Where Modernism hit a brick wall

By Nathan Glazer

THE AMERICAN Institute of Architects recently asked a national sample to judge American buildings, monuments and other structures. Each participant in the survey rated some of the 247 buildings nominated by the institute, and the scores were tallied into overall rankings of Americans' favorite buildings.

To the dismay of sophisticated architects and architecture critics, not a single Modernist building made it to the top 10. The only modern and Modernist structure to (barely) crack the top 10 was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The Art Deco Empire State Building came out first, the Classical White House second, the Gothic Washington National Cathedral third and the Jefferson Memorial, whose Roman rotunda design outraged contemporary Modernist architects and critics when it was designed in the 1930s, fourth.

In contrast, in the last major survey of architects in 1991, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house was first. The runner-up was Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, which might have scored better among the general public if the campus were easier to grasp from a photograph.

The surveys underscore a deep divide between most Americans, with their attachment to the traditional, and architects and critics, with their preference for the modern, the new and the striking.

In the 1980s, a similar chasm opened up in Britain when Prince Charles attacked a proposed Modernist addition to the National Gallery in London. After a contentious public debate, the addition got a new design that connected in some respects to the Classical main building by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Ordinary Brits, as far as one could discern, supported the prince over the Modernist architects, which was surprising. Modernism, after all, began as a reformist effort to create an architecture better suited to our times and our needs, but it now appeared as an elitist effort to impose on people what they didn't like and didn't want.

Modernism's goal was to create architecture for the people, not princes. It would get rid of furbelows and flourishes, columns and wreaths, ornament and imitation, and build directly for needs — efficient factories, orderly homes, sober churches. "Form follows function," "ornament is crime," "less is more" — these were the slogans of Modernism. The giants of the movement — Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe — never polled people about their tastes and desires, of course. But it stood to reason that economical Modernist buildings, stripped of ornament, would provide better housing for everyone and, with design that prioritized open spaces and fresh air, would aggregate into better neighborhoods and cities.

And so indeed it appeared for a while. Vast swaths of London and other cities that had survived German bombing were torn down in postwar Britain to create Modernist "housing estates" ("public housing" in American terms) and new city centers. But the alliance with social reformers broke down as it became evident that these Modernist plans were not, overall, creating a more desirable urban environment.

Even as the U.S. followed course, it began to dawn on the public that something was being lost. As the old was swept away and replaced by these buildings and neighborhoods purportedly better suited to our modern lives, we saw virtues in the traditional: its complexity, its acknowledgments of history, even its idiosyncrasy and oddity. The most powerful and effective attack on the Modernist doctrine was launched by Jane Jacobs in her "Death and Life of Great American Cities" in 1961. Her book's relevance and influence has grown steadily in the years since.

Modernism more or less gave up the effort to design economical housing for the masses by the 1970s. Nearly all our suburbs — tracts of Georgian revivals, Cape Cod bungalows, faux adobes — evoke the past rather than the Modernists' future. Some residential Modernist masterpieces emerged, and a few by Wright, Robert Neutra and other leading Modernists survive in Los Angeles. But in the end, it was only a small elite who chose Modernist-designed homes.

Modernism found its greatest acceptance in office buildings, for which it was well suited. But as they sprouted en masse in city centers and new suburbs, they produced dreary and soulless neighborhoods. Modernists struggled with how to build important public buildings too; no form emerged to replace the traditional models of the past, and Classicist, Gothic or Art Deco public buildings are now more admired than their stripped-down counterparts.

Though Modernism has gone through many transformations, our contemporary architecture is still marked by that historic revolution that abandoned models of the past. The current version of Modernism has produced some striking museums and performance spaces that have made their architects — Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and others — international stars.

