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SORTING DEBRIS

Another Look at the Modernist Urbanism Experiment

ABSTRACT: Despite its controversial reputation, some ideas of modernist urbanism can still inform the future of cities. Postmodern critics often failed to dissociate the unified project from its complicated political, economic, and infrastructural context. When the reputation of modernist mass housing declined after omnipresent pushbacks, the architectural debate shifted to different problems. Modernist urbanism became known as an unsuccessful project, while its buildings still inform architectural design today. One hundred years after the beginnings and again – for different reasons – cities confront the need for holistic ideas for affordable housing catering to growing urban populations. This challenge clashes with the ecological imperative to free up land to regreen urban environments affected by global warming. Although different times bring different requirements, the first waves of modernist experiments have laid out some tools. By sorting the debris of what remains of their urbanism in Brasilia and Berlin, this argument shows a path to reconsider forgotten potential and nuance the postmodern critique. Further, the essay outlines valuable concepts of selected projects and how their critics convoluted too many layers. Tracing ideas in their historical context to establish a continuity between the early 20th and early 21st centuries through modernist urbanism might still be a path forward.

KEYWORDS: Modernism, Urbanism, Post-War, Mass Housing, Berlin, Brasilia.

It began one hundred years ago and lasted until the end of the cold war. Both high and total modernist urbanism produced abundant visions with potential for the future of cities. However, the emergence of postmodernism in the late 1970s confined previous city plans to the discourse's periphery. Postmodern scholars declared the projects tested and failed because of enormous housing densities, monofunctional planning, and motorized mobility orientation, among other points. So why should anyone engage in a failed project in the first place? By outlining the tipping point between high and total modernism, Michel Rabaté offers a historical parallel: "What distinguishes those [1922] masterpieces from the works that came before [...] is a sense of a new mission: because of the massive destruction there was a general sense of added responsibility" (Rabaté 2015, 3-4).

Rabaté's hint at continuity shows that the emergent conditions of modern totality are still relevant. Urgent housing demands, accelerated by continuous urbanization and the simultaneous mitigation of global warming effects, lend architecture and urban design a sense of added responsibility. Most present-day projects, however, fail to address those problems on an appropriate scale. Still or again, humanity is at a point where a global

impulse requires planners and architects to consider large-scale collective responses to an overarching question: how to provide affordable housing for the many while minimizing environmental impact?

With this renewed attention to modernist urbanism, its continuities, and parallels, I argue that high and total modernist urbanism hold future potential despite their controversial reputation. As Rabaté (2015, 12) claims, Corbusier's totalizing rationalism did not plan to control the masses but to build a machine for living a better life. Against the prevailing notion of the modernist city as architectural totalization, the two projects of edifice and city were not as smoothly intertwined. Modernist urbanism maintained its separate course from the experimental to the established modernist city.

A look at the evolution of Brasilia informs the first part of my argument on how to complicate the postmodern critique clinging to modernist urbanism. Brazil's capital is one of the few totalizations of high modernism. As such, the discretely planned city became a prime target for critics of modernist urbanism. Despite several good reasons for critique, none of those accounts properly consider some valuable ideas behind the master plan concept. The second part of this argument revisits the rise and rupture of Berlin's high modernist urbanism in the 1920s. Its expanding wave of modernism after the second world war can exemplify how the projects became subjects of a discourse focusing on architectural deficiencies until declared failures (Jencks 1984, 9).¹ However, the judgment always ignored that total modernist urbanism was not total (i.e. complete) *enough* to surpass the laboratory. Instead of archiving the strain of ideas, renewed attention could establish continuities between high and total modernist urbanism, and today. The outcomes might inform the revision and development of once visionary ideas.

