

WELFARE STATE MODERNISM AND THE POLITICS OF AESTHETIC CHANGE

Guy Ortolano
New York University

Forged during the interwar decades, following the Second World War modernist architecture shaped streetscapes and skylines from Berlin to Chandigarh to Brasília. Postwar reconstruction, post-colonial development, and nationalist ambitions combined to unleash “a massive scale of experimental solutions that had been proposed in the 1920s and 1930s,” according to Jean-Louis Cohen’s global history of architecture, with the result that “principles that had been primarily in the theoretical sphere before the war quickly found their way into mass production.”¹ These innovations included functional zoning, non-traditional materials, and industrialized building methods, but modernism became most associated with such characteristic forms as glass and steel towers, concrete civic spaces, and flat-roofed housing. Even that partial list indicates the diversity that the label “modernism” always struggled to corral, but the style’s coherence snapped into starker relief upon its repudiation. Because even more rapidly than it had triumphed, architecture’s modernist moment swiftly ended. Some scholars date its demise to the fatal explosion of London’s Ronan Point tower in 1968, while others point to the demolition of St. Louis’s Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in 1972.² Its death throes persisted, through the Museum of Modern Art’s sympathetic revisiting of Beaux-Arts in 1975, and then that same venue’s iconoclastic *Transformations in Modern Architecture* exhibition of 1979.³ Generally, however, during the 1970s architects and critics were

¹ Jean-Louis Cohen, *The Future of Architecture. Since 1889*. (London: Phaidon Press, 2012), 298.

² Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), 585-604; Charles A. Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*, rev. ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.

³ Cohen, *The Future of Architecture*, 412.

increasingly questioning their commitments, and turning towards what they began to identify as “post Modern Movement” stirrings instead.⁴

Modernism’s disavowal calls attention to the historical problem of explaining how aesthetic change happens. How could far-flung curators, architects, builders, and residents more-or-less simultaneously come to esteem cornices over clean lines, natural materials over industrial methods, and pitched roofs over flat ones? The British historian Raphael Samuel captured the sheer range of this transformation, part of a wider shift in taste that registered in the selection of lighting fixtures, furnishing fabrics, interior plantings, garden design, pub decorations, street furniture, and much else besides.⁵ Samuel’s identification of causes was no less exhaustive, including repentant modernists, environmental politics, conservation movements, urban gentrification, building societies, estate agents, private home ownership, national heritage, international trends, long-distance commuting, and containerized shipping.⁶ But while so vast a transformation might involve an equally vast array of causes, at some point such a list tips from explanation to itemization. This problem bedevils efforts to explain modernism’s demise, which easily cite relevant factors without actually demonstrating how the style became extinguished – an explanatory gesture more casual than causal, abetted by the assurance that modernism’s failure was so obvious that its end was inevitable,

⁴ Lance Wright, “Towards Another Architecture,” *Architectural Review* 160 (July 1976): 44; Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 53-66. On the turn against urban modernism generally, see John Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954-1972* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Simon Gunn, “The Rise and Fall of British Urban Modernism: Planning Bradford, circa 1945-1970,” *Journal of British Studies* 49:4 (2010): 849-869; Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Samuel Zipp, Michael Carriere, *et al.*, “Special Section: Thinking through Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Urban History* 39:3 (2013): 359-453; Otto Saumarez Smith, “The Inner City Crisis and the End of Urban Modernism in 1970s Britain,” *Twentieth Century British History* 27:4 (2016): 578-598.

⁵ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), 59-79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-79, 127-131.

eliminating the need for careful explanation in favor of simply allowing the history to arrive at its end.⁷

Scholars who do attempt to explain modernism's end approach the problem from opposite directions. Theorists attuned to its broadly simultaneous disavowal across space, such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, depict it as the result of transformations within capitalism; while architectural historians such as Florian Urban and Annemarie Sammartino, more attentive to temporal and spatial variations in modernism's fate, highlight the interplay between local dynamics and these broader forces.⁸ If the former approach accounts for the coincidence of uncoordinated developments, the latter calls attention to the roles of individuals and localities in realizing (or inhibiting) those changes. This explanatory dichotomy reflects a broader dynamic within the historical discipline. The recent ascendancy of supra-national approaches – comparative, imperial, transnational, international, world, global – has shifted the emphases of causal accounts from individuals and contexts to structures and systems.⁹ Where once the historian of the Industrial Revolution recovered the artisanal cultures of Lancastrian weavers, a comparative approach locates causation in the Atlantic hinterlands instead; where once the historian of colonial South Asia identified the social bases of Indian nationalism, a transnational perspective stresses the cosmopolitan exchanges that produced a Ghandi or a Sarojini Naidu; and where once the historian

⁷ Compare Tracy Neumann on “de-industrialization” in *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁸ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Annemarie Sammartino, “Mass Housing, Late Modernism, and the Forging of Community in New York City and East Berlin, 1965-1989,” *American Historical Review* 121:2 (2016): 492-521.

⁹ For a fuller discussion, see C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111:5 (2006): 1441-1464.

of Eurasian empires analyzed the military genius of Genghis Khan, an environmental framework suggests that the empire's expansion followed from climactic changes.¹⁰ Yet, as historians such as Karen Halttunen have argued, these wider frames of explanation beg the question of the roles played by agents and localities in causing – rather than merely accommodating, reflecting, or, indeed, inhibiting our apprehension of – historical change.¹¹

Drawing upon the work of both architectural and postwar historians, this article integrates both scales of analysis into a single explanation of aesthetic change. The approach toggles between a pair of optics: a macro account developing the transnational concept of welfare state modernism, and a micro account explaining the repudiation of welfare state modernism in the English new town of Milton Keynes. Part I argues that signature modernist forms – unadorned facades, non-traditional materials, flat rooflines, and high-rise towers – were not simply coincident with, but indeed were produced by, a generational alignment of aesthetic commitments, construction demands, and state priorities. Architectural historians have examined these dynamics in various national contexts, for example Kenny Cupers in France; Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk van den Heuvel across Europe; and Florian Urban around the world.¹² As Part II shows, welfare state modernism shaped Milton Keynes as well, where – rather than a discredited style,

¹⁰ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014); Neil Pederson, Amy E. Hessl, Nachin Baatarbileg, Kevin J. Anchukaitis, and Nicola Di Cosmo, “Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111:12 (2014): 4375-4379.

¹¹ Karen Halttunen, “Grounded Histories: Land and Landscape in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68:4 (2011): 513-532. For a conversation that illustrates the lack of professional consensus regarding causality, see Emmanuel Akyeampong, Caroline Arni, Pamela Kyle Crossley, Mark Hewitson, and William H. Sewell, Jr., “AHR Conversation: Explaining Historical Change; or, The Lost History of Causes,” *American Historical Review* 120:4 (2015): 1369-1423.

¹² Kenny Cupers, *The Social Project: Housing Postwar France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk van den Heuvel, *Architecture and the Welfare State* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Urban, *Tower and Slab*.

certain to collapse – a new generation of architects arrived eager to renew their aesthetic inheritance. Part III pans out again to develop a general explanation of how aesthetic change happens, historicizing ideas about popular taste (what people “want”), architectural merit (why buildings “fail”), and the changing role of the “market” in relation to both. If welfare state modernism represented the visual expression of a broader ideological formation, when that formation came under pressure its visible elements became subject to critique. Part IV reveals the process by which that critique triumphed in a particular place. In Milton Keynes, rather than passively waiting for transnational developments to win the argument for them, modernism’s critics enlisted financial institutions and social scientists in a campaign to change architectural styles.¹³ As Cupers writes with regard to a parallel story unfolding simultaneously across the English Channel, “[T]o understand the making of the French suburbs we need to favor situated agency over abstract forces and contingency over determinism.”¹⁴ Indeed, rather than ascribing the end of modernism to agent-less abstractions such as neo-liberalism, post-Fordism, or post-modernism; or simply listing plausible factors without demonstrating causation; or treating local developments independently of broader historical forces, this article depicts local actors harnessing transnational developments to engineer aesthetic change.

I

Following the Second World War, reconstructing states inserted themselves – as both contractors and employers – into the business of architecture on an unprecedented scale. During the quarter-century before the 1973 oil shock, economic expansion funded statist building projects.

¹³ On microhistory as offering not a more isolated or idiosyncratic account, but rather a more textured and therefore illuminating one, see Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 178-185.

¹⁴ Cupers, *The Social Project*, xv.

At the same time, modernist design came to feature in everyday construction.¹⁵ While historicizing “modernism” resembles the attempt to nail jelly to a wall, this particular coincidence between state patronage and building styles offers a discrete historical subject.¹⁶ Yet according to Swenarton, Avermaete, and Heuvel, “Little attention has been paid to the varied ways in which architecture and urban planning interacted with the different regimes of welfare provision” – a “mutual indifference” that they rightly deem “extraordinary.”¹⁷ Indeed, far from two distinct – or vaguely “related” – realms, the priorities of welfare states fostered aesthetic motifs that, as recently as the 1930s, had figured as the avant-garde tastes of an intellectual minority.¹⁸ This dynamic was evident not only throughout Western Europe, including Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Italy, but also in the United States, and it extended via professional networks and development projects to post-colonial states across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.¹⁹ Indeed, the

¹⁵ Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-war World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2002), xi.

¹⁶ Sarah Williams Goldhagen, “Something to Talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64:2 (2005): 144-167.

¹⁷ Swenarton, Avermaete, and Heuvel, “Introduction,” *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 1-2; Heuvel, “The Open Society and Its Experiments: The Case of the Netherlands and Piet Blom,” 132-152.

