



Walk Midlands



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Review: Horror in the Modernist Block

Ever since its regeneration fueled 1990s relocation to Brindley Place, Birmingham's IKON Gallery has been housed in a former school building that is an intriguing blend of late Victorian municipal gothic and minimal high modernist white cube gallery space. Each style is equally institutional in its own way, albeit with rather different connotations.

Both these historical foundations and their expression through architectural form, make the gallery the perfect space for [Horror in the Modernist Block](#), IKON's current visual art exhibition on until 1st May 2023.

Arguably the exhibition represents the latest twist in Birmingham's relationship with its reputation as a place which first embraced and then rapidly tried to distance itself from modernist, and especially brutalist, architecture.

The story of the city's pre-Second World War rush to construct iconic ODEON cinemas and rows and rows of suburban vaguely art deco villas alike, and its post-1945 haste to remodel its urban fabric in favour of the car, and its 1960s high-rise boom, is well rehearsed. As is the equal hurry after the city's de-industrialisation – almost unparalleled in its quickness – in the early 1980s in the teeth of the monetarist induced recession, to replace much of what had been constructed only a few decades earlier. A second post-war remodelling of Birmingham's central districts and many of its (increasingly former) council estates encouraged by the policies of the neo-liberal true believers in the John Major and Tony Blair governments, and the kind of service (think conferences) and property firms which did well in the 20 or so years between the end of Cold War and the Credit Crunch.

The most recent act in this drama is a renewed appreciation of the architecture of the post-war period – primarily by online subcultures – between the late 2000s and the end of the 2010s. This moment of rediscovery and its underlying politics was in no small part a reaction against the austerity policies pursued nationally by the Tory-Liberal Coalition government post-2010 and at local level by councils of all political colourings. An idealised and mythologised version of the state and political economy between the end of the Second World War and the early 1980s, painted the modernist and brutalist architecture of these years as an expression of a kinder, gentler, more socialist form of politics. An idealised form of opposition to the running down and privatisation of the public realm that came to increasingly characterise British life in the 2010s, and especially to the deskilling and discarding of the kinds of public and third sector jobs that many of modernist architecture's defenders did for a living.

In reality of course, many of the trends and tendencies discernable in the operation of British capitalism in the late 2000s and 2010s were equally prevalent in the post-war period during modernist architecture's high noon. It was not a kinder, gentler, nor even especially "socialist" time, especially not in Birmingham. Rather the mythology constructed around modernist and brutalist architecture and building over the last 10 to 15 years has served to perform ideological work in the present. Ideological work which found its political expression in the inchoate leftist roar that was Corbynism. A crazy bricolage of a project, which was actually rather successful, whilst it was running full throttle, but which ultimately collapsed in on itself as it got damp around the edges, the glue viscous once more, and the paper heavier and prone to tearing.

Appreciating this context of how public understanding and reception of modernist and brutalist architecture has changed in the last few years is essentially to understanding the *Horror in the Modernist Block* exhibition and the works presented as part of it.

Undoubtedly, it represents part of a new understanding of the modernist architectural heritage and legacy bequeathed us by the 20th Century, one which is neither straightforwardly condemnatory like many critiques published over the decades, but which is also not an uncomplicated and simplistic celebration either. Rather it represents an altogether more complete, complex and thoughtful understanding of the period's built environment.

Ambiguity, nuance, and multiple potential readings, much like the best of the horror genre, is the watchword which unites the disparate artworks drawn from across the world which are on display and brought into dialogue with each other.

This comes into focus when you first enter the exhibition through a series of video projections showing short films on loop. Each one draws on the rich vein of tropes that the horror film genre has built up around modernist architecture and its association with scientific experiment, alienation, mid-20th Century thriller films and totalitarianism alike.

