

'Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its social mission'

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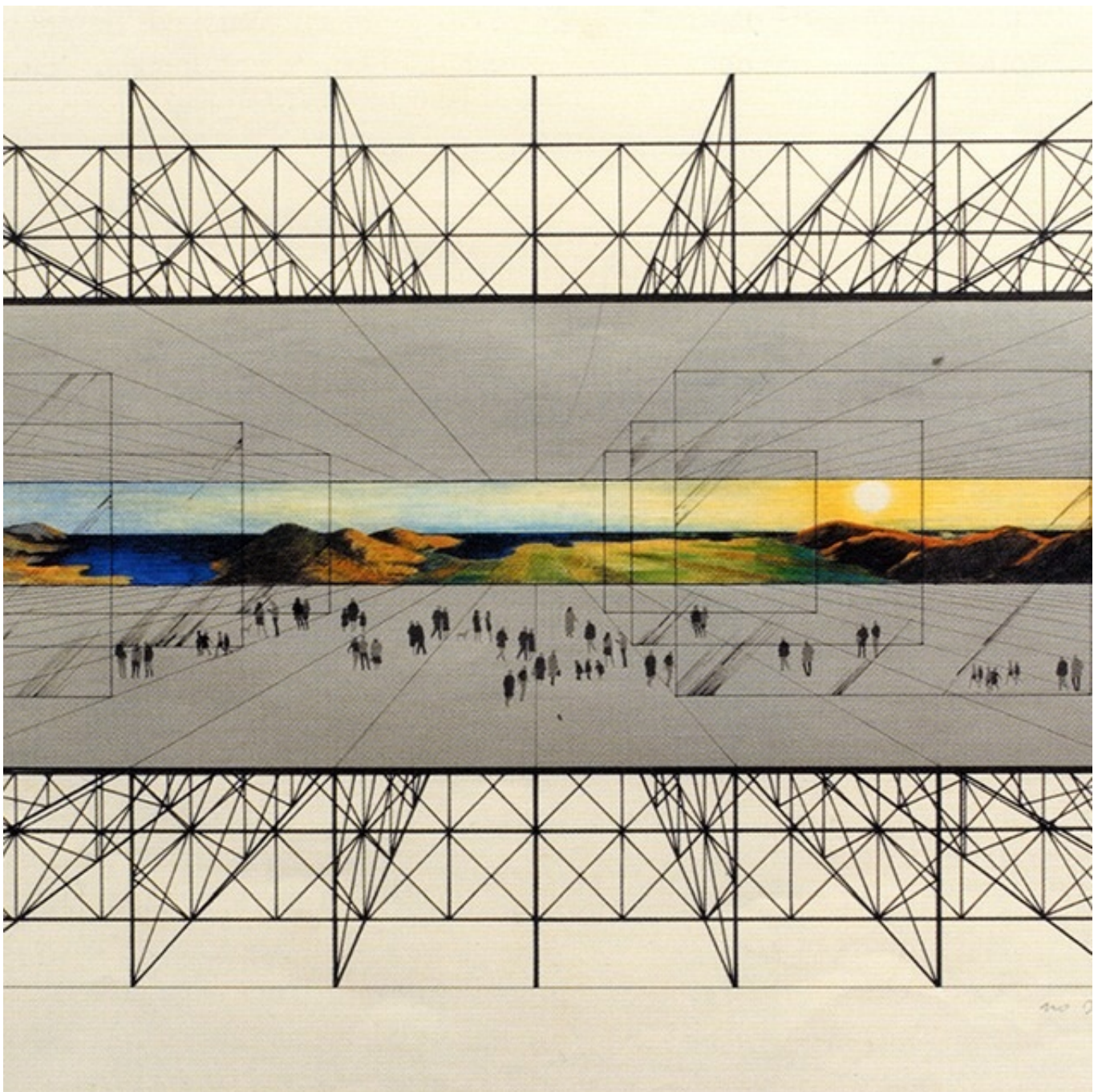
As large housing estates are being demolished and the age of great social democracies recedes, taking with it any notion of an architecture for the public, OMA partner Reinier de Graaf asks if there is any alternative to building capital

