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Two Sides of Modernity and Its Architecture

Dua Sisi Kemodenan dan Senibina

Spahic Omer*

Abstract

This paper discusses the two-sidedness of modernity and its architectural evolution. The paper concludes that modernity was exclusively a Western concept exported to the rest of the world. It was incubated by the weakening and marginalization of Christianity as a worldview and way of life, the rise of capitalism, and the worship-like attitude towards science and technology in everyday life. The world of architecture, especially its modernist school of thought and style, clearly reverberated such developments. Since its inception, modernity recognized no spiritual power or authority. It held inviolable only man and his capacities, plus his rapid scientific and technological progress.

Keywords: Modernity, Architecture, Man, Progress, West.

Abstrak

Makalah ini membincangkan dua aspek kemodenan dan evolusi seni bina. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa kemodenan adalah pemikiran Barat yang dieksport ke seluruh dunia. Ia dicetuskan oleh kelemahan dan perpecahan ajaran Kristian sebagai satu mazhab dan amalan hidup, kebangkitan kapitalisme, dan ketaksuban terhadap sains dan teknologi dalam kehidupan seharian. Dunia seni bina, terutamanya institusi pendidikan senibina aliran moden jelas menyokong kaedah dan gaya pemikiran tersebut. Sejak penularannya, kemodenan tidak mengiktiraf kuasa atau kuasa rohani. Ia berpegang kepada pendapat bahawa hanya kesucian terletak pada manusia dan keupayaannya, serta kemajuan saintifik dan teknologi yang pesat.

Kata Kunci: Kemodenan, Seni bina, Manusia, Kemajuan, Barat.

Introduction

Modernity is a universal term. It is at once a historical period, worldview and ideology. As such, it's got much in common with

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modernism, which signifies the character or quality of being, thought, beliefs and ideas associated with modernity as an ongoing chapter in history. The two concepts are often used interchangeably.

With its virtually global currency and endless ramifications, modernity was perhaps the most impactful phenomenon that has happened to mankind. To be modern, to live a modern lifestyle, and to get modernized - that is, to realize man's instinctive and total wellbeing here and now - was on everyone's lips. Ideas and experiences materialized and unfolded at all levels of existence: individually and collectively, unofficially and at the level of institutions.

However, as the especially 19th and early 20th century modernity euphoria started to subside, it became increasingly clear that modernity was not what it initially was meant and expected to be. Modernity was envisaged to become a generator, as well as personification, of ultimate truth and freedom, leading, in turn, to the creation of new and significantly better societies. The whole world was expected to be made an exceptionally better and more promising place. At the core of this philosophy stood the belief in the perfectibility of humankind adorned with truth, equality, freedom and erudition.

The philosophical and civilizational paradigms of modernity denoted a synthesis of a theoretical utopianism, intellectual arrogance, and scientific along with technological overindulgence, which were permeated and sustained with the spirit of the notions of scepticism, humanism, nihilism and hedonism. Due to the extraordinary nature and scope of modernity, its escalating drawbacks led the world to a crossroads. The very existence of human species and delicate earthly ecosystems appears today to be at stake. If any turnaround in fortune is to be made anytime soon, some tough ontological together with matter-of-fact questions will need to be honestly asked and as honestly answered.

This paper discusses the two-sidedness of modernity, emphasizing the consequences of its separation from and setting itself on a collision course with the spiritual and traditional realms. The paper's focus is twofold. It delves into the issues of modernity as an achievement or a mirage. Then, it examines the relationship between modernity and the world of architecture and how the former dictated the terms of the latter.

Conceptualizing Modernity

The word modernity is derived from the Late Latin adjective "modernus", which means "modern". The former is further a derivation

from the Latin adverb “modo”, which means “just now, presently, at the moment”. Modern, it follows, is what is prevailing in our time.¹

Modernity is an aggregate of particular socio-cultural beliefs, standards, outlooks and practices that began in Western Europe in the wake of the 16th and 17th century Renaissance and the 18th century Enlightenment. It is a comprehensive worldview and philosophy framed by a distinct historical epoch that witnessed a series of profound socio-structural and intellectual transformations. As a cultural project, modernity achieved its maturity with the fruition of Enlightenment, and as a socially accomplished form of life with the growth of individual (capitalist, and later also communist) society.²

To Hilde Heynen, modernity “constitutes that element that mediates between a process of socioeconomic development known as modernization, and subjective responses to it in the form of modernist discourses and movements.” That means that modernity is a phenomenon with an objective and subjective aspect. The former is linked to socioeconomic processes, and the latter is connected with personal experiences, artistic activities and theoretical reflections. Some people tend to separate the two domains, while others keep them together.³

It was arguably during and in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution (1789-1799) when monarchy as a system of government and the Catholic Church were dealt a heavy blow, triggering, as a consequence, the rapid rise of nationalism and boosting of citizens’ fundamental rights that revolved around freedom, liberty and equality - that modernity as a concept and life pattern got into full swing. Such was a time when the modern public was brought into being; when the notion of ‘man’ as an essentialist, transcendental subject developed; and in the wake of which Hegel, the first philosopher to experience modernity as a problem, “evolved a comprehensive legitimizing system to reassure modernity about itself”.⁴

Accordingly, in historiography the late 16th and entire 17th and 18th centuries are described as early modern, while the 19th century with some of its prolonged periods of matchless technological advance and

¹ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 6.

² Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 8.

³ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), p. 10.

⁴ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, p. 8.

economic growth - albeit coupled with a wave of political revolutions - is regarded as modern history proper. However, the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century - the latter having been forever darkened by the devastating and demoralizing World Wars - were a time when some serious doubts started to creep into the phenomenon and project of modernity.

