The Dehumanization of Architecture

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1. Introduction

From its beginnings up to the present day, modern architecture has faced a problem that even its sympathizers have found hard to ignore. Briefly stated, the problem is this: modern buildings do not easily harmonize with other buildings.[[1]](#endnote-1) Their proximity to other buildings, including buildings that are also modern, rarely results in a beautiful whole such as a beautiful street or a beautiful square—let alone a beautiful city. The configuration of buildings shown in Figure 1 is representative in this respect.

**<INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>**

Superficially, the reason for the lack of harmony is that modern buildings appear to have been designed with no regard for their environment. Hence, they have been described as “uncivil”, “selfish”, and “unsociable”; in other words, as lacking those qualities that are of utmost importance in the public realm.[[2]](#endnote-2) But this reason really is just an alternative description, not an explanation for the lack of harmony. If one asks why modern buildings appear to have been designed with no regard for their neighbors, then it is hard to avoid answering that they do not harmonize with their neighbors.

An alternative, and less superficial, explanation is that modern buildings do not harmonize because they are supposed to stand out, so that architects can draw attention to themselves as their genius-like creators.[[3]](#endnote-3) Harmony is sacrificed because modern architects want to be “starchitects.” The main problem with this explanation is that it is limited in scope. It can easily explain the unharmonious character of postmodernist extravaganza à la Frank Gehry, but it does not explain the unharmonious character of the anonymous “glass box” that modern architecture has long been associated with. Likewise, it does not explain the failure of contemporary attempts to make modern buildings fit in (assuming that we can take these attempts at face value). Figure 2 provides an illustrative example. Finally, it does not explain why architectural critics and historians have tended to conspire with this rather base and personal motive.

**<INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE>**

For an explanation that is at least wider in scope, one may turn to the work of Roger Scruton. According to him, modern buildings do not harmonize because they have not been designed in accordance with an “architectural grammar”: a set of—flexible—rules that can guide the architect in the design process, particularly when decisions are to be made regarding the combination of architectural elements such as doors and columns.[[4]](#endnote-4) By contrast, buildings in the “classical vernacular” have been designed in accordance with such a grammar, which is why they often compose streets and squares that are beautiful in their own right; their beauty is not due just to the buildings that compose them, but also to the *relation* (e.g., proximity) between those buildings. As a result, buildings in the classical vernacular appear to have been designed with regard for their neighbors, and so to manifest good manners, civility, and so on. This observation applies to other vernaculars as well. Consider, for example, a typical street in Brussels: although the horizontal alignment of the houses is not as perfect as the one shown in Figure 2, and their colors are all different, they harmonize with each other. Recurrent patterns become evident when one pays attention to the design and placement of windows, lintels, belt courses, balconies, corbels, and grills. These patterns can be thought of as constituting an architectural grammar.

One may wonder why the existence of grammar-like rules (in the case of traditional architecture) makes such a big difference. One reason is that rules, unlike genius or talent, can easily spread through mechanisms of cultural transmission such as imitation and (formal and informal) education. Another reason is more specific and has to do with the nature of the rules that make up, for example, the classical vernacular. According to Scruton, these rules have been passed down from previous generations because they proved to be helpful in solving common design problems, including the coordination problem that arises when different buildings have to fit together in a public space such as a street. In Scruton’s words, the rules constitute “a tradition of patterns, adapted to the uses of the ordinary builder, and capable of creating accord and harmony in all the many circumstances of potential conflict.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Unfortunately, Scruton’s explanation stops at this point, and the question why, in this respect, modern architecture differs from traditional architecture is left unanswered. For example, why did modern architecture not develop its own harmonizing grammar? And could it develop such a grammar in the future?

Although Scruton does not answer these questions, they bear crucially on the success of aesthetic education as he conceives of it. After all, for him, “[t]he main task of aesthetic education is the search for appropriate forms and details, adaptable solutions to recurring problems, *an idiom which will foster commonplace harmony* and an easy, as it were, conversational, relation between buildings and people.”[[6]](#endnote-6) If this is true, then it is of the essence to know whether modern architecture can develop a harmonizing grammar or not. For, if not, then the “main task” of aesthetic education is one that is impossible to discharge within the constraints imposed by modern architecture.

In past work,[[7]](#endnote-7) I have suggested that we may not be able to know whether modern architecture can develop a harmonizing grammar until it has actually developed such a grammar, which may of course never happen. In this article, I want to explore the viability of a less agnostic answer. Very briefly, the answer is that modern architecture is incapable of developing a harmonizing grammar because (i) harmonization would lead to humanization, whereas (ii) the motive at the heart of modern architecture is *de*humanization.

