

Anna Maria Karczewska

Uniwersytet w Białymstoku
a.karczewska@uwb.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-8644-4723

From Bauhaus to Our House: Tom Wolfe contra modernist architecture

Introduction

Tom Wolfe who wore custom-tailored three-piece suits with pocket squares and extra-wide ties might be remembered as much for his snappy dressing as for his celebrated works – from *The Right Stuff*, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* to *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. Not only was Wolfe’s appearance controversial and eccentric but also his style of writing was distinct. His language was florid, full of pathos, with sweetened speech patterns, lurid metaphors, onomatopoeias and whimsical adjectives. In this particular style, he wrote for the most talked-about magazines in America – *The International Herald Tribune* and *Esquire*, and produced some of the most vibrant journalism of the decade. His “verbal pyrotechnics” and meticulous reporting exerted an impact on a national level, made him famous, earned him the name of a leader of a journalistic revolution, and transformed him into a cultural icon. Tom Wolfe was a brilliantly gifted social observer, satirist, caricaturist, a breaker of journalistic conventions, a pioneer of the enormously influential hybrid known as New Journalism.¹

Wolfe was anxious to chronicle all the social changes which his country was undergoing and, to this end, in 1981 he delved into critique

¹ William McKeen, *Tom Wolfe* (New York: Twayne, 1995), pp. ix, 3, 12.

on modernist architecture² in his book-length essay *From Bauhaus to Our House*. The author of *The Bonfire of Vanities* not only presents a compact history of modernist architecture but, apart from devoting pages to masters such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, he also frontally attacks modernist architecture and levels the complaint that a small group of architects took over control of people's aesthetic choices. According to Wolfe, modern buildings wrought destruction on American cities, "sweeping away their vitality and diversity in favour of the pure, abstract order of towers in a row."³ Modernist architects, on the other hand, saw the austere buildings of concrete, glass and steel "as signposts of a new age, as the physical shelter for a new, utopian society."⁴

This article attempts to analyse Tom Wolfe's selected criticisms of the modernist architecture presented in *From Bauhaus to Our House*. In order to understand Wolfe's discontent with modernist architecture's basic tenets economic, social, and political conditions that prompted architects to pursue a modernist approach to design will be analysed. Moreover, Wolfe's criticism will be contrasted with the opinions of different scholars and architects to give a wider perspective and a broader context to the phenomenon in question. The issues discussed in the article will cover Wolfe's description of the arrival of the International Style in the United States, his critique of the "non bourgeois style", monotonous glass box imagery, worker housing ideal and modernist city planning.

Modernist architecture and its ideals

Modernist architecture implied focus on simple forms, it tended to discard ornament as an incongruity from the past. Most of its proponents followed Adolf Loos's controversial ideas,⁵ which later became a central

² Modernist architecture is a general term for currents in world architecture developing in the years 1918-1975. This broad term is used here interchangeably to refer also to Bauhaus and the International Style. In the 1950s and 1960s many modern architects started drifting away from minimalist forms of Gropius and van der Rohe and created buildings with ornaments. The coterie of true modernists did not accept it and, for this reason, Wolfe humoristically calls Edward Durrell Stone or Robert Venturi the apostates. The novelist agrees more with the new trends in modernism. In *From Bauhaus to Our House* modern/modernist architecture are virtual synonyms for the International Style.

³ Paul Goldberger, "From Bauhaus to Our House: review," *The New York Times*, 11 October 1981, accessed 15 November 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/11/books/no-headline-46349.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See: Adolf Loos's 1908 lecture Ornament and Crime.

tenet of Bauhaus. Lecturing on his theory, Loos claimed that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects”⁶ and that ornament was no longer an expression of our culture. Moreover, “modern architecture aspired to reconnect with the culture of the age of the machine. In this light also, ornament was doomed as a relic.”⁷

Modernist architecture embraced minimalism and was associated with an analytical approach to the functions of buildings. It has also been called International Modern or International Style. In France, this movement was exemplified by Le Corbusier who had renounced any interest in beauty in order to focus exclusively on mechanical functioning and declared that “the house is a machine for living in.”⁸ He recommended that the houses of the future be ascetic and clean, disciplined and frugal and that the point of a house was not to be beautiful but to function well. Le Corbusier was known for his categorical views on architecture and quest for efficiency. According to Le Corbusier, the functions of a house were to provide a shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive; to be a receptacle for light and sun; to offer a certain number of rooms appropriated to cooking, work, and personal life.⁹ Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in France serves as the example of function and progress. The building eschews historical references, and ornamentation in favour of clean geometric lines.¹⁰

Le Corbusier, whom Wolfe calls *Mr. Purism* and claims that he became a famous architect without building buildings, is also known for his plans for the city of the future. And although Le Corbusier’s Radiant City never actually came to fruition but was built inside his mind,¹¹ many of its principles went on to influence modern planning and urban housing complexes across the globe. Le Corbusier’s plan was to divide the city into segregated commercial, business, entertainment and residential areas which were arranged on a Cartesian grid, allowing the city to function

⁶ Loos in Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 19–24.

