and workspace curtails activities like DIY and gardening. There is nowhere to dry clothes in cramped flats. It's hard to keep tabs on kids playing twenty or thirty floors down. If the lifts break down (as they tend to do), it's hard getting up and down stairs with kids and shopping.

Tower block estates are full of areas such as lifts, stairways, corridors and "common" grassed areas that are neither private nor public. Many such areas become graffiti-covered, littered, vandalised, urine-smelling and frightening. Tall buildings are also vulnerable in case of fire. If someone breaks into a flat, there are no passersby, as on a street, to see.

As worker housing, Modernism was a gigantic flop. The people Modernism was designed to help have turned away from it in droves. It's not snobbery to say most workers would rather have a house than a flat, especially a tower block flat. They would.

And high rise building has not even led to higher densities of people. Much higher densities can be achieved with low rise accommodation. Space on high rise estates that could be used for living is wasted. Each tower block sits in lonely isolation far apart from its neighbour. The ground in between, forlorn strips of littered turf, despised even by playing children, remains desolate and unused.

It would not only be far better to use the land to build two and three storey houses with gardens and streets; it would also be cheaper. High rise costs more to build, and much, much more to maintain. If mistakes occur in low rise building, they can usually be fixed; in high rise construction, a mistake soon becomes a catastrophe. In high rise buildings, the maintenance of lifts is a major expense.

The blame for tower blocks can't be laid entirely at the Bauhaus's door. The tower block horrors of today were flung up by building contractors, who creamed the cheap aspects of Modernism off — the lack of ornament, the quick-and-dirty construction methods — and left out the extras such as community centres, shops, laundries, creches, gardens and so on that the early Modernists insisted on.

We didn't know then that concrete would weather so badly, turning even a posh, expensive development like London's Barbican into a rainstreaked, bleak estate. We didn't know how tower blocks, and their corridors and walkways, would foster crime and vandalism. We didn't know how they would be starved of resources — for repairs, for concierges — by cash-strapped councils.

But if Modernism was never given a real chance with housing in this country, how did it fare elsewhere? Have architects done better with large, modern public buildings? Alas, no.

Modernism, as imagined by the Bauhaus/De Stijl architects, never really got a look in. Instead, architects took some of the basics — concrete and steel, lack of ornament, industrialised building methods, flat roofs — and called it a style. The International Style had arrived.

It is this increasingly discredited International Style, rather than Bauhaus Modernism, that Prince Charles and others are attacking. The Style is associated almost solely with tall, ugly, concrete-and-steel boxes.

The glass and steel box and the steel and

The Seagram building in New York, designed by Mies van der Rohe. Since the 1950s city centres all over the world have been filled with replicas of this 'International Style'

concrete skyscraper are a terrible blight on the world. Since their spread, every city centre has similar dead areas, killed off by the grey pall of unadorned concrete.

Most big modern buildings fail spectacularly in one key area — entrances. At the Barbican and the South Bank Centre people have to come in feeling unsure they've actually arrived; they feel they've crept in the back way; nothing is "announced". Maybe architects wanted to rebel against the grandiose entrances of wedding cake Victoriana and the Greek temples. If so, they've bent the stick too far the other way.

Too many modern buildings present a blind face to the street. Some entrances look so mean and small that people discount them.

The South Bank Centre assumes everyone will arrive from the river. The signposting only makes sense from that vantage point. Since we are not yet amphibious, this seems daft. Getting to the National Film Theatre from the bus stop on Waterloo Bridge is a dispiriting experience — down a concrete stairwell into a narrow corridor, and that's it. You feel there must be a proper way in that you happened to miss. But no.

Confusion does not end with entrances either. Many modern buildings are labyrinths inside, with no landmarks for orientation; every floor and section looks the same. The Barbican Centre is notorious for this. The main entrance is hidden down a roadway. The interior is so confusing that bewildered visitors have to be constantly redirected.

Why should places designed for entertainment be so grim? Even apart from entrances, the buildings look joyless and forbidding. The South Bank Centre is a great, ugly concrete bunker with tiny windows. The window is another feature that modern architects have got completely wrong.

Windows should let in air and light. But modern architects have turned that on its head. Windows now ***exclude*** air and light. Huge glass curtain walls are a feature of many modern buildings, but the windows cannot be opened, and many are made of dark solar glass that blocks out daylight. Workers in these buildings have air conditioning instead of air, fluorescent light instead of daylight. The cost in electricity is enormous. The cost to health is immeasurable.