It is almost a year since Thomas Piketty published his book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.¹ If Piketty is right, we can once and for all bury the illusion that the present economic system ultimately works in the interest of all and that its benefits will eventually trickle down to the poorest in society. Contrary to what every economist after Keynes has been telling us, the inequality produced by capitalism may not be a temporary phase that will ultimately be overcome; it is rather a structural and inescapable long-term effect of the system itself. Piketty's analysis is exceedingly simple. He identifies two basic economic categories: income and wealth. He then proceeds to define social (in)equality as a function of the relation between the two over time, concluding that as soon as the return on wealth exceeds the return on labour, social inequality inevitably increases. Those who acquire wealth through work fall ever further behind those who accumulate wealth simply by owning it. Only during the 20th century - under the pressure of two world wars, social unrest, revolutions, labour unions and the daunting presence of a global alternative to the capitalist system in the form of a (former) communist world - only during this unique capsule of time, was capital briefly surpassed by labour as the prime means to accumulate wealth.

Whether or not the 20th century was a brief exception in the inescapable mechanism of a deeply fraught economic system remains to be seen. Much will depend on what happens next: the 21st century will determine the legacy of the 20th. So far, the signs are not encouraging: since the late 1970s, after the great conservative revolution set in motion by Reagan and Thatcher, the promise of accumulating wealth through work has steadily lost

ground. The fall of the Berlin Wall (generally claimed as a victory of that same conservative revolution) and in its wake, the wholesale collapse of the Communist Bloc, have exacerbated this trend. If current indicators are right, we could well be faced with a situation in the near future where, for the first time since the end of the 19th century, returns on wealth through ownership will again exceed those of labour.

Indeed, if Piketty's argument holds true, the 20th century will have been no more than an anomaly: a brief interruption in the systemic logic of capitalism, where the inherent accretion of capital through capital remains an unbreakable cycle. This simple economic conclusion may have social and cultural implications beyond our wildest imagination. When a lifetime of labour can no longer match the returns on an acquired fortune, inherited wealth once again becomes the defining factor of class distinction, reducing any notion of social mobility to a remote possibility at best.



'No-Stop City. Veduta di città', c1970 by the radical Italian architects Archizoom. One of the members, Andrea Branzi, described 'a society freed from its own alienation, emancipated from the rhetorical forms of humanitarian socialism and rhetorical progressivism'

Furthermore, if the 20th century really was an anomaly, then perhaps so were its ideals: an entire period characterised by an enlightened belief in progress, social emancipation and civil rights can be retroactively discarded as a fleeting moment of self-delusion -

(no more than) a footnote in the long course of history. For the generation currently in a position of power, raised and educated in the 20th century, this is difficult to acknowledge. For them, the moral imperatives of the 20th century are beyond question, irrespective of political choices. (Even the most ardent supporter of the current free market economy probably does so only because s/he believes that the system ultimately acts in the interest of all, rather than explicitly supporting the notion of inequality.) The current generation, whether left or right, has not (yet) had its faith in the great emancipatory mechanisms shaken in any way. It is all they know and all they have ever known.

I was born in 1964, started primary school in 1970 and graduated from university in 1988, one year before the fall of the Berlin Wall. I received 18 years of public education, during which the notion/dogma that one progressed through study and hard work was firmly instilled. You earned your rights and did not inherit privileges. Education was received on the proportional basis of your talents, not the size of your wealth. We lived in the conviction that cultural and religious differences, Protestant and Catholic alike - there was no sizeable Muslim population yet - would eventually merge into a single middle class. The absence of a poor 'under class' was generally interpreted as the logical consequence of the (apparent) absence of an 'upper class'. Inasmuch as we were aware of an upper class, in no way did we have to reckon with or even acknowledge them. Sure, we had a monarchy, but even their implication in the occasional corruption scandal in no way shocked our faith in their absolute irrelevance. They were a symbolic necessity, there to represent the unity of a nation that in every other respect was getting by without them. Power was in the hands of an elected government, independent of our royal head of state. (It was not until much later, until the mysterious release of Dutch Greenpeace activists in Russia, that I realised things were perhaps not that straightforward ...) Wealth existed, but it did not guarantee a right to power, nor should it. Our leaders were chosen by us, for us, from us.

If Piketty is right, those self-evident 'truths' may well have been based on quicksand. The many privileges/blessings of a life in the latter 20th century, particularly in Western Europe, were not the natural outcome of a progressive evolutionary process, but the result of a short-lived and unsustainable suspension of the real fate dictated by its contemporary economic system. Only under severe (political) pressure did capital refrain from showing its true face. In that context, Western Europe got a good deal - protected by American intolerance towards the threat of Communism, but itself threatened (or savvy) enough to maintain a generous welfare system, dissuading its citizens from entertaining any real Communist sympathies of their own. With the dissolution of the Communist Bloc, much of that threat is gone and the economic trends of most European countries after 1989 speak subsequent volumes: welfare cuts, the erosion of pensions, the reduction of public services, and so on.