In what follows, I will start by offering considerations in support of claims (i) and (ii). Next, I will argue that (i) and (ii) do not prevent modern architecture from developing a harmonizing grammar just under present circumstances, but under all possible circumstances. This (second) part of my argument will turn it into something stronger than a combination of causal claims. To achieve the desired strengthening, I will rely on a specific—in my view, plausible—conception of the metaphysics of styles that is inspired by work in the philosophy of biology.

Before I start, however, I should emphasize that my aim in this article is merely to *explain* the current situation in architecture with respect to harmony. Others should feel free to draw normative conclusions from the explanation I am about to put forward, but that will not be my aim here.

As a further preliminary, it may be useful to have some clarification of three terms that play a key role in the statement of my explanation: “modern architecture”, “harmonization”, and “humanization.”

First, I use “modern architecture” to designate the kind of architecture that has gained prominence in the twentieth century and that can be further divided into modernist and postmodernist architecture. In line with this usage, which is fairly common in historical surveys of architecture, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman and Frank Gehry can all be counted as modern architects.

Secondly, I use “harmonization” to refer to the state of affairs that is obtained when there is a “combination of parts or details in accord with each other, so as to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect.”[[8]](#endnote-8)  In other words, I use the term in its aesthetic sense. In what follows, I will further narrow the application of the term by using it only to characterize how buildings relate to other buildings. In case a philosophical analysis rather than a dictionary definition is desired, the best I can offer is the following:

(Harmony) Architectural elements *x* and *y* *harmonize* =def the spatial proximity of *x* and *y* confers positive aesthetic value upon the whole composed of *x* and *y*.

By way of further guidance on how I am using “harmonization”, it may be helpful also to have at hand an analysis of some contraries:

(Disharmony) Architectural elements *x* and *y* *clash* =def the spatial proximity of *x* and *y* confers negative aesthetic value upon the whole composed of *x* and *y*.

(Neutrality) Architectural elements *x* and *y* are *indifferent* to each other =def the spatial proximity of *x* and *y* confers neither positive nor negative value upon the whole composed of *x* and *y*.

For a defense of these analyses, I refer the reader to previous work.[[9]](#endnote-9) Again, they are included here merely to help the reader who cannot get a handle on the relevant concept of harmonization by means of the dictionary definition alone. My argument in what follows does not assume that the analyses are adequate as they stand, or even that an analysis of “harmonization” is feasible.

Finally, I use “humanization” to refer to the action or process of making something more humane in the sense of “gentle, or tender, soften”,[[10]](#endnote-10) as opposed to making it harsher or more severe. More literally, what I have in mind is the process of making something more agreeable, or easierto engage with, where “easier” means that no special effort or talent is required; abilities and dispositions that are widespread in the human population will do. I do not have in mind the process of endowing something with human-like features, although this might *contribute* to humanization in the relevant sense. For example, if the “anthropomorphic”[[11]](#endnote-11) character of classical buildings is part of what makes them appealing, as Scruton has argued,[[12]](#endnote-12) then that represents one way that a building can be humanized; it is not, however, what humanization consists of. Further clarification of the relevant concept of humanization will be provided in due course.

1. In support of claims (i) and (ii)

One reason for believing that harmonization leads to humanization has already been given: harmonizing is a way of appearing respectful and cooperative. That is why it is considered a manifestation of good manners. Another reason for believing (i) is that, if harmonizing is achieved by means of a grammar (like the one that is found in the classical vernacular), then it is bound to bear a cultural imprint: the imprint of something that is shared with members of one’s community, but not necessarily with everyone. Taken together, these reasons imply that a harmonizing grammar is bound to produce something that social creatures like us long for: the sense of being part of a concrete, identifiable community that is held together by shared values such as beauty and courtesy.[[13]](#endnote-13) In other words, a harmonizing grammar is bound to answer to a fundamental human desire, and so to constitute a form of humanization. At the very least, this is how a harmonizing grammar is likely to be experienced in the public realm. And that is why it runs counter to one of the dominant motives behind modern architecture, and arguably modern art in general: dehumanization. But this requires some more explanation.