On Brasilia

In Rabaté's chronology that precedes his book *1922*, the author lists numerous relevant events and dates for the development of early modernism. Brasilia's conception could be an additional entry. On Thursday, September 7th, 1922, Brazil celebrated one hundred years of independence. On that very day, the foundational stone for Brasilia, the future capital, was laid. Not long after, news of ongoing plans to transfer the government from Rio de Janeiro reached the architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier, via his friend and artist Fernand Leger. Le Corbusier's desire to build new cities manifested that same year with "*ville contemporaine*," a city for three-million people (an entry in Rabaté's *1922* chronology). It was that year when Le Corbusier and other architects dreamt of seeing their ideas of a modernist city materialize in South America. Getulio Vargas' *coup d'état* and his totalitarian *Estado Novo* convoluted the constitutional

¹ Charles Jencks' famous declaration that modernist architecture is dead, referring to the demolition of Pruitt Igoe in 1972, has been a contested "modern myth" since the early 1990s (Bristol 1991). However, the postmodern dismissal and rejection of modernist urbanism carry on, visible in the predominant paradigm of "new urbanism."

transfer of Brazil's capital until 1945. With the regime's fall, the new congress formed an urban planning subcommission in 1954, which invited Le Corbusier to supervise the project. After a national competition, the subcommission selected Lucio Costa's master plan for its capacity to project a capital of Brazilian culture while accounting for temporal constraints (el-Dahdah 2021, 8-10).

The story of Brasilia is a unique example. It represents the evolution from experimental, high modernist concepts to a built national capital, thus totalizing modernist architecture. Brasilia is also relevant because its architecture is still held accountable for turning the city into a symbol of a failed modernist project. Beyond aesthetic and spatial reasons, the narrative imbues the architecture with real classism, racism, and colonialism in its foundations (Tavares 2020). However, most critics mash too many ingredients together. Le Corbusier and Brasilia's "founding fathers" indeed adhered to racist ideologies (Wilson 1996, 35-39). It would yet be hasty to conflate Brasilia's colonialist heritage with its modernist architecture and urban design. Brazil's population can only address the former with a collective and intensive healing and repairing process. The problems of modernist urbanism are more ambiguous.

The two anthropologists James Holston and James Scott are likely among the most prominent critics of modernist urbanism. Both make the spatial qualities of car-oriented, over-scaled open spaces responsible for Brasilia's minimal success in launching its country toward a new way of life (Holston 1989; Scott 1999). Both also fail to acknowledge the informal public spaces that weave throughout the fabric of Brasilia's north and south wings. Additionally, they disregard the entangled economic and political factors implicated in the spatial layout of Brasilia (el-Dahdah 2021, 15). Lastly, their seminal books exclude the spatial experience of Brasilia's residents, many of whom enjoy their daily lives in the planned city.² Of course, this does not invalidate criticism concerning social inequality, political corruption, or postcolonial power dynamics. But it shows that making modernist architecture responsible for the city's perceived success or failure falls short.

Apart from many Brazilians appreciating the intimate dynamics of the superblock courtyards, Brasilia originated from several compelling design ideas. Many of its residential buildings are lifted from the ground, leaving ample space for pedestrians, not cars, to roam freely. It was the first master plan conceived as a park city – in contrast to a garden city – to be a green and publicly oriented environment representing a young democracy. Additionally, instead of maintaining the building composition as an image in the plan, Costa inscribed the preservation of the city in a text accompanying his master plan for Brasilia (el-Dahdah 2021, 14). This text-based preservation principle remarkably resembles James Joyce's claim that writing *Ulysses* could serve to rebuild the

² Farès el-Dahdah grew up in Brasilia and published on its intricate emergence while putting the postmodern critique into perspective. Supporting this argument, Michel Rabaté commented on the oral presentation of this paper at the conference "1922/2022" (Università degli Studi di Torino, May 2022), that his acquaintances retain fond memories of growing up in Brasilia too. Both accounts coincide with the author's encounters with Brasilia natives.

city of Dublin from its pages in case of its destruction (Rabaté 2015, 12). Brasilia was hence the first city on record to account for temporal change by protecting its urban scales in a text, instead of freezing entire building compositions in time. It allowed for aggregations to be renewed over and over if the defined four scales (monumental, residential, aggregate, and bucolic) were preserved (el-Dahdah, 2021, 14).

From an urbanist viewpoint, this idea of preservation is still significant. At its core, Brasilia was more about its spaces than about the solids. Revisiting its central design principles might assist in sorting out the shimmering debris of a shattered vision. It aims to recover the valuable potential lost between the experimental and total phases of modernist urbanism. Brasilia's design had significant and lasting values despite the racist, colonialist, and machine-centered history of its emergence. Revisiting these values is my first argument to salvage the zombie of modernist urbanism from its reputation. It exemplifies that the idea of the modernist city is more than a unique, frozen object in time, more than a success or a failure, more than a discrete thought kept in books. The modernist city continues.

