THE FUTURE OF CITIES: THE ABSURDITY OF MODERNISM.

Nikos Salingaros interviews Léon Krier.


Comment by James Howard Kunstler, from a review of Léon Krier’s book Architecture: Choice or Fate (Krier, 1998).

“Léon Krier may be best known ... as the intellectual godfather of the New Urbanism movement in America, a campaign to rescue the landscape, townscape and civic life of our nation from the failed experiment of a drive-in utopia. Krier [is] a Luxemburgois who lived in London for twenty years and now makes his home in southern France. He brings an exhilarating clarity to issues of place-making and architecture that have been otherwise subject to a remorseless obscurantism by a colorful cast of self-promoting avant-gardist charlatans ranging from Le Corbusier in the 1920s to Peter Eisenman in our time ... Among the other putative leading figures in international architecture, Krier’s work is the most comprehensive and intelligent.”

1. Tall buildings.

Nikos Salingaros: With the recent tragic events of September 11, 2001, do you think that our civilization needs to change direction in its thinking about urbanism? Does the perceived unease in inhabiting tall buildings also indicate a crisis with modernist architecture in general?

Léon Krier: The tragic events of September 11 affect our general perception and thinking about tall or low buildings for both psychological and practical reasons. Assuming that the Pentagon and one of the World Trade Center towers had a similar floor area (roughly 5 million square feet), we can compare the relative damage done to
one or the other by the same explosive charge. It is evident that we are dealing with events of a fundamentally different order [approximately 200 versus 2000 casualties]. Let’s imagine that the Pentagon establishment had been housed in a single tall rather than a low building, and reflect on the potential damage that could be done to the entire U.S. defense system by one civilian aeroplane. Conversely, let us assume that the World Trade Center had been housed in 4-storey-high traditional building blocks and reflect on the question: How many aeroplanes would have been needed to cause the destruction of its compounded floor area? I guess the number to be around 160 aeroplanes of Boeing 737 size, instead of 2.

The tragic absurdity of the World Trade Center is that a very poor piece of architecture (of insignificant quality) has become an involuntary martyr, a phantom tombstone of monstrous scale. A fake architectural monument (i.e. private economic activities dressed in a monumental garb, and housed in memorial pillars, totems and the like) has become a true memorial only through its disappearance. By its bodily dissolution it has gained the (immortal) soul that had so far eluded it.

There are lots of good reasons to build high symbolic structures, such as the Washington Memorial, the Capitol Building, the Eiffel Tower, St. Paul’s Cathedral; there exists no sound reason, however, for building excessively high utilitarian buildings (with the exception of financial gain). Their collateral damage is such that society cannot afford such absurdities as general propositions; the problem today is not so much that they exist, but that some architectural ideologues want to make us believe that the construction of such buildings is inevitable and necessary even in the future. Evidently, those buildings make a very large impact as sex and power symbols, and from a semantic point of view they are symbols of shallowness and minimal value. In fact, considering the very real damage they do to their host cities, users, and neighbors, they may not only be considered now to be toxic, fragile, and dangerous, but also obscene rather than powerful.

2. Skyscrapers as an experimental typology.

NS: How far and on what points do you agree with James Howard Kunstler and myself that “the era of skyscrapers is at an end”; that it is “an experimental building typology that has failed”? Are there any issues raised in our paper entitled “The End of Tall Buildings” with which you disagree?

LK: I would rather reformulate your quote as “the era of the utilitarian skyscraper is at an end”. It’s not the metric height but the excessive number of inhabited floors that causes systemic problems. Applied science and technology undertake mechanical and typological experiments in controlled conditions. They don’t fly civilian passengers in experimental planes: nevertheless, metaphorically that is exactly what modernist architects have been doing for three generations; they literally build buildings that are not ready for common use.

3. False steps and ideology.

NS: Has humanity, as you claim in your writings and talks, made a fundamentally false step in building its cities, and if so, what can be done about it now?
**LK:** Humanity lives by trial and error, sometimes committing errors of monumental scale. Architectural and urbanist modernism belong — like communism — to a class of errors from which there is little or nothing to learn or gain from a disciplinary point of view. They are ideologies that literally blind even the most intelligent and sensitive people to unacceptable wastes, risks, and dangers. Modernism’s fundamental error, however, is to propose itself as a universal and exclusive (i.e. unavoidable and necessary) phenomenon, which needs to legitimately replace and exclude all traditional solutions. Thank God there are, through the applications of New Urbanism in the last 20 years, enough positive experiences worldwide to see a massive return to common-sense solutions.


