

## Dirty rotten scoundrels

Paul Hirst's lecture on 'Modernism's fear of dirt' accused modernist architects and planners of attempting to clean up the dirt that gives a city its spirit. Ellie Duffy reports

In attempting to remove grime and disorder from the urban environment, did modernist planners and architects also inadvertently wash away the spirit of the city? This was the question posed by Paul Hirst's lecture 'Clean Cities: Modernism's Fear of Dirt', which was part of the Women's Library's 'Dirty Linen' series of talks on the theme of cleanliness (forthcoming speakers include Jonathan Glancey and Adrian Forty). Hirst, a social theorist and academic director of the London Consortium, has no doubts that the answer is 'yes' and proposes that there was, in fact, nothing inadvertent about such attempts to clean up the city.

There is, he says, an enduring and interdependent relationship between cities and dirt. And this, he argues, presents a fundamental problem to modernisers and their attempts to impose order and cleanliness on civilisations which, by definition, have been raised up on their own detritus. Cities are by their very nature chaotic. Dirt and culture, disorder and pleasure – the argument goes – go hand in hand. Moreover, Hirst suggests, the historic popularity of the city only goes to show that its inhabitants have always been ambivalent about dirt and chaos, are even attracted to aspects of this unclean reality of city life. Attempt to take away the grime and disorder and you lose the 'cityness' of the city too.

To illustrate this theory, Hirst examined the influence of three key advocates of the modernist ideal of the city – Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier – and traced their subsequent influences on the built environment in the UK, the United States and France respectively. They had in common, he argues, a fundamentally anti-city approach to remodelling the city. They shared the desire to separate residents from traffic flow (in effect abolishing the street) and rationalise the city by means of functional zoning (therefore destroying the innately mixed-use character of cities). In addition, the shared preference for low-density, family-oriented units of accommodation and, above all, for light, air and cleanliness betrays the city-hating truth behind the visionary models developed by these three influential figures.

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City solution for instance, with its mix of low-density, low-rise arts & crafts architecture and orderly planning radiating from an empty, green centre is presented as the model for Milton Keynes – except that Howard's 'crystal palace', a giant radial arcade surrounding parkland at the heart of the Garden City, has been replaced – in reality – by B&Q and Tesco.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, the model project for 'America tomorrow' undertaken by Wright during the lean years of the depression, was comparatively more dispersed and individualist. It was based on a 'yeoman democracy' in which the population helped each other to construct simple and cheap homes incorporating smallholdings and space for artisan industries. Freed from the tyranny of factory labour, this ideal community of dispersed, autonomous individuals shared limited communal facilities linked by 60mph freeways. And the reality? The 'edge city', sprawling complexes of corporate offices, housing and entertainment facilities crossing county boundaries and lacking any administration, created out of 'white flight' from urban centres.

But it is Le Corbusier who comes in for the biggest bashing from Hirst. Hating the slime of Paris and waging a 'one-man war against dirt, disorder and traffic', in the 1920s Corb proposed a series of theoretical plans for the remodelling of Paris. These included Le Plan Voisin in which the city's existing centre was razed to make room for a grid of tower blocks to accommodate the elite, surrounded by parks and gardens. Meanwhile, the usurped working classes were relegated to dormitory towns. In the event, Paris' actual skyscrapers were banished beyond the periphery and packed with the city's poorest inhabitants. A precise inversion created by top-down planning and abandonment of place and sociability in pursuit of cleanliness and order.

'Be careful what you wish for' is how Hirst ends this cautionary tale for architects and planners. And his is, indeed, a salutary tale of city planning. But in the context of rampant tuberculosis in which these visions of the perfect city were conceived, the charge of imposing cleanliness seems rather low on the list of heinous crimes. On the whole it would seem rather a good thing that these days most of the inhabitants of London and Paris should have access to bathrooms and indoor lavatories. And the notion that the city as depicted by Hogarth in the 1730s should be inhabited by its working population for reasons other than economic seems to confuse cause with effect. Of more concern to architects working today might be the illumination of a failure on behalf of these visionaries to recognise that architecture, and especially architecture when it relates to planning and urbanism, is in fact a service and not a religion.