The films in this section of the exhibition include *Mies 421* (Maria Taniguchi 2010), *Slow Violence* (Kihlberg & Henry 2018-2022) and *Brutal* (NT 2022). Each of them in different ways appropriate the tropes of horror films associated with modernism to trigger feelings of threat and danger in viewers. This includes an appreciation of ecological damage and the alienation from the natural world and ecology that is inherent in the controlled, concrete world of modernist structures in *Mies 421* and *Slow Violence*. Both films expose the links between modernist buildings projects and humanity's degradation and alienation from the natural world. *Brutal*, which was made on Inner-Birmingham's current and former housing estates, has an altogether more human thrust to it. The sense of threat which is evoked here draws upon the concepts of crime, disorder and threat, which our culture has imposed upon such estates and their residents. An unjust, classist and frequently racist set of tropes and framings, which *Brutal* aims to expose and unsettle.

Fourth amongst the films in this section is *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Ho Tzu Nyen 2011). Which with its imagery of dank caves, apartments taken over by plant life, and nods to body horror is the closest to a conventional horror film. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is less overtly political in its charge than the other three films. Rather the themes being explored here relate to alienation and a block of flat's capacity to change when inhabitants move in and out. The film's premise of swapping between different privatised horrors in each apartment and the inhabitants struggling with them (whether real or figurative) is a metaphor for how flatted living and modern society in general separates us from each other and makes us confront our fears and challenges alone.

The themes of alienation, isolation and oppression which emerge from the themes in the first part of the exhibition are teased out further in the sculptures, photographs and drawings of various kinds which follow later in the exhibition.

Some of these works such as Seher Shah's *Unit Object* series (2014) and *Notes from the City Unknown* are created directly from the plans and schemas of modernist town planning and architecture. In *Unit Object* a schematic drawing of Le Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation* is rendered on paper as if in three dimensions. The end result is a drawing which recalls nothing less than a labyrinth in which the viewer's eye is trapped. A concept which develops further in the artist's recent *Notes from the City Unknown* which pairs schematic drawings of the monumental architecture of India's capital New Delhi with snatches of text. These texts give the viewer a sense of the city as a dangerous place for women, a place where many frequently fall victim to patriarchal violence.

Feminist critique of modernist planning and architecture dates back at least as far as the 1970s. In parallel with the critical reassessment of modernism and brutalism in the late 2000s and 2010s these critiques have also in recent years, rightly, been returned to. Examples of this include the [exhibition on the all women, feminist, Matrix Architects which was held at The Barbican in 2021](#). In Birmingham Matrix Architects and their ideas were influential in the production of the film *Paradise Circus* (1988) which explored how the design of the urban realm in Birmingham disadvantaged women, and was especially prevalent amongst the underpasses, walkways and high rise blocks of the city's redeveloped areas. Issues which remain to this day, and which continue to inspire the city's artists including Cathy Wade who in recent years has produced a sequel – of sorts – to *Paradise Circus* and a zine.

In the *Horror in the Modernist Block* exhibition, in addition to Seher Shah's work, the exhibition explores these feminist critiques and how modernist planning, architecture and design impacts upon people who are not men, through exhibiting the work of Laetitia Badaut Haussmann and Firenze Lai. Badaut Haussmann's *Espace vaincu, Energie controlee* (*Vanquished space, Controlled energy* 2022) is a large almost hyperreal painting of a stark modernist bedchamber. It is supposed to recall the kind of spaces where in films and other parts of popular culture – be it *American Psycho* or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* where women fall victim to brutal patriarchal violence. Firenze Lai's paintings and drawings are similar, shadowy figures following each other along dark, potentially subterranean passages. Spaces which are akin to the underpasses critiqued as inaccessible, threatening and dangerous in *Paradise Circus* almost 40 years ago.