**NS:** *Many of the leading new urbanists look to you for inspiration. What are your suggestions for the future of cities if the world can be convinced to build in a New Urbanist context?*

**LK:** There already exist excellent New Urbanist models for living in new small and medium size towns. Some higher density projects are only recently being completed, but they don’t get the media attention they deserve (certainly not comparable to the publicity hype created around neo-modernist projects such as the Guggenheim, etc.), so the learning process is slower than it could be. Despite the lack of publicity, however, these projects have a notable economic success; their basic idea is winning.

Very great sums of public money are being invested now to renovate 1950s and 1960s modernist estates and campuses, but many of these are no more than the artificial prolongation of failed experiments of social and architectural collectivism. New Urbanism is not utopian and does not impose socio-political master plans. Instead, it allows the infinite variety of human talent and ambition to build harmonious and pleasing environments. It channels competitive forces to flourish as good neighbors while permitting everyone to pursue their own aspirations. The very great challenge of the immediate future, however, will be the urbanization of suburbia, the redevelopment of sprawl.

The theoretical models are ready, but their application is slow. What is now already certain is that even the most soulless dumps on earth can — with the right ideas and people, and sometimes very modest means — be turned around to become places of beauty and human thriving.

**NS:** *There remains a serious misunderstanding. Planners — and more importantly, citizens in general, including those elected representatives in a position to make decisions — don’t realize that the solutions you propose apply to all cities, irrespective of style. Urban structure obeys scientific rules that are independent of region. There is a secondary dependence on local tradition, climate, resources, and materials, but these differences have long been erased with the uniform modernist approach. Current planning practice creates two separate and artificial images of urban form: traditional, Classical and historic centers on the one hand; and vital, dynamic, growing urban fabric on the other.*
Within this mind-set, the governing body of a city comes to you only when it wants to revitalize itself in a Neo-traditionalist manner. My question is thus the following: have the New Urbanists, in carving out a niche for themselves, helped to isolate New Urbanism from mainstream planning? How can this be corrected, and how do you convince the profession that New Urbanism does not impose stylistic limits?

LK: You are absolutely right to point out that urban structure, as a set of organizational principles, is largely independent of questions of style. Many New Urbanist projects are done using buildings in traditional style (in general based upon a local vernacular) because that is the way that we prefer them to be done; at least for the time being. Modernist architecture is generally arbitrary and of such poor quality that it is almost totally inappropriate for most common uses and specific climates. The most successful and well-publicized New Urbanist projects are of course the neo-traditional ones like Seaside, Celebration, and Poundbury. Nevertheless, there are plenty of similar schemes based on the principles of New Urbanism, but realized using neo-modernist architecture in Holland, Denmark, and Germany: they generate an atrocious sadness, they are architectural no-man’s land — and consequently remain unknown. They make only architects dreamy-eyed.

I personally resist for the moment mixing traditional and modernist architecture. First, they are experiments already performed and failed. Second, judging from experience, one modernist building is enough to destroy the spirit even of a largely traditional scheme. The Steven Holl building in Seaside may be the best example of this. Nobody is happy with the result; neither the modernists, nor the residents, nor even us.

Modernists seem up to now to be so disorganized in their ideas that they are quite unable to realize anything so coherent and complex as Windsor or Poundbury. The situation is so critical that Andrés Duany and I have discussed for a while the necessity of designing a town in modernist style, simply to show that it’s not impossible, and to show them how it is done. A town “design code” could for example easily limit itself to Le Corbusier’s 1920s or 1950s grammar and produce a meaningful townscape that is coherent and harmonious, based on common sense and comprehensible to the great majority of users. The same could be done with Frank Lloyd Wright — or even Zaha Hadid or Oscar Niemeyer idioms.

New Urbanists are at any rate not philosophically limited to traditional architecture, and yet a lot of architects spend sleepless nights and are torn between old and new allegiances. But I would say that this is not a transcendental or moral issue, but a technological choice. In the end, every one should do in this area what he or she feels is right for the situation, the geography, the society, the economy … and if one is not sure, experiment around a little if the client is prepared to take the risk and then make a lucid choice. However, if you are faced with a political situation of common complexity I would always recommend a local vernacular as the basic architecture, because it moves design issues away from the arbitrary and from the intellectual terror of modernist moralism. This choice reduces stylistic and architectural errors to the level of the bearable and away from spectacular errors so common to modernist experiments.