In an influential essay titled ‘The Dehumanization of Art’, José Ortega y Gasset provided an interpretation of the overarching intention behind modern art as it manifested itself in the painting, literature and music of his day.[[14]](#endnote-14) According to this interpretation, the intention of modern artists is to make art purer and, at the same time, less serious or consequential. The ideal, from their (not necessarily Ortega’s own) perspective, is an art that is of aesthetic interest only, that is, one that yields *purely* aesthetic pleasure. That ideal may well be impossible to achieve, but it is possible to work toward it by a progressive elimination of everything that makes art attractive for non-aesthetic reasons. Elimination-worthy, in particular, is what is of general human interest, not just because it is likely to make art attractive for non-aesthetic reasons, but also because it could confound the aesthetic interest with something more basal, something “human, all too human.” This tendency to avoid what is of general human interest is what Ortega referred to as “dehumanization.” Note that “dehumanization” is used by Ortega (and in this article) in a purely descriptive manner. Ortega used the term neither to praise nor to condemn modern art, but to distinguish it from the art of the past (Romantic and naturalistic art in particular) like “the zoologist characterizes two contrasting species.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Moreover, the choice of the term is not surprising in light of how “humanization” was elucidated in section 1. After all, for Ortega, the elimination of what is of general human interest boils down to the elimination of what is easy to like, or engage with, in a work of art. In his view, it is what explains the unpopularity of modern art.

Still, it may be asked: is aesthetic value not itself something that is of general human interest? And, if so, why is it not a target of dehumanization?

There are two answers to these questions that can be given on Ortega’s behalf. The first answer grants that aesthetic value is not of general human interest, on the ground that the vast majority of people are incapable of appreciating aesthetic value. What they take to be appreciation of aesthetic value is, on closer inspection, something more like a sentimental response. There is some support for this answer in Ortega’s text:

As [the majority of people] have never practiced any other attitude but the practical one in which a man’s feelings are aroused and he is emotionally involved, a work that does not invite sentimental intervention leaves them without a cue.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Instead of delighting in the artistic object people delight in their own emotions, the work being only the cause and the alcohol of their pleasure.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The second answer does not deny that aesthetic value is of general human interest. Instead, it reminds us that dehumanization is not, in Ortega’s view, pursued for its own sake; it is pursued for the sake of obtaining pure aesthetic pleasure. If that is true, then there is no reason why dehumanization ought to be carried out in such a way that nothing of general human interest is left. It suffices to eliminate only sources of non-aesthetic pleasure.

Where are these sources of non-aesthetic pleasure to be found? Most likely, they are part of the representational content of a work. After all, there we may encounter the same realities that interest us also outside of art; for example, people in emotion-provoking situations. Hence we get the frequent suppression—not necessarily obliteration!—of representational content in modernist works; this is commonly known as “abstraction”. Thus, abstraction is one of the principal ways in which dehumanization is achieved in the fine arts. This gives us the following schematic picture of the means-ends reasoning that is supposed to have guided modern artists: abstraction 🡪 dehumanization 🡪 purification. Note that, on this picture, abstraction is a chosen means to an end rather than a manifestation of a primitive “urge to abstraction.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Not mentioned by Ortega is that a similar tendency can be discerned in modern architecture.[[19]](#endnote-19) Although buildings have to meet certain non-aesthetic demands, it is possible to specify these in a very rudimentary manner, as in Le Corbusier’s specification of “a machine for living in”:

*A house*: a shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive. A receptacle for light and sun. A certain number of cells appropriated to cooking, work, and personal life.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Now, unless we are destitute, we are unlikely to take an interest in a building because it is able to meet such elementary demands. In other words, its function (considered in itself, not in relation to other features) is not going to be of great interest to us. By contrast, it is easy to imagine someone taking an interest in a building because it is a Dutch canal house, a Victorian railway station, or a Bavarian rococo church. After all, there are quite a few books on these subjects. The problem is that such an interest in a building, *qua* token of a type, is unlikely to be purely aesthetic. Certainly, it is not going to count as purely aesthetic by the standards of the Kant-inspired formalist theories (e.g., Clive Bell’s theory) that were popular in the first half of the twentieth century.[[21]](#endnote-21) Even as a matter of commonsense psychology it is likely that such an interest is going to have a mixed aesthetic/non-aesthetic character. Moreover, to the extent that it has a non-aesthetic character, it is likely to be manifestation of propensities that are common among human beings, such as the propensity to like what is familiar, humble, inoffensive, homely, comfortable, and so on (say, in the case of the Dutch canal house).[[22]](#endnote-22) Of course, the manifestation of such propensities in our appreciation of art and architecture is precisely what dehumanization is meant to prevent.