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Although my training as an architect might make me utterly unqualified to comment on Piketty's economic theories, I certainly cannot help but notice the resonance between Piketty's narrative of 'economic history' and the context of my own profession. If you study the history of architecture, and particularly that of the last century, a striking

confluence emerges between what Piketty identifies as the period of the great social mobility and the emergence of the Modern Movement in architecture, with its utopian visions for the city. From Le Corbusier to Ludwig Hilberseimer, from the Smithsons to Jaap Bakema: after reading Piketty, it becomes difficult to view the ideologies of Modern architecture as anything other than (the dream of) social mobility captured in concrete.



Glasgow's Red Road flats by Sam Bunton&Associates, built in the mid 1960s, were billed for demolition at the 2014 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony, but this tasteless plan was scrapped by dint of public outrage. Of the original eight blocks, two were demolished, in 2012 and 2013, and the remaining structures face an uncertain future

Let's take a closer look. Until 1914, the returns on capital enjoy a comfortable lead over economic growth; from 1914 to 1950, the period of the great wars, that relationship reverses.² Not only does this period signify a turning point economically, it also marks a major cultural shift as the period during which the great Modernist visions emerge. Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, 'The Futurist Manifesto'³ was published in *Le Figaro*. The spirit in which it is written is one of a deliberately reckless and unconditional embrace of the new. The manifesto glorifies speed, machinery and violence as the dawning of a new era. In announcing great crowds excited by work, pleasure and turmoil⁴ it 'describes' the Russian revolution before it happens. The Futurists insist that 'Man will not be overtaken by progress, but instead Man will absorb progress in its evolution ... reacting against the potentially overwhelming strength of progress, and shouting out his centrality.'⁵ This 'triumph of the will', more than the aggressive nationalism it is generally associated with, is a definitive reckoning with the laissez-faire of 19th-century Italy and the lethargy of its ruling class, to be abolished in favour of cultural rejuvenation and an aggressive modernisation.

A belief in the promises of modernisation continues to dominate much of the rest of the century. It results in a curious alternation between brutal industrial wars and utopian blueprints, the latter of which hope to deploy the (ensuant) maelstrom of industrial development for the greater good. In this respect there is a clear resonance with Piketty's book, which observes a close relation between the progress made during the 20th century and the upheavals that went with it, noting that somehow no manifestation of the

new ever unfolds without unsettling the old vested interests and established relations of power. The great visionary actors in architecture - from the Futurists to the Constructivists, from CIAM to Team X, from the Metabolists to Archizoom - invariably seemed to have coupled their embrace of the new to a need to settle scores with (read: destroy) the old. Despite its mostly social(ist) mission, there is an element of unabashed cruelty in the depiction of the 'city of tomorrow', with its repetitive, industrially produced housing blocks and ambitiously over-dimensioned infrastructural systems. Good intentions are dressed up in harsh vestments, as if to convey the brutal truth that progress comes at a price.

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The Druzhba (friendship) sanatorium, Yalta, Ukraine – designed by Russian architect Igor

Vasilevsky with Nodar Kancheli and completed in 1986 – was envisaged as a social condenser

Piketty has been viewed as a Marxist. This is wrong. Where Marx saw social relationships and class struggles, Piketty sees only economic categories: wealth and income. Marx envisaged proletariat rule through revolution, Piketty's views are rather apolitical. Indeed, if Piketty's analysis is at all political, it is only because he recognises the relevance of political choices in the context of signalling capital's natural tendency towards inequality, which is best countered when the opposition between political sides is prolonged without end. In this view, the emancipating achievements of the 20th century owe their existence largely to a contest between opposing political camps and would last only as long as victory for any one party is suspended.