⁷ Antoine Picon, *Ornament. The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013), p. 20.

⁸ Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 107.

⁹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publication, 1986), p. 114.

¹⁰ Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 41.

¹¹ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1981), p. 29.

as a “living machine.” According to Le Corbusier the modern city was supposed to be created, properly arranged and built according to a formal layout, rather than an accidental one.¹² Although Le Corbusier’s principles were radical and nearly totalitarian in their order and standardization, they had an extensive influence on modern urban planning and led to the development of new, high-density housing typologies.¹³

In Europe, apart from Le Corbusier there were other great functionalists – as Hitchcock and Johnson¹⁴ called them – such as Walter Gropius, the creator of the Bauhaus school, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Wolfe explains that architects and artists at the Bauhaus devised an innovative vocabulary of design that was based upon new materials, new structural methods and new methods of production. The hallmarks of the Bauhaus style were glass corners, flat roofs, honest materials,¹⁵ and expressed structure. In the Bauhaus school, architects rejected all things bourgeois, created their architecture “starting from zero”¹⁶ and created it for the workers. Wolfe explains the look of worker housing:

And how did worker housing look? It looked nonbourgeois within an inch of its life: the flat roofs, with no cornices, sheer walls, with no window architraves or raised lintels, no capitals or pediments, no colors, just the compound shades, white, beige, gray, and black. [...] They had open floor plans, ending the old individualistic, bourgeois obsession with privacy.¹⁷

The arrival of the International Style in the United States

In the wake of the Nazi’s rise to power, the aforementioned architects fled their countries and arrived at about the same time in the United

¹² Le Corbusier, 1987, p. 220

¹³ Gerald Steyn, “Le Corbusier’s town-planning ideas and the ideas of history”, *SAJAH*, volume 27, number 1, (2012), pp. 83–106.

¹⁴ See: *The International Style* by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

¹⁵ **Truth to materials** is an architectural theory according to which materials should be honest, which means used where they are most appropriate, and without their innate qualities being concealed in any way. Examples of this theory in practice include: exposed concrete left unpainted, with shuttering marks unsanded, timber’s natural grain left unpolished or painted, copper’s natural patina left untouched, steelwork left exposed (www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Truth_to_materials, accessed 27 February 2020).

¹⁶ Wolfe, p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

States. In *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Wolfe writes about the influence of the Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius (whom Wolfe calls the Silver Prince, White God No. 1.) on twentieth-century American architecture and describes the arrival of the International Style architects in the United States with these words:

The reception of Gropius and his confreres was like a certain stock scene from the jungle movies of that period. Bruce Cabot and Myrna Loy make a crash landing in the jungle and crawl out of wreckage in their Abercrombie & Fitch white safari blouses and tan gabardine jodhpurs and stagger into a clearing. They are surrounded by savages with bones through their noses – who immediately bow down and prostrate themselves and commence a strange moaning chant.

The White Gods!

Come from the skies at last!

Gropius was made head of the school architecture at Harvard [...] Mies was installed as dean of architecture at the Armour Institute in Chicago. And not just dean; master builder also. He was given a campus to create, twenty-one buildings in all [...] Twenty-one large buildings, in the middle of the Depression, at a time when building had come to a halt in the United States – for an architect who has completed only seventeen buildings in his career –

O white gods.¹⁸

Gropius and many of his comrades fled to the U.S. and were welcomed at universities with open arms. The author of *The Right Stuff* explains how, at first, insecure American architects rushed to the Bauhaus to study; then, camp-followers Philip Johnson and Henry Russell-Hitchcock heralded the coming of the “International Style”; then, in 1937, Gropius & Co. arrived “uprooted, exhausted, penniless, men without a country, battered by fate”¹⁹ in the United States and how the Americans fell on their faces, made them heads of schools, made modernism the new gospel, downgraded Frank Lloyd Wright, and built confounded boxes.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 41–43.

The White God No. 2., according to Wolfe, was Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe. He was one of the shapers of modernism, a legendary architect who was cast as a leader of the International Style. Van der Rohe is celebrated for conceiving soaring structures of glass, steel and concrete and famous for his “less is more” philosophy. He often repeated: “My architecture is almost nothing.”²¹ His idea was to combine the usual worker-housing elements in ways that were austere and elegant at the same time, along the lines of what today is called “minimalism.” Wolfe accuses Mies van der Rohe of putting “half of America inside German worker-housing cubes.”²² Examples of his work that epitomize the International Style can be seen on the campus of the new Illinois Institute of Technology – these are its prismatic steel-structured buildings with naked brick and glass walls. According to Wolfe, “[t]he main classroom building looked like a shoe factory. The chapel looked like a power plant. The power plant itself, also designed by Mies, looked rather more spiritual [...] thanks to its chimney, which reached heavenward at least.”²³ Mies van der Rohe’s residential towers of 860-880 Lake Shore Drive and the Farnsworth House in Chicago also serve as examples of the International Style. In 1958, the greatest single monument of modernist architecture appeared on Park Avenue in New York City – the Seagram Building.