In this respect, then, the dehumanization of architecture is similar to the dehumanization of the fine arts. In both cases, there is a tendency toward abstraction, which is meant to foreground those aspects that are taken to be the true objects of aesthetic interest: the form of a building, for example, or how that form relates to (“follows”) its function.[[23]](#endnote-23) In the fine arts, content is abstracted from the traditional subject matter of art; for example, from human affairs and the observable world. In architecture, functions are abstracted from traditional building types such as the Dutch canal house.

In both cases there is also a remainder left by abstraction. Just as modern buildings always have some non-aesthetic functions, modern artworks usually have some expressive and/or representational content. It is important to note that this does not mean that abstraction has failed to achieve (full) dehumanization.[[24]](#endnote-24) The point of dehumanization is not to rid art of all human content,[[25]](#endnote-25) let alone to rid art of all content whatsoever, but to present whatever content a work has in such a way that it is no longer of general human interest. For example, one can make the characters in a play or a performance act so artificially—in other words, so unrealistically—that spontaneous identification will not take place. In a similar way, a house can be so close to meeting only the definitional requirements for a house that one cannot imagine oneself actually living and settling in it.[[26]](#endnote-26) For example, Mies van der Rohe’s *Farnsworth House* (completed in 1951), Philip Johnson’s *Glass House* (completed in 1949) and Peter Eisenman’s *House VI* (completed in 1975) barely meet Le Corbusier’s rudimentary function specifications for a house, and, in their turn, these specifications barely add anything to what one finds in a dictionary entry for “house.” To be specific: neither the *Farnsworth House* nor the *Glass House* provides adequate “shelter against heat, cold,… and the inquisitive,” as Le Corbusier requires. Instead, they amplify fluctuations in outside temperature and leave occupants without privacy. Eisenman made no secret of the challenges posed by his designs: he reportedly “[told] his clients for House VI that he would like to build them another house that they can live in.”[[27]](#endnote-27) To be sure, these are extreme cases, but they are widely regarded as classics of modern architecture, and so they can tell us something about what is considered to be ideal. Moreover, in case one is under the impression that the “human interest” factor is only absent in the high-art regions of modern architecture, it may be worth pointing out that Howard Davis has complained about a similar absence in connection with shopping malls, fast-food restaurants and the conveniences stores attached to gas stations. These examples suggest to Davis that “[m]odern building types tend to satisfy needs that can be expressed in explicit and quantifiable ways but not needs that are more emotionally felt, that affect people in their hearts and memories.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

Abstraction in architecture—that is, from building types—has four predictable consequences. First, it becomes easier to experiment with the form of a building because elementary function specifications impose fewer constraints on that form. Secondly, it becomes harder to infer the function of a building from its outward appearance because elementary function specifications, again, impose fewer constraints on that appearance.[[29]](#endnote-29) Thirdly, ornaments become obsolete, and are therefore shunned, because they cannot serve any of the elementary functions abstracted from the building types that they used to be part of. Fourthly, buildings become less practical because traditional building types have evolved in response to a complex web of demands that is only partially recovered in the abstraction process.[[30]](#endnote-30)

It is worth mentioning these consequences because they have all been observed and because they constitute important evidence that the aforementioned abstraction (of functions), and so dehumanization, is a historical fact about architecture. Whether it is a historical fact about the fine arts as well, as Ortega has suggested, is something that can in principle be left undecided for the purpose of this article, although it would constitute important circumstantial evidence for dehumanization in architecture.

More evidence of dehumanization can be found in the way artworks and buildings have been *produced* in the twentieth century. Algorithms and all sorts of aleatoric devices have been used to create works of fine art; for example, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, André Breton, and Iannis Xenakis made use of them. Standardization and mass production have been promoted by modern architects such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and J. J. P. Oud. Again, the goal seems to have been to prevent something that is easily enjoyed (e.g., admired) for non-aesthetic reasons—skill, craftsmanship, creativity, wisdom—from making an impression on people and contaminating their aesthetic pleasure.[[31]](#endnote-31) In other word, mechanization and randomization seem to serve the same goal as abstraction: dehumanization.

This is not to deny that mechanization and randomization can simultaneously serve other goals. There is, for example, an economic argument for mass production that, needless to say, is much more straightforward. However, the economic motive behind mass production is compatible with an aesthetic motive that aims at dehumanization. Moreover, the aesthetic motive can help to explain why architects of a decidedly artistic inclination such as Le Corbusier have not just accepted, but *embraced*, the use of mass-produced components and materials.