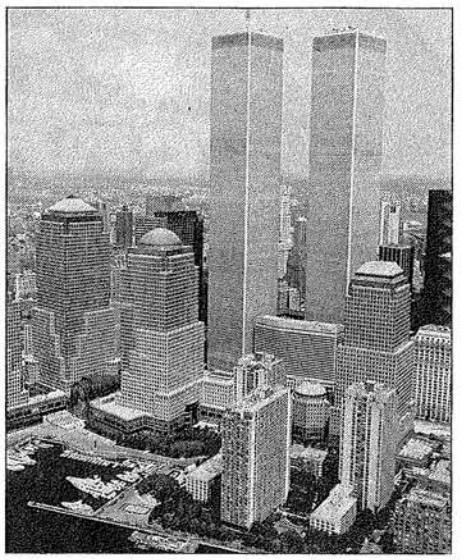
Some of their sensational buildings have helped cities by creating new tourist attractions — the Sydney Opera House, the Walt Disney Concert Hall — but architects don't even think anymore, as they once did, of how to build a better city. Nor does anyone subscribe to the idea that a collection of buildings by superstar architects would do so.

Rather, many of us flock to the European cities that escaped Modernist makeovers, or to the U.S. cities that were built up before Modernism could impose its strictures. There is an attractiveness, variety, usability — and reusability, as we remodel the structures that have survived — to traditional architecture that modern architecture lost and has not yet recovered.

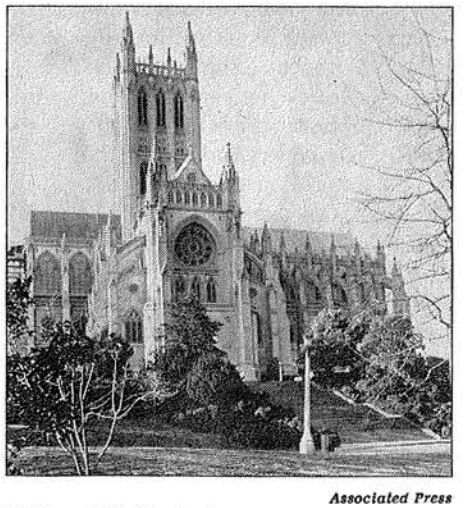
Architecture can't go back to the past, no matter how much we admire the artful use of columns, Gothic vaults or Classicist domes. The challenge is to move forward without losing the urban delight that comprises complexity, vitality, surprise and, yes, a sense of a human past.

Sociologist NATHAN GLAZER *is the author of "From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture's Encounter with the American City," to be published in April.*

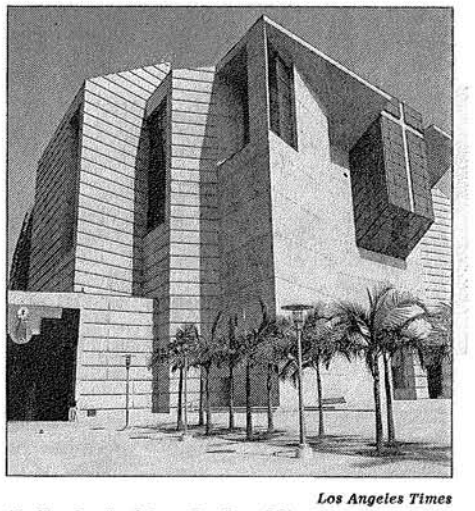
KATHY WILLENS *Associated Press*
Empire State Building



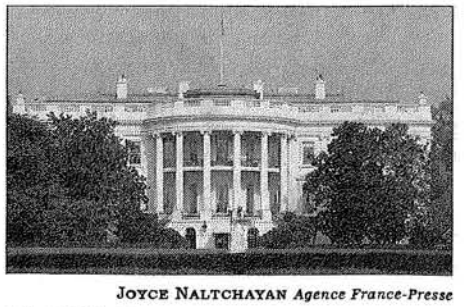
ED BAILEY *Associated Press*
Former World Trade Center



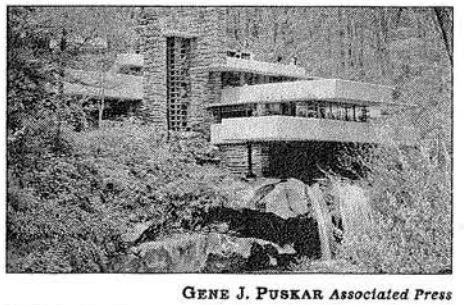
Associated Press
National Cathedral



Los Angeles Times
Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels



JOYCE NALTCHAYAN *Agence France-Presse*
The White House



GENE J. PUSKAR *Associated Press*
Fallingwater

YOU DECIDE: America's top three architectural choices on the left; Modernist "comps" on the right.