Mies’ vision of ultimate nonbourgeois purity was a building composed of nothing but steel beams and glass, with concrete slabs creating the ceiling and floors. [...] The tenant could only have white blinds or shades, and there were only three intervals where they would stay put: open, closed and halfway. At any other point they just kept sliding.²⁴

Commenting on Van der Rohe’s building in this way might suggest that Wolfe does not see that “Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building is a lush and extraordinarily beautiful object.”²⁵ Goldberger claims that Wolfe “understands Seagram only as part of Mies van der Rohe’s theorizing, which means he understands it only as a prototype for a universal architectural style, and not as a unique and even profound work of art. [...] He does

²¹ Brett Wallach, *Understanding the Cultural Landscape* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), p. 93.

²² Wolfe, p. 43.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁵ Goldberger, n. pag.

precisely what he warns us against; he has listened to the words, not looked at the architecture.”²⁶ O’Gorman, on the other hand, claims that one cannot fault Wolfe for not analysing building after building in boring details. The critic claims that, to write about architecture with any vitality, it is necessary to write about the people and the circumstances which gave birth to architectural ideas. In doing so, Wolfe brings the climate of academic ideas into sharp focus.²⁷ Wolfe serves up humorous anecdotes about contemporary architects who campaigned for any new building to be built in the style of the Bauhaus-inspired compound, and about fighting among architectural factions. He writes how they strived to outwit one another, how they ignored their clients and wanted to reeducate them. Let the quotation below serve as an example of Wolfe’s “search-and-destroy mission against architectural pretensions”:²⁸

In the great corporate towers, the office workers shoved filing cabinets, desks, wastepaper baskets, potted plants, up against the floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass, anything to build a barrier against the panicked feeling that they were about to pitch headlong into the streets below. Above these jerry-built walls they strung up makeshift curtains that looked like laundry lines from the slums of Naples, anything to keep out that brain-boiling, poached-eye sunlight that came blazing in every afternoon ... And by night the custodial staff, the Miesling police, under strictest orders invaded and pulled down these pathetic barricades thrown up against the pure vision of the white gods and the Silver Prince. Eventually everyone gave up and learned, like the haute bourgeoisie above him, to take it like a man.²⁹

In his entertaining and amusing manner, Wolfe describes million-dollar houses as insecticide refineries (due to their halogen lamps, industrial plate glass, and hob-tread metal spiral stairways) and laments that many American children go to school in buildings that look like “a duplicating-machine replacement-parts wholesale distribution warehouse.”³⁰ Wolfe’s premise is that, since the arrival of the modernist architecture in the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ James F. O’Gorman, “Review of *From Bauhaus to our House*,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March, 1982), pp. 82–83.

²⁸ *The New York Magazine* quoted in Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, p. 1.

²⁹ Wolfe, p. 71.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

Unites States, Americans have commissioned and lived and worked in buildings that they do not like, do not understand and feel uncomfortable in. The journalist explains how the European modernists of the early 20th century consciously cast tradition aside, believing they could create not just buildings and cities according to simple rational principles, thus formulating new esthetics. The results were cold, ugly, inhuman, and impractical buildings. Wolfe presents his theory in the introduction to *From Bauhaus to Our House* with a fragment of the patriotic song “America the Beautiful”:

O BEAUTIFUL, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested as within thy blessed borders today?

I doubt it seriously. [...]

Every great law firm in New York moves without a sputter of protest into a glass-box office building with concrete slab floors and seven-foot-ten-inch-high concrete slab ceilings and plasterboard walls and pigmy corridors [...]

Without a peep they move in! – even though the glass box appalls them all.

These are merely my impressions, I promise you.³¹

Wolfe, criticizing the monotonous glass box imagery explains that he is not alone in his reception of the modernist style. He gives the reader the impression that people who share his point of view are in the majority. However, this is what raises Goldberger’s reservations about Wolfe’s critique. Goldberger accuses Wolfe of being interested only in society’s reactions to architecture and criticises his observations for being simplistic and selective.³² Signaling his dislike of modernist architecture, Wolfe describes how designers wanted to foist modern aesthetics upon an unwilling world and states that the collective legacy of modernists was nothing more than “the glass box” (a pejorative term for such buildings as Gordon Bunshaft’s Lever House in New York) and “worker housing” (a pejorative term for everything from Yamasaki’s Pruitt-Igoe to luxury high-rises on Fifth Avenue). Wolfe sought to convince his readers that American architects embraced the legacy of German architects of the Bauhaus far too

³¹ Ibid., pp. 7–8.

