

The paradoxes of progress

The paradoxes of progress have plagued architecture for most of the last century. We revitalized our cities and ended up concentrating poverty, we used technology to bring us closer to nature and ended up damaging the environment, and we established a progressive design culture and ended up isolating ourselves from the very public whose lives we sought to improve. As we begin the next century, we should ask how we might avoid the unintended consequences of our often well-meaning efforts.

That will demand a rethinking of modernism. As the philosophers Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins have argued, the modern world brought ‘a new emphasis on objectivity...(but) the source of the objectivity, paradoxically enough, was to be found in one’s own subjectivity. Thus the modern age was founded on an apparent contradiction: we come to know the world “outside” by looking “inside.”’¹ The utopian tradition of modern architecture reflects that contradiction, as architects have asserted highly subjective visions as the basis for a universal transformation of the objective world. Whether it be the technological utopia of LeCorbusier’s Plan Voisin or the Arcadian utopia of Wright’s Broadacre City or the rational utopia of Burnham’s Chicago Plan, architects emerged in the 20th century at the vanguard of efforts around the globe to realize, as a universal objective fact, one person’s subjective vision. And we have paid a heavy price for that hubris: not only a physical price – whether in the loss of the historic cores of our cities in realizing LeCorbusier’s urban vision or in the destruction of the rural landscape in realizing Wright’s suburban one – but a political price as well – in the tremendous human and environmental losses we’ve taken in realizing the utopias of Marx, Nietzsche, and now in the midst of global laissez-faire capitalism, Adam Smith.

As we look ahead, can we have ‘progress without utopia’ as Edward Rothstein asked recently in the *New York Times*? Can we improve the lives of all people and respect the existence of all species, without lapsing back into our old utopian ways of imposing singular subjective visions onto others? That will depend upon our finding a new relationship between the objective and subjective realms, in which they are neither totally separate nor as a matter of one dominating the other, but instead interwoven and mutually respectful realities. For architecture, that means shaping environments whose objective reality recognizes the diverse subjective realities of those who inhabit what we create, as well as seeing our own subjective reality, as architects, as just one of many inputs into the objective realities we design.

THE EDITORS

1. Solomon, Robert and Higgins, Kathleen. *A Short History of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 1996. pp. 177–178.

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