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BRENDAN EARLEY TOWARDS A LARGE WHITE BUILDING

For all its shiny promise of newness, there's something about Modernism that is now distinctly nostalgic. Perhaps it is because Modernism represents the last time we could actually believe that mankind and society were perfectible, that changes would necessarily be for the better. Of course Modernism as it was manifested in literature and art is rather different from Modernism in architecture; one of the reasons for this being that while the underlying philosophies may well have been the same, individuals aren't compelled to live with (and in) the results of experimental painting, sculpture and writing.

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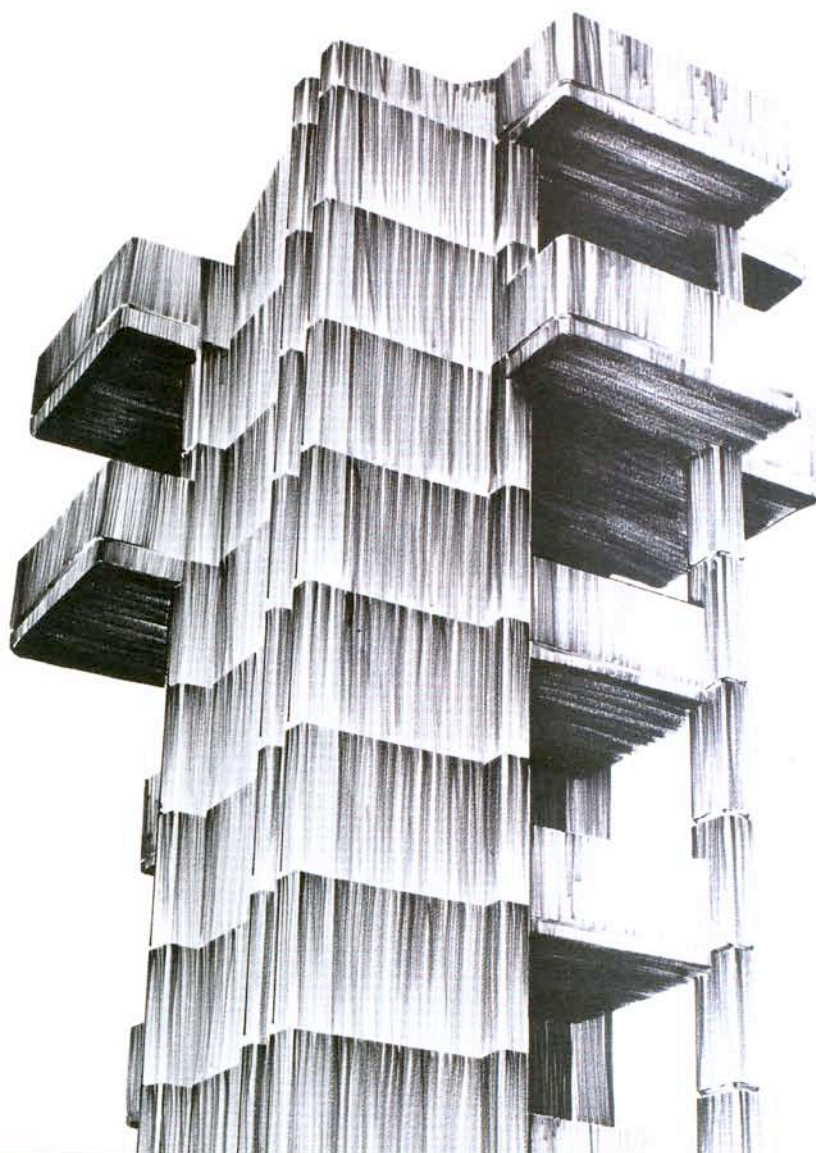


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- 1 *Modernism: designing a new world 1914 – 1939*, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 6 April to 23 July 2006
- 2 see documenta12.de/english/leitmotifs.html, Documenta 12 will run in Kassel from 16 June to 23 September 2007