Thus does the concept of struggle itself move to the centre, not struggle between social classes, but as form of necessary agonistic pressure on the system ... perhaps even an indispensable part of the system itself, one that can never relent if the system is to remain progressive. 'Except in struggle, there is no more beauty', wrote the Futurist Marinetti, followed by: 'No masterpiece without an aggressive character.'⁶ Also here an interesting echo with the Modern Movement emerges. Modern architecture is invariably considered to be political, but by and large its political life has proved promiscuous. Italian Fascism was a sponsor of Modern architecture, as was Communism until Stalin. Le Corbusier served both the USSR and the Vichy regime. It is mostly in a desire to overthrow the old that commonalities between these systems can be found: a shared belief that whatever the consequences of action are, the consequences of inaction would be greater. In hindsight then, the social mobility of the 20th century becomes not a victory of the left over the right, but of new over old: a cleansing of the existing social order in the name of levelling the playing field. Maybe that is the main idea encapsulated, albeit strangely, in Le Corbusier's statement: 'Architecture ou Révolution',⁷ wherein architecture is presented as a way to prevent (violent) revolution, embodying an (ideological) revolution in itself. Despite all the hallmarks of leftist rhetoric, somehow this slogan proposing that architecture replaces politics, remains apolitical. Political oppositions dissolve in a battle between new and old - in a choice between progress and regress.

The resonance of Piketty's historic analysis of capital with the progression of architectural history is eerie at times. The first intersection (economic output exceeding the returns on capital) just prior to the First World War clearly coincides with the emergence of the avant-garde, but the resonance even applies at a more subtle level within the 20th century itself. From the early- to mid-1970s, for the first time in the 20th century, the lead of economic output over the returns on capital begins to diminish. And towards the end of the 1970s, a different political wind begins to blow. The conservative revolution first sweeps America and later Europe, forcing an agenda of economic liberalisation and the slashing of government spending. The size of the public sector is steadily reduced and large public housing projects become a thing of the past. This period essentially and concurrently marks the end of an unfettered belief in the merits of modern architecture. In 1972, the Pruitt-Igoe public housing estate in St Louis is demolished, an event that is generally heralded by critics as the 'end' of modern architecture - and on a larger scale, the end of modern utopian visions for the city. After the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe, the confidence in the architectural profession is severely shaken. The mood becomes pensive, the major seminal works of architecture are no longer plans but books, no longer

visions but reflections. It is telling that the most noteworthy architectural manifesto of 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the onset of an uncontested global rule of capitalism, is *A Vision of Britain* by Prince Charles. The modern age prefigured in 'The Futurist Manifesto', at the tail end of the Ottocento with its hereditary hegemonies, ironically concludes with an anti-modern manifesto written by a member of the British Royal Family.

If the egalitarian climate of the '60s and '70s had made modern architecture generally unpopular, the neoliberal policies of the '80s and '90s made it obsolete. The initiative to construct the city comes to reside increasingly with the private sector. 'Thought production' by the architectural profession, in the form of theoretical manifestos or wholesale urban visions, gradually comes to a standstill. The very grain through which the city is constructed changes. Large interventions in the city, using public housing projects as the texture from which to compose a new, alternative urban fabric, become virtually impossible.

As part of a wholesale privatisation programme, public housing associations are privatised and home ownership takes a dramatic rise. By transforming large sections of society from tenants into home owners, the prevailing powers also hope to garner political sway. As soon as people own their homes, a mortgage will give them a vested interest in keeping interest rates and inflation down. Locked into an inescapable financial reality, they will have little alternative but to sympathise with the economic agenda of the right. Home owners, it is reasoned, will form an instantaneous conservative constituency.

Yet, over the decades to come, the new allegiance between the middle class and the right turns out to be a marriage of inconvenience. The conservative revolution had relied on two pillars: a permanent rise of property values (to maintain the desire for home-ownership) and wage moderation (to maintain the economy's competitive power). It would only be a matter of time before the combination of these two would clash, exposing the whole system which allowed people to 'buy in' as something of a Faustian pact. With property appreciating value quicker than incomes rise, homes became ever more unaffordable; each generation of buyers suffering from that same condition by which the first owners had gained profit.

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Piketty's observation on the returns of wealth over income manifest clearly in real-estate narratives of the last decades. Real estate is a prime example of how capital, after a first wave of seemingly working to people's advantage, inevitably acquires a dynamic of its own. With time, the basic possibility to own one's home is progressively beyond the reach of more and more people.

After the conservative revolution, the built environment and particularly housing acquired a fundamentally new role. From a means to provide shelter, it becomes a means to generate financial returns. A building is no longer something to use, but to own (with the hope of increased asset-value, rather than use-value, over time). Through the general deployment of the term 'real estate', the definition of the architect is replaced by that of

the economist. This is also the moment that architecture becomes definitively inexplicable (at least in line with the criteria according to which architects usually explain architecture). The logic of a building no longer primarily reflects its intended use but instead serves mostly to promote a 'generic' desirability in economic terms. Judgement of architecture is deferred to the market. The 'architectural style' of buildings no longer conveys an ideological choice but a commercial one: architecture is worth whatever others are willing to pay for it.