On Berlin's Modernist Housing Estates

Siemensstadt or Weisse Stadt, Berlin's examples of high modernist urbanism from the 1910s and 1920s, are coherent and scale-crossing neighborhoods. They are Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerke*, designed from immaterial spaces to buildings, conceived from façade to beam down to every screw, and arranged from the centers of their urban morphology to the fringes of adjacent neighborhoods. Like Brasilia, they hold potential beyond their historical UNESCO heritage value that preserves their past configuration into our present and future. The first generation of modernist urbanists emerged from the experimental, compositional ideas for entire housing neighborhoods. Incorporated into the teachings of the Bauhaus school, it included the emancipation of space over form. Its first propagators were interested in buildings constituting a whole exceeding the sum of its parts. They delivered plans for constructing projects that still show their avant-gardist heritage and beliefs, embedded in the provision of affordable housing through typification and industrial manufacturing (Sieverts 2006, 163-167).

Spatial form in those housing estates develops experiences from tradition, structure, and composition of forms while following aesthetic superstructures. For example, the prominent architects Bruno Taut and Max Wagner skillfully emphasized material, structure, and form. However, their expertise in landscape, program, and urban scale was still developing. Early modernist urban design became susceptible to schematism through aesthetic reduction, abstraction, and ornamental timidity. The phase turned out to be challenging to assume new standards. Although the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in 1928 made modernist urbanism part of an international movement, the rise of Hitler's totalitarian regime disrupted the change in Germany. As in Brasilia's case, totalitarianism violently paused the totalization of

modernist urbanism. Instead, Nazi Germany returned to megalomaniac neoclassicism and more representational city architecture.

Nonetheless, the planning and construction of those early modernist neighborhoods demarcate a structural change in large-scale housing developments as a counter-model to the private-sector speculation with its overcrowded tenement buildings of the late nineteenth century. Aesthetic ideas of the architectural avant-garde met social concepts of the political left. Unions, cooperatives, and municipal building groups became guiding motors of those projects. They managed to overlay high aesthetics and complex densification with popular social demands for novel ways of living.

As a result of several modernist architects having fled their prosecution during the war, a new generation of young, post-war architects, joined by some returnees, initiated the second wave of modernist cities from the late 1950s onwards. Kicked off by a group of pre-war modernists in 1957, the second wave of modernist urbanists tried to learn from examples of the past. The subsequent projects, such as Märkisches Viertel and Gropiusstadt, reacted to a particularly pressing housing shortage with an impressive range of large-scale projects in Berlin's periphery. In this instance, the projects experienced an enormous increase in height and density due to a constantly growing demand from the municipality. The housing tower and slab typologies introduced new conceptions of dwelling. Yet, the designers still had to defend their projects against accusations like high conceptual rigidity, too little mixed-use, no diversity of household incomes, and a top-down planning approach.

Landscape architecture had now become more independent. Landscape architects repeatedly rejected masterplan suggestions of superordinate green spaces and focused on free-flowing landscapes (IfS Institut 2021). The combination of non-hierarchical green space with a progressively dominant automobile infrastructure turned open spaces into amorphous "non-places". Their program and scale changed drastically (Augé 2009). Simultaneously, the projects suffered from a 90% social housing ordinance, which turned the flats shortly after completion into a relatively homogenous composition of low-income households (Hunger 2021). Berlin's late modernist housing estates entered a process of neglect. Their reputation declined, and the architectural canon shifted away from modernist urbanism (Jencks 1984). Although modernist architecture recovered from this trauma, the branch of modernist urbanism became known for failing twice.