As a result, modernity's faith in absolute reason began to dwindle. It was maintained that below the surface of rationality lie impulses, instincts and drives that constitute a deeper reality.⁵ The beliefs in linear progress, absolute truths, ideal social orders and the regularization and control of epistemology were shaken to their core as well. The world was ever more torn between the experience of modernity as progressive and the experience of modernity as chaotic. Whereas modernity while at its peak felt that it had the whole world at its feet, the global events of the first half of the 20th century changed everything. The ubiquitous Western buoyancy that modern humanity would generate a just, unprejudiced, peaceful and thriving new age was thus unsettled forever.⁶

The doubts and questionings culminated in gradual departing from modernity and modernism and their tendencies, and embarking on the idea, phenomenon and historical period of post-modernity and post-modernism. The latter's historical framework is generally perceived as the middle and late 20th century. It connotes the latest phase in human intellectual and cultural evolution. By and large, post-modernism is a reaction against the intellectual and, to a lesser extent, social and cultural assumptions, beliefs and values of modernity. Post-modernism is characterized "by broad scepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power."⁷ The common thread in both modernity and post-modernity is a bitter conflict with religion as a rival source of epistemology and morality, accentuating the value and agency of human beings, affirming that without religion and the interfer-

⁵ Marvin Perry, Joseph Peden and Theodore Von Laue, *Sources of the Western Tradition* (Volume II: from the Renaissance to the Present), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), p. 264.

⁶ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, p. 8-9. Jon Newton, *The Revelation Worldview: Apocalyptic Thinking in a Postmodern World*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), p. 21.

⁷ Brian Duignan, *Postmodernism*, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy, 2018, accessed on June, 10 2019).

ence of Heaven people are capable of leading ethical lives of personal fulfilment, and preferring rationalism and empiricism over the revelation.

As an outgrowth from Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment's age of reason, modernity featured dominantly in effectively all aspects of Western culture and civilization. Its hallmarks cantered on the questioning or the outright rejecting of traditional and religious doctrines and values; giving precedence to individualism, liberty, freedom, equality and scepticism; replacing "the religious understanding of nature with the new 'mechanical philosophy', which not only claimed to be a science of nature but also to be the only legitimate science of the natural world", ensuring thereby "the triumph of a purely quantitative understating of the order of nature over the religious and qualitative one"⁸; harbouring an unwavering faith in ultimate social, scientific and technological progress; the emergence of the capitalism system, the market economy, industrialization, urbanization, secularization, nation-state and democracy.⁹

Modernity stemmed from a rather rebellious mood that coveted to regenerate the way people perceived and experienced life, politics, society, science and art. The status quo dictated by religious (Christian) traditions and political authorities was deemed too lethargic, corrupt, unfulfilling and ailing to continue unopposed.¹⁰ Religious dogmas, values and moral principles were questioned, or rejected completely, because of their arbitrariness, futile formalism, opacity and exertion of control over human feelings, yet total human existence.

On account of the novel scientific and technological dynamics and their constant advancements and discoveries, the proponents of modernity felt a sense of perennial anticipation and hope. They found it unwise and counterproductive to commit themselves and their potentials to any existing system of thought and life and thereby curtail the most prized commodities: creativity, resourcefulness and prospects. Their flames needed to be cherished and nurtured, rather than controlled or, worse yet, extinguished. To be modern and think as such was an exhilarating thing. The impending age of modernity and its modern world were meant to be the most exciting existential contexts to live in and to participate in whatever way in their bettering. In other words, modernity generated an aura of worldly paradise. On his path to an intellectual self-

⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 137-138.

⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air, the Experience of Modernity*, (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 90-120.

¹⁰ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, p. 9.

actualization and moral perfection, modern man felt invincible and unstoppable.

However, having successfully undermined and forever shunned the religious dogmas and authority of the Church, modern man unconsciously created a myriad of new religious cults that pertained to science and technology. If he stopped obeying and worshipping God, he in effect ended up deifying himself and his achievements as well as aspirations. Furthermore, if he desacralized the world and religious institutions through science and technology, he once more ended up creating and sacralising his own artificial world. That world was constructed and sustained by modern man's newly established systems and institutions, which were invested with a halo of "modernist sanctity".

The Christian religious authority, admittedly, was to be largely blamed for the scenario. Its legitimacy and power, and the legitimacy and power of its Bible, were shaken and compromised, firstly, by the split of European Christianity, and secondly, by the uneasy relationship between faith and the emerging modern empirical science. Certain religious beliefs were proven empirically flawed or, at best, seriously questionable. Christians often found themselves "on the back foot", as they attempted to respond to such alarming developments.

Generally, the Church was slow and reluctant to respond to the rising modernity trends and the undercurrents they produced. One wonders if that was a sign of weakness or admission of irreconcilability. Hence, left in the lurch, people were unsure as to which branch of Christianity represented orthodoxy, and which one did otherwise. Disagreements, and even conflicts, were numerous, inexhaustible and, above all, fundamental. Nobody was utterly certain whose interpretation of Scripture was most authoritative and why.

Moreover, this caused many philosophers and scientists to embark on journeys of discovery of their own, in quest of new grounds for certainty and offering the truth-seeking persons new alternatives. Perhaps most emblematic of this ethos was Rene Descartes (d. 1650), a French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, who set out on his mission of radical doubt that led to his celebrated maxim, "I think, therefore I am". The process possibly marked the commencement of the European Enlightenment, with its faith in individual human - rather than religious - enquiry.¹¹

¹¹ Jon Newton, *The Revelation Worldview: Apocalyptic Thinking in a Postmodern World*, p. 22.

Finally, the authority of the Church and Bible was undermined from within when Enlightenment and modernity criticism “entered the theological academy and investigated the Bible without the presumption that it was God’s holy words, but rather on the basis that it was an ancient text (or collection of texts) like any other”.¹² All of a sudden, Christianity’s core texts were made by historical-critical investigations to be the object of human rather than the revealed knowledge. That lent credence to the conviction of modernists that society should be ridden of superstition and ignorance in the name of religion, and that a rationalist and scientific mind-set should be propagated instead for the pursuit of a source of knowledge and morals.