¹⁸ On architecture and political culture, see Saumarez Smith, “Graeme Shankland: A Sixties Architect-Planner and the Political Culture of the British Left,” *Architectural History* 57 (2014): 393-422.

¹⁹ For studies that span Western Europe, see Swenarton, Avermaete, and Heuvel, eds., *Architecture and the Welfare State*; Peter Rowe, *Modernity and Housing* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993). Accounts that follow the story outside Europe include Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Urban, *Tower and Slab*; Michelle Provoost, “Exporting New Towns: The Welfare City in Africa,” *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 276-297; Miles Glendinning, “From European Welfare State to Asian Capitalism: The Transformation of ‘British Public Housing’ in Hong Kong and Singapore,” *ibid.*, 298-318. Though focused on planning rather than architecture, Rosemary Wakeman reveals the networks that facilitated these exchanges in *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Towns Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). National studies include Cupers, *The Social Project*; Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, eds., *Swedish Modernism: Architecture, Consumption, and the Welfare State* (London: Black Dog, 2010); Michael Ryckewaert, *Building the Economic Backbone of*

general version of this phenomenon – in which governing structures shape the built environment – is evident more widely still, as in recent findings tying pre-Columbian American building patterns to broadly participatory political arrangements.²⁰

After 1945, this relationship between politics and form facilitated a historically specific way of building: a welfare state modernism. Since its expression necessarily varied according to particular political cultures, professional contexts, and state priorities, this article examines welfare state modernism in the particular case of postwar Britain. As British modernists entered mainstream practice following the war, they carried the conviction that they were building a better society. While not necessarily activist, much less revolutionary, this conviction was broadly in tune with the left.²¹ They wanted to build a world free not only of pestilence and crowding, but also conflict and inequality, and they believed that architecture should play a role in forging this new society.²² So whether designing factory entrances that treated labor and management identically, or building housing shorn of the adornments that broadcast social status, modernist architects brought an ethic with their aesthetic.²³ Some insisted that, whatever their private views, their work was apolitical, but the movement's politics were clear enough to their critics. “[T]he open-planned housing complex, [without] any visible record of the individual house,” according to the conservative philosopher,

the Belgian Welfare State: Infrastructure, Planning, and Architecture, 1945-1973 (Rotterdam: OIO Publishers, 2011).

²⁰ Lizzie Wade, “Unearthing Democracy’s Roots,” *Science* 355:6330 (2017): 1114-1118.

²¹ Gold, *The Experience of Modernism: Modern Architects and the Future City, 1928-1953* (London: E & FN Spon, 1997), 96-97, 186-209; Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954-1972* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24-26; Bullock, *Building the Post-war World*, ix and *passim*.

²² Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 204-227; Patrick Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 57.

²³ “Electronics Factory, Swindon, Wilts,” *Architectural Review* 142 (July 1967): 18-21; Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 206; Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold, 1966).

Roger Scruton, demonstrated “the triumph of that collective individualism from which both community and individual are abolished.”²⁴ In a different key, the movement’s partisans agreed: as the historian John Summerson had put it in 1944, “Hitler hates flat roofs.”²⁵ Modernists thought, wrote, and built socially, and, in the eyes of their critics and their advocates, that tenet – and their movement – was obviously political.

This political mission became most evident in housing. A modern approach to housing had emerged in Europe during the 1920s, as architects and planners confronted Europe’s squalid nineteenth-century inheritance.²⁶ Housing featured prominently in the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), providing as the theme of their Frankfurt meeting in 1929.²⁷ For CIAM’s leading figure, the Swiss architect and theorist Le Corbusier, thinking about the city required thinking about housing. “The dwelling,” he wrote in *The Athens Charter* (1941), “is the urbanist’s central concern.”²⁸ Modern architects believed that a rational, technological approach to housing would not only foster healthier living conditions, but could also rid the world of greed, conflict, and inequality.²⁹ These social hopes were rising, however, when building opportunities were declining, as depression and then war placed CIAM’s ambitions on hold.³⁰ During the war, up to four million British homes were damaged or destroyed; estimates vary, and the situation was nothing like what

²⁴ Roger Scruton (1979), quoted in Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 324.

²⁵ William Whyte, “The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927-1957,” *Journal of British Studies* 48:2 (2009): 441-464, at 457.

²⁶ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, 158; Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 13-47.

²⁷ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, 165.

²⁸ Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, trans. Anthony Eardley (1941; New York: Grossman, 1973), 97.

²⁹ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, 158-163; Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 206; Gold, *The Experience of Modernism*, 78-115.

³⁰ Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, 166-167.

continental nations endured, but wartime damage impacted as much as thirty-five percent of Britain's housing stock.³¹ The housing that survived remained inadequate, with more than a quarter of it dating from the nineteenth century. As the 1950s dawned, eighty-three percent of British homes still shared or lacked a bath.³²

The overwhelming scale of the rehousing project ensured that modernists got their chance.³³ These British efforts were part of the global story of postwar mass housing, which Florian Urban gamely follows from Chicago to Paris, from Berlin to Brasília, from Mumbai to Moscow to Shanghai.³⁴ Beginning in the 1950s, and especially during the 1960s, it became possible to understand housing along the lines of automobile production: as industrial projects within Fordist regimes, demanding speed of completion and economies of scale.³⁵ For a project of such scope, even Britain's Conservative Party acknowledged the private sector's inadequacy: Harold Macmillan, Minister of Housing and Local Government from 1951 to 1954, needed to include local authorities' production (four times that of the private sector) in order to meet his target of building 300,000 homes annually.³⁶ Indeed, during the three decades after 1945, public authorities built more than half of Britain's nine million new homes.³⁷ Not restricted to housing, other ministries – including

³¹ *Ibid.*, 176. Elain Harwood omits homes suffering lesser damage in citing 200,000 destroyed and 250,000 uninhabitable in *Space, Hope, and Brutalism: English Architecture, 1945-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), ix. Thanks to John Gold.

³² Rowe, *Modernity and Housing*, 176; Gold, *The Experience of Modernism*, 189-190.

³³ *Ibid.*, 192-194.

³⁴ Urban, *Tower and Slab*.

³⁵ Brian Finnimore, *Houses from the Factory: System Building and the Welfare State, 1942-1974* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1989), 1, 20-21, 202, 211, 244, and *passim*.

³⁶ Bullock, *Building the Post-war World*, 277.

³⁷ Swenarton, "High Density without High Rise: Housing Experiments of the 1950s by Patrick Hodgkinson," *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 236-257, at 237.

both education and health – created their own in-house architecture departments.³⁸ For the first time, then, the British state emerged as the construction industry's primary customer, and consequently as the architectural profession's primary employer.³⁹ By 1968, the British state commissioned nearly half of all building contracts, while the architectural profession became increasingly subsumed within the public sector – to a degree, by the early 1970s, approaching that of teachers and doctors.⁴⁰ Even when architects left the public sector, their commissions nevertheless still came largely from the state.⁴¹

During this period, then, the state displaced both private contractors and individual buyers as the dominant influence upon design.⁴² This new client-state emphasized neither sale nor resale, as under former (and subsequent) arrangements, but rather the need to transition wartime firms to peacetime production, maintain the viability of domestic building companies, and meet national housing needs.⁴³ These priorities facilitated a method of construction, “system-building,” that harnessed non-traditional materials to industrialized practices in order to realize mass production.⁴⁴ These methods produced characteristic formal features such as repetition (rather than variety), scale (rather than intimacy), estates (rather than street frontage), and flat roofs (rather than pitched ones).⁴⁵ The resulting towers, flats, estates, and urban redevelopment generally met the needs of

³⁸ Alistair Fair, “‘Modernization of Our Hospital System’: The National Health Service, the Hospital Plan, and the ‘Harness’ Programme, 1962-1977,” *Twentieth Century British History* 29:4 (2018): 547-575, at 553.

³⁹ Gold, *The Experience of Modernism*, 96, 187, 191; Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 23; Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain*, 56-57.

⁴⁰ Finnimore, *Houses from the Factory*, 240, 120-123.

⁴¹ Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*, xxviii.

⁴² Finnimore, *Houses from the Factory*, 8, 240.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36, 243-244.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 231, 233.

other welfare state actors as well: politicians, for whom redeveloped housing forestalled the loss of urban constituents; and conservationists, for whom urban reconstruction promised to spare the countryside.⁴⁶ The client-state's influence shaped even interior domestic spaces, as public funding became tied to specific dimensions, layouts, and conceptions of the family home. The 1961 Parker Morris Report on housing standards, for example, defined a "double bedroom" as including a double bed, bedside tables, a double wardrobe, dressing table, and a dresser – recommendations that became mandates for all public sector housing after 1969.⁴⁷ The home, in short, was being shaped by the state that increasingly built it.

This connection between state priorities and built forms makes it possible to identify a distinctive public sector aesthetic. That aesthetic included, from the 1940s, flat roofs, unadorned facades, and ample green spaces; and increasingly, from the 1960s, high-rise towers, concrete construction, and system-built megastructures.⁴⁸ If these formal features comprised an identifiable welfare state aesthetic, when combined with the political arrangements that produced them they constituted a welfare state modernism generally. "Balfron Tower is the welfare state in concrete," writes the National Trust's Joseph Watson, referring to Erno Goldfinger's brutalist 1960s tower in east London.⁴⁹ Watson's formulation conveys the way that built forms – in this case a twenty-six

⁴⁶ David Heathcote, *Barbican: Penthouse over the City* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), 62-65.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* (London: HMSO, 1961); Marion Hill and Roger Kitchen, *The Heritage of Milton Keynes: The Story of the Original CMK* (Milton Keynes: Living Archive, 2007), 127.