³² Goldberger, n. pag.

eagerly. German architects wanted to reject anything that reminded them of the monarchy and, also, they wanted to satisfy a need: cheap housing for factory workers in the cities. One of Wolfe's accusations is that American architects not only imitated the designs of the Europeans they admired, but adopted their twentieth-century "compound mentality", which meant that art was only for the chosen few who designed only for each other, that American architects wished to design over and over again variations of "the glass box" and "worker housing". Apart from criticising the esthetics of modernist buildings, Wolfe had one more objection. He claimed that the theory and political philosophy the modernists followed was both dubious and inapplicable in the United States.³³

The approach of the European compounds, of Gropius and the Bauhaus, of Mies, Corbu and de Stijl, was utterly irresistible. There were several problems to overcome, however. To begin with, the notion of starting from zero made no sense at all in the United States. The sad truth was that the United States had not been reduced to a smoking rubble by the First World War. She had emerged from the war on top of the world. She was the only one of the combatants who had not been demolished, decimated, exhausted, or catapulted into revolution. She was now one of the Great Powers, young, on the rise, bursting with vigor and rude animal health. Not only that, she had no monarchy or nobility to be toppled, discredited, blamed, vilified, or otherwise reacted against. She didn't even have bourgeoisie. In the absence of a nobility or any tradition of one, the European concept of the bourgeoisie didn't apply. [...] There was very little interest in socialism. There was not even any interest in worker housing. Nobody even talked about it.

Nevertheless ... it had to be! How could anyone turn back after having seen the Radiant City? The great new European architectural vision of Worker Housing would have to be brought to America by any means necessary, in any form necessary. *Any form.*³⁴

In Wolfe's view, Americans became so mired in their colonial complex that they too eagerly adopted the mentality of the modernist design. It was least appropriate in the American century as the modernist architecture "prohibit[s] every manifestation of exuberance, power, empire, grandeur,

³³ Brian Abel Ragen, *Tom Wolfe. A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 29.

³⁴ Wolfe, pp. 33-34.

or even high spirits and playfulness, as the height of bad taste.”³⁵ The admiration of modernist mode of expression seems to be puzzling for Wolfe as, in his view, it was unfaithful to “the Hog-stomping Baroque exuberance of American civilization.”³⁶

However, contrary to Wolfe’s opinion there are scholars who believe that American modernism needs to be analysed in the context of American national peculiarities, which Wolfe seemed to overlook.³⁷ Those who applauded the structures of Mies van der Rohe viewed them as embodying and articulating both the artistic zeitgeist of the postwar era and the American character in that particular period in which it became the political, financial and cultural leader of the free world. Their arguments seem to be not only about architecture but also about the national identity of a country that just assumed the leadership of the world. Van der Rohe’s architecture was the ultimate embodiment of American nationalism and a symbol of the unified postwar American culture, and its spirit, which was neither territorial nor ethnic but embedded in utopian and universal referents. Admirers of van der Rohe’s architecture favoured its lack of external references and the dismissal of worldly circumstances. The émigré architect’s work is perceived in a context in which an imaginary absolute triumphs over reality. His buildings were read as the embodiment of America’s democratic values, its exceptionalism and architectural heritage. Van der Rohe’s architecture is connected with autonomy, freedom of artistic expression, ideological independence and distance from political goals. Those were also the characteristics of the liberal American society. American modernism represented values of American liberal democracy. Van der Rohe was applauded for the sense of freedom the American citizen could experience in his open plans and for the freedom and originality of his artistic expression. His buildings also corresponded to American pragmatism and represented ambition, ingenuity, power, expansiveness and rationalism. “Something about Mies’s architecture and ideological vision seemed to be in sync with the United States’ potent character and heritage.”³⁸ Van der Rohe’s buildings symbolize the narrative through

³⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁷ See: Fershtman and Nitzan-Shifan, 2011.

³⁸ Dorit Fershtman and Alona Nitzan-Shifan, “The Politics of Historiography: Writing an Architectural Canon into Postwar American National Identity,” *National Identities*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (March, 2011: 67–88), p. 79.

which American society gave meaning to itself and, in this sense, following the thought of Walter Benjamin, his architecture bears testimony to “mythology of a society.”

Wolfe would disagree with the abovementioned claims. Also, it would seem that Norman Mailer could be called Wolfe’s ally in judging and finding faults in modernist architecture. In his column “The Big Bite” in the May and August 1963 issues of *Esquire* magazine, Mailer called modernist architecture a plague, cancer which developed in American suburbs, office buildings, schools, factories.³⁹ Mailer saw the cause of the disease in totalitarianism. By totalitarianism in architecture Mailer means “the lack of ornamentation, complexity and mystery”⁴⁰ and adds that “[t]otalitarianism has haunted the twentieth century ... and it proliferates in that new architecture which rests like an incubus upon the American landscapes, that new architecture which cannot be called modern because it is not architecture but opposed to architecture”⁴¹ Mailer claims as well that the new architecture kills individuality, variety, destroys the past. In his view, Guggenheim museum “shatters the mood of neighbourhood and deadens human possibilities,”⁴² Pan Am building on Park Avenue, according to Mailer, “kills the sense of vista.”⁴³ Mailer also claims:

Le Corbusier, Wright and all the giants of Bauhaus are true villains [...] modern architecture tends to excite the Faustian and empty appetites of the architect’s ego rather than reveal an artist’s vision of our collective desire for shelter which is pleasurable, substantial, intricate, intimate, delicate, detailed, foibled, rich in gargoyle, guignol, false closet, secret stair, witch’s hearth, attic, grandeur, kitsch, a world of building as diverse as the need within the eye for stimulus and variation.⁴⁴

Both Mailer and Wolfe criticised modernist architects who, according to them, had an inflated ego and wanted to impose their vision and taste on the clients, who “no longer counted for anything except the funding.”⁴⁵

³⁹ “Mailer vs. Scully [Two Statements on Contemporary Architecture]”, *Architectural Forum. The Magazine of Building*, Vol. 120 (April, 1964), pp. 96–97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Wolfe, p. 38.