Traditional detailing and architectural elements generally have to do with the willingness of resolving practical problems of building in a logical and elegant way,
whereas style in general has to represent something more: really the aesthetic quality with which you master what are technological issues. What we have to point out to dogmatic modernists again and again is that, in democracies, even architecture and urbanism are a matter of choice, and are not metaphysical constraints or absolutes of their own making. Those who don’t accept choice in these matters are ultimately anti-democratic, totalitarian, and possibly un-modern, however futuristic their buildings may look.

5. Scarcity of land.

**NS:** *Architects trained in the modernist tradition of our schools do not share the same reverence for your ideas as do New Urbanists. They argue that you neglect the serious population pressures that force high-rise buildings on the third world, and commercial pressures that do the same in downtowns the world over. Can you respond to such criticisms?*

**LK:** There is strictly speaking no correlation between demographic pressure and high-rise buildings (with the rare exception of the type of conditions found in Hong Kong and Monte Carlo). In the U.S. or Europe the “scarcity of land” argument is promoted and maintained by people with a variety of contrasting agendas, reaching from those of landowners to those of ecologists. It is an artificially fabricated myth, which dissolves into thin air when we look down onto those continents from the air.

We will then realize that our towns and landscapes do not suffer so much from a scarcity of land or generalized road and building congestion, but rather from badly divided lots and badly used land, hence from a politics of weak planning. For instance, while Paris doubled its population during the second part of the 20th century, it spread its buildings over a territory 15 times that of central Paris, despite the proliferation of utilitarian high-rise buildings.

6. Market forces.

**NS:** *The built environment is created by market forces, speculative greed, zoning legislation, etc. Is it even possible to build a humane environment within these unfortunately real restrictions?*

**LK:** Market forces are vectors of human energies and enterprise. No city can be built without them. Planning laws have often had the objective of strangling such activities rather than letting them flourish. The motive was a mixture of politics and moralism: the idea was to replace an unpredictable and chaotic activity with political direction, in general tied to a utopian project driven by politico-moral ambitions.

New Urbanist principles are not motivated by transcendental schemes. They have the simplicity and practicality of moral precepts rather than the tyrannical sophistications of utopian reform. They are not so much prescriptive as they are permissive. In that perspective, the common interest, expressed in the form of public spaces, is the product of neighbors knowing how to bring together and realize their contrasting and variegated self-interests.
7. The electronic city.

**NS:** I would like to know your thoughts on the developing network city, which incorporates telecommuting and information technology. Have you thought about how this will affect urban morphology?

**LK:** The network of traditional patterns of streets and squares is the optimal means of developing pieces of real estate of whatever size. It is no accident that many symbols from the computer screen originate in traditional urbanism: the site; the homepage; the portal; the window; etc. Electronic networking completes spatial networks of streets and public spaces; not by competing with them, and, in fact, it cannot replace them. To believe the latter is a philosophical error of the same degree as believing that the wheel could replace the leg.

8. Building typologies.

**NS:** The pressing issue is the following: does the increasing development of electronic networking have spatial consequences? The information revolution is generating enormous social and commercial forces, so in which direction will those forces act? Does the network city push the urban fabric towards a modernist typology, or a traditional typology; or does it do neither?

**LK:** New types of building are generated by new kinds of use. For instance it is the aeroplane that caused airports to be developed as a building type, not the reverse. New building types however may generate uses for which they were not intended, like Roman market-halls (basilicas) becoming Christian churches, or airports being used as shopping malls, etc. It is not the urge for creative innovation that brings about new building types; yet this continues to be a widely diffused modernist phantom.

Typological innovations based on such utopian ideologies are generally short lived. Strictly speaking, there is no “modernist” typology ... for the simple reason that any type of building which becomes established as a recognizable and reproducible type becomes *ipso facto* traditional; be it a discotheque, an oil drilling platform, a cooling tower, an office building, or a house.

There are, however, building types which are the result of excessive concentrations of uses of one kind under one roof; these are typological aberrations which can be built in any style or using any form of construction. The utilitarian skyscraper and groundscraper (an enormous low-lying horizontal building covering a large area) are such typological hypertrophies. They are generally involuntary and unreflected outcomes of financial or political mechanisms, and are not uniquely related to modernism. We can define them as useless and paradoxical mega-structures. Building a city solely out of such mega-structures is a nightmare, because they are profoundly dysfunctional, and therefore inhuman, antisocial, and anti-urban.