⁴⁸ For more nuanced chronologies, see Pepper, "The Beginnings of High-Rise Social Housing in the Long 1940s: The Case of the LCC and the Woodberry Down Estate," *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 68-91; Swenarton, "High Density without High Rise." On concrete, see Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion, 2012); Barnabas Calder, *Raw Concrete: The Story of Brutalism* (London: William Heinemann, 2016).

⁴⁹ Oliver Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's 'Pop-Up' Plan Sounds the Death Knell for the Legendary Balfron," *Guardian*, 26 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2014/sep/26/wayne->

story tower, cast in concrete, and designed as social housing – not only resulted from, but indeed embodied, broader political arrangements; in the words of another set of architectural historians, these built forms represented “the physical realization of the welfare state in architecture and the built environment.”⁵⁰ The concept of welfare state modernism does not purport to characterize all postwar modernism, much less all postwar building, any more than Balfour Tower represents all postwar public housing. Private sector clients still commissioned homes and offices, and devotees of curves and ornament built when and where they could. But for one consequential generation, the British state commissioned buildings that assumed characteristic built forms – a nexus that left ample testimony of its existence in the built environment of welfare state Britain.⁵¹

The forms, materials, layouts, and even ideas about lived spaces were all being shaped by forces beyond the architect’s control. In daily practice these parameters might feel like constraints, but modern architects subscribed to a creed that elevated public priorities into aesthetic principles. “All that is socially good,” as one put it, “is also beautiful.”⁵² “Beauty,” in this sense, did not refer to or reflect pleasing formal properties: rather, it named a quality that followed from a building’s social function. Here was an aesthetic principle to turn unadorned, concrete, mass-produced towers into sublime architectural achievements – here, indeed, was a welfare state aesthetic.

II

hemingways-pop-up-plan-sounds-the-death-knell-for-the-legendary-balfour-tower, accessed 4 November 2015.

⁵⁰ Swenarton, Avermaete, and Heuvel, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵¹ Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*; Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*; Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain*; Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Winchester: O Books, 2008), 15-42; John Grindrod, *Concretopia: A Journey around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain* (Brecon: Old Street Publishing, 2013).

⁵² Christoph Bon quoted in Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, 94. Contrarily, buildings that lacked social purpose, cheaply built for profit, read as ugly: Peter Mandler, “New Towns for Old: The Fate of the Town Centre,” in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, eds. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (New York: Rivers Oram, 1999), 208-227.

In 1946, Britain's Labour government passed the New Towns Act. This act granted the state extensive powers to acquire land to build new communities, either by developing existing areas or by building on new ("greenfield") sites. Passed the same year as legislation consolidating National Insurance and establishing the National Health Service, the new towns program represented the spatial dimension of the welfare state. Descended from the Edwardian garden cities movement, associated the world over with its founder Ebenezer Howard, Britain's new towns program was the largest in western Europe.⁵³ Its founding act stipulated that these projects would be directed not by local authorities (with priorities of their own), but rather by development corporations answerable to London. During the next quarter-century, three waves of new towns followed, beginning with fourteen designations between 1946 and 1950. After a hiatus during the 1950s, which saw the establishment of only Cumbernauld in Scotland, two additional waves followed between 1961 and 1970. The apex of this second wave, Milton Keynes – designated in 1967, situated on a greenfield site between Birmingham and London, and planned for up to 250,000 people – was Britain's largest new town to date. With the 1969 and 1974 housing acts shifting policy away from substantial new developments, in favor of improving existing stock, Milton Keynes stood out for the scale of its construction effort. By 1970, after three years of planning, building began at last.⁵⁴

Milton Keynes illustrates welfare state modernism in action. To assert as much is, in the context of British culture and historiography, triply mischievous. For British historians, the 1970s represents not the apex but the crisis of the welfare state; for architectural historians, the 1970s marks the moment when modernism finally became repudiated; and in British culture, far from a

⁵³ Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1898); Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia*.

⁵⁴ Helen Meller, *Towns, Plans, and Society in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

leading instance of anything, Milton Keynes figures primarily as a punchline.⁵⁵ But looking forward from 1970, rather than backward from today, reveals neither an exhausted modernism nor an absurd Milton Keynes, so much as a thrilling opportunity for a new generation of architects, planners, and residents to make their world anew. The chief architect, Derek Walker, promised to create “the most enjoyable city in Britain,” joining modern architecture with lush landscaping into something fresh and responsive to its times.⁵⁶ For the *Architectural Review*, Milton Keynes represented a “guinea pig city,” full of possibilities; for the *Architects' Journal*, Milton Keynes proved “amazingly rewarding” because it licensed “architectural risks.”⁵⁷ “Milton Keynes is indeed our Bonanza,” the *AJ* concluded, meaning that, even as modernist architecture was enduring mounting criticisms, Milton Keynes offered a site for its renewal.⁵⁸

Initially, a national building boom mitigated against a vernacular revival, stimulating the adoption of non-traditional materials and methods instead.⁵⁹ Britain's postwar building industry relied upon casual labor – less skilled, secure, or unionized than factory work – and before 1973

⁵⁵ Sandbrook, *White Heat*; Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

⁵⁶ Derek Walker, “Working Document: Consultancy to Milton Keynes,” 1977, Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS), MKDC, Box 770/91 2 of 2, File 00770/91/17 00770/18/11.

⁵⁷ Editorial caption appended to Anne Williams, “The Planning Scene,” *Architectural Review* 162 (November 1977): 274-279, at 278; “Industrial Buildings by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation,” *Architects' Journal*, 18 November 1976, consulted in CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A72, File 00400/16/1. For good discussions of the *Architectural Review*, see Gold, *The Experience of Modernism*, 87-88; Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal*, 83-90.

⁵⁸ “Industrial Buildings by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation.” For the criticism, see Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 270-289.

⁵⁹ Alison Turner, “The Success or Failure of Housing Developments in Milton Keynes,” 25-26, CBS, MKDC, Box PD A75, A77, File A75/1; “The Financing of Milton Keynes,” *Architectural Design* 45 (June 1973): 398; Fred Lloyd Roche, “A Place to Live – Political or Technical,” 4 February 1975, CBS, MKDC, Box Lib/17-18, File 17/5.

even this labor pool was comparatively scarce.⁶⁰ At the same time, national demand placed pressure on building markets, creating a shortage of bricks no less than brick workers.⁶¹ The corporation building Milton Keynes might have slowed its building accordingly, but government funding required them to meet annual construction targets.⁶² Obligated by the state to build up to three thousand units annually, non-traditional materials necessarily replaced brick, while pre-fabricated methods were called upon in the absence of skilled labor.⁶³ This adoption of non-traditional materials and methods was further boosted by the fact that, since 1967, the state had required all new town housing to meet generous space standards, while simultaneously imposing crippling spending restrictions.⁶⁴ Non-traditional materials and methods offered one of the only ways to square this circle, meaning that the resulting built forms were produced, not by modernists intent on defying popular tastes or imposing elite preferences, but rather by mandates from the welfare state. The national picture changed after 1973, leading to a second phase of building that differed from these earliest developments, but by that time the inaugural phase of Milton Keynes's housing had been launched.⁶⁵

If the economic context and state priorities comprised two forces behind a revived 1970s modernism, the chief architect represented another. When he accepted this position in 1970, Derek

⁶⁰ Finnimore, *Houses from the Factory*, 237-238.

⁶¹ Foster to Walker, 16 October 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File 00174/19/1 A21/2.

⁶² Grindrod, *Concretopia*, 389; Roche, "A Place to Live."

⁶³ Walker, "The Formative Years: Recruitment, Reward, and Replenishment," *Urban Design* (Autumn 2007): 14-16, 15.

⁶⁴ Hill and Kitchen, *The Story of the Original CMK*, 127; "Milton Keynes: Whose City?" (1975), CBS, MKDC, Box Lib/59, 60, 61, File 60/45-50, Item 60/46; Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*, 88.

⁶⁵ Christopher Knight, "Appraisal," *Architects' Journal*, 15 April 1980, 696-703.

Walker had won acclaim for his restrained style, natural materials, and holistic sensibility.⁶⁶ But these modest aspects of his early work belied hard-charging ambitions, which were given full rein when Fred Roche, the new town's general manager, asked him to "bring flair" to Milton Keynes's design department.⁶⁷ Walker turned Milton Keynes into an architect's haven, assembling a young, dynamic, and international team: his architects hailed from at least a dozen countries, and most were not yet forty.⁶⁸ Locals nicknamed them "the undertakers," after spotting them traversing muddy building sites in stylish black suits.⁶⁹ Walker boasted of their left-wing credentials, declaring that they were building a city for iconoclasts, innovators, and "every type of social, cultural, and financial revolutionary."⁷⁰

Their iconoclasm was buttressed by their patron, the welfare state. For Walker, the appeal of Milton Keynes derived from the fact that its architects were free of the market – as he put it, "there was no client."⁷¹ Of course, there was a client, in the corporation commissioning all these buildings, but this client's priorities emphasized scale, economy, and pace. Walker could live with these parameters, given that they defined his work as a public sector architect. He had no patience, however, for the criticisms of modernism in the public culture, which struck him as banal pieties about "participation," "consultation," "intimacy," "atmosphere," and "human scale." These terms,

⁶⁶ "Chapel in Yorkshire," *Architectural Review* 133 (February 1963): 125-127; "Preview 1964," *Architectural Review* 135 (January 1964): 9.

⁶⁷ Walker, "The Formative Years," 14.

