

Building for humans: Architecture after Modernism

by [Matthew J. Milliner](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

The first days of Princeton Theological Seminary's annual book sale are an academic feeding frenzy. Used copies of biblical commentaries, patristic texts and works by Aquinas, Luther and Calvin are quickly scooped up by eager seminarians. After two days of this, what's mostly left are the "cutting-edge" religion books of the 1950s and '60s—the dregs of retired pastors' libraries that the next generation can do without.

Most of these books, having passionately defended a bygone mind-set, won't even find a taker on the sale's final day, when a box full of books can be had for five dollars. Titles like Episcopal bishop James Pike's *A Time for Christian Candor* have one last modern cause to serve: they add to the pile labeled "recycling." As the saying goes, he who marries the spirit of the age will soon become a widower.

The book outnumbering all others on the dregs tables each year is John A. T. Robinson's onetime best seller *Honest to God*, a heartfelt cry that traditional God-talk can't make sense to "modern man." In light of the resurgence of the doctrine of the Trinity, Rowan Williams some years ago suggested that "*Honest to God* seemed a museum piece." Martin Marty's prophecy that Robinson's best seller would "serve no more than a footnote" in any survey of 20th-century theology now seems a bit generous. Robinson, who called his book in retrospect "the worst thing I ever did," would perhaps have agreed.

One year, as I was sifting through the copies of *Honest to God* on five-dollar box day, I came upon a hidden gem. It was a hardcover copy of *The Modern Church: Masterworks of Modern Church Architecture*, by Edward D. Mills, published in 1956. I opened the uncreased pages. "If the church is to remain a vital element in the sociological adjustment of the twentieth century," trumpeted the introduction, "its new building should therefore be an expression of its purpose in our life today. The nineteenth-century Gothic Revival has lost its meaning for the scientific spirit of this

age.”

I had discovered the architectural equivalent of *Honest to God*. What followed was page after page celebrating churches that communicated this “scientific spirit”—that is, churches that looked like they were built to house scientific laboratories.

Many architectural styles have been embraced by the Christian tradition. But when a style seeks by definition to annihilate tradition, as does that style known as Modernism, Christians should be suspicious.

“It is only from the present that our architectural work should be derived,” insisted the hugely influential Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), whose leader hypostasized the modern spirit by erasing his family name and inventing for himself a new one, Le Corbusier. This was not historical amnesia, but active resistance: “We must set ourselves against the past,” wrote Le Corbusier in his Modernist treatise *Vers Une Architecture*.

Accordingly, Gothic cathedrals were dismissed as a futile “fight against the forces of gravity.” Vestiges of the past such as Chartres were “sentimental” and “not very beautiful.” Le Corbusier’s disdain for St. Peter’s Basilica didn’t even merit a complete sentence: “Wretched failure!” he called it. Sending architectural students to Rome at all “was to cripple them for life.” The purifying ambition of architectural Modernism was a sort of Calvinism without Christ.

The hostility of Modernist architecture toward religious faith perhaps came from the fact that the style was itself a kind of faith. Bauhaus director Walter Gropius promised not just new buildings, but a “new structure of the future . . . which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.”

Modernism once sought to help—even to save—the average person. But it tended to alienate the average person. The founding intentions of Modernist architects were laudable. The new materials afforded by industrialization required a new style that could house a population under new economic conditions. Modernism would meet this challenge with an efficiency inspired by the modern machine: a house was “a machine for living in.” The new style portrayed itself as moral. Forsaking the architectural “facade,” Modernism would be honest about a building’s structural needs.

Modernism's mistake, however, was to underestimate the needs of the humans who inhabit buildings. To the human penchant for color and variety, Modernism offered the international style—flat white planes that were the same everywhere, from India to Illinois. In the face of the human delight in surprise and irregularity, Le Corbusier offered a plan to bulldoze the cobbled streets of Paris and start anew (a plan that, fortunately, was not carried out). Modernism condemned all ornamentation as bourgeois frivolity, forgetting the simple fact that decoration brings pleasure to the human eye.