We could for instance build a city based on traditional building types and street patterns but entirely designed in a modernist architectural style. It may even be pleasing and successful on aesthetic and social terms, and many users may be very happy to live there. If it is robust and adapts to the climate and topography, I see no metaphysical reason not to build it. However, a city built entirely of ground- and sky-scrappers — even
if built using traditional building materials and methods, and designed in traditional styles — may be pleasing to look at but would in the end alienate human relations and lives as radically, if less cruelly, than its modernist counterpart.

To sum up the argument: there is strictly speaking no “modernist typology” but modernism has been remarkably proficient in typological aberrations.


**NS:** There is a profound loss of reverence for human sensibilities — the building tradition which produced even modest, pleasing structures has vanished. How can a world without deep values regain such a philosophy?

**LK:** Traditional architecture and urbanism is not an ideology, religion, or transcendental system. It cannot save lost souls or give meaning to empty lives. It is primarily part of technology rather than style or art. It is a body of knowledge and know-how allowing us to build practically, aesthetically, socially, and economically satisfying cities and structures in the most diverse climatic, cultural, and economic situations. Such structures do not ensure happiness, but they certainly facilitate the pursuit of individual or collective happiness for a large majority of people.

10. The effects of modernism.

**NS:** Certain spatial structures having particular mathematical qualities provide positive sensory feedback to an observer. Mankind has built these, from the scale of cities, down to the scale of artifacts, so as to give meaning to the environment. I don’t refer to meaning in one’s life, but to meaning in one’s surroundings that is contained in cognitively accessible complexity. A wholesale removal of meaning was perpetrated by the modernists in pursuit of their agenda. How could this have happened when it goes against our physiological make-up?

**LK:** Modernism is a totalitarian ideology that, like all dogmatisms, is based on unprovable assumptions. Until now it was unable to tolerate, let alone accept opposition, contradiction, or refusal. If you accept such fantastic assumptions you necessarily abandon your own cognitive capacities and blind yourself to overwhelming evidence, in spite of interior and exterior contradictions.

Modernism’s declaration of war against tradition was not just a rejection of obsolete traditions, but it included all knowledge and know-how that does not fit its reductive vision of humanity, history, technology, politics, and economy. It represents a systematic rape of man’s psychological and physiological make-up. It therefore took at least three generations to recover from a mental rape that goes against human experience, against accumulated human intelligence, instinct, and sensibility.

**NS:** Modernism has replaced the means that human beings use to connect to each other, and to external structures. The city as a framework for establishing connections among members of an urban population has been changed to a spatial structure whose aim is to disconnect. This applies both to path connectivity — people easily walking to meet one-another face-to-face — and also to visual connectivity between an individual
and the built components of the city.

My investigations reveal that a city is a system of systems — with a logical architecture (in the sense of computer architecture) that is far closer to the human brain than to existing electronic computers. Cutting connections, as the modernists have done, is akin to cutting the wiring in a computer or the neurons in the brain. After decades of psychological conditioning to a sterile world, people have accepted disconnectedness as a way of life. We therefore have to ask ourselves: are human beings changed so they are no longer capable of valuing spatial structures that satisfy basic sensory and social needs?

LK: Your question contains the answer. Modernism operates through various forms of alienation, incapacitating people’s autonomy, and thus their ability to act, work, and think individually. It is a form of radical brainwashing from which very few, once they have experienced it, are able to escape. Millions have fallen victim to its powerful lure (fascinating and tyrannical at the same time), yet it is as if nature with each new generation was producing antidotes for such massive ideological aberrations of the past; that at least is my hope.
Image caption The cities of the future will be informed by data as much as by design. Simulation software that can create accurate “digital twins” of entire cities is enabling planners, designers and engineers to improve their designs and measure the effect changes will have on the lives of citizens. Cities are hugely complex and dynamic creations. They live and breathe. Image caption Planners now have a data-rich simulation of the city to interact with. This island state, sitting at the foot of the Malaysian peninsula with a population of six million people, has developed a virtual digital twin of the entire city using software developed by French firm Dassault Systemes. Start studying Modernism. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. One of the absurdities of the opening of the story is the fact that the authorities were looking for three other men who were Basque. true false. true. What is the occupation of the Big Black Good Man? banker mechanic sailor politician. This story is a work of fantasy literature, which often sets a story in the future but its real purpose is to provide a commentary on contemporary culture. true false. true. The Harlequin is dangerous to the Ticktockman because he refuses to be a slave to time refuses to be a slave to the system has personality all of the above. Content Curation For Newbies: 3 Easy Steps To Build Your Content Strategy We have been thinking a lot about how we connect with our clients, what content we create and curate, and how we share it. It seemed such an easy task at first - we haven't considered we would need to create a special strategy for this sort of things.