⁶⁸ Terence Bendixson and John Platt, *Milton Keynes: Image and Reality* (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 1992), 95, as well as an interview with Walker, on *The New Towns Record, 1946-2002* (CD-ROM), eds. Anthony Burton and Joyce Hartly (London: IDOX Information Services, n.d.).

⁶⁹ Bendixson and Platt, *Milton Keynes*, 95; "Derek Walker, Architect," *Telegraph*, 18 May 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11613213/Derek-Walker-architect-obituary.html>, accessed 17 December 2015.

⁷⁰ Interview with Walker, *The New Towns Record*; Christopher Woodward, "Derek Walker Interviewed," *Architectural Design* 45 (June 1973): 351-352, at 352.

⁷¹ Bendixson and Platt, *Milton Keynes*, 95.

he believed, represented a self-righteous “golden word game,” whereas his team were meeting real social needs through the hard work of building.⁷² Walker could be abrasive – dismissing a villager at a public meeting, disparaging his non-architect colleagues, and citing William Blake’s excoriation of “the presumptuous judgment of the ignorant” – but, for those on his side, he fostered an atmosphere of mission.⁷³ Milton Keynes’s first architecture, in short, reflected Milton Keynes’s first architect: alienating to some, inspiring to others, but unapologetically ambitious, irreverent – and modern.

Walker recruited some of Britain’s most distinguished architects – including James Stirling and Norman Foster – to erect signature buildings throughout the new city.⁷⁴ His staff enjoyed latitude, the in-house and aspiring no less than the commissioned and established. An example of the in-house and aspiring was the team responsible for Netherfield, led by Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones.⁷⁵ Netherfield became one of Milton Keynes’s most notorious developments, not only because Dixon and Jones went on to great acclaim, but also because its “towers-on-their-sides” scheme represented the new town’s most daring design.⁷⁶ By digging into the earth across a rolling site, the architects – known as the “Grunt Group,” said to have adorned their office walls with

⁷² Walker, Stuart Moss crop, and Chris Woodward, “Designing for Milton Keynes: Discussion,” *Architectural Association Quarterly* 6 (1974): 26-35, 32.

⁷³ “Storm at Linford,” *Bucks Standard*, 3 November 1972; Woodward, “Derek Walker Interviewed,” 352; Walker, “The Formative Years,” 16.

⁷⁴ Interview with Walker, *The New Towns Record*; Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*, 41.

⁷⁵ “Housing, Milton Keynes, Bucks, England,” *Architectural Review* 153 (January 1973): 32.

⁷⁶ Turner, “The Success or Failure of Housing Developments in Milton Keynes,” 24; Geraint Franklin, “White Wall Guys: The Return of Heroic Modernism,” in *The Seventies: Rediscovering a Lost Decade of British Architecture*, eds. Elaine Harwood and Alan Powers (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2012), 89-101; Ken Powell, “Terry Farrell, Jeremy Dixon, and the Beginnings of Post-Modernism in England,” *ibid.*, 153-163.

posters of Le Corbusier – ensured continuous, linear rooflines, while providing more than a thousand units featuring seventeen different floorplans.⁷⁷ [Image 1]

Ralph Erskine's Eaglestone abutted Netherfield on the north, but a more stark stylistic difference could hardly be imagined. Crooked entryways and intimate spaces looked inward from roads encircling the estate, achieving a sense of identity not through uniformity but from nestled housing clusters.⁷⁸ The materials were natural and the rooftops were pitched, a contrast not only with Netherfield's flat aluminum roofs and metal-clad walls, but also with Foster's Beanhill to Netherfield's southwest.⁷⁹ Today the Pritzker Prize winning Lord Foster, whose credits include Berlin's Reichstag, by the early 1970s Foster was already the man of the hour in British architecture, and his sleek, flat-roofed rendering of that most universal form, the bungalow, found echoes across the city in seventy homes for sale by Cliff Nicholls.⁸⁰ What most distinguished Calverton End, however, was "The Boat," a playground built by the Archigram collective – one of just two projects (the other a swimming pool for Rod Stewart) ever realized by those arch provocateurs.⁸¹ Meanwhile, in sector after sector across the city, signature projects arose: the Cofferridge Close in-fill on Stony Stratford's high street, the Agora entertainment complex and a lime-green sports pavilion in Wolverton, a Miesian black-box shopping center in Bletchley – all culminating in 1979 with the chic glass-and-steel shopping building in the city center.⁸² [Image 2]

⁷⁷ Philip Opher and Clinton Bird, *Milton Keynes: An Illustrated Guide* (Headington: Urban Design, Oxford Polytechnic, 1981), 12-13. Thanks to Michael Synott.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁹ Richard MacCormac, "Housing and the Dilemma of Style," *Architectural Review* 163 (April 1978): 203-206.

⁸⁰ Harwood and Powers, "From Downturn to Diversity," 27; Opher and Bird, *Milton Keynes*, 42.

⁸¹ "Calverton End," *Architectural Design* 45 (June 1973): 386; Grindrod, *Concretopia*, 400.

⁸² Opher and Bird, *Milton Keynes*, 44-46; Hill and Kitchen, *The Story of the Original CMK*; Alastair Best, "Sports Centre, Wolverton," *Architectural Review* 155 (June 1974): 364.

Yet for all their visual diversity, together these projects testify to an enduring welfare state modernism. The estates' designs, layouts, materials, and color palates resulted not from the straightforward realization of architects' visions, but rather were produced through the fusion of those visions with residents' preferences, government requirements, and local circumstances. Consider the most radical scheme of Netherfield, whose linear terraces, steady rooflines, and non-traditional materials might seem the epitome of the international style excoriated by Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981).⁸³ To be sure, the neo-purists responsible for Netherfield adhered to a high-modernist aesthetic, but their buildings' layouts resulted from other factors too.⁸⁴ Residents might say, when asked, that they wanted detached homes on intimate cul-de-sacs, but they also wanted the light, storage, and living space mandated by the welfare state; they might say they craved green space and ample gardens, but they also wanted – indeed, needed – affordable rents. These competing demands shaped Netherfield, the form of which provided a variety of floorplans and ample green spaces, while meeting the state's cost targets.⁸⁵ There were other trade-offs as well, for instance when the stucco requested by the architects was replaced by metal cladding – an economy enforced by the national building market, so buoyant that it absorbed skilled labor, just as the state's imperative to build forced the corporation to proceed with whatever materials were available.⁸⁶ These factors produced not simply a welfare state modernism in general, but a welfare state aesthetic in particular, down to the flat roofs, non-traditional materials, and scale characteristic

⁸³ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1981).

⁸⁴ Franklin, "The Return of Heroic Modernism," 98.

⁸⁵ MKDC, "Milton Keynes: Whose New City?" *Architectural Design*, March 1975, partially reproduced in CBS, MKDC, Lib/59, 60, 61, Ref 60/45-50, Item 60/46.

⁸⁶ Interview with Bill Berrett, *The New Towns Record*; Walker, http://www.medienarchitektur.at/architekturtheorie/milton_keynes/content/AF_Gold_talk2.mp3, accessed 28 December 2015; Walker, "The Formative Years," 16.

of that style.⁸⁷ These forces defined even the color spectrum inside people's homes, the unloved brown tiling the consequence of the architects' need to achieve economies.⁸⁸ The point is not to insist that architectural fashion – even architects' arrogance – played no role in shaping design (“Why flat roofs?,” one architect recalled, “Pitched roofs were for wimps”), so much as to illuminate the roles that the public, government, state, and economy also played in producing these built forms.⁸⁹

The architects understood themselves not to be clinging to discredited styles, but rather to be refreshing modernism for the coming generation. These ambitions informed their efforts to revivify street life, after earlier new towns had experimented with rear access to homes, as well as their rejection of tower blocks, dispensing with concrete and, at Netherfield, laying those towers on their sides.⁹⁰ But their boldest rethinking did not involve buildings at all, focusing instead on the creation of an entirely new urban landscape: “a city ‘softer’ than the surrounding countryside, a city enveloped in green, a city set in a forest.”⁹¹ Ever since Corbusier's chilling “Plan Voisin” for Paris, which envisaged rows of skyscrapers on a rationalized right bank, modern architecture and urban landscapes had existed in uneasy tension. If England's garden city tradition sought to address that tension by softening the urban landscape, and then postwar modernists pledged that urban rebuilding schemes would preserve the countryside, the makers of Milton Keynes decided to

⁸⁷ Jock Campbell, *The New Towns Record*; J. R. Hyatt to A. G. Ashton, 17 July 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File 00174/19/1 A21/2.

⁸⁸ Leo Walsh, “P.C.W.'s Resume – December – Coffee Hall,” 9 February 1976, CBS, MKDC, Box SDD/A49, File A49/1.

⁸⁹ David Byrne quoted in *The Story of the Original CMK*, 127.

⁹⁰ Bendixson and Platt, *Milton Keynes*, 96; Turner, “The Success or Failure of Housing Developments in Milton Keynes,” 24.