This divorce of Modernism from basic human necessity would eventually spur resistance, but marriage to political power ensured the style's temporary success. It is no coincidence that the high point of Modernist architecture dovetailed with the activity of heavy-handed political movements. In the words of CIAM, the new style would have to "teach people how to live." When inhabitants of Le Corbusier's Cité de Refuge, a dormitory for Paris's down-and-out, complained in the sweltering summer heat that the windows could not open, Le Corbusier chastised the residents for confusing their "psychological reactions" with their physiological ones. The inhabitants had yet to imbibe what Le Corbusier called "the spirit of living in mass-production houses."

This gaping disconnect between architectural ideals and average citizens' needs continues in our own day in the dispute over a landmark of Modernist (more precisely "Brutalist") architecture, the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, in Washington, D.C., a windowless concrete fortress. The worshiping congregation hopes to tear down the structure and build anew. Its owners concluded: "We know of no way to adapt the building to meet our needs. It's not a welcoming building."

Architectural preservationists have responded to this attack in the spirit of Le Corbusier: "You can learn enough to have an appreciation for it." Perhaps the worshipers have yet to imbibe the spirit of worshiping in mass-production churches.

The divorce of contemporary architecture from human need is explored at length by Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer in a perfectly titled book, *From a Cause to a Style*. In 11 essays unified by a clear message, Glazer recounts how Modernism went from a world-saving mission to one among several furniture options on an IKEA showroom floor. The book's power comes from Glazer's position as a high-profile urban consultant for the past 50 years. He has been a witness to the literal demolition of Modernism's accomplishments.

A commonly cited end point for Modernism is 1972, when World Trade Center architect Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe apartments in St. Louis, despite being the subject of a prestigious architectural award, were intentionally destroyed. Glazer was on the committee that made the decision. "I had shared that optimism and modernist faith," he declares. But Glazer is a Modernist who has been mugged by reality.

Glazer provides some frightening examples of how Modernism's faith in the future burned all bridges to the past. Lewis Mumford, the most prominent American urban theorist of the mid-20th century, even considered the Lincoln Memorial a part of the old order that needed to be overturned. Monuments in general, for Mumford, "are all the hollow echoes of an expiring breath . . . which either curb and confine the works of the living, like the New York Public Library, or are completely irrelevant to our beliefs and demands."

Such radicalism was justified as necessary to defend the ordinary citizen. Modernism, explains Glazer, "represented a rebellion against historicism, ornament, overblown form, pandering to the great and rich and newly rich as against serving the needs of a society's common people." Hence brownstones were bulldozed to make way for the modern housing developments that would, in the words of CIAM, "teach people how to live." Such projects gave us what urban dwellers today call "The Projects." "We know better now," sheepishly admits one of the many Modernists quoted by Glazer.

While Modernism today may be a lost cause, it has yet to be replaced by anything else. Contemporary architecture is not the next in a succession of styles, but "the merest skirmishes around a common norm that has effaced all historical styles. And a norm that leaves most of us discontented."

Glazer identifies the fissure underlying abstract architectural discussion today, a discussion lost for some time in the smoke and mirrors of postmodernism. Those who seek to follow a contemporary architectural discussion are rightfully puzzled by the opacity and baffled to hear architects say, for example, that they are now "beyond building." Glazer, however, provides a cogent explanation for the bewildering intellectual atmosphere: "Architecture in recent years has turned away from the pragmatic social and behavioral sciences to the wilder reaches of critical theory because its early efforts to design better housing turned into a failure."

Critical theory is the study, inspired mostly by thinkers in the Marxist tradition, of how social meaning is generated and maintained by social elites. Critical theorists examine texts—and buildings—for how they uphold traditional meanings and, presumably, repressive social orders.

From a Cause to a Style is not a wholesale condemnation, and the book's elegant, judicious tone keeps it from ever descending into a harrumph. Modernism may be an ideal style for certain kinds of buildings or monuments. Glazer concedes, for example, that the very modern Vietnam Memorial is a success. But the limits of the style are evident. Modern simplicity makes for wonderful factories, claims another of Glazer's repentant Modernists. However, "let a religious belief or a social ideal replace cubic foot costs or radiation losses, and nothing happened. There is not a single modern church in the entire country that is comparable to a first-rate cafeteria."

According to Glazer, critical theory is now the ruling mind-set of architecture. As a result, Glazer has little hope that an architecture of beauty is on the horizon. Today's "starchitects," such as Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind, seem more interested in generating buzz than in creating humane models for urban life. Furthermore, because postmodern architecture lacks the narrative force to fully overturn the anathema on ornament, Modernism has reasserted itself.