Modernist architects wanted to educate people and arrange their life for them. The purpose of this education was to make people comprehend the beauty of the city of the future. The commissioners then could not expect variation and stimulus, so praised by Mailer and Wolfe.

During the heyday of the modernist architecture in the United States Vincent J. Scully, Professor of Art History in Yale defended modernism against Norman Mailer's assault. *Architectural Forum* published Scully's rebuttal to Mailer's railing remarks. In it, Scully criticises Mailer's paragraphs for being biased and "smacking of nineteenth-century romanticism and eclecticism."⁴⁶ He also accuses Mailer of being uninformed about the great modern architects. He claims that the works of modern architects, Le Corbusier among them, contradict everything that Mailer has to say. What is interesting, however, is that Scully soon adopted a mode similar to Mailer's. Later in his essays, Scully writes that Pan American building, Lever House, Seagram Building are aggressive in their self-centeredness. Scully claims the new skyscrapers were being placed close to one another according to the principle of who owns which lot. He also feels that "the skyscrapers fight each other, they are their worst enemies, but the Avenue's most of all. [...] The Park Avenue was a good street, one of the few splendid ones in America, in its own way noble and unique: too bad it all had to happen there."⁴⁷

Surprisingly, Peter Blake, a critic who once was a vigorous proponent of modernist architecture, and who wrote a biography of van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright (see: *The Master Builders*) changed his course radically and started to denigrate it. In 1978, Blake wrote *Form Follows Fiasco, which, note well, Ed Driscoll in his review compares to* Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House*, with the proviso that Blake is an accomplished modern architect.⁴⁸ In the book, Blake observes that much of modern architecture, which promised to revolutionise the living conditions of the world, is unfortunate. Corbusier's massive designs destroyed functional urban neighbourhoods and replaced them with concrete nightmares, which were out-of-touch with the realities of

⁴⁶ "Mailer vs. Scully," p. 97.

⁴⁷ Vincent Scully and Neil Levine (introductions and selection). *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 125.

⁴⁸ Driscoll, Ed, "Review: Form Follows Fiasco", *PJ Media*, 21 January 2011, accessed 31 July 2019, <https://pjmedia.com/eddriscoll/2011/1/21/form-follows-fiasco/>, p. 19.

construction, economy, and human well-being. Blake calls modernist utopias “immensely rational machine[s]”⁴⁹ and believes that people would not want to live inside such machines. He recounts that cities and streets should be “places of intimacy and of interaction rather than [...] landscaped wastelands of alienation.”⁵⁰

Many projects of the modernist era were initially successful, and the public came to associate this strong aesthetic with prosperity and progress; however, modernist architects turned away from the design of the monumental city, the city of vistas focusing on palaces or other great structures, and devoted themselves to designing the city of the common man. Modernism “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.”⁵¹

Modernist housing projects

The modernist architects and urbanists who thought about the city and common life believed that a better design of housing and a larger urban zone could contribute to social improvements. Their housing projects, which from one perspective seemed the fulfillment of modernism in planning and design, from another turned out to be the Achilles’ heel in the link between social reform and modernism. The architects thought that if they eliminated the very substandard physical dwellings and surroundings of slums, the new sanitized dwellings and surroundings would almost *per se* cure social ills. And, though the modernist city was envisioned as a utopian city, modern-day manifestations of Le Corbusier’s ideas have drawn criticism for their lack of public spaces and a general disregard for livability. Apartment complexes (housing units) on urban fringes, inspired by his Unité are now subject to high levels of poverty and crime.

In 1955, a vast worker housing project called Pruitt-Igoe was opened in St. Louis. Pruitt-Igoe was a huge public housing complex made up of 33 separate 11-story buildings. Minoru Yamasaki designed it according to Le Corbusier’s philosophy and fulfilled “the master’s vision of high-rise hives

⁴⁹ Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco. Why Modern Architecture Hasn’t Worked* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1978), p. 66.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵¹ Nathan Glazer, *From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture’s Encounter with the American City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, Kindle).

of steel, glass, and concrete separated by open spaces of green lawn.[...] On each floor there were covered walkways, in keeping with Corbu's idea of 'streets in the air.'"⁵² Yamasaki constructed Pruitt-Igoe according to the best principles of the modern movement: he based on it an orderly plan in which cars and pedestrians were separated, ample open space was provided between the blocks, and flats were oriented to catch daylight and views. The blocks quickly became notorious for poverty, filth, violence, vandalism and chaos. The Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex was demolished in a highly publicized implosion in the seventies and has become a widespread symbol of this failure.