Here again, not all criticism is unwarranted. The enthusiasm for economic feasibility models and technical advancement led to utilitarian housing estates that obeyed the demands for optimization. However, the technocratic character of both movements cannot cloud the goals aiming at social equality and freeing the urban environment from previous constraints or dangers. Despite the abundant criticism, modernist housing estates still require an interpretation as elemental symbols of their emergent conditions. Like Brasilia, car orientation, use separation, or ordinance failures are reactive witnesses of their time. They do not deem the virtues of modernist urbanism as entirely lost. The availability of public institutions in post-war modernist housing developments, schools, and civic centers, especially their open landscapes and high density, unveil significant

potential. The execution of the original plans often came with severe budget cuts and densification requirements. It thus helps to study the original plan documents to understand the design intentions separately to subsequent political demands so as to initiate a critical redevelopment. Not coincidentally, one hundred years after 1922, the Pritzker Prize went to Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal, two architects dedicated to the careful renewal of post-war modernist housing. Their projects expose original qualities achieved by conversion and renovation.

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Housing estates are still relevant because they are familiar with the problems of today: the need for new housing units for a rapidly growing city as quickly and affordable as possible. Modernist urbanism had always been about experimentation. While there is a better understanding of why some solutions were incorrect, there is no convincing reason for abandoning the core set of ideas altogether. Instead, urbanism has spent decades and resources defending itself against neoliberal housing supply mechanisms. Therefore, it left the stage for the business side of the housing industry (Pope 2021, 112-121). One hundred years after 1922, once again, humans need affordable housing while freeing up land and regreening cities to address global warming. Although different reasons alter the requirements, the experiment of modernist urbanism had already invented some of the necessary tools (Harnack 2018, 173-180).

Learning from past failures, one of the central problems was a top-down planning approach susceptible to the political routines of the time. Projects of architectural authorship imposed individuals' ideas on diverse collectives. Present urban design must find appropriable and innovative tools to repair and reconsider the modernist experiment. It needs to imagine a Doctor Frankenstein who would not flee in horror at the creature he bungled at first, but instead, one who returns to the laboratory and takes everyone back in with him (Latour 2009, 459-475). A new experimental turn in modernist urbanism starts with redefining the term "laboratory" and who has access to it. It should reconcile Prometheus with the seemingly antithetical notion of care and repair. These concepts were present in the paradigmatic projects discussed above. However, the declared failures of large-scale ideas made early 21st-century planning more incremental. It is a city of immediacy that condemned modernist urbanism as a dystopia. Against this notion, many of its housing estates have become teeming heterotopias, cities within cities, in the meanwhile of the urban periphery (Foucault 1967, 1-9).

How can the history of modernist urbanism inform an experimental turn in urbanism and urban design today? The continuities between 1922 and 2022 outlined in this text lay out some starting points for answers. The foundation of Brasilia demarcated a period in which a generation of architects began to see their utopian visions of modern cities materialize. Despite today's architectural discourse treating Brasilia as a representative

failure of modernist urbanism, the critique often dismisses the revolutionary ideas of Brasilia's origin: text-based preservation of scales, continuous public parkland, and a fine-grained succession of urban spaces dominating form. At its core, these ideas bring all attention to the collective and away from the authoritative individual. They also foresee the change of a city over time. The critical discussion around Brasilia fails to disentangle its spatial quality and democratic aesthetics from the complicated heritage of Brazil's national history. In Berlin's case, a totalitarian regime and then a world war halted the first modernist urbanism experiment. When the new generation of architects initiated the second, more popular wave, their projects received a negative public reputation, sometimes even before completion. The initiators of this notoriety always ignored the immense successes of Berlin's housing estates regarding the integration of vulnerable newcomers to the city, green environments, and housing provision for the masses.

Their declared failure, if this term still applies, was not inherent in the architecture but in the convolution of deficient urban management strategies. These economy-driven politics hampered a diversity of households and incomes, restricted high degrees of use separation, and led to the peripheral locations of the estates, to name but a few. The modernist urbanism experiment, first conceived in the early 20th century, was discontinued by the end of the 1980s. It is time to sort out the reasons for those failures so as to save the experiment from its enduring reputation and reopen the discourse toward new, and more continuities. Scholars and designers should reconsider the tools brought forward by modernist urbanism to face the recurring challenges for people in future cities. It starts with negotiation. It lies between the successes and failures of the first and second waves, and thus takes the shape of a third wave between high and total, master composition and temporal aggregation. It starts with sorting modernist debris.

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