Now it is possible to provide a fuller explanation of why a harmonizing grammar does not find a natural home in modern architecture. It may be thought that harmonization is an aesthetic goal and so is naturally aligned with the aesthetic motive behind dehumanization. But notice, first of all, that the motive behind dehumanization is not to maximize aesthetic pleasure; it is to *purify* it, or rather to purify *art and architecture* by making them, as far as possible, the object of aesthetic pleasure only. And, from the point of view of someone who wishes to purify architecture in this manner, there is no reason why groupings of buildings would be of greater importance than, say, groupings of paintings. From this point of view, there is no reason why the street or the town should be regarded as the proper aesthetic unit in architecture, as, for example, Trystan Edwards, Bruce Allsopp, and Scruton have argued.[[32]](#endnote-32)

However, it is not just that harmonizing will be of no concern to those who wish to purify architecture in the manner that has just been described; they will have to actively resist it.[[33]](#endnote-33) The reason is that our interest in harmony is not a purely aesthetic one. What is more, it is an interest that we share with the great majority of people. As was noted earlier, harmonizing is a way of appearing respectful and cooperative, which is important for social and ethical reasons. Harmonizing is also a way of forming larger visual wholes, which may be important for psychological reasons.[[34]](#endnote-34) As a result, the aesthetic pleasure that we take in harmony is very likely to be mixed with other pleasures such as the pleasures of friendliness and conviviality, for example, or the pleasure of finding order and stability in one’s visual environment.

Such mixing is, again, what dehumanization was meant to prevent. And it is all the more likely to occur when harmonizing is achieved by means of a grammar. After all, as was also observed earlier, such a grammar is bound to bear the imprint of a particular culture. This, too, will lead to a mixing of aesthetic pleasure with other pleasures, because familiarity, recognition, and belonging are all sources of non-aesthetic pleasure for the average human being.

In sum, the hypothesis about the development of architecture that I have adapted from Ortega’s essay has considerable explanatory power. It is able to explain the form and appearance of modern buildings, their frequently reported malfunctioning, and even the way they are produced. It is also able to explain this quip from a prominent modern architect:

What about the people? Don’t you care about people at all? The answer is “no,” of course. I mean I respect the scale of a human being, but the people themselves? What have they got to do with architecture?[[35]](#endnote-35)

Yet one often-noted fact about modern, or at least modern*ist*, architects seems to be absent both from the hypothesis itself and from its predicted consequences: many of them were committed to “social reform.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Clearly, this is a not a purely aesthetic aim. Moreover, it seems to be of general human interest, at least from the perspective of those who pursue it. Then how can it be reconciled with what I have taken to be the fundamental motive of modern architecture, namely, dehumanization?

Note, first of all, that social reform was not something that buildings were supposed to attain on their own. It was something to be attained at the level of the town or city, and therefore by means of urban planning rather than architecture.

Secondly, with the exception of social housing projects, architects’ urban planning ideals seem to have had little impact on the design of their buildings. In particular, the ideals seem to have had little impact on the buildings’ *style* (keep in mind that this is what dehumanization is supposed to explain). Where there was impact, it was probably limited to the addition of one or two functions to a building because abstraction was also carried out at the level of urban planning. For example, one could think here of Le Corbusier’s narrow focus on air, light, hygiene and greenery in his design of the ideal city.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, these additional functions are unlikely to be a source of non-aesthetic pleasure in the contemplation of an individual building. For example, increasing density in a neighborhood is not something that appeals to human beings unless they are in the grip of a certain theory. In other words, something that is *in* the general interest may not be *of* general interest, and so may not be among the targets of dehumanization.

Finally, and as will be explained further in the next section, modern architecture does not have to be dehumanizing through-and-through in order for the dehumanizing motive to be the primary determinant of its development.

1. Beyond the present

The purpose of the preceding section was to establish the following, twofold conclusion: (i) to add a harmonizing grammar to modern architecture is to humanize it, and (ii) to humanize modern architecture is to divorce it from the motive that is responsible for its development and characteristic features. This intermediate conclusion naturally leads to the further question of whether modern architecture *could* be divorced from the dehumanizing motive—for example, at some point in the future. As suggested in the introduction, I take the answer to be ‘no’. Let me now try to justify that answer.