This is also the moment that architecture and marketing become indistinguishable. A curious reversal of process follows: computer renderings precede technical drawings, the sale of apartments precedes the design of structure, the image precedes the substance, and the salesman precedes the architect. Perhaps Aldo van Eyck's famous tirades against Postmodernism in the 1980s were actually nothing more than the expression of desperation or indignation, that somehow our work had been hijacked.



The Waterwijk housing development of Ypenburg in the Hague by MVRDV – as masterplanner and architect of the Watervillas, Hedge Island and Patio Island – encompasses different suburban typologies encouraging social diversification

Indeed, if we take the Piketty analogy to its full conclusion, we may wonder if there was really ever such a thing as Postmodern architecture at all. Perhaps what we witnessed was not a succession of architectural styles in a state of mutual polemic, but a shift

towards a fundamentally different role of buildings altogether. If before the 1970s (roughly speaking) buildings were primarily regarded as (public) expenditure, after the 1970s buildings became mostly a means of revenue - which fact ironically only contributed to further downward pressure on construction budgets. Once discovered as a form of capital, there is no choice for buildings but to operate according to the logic of capital. In that sense there may ultimately be no such thing as Modern or Postmodern architecture, but simply architecture before and after its annexation by capital.

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a new sobriety, a new Modernism, at least in aesthetic terms. But how modern is the modern architecture of today? Modernism had a rational programme: to share the benedictions of science and technology, universally. Recent decades have shown, that modern architecture can easily be deployed to work against its original ideology. Once buildings are identified as a means of return, modern architecture's 'economy of means' is no longer a way to reach the largest number of people, but a way to maximise profits. The same repertoire of rational production, the incorporation of industrial products, the celebration of the 90-degree angle and the aesthetics of sobriety that once made buildings affordable, now make buildings 'cheap'. Marketing plays a crucial role here. Once Modernism can freely be reinterpreted as a style rather than an ideology, it becomes relatively easy to dissociate a (high) selling price from a (low) cost base and reap record profits as a result.

Ironically, this development affects both rich and poor. With sale values exceeding production costs to the current extent, quality no longer resides in the product, but in a potential profit through selling. The whole notion of physical luxury is superseded by a value on paper. However, the value on paper in no way represents the real material value of the product. The price of property is created by a combination of size and location. Unless major technical flaws come to light, the material or technical quality of buildings barely plays a role. As long as the hype continues, the 'investment' is safe.

A small anecdote: this year, in one of the wealthier boroughs of central London, a high-end residential project will be completed. The project consists of some 50 luxury apartments. The obligation to realise a percentage of the apartments as affordable homes, a legal requirement according to London planning policies, has been met by offering an alternative site in a somewhat poorer neighbourhood some distance from the development itself. The project is targeted at the expat market, broadly known to settle purchases in cash, without a loan from the bank. Sales go quicker that way. The cheapest apartment in the project costs £11 million. (The price of the most expensive apartment remains privileged information between the buyer and the developer, covered by a confidentiality agreement.) The sales brochure speaks of 'a rare place to live, in and around outstanding modern architecture in a park'. For quite a few of the prospective residents (rich Russians, perhaps) the idea of modern architecture in a park will invoke memories of a system whose collapse funded their personal fortunes. The architects are rumoured to have considered weather-resistant cardboard as a facade material, underlining the supreme irony of asking some of the world's richest people to pay record prices for a cardboard box. The client, an old hand in the development business, has remained unfazed by the irony and has allowed the project to proceed, albeit on the condition that there is a 'slight change' in facade material.

Despite its 'aesthetics of poverty', the building is already substantially over budget. By

coincidence, the surveyor released his report (urging major cost cuts) on the same day as the estate agents release their list of buyers: an interesting collection of über-wealthy Americans (many with Dutch surnames); Russian oligarch-billionaires and Arab oil sheikhs. Their combined fortunes represent about twice the size of the British economy. The 'poorest' of the prospective buyers is worth a little over £2 billion, about 50 times the project's construction budget. To ensure that 'finances will add up', the cost of the project is subsequently cut by 40 per cent.