⁹¹ Walker, *The Architecture and Planning of Milton Keynes* (London: The Architectural Press, 1981), 14.

reinvent urbanity itself – a reinvention they took so seriously that their controversial chief architect also headed up landscaping.⁹²

Despite his bracing tastes, Walker sought to create “a very green suburban town,” whose “architectural character” and “urbanity” derived not from its buildings or its density, but rather from so lush a landscape that passing drivers would not know they had entered a city.⁹³ By 1972, while turning vast swathes of farmland into muddy construction sites, the corporation had already planted forty-five thousand new trees. So herbaceous was their appetite that the corporation maintained its own nurseries, while fast emerging as one of the largest buyers of semi-mature trees anywhere in Europe.⁹⁴ Shrubberies and trees, more than buildings and estates, were to fix identities in Milton Keynes, fostering a sense of rootedness among new residents in new homes in a new city that otherwise lacked identifying markers. Thematic plantings distinguished residential zones – lime, birch, and hawthorn in the northwest; ash, hazel, and snowberry just north of the city center – while no building anywhere in the city would rise higher than the tallest tree.⁹⁵

The building of Milton Keynes therefore testifies to a modernism anything but monotonous, exhausted, or inhuman. Under Walker’s iconoclastic leadership, the “bonanza” of British architecture attracted established and emerging architects to a diverse and dynamic project. These architects worked, as historical actors always must, within statutory and economic constraints, which combined with their aesthetic priorities to produce characteristic formal features. These features

⁹² Whyte, “The Englishness of English Architecture”; David Matless, “Appropriate Geography: Patrick Abercrombie and the Energy of the World,” *Journal of Design History* 6:3 (1993): 167-178.

⁹³ Walker, *The New Towns Record*; Walker, “The Formative Years,” 15.

⁹⁴ Campbell, 2 June 1972, CBS, MKDC, Box GM A5 A6, File 122/3/6; “Press Release: The Centre of the City,” “Milton Keynes Exhibition: Press Information,” 5 June 1972, CBS, MKDC, Box GM A5 A6, File 122/3/6. Thanks to Lee Shostak.

⁹⁵ Walker, *The Architecture and Planning of Milton Keynes*, 20; “Infrastructure: Unifying Features within the City,” *Architectural Design* 45 (June 1973): 355-362; Roland Jeffery, “The Centrality of Milton Keynes,” *The Seventies*, 106-109.

comprised welfare state modernism: not simply because they were produced under a welfare state, but because their formal characteristics – their scales, heights, materials, designs, colors, layouts, and landscaping – resulted from this confluence of ideas and politics. As the 1970s proceeded, however, these architects increasingly came under fire, as the balance of forces for and against welfare state modernism reshuffled all around them.

III

How, then, did welfare state modernism become displaced? The neologism admittedly risks rendering an explanation elusive, since it turns a precise aesthetic question (about, say, the repudiation of flat roofs) into a complex historical question (about the unraveling of the factors that had produced flat roofs to begin with). But locating particular aesthetic features within a larger ideological formation offers a mechanism for explaining how their fortunes shift, without invoking ahistorical notions about what designs “work” or what people “want.” However commonsensical these ideas may seem – *flat roofs leak; people want gardens* – they are the results, not the causes, of larger historical processes. This point can be illustrated by comparison with the historiography of science. The foundational insight of the history of science is that what later generations take as “truth” does not drive intellectual change, but rather is the result of a process of inquiry itself shaped by broader interests, networks, and worldviews.⁹⁶ If historians of science have found it necessary to bracket today’s ideas about matter and life in order to explain the rise and fall of scientific paradigms, architectural historians might similarly set aside today’s ideas about what designs work or what residents want to explain the rise and fall of aesthetic paradigms.

Welfare state modernism, like modernism everywhere, always had critics. According to the historian Richard Evans, the modern movement ignored what “people wanted” and “most people

⁹⁶ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

liked” – or, in the populist idiom of the writer Lynsey Hanley, “Sod Modernism, if all it has done is make the people who had it visited upon them unhappy.”⁹⁷ This position was evident by 1940, when even the sympathetic John Summerson worried that “modern architecture will have to beat a retreat, simply because the public can’t understand it, never will, and hates it like poison.”⁹⁸ By the 1960s, for example in Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), these suspicions were gaining further traction among professionals and critics.⁹⁹ In 1969, Reyner Banham – who had only recently celebrated concrete brutalism – joined the planner Peter Hall, journalist Paul Barker, and architect Cedric Price in repudiating the conventions governing all of urban planning.¹⁰⁰ By 1970, a broadly negative impression of modern architects made Monty Python’s “Architect Sketch” possible. A pair of architects present competing models for a commissioned block of flats. The first, played by John Cleese, offers a sleek abattoir instead. (“Oh, I see. I hadn’t correctly divined your attitude towards your tenants.”) The second, played by Eric Idle, proudly displays a twenty-eight story tower, only to be interrupted when his model tilts to the side, bursts into flame, and eventually explodes; he concedes that the internal pillars might need strengthening, but the gathered investors worry about the cost: “After all, they’re not meant to be luxury flats.”¹⁰¹ The sketch relies on a shared understanding that the needs, desires, and even lives of residents are marginal to the concerns of investors, developers, and, of course, architects.

⁹⁷ Richard Evans, “Disorderly Cities,” *London Review of Books*, 5 December 2013, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n23/richard-j-evans/disorderly-cities>, accessed 19 November 2015; Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta, 2012), 209.

⁹⁸ Powers, *Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain* (London: Merrell, 2005), 232.

⁹⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

¹⁰⁰ Banham, *The New Brutalism*; Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall, and Cedric Price, “Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom,” *New Society*, 20 March 1969, 435-443.

¹⁰¹ *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, Season 2, Episode 4, “Architect Sketch,” aired 20 October 1970 on the BBC; transcript at <http://www.ibras.dk/montypython/episode17.htm>, accessed 2 December 2015.

But styles have histories, and within those histories lie obscured attitudes.¹⁰² Among the postwar working class, for example, modernism could prove popular. It signified a rejection of “architecturally tired” southern towns in favor of “sharp, stark beauty” suitable to “an age of precision,” part of a built environment not only modern but, indeed, “space age” – even “supersonic.”¹⁰³ Even the most hostile accounts of modernist housing acknowledge its initial popularity with the residents who knew it best. When asked in 1971 whether they were satisfied with their new flats, ninety percent of rehoused Glaswegians answered yes – an attitude that scholars have corroborated nationally.¹⁰⁴ While such enthusiasm might be thought to refer to new homes in general, rather than to their specifically modernist features, researchers found that many Londoners appreciated the quiet, light, and views that higher flats afforded, and that the earliest residents of Sheffield’s Park Hill lauded its ultra-modern “streets in the sky.”¹⁰⁵ Internationally, rather than modernist housing projects facing certain doom from the 1960s, new developments were generally popular developments, whether they dated from the 1950s or 1970s.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, high-rise flats on once notorious estates in Sheffield and London – Park Hill and Balfron Tower – have become remade into pricey properties for young professionals. This reversal

¹⁰² Whyte, “How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture,” *History and Theory* 45 (May 2006): 153-177.

¹⁰³ Selina Todd, “Phoenix Rising: Working-Class Life and Urban Reconstruction, c.1945-1967,” *Journal of British Studies* 54:3 (2015): 679-702, at 691, 699-700. This attitude was particularly prominent among younger residents: Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity, and Social Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 108.

¹⁰⁴ Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1985), 11-12; Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, 5 and *passim*.

¹⁰⁵ Cupers, “Human Territoriality and the Downfall of Public Housing,” *Public Culture* (forthcoming): 165-190, at 169-171; Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*, 69; Pepper, “The Beginnings of High-Rise Social Housing in the Long 1940s,” 84; Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 219.

¹⁰⁶ Sammartino, “Mass Housing, Late Modernism, and the Forging of Community in New York City and East Berlin”; Urban, *Tower and Slab*; Michael Romyn, “The Heygate: Community Life in an Inner-City Estate, 1974-2011,” *History Workshop Journal* 81:1 (2016): 197-230, especially 210.

of fortunes flips the conventional gestalt, inviting the question not of why a modernist aesthetic briefly thrived from the 1950s to the 1970s, but why it briefly floundered from the 1980s to the 2000s. The point is not to insist that modernism was ever universally admired, much less to deny the terrible human impact of genuine structural failings. But the evidence nevertheless confirms – against commonsensical appeals to what people “want” – that the forms of welfare state modernism were capable of generating satisfaction as well as criticism.¹⁰⁷

Historians should thus aim for balance in accounting for modernism’s standing over time. Rather than pointing to a complex intersection of professional, technological, and political factors that sustained this style from the 1940s, only to blithely invoke assumptions about what people “want” to explain its eclipse from the 1970s, welfare state modernism’s ascendance and displacement should both be explained with reference to wider contexts. To proceed otherwise would endorse the ahistorical notion that its formal features represented an artificial departure from a more natural state of affairs, imposed by the state until the market intervened to restore a traditional aesthetic. But the notion that some preferences are “natural,” some styles are “traditional,” and the “market” reveals timeless priorities are constructions that came to thrive during the 1970s. Rather than invoking ostensibly natural styles, and depicting modernism as a departure from them, a historical account of aesthetic change would explain the fortunes of all aesthetic practices with reference to the broader forces – social, cultural, political, technological, and intellectual – of which they were a part. Historicizing welfare state modernism thus requires, beyond attention to formal properties and popular opinion, recovery of the commitments and assumptions that sustained these ways of building. This approach integrates architectural history with political, cultural, and postwar history in general – and, in each case, the 1970s figured decisively.

¹⁰⁷ Jesse Meredith, “Cities of the Plan: Visions of the Built Environment in Northern England, 1960-1985” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2018).