Yamasaki believed, as did Le Corbusier and other modernists, that rational architecture could make people behave better, yet Pruitt-Igoe seemed to prove the opposite. Alain de Botton confirms the latter opinion, writing that "[a]rchitecture may well possess moral messages; it simply has no power to enforce them."⁵³ The high-rise blocks were a global failure and in his essay Wolfe presents more examples of modern architecture's fiascos:

That part of the worker-housing saga has not ended. It has just begun. At almost the same time that Pruitt-Igoe went down, the Oriental Gardens project went up in New Haven, the model city of urban renewal in America. [...] The Oriental Gardens were made of clusters of prefabricated modules. You would never end up with more disadvantaged people than you bargained for. You could keep adding modules and clustering the poor yobboes up until they reached Bridgeport. [...] Other American monuments to 1920s Middle European worker housing began falling down of their own accord. These were huge sports arenas and convention centers, such as the Hartford Civic Center coliseum, which had flat roofs. The snow was too much for them – but they collapsed piously, paying homage on the way down to the dictum that pitched roofs were bourgeois.⁵⁴

Wolfe states that, first of all, public housing projects were viewed with suspicion, as un-American and socialist. Secondly, modern architects were often condemned for a seeming disregard of site consideration such as climate, topography, and existing vegetation. Wolfe observes what Mailer

⁵² Wolfe, p. 73.

⁵³ de Botton, p. 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

described almost twenty years earlier: “Since it [modern architecture] is also irrational, it puts up buildings with flat roofs and huge expanses of glass in northern climates and then suffocates the inhabitants with super-heating systems while the flat roofs leaks under a weight of snow.”⁵⁵

According to Wolfe, the twentieth-century urban architecture is to be blamed for the Pruitt-Igoe’s failure. The journalist does not seem to recognise the importance of the economic, political and social circumstances concurrent with this failure, and however hilarious and entertaining his remarks are, his essay lacks deeper analysis. In his documentary, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (2011), Chad Freidrichs argues that the dysfunctions which prompted the Pruitt-Igoe demolition were not inevitable – that crime, violence, and vandalism that plagued it were products of a negligent maintenance regime, poor financing, and poor design. On the basis of the above, the interviewed New School urban studies professor Joseph Heathcott concluded that the use of public housing was a means of planned segregation. Yamasaki’s complex became a symbol of liberal reformers’ shortcomings: their skepticism about the virtues of the private economy and their excessive faith in the abilities of technical experts and of the government to serve not just as protectors, but providers. While the government’s money paid to build the blocks, running costs were to be covered with rental fees which, as the residents were poor, were not enough. What is more, the majority of the inhabitants were unprepared to live in apartment blocks. They came from slums and, suddenly, they were provided with flats, with common areas, which they had to take care of collectively. Moreover, no social program was created to integrate the residents or prepare them for a new life. Many poor decisions were taken; first of all, to relocate the poorest, socially excluded black inhabitants of St. Louis onto a relatively small piece of land which deepened racial segregation in the city. Secondly, a decline in both industry and population, along with a sharp increase in crime, coincided with the implementation of the Pruitt-Igoe worker housing project.⁵⁶

Modernist planning was a popular idea as a solution to the problem of slums and poverty but the movement could not adequately comprehend and cater to the social dynamics of family and community. And although

⁵⁵ “Mailer vs. Scully,” p. 96.

⁵⁶ Chad Freidrichs, dir., *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth: An Urban History* (First Run Features, 2012).

many modernist building designs are certainly entrenched and celebrated in architectural history and theory, critics have been considerably less flattering in their comments on modernist architects' city planning. In fact, Le Corbusier "is frequently blamed for the monotonous, single-use zoning and car-dependent developments immediately after the Second World War."⁵⁷ Geoffrey Baker writes that "the inadequacies of Le Corbusier's town-planning strategies are now well known" and speaks of his city schemes as "excruciatingly boring" and "regimental."⁵⁸ No wonder that Peter Blake claims that chaos, which is the way real life is, is missing in modern cities. He gives examples of Paris, Milan, London and parts of New York where everything is all jumbled together — living, working, schools, marketing — to the greater good because people need places where they can fight, love, shop, go to theatres: we enjoy variety. Modern planners seem to steer away from this natural chaos in favour of architectural tidiness which is a pity because life, as Blake claims, is untidy.⁵⁹ And Glazer adds "[w]hen one considered these other aspects of cities — the surprising, the unexpected, the accidental, all that made for urbanism and urbanity in a wider sense — modernism had no contribution to make."⁶⁰

Ackerman asserts that the significance of the great modernist architecture does not lay only in resolving the problems of the modern world. He refuses to agree with the criticism of modernist architecture. According to him, the opponents do not show the causes of the failures of modern buildings. The realisation of their critique is superficial. They do not seem to balance the failures with the recognised successes. In defence of the modernists, he adds that "Bauhaus was an alternative to the Edwardian plush and to the stuffiness it represented. Together with the painting, the literature, theatre and music of the time, modernist architecture helped to break down the barriers of a rigid society and the oppressiveness of stodginess masquerading as respect for history."⁶¹ Wolfe seemed not to accept Ackerman's point of view and belonged to the group of anti-modernists who loved the neighbourhoods with mixed functions.