One Hyde Park by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners in Knightsbridge, London – an 86-apartment luxury development marketed as 'the most exclusive address in the world'. A one-bedroom flat here costs £9 million. In 2013, only 19 were registered as being occupied as a first home; 26 of the flats were registered as second homes meaning owners benefited from a 50 per cent reduction in council tax; 16 were empty; and the rest were occupied by 'companies'

This anecdote, for all its more tragi-comical elements, is symptomatic of overheated residential markets such as central London, where even record prices paid by astronomically rich residents do not prevent the downward pressure on construction costs.

Meanwhile, the upward trajectory on residential prices created by the expat market has had a predictable effect at the other end of the spectrum in forcing moderate income

groups to live ever further from the centre. Nurses, teachers, policemen, firefighters and other professionals earning moderate wages no longer qualify for mortgages required for even the most modest properties inside central London. The recent fire-sale of council property in central London boroughs, supposedly created to enlarge the stock of affordable homes, has done little to mitigate the process. After the first generation of tenants is offered to purchase their rental apartments at subsidised rates, the next round of sales quickly conforms to market rates, generally making the apartments unaffordable for the income groups for whom they were originally intended. Even a well-intended piece of architecture, with all the right references to the enlightened Modernism of the 20th century, cannot but become an accessory in promoting an ever widening gap between value and quality: a downward spiral where ultimately even the happy few get short-changed.

Trellick Tower, a 31-storey building with 217 flats in North Kensington, built in 1972 and very familiar to architects, long had a reputation for anti-social behaviour and crime. With the introduction of the 'right to buy' council homes in the mid '80s, many of the flats were bought by the tenants. A new residents' association was formed and several security improvements were undertaken, including the employment of a concierge. After the building's Grade II* listing in 1998, property prices rose sharply and flats in the tower came to be regarded as highly desirable residences. Despite serious technical problems within the building, properties inside the tower have sold for between £250,000 for a small one-bedroom flat to £480,000 for a fully refurbished three-bedroom flat. The maximum obtainable mortgage on an average annual gross income of £32,188 in the UK in 2014 was £152,000.



The Brutalist Trellick Tower (1972) by Ernö Goldfinger in North Kensington was conceived as social housing for working-class Londoners but has become a case study in gentrification. Many of the flats are now privately owned

Central London is not the only place affected by this phenomenon. The Park Hill Estate, in Sheffield, North Yorkshire, a council estate built in 1957,⁸ fell into decay in the 1970s. In 1998 the complex was Grade II* listed, following which English Heritage, together with a private developer, launched a renovation scheme to turn the flats into upmarket apartments and business units. (The renovation was one of the six shortlisted projects for the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize.) According to Sheffield's own website, the city has 'the lowest annual average salary of UK's core cities', at around £24,000, allowing a maximum mortgage of around £115,000. Outside the UK, the original units of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation are currently being sold for: €151,000 (for a 31m² studio); €350,000 (for a three-bedroom flat) and €418,000 (for a four-bedroom flat). The average annual wage in France is €30,300, allowing a maximum mortgage just shy of €120,000. *Existenzminimum* seems to have become a privileged condition in the 21st century.

The 20th century taught us that utopian thinking can have precarious consequences, but, if the course of history is dialectic, what follows? Does the 21st century mark the absence of utopias? And if so, what are the dangers of that? Piketty's framing of the 20th century echoes the familiar notion of 'the short 20th century'⁹: the historic period marked by a global contest between two competing ideologies, running from the beginning of the First

World War to the end of Communism in Eastern Europe; starting in Sarajevo, ending in Berlin. If we are to believe Piketty, we may well be on the way back to a patrimonial form of capitalism. With that, modern architecture's social mission - the effort to establish a decent standard of living for all - seems a thing of the past. Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its erstwhile ideological endeavour.

Fifteen years into the new millennium, it is as though the previous century never happened. The same architecture that once embodied social mobility in béton brut, now helps to prevent it. Despite ever higher rates of poverty and homelessness, large social housing estates are being demolished with an ever greater resolve. Perhaps Piketty's theory, the final undoing of the 20th century, finds concrete proof in the methodic removal of its physical substance.

References

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5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futurist_Manifesto.
6. 'The Futurist Manifesto', Article 7.
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8. Designed by Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith.
9. The short 20th century, originally proposed by Iván Berend (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) but defined by Eric Hobsbawm, a British Marxist historian and author, refers to the period between the outbreak of the First World War and the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe.