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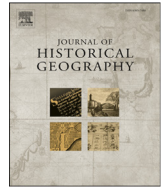

Review

Modern Futures, Hannah Neate and Ruth Craggs (Eds). Uniform Books, Axminster (2016). 142 pages, £12.99 paperback.

In the last decade or so, a number of different traditions in architectural history, urban geography, planning, and cultural studies have coalesced around a mutual interest in the brutalist landscapes of the post-war years, exploring both their production and consumption. The reasons for this are multiple, but include the gradual, and sometimes grudging, acknowledgment that once-derided developments are worthy of conservation: the shifting temporal horizons of statutory listing in the UK mean that bus stations, shopping centres, municipal swimming pools, and council estates constructed in uncompromising modernist styles during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s are now often considered worthy of protection. In this regard, the 2010 demolition of Owen Luder's Trinity Square car park in Gateshead (infamous for its pivotal role in 1971 gangster flick *Get Carter*) was headline news, following a hard-fought campaign in which enthusiasts argued, and failed, to prevent its demise. Other icons of post-war civic modernism—such as the Tricorn Centre in Portsmouth (once voted by Radio 4 listeners as Britain's ugliest building) and John Madin's 1973 Birmingham City Library (compared by HRH Prince Charles to a municipal incinerator)—have perhaps been less fervently defended, but the demolition of both still prompted considerable local mourning.

A fairly straightforward reading of this interest in all things concrete is that we are simply witnessing a desire to preserve a type of landscape that is fast disappearing, a desire to ensure at least a few high-quality examples of modernism survive the cull. But here it needs to be noted that the calls for a renewed appreciation of modern landscapes are not just coming from those who worked alongside the architects and planners who blazed a trail in the post-war years, or the look-back bores whose interest in the modern is freighted with a nostalgia for a Britain that seemed more certain about its place in the world. Indeed, many of those currently waxing lyrical on modernism are from a younger generation that grew up long after the white heat of the 1960s had faded, at a time when modern brutalism had given way to a more playful but ultimately brittle post-modernism that characterises what Owen Hatherley has playfully described as the 'new ruins' of Britain. But this thirty-something cohort is the precisely the generation that seems to be most enthusiastic about modernism, celebrating its aesthetic forms through modes of cultural appropriation that take in Trellick Tower tea-towels, Tricorn t-shirts, and Park Hill plates. Sunderland council cashed in by selling concrete chunks of Trinity Square for £5 a time, canned and sealed with a signature of authenticity. And for those who want to domesticize modernist icons, there is always the *Brutal London* collection (2016) that allows the reader to cut out and build scale models of nine of the capital's most iconic modern buildings.

So what are we to make of this 'bruta-lust'? Is this a form of ironic consumption in which the aesthetic forms of modernism, once dismissed as lumpen and alienating, are now valued precisely because of this disregard for traditional canons of taste and distinction? Or a form of hauntology in which nostalgia for the past's future seems preferable to facing the possibilities and problems of the contemporary? Or is there a more substantial and meaningful search here for an understanding of how our built environment can enliven and improve our lives? Is *Concretopia* the closest we can still come to imagining utopia? This edited collection, emerging from an inter-disciplinary AHRC-funded network on the legacies and futures of modern architecture, provides some possible answers. Beginning with the assertion that the contemporary status of the modern is contradictory—i.e., both popular but threatened—the book asks important questions about who decides what buildings have value (whether economically, socially, and politically) and how new life can be bought to old buildings.

The three sections of this slim but readerly book are themed around a number of important dimensions of such debates, concerning the methods of *documentation* which are used to reveal the value of modern architecture to different community and resident groups; the *interventions* designed to enhance or conserve this value and the *transformations* which are necessary to make modernism relevant in the contemporary city. The thirteen chapters hence move between a number of sites and contexts—the fountains of Harlow, the South Bank Arts Centre, the Byker Estate, Gate 61 of Preston Bus Station—to show how both mainstream modernism and more one-off buildings have become folded into the everyday life of cities, both for better and for worse. Though there are nods here to a more traditional architectural history that celebrates the great and good, the chapters mainly focus on the way such buildings can be understood to obtain value by becoming the backdrop to mundane social routines and interactions.

Contrary to the oft-made critique that modern landscapes are placeless, the incorporation of popular narrative and oral histories is an important theme here, and one that suggests that these landscapes became familiar and even loved via their incorporation into everyday life. However, the chapters are astute enough to not fall into the trap of accepting the idea that this makes them inherently worthy of preservation, noting the problematic status of 'everyday life' as both a locus of social transformation but also the most obvious manifestation of capitalism's abstracting ability to deaden and eviscerate. For example, in his essay on Edinburgh's modern landscapes, Michael Gallagher argues for the preservation of the modern precisely because it embodies a fundamental critique of urban process because of the clarity with which modern buildings betray their function. Other chapters pick up this theme, and

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explore how the sheer ordinariness of many modern landscapes both conceals and reveals the changing cultural and political aspirations of the post-war era. A desire to document now-demolished modern landscapes is, then, perfectly explicable, as is the drive to conserve or preserve those that remain. But given this is a preservation that can fuel gentrification, and a hipster-generation appropriation of brutalism as style rather than substance, the book does well to finish with a warning from Pendlebury and While that austerity nostalgia and the fetishisation of the modern should not distract from the enrolment of modern buildings in the neoliberal politics of displacement that are making many of our cities less affordable for a greater number. Here, the repurposing of post-war council estates is a case in point, with redeveloped flats sold to the wealthy and social housing often a mere tokenistic afterthought.

Overall, this is a nice collection of essays that, while sometimes overly-brief, consider the ways that everyday urban environments can be interpreted and understood. As befits a collection that often touches on the importance of photography as documentation, the book is lavishly illustrated. While lightly referenced, it clearly touches upon a number of different themes and literature familiar to geographers, engaging with debates surrounding geographies of enthusiasm, nostalgia, and memory. At the same time, the book addresses questions of creative practice and the ways that academics can make legible the histories and legacies of different spaces. As such, *Modern Futures* deserves to be read by audiences beyond those aesthetes in the UK who are obviously keen to devour modern architecture in print at the same time that they consume it in its refurbished, repurposed, and regenerated forms.

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