And the interior spaces don't work. If modern architecture's claim is that the function defines the form, then it has comprehensively failed. These buildings are meant to function as offices, and they don't work. Workers hate them. The form has flopped.

Outside, we have blank, blind buildings that seem to exclude people, while inside, we have dark, cramped corridors, offices full of static and fluorescent light, and a miserable, ill-feeling workforce who can't tell through their big picture windows of solar glass whether it's rain or shine outside.

Euston Tower, the DHSS building in Euston Road, is a tall concrete building, designed with vertical rubber insets to carry window cleaning cradles. Sadly, the rubber has long perished, so it is no longer safe to use the cradles. From inside, it's never fair weather; the windows haven't been cleaned in months. They can't, of course, be opened, so workers there have had to get used to the gloom.

One of the International Style's main problems is how cheap it looks — even when it cost millions and millions. In old-style architecture, the money's on show; you see just how it was spent. Going to places like Versailles can be overwhelming. Every surface is encrusted and marbled and panelled.

But in modern architecture, those millions fall into a pit. All that money! It goes on digging a hole big enough to have foundations strong enough to build a building tall enough — to be an eyesore!

So who do we blame for the sorry state of our cities and homes and workplaces — the architects? Not them alone.

Capitalists wanted tall buildings to maximise their profits on sites and have done pretty well out of them (even ugly offices can be let for large sums of money); councils wanted cheap housing and ended up with unlettable, expensive to maintain, fast-deteriorating tower blocks.

> "Far from being a new development or a return to first principles, Post-Modernism is just the same old concrete and steel boxes with ornament stuck on."

Labour councils who built tower blocks were doing the best they could, then, pushed along by profit-hungry building contractors. The tower blocks seemed to be better than the slums that workers endured before.

But they're not. They are a catastrophe. The problem is not who to blame now, but rather how do we stop things like this happening again?

We have to educate ourselves in the theory of housing, architecture and design so we can take so-called experts on and expose the schemes they work on for the sham they are — schemes to ruin our environment for money. We have to tear the masks off the developers, and be as truculent with the city developer as we are with the countryside despoiler.

The city is our environment too; we have to fight to protect our interests. We know now what modern and high rise mean in human terms — miserable home conditions and horrible workplaces, collapsing tower blocks and windswept canyons.

Architecture is in a blind alley now. Some of the former die-hards of the International Style are now embracing Post-Modernism or the New Classicism, with its pretty pastels and its fake ornamentation. Old Glass-and-Steel himself, Philip Johnson, is now proposing a Gothic castle for the South Bank.

But far from being a new development or a return to first principles, Post-Modernism is just the same old concrete and steel boxes with ornament stuck on.

All the new ornamentation is done as "ironic references" rather than honestly. Rather than admit they have failed, some architects send up the fact that they have had to go back to ornament by not treating it as seriously. Instead of designing Greek temples, they now put up astonishing hybrids — buildings with absolutely no cohesive style, buildings that borrow fragments from every conceivable period, buildings painted in all colours of the rainbow. Of course, the windows still don't open.

There is a small core of architects who have never embraced Modernism but who have gone on building as if the twentieth century has never dawned. Architects like Quinlan Terry see nothing better than Classical architecture, and have gone on building in that style despite the hoots of derision.

The joke's on the Modernists now, as some people turning to Classical architects as a revulsion from glass and steel. Terry's new development of stone and brick offices at Richmond is attractive. The entrances are obvious, and every building has ornament. The windows open and the development is low rise. Modernity in the form of computer floors and car parking is accommodated, but gracefully. The Modernists titter at it.

Terry would like to see this style replace Modernism. It certainly seems more appealing than the mish-mash of Post-Modernism, which never rises above the kitsch. And it's cheaper. What's worrying about Terry and the other "Golden Age" enthusiasts is that Georgian design was primarily for the rich while the poor lived in hovels. Elitism won't give us the kind of cities we need. I quite liked Terry's Richmond development, but I certainly don't want to see a return to Georgian or Victorian values.

The left has been a bit weak on the whole architecture/city planning debate. I think we have been too afraid to say that workers deserve decent houses and attractive cities and towns. We don't want to seem too bourgeois, so we tiptoe round the issue, and end up allowing the majority of working class people to live and work in rotten, unsafe, ugly buildings.

Socialism was never about levelling ***down***, but about levelling ***up***. We want to abolish the cheap, the shoddy and the substandard and keep the nice things.

Workers deserve nice things. The left has to take the view, as Kingsley Amis's Lucky Jim does, that "nice things are nicer than nasty things". That isn't bourgeois; it's a matter of using art and technology to build a better world.