According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, at the heart of the cluster of reasons as to why religion (Christianity) lost the cosmos in the West to modern science, and why the Christian view of the order of nature was eclipsed by science during the Scientific Revolution, lies the following: “the weakening of the sapiential dimension (having or providing wisdom), with its emphasis upon the symbolic significance of the cosmos within Christianity; the rise of a rationalism already embedded to some extent in the Thomistic synthesis; the dominance of nominalism in the late Middle Ages; the eclipse and marginalization of Christian philosophy during the period, which marks the incubation and formation of modern science; and the all-important rise of humanism in the Renaissance”.¹³

Once the corruptions of religious and political authorities were cleansed by reason and open-minded thinking, the path to truth was clearly shown. Facilitating the arrival at truth and teaching it was the task of education. Education was recognised as a vehicle for nourishing and further promoting the newly found truth and its infinite socio-cultural manifestations and ways. It was aimed at enlightening the masses and making them better citizens and better people. Educated enlightened people will form the foundations of the new free and integrated society, a society which they will create through their own efforts.¹⁴ If God created the universe, earth and people, He was not needed afterwards for running and managing the human lives on earth. God could be accepted as creator, but not as a guide.

¹² Richard Sullivan, Dennis Sherman and John Harrison, *A Short History of Western Civilization*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), pp. 22-23.

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, p. 130.

¹⁴ Christopher Witcombe, *The Roots of Modernism*, (Art History Resources, <http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/roots.html>, accessed on June, 11 2019).

Modernity as an Achievement or a Mirage

However, the worldview and ideals of modernity soon proved to be significantly untrue and unnatural, having no basis in the reality of human condition. Riddled with doubts concerning the continued feasibility and sustainability of material progress, human liberty, freedom and equality, the edifice of modernity fast started to fracture. It in the end degenerated into a corrupt and oppressive system of thought, attitudes and practices. It at long last might have become as fraudulent and unjust as the religious and political systems it sought to overthrow and replace. Especially its philosophical underpinnings were perceived as a synthesis of all heresies that threatened to destroy all religions.¹⁵

It was as early as in the 16th century that Martin Luther, a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation, warned: “Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but — more frequently than not — struggles against the Divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God.” Martin Luther also said: “Reason is the devil’s handmaid and does nothing but blaspheme and dishonour all that God says or does.”¹⁶

The modernist ideology deteriorated to the point where its fundamental notions of truth, freedom, liberty, education, justice and equality were transformed by many Western governments and other institutions into self-serving excuses for invasion, subjugation, conversion and exploitation. Christopher Witcombe writes that “to the dismay of progressive intellectuals, the ideology of modernism has also become the means by which the values and worldview of the West have been promoted and imposed around the world either through imperial colonialism and economic globalization, or through the ‘conditionalities’ attached to loans granted by the International Monetary Fund, and policies serving Western interests that are forced on developing countries by the World Bank. With proselytizing zeal, local cultures, customs, economies, and ways of life in Third World and developing countries have been swept aside in the name of ‘modernization’ the benefits of which have been measured

¹⁵ Daniel Donovan, *Church and Theology in the Modernist Crisis*, (San Francisco: Proceedings of the Fortieth Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America – June 5-8, 1985, 2013), pp. 145-159. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air, the Experience of Modernity*, pp. 120-129.

¹⁶ Paulos Huang, *Dialogue and Critique: The 16th Century Religious Reformation and Modernity*, inside: “Yearbook of Chinese Theology 2017”, edited by Paulos Huang, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. vii-xxiii.

primarily in Western terms. Modernism has been the West's most effective and influential export and in fact has been willingly embraced by many non-Western cultures for commercial, economic, or political reasons, or as a demonstration of support of Western ideals."¹⁷

It is now widely held that the period defined and dictated by the modernist philosophy and principles has ended. Now is a phase of transition into a new phase of human history called post-modernity or post-modernism. The term generally implies a broad spectrum of anti-modern penchants, on the one hand, and such as call for the revision of modernist fundamental assertions and ideas, on the other. It stands to reason that modernity failed in the sense that it has abruptly ended, and in the sense that it achieved little of what it had intended.

Modernity was guilty of naïve realism where the truth about the supposed objective natural reality, independent of whether anyone is thinking about or perceiving it, has been manipulated and attempted to be imposed on everyone globally. The pursued objective truth was regarded as independent of human beings and all of their intellectual and socio-cultural influences. It was also believed that the descriptive and explanatory statements of scientists and historians could, in principle, be objectively true or false.¹⁸ This doctrine accorded science and scientists all the leverage they needed to ascribe a sense of functional sanctity to themselves and what they were doing.

The proponents of modernity and modernism were likewise way off the mark when they affirmed that through the use of reason and logic, and with the more specialized tools provided by science and technology, human beings were likely to change themselves and their societies for the better. It was reasonable to expect that future societies will be more humane, more just, more enlightened, and more prosperous than they were before.¹⁹ It was proven time and again – and it is still being the case – that the misguided pursuit of scientific and technological knowledge leads to the development of technologies for destruction, oppression, subjugation and exploitation. It was owing to that verity that to a majority of researchers, the most advanced 20th century was at the same time

¹⁷ Christopher Witcombe, *Modernism and Postmodernism*, (Art History Resources, <http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/modpostmod.html>, accessed on June, 11 2019).

¹⁸ Brian Duignan, *Postmodernism*, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy, 2018, accessed on June, 10 2019).

¹⁹ Ibid.

the bloodiest in human history, as it was fraught with wars, genocides and famines.

Another problem with modern man was that he gained a new - albeit faulty - conception of himself as a being endowed with reason and technological power, totally independent of Heaven and its revealed knowledge and guidance, "and ready to conquer Earth, both its non-European humanity and the order of nature."²⁰ Modern man further viewed himself – again entirely predicated upon humanism, naturalism, rationalism, individualism and scepticism as the cornerstones of the modernist worldview - as a being whose solitary goal was bodily pleasure rooted in the stimuli of greed, self-centeredness, pride and vanity. Consequently, modern man became a prisoner of his senses and desires, which he had to seek to constantly satiate without limit. He showed no interest whatsoever in the potential significance of both his body and the surrounding natural world in the religious, metaphysical and cosmological sense.²¹

Relentless scientific discoveries and technological dynamics, fed with the unrestricted innovation and creativity spirit, created a sense of perpetual expectation, hope and insatiability. People wanted more of everything, and that those things be always better, faster and brighter. There was so much in life to be experimented and enjoyed by everybody. Opportunities were limitless and life was not to be wasted on lethargy, traditionalism and conformity. It was to be lived to the fullest. It could be asserted, therefore, that the pinnacle of modernity and modernism signified the birth of popular culture as a concept and social phenomenon with mass accessibility and appeal, personifying the most broadly shared meanings of a social system.²²

The dire consequences of such a modernist philosophy and such a set of modernist behavioural patterns could be anticipated. And they were as pervasive and universal as the philosophy and lifestyles that instigated them. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it: "Modern man has burned his hands in the fire which he himself kindled when he allowed himself to forget who he is. The problem of the devastation brought upon the environment by technology, the ecological crisis and the like, all issue from the malady of amnesia or forgetfulness from which modern as well as

²⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, p. 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

²² Raymond Betts, *A History of Popular Culture*, (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), pp. 9-11.

postmodern man suffer.”²³ Modern man has simply forgotten who he is and how he is relatable to the spiritual realm and the realm of his Creator and the Creator of the whole universe. Living on the periphery of his own circle of existence, Modern man “has been able to gain a qualitatively superficial but quantitatively staggering knowledge of the world. He has projected the externalized and superficial image of himself upon the world. And then, having come to know the world in such externalized terms, he has sought to reconstruct an image of himself based upon this external knowledge.”²⁴

One of the greatest crimes of modernity was the undue exaltation of man’s freedom. Such happened to the extent that it was held that man was so talented and capable that he could act independently of any other agent in the universe, while harbouring the idea of a new world and indefinite material progress therein, which was set to be identifiable with the attainment of man’s inclusive welfare and happiness. It was additionally believed that only free man could change and form the world. On account of his newly acquired qualities – on top of which stood absolute freedom – man could do so “as he willed irrespective of any cosmic laws or even of the Divine Will.”²⁵

Thus, armed with his rebellious and defiant tendencies against Heaven and the metaphysical world, selfish and avaricious personality, disoriented mind and character that lacked any genuine moral compass, modern man was set to cause in the long run more damage than benefit for himself, humankind and the natural world. He proved thereby that his modernity project was more of a mirage than an authentic and definite achievement. The global spiritual, moral and environmental crises that have been brought about by modern man and his science and its applications in the sphere of technology, have been unprecedented both in scope and intensity. So critical and so omnipresent are the crises that they could yet prove a cause of the ultimate demise of man as a species.

Having fully forgotten who he is, where he belongs and what his life purpose and mission are, artificial modern man has created artificial environments for himself and his operations. Concrete jungles, calling to mind the worst and most unpleasant aspects of modern predominant urban life, have become the rule of the day for modern urbanized man.

²³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2002), pp. 4-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, p. 173.

From those artificial environments, nature, human natural disposition and, of course, elements of spirituality, have been excluded to the greatest possible extent. Nature has become desacralized for modern man. It has come to be regarded as something to be used, exploited and profited from to the fullest extent possible without any sense of obligation and responsibility towards it.²⁶

All the talk nowadays about sustainable development and peaceful coexistence with nature is not due to modern and postmodern man's sudden change in attitude towards nature, life and himself. Rather, it is due to man's realization that the natural resources of the world are dwindling at an alarming rate. As such, he will soon become unable to rampantly use and enjoy nature for his greedy and selfish ends, as he did in the past. As attractive as they seem, the notions of sustainability and preservation of nature aim only to prolong man's raping and exploitation of the natural world as a means as well as object of his physical pleasure-seeking. Hence, the issue is never about nature, but about man; nor is it about the inherent interests of nature, but about the artificial and extravagant interests of man.

The harmony between man and his self, and between man and nature, has been damaged by modernity beyond repair. That is a fact everyone seems to be ready to admit. But not everyone realizes that this disequilibrium, with its internal and external manifestations in man and his existential contexts, "is due to the destruction of the harmony between man and God."²⁷

Lastly, as an illustration of the scale of the problems faced by man today, according to the findings from a United Nations-backed panel called the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), up to one million plant and animal species face extinction, many within decades, because of human activities. Without "transformative changes" to the world's economic, social and political systems to address this crisis, the IPBES panel projects that major biodiversity losses will continue to 2050 and beyond. "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food securi-

²⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1997), p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

ty, health and quality of life worldwide,” says IPBES chair Robert Watson.²⁸

The Impact on Architecture

In the midst of all the developments associated with the emergence of modernity, architecture as a system of thought and a physical framework that outlines and frames human lives, was significantly affected. That was due to a tenet according to which changes in social systems, in cultural maturity and in people’s way of thinking and their beliefs, inevitably lead to changes in ways people perceive, build and experience their built environment. The former is the cause, the latter the effect. Moreover, the latter represents an embodiment and physical expression of the former. Hence, the various domains of people’s-built environment denote a depository of frozen ideas, initiatives and solutions, as well as a succession of exhibition pathways where the level of people’s artistic and architectural consciousness and creativity has been immortalized and permanently displayed. Architecture is an open book about people, affirming their identity and their cultural together with civilizational proclivities and achievements. Developments in architecture are symptomatic of wider general trends.

Thus, as soon as the age of the Renaissance, as a prelude to modernity, came into being, the above canon was set into motion. Renaissance architecture, just like the rest of its fine arts, drew heavily from Greek and Roman sources. That was the cause because the advocates of the Renaissance rejoiced in reviving classical civilization and the cultural products of Greece and Rome. They wished to generate new cultural and civilizational outputs dissimilar from stale medieval Christianity-dominated civilization. At the receiving end of their criticism were medieval Scholasticism and medieval culture in general. What was intended was integration of the best of classical civilization and the best and most wholesome elements of Christianity and its civilization.

Renaissance architecture borrowed from the Greek sources columns - though only for decorative purposes - and the idea of horizontal lines and symmetry as a whole. Whereas from Rome arrived the concepts of the dome, the arches and the emphasis on the mass. This was a stark departure from the Gothic architecture of the later Middle Ages, which

²⁸ Jeff Tollefson, *Humans are Driving One Million Species to Extinction*, (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01448-4>, 2019, accessed on June, 10 2019).

was most widely used especially for cathedrals and churches, and which featured and gave clear emphasis to plans that resembled the ancient Roman basilica, rib vaults, flying buttresses, increased height both absolutely and in proportion to the width as an aspiration to Heaven, stained glass windows, portals and the tympanum, towers and spires, lavish sculpture and decoration on religious themes, and pointed arches.

Additionally, Renaissance architecture, together with especially sculpture and painting, celebrated humanism in man and the intrinsic natural components of life. The human being: his life and ultimate destiny, emotions, capabilities, talents and terrestrial backgrounds and milieus wherein he lived and performed, has been put on a pedestal and glorified. The themes and styles were ever more humanized, secularized and naturalized, rather than divinized and spiritualized. The spectacle and pagantry of Christianity and its institutions, rites and teachings – at least as depicted through the prism of medieval art – were losing their allure by the day.²⁹

Next is the Baroque style of architecture which grew directly out of the Late Renaissance. The Renaissance has led to an enormous loss of power and influence by the especially Catholic Church in many fields. Large parts of Europe had converted to Protestantism, which originated with the 16th century Protestant or European Reformation, and the emergence of modern science had proved the fallacy on which many of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith were based. Needless to say, that the Renaissance and its profound humanism played a notable role in the Reformation. The Church had also lost its monopoly in education, and the religious building had relinquished its position as the sole source of authority in architectural development.³⁰

As a corollary of those earth-shattering events, the Church embarked on an initiative to respond to the sweeping Protestant Reformation. The move is called the Counter Reformation or the Catholic Reformation, and was a period of general Catholic revival. It was the advent of the Counter Reformation that was to exert the main formative influence on the development of Baroque architecture. “Like secular power, religious power was seen as absolute and its legitimization a matter of

²⁹ Richard Sullivan et al., *A Short History of Western Civilization*, pp. 349-351. Christoph Hocker, *Architecture, a Concise History*, (London: Laurence King, 2000), pp. 73-89.

³⁰ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, (Cambridge: Goodfellow and Egan, 2005), p. 52. Richard Sullivan et al., *A Short History of Western Civilization*, p. 414.

divine right. Baroque architecture set out to tackle the task of representing both authorities on a suitable scale and with due ceremony, using similar methods in the representation of both. The idea was to dramatize the power and to appeal to the sensuous perceptions of the observer. The express aims of the new style were to confuse and overpower.”³¹

The Baroque style was a direct outgrowth of absolutism: the two go hand in hand. Baroque was the symbolization of opulence, wealth and the power of the upper classes. Its buildings and paintings were a reflection of the close interweaving of the Church and secular power, aimed to support and sustain each other.³² It is no accident that the main emphasis of the style fell on the religious institutionalized buildings, such as churches and monasteries, together with the government-related buildings, such as palaces and princely residences, and secular buildings designed to impress the beholder. “It was, after all, the court, the aristocracy and the clergy who commissioned the work.”³³

The first phase of the Counter Reformation had imposed a severe, academic style on religious architecture, which had appealed to intellectuals but not the mass of churchgoers. The Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563 and labelled as the quintessence of the Counter Reformation) decided instead to appeal to a more popular audience, and declared that the arts should communicate religious themes with direct and emotional involvement.³⁴

Baroque art was essentially concerned with the dramatic and the illusory, with vivid colours, hidden light sources, luxurious materials, and elaborate, contrasting surface textures, used to heighten immediacy and sensual delight. Ceilings of Baroque churches, dissolved in painted scenes, presented vivid views of the infinite to the worshiper and directed him through his senses toward heavenly concerns. The dome illustrated the union between the heavens and the earth. The inside of the cupola was lavishly decorated with paintings that depicted vivid religious themes, giving the impression to those below of looking up at Heaven. Baroque architects made architecture a means of propagating faith in the church and in the state. Baroque palaces expanded to command the infi-

³¹ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, p. 53.

³² Christoph Hocker, *Architecture, a Concise History*, p. 101. Bertrand Russel, *History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), pp. 422-424.

³³ Christoph Hocker, *Architecture, a Concise History*, p. 101.

³⁴ *Baroque*, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque#cite_note-16, 2019, accessed on June, 11 2019).

nite and to display the power and order of the state. Baroque space invited participation and provided multiple changing views. Renaissance space was passive and invited contemplation of its precise symmetry. A Baroque building expanded in its effect to include the square facing it, and often the ensemble included all the buildings on the square as well as the approaching streets and the surrounding landscape. Baroque buildings dominated their environment; Renaissance buildings separated themselves from it.³⁵

Baroque architecture thrived in Europe from the early 17th to the mid-18th century. It was followed by the Rococo style which, as an outstandingly showy and grandiose style of decoration, is regularly defined as the final example of the Baroque architecture school. At times, however, it is simply called “late Baroque”. The Rococo style was succeeded by Neoclassical architecture styles, receiving inspiration from the classical art and culture of classical antiquity known as the Greco-Roman world, something like what happened during the Renaissance. The main Neoclassical movement coincided with the 18th-century Enlightenment and its age of reason, and continued into the early 19th century.³⁶

Furthermore, “Romantic architecture appeared in the late 18th century in a reaction against the rigid forms of neoclassical architecture. It reached its peak in the mid-19th century, and continued to appear until the end of the 19th century. It was designed to evoke an emotional reaction, either respect for tradition or nostalgia for a bucolic past. It was frequently inspired by the architecture of the Middle Ages, especially Gothic architecture.”³⁷

During in particular the latter architectural movements, there was progressively more room for borrowing and copying elements from other architectural styles which existed beyond the European historical and geographical parameters. Jan Gympel writes that “technology and the natural sciences demolished one apparently unshakable certainty and permanent boundary of knowledge after the other: why shouldn’t the limits of time and space also be removed from culture? Thus elements from Western architectural history were enthusiastically complemented by those

³⁵ Henry Millon, *Baroque and Rococo*, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Western-architecture/Baroque-and-Rococo>, 2019, accessed on June, 11 2019).

³⁶ Christoph Hocker, *Architecture, a Concise History*, pp. 116-129. Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 58-69.

³⁷ *Romanticism*, (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism#Architecture>, 2019, accessed on June, 11, 2019).

from other cultures, which the European colonial powers encountered in the course of their conquests and were keen to copy.”³⁸ Even Byzantine, Moorish and Oriental models appeared here and there throughout the West during the period as the world was becoming “smaller” and was brought closer together by rapid communications.³⁹ It was a “free style”, so to speak, where anything was possible.⁴⁰

Throughout history, most architectural styles grew naturally and out of expediency. Some did because of the discovery of new building technologies, or because of the availability and use of certain building materials; and others did because of a desire to stand still - like the pyramids of Mexico and Egypt, ancient Incan temples in Peru and the Great Wall of China - or move forward - like the architecture of the Renaissance which explored the past Greek and Roman legacies but reworked them for new contemporary ends. However, it was increasingly felt that the architecture of the 19th century was rapidly losing its innocence and direction. Such was not a momentary loss of concentration and purpose. Rather, the situation represented the climax of a process that started with the regression of the Renaissance.

Encouraged by the age of Enlightenment and its championing of human reason and its dormant ability to prevail and bring about good to man, the current architecture was regarded as dishonest and corrupt. It was dishonest because it squeezed its functions into buildings that were meant to be temples and not houses, banks, town halls, or railway stations; and corrupt, because such buildings were all too often encrusted with gratuitous and meaningless decoration.⁴¹

Since the architecture of the 19th century was hybrid whereby almost anything could go, it was time to pause, think and ask some crucial questions. What really mattered and what was needed, and really aspired? How should architecture best serve society and, if there was a better society to be fashioned, what could the architect do to help jostle it along?⁴²

It was during Enlightenment when the marked secularization of society took off, that the idea of basing architecture on some rational moral criteria was put forward. With that - it could be contended - the

³⁸ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, p. 74.

³⁹ Richard Sullivan et al., *A Short History of Western Civilization*, p. 602.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Glancey, *The Story of Architecture*, (New York: DK Publishing, 2000), p. 152.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

first seeds of modern architecture were sown, and its first embryonic physical manifestations also came to pass. The new and certainly most important age of architecture was about to arrive.

From then on, driven primarily by the power of reason, architecture no longer served religion and even less so the feudal rulers. It was believed that the built environment could be used to have a positive influence on the spirit of the people, and inspire them to behave in a manner based on reason and morality. To achieve this, however, architecture itself had to fulfil ethical-moral criteria.⁴³ That is, it had to be free, just as philosophy and all sectors of life were becoming liberated and free from the stifling shackles of religion and tradition. Architecture could be free and true to itself only when people: its perceivers, creators and users, become liberated from their “self-induced nonage”, as was the main aim of Enlightenment according to the German philosopher Emanuel Kant (d. 1804).

Some of the theories thus evolved and articulated were to the effect that architecture should be true to its purpose and materials, and therefore, true to itself; and that it should be “honest” in the sense that structure and ornament would again constitute a unity. Architecture, it follows, had to “speak” and express the ideas of the Enlightenment era and spirit. For example, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (d. 1806), French architect and town planner, designed a house for the surveyor of the river Loue. The structure consisted of a horizontal cylinder through which a stream was directed, which then flew into the river as a waterfall, “symbolizing the mastery of the river by rational technical means.”⁴⁴

The Birth of Modernist Architecture

Industrialization and mechanization in the latter 19th and early 20th century changed everything. It was a time when technical innovations were as unsurpassable as dynamic and relentless. The wide spectrum of new building materials, structural forms and building techniques were thus made possible and easily available. The period signified the peak of modernity as a way of life. Similarly, through subsequent decades, it characterised a stage in the rapid progression of modernist architecture as a foremost philosophy and style of architecture and design of the epoch.

⁴³ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The invention and wide use of structural steel, reinforced concrete and glass revolutionized architecture. The spirit of intellectual rebellion against the standards and values of the past dominated by religion and other traditional systems gave architects freedom to think and experiment like never before. Unparalleled wealth and opportunities brought about by the ongoing revolutions in science, technology, engineering and building materials provided architects with means to execute their ideas.⁴⁵ They were able to bring those ideas from the orb of abstract concepts and theories to the orb of palpable solutions and results.