Modern architecture is a style, and styles are like syndromes in that both are non-accidentally related to an underlying process: a psychological process in the case of styles (e.g., a set of connected motives), and a biological process in the case of syndromes.[[37]](#endnote-37) For this reason, it is plausible to consider styles and syndromes as examples of what Richard Boyd has dubbed “homeostatic property clusters,” which means that:

1. There is a family (F) of properties that are contingently clustered … in the sense that they co-occur in an important number of cases.

2. Their co-occurrence is, at least typically, the result of what may be metaphorically (sometimes literally) described as a sort of homeostasis. Either the presence of some of the properties in F tends (under appropriate conditions) to favor the presence of the others, or there are underlying mechanisms or processes that tend to maintain the presence of the properties in F, or both.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Modern architecture consists of a set of features that tend to co-occur: curtain walls; open floor plans; materials such as glass, steel, and (exposed) reinforced concrete; flat roofs; horizontal windows; no ornamentation; and so on. Moreover, their tendency to co-occur is explained, at least in part, by an underlying mechanism such as the purifying-by-dehumanizing motive. This underlying mechanism, too, is part of what modern architecture consists of.[[39]](#endnote-39) To be sure, the mechanism may change over time. For example, it is conceivable that the motive behind dehumanization is replaced with another one, or several others. According to Clement Greenberg, this has happened in the fine arts. In his later writings, he complains that dehumanization (in the form of “the shocking, scandalizing, startling, the mystifying and confounding”) is pursued as an end in itself and is embraced by the establishment out of a fear of looking conservative.[[40]](#endnote-40) In this way, the avant-garde is supposed to have strayed from its original goal of maintaining aesthetic standards in an environment that is dominated by kitsch. It is possible that something similar has happened in architecture. In 1974, Allsopp wrote that modern architecture, whose pioneers “were dedicated to ideals,” has been “debased by men whose principal qualifications are ability in handling committees and a gift for making money.”[[41]](#endnote-41) A couple of years later, Robert A. M. Stern gave voice to a similar sentiment.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Be that as it may, if the original mechanism behind a style’s development is replaced in its entirety—or, more radically, if it is replaced with a mechanism that works *against* it—then a new style must have emerged. My sense is that this would also be the best description of a situation in which a humanizing grammar is added to modern architecture *for the reason that it is* humanizing. A humanizing motive simply is not compatible with a dehumanizing motive. At the very least, one of the two motives will have to be the dominant one.

In sum, to divorce modern architecture from its propelling motive is to replace modern architecture with something else. Of course, one can add humanizing features to modern buildings: organic shapes, “warm” materials such as wood, softer color tones, roof gardens, green walls, and so on. There are plenty of modern architects who have done so: Frank Lloyd Wright, Michael Graves, and Jean Nouvel, to name only a few. But whereas such humanizing features may strike one as mere patches in an individual building, within a larger architectural whole such as a street or a town, their significance vanishes altogether. In any case, an architectural grammar is of an altogether different order. Like the grammar of a language, it is much more fundamental and comprehensive. As a result, it cannot be added to an architectural style in the interest of humanization without making humanization a *dominant* motive.

To be sure, a grammar can be imposed on modern architecture with the aim of humanizing it. Figure 3 provides an illustrative example. However, if my conception of styles as homeostatic property clusters is correct, then such a grammar would not become *part* of modern architecture, or even *part of a part* of modern architecture (say, the post-postmodernist part). It would remain an external constraint, imposed in some places and for some time, but not always and everywhere. In other words, it would be a building code rather than a grammar. As such, it is unlikely to be “capable of creating accord and harmony in all the many circumstances of potential conflict” (to quote Scruton again), or even just in the changing circumstances of a particular place. More likely, it will only prevent some instances of *dis*harmony.[[43]](#endnote-43)

**<INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE>**

To be clear, what has been offered in this section is a conception of what a style such as modern architecture *is*. This conception is compatible with a variety of explanations of why the style came into existence, and why it spread around the world: changing social and economic circumstances, technological advances, the *zeitgeist*, and so on. For example, it may be that the *zeitgeist* called for a “ruthless” and “cold” attitude on the part of architects.[[44]](#endnote-44) Alternatively, it may be that the poor taste of the burgeoning middle-class made dehumanization an attractive option.[[45]](#endnote-45) Such explanations, to the extent that they are successful, cite more distal, *external* causes of modern architecture, which typically are events preceding its emergence. By contrast, the conception put forward in this article aims to identify its most proximate, *internal* cause: a cause so closely tied to its development and observable features that we cannot speak of the same style (in a different place, or at a different time) if that cause is not also present. Again, a comparison with syndromes may be helpful. The mechanism underlying Down syndrome is an abnormality relating to chromosome 21. That understanding of what Down syndrome consists of does not explain how someone came to have the abnormality, for example, whether it was inherited from one of the parents or not. In a similar way, the proposed understanding of what modern architecture consists of is compatible with a variety of explanations of why that style came into existence, and why it spread around the world.