For example, welfare state modernism depended upon particular understandings of “success” and the “market.” In the context of postwar reconstruction, the “success” of housing referred to the number of people accommodated, a criterion that even Conservative governments – despite their eagerness to stimulate private building and owner occupation – acknowledged the “market” could not satisfy.¹⁰⁸ Flat roofs, clean lines, repetitive facades, non-traditional materials, industrialized methods, and high-rise towers followed from this priority to build. The resulting forms were “ideological” in the sense that they were tied to the state’s needs and the architects’ ideals, but they were not political in the sense that opposing parties lined up on either side of them.¹⁰⁹ “[I]f architects are given a chance in a large enough area to use modern styles, materials and engineering,” wrote one MP in 1962, “they can not only achieve excellent modern accommodation but the beauty of exciting lines, freshness and something which puts character into the life of a town.”¹¹⁰ This hymn to “modern styles” and “exciting lines” was hummed not by a technocratic Labour modernizer, but by a Conservative MP.¹¹¹ Indeed, according to Britain’s leading architectural journal, the built forms associated with “state socialism” after 1945 were mainly erected under the Conservatives.¹¹² So obvious was modernism’s appeal that the Labour Party attempted to claim a monopoly on its associations, cruelly branding the Tories the party of traditional design, but in practice modernism’s appeal was so obvious that both parties eagerly embraced it.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, 319-320; Bullock, *Building the Post-war World*, 277.

¹⁰⁹ Saumarez Smith, “Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment in Britain, 1959-1966,” *Historical Journal* 58:1 (2015): 217-244, 232; Gunn, “European Urbanities since 1945: A Commentary,” *Contemporary European History* 24:4 (2015): 617-622, at 618.

¹¹⁰ Saumarez Smith, “Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment,” 226.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 220-229.

¹¹² Stephen Bayley, “Living in Britain, 1952-77,” *Architectural Review* 162 (November 1977): 263.

¹¹³ Saumarez Smith, “Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment,” 229-233.

From the mid-1960s, however, the assumptions sustaining welfare state modernism faced rising challenges.¹¹⁴ Horrific building disasters, most famously at Ronan Point in 1968, compromised the promise of technology and the authority of experts, the latter also suffering at the hands of a wider turn against authority associated with the 1960s.¹¹⁵ At the same time, ideas about “success” in housing were also changing, from the number of people housed to the number of units sold.¹¹⁶ This shift in the meaning of success dovetailed with changing understandings of the “market”: from a mechanism that limited variety, and therefore restricted consumer choices, to a mechanism that discerned and reflected consumer preferences.¹¹⁷ The authority of the market particularly rose after 1973, when recession began restricting the receipts, and thus the budgets, that supported public building. Reversing the situation the Conservatives had faced during the 1950s, Labour governments found themselves reliant upon the private sector to meet their housing targets. This enhancement of the private sector’s power renewed attention to the individualization of housing, replacing the visual unity through which modernists had aimed to banish social distinctions with building alterations meant to convey precisely such distinctions. The intellectual, economic, and political world around architecture was therefore changing, undermining the commitments that structured welfare state modernism. As the postwar ideological settlement cracked, modernism’s stylistic signatures were left exposed, so the very features that recently enjoyed cross-party support

¹¹⁴ Pearl Jephcott, *Homes in High Flats: Some of the Human Problems Involved in Multi-Storey Housing* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1971). If located within a turn against urban policies more broadly, the vast historiography would include Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal*.

¹¹⁵ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989), 475-483.

¹¹⁶ “Milton Keynes Environmental Perception,” 22 May 1979, CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

¹¹⁷ W. Cowburn, “Housing in a Consumer Society,” *Architectural Review* 142 (November 1967): 398-400.

became associated with Labour in particular.¹¹⁸ Newly thrust onto the polarizing terrain of politics, the stylistic signatures, building technologies, social commitments, intellectual assumptions, and ideas about the state that had buttressed welfare state modernism began to seem of another world entirely.¹¹⁹ Flat roofs, unadorned facades, and concrete towers became collateral damage, their repudiation a product of these larger historical shifts.¹²⁰

These changes were happening not only to, but also within, the architectural profession. From the early 1970s, in line with parallel movements across the Atlantic, the *Architectural Review* remade itself into a forum reconsidering modernist commitments.¹²¹ Criticisms were coming, that is, not only from conservative figures such as the academic David Watkin, Prince Charles, and (as we shall see) Alice Coleman, but from within the movement itself, culminating in 1976 when the *Review's* editor announced a startling departure.¹²² Britain, Lance Wright wrote, was leading the world once again: not by elaborating modernism, but by acknowledging its abeyance, making Britain the world's first country to question technocracy through architecture. "Modern Architecture [sic] as we have been experiencing it," Wright reported, "has gone into hiding."¹²³ Clients still wanted, and architects still delivered, good buildings for their money, but these designs were now softening

¹¹⁸ Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, 313; Nick Beech, "'Et tu, Peter?' Some Kinds of Real- (or Not So) *Politik* at the Festival of Britain," *Journal of Architecture* 17 (2012): 747-762, 757.

¹¹⁹ Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, 40.

¹²⁰ On the secondary status of aesthetic objections amid larger battles, see Florian Urban, "The Maerkisches Viertel in West Berlin," *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 176-196.

¹²¹ Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal*, which links "anti-modernist architectural feuilletonists in postwar London" to peer movements in West Berlin, Philadelphia, Boston, and Toronto (239 and *passim*).

¹²² David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture: The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Harwood and Powers, "From Downturn to Diversity, Revisiting the 1970s," *The Seventies*, 25; Wright, "Architects in Hiding," *Architectural Review* 159 (January 1976): 3-4.

¹²³ Wright, "Architects in Hiding," 3.

their edges, incorporating the landscape, and referencing the past.¹²⁴ Attempting to characterize this departure, Wright seized upon an unfamiliar term, writing that the moment exhibited something of a “post Modern Movement” delusion.¹²⁵ His leader was titled “Towards Another Architecture,” and its opening sentence dispelled any doubts about its implications: “An era, both in society and in architecture, is coming to an end.”¹²⁶ The *Review*’s mission, Wright announced, was changed: no longer “the recorder and illustrator of an established aesthetic,” it would now work to identify “a new kind of architectural sensibility.”¹²⁷ The heroic age of modernism was finished, replaced by a new, “post Modern” world of diverse and competing styles.¹²⁸

By the 1970s, then, modernism in general – and welfare state modernism in particular – was being buffeted by erstwhile devotees no less than by longtime opponents. Critics had existed during the 1960s, and advocates persisted into the 1980s, but this decade in-between saw a reshuffling of their positions until the former emerged ascendant.¹²⁹ While this transformation registered as an aesthetic shift – the re-sloping of roofs, the return of historical references, the revival of brick – these formal changes were but visible signs of broader transformations. If it had seemed obvious to Tory politicians in 1962 that “modern styles, materials, and engineering” promised “a new twentieth-century urbanity,” by 1986 it seemed no less clear to left-wing sociologists that modern architects

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Wright, “Towards Another Architecture,” 44.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Wright, “Starting Out on a Long Journey,” *Architectural Review* 160 (July 1976): 7-8, at 7.

¹²⁸ Stephen Bayley, ed., “Living in Britain, 1952-77,” *Architectural Review* 162 (November 1977).

¹²⁹ Bullock puts this point well in “West Ham and the Welfare State, 1945-1975: A Suitable Case for Treatment?” *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 92-110, especially at 104.

had committed a “gigantic folly.”¹³⁰ Rather than Whiggishly siding with the latter view, and devoting historical analysis to explaining how it corrected past mistakes, this discussion has embedded all such judgments within their times. Welfare state modernism was sustained by a particular ideological arrangement, and when that arrangement unraveled its forms were left exposed. Exposed, but not extinguished: as events in Milton Keynes soon showed, the decisive turn against welfare state modernism required agents to see it through.

IV

Milton Keynes’s modernists commanded the stage in the early 1970s, only to suffer total defeat by decade’s end. This story culminated in 1981, when Milton Keynes Development Corporation commanded future architects to adopt neo-traditional styles. That injunction followed the recommendation of an extensive social survey, the Neighbourhood Feedback Study (1979-1981), which promised unfettered access to residents’ housing preferences. These directives, however – and the survey that produced them – represented not the neutral expression of popular will, but rather the triumph of particular actors. Broadly speaking, housing in Milton Keynes was divided between rental properties, managed by the corporation, and private housing, built by a combination of the corporation and private builders. Lending institutions, eager to maintain social – and thus economic – distinctions between rental and sale housing, refused mortgages to homes with non-traditional designs. With loans therefore scarce, the corporation found itself sitting atop a housing backlog they could not sell. At this point, a faction within the corporation turned against their colleagues in the architecture department. They designed surveys to discredit “architect-designed” housing, in favor of a new category of “saleable” homes instead. In this hidden backroom battle,

¹³⁰ Richard Nugent and Keith Joseph quoted respectively in Saumarez Smith, “Central Government and Town-Centre Redevelopment,” 226, 227; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957; New York: Routledge, 1986), xx.

design served as the terrain amid a wider effort to align Milton Keynes with the priorities of financial institutions and Conservative politicians.

The opponents of modernist Milton Keynes were present from the outset. “There was not a member of the Board who did not detest [flat or mono-pitched roofs],” recalled the chairman, Jock Campbell. “[W]e all wanted to see good old fashioned, two-pitched rooves.”¹³¹ He worried they were building “slums for the future,” but felt cornered by pressing need to build.¹³² Fred Roche, who owed his position as general manager to his ability to drive building forward, initially backed his architects, but he, too, harbored reservations about the materials and forms public funding effectively mandated.¹³³ Marginal early in the 1970s, by comparison with the architects who controlled the pace of production, these skeptics found powerful allies in the housing associations, building societies, and (eventually) banks that offered housing mortgages. Quietly intervening in design decisions, these financial institutions conveyed that they favored homes devoid of modernist features.¹³⁴ Some residents shared these reservations, expressing their dislike of aluminum and cedar cladding, and organizing campaigns to replace flat roofs with pitched ones.¹³⁵ To be sure, leaky roofs, damp interiors, and poor insulation endeared nobody to new buildings. From the architects’ perspective, however, it made no sense to draw aesthetic conclusions from construction flaws.¹³⁶ By 1976, growing hostility to his preferred designs drove the Walker out of the corporation, issuing a

¹³¹ Campbell, 12 November 1981, CBS, D 187/13.

¹³² Campbell, at the Milton Keynes Forum, 22 October 1982, CBS, D 187/13.

¹³³ Roche, “A Place to Live,” 2.

¹³⁴ Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home*, 244; David Llewellyn to Foster, 31 October 1972, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2; J. R. Hyatt to A. G. Ashton, 17 July 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2; Nationwide Building Society to Ashton, 3 September 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2.

¹³⁵ Mark Clapson, *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), 111-113, 156-157. On tenant action, see Peter Shapely, *The Politics of Housing: Power, Consumers, and Urban Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

¹³⁶ See also Urban, “The Maerkisches Viertel in West Berlin,” 187-188.

defiant defense of “architectural decisions that have not been shared more generally within the [corporation].”¹³⁷ For five years he remained affiliated as a consultant architect, most notably on the shopping building that opened in 1979, but by that time his flat roofs were being pitched in more ways than one.

These negative assessments always competed with more favorable views. For Richard MacCormac, writing in the *Architectural Review*, Foster’s Beanhill represented “a thoughtful interpretation of . . . suburban housing”; its bungalows displayed versatility in their resourceful use of space.¹³⁸ For the architect, planner, and historian Lionel Brett, the builders of Milton Keynes were thoughtfully responding to the critiques of Jane Jacobs, employing visual diversity to foster their residents’ sense of place.¹³⁹ Celebrations of Milton Keynes flooded the architectural press, where building firms trumpeted their involvement with the city’s most avant-garde estates.¹⁴⁰ Praise flowed in from other quarters, too. “It’s so futuristic, like a moon holiday,” raved Warren, aged ten; nine-year-old Stephen added, “When it rains you can hear it clatter on the aluminium and that’s really good.” To be sure, Katie (aged nine) complained that “[s]ome of the houses are funny colours,” while Adam (eight) thought they “looked like sardeen cans,” but Andrew tempered their criticism with a perspective earned through his eight years: “I do like my house,” he explained, “I have a bedroom of my own.”¹⁴¹ Unsocialized into commonsensical views about design, these children’s reactions belie the idea that any given forms are inherently lovely or ugly, natural or

¹³⁷ Walker, “Working Document,” published as *The Architecture and Planning of Milton Keynes* (1981).

¹³⁸ MacCormac, “Housing and the Dilemma of Style,” 204.

¹³⁹ Lionel Brett, *Architecture in a Crowded World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 123-161, especially 135-136.

¹⁴⁰ *Architectural Design* 44 (August 1974): 531-532, 535.

¹⁴¹ *This Place Has Its Ups and Downs* (Milton Keynes: People’s Press, 1977); spellings and punctuation corrected.

unnatural, wanted or unwanted. The adults, in any case, sided with Andrew: in 1974, ninety-seven percent of new arrivals wanted to remain in Milton Keynes; the next year that figure rose to almost ninety-nine percent – in short, resident satisfaction was effectively unanimous.¹⁴² Residents rightly protested physical failings, and higher majorities always favored vernacular designs, but they generally appreciated the city's architectural diversity, and expressed overall satisfaction from vernacular Neath Hill to modernist Netherfield.¹⁴³ These findings echoed the corporation's research. Their 1975 study concluded that aesthetic features, far from driving resident dissatisfaction with their homes, paled next to concerns about heating, privacy, space, and amenities. "From the residents' view," the report concluded, "functional details are more important than the aesthetic details."¹⁴⁴ But perhaps the residents' silence on design reflected the fact that the survey had hardly asked about it – an omission that modernism's opponents soon set out to remedy.

That 1975 study revealed that in order to prevail, the opponents of welfare state modernism needed better data. They therefore set out to manufacture dissent, generating research to validate conclusions already held. During the winter of 1978-1979, the corporation invited Clare Cooper Marcus, a professor of architecture at Berkeley, to study the effects of landscape and housing on life in Milton Keynes.¹⁴⁵ They asked her to generate propositions for survey testing, but by inviting Marcus the corporation knew what they were getting. Her admiration of privately defined spaces in public housing had featured in Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* (1972), a blockbuster attack on

¹⁴² Grindrod, *Concretopia*, 392; MKDC, *Architectural Design* 45 (December 1975): 766.

¹⁴³ Turner, "The Success or Failure of Housing Developments in Milton Keynes," 47-50, 53-57, 67-68.

¹⁴⁴ Planning Directorate, "Residential Design Feedback: Report of Studies," 1975, 1, CBS, MKDC, Box Lib 5, 6, 7, Ref 5/10.

¹⁴⁵ "Personalised Housing in Milton Keynes," June 1980, CBS, MKDC, Lib 12-13, Ref 12/30.

public housing's denial of humans' purportedly innate territorial instincts.¹⁴⁶ Socialized space, for Newman, became undefended space, rendering architects and planners – rather than, say, racial discrimination or chronic unemployment – responsible for crime and urban blight. Read as an endorsement of private property, *Defensible Space* became a touchstone for Margaret Thatcher's housing advisor, Alice Coleman. Coleman's *Utopia on Trial* (1985) began by acknowledging its debt to Newman, before unleashing a blistering attack on “modern housing estates” across Britain.¹⁴⁷ Marcus's work similarly showed how academic criticisms of public housing policies could feed criticisms of public housing generally. In her case, the key concept was “personalization,” the ability for residents to render their homes “tangible statement[s] of ‘self.’”¹⁴⁸ Yet while convinced that this capacity for personalization determined estates' success or failure, Marcus worried that Milton Keynes's residents might not know what they were missing.¹⁴⁹ She therefore recommended that the survey offer pre-defined choices, guiding residents' responses towards conclusions already known.¹⁵⁰

While Marcus wanted to foster a “feeling” of ownership among the city's residents, the development corporation was increasingly seeking the real thing.¹⁵¹ Like nearly all of Britain's new towns, Milton Keynes aimed at a balance between renters and owners, but that aspiration became a priority when the 1979 election returned a Conservative government promising the nation “homes of our own.” Eager to prove themselves a facilitator of, rather than an obstacle to, government priorities, the corporation placed housing sales at the top of their agenda. Despite the evidence that

¹⁴⁶ Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Collier Books, 1972), 155-158.

¹⁴⁷ Coleman, *Utopia on Trial*.

¹⁴⁸ Clare Cooper Marcus, “Personal Critique of Housing Areas in MK: Pilot Study for Neighbourhood Feedback Research,” April 1979, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A69 A70 A71, File 00400/4/1.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ “Personalised Housing in Milton Keynes.”

the primary factor in determining a property's viability on the market was its cost, design emerged as a shorthand for determining which of the city's homes they could sell.¹⁵² This shorthand resulted partly from the policies announced by lending institutions, namely their opposition to issuing mortgages to homes featuring non-traditional designs. Their goal was not to realize any particular aesthetic vision, but rather to instantiate visible distinctions between properties for rent and for sale – distinctions that promised to endow exclusivity, social and thus financial, upon their investments.¹⁵³

Construction in Milton Keynes proceeded, yielding a mixture of tenures and styles, but these policies meant that the resulting homes bore markers making it possible to distinguish homes-for-rent from homes-for-sale. The architects responded that, due to mandatory standards for public accommodation, public rentals should indeed look different from the cheapest of sale housing.¹⁵⁴ The city's residents, however, read those features as markers less of standards than of class, which they expressed as an aversion to "architect-designed" homes.¹⁵⁵ Of course, all homes are architect-designed, and modernist architects routinely designed pricey private homes.¹⁵⁶ But the residents were expressing their aversion less to formal features than to the status they conveyed. "Monopitch roofs are not disliked because of their *shape*," concluded one investigator, "but because of the

¹⁵² Lee Shostak, "Sales to Sitting Tenants: Progress and Issues," 26 March 1980, CBS, MKDC, Box MK 39, File 00930/23/4.

¹⁵³ Llewellyn to Foster, 31 October 1972, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2; J. R. Hyatt to A. G. Ashton, 17 July 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2; Nationwide Building Society to Ashton, 3 September 1973, CBS, MKDC, Box DDD A21, File A21/2. On this political project, see Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2014), 302-303, 179-181.

¹⁵⁴ MKDC, *Architectural Design* 45 (December 1975): 765.

¹⁵⁵ "Hypotheses (House Layout and Preferences)," CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1; "Neighbourhood Feedback Study: Current Consensus on Topics Covered," CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/2.

¹⁵⁶ Harwood, *Space, Hope, and Brutalism*, 114-163.

meaning they have for people – they are signs of an architect at work[,] and therefore council housing.”¹⁵⁷ This visible tie between design and class threatened to polarize estates along socio-economic lines, with some areas coding as rentals (and thus working class) and others as private (and thus middle class) – a familiar problem in housing policy, known as residualization, which if not interrupted would progressively intensify class segregation.¹⁵⁸ Sure enough, the corporation soon identified social tensions in the city along precisely these lines.¹⁵⁹ In order to arrest this segregation, the corporation needed to eliminate the formal markers that made it possible to distinguish rental from sale housing. Given the building societies’ denial of mortgages to “architect-designed” (modernist) homes, this ambition required them to eliminate modernist design features in particular.¹⁶⁰ A public agency, born of the welfare state, thus became enlisted in the project of eliminating the welfare state aesthetic.

