PART ONE
The Death of Modern Architecture

Happily, we can date the death of modern architecture to a precise moment in time. Unlike the legal death of a person, which is becoming a complex affair of brain waves versus heartbeats, modern architecture went out with a bang. That many people didn’t notice, and no one was seen to mourn, does not make the sudden extinction any less of a fact, and that many designers are still trying to administer the kiss of life does not mean that it has been miraculously resurrected. No, it expired finally and completely in 1972, after having been flogged to death remorselessly for ten years by critics such as Jane Jacobs; and the fact that many so-called modern architects still go around practising a trade as if it were alive can be taken as one of the great curiosities of our age (like the British Monarchy giving life-prolonging drugs to ‘The Royal Company of Archers’ or ‘The Extra Women of the Bedchamber’).

Modern Architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grâce by dynamite. Previously it had been vandalised, mutilated and defaced by its black inhabitants, and although millions of dollars were pumped back, trying to keep it alive (fixing the broken elevators, repairing smashed windows, repainting), it was finally put out of its misery. Boom, boom, boom.

Without doubt, the ruins should be kept, the remains should have a preservation order slapped on them, so that we keep a live memory of this failure in planning and architecture. Like the folly or artificial ruin – constructed on the estate of an eighteenth-century English eccentric to provide him with instructive reminders of former vanities and glories – we should learn to value and protect our former disasters. As Oscar Wilde said, ‘experience is the name we give to our mistakes’, and there is a certain health in leaving them judiciously scattered around the landscape as continual lessons.

Pruitt-Igoe was constructed according to the most progressive ideals of CIAM (the Congress of International Modern Architects) and it won an award from the American Institute of Architects when it was designed in 1951. It consisted of elegant slab blocks fourteen storeys high with rational ‘streets in the air’ (which were safe from cars, but as it turned out, not safe from crime); ‘sun, space and greenery’, which Le Corbusier called the ‘three essential joys of urbanism’ (instead of conventional streets, gardens and semi-private space, which he banished). It had a separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the provision of play space, and local amenities such as laundries, crèches and gossip centres – all rational substitutes for traditional patterns. Moreover, its Purist style, its clean, salubrious hospital metaphor, was meant to instil, by good example, corresponding virtues in the inhabitants.

Good form was to lead to good content, or at least good conduct; the intelligent planning of abstract space was to promote healthy behaviour.

3 MINORU YAMASAKI, Pruitt-Igoe Housing, St Louis, 1952–55. Several slab blocks of this scheme were blown up in 1972 after they were continuously vandalised. The crime rate was higher than other developments, and Oscar Newman attributed this, in his book Defensible Space, to the long corridors, anonymity, and lack of controlled semi-private space. Another factor: it was designed in a purist language at variance with the architectural codes of the inhabitants.

4 PRUITT-IGOES AS RUIN. Like the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the high-rise block, Ronan Point, in England, 1968, this ruin has become a great architectural symbol. It should be preserved as a warning. Actually, after continued hostilities and disagreements, some blacks have managed to form a community in parts of the remaining habitable blocks – another symbol, in its way, that events and ideology, as well as architecture, determine the success of the environment.
Alas, such simplistic ideas, taken over from philosophic doctrines of Rationalism, Behaviourism and Pragmatism, proved as irrational as the philosophies themselves. Modern Architecture, as the son of the Enlightenment, was an heir to its congenital naivities, naivities too great and awe-inspiring to warrant refutation in a book on mere building. I will concentrate here, in this first part, on the demise of a very small branch of a big tree; but to be fair it should be pointed out that modern architecture is the offshoot of modern painting, the modern movements in all the arts. Like rational schooling, rational health and rational design of women’s bloomers, it has the faults of an age trying to reinvent itself totally on rational grounds. These shortcomings are now well known; thanks to the writings of Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul, E. F. Schumacher, Michael Oakshott and Hannah Arendt, and the overall misconceptions of Rationalism will not be dwelt upon. They are assumed for my purposes. Rather than a deep extended attack on modern architecture, showing how its ills relate very closely to the prevailing philosophies of the modern age, I will attempt a caricature, a polemic. The virtue of this genre (as well as its vice) is its license to cut through the large generalities with a certain abandon and enjoyment, overlooking all the exceptions and subtleties of the argument. Caricature is of course not the whole truth. Daumier’s drawings didn’t really show what nineteenth-century poverty was about, but rather gave a highly selective view of some truths. Let us then romp through the desolation of modern architecture, and the destruction of our cities, like some Martian tourist out on an earthbound excursion, visiting the archaeological sites with a superior disinterest, bemused by the sad but instructive mistakes of a former architectural civilisation. After all, since it is fairly dead, we might as well enjoy picking over the corpse.

Crisis in architecture

In 1974 Malcolm MacEwen wrote a book of the above title which summarised the English view of what was wrong with the Modern Movement (capitalised, like all world religions), and what we should do about it. His summary was masterful, but his prescriptions were wildly off the mark: the remedy was to overhaul a tiny institutional body, the Royal Institute of British Architects, by changing a style here and a heart there – as if these sorts of things would make the multiple causes of the crisis go away. Well, let me make use of his effective analysis, not his solution, taking as a typical grotesque of modern architecture one building type: modern hotels.

The new Penta Hotel in London has 914 bedrooms, which is almost nine times the average large hotel of fifty years ago, and it is ‘themed’ (a word of decorators) in the International Style and a mode which could be called Vassarely-Airport-Lounge-Moderne. There are about twenty of these leviathans near each other, on the way to the London Airport (it is known in the trade as ‘Hotellandia’), and they create a disruption in scale and city life which amounts to the occupation of an invading army – a role tourists tend to fulfil.

These newly formed battalions with their noble phoney names include The Churchill (500 bedrooms, named after Sir Winston and themed in the Pompeian-Palladian Style by way of Robert Adam); the Imperial Hotel (720 bedrooms, International outside, fibreglass Julius Caesar inside); and the Park Tower (300 bedrooms, themed in Corn-on-the-Cob and various sunburst motifs inside).