

The Jetsons Don't Live Here Anymore: Architecture of Isolation

Brendan Martin

Modern architecture began as a dream in the minds of men like Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe. Corbusier envisioned a utopia; clean, vertical, and above all, ordered. In the postwar period, their dream was taken up in every major city across the world, with Toronto being no exception. Low modernism was seen as a cheap, effective way to house the poor. Today, the image of the modern housing project has become synonymous with poverty, racial tension, and civil unrest. The 2005 riots in the New Towns of France were perhaps the ultimate expression of this.

In deciding to focus on the subject as my thesis, I began thinking about my own relationship to these structures; how I thought and felt about them. I also thought about how I wanted to photograph them, and how architecture affects us as people.

My own interest in the modern housing project began as a child. I remember being driven by my mother along the Don Valley Parkway, and marvelling at the towers perched along the edges of valley, surrounded by the forest below. To me, it seemed so futuristic. It's immediacy and clearness of vision was so appealing, as it must have been to the modernists of the CIAM. Today, I maintain a conflicted relationship with these structures. On one hand, 60 years of living with these complexes has taught us that they are not nice places to live. They are the sites of crime, poverty, and depression. Yet, I still find their ambitious nature compelling. There is a faded sense within these structures that we were reaching towards something better. Even though most of the photographs in the series are focused on architecture built without the ideals of Le Corbusier strictly in mind, there is still a trickle down effect which I believe comes through when looking at these buildings.

I focused on four areas of Toronto. Thorncliffe Park is a large, Tower In Park development along the Don Valley. Leaside Towers, its center piece, remain the tallest buildings in North York. The park setting of this area is its defining feature, and I photographed the buildings in way which placed them in this context. St. James Town is the opposite. The size and verticality of the apartments and the density of their arrangements create an imposing, monolithic space. The Don Mills corridor at the 401 is where the modern housing project meets its co-culprit – the car. Finally, Don Valley Town Homes is perhaps the ultimate expression of modernism which I saw. Each street looks exactly like the last. The houses identical, colour coded. Even the playground painted beige. But, like most modern housing projects, neglect and dilapidation have taken hold.

The photographs are both a formal and humanistic response. They portray distance, coldness, order, decay and entropy, and show the little human touches that manage to peek through. Bread skids strewn about for seemingly no reason. Buildings named after Canadian cities. Dead appliances, lines left in the snow by cars in a parking lot abandoned for the weekend. Plywood and plastic sheets rigged up on balconies to help trap heat in apartments, and always little bits of trash. All these things are remnants of how people live and relate to these spaces.

Faith in the modern housing project died in the 1960's and 70's. Nevertheless, they are still with us today, and will be for some time to come.