Not only would it embarrass architects to design decorative detail or call for it; they wouldn't know how to do it, and there would be no craftspeople to provide it. The workers who once carved and sculpted the decorated surfaces of buildings in the late 19th and early 20th century simply don't exist.

Glazer's solution is a sober one. We should cultivate appreciation for the accomplishments of the now unrepeatable past. If ever there was a charge to jealously defend premodern churches, Glazer provides it: "We can preserve the buildings of the past. We can't build them again."

Conservation of premodern architecture, however, may be an insufficient strategy, especially considering that a recent survey conducted by *LifeWay* found that most people prefer churches that are built in the traditional, premodern style. One indication of what a renewal of traditional architecture and urban planning might involve is the book *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*, by Philip Bess, head of the graduate school of architecture at the University of Notre Dame, which is spearheading a

countercultural focus on traditional design.

Like Glazer, Bess offers an array of explorations—from a meditation on the Ghent altarpiece to a dissection of Nietzsche’s aesthetics. But he also offers a blueprint for academic engagement of a fiercely secular field. Despite Christian theology’s impressive track record for inspiring beautiful architecture, there is almost an ironclad indifference toward traditional belief among architectural theorists today. Bess counters this indifference bluntly: “I am obviously not uninterested in comprehensive narratives, most especially true ones.” Rather than cutting a deal with the architectural establishment, Bess repeatedly cuts to the chase. “Modernist social fantasies,” he explains, “underestimated the pervasiveness of what theologians call sin, while overestimating the redemptive power of steel, glass and electricity.”

Till We Have Built Jerusalem is therefore not the place to go for a Christianized version of critical theory. Bess knows a rival when he sees one. “Critical theory . . . by its own logic—e.g., its views of the primacy of the will-to-power, and of the ‘constructedness’ of nature—is notoriously poor soil for a theory of sustainability or, for that matter, of a just social pluralism, each of which is arguably better grounded in traditional Western religious views of the created character of man and nature and their relationship to each other and to God.”

Bess lays his Catholic cards on the table as he marshals biblical religion, Aristotelian philosophy and natural law theory in his effort to reinvigorate traditional architecture and urbanism. He is suspicious both of contemporary architects who use religious language that is disconnected from religious communities and of religious leaders who build synagogues and churches that owe more to architectural fashion than professed beliefs. But the possibility for a revival of traditional architecture is a real one for Bess because “human beings generally can only stand so much ugliness in their built environments.” Bess does not call for one particular style, but he does provide solid, historically informed proposals for what successful church and synagogue building today involves.

Unsurprisingly, his proposals are not modern. Bess concedes that some modern buildings, and even some modern churches, are successful, but he also points out the irony that “the best of them typically were created by architects educated as traditionalists.” Bess suggests that premodern buildings admirably serve people who worship because often their architects were themselves worshipers. Art produced by

living worship traditions should therefore be resumed.

While critical of the theorists he calls the “heirs of Nietzsche,” Bess pulls some architectural critics, such as Colin Rowe, into the orbit of his more religiously informed vision. He does the same for the New Urbanism, a movement that seeks humane alternatives to suburban sprawl. Bess understands that if New Urbanists are to succeed, they will need to draw on more than nostalgia for a brownstone past. For urbanist projects to keep from becoming Projects, they require more than a retro aesthetic—they require a “belief in sacred order.”

Till We Have Built Jerusalem contains an informed discussion on the nature of beauty: “*Completeness* is precisely what the natural order lacks, and this is exactly why aesthetic experience has religious implications, because it seems to reveal to us a glimpse of some other order outside of nature.” And while the book may take theological and philosophical detours, it does not lose its practical edge: “The way to make traditional urbanism less expensive is to make it less rare.” One of Bess’s more radical proposals is that churches should partner with developers to form a city around themselves—the very arrangement that gave us one of our most successful urban environments: Savannah, Georgia.

“Though we cannot avoid being moderns,” says Bess, “we can certainly avoid being Modernists.” Or, to quote Glazer in one of his more hopeful moments, “Looking backward, it seems, has become the most popular way of going forward.” A renewed appreciation of Christian tradition can inform not only sermons but also the physical settings in which they are preached.