1. Conclusion

Modern buildings do not easily harmonize with other buildings, regardless of whether the latter are also modern. This is an often-observed fact about modern architecture, which so far has not received a satisfactory explanation. The explanation I have defended in this article is that modern architecture is incapable of developing patterns that facilitate harmonizing (what I have referred to as a “harmonizing grammar”), because such patterns would humanize buildings, while modern architecture is a homeostatic property cluster with a *de*humanizing motive at its core. If an explanation along these lines is correct, then chances are slim that modern buildings will harmonize more often in the future. Whether this is something to regret or to celebrate is a topic for another article. The aim of the present article was to explain rather than criticize, or justify, an ongoing practice. Nonetheless, the implications for aesthetic education are straightforward if, like Scruton, one considers it part of its main task to discover “an idiom which will foster commonplace harmony.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

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   See, for example, Trystan Edwards, *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (London: John Tiranti, 1946[1924]); Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1998[1967]), 298; John Haldane, “Architecture, Philosophy and the Public World,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30, no. 3 (1990): 203-17; Roger Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular: Architectural Principles in an Age of Nihilism* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994); John Silber, *Architecture of the Absurd: How Genius Disfigured a Practical Art* (New York: Quantuck Lane Press, 2007); Paul Rudolph, *Writings on Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Robert A. M. Stern, *Architecture on the Edge of Post-Modernism: Collected Essays 1964-1988*, ed. Cynthia Davidson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Rafael De Clercq, “Modern Architecture and the Concept of Harmony,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no. 1 (2011): 69-79; Brianna Rennix and Nathan J. Robinson, “Why You Hate Contemporary Architecture,” *Current Affairs*, October 31, 2017, https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/10/why-you-hate-contemporary-architecture. It may be worth noting that this list includes both (modern) architects and scholars, as well as people of different political persuasions. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The quoted terms are used in Edwards, *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture*, and Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*. An old (1964) essay of Robert Stern’s on MOM’s Pepsi-Cola Building in New York ends as follows: “Too bad more attention wasn’t paid to that Pepsi advertising campaign of a little while ago, which admonished a thirsty America: ‘Be sociable…’” (Stern, *Architecture on the Edge of Post-Modernism*, 4). The connection between stylistic descriptions and how a work *appears* to have been made is made by Kendall L. Walton, “Style and the Products and Processes of Art,” in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 45-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Silber, *Architecture of the Absurd*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The expression “architectural grammar” is used in Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*, 66, but more explicitly in connection with harmony in Roger Scruton, “After Modernism,” *City Journal,* Spring 2000, https://www.city-journal.org/html/after-modernism-11801.html. Roger Scruton, “Aesthetic Education and Design,” *Architecture Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2018): 214-31, continues to use it, but warns against taking the analogy with language too far (on p. 226). See also Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 160-178. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*, 52; my italics. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. De Clercq, “Modern Architecture and the Concept of Harmony,” 79; Rafael De Clercq, “Architecture,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Anna Christina Ribeiro (London: Bloomsbury, 2015[2012]), 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *OED Online*, accessed on 01/06/2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. De Clercq, “Modern Architecture and the Concept of Harmony,” 70-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *OED Online*, accessed on 01/06/2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1957[1948]), 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. “Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that to live a meaningful life, to dwell in this sense, we must recognize ourselves as parts of a larger ongoing community. Such community in turn depends on certain shared values” (Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000[1997]), 363). Víctor Fernández Castro and Elisabeth Pacherie, “Joint Actions, Commitments, and the Need to Belong,” *Synthese* 198 (2021): 7597–7626, provide empirical evidence to support the importance of the “need to belong”. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019[1948/1968]). The essay was first published in Spanish in 1925. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ortega, *The Dehumanization of Art*, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ortega, *The Dehumanization of Art*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ortega, *The Dehumanization of Art*, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. As in Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of* Style, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997[1908]). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Evelyn Waugh seems to have brought it to our attention in *Decline and Fall*, which was published just three years after Ortega’s essay. One of the characters in the novel (Professor Silenus) says: “The problem of architecture is the problem of all art: the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form” (quoted in Rennix and Robinson, “Why You Hate Contemporary Architecture”). Later, Sedlmayr also noted a dehumanizing tendency in modern architecture, using the term itself and citing Ortega. See Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis,* 32, 80-81, 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986[1931]), 114; italics in original. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Clive Bell, *Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987[1949/1914]). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. At the same time, there can be a propensity to like what is grandiose and exotic. However, the propensities will tend to manifest themselves in different circumstances; for example, depending on the location and the importance of a building. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. In other words, dehumanization, as understood by Ortega, is compatible with both formalism and functionalism in the philosophy of architecture. Likewise, it is compatible with the (now well-accepted) idea that the *relation* between the form and the content of a work of fine art is of utmost aesthetic importance. Dehumanization merely places certain constraints on what the form and the content of a work can be like. For this reason, dehumanization does not seem to be equivalent to the (formalist) “aesthetic approach” that Karsten Harries takes to have dominated modern architecture (in Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ortega, *The Dehumanization of Architecture*, 22-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Pace* Colin Lyas, “The Dehumanization of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13, no. 4 (1973): 373-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. “Even the most inveterate wanderer and the most detached cosmopolitan has some place where he feels he has roots, some place from which he sprung or, failing that, some place from which his people came. There may be advantages in suppressing the sense of home… but for the vast majority of people for whom an architect designs, the place at which a man is plugged into Earth is important to him” (Bruce Allsopp, *Towards a Humane Architecture* (London: Frederick Muller, 1974), 86). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Stern, *Architecture on the Edge of Post-Modernism*, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On this difficulty, see Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 56, and Léon Krier, *Architecture: Choice or Fate?* (London: Andreas Papadakis, 2007), 31-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Numerous examples of impractical buildings designed by famous modernist *and* postmodernist architects can be found in Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn’t Worked* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1977); Silber*, Architecture of the Absurd*; and Malcolm Millais, *Exploding the Myths of Modern Architecture* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2009). See also Stern *Architecture on the Edge of Post-Modernism*, chap. 3. For some of the history of this complaint about modern architecture, see Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 336-37. For the difficulty of doing justice to the complexity of design in a “self-conscious” culture like ours, see Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For example, creativity is admired for non-aesthetic reasons when it is valued as an ability to come up with new ideas, regardless of whether these ideas are *aesthetically* valuable. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Edwards, *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture*; Allsopp, *Towards a Humane Architecture*; *Scruton, The Classical Vernacular.* [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. For some examples of modern architects who have been explicit about their resistance to harmony, see De Clercq, “Modern Architecture and the Concept of Harmony,” 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. De Clercq, “Modern Architecture and the Concept of Harmony,” 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Philip Johnson as quoted in Hilary Lewis and John O’Connor, eds., *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Cf. “The roots of Modernist thinking about Design lie… in the nineteenth-century impulse for social reform, which was itself a reaction to the social upheaval of the industrial revolution” (Glenn Parsons, *The Philosophy of Design* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 54), and, similarly, “Modernism in architecture was more a social than an aesthetic project” (Scruton, “After Modernism”). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Using Richard Wollheim’s terminology (in Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 11), I am assuming that a “general style” can have “psychological reality” and so explanatory power. For a defense of this position, see Aaron Meskin, “Style,” in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 446-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Richard Boyd, “Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa,” in *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Robert A. Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Of terms used to designate homeostatic property cluster kinds, Boyd writes: “all or part of the homeostatic cluster F, together with some or all of the mechanisms that underlie it, provide the natural definition” (Boyd, “Homeostasis, Species, and Higher Taxa,” 143). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See several of the essays collected in Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). In a similar fashion, Bertold Brecht thought he could accomplish political goals by means of *Verfremdung* (arguably, a form of dehumanization) in his plays. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Allsopp, *Towards a Humane Architecture*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. “In the post-World War II building boom, the leaders of the second generation of modernists… shed the philosophical, political, and sociological idealism of the Modern Movement, holding on largely only to its forms, which, as they typically employed them, seemed particularly well suited to the needs of an expanding corporate and commercial bureaucracy anxious to build expeditiously, cheaply and splashily” (Stern, *Architecture on the Edge of Post-Modernism*, 44). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. As the analyses in section 1 make clear, avoiding disharmony does not mean creating harmony. Monotony may be created instead. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. See Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Penguin Books, 1977[1936]). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Greenberg, *Late Writings*. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Scruton, *The Classical Vernacular*, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)