⁵⁷ Steyn, p. 83.

⁵⁸ Geoffrey H. Baker, *Le Corbusier: The Creative Search* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996), pp. 294, 303.

⁵⁹ Blake quoted in Wohlfert, n. pag.

⁶⁰ Glazer, n. pag.

⁶¹ James S. Ackerman, "Review Form Follows Fiasco. Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked by Peter Blake," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 38 No. 1 (March. 1979: 49–50), p. 49.

Modernist city planning

The heritage of Le Corbusier and modernist city planning has been a subject of many debates. More than one million people now live within Chandigarh in India, the original city created by Le Corbusier. It became a modern Indian metropolis which includes plenty of green spaces and cycle paths; it is one of the country's greenest cities. It was designed from scratch to resemble a living organism, complete with head, heart, limbs and circulatory system.⁶² Le Corbusier's ideas influenced other architects and city planners such as Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer who designed Brasilia from scratch in the 1950s. On the one hand, it is claimed that this city is a fascinating example of mid-century architectural vision meeting contemporary urban realities and improvisation; British architect Norman Foster⁶³ describes some of Niemeyer's buildings in Brasilia as a great body of work by a great architect. On the other hand, however, Brasilia's spatial structure is heavily criticized nowadays. There are those who voice the opinion of untisepic Brasilia being a kind of urban experiment that has not survived the test of time, as nowadays people have a completely different approach to public spaces and communication. A plethora of observers and many inhabitants have perceived that some important aspects of cities were suppressed in the designs. Ricky Burdett, Professor of Urban Studies at the London School of Economics, states that "Brasilia does not have the ingredients of a city such as messy streets, people living above shops, and offices nearby."⁶⁴ Critics of modernism, in addition to claiming that modernist city planning failed, say that modernism offers no architecture for ordinary life. In reality, architects of the Modernist movement wanted their houses to speak of the future, with its promise of speed and technology, democracy and science.⁶⁵ It seems that, in this sense, ordinary life has fled from the movement. Modernism stopped providing architecture for normal, quotidian urban use and life. Modernism could no longer play a significant role in the housing of the poor, the workers,

⁶² Manish Chalana and Tyler S. Sprague, "Beyond Le Corbusier and the modernist city: reframing Chandigarh's 'World Heritage' legacy," *Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2013), pp.199–222.

⁶³ Robin, Banerji, "Niemeyer's Brasilia: Does it work as a city?," *BBC World Service*, (discussion: Lord Foster, Lucy Jordan and Professor Ricky Burdett, Newshour on the BBC World Service) 7 December 2012, accessed 27 December 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20632277>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ de Botton, p. 292.

or the middle classes, and was limited to housing for some of the wealthy who appreciated its aesthetic.⁶⁶ According to de Botton, housing tastes remain traditional; present-day modernism expresses itself in advanced and experimental architecture that has become reserved most typically for museums or cultural centres or concert halls where the architect can count on a sophisticated elite client. The architecture of ordinary life has placed itself in opposition against modernism.⁶⁷

Modernism in America was based on the promise of social good, however, Glazer believes that modernist architecture abandoned the social cause. From attempting to design an environment that rejected rationality and good sense and economy – he asserts – modernism evolved into something which wanted to surprise, to astound, to disorient, perhaps to amuse.⁶⁸

Tom Wolfe does not seem to take a very serious look at the ideas behind the modern design, which he calls “an exorable trend, meteorological in nature, like a change in the weather or a tidal wave.”⁶⁹ This meteorological trend seems to be nothing new as “[a]rchitectural fashions go in and out of style with disorienting alacrity. What is one era’s style is the next era’s eyesore.”⁷⁰ The examples can be multiplied, starting from modernists’ criticism of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building⁷¹ in art deco style as described by Wolfe: “The stainless steel gargoyles of the Chrysler Building”, “the fantastic mast atop the Empire State” – how could such vulgarities come into being? [...] Oh how they [modernists] sniggered at the little Christmas-tree ornaments on top!”⁷² and finishing with the latest revival and enthusiasm for Brutalist architecture which went out of favour in the 1970s.⁷³

Nowadays modernist architecture is perhaps even more popular than in its post-World War II heyday. However, the building techniques that the modernists preferred and materials they used are either out-of-

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 288.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 291.

⁶⁸ Glazer, n. pag.

⁶⁹ Wolfe, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Nikil Saval, “Brutalism Is Back,” *The New York Times Style Magazine* (Oct. 6, 2016), accessed 20 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/t-magazine/design/brutalist-architecture-revival.html>.

⁷¹ These modern icons did not reflect classical modernism of the International Style.

⁷² Wolfe, pp. 36–37.

⁷³ Saval, n. pag.

date, or it is very expensive to reproduce them. Although pure modernist elegance comes at a price and it is virtually impossible to design in the strict modernist style, new homes which are highly faithful to this tradition are enjoying a resurgence in popularity and appreciation. The restorations of homes such as the Snower⁷⁴ house have become noteworthy architectural endeavors.⁷⁵ It only confirms that trends are circular and Wolfe's assertion that modernism is unpopular among everyone apart from architects does not represent the current reality. Also in Australia one observes a recent revival of the modernist design, which has resulted in a surge of modernist home enthusiasts, particularly from younger generations. According to Melbourne agents, they are drawn to this style and its minimalistic appeal because it represents a feeling of coming home, returning to the style of their childhood. Melbourne agents also point to Don Draper's Manhattan apartment on television show *Mad Men* (2007-2015) as an impetus for the sudden increase in the popularity of modernist architecture.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Geoffrey Scott, a renowned architectural historian wrote, in his book, *The Architecture of Humanism* that "there is no building so bad that it cannot with a little ingenuity be justified, or so good that it cannot plausibly be condemned." To him, "there may be lack of architectural taste but unfortunately no lack of architectural opinion."⁷⁷ And opinions on modernist architecture are divided just as the critics' opinions about Wolfe's book are divided. Wolfe also had his reasons and his architectural opinions to document, in his view, the utopian pretensions of modernism. On the one hand, O'Gorman praises Wolfe for presenting the human

⁷⁴ "Last year, the Kansas City-based firm Hufft Projects completed their challenging and intricate restoration of the Snower House, designed by famed architect Marcel Breuer in 1954. Located in the upscale neighborhood of Mission Hills, the 1,900-square-foot home is a Modernist gem." (Hay 2015).

⁷⁵ David Hay, "Why Modern Architecture Came Back, and What It Looks Like Now", *Curbed*, 16 December 2015, accessed 4 December 2019, <https://www.curbed.com/2015/12/16/10620698/modern-architecture-legacy-today-architects-contemporary-resurgence>.

⁷⁶ Amelia Barnes, "Modernist homes make a comeback in Melbourne", *Domain*, 16 April 2015, accessed 15 December 2019, <https://www.domain.com.au/news/modernist-homes-make-a-comeback-in-melbourne-2015-0416-1mm4rg/>

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Scott. *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 11.

origin of architectural ideas. On the other, Goldberger⁷⁸ and Posner⁷⁹ claim that Wolfe frames discussion in the form of an argument replete with generalizations, and that he ignores or distorts historical facts. They see the faults of Wolfe's essay and blame it on the selective use of history, errant facts or disregarding a break between modern and post-modern architecture. Wolfe, however, does not seem to be interested in a chronological order of architectural phases, he chooses to entertain the reader, present amusing observations and snappy anecdotes. Although postwar modern architecture in America is the villain in *From Bauhaus to Our House*, present-day magazines and different publications⁸⁰ extol the houses designed by modernist architects. They cement the modern house into a realm of nostalgia, underlining the iconic timeless properties of the modern house which is presented as an object of fantasy. Moreover, contemporary houses and apartment buildings that respect Adolf Loos's warning have been appearing around the world, and the variants and offshoots of modernism are making a comeback.

Funding: The project is financed from the grant received from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the Regional Initiative of Excellence programme for the years 2019–2022, project number 009/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding 8 791 222,00 zloty.

Anna Maria Karczewska

From Bauhaus to Our House: Tom Wolfe contra modernist architecture

In his 1981 book-length essay *From Bauhaus To Our House*, Tom Wolfe not only presents a compact history of modernist architecture, devoting the pages to masters such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe but also frontally attacks modern architecture and complains that a small group of architects took over control of people's aesthetic choices. According to Wolfe, modern buildings

⁷⁸ Goldberger, n. pag.

⁷⁹ Ellen Posner, Review. *From Bauhaus to Our House*, *The New Republic* (pre-1988); Nov 18 (1981), p. 30.

⁸⁰ See: *Ornament is Crime* by Matt Gibberd and Albert Hill (London: Phaidon, 2017).

wrought destruction on American cities, sweeping away their vitality and diversity in favour of the pure, abstract order of towers in a row. Modernist architects, on the other hand, saw the austere buildings of concrete, glass and steel as signposts of a new age, as the physical shelter for a new, utopian society.

This article attempts to analyse Tom Wolfe's selected criticisms of the modernist architecture presented in *From Bauhaus to Our House*. In order to understand Wolfe's discontent with modernist architecture's basic tenets of economic, social, and political conditions that prompted architects to pursue a modernist approach to design will be discussed.

Keywords: modernism, the International Style, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Pruitt-Igoe,

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, Styl międzynarodowy, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Pruitt-Igoe