(previous page)
Brendan Earley
Loos House
pen and ink on paper
30 x 20 cm

(this page)
Tower 3
marker on paper
210 x 120 cm
photos John Kellett
courtesy the artist



Although expressed in a gallery as art, Brendan Earley's concern is nonetheless with Modernism as it relates to architecture. This is emphasised in his title to the exhibition, borrowing from Le Corbusier's collection of texts, *Towards a New Architecture*. Ireland came to Modernism in architecture relatively late, and therefore our understanding of it can be confused with an understanding of Ireland in the sixties and seventies, rather than in relation to, for example, the period chosen by the V&A for their survey exhibition, *Modernism: designing a new world 1914-1939*.¹

The V&A dates immediately conjure the experience of two World Wars, and imply one of the uncomfortable elements of Modernism in architecture, which is the idea of social engineering and the desire to design the imperfections out of society (Le Corbusier's 1922 plans for Paris being a case in point here). This idea is picked up by Roger M. Buergel as one of his three introductory leitmotifs for Documenta 12. Writing under the question, 'Is modernity our antiquity?' Buergel suggests that modernity is "in ruins after the totalitarian catastrophes of the 20th century (the very same catastrophes to which it somehow gave rise)... In short," he says, 'it seems that we are both outside and inside modernity, both repelled by its deadly violence and seduced by its most immodest aspiration or potential: that there might, after all, be a common planetary horizon for all the living and the dead.'²

While architectural discussions of Modernism tend to focus on its groundbreaking philosophies; beliefs that allowed architects to break away from historicism and design machines of beauty and clarity for living, they often ignore the flaws in those philosophies, flaws which undermine the rational integrity of Modernism altogether. It is these flaws that Earley's

installation explores and investigates. To be seen as an argument, rather than as a series of aesthetic elements (although some, particularly the wall drawing *A Large White Building*, are nonetheless beautiful), Earley deals with the natural, human and temporal forces that disrupt and thwart Modernism's aspirations towards perfection and perfectibility.

Clues to this purpose abound. *Veneer*, the title of the accompanying publication, points to the idea of investigating what is going on behind Modernism's façade, beneath its deceptively sleek veneer. Sketches of weeds found in the grounds of the Adolf Loos (author of the provocative *Ornament and Crime*) Steiner House, are fragile delicate pencil drawings. And yet the weeds they depict have a tenacity that, left unchecked, can undermine both foundations and fabric of the sleekest white building a Modernist architect could imagine.

The physical centrepiece of the installation is *Complex 1*, a chipboard veneer model of what seems a rather useless piece of furniture. A flatpack gone wrong. Here it is based on Michael Scott's RTÉ building (1962), while a previous version came from the now-demolished building at Lough Key Forest Park (present in this exhibition in a series of drawings made in felt-tip marker pen). The cheap quality of chipboard, hidden by the thin layer of glossy veneer, reminds that surface looks aren't everything, at the same time as it hints at the poor quality of many of our contemporary buildings masquerading as Modernist, where white boxes are dumped across the land and cityscapes as factories, apartments, warehouses, shopping malls. How are we to relate to these? Earley's use of recycled detritus, of broken pieces of furniture, and dumped Styrofoam

(as in the video piece *Car Park*) hints at the throwaway nature of many contemporary buildings, where the implicit criticism is of the way these adopt the veneer of Modernism, using its rhetoric as an excuse for flaws in concept, location, craftsmanship.

The accompanying text to the exhibition suggests 'that the drawings evoke the longing expressed for the modernist project'. Judging from the way the drawings, and the model, expose the cracks in the certainties of Modernism (as expressed through architecture), it would seem to me that the longing is instead for the period when we were sure of where our future was bringing us, rather than for the means we constructed of getting there. If Modernism showed us that we can't create perfection, it also showed how fundamentally the environments we do create affect us. And what Brendan Earley demonstrates here is the futility of thinking that the messy realities of man, nature and the passage of time can be controlled and conquered through architecture.