Their instrument became the Neighbourhood Feedback Study. This was not the first time that the corporation deployed surveys purportedly eliciting residents’ feedback, while actually seeking to educate them at the same time.¹⁶¹ An earlier study had invited residents to engage in trade-offs between various amenities, such as garden sizes, play space access, and flats-versus-

¹⁵⁷ Jeff Bishop, “Passing in the Night? Public and Professional Views of Milton Keynes” (1981), CBS, MKDC, Box PD A75 A77, Ref 00157/8/2 A75/3.

¹⁵⁸ B. Jones, “Slum Clearance, Privatization, and Residualization: The Practices and Politics of Council Housing in Mid-Twentieth-Century England,” *Twentieth Century British History* 21:4 (2010): 510-539; Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁵⁹ Shostak, “Sales to Sitting Tenants: A Discussion Paper,” 12 February 1980, MSC.24.80, included in “Private Housing Unit: Sales to Sitting Tenants,” CBS, MKDC, MK 39, Ref 00930/23/4; Joan Butterworth, “Arrivals Team Report – SMK,” July 1975, CBS, MKDC, Box SDD/A49, File A49/1.

¹⁶⁰ Bishop, “Private Sector Housing – Relevant Results,” 3 June 1981, CBS, MKDC, Box PD A75, A77, Ref 00157/8/2 A75/3.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Hollow, “Governmentality on the Park Hill Estate: The Rationality of Public Housing,” *Urban History* 37:1 (2010): 117-135.

houses; the results ostensibly promised to inform decision-makers of their residents' priorities, but the corporation also wanted to teach demanding residents that they simply could not have everything.¹⁶² Four years later – a month after Marcus submitted her report, and not three weeks after the 1979 election – another team met to design yet another social survey. Word arrived from Roche that a new category should figure in these interviews, “saleability.” Ostensibly, saleability meant the corporation should identify the styles that residents would buy, but Roche – fed up with leaking roofs, hostile news stories, and “a mass of houses which don't sell” – already knew his answer. He had just halted construction on an estate with monopitch roofs, ordering the builders to proceed with houses “people like” instead. The corporation, he announced, would build semi-detached, pitched-roofed, saleable homes, and the Neighbourhood Feedback Study would provide the data, arguments, and, ultimately, instructions to architects entrenching the new policy.¹⁶³

The survey interviewed more than two hundred residents, on topics ranging from parking to their hopes for the city, but the interview scripts included specific instructions about introducing “saleability” into the discussions.¹⁶⁴ “If saleability has not been covered,” advised one, “ask if they would be prepared to buy any of the houses sketched.”¹⁶⁵ At another point, after viewing photographs of different housing styles, residents were invited to divide their responses among four categories: “Favourite,” “Prepared to buy,” “Least favorite,” “[Not] prepared to buy.”¹⁶⁶ The

¹⁶² “Residential Design Feedback: Appendices,” CBS, MKDC, Lib 5, 6, 7, Ref 5/11; MKDC, *Architectural Design* 45 (December 1975): 765.

¹⁶³ “Milton Keynes Environmental Perception: Neighbourhood Feedback Study,” 22 May 1979, CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

¹⁶⁴ “Neighbourhood Feedback Study – Soundtrack Script,” CBS, MKDC, Box PD/A75 A77, File 00157/8/2 A7513.

¹⁶⁵ “Neighbourhood Feedback Study – Newcomers – Special Round A,” CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

¹⁶⁶ “Neighbourhood Feedback Study – Established Residents Questionnaire,” CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

researchers were seeking genuine responses, but – as Marcus had advised – their responses were being channeled into categories the corporation could use in the arguments to come. “Saleability” foregrounded qualities associated with ownership, at the expense of other features that the welfare state’s rental program prioritized, such as space, storage, layout, amenities, and cost. The results showed that residents deemed houses that looked private the most saleable, an unsurprising finding that nevertheless did the job – especially since contradictory results, as when residents identified modernist homes as saleable, were excluded from the final report.¹⁶⁷

The study weaponized ideas about what residents “wanted,” and deployed them against welfare state modernism. “What the residents seem to prefer,” the authors concluded, “is a solid looking, mainly brick built house with a pitched roof thought to have some character and individuality whilst retaining a traditional house formula.”¹⁶⁸ Their research had not divined hidden popular preferences – which would, after all, have included residents’ desires for ample space and affordable costs – so much as it transformed hunches into conclusions and preferences into directives. “The Neighbourhood Feedback Study . . . puts these [elements] forward as guidance for the future development of the city.”¹⁶⁹ Issued to all future architects, these directives included breaking up straight lines, grouping homes into clusters, employing traditional materials, pitching the roofs, and facilitating personalization.¹⁷⁰ Walker’s consultancy to Milton Keynes ended the year of this report. [Image 3]

The opponents of welfare state modernism boasted powerful allies, both within the development corporation and in key financial institutions. As late as 1975, however, surveys

¹⁶⁷ “Neighbourhood Feedback Study: Report of Progress, First Round of Interviews,” CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

¹⁶⁸ “Neighbourhood Feedback Study – Soundtrack Script,” 18.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ “The Neighbourhood Feedback Study – Main Findings,” 4 August 1981, CBS, MKDC, Box PD A5, File 18/7/1.

revealed that they could not passively rely on popular opinion or the political zeitgeist to win the argument for them. So they set out to undermine modernism's standing, enlisting social research to revise the criteria against which housing was judged. Rather than referring to the number of people housed, "personalization" recast success as the ability to provide residents with a sense of ownership; and rather than representing simply one part of the housing equation, "saleability" recast the market as the sole metric against which housing could be judged. What happened by 1980 is not that flat roofs leaked more water than they had in 1960, but rather that these arguments carried more water than they had in 1960. This transformation was made possible by the fraying of the factors that had sustained welfare state modernism. But it only became realized in Milton Keynes through the efforts of particular actors to anticipate a new world on post-welfare state foundations.

V

This article has developed the concept of welfare state modernism. The concept refers to the way that a historically specific alignment of professional commitments, building demands, and state priorities produced characteristic formal features – or, an aesthetic. By embedding that aesthetic within a broader ideological formation, rather than explaining its rise and fall in strictly formal terms, welfare state modernism offers a way of explaining aesthetic change without invoking ahistorical assumptions about what people want or like – as if those preferences exist independently of the world around them. During the early 1970s, far from nursing a doomed aesthetic, a new generation of architects seized the opportunity of building Milton Keynes to renew their modernist inheritance. Amid mounting economic and political challenges, however, the foundations of welfare state modernism buckled, empowering the advocates of private building and home ownership in a campaign to eliminate modernism as an option. This shift occurred against a backdrop extending far beyond Milton Keynes, Britain, or indeed Europe. The modern movement was transnational, as was its expiration, but revealing how it ended in a single place illuminates the mechanisms of its fall.

At the same time, this emphasis upon local actors and their contexts indicates how welfare state modernism could meet alternative fates in other places where the political situation differed.¹⁷¹

This explanation of aesthetic change has attended equally to systemic shifts and local contexts. With the routinization of supra-national perspectives, most notably in transnational and global histories, historians are once again grappling with the relationship between local contexts and broader dynamics.¹⁷² In his classic *Work and Revolution in France* (1980), published as the new social history enjoyed its hard-won status as the discipline's "normal science," William Sewell addressed social history's increasingly evident limitations.¹⁷³ While saluting the success of "local studies" in establishing "more complex connections between political or ideological events and social and economic processes," he noted their inability to explain the wider "ideological transformations that these events embodied and brought about."¹⁷⁴ Today, after at least two decades setting the discipline's agenda, a mature transnational history has arguably arrived at a point opposite Sewell's depiction of a mature social history. In their *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* (2014), for example, Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang lament "'global' histories that operate at such high levels of abstraction as to risk losing their moorings in the evidence."¹⁷⁵ If Sewell was suggesting that social history inadequately explained larger ideological transformations, Hall *et al.* worry that global histories too often sacrifice textured local contexts. Rather than reversing course yet again, calling for a "local turn" that will yield "a new local history,"

¹⁷¹ Sammartino, "Mass Housing, Late Modernism, and the Forging of Community in New York City and East Berlin"; Urban, *Tower and Slab*.

¹⁷² For an early critique along these lines, see Antoinette Burton, "Not Even Remotely Global? Method and Scale in World History," *History Workshop Journal* 64:1 (2007): 323-328.

¹⁷³ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

¹⁷⁴ Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 7.

¹⁷⁵ Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

this article has joined the macro with the micro to produce an integrated account of aesthetic – and historical – change.¹⁷⁶

Images:

1. Towers-on-their sides at Netherfield, Milton Keynes (1975):
<https://www.architecture.com/image-library/ribapix/image-information/poster/modular-terraced-housing-netherfield-milton-keynes-buckinghamshire/posterid/RIBA43356.html>
2. Flat-roofed bungalows at Beanhill, Milton Keynes (1975):
<https://www.architecture.com/image-library/ribapix/image-information/poster/housing-at-bean-hill-milton-keynes-buckinghamshire/posterid/RIBA28894.html>
3. Neo-traditional brickwork, sloped roofs, and generous street frontage at Great Linford (1979): rights being procured from the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies.

¹⁷⁶ Judith Surkis, Gary Wilder, James W. Cook, Durba Ghosh, Julia Adeney Thomas, and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “AHR Forum: Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” *American Historical Review* 117:3 (2012): 698-813.