How modernism has been received, entered into dialogue with, and shaped cities and cultures around the world is also explored in the exhibition. This especially comes through in the photographic work of Shezad Dawood *The Directorate* (2019) and Ola Hassanain *The Line That Follows and An Early Road Before a Modern One* (2022). These works capture expression of modernity from outside of Europe, North America and the industrialised regions of East Asia. This includes *The Directorate's* documentation of a long abandoned swimming pool in an American consulate in Pakistan, as well as Hassanain's film and textile work reflecting upon how modernism has been expressed in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

The folk and folkloric aspects of horror are also well represented in the exhibition. This includes both very old kinds of folklore such as Ismeal Monticelli's new commission for the exhibition *Spaghetti Junction* (2022). The artwork takes inspiration from medieval drawings of bestiaries, albeit modernised, to draw connections between Birmingham's gargantuan Spaghetti Junction road interchange and Brasilia's Tesourinhas or Scissor Junction. What this suggests is that there is a global, modern, form of folklore which has developed and is shared between all locations around the world where hulking, divisive, motorway interchanges are situated.

This marriage of the old and the new is also present in Richard Hughes' new work *Lithobolia Happy Meal* which is inspired by Early Modern myths about stone throwing devils. In Hughes' sculpture the story is recast through concrete debris shaped like another iconic, highly processed item of modernity: the chicken nugget. Monika Sosnowska's sculptural work *Tower* (2019) looks back to a more modern kind of mythology, that around the

groundbreaking and idealistic forms of early Soviet modernism and constructivism created in the fertile soil of the Soviet Union's tumultuous first decade.

Altogether more immediate forms of horror and haunting are also present in the exhibition. The horror of the social murder that was perpetrated at Grenfell Tower is present near the start of the exhibition in Abbas Zahedi's *Exit Sign* (2021). As if inspired by the subvertising tradition developed by the situationist and anarchist movements, when glanced at the work looks like a standard fire exit sign. However, upon closer viewing it is clear that its arrow has been reversed with two human figures hurtling to earth on each side of it.

The urban landscape's everyday horror and implicit danger is also present in Karim Kal's photographs taken on housing estates in France. These works peer out from the illuminated parts of estates into the darkness. They suggest that away from the brightly lit housing the darkness looms all around. What is heavily implied here is that for all the modernity, and ease relative to previous generations, of life on housing estates in modern cities, the old darkness and fears which humans have always possessed remain present nearby lurking in the darkness.


All of these works and the others in the exhibition show what the cultural discussion in Birmingham and beyond about the modernist past and its ongoing legacy in the shape of the urban environment within which we all live has changed. We have moved past the simple, celebratory, not especially well informed or reflective celebration of modernist and brutalist architecture that was common in the 2010s. A cultural moment which was a simple and unreflexive howl of rage at the impact of austerity after 2008.

Instead, as the works exhibited in *Horror in the Modernist Block* show, we are moving towards a far more diverse and interesting understanding of the modernist past and present. It is far from a straightforwardly condemnatory approach attacking modernism and its impact. Rather it melds exploration and critique of the alienating, sometimes brutalising effect of modernist architecture and planning, with the creation of new forms of mythology and folklore. This allows for viewers to understand and appreciate and modernism has been expressed similarly or differently around the world, as well as unearthing and retooling evergreen feminist critiques of aspects of town planning and modern building design.

The overall effect, as ever with good horror, whether gothic, body based, a slasher or a good old fashioned ghost story, is to suggest that style and buildings are not the real villains. Rather it is the people who design, maintain or otherwise use the built environment to prey upon and exploit others. Ultimately, the message that you take away from the uncanny former municipal gothic-cum-white cube modernist building that is IKON Gallery, is that the monsters are the public authorities, contractors and landlords who shape and dominate the urban realm in ways which are not in our interests.

[Horror in the Modernist Block](#) is on at IKON Gallery just off Brindley Place in central Birmingham until 1st May 2023, generally open 11:00-17:00 Tuesdays – Sundays.


Header photograph for this article is of Karim Kal's *Entourage 1, Lyon/La Guillotiere* as hung in the *Horror in the Modernist Block* Exhibition at IKON Gallery, Birmingham. Author's photo, all rights reserved (2022)



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