Thus, modernist architecture as a universal style and school of thought was born, and the sky seemed to be the limit. Architects were finally able to make their dreams a reality by fully breaking away from historical and traditional architectural styles, and to invent something that was utterly new and purely functional. Architecture was to be a product of the now and here, and to echo the ideas and achievements of modernity. The style was soon to be transformed into a global phenomenon with an international appeal.

Perhaps the first example of modernist architecture was the Crystal Palace by Joseph Paxton. It was built in 1851 in London, and was destroyed by fire in 1936. The building was an example of iron and plate glass construction. Examples of glass and metal curtain walls were to follow soon. The building was also seen as a product of the industrial and commercial boom which coincided with the Industrial Revolution. Then came steel-framed skyscrapers. The first example was the ten-story Home Insurance Building in Chicago. It was built in 1884 by William Le Baron Jenney (d. 1907) and was razed in 1930. The iron frame construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris built in 1889 captured the imagination of millions. It was then the tallest structure in the world.⁴⁶ It became as much the symbol of the city of Paris as of an age and its built environment ideology. A big boost to modernist architecture and its attempt to reach at once for the sky and for people's hearts was further given by the invention of the safety elevator in 1852, electric light in 1879, and the first modern air conditioner in 1902.

The greatest pioneering masters and icons of modernist architecture were: Louis Sullivan (d. 1924), an American architect famous for his

⁴⁵ Brent Broolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1976), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 73-97. Richard Sullivan et al., *A Short History of Western Civilization*, pp. 602-603.

doctrine “Form follows function” and known as the “Father of skyscrapers”; Adolf Loos (d. 1933), an Austrian and Czech architect known for his belief that ornament was a crime as broadcasted in his essay cum manifesto titled “Ornament and Crime”; Frank Lloyd Wright (d. 1959), an American architect about whom some people say that he was the greatest architect of all time; Le Corbusier (d. 1965), a Swiss-French architect and urban planner, who made a great effort to provide better living conditions for the residents of crowded cities, and to whom is ascribed the maxim “A house is a machine to live in”; Walter Gropius (d. 1969), a German architect and the founder of the seminal Bauhaus School, who insisted that architecture should snub historical and traditional orthodoxies and espouse the innovative new ideologies of modern industry; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (d. 1969), a German-American architect who was a director of the Bauhaus and associated with the modernist precept “Less is more”.

The following declarations of Le Corbusier summarizes the disposition of modernist architecture: “A grand epoch has just begun. There exists a new spirit. There already exist a crowd of works in the new spirit, they are found especially in industrial production. Architecture is suffocating in its current uses. ‘Styles’ are a lie. Style is a unity of principles which animates all the work of a period and which result in a characteristic spirit. Our epoch determines each day its style. Our eyes, unfortunately, don’t know how to see it yet.”⁴⁷

Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, a French architect and architectural theorist and historian, along the same lines in 1872 advocated a complete break with tradition when he wrote: “Use the means and knowledge given to us by our times, without the intervening traditions which are no longer viable today, and in that way we can inaugurate a new architecture. For each function its material; for each material its form and its ornament.” This thought is believed to have influenced some of the leading founding masters of modernist architecture.⁴⁸

By and large, some of the main and most easily recognizable characteristics of modernist architecture are as follows: lack of ornaments and mouldings; rectangular, cylindrical and cubic shapes; large

⁴⁷ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, (London: J. Rodker, 1931), (https://archive.org/stream/TowardsANewArchitectureCorbusierLe/Towards%20a%20New%20Architecture%20-%20Corbusier%20Le%20_djvu.txt, accessed on June, 12 2019).

⁴⁸ *Modern Architecture*, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_architecture#Origins, 2019, accessed on June, 12 2019).

windows set in horizontal bands; open interior floor plans with fewer walls; extensive use of reinforced concrete, steel and glass; lines are straight and angled, rather than curved, gabled and carved; visual expression of the structure, rather than hiding structural elements; following the ‘machine aesthetics’ in the use of materials produced by industrial processes; connection to outdoors; promoting the concept of truth and justice to the materials used and not ornamenting or plastering them with some other artificial materials (what is inside should be reflected outside); the natural colours of building materials is the natural embellishment of buildings; simplicity to the core whereby simple is always sophisticated and is the greatest adornment of buildings; “Less is more” which denotes all-round minimalism in buildings; function is a key objective and drives the overall form of the structure, indicating that the built space is the result of the intended meaning or purpose behind it (“Form follows function”); skyscrapers are generally sheathed in glass.

Assessing the Main Dogmas of Modernist Architecture

This way, modernist architecture endorsed and celebrated the secured human liberty and freedom of expression and experience. It recorded its victory over all forms of tradition and institutionalized religion. The past was left where it belongs: in the past, and the future was right here and right now. Both tradition and religion were forever buried under the rubble of their irreparable inadequacies and flaws, coupled with the damages their respective questionable legacies had caused to human mind and soul. Lest they come back, over their tarnished reputations and also their fast-decaying material residues, soaring skyscrapers were erected, and the continued spatial expansion of the cities and the increasing density of population and their built environment – as epitomes of an ideology and its systems of thought and values – were assertively stretched and laid out. As if the massive and ever-expanding cities, which functioned as the physical loci of modernization, which, in turn, served as the root cause of rapid and frenzied urbanization, acted as the necropolises of tradition and religion, and the skyscrapers as their cenotaphs and tombstones.

Modernist architecture also fostered modern man’s naturalistic tendencies. Man was perceived as part of nature, albeit in the sense that his own natural bodily pleasures were most important. Even though architecture promoted close interaction with outdoors and doing justice to the natural building materials by not ornamenting them with some artificial ones, modern man thus wanted to parade his subjugation of and mas-

tery over nature and its forces. As central to the modernist creed, it was held that an artificially created world with the built environment as its framework, which is completely planned and designed by man, had to be better than any natural one created by random natural forces. Buildings were “machines for living”. The natural world should always be in service of man’s created and mechanized world. Man’s physical progress and corporeal contentment were life’s *raison d’être*. Man, with his science and technology was its only deity, so to speak.

Modernist buildings were consistently regular and well proportioned, featuring almost exclusively straight lines and right angles. They were wide and bright with the elevations glazed from top to bottom. The only decoration both inside and outside was the pure effect of the materials used.⁴⁹ Symmetry was their distinctiveness. That was so because nature, too, displays a strong penchant for symmetry and repetitive patterning. Such is evident in animate and inanimate beings as well as structures.

Straight lines communicate messages and generate experiences. If they are horizontal, they convey the meanings of stability, confidence and peace. Since they cannot fall over, horizontal lines draw attention to width, firmness, constancy and security. By their association with horizon, they likewise evoke the notions of clarity and authority of vision, purpose and objective. They suggest the infinity of inspiration, opportunities and vitality. Vertical lines, on the other hand, are strong and rigid, implying determination, ability and potential energy. In their own way, they accentuate stability and combine it with perpetual dynamism. They stretch from the earth to the heavens and so, are connected with ontological dimensions and feelings. Their tallness and formality give the impression of dignity, prominence and victory.

Modernist architecture was projecting itself as self-righteous. It exuded a sense of superiority that was reminiscent of Western colonialism.⁵⁰ It possessed a missionary or proselytizing attitude, and its architects’ personal visions were infused with a sense of moral superiority. They believed that the architect’s mission was to redesign the world in his own image, and his values applied to all. Less “civilized” people could only profit from adopting architects’ way of life. So important were the precepts and mottos of modernist architecture that they were

⁴⁹ Jan Gympel, *The Story of Architecture, from Antiquity to the Present*, pp. 96-99.

⁵⁰ Brent Brolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture*, p. 45.

regarded as articles of faith. They were “rhetorical statements whose moral overtones made them as unquestionable as Divine Law.”⁵¹

Nevertheless, since the form of architecture is the language of an architectural will and movement, the modernist doctrines of simplicity, minimalism and visual transparency reveal the absence of a meaningful and profound worldview in modern man, apart from his rugged individualism, relativism, nihilism and scepticism. Buildings planned and built in such a fashion simply put across that modern man and his architecture have nothing, or extremely little, consequential to tell the audience. Buildings persuasively speak that modern man is unsure of his inherited value, is sceptical of his self and any system, and is reluctant to identify with any vision. He is one-dimensional, minimalist and superficial, and so is his architecture.

Modernist architecture is self-assertive and presumptuous. It carves out the space needed for its buildings with might. It strengthens and solidifies the outside edges, right angles, its frontiers and the landscaping of space, in order to make sure that the piece it has cut off does not re-join the rest of space. Buildings stand alone and autonomously, testifying defiantly to the presence and might of man and his victorious interference with nature and space. Thus, modernist architecture gives evidence of the assertion of man and human power in space, of the power of that power to act in space, to contend in the physical theatre of God, defying and challenging Him at the same time.⁵²

Finally, having cut out and appropriated a portion of space, modernist architecture now seeks to express man’s will, to enable man to live his victory, to enjoy his property as he enters and remains in the building. The idea which serves this purpose best is “enclosure”. Space must be enclosed, trapped, if it is to be had, owned and enjoyed.⁵³ In point of fact, each building for modern man is his haven, yet his temple, as it were, for it is in them that he goes about demonstrating who he is and what his life purpose is. It is in them furthermore that he becomes the prisoner of his nihilistic and hedonistic inclinations, which he had to seek to relentlessly quench without limit.

At long last, as a reaction to modernist architecture and the dogmas connected with it, postmodernism and postmodernist architecture as

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵² Isma’il Ragi al-Faruqi, *Islam and Architecture*, inside: “Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization”, edited by Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg, (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1981), pp. 99-117.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 99-117.

a style, or styles, of architecture and the decorative arts appeared in the late 20th century. The new style rejected the perceived austerity, formality, exclusivity and lack of variety associated with modernist architecture. It signified a victory over and escape from the nihilistic, anti-traditional and misanthropic concept of the modern architectural style(s) to an architectural style of “old” values.⁵⁴ Some of the chief characteristics of postmodernist architecture are as follows: structural variety, asymmetric and oblique forms, bright colours, variety of materials and shapes, literary allusions, classical motifs, historical references, rich ornamentation, complexity and contradiction.

Postmodernist architecture was a clever combination of “old” and “new”. It often blended astonishing new forms and features with seemingly contradictory elements of classicism. The process has been described as a synergy between “representation and abstraction, monumental and informal, traditional and high-tech.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Modernity is an exclusively Western concept that has no equivalent in other cultures and civilizations. The same holds true as regards its principal offshoots, including architecture. Its main doctrine is the rejection of tradition and all forms of religion, effectively declaring a war against Heaven, refuting the ideas of God and any spirituality, and desacralizing nature. The only thing that is deified is man and his scientific and technological progress. The planes and faces of modernist architecture, as somewhat the peak of modernity and its architectural progression, unmistakably testify to those realities.

However, due to its missionary and proselytizing penchant, which concurred with and grew out of European colonialism, modernity and everything that went with it was attempted to be conceived and presented as a globalized phenomenon. It was regarded as an epitome of truth, as well as the key to human wellbeing and happiness. And that is where the biggest problem lay. When people started to become disillusioned with modernity and its increasingly unbecoming legacy, it was discovered that the predicaments were so global and all-embracing that they touched the core of existence. Thus, the whole of mankind - yet the whole earth - stands today at a crossroads with its sheer existence at stake.

⁵⁴ Christoph Hocker, *Architecture, a Concise History*, p. 125.

⁵⁵ *Postmodern Architecture*, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_architecture, 2019, accessed on June, 13 2019).

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