

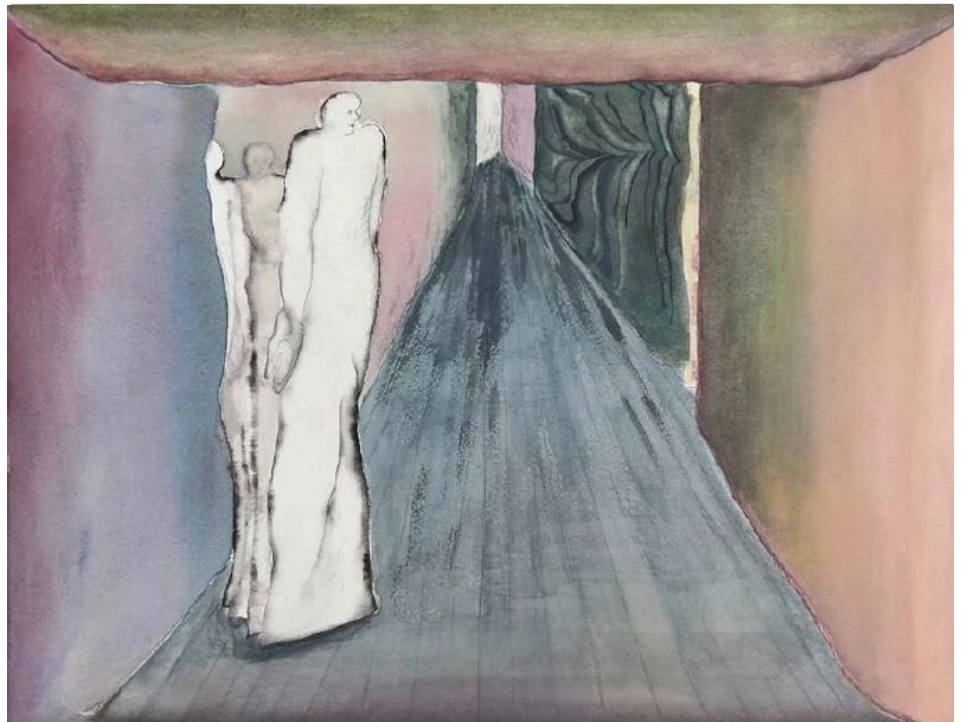
Review: Why villainy hangs out with modernist buildings



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Words: Pamela Buxton

From the obliteration of indigenous culture to urban alienation, *Horror in the Modernist Block* at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham explores how tension and anxiety co-opt 20th century architecture



Union by Firenze Lai (2022), from *Horror in the Modernist Block* at Ikon Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

Why is modernist architecture often associated with the horror genre? Is there something about its physical characteristics and aesthetics that make it ideal for feelings of suspense and dread? Or does the answer lie more in the contexts of the buildings, and the connotations that these might trigger, whether painful memories of harsh regimes, scenes of tragedies, or dashed hopes of a utopian future.

All this, and more, makes fertile territory for *Horror in the Modernist Block*, a new exhibition at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery featuring work by 20 contemporary artists from around the world.

It's not that surprising to learn from curator Melanie Pocock that the show had its origins during lockdown, when she explored the modernist architecture of the city on her exercise forays out of the house, and found it a 'ghostly presence' oddly devoid of normal activity. Around that time, in her conversations with artist Maria Taniguchi, the Philippines-based artist talked about her film *Mies 421*, set inside the famous 1929 German Pavilion recreated in Barcelona. While not a horror film in the conventional sense, this makes the most of the setting to create feelings of anticipation and anxiety using techniques familiar to the genre.

The idea clicked, and the resulting exhibition, which opens later this month, encompasses a range of responses from artistic disciplines including sculpture, film and photography. It promises to 'unpack' the troubled histories and legacies of modernist buildings, ranging widely through Brazilian modernism, housing estates on the periphery of French cities, modernism in Sudan and a South Korean housing block. Closer to home, Birmingham's famous Spaghetti Junction motorway interchange also features. Although the city's gone-but-not-forgotten Central Library by John Madin is not specifically referenced in the exhibition, it was certainly a reference point in many of Pocock's conversations with the participating artists.



The Cloud of Unknowing (2011) by Ho Tzu Nyen.

Talking ahead of the opening of the exhibition, she discussed the association of certain buildings with their

political backdrop, from the modernism of the Fascist era in Italy, to the brutalism of the authoritarian Marcos regime in the Philippines – in particular the Manila Film Center, where many workers died in a fatal accident during the fast-track construction. In contrast to these actual events, there's also the impact of how writers and filmmakers may have shaped perceptions of these buildings through their own, often dystopian visions.

'Fears about the future were projected onto the buildings,' says Pocock of writers such as J G Ballard, noting that 'art and film have a lot to answer for in creating this horrific image' of brutalism, most notably in the case of *A Clockwork Orange* and the Thamesmead estate.

Artists in the exhibition are, she says, taking a more critical position on modern architecture and its association with horror. Ola Hassanain tackles how British colonial architecture in her homeland Sudan came at the expense of indigenous culture, and laid the groundwork for later, Soviet-inspired architecture. Shezad Dawood's tapestry *The Directorate* focuses on the American-designed, now-empty modernist pool in the former US Consulate in Karachi, Pakistan. In the UK, the recent tragedy of the Grenfell Tower is the subject of Abbas Zahedi's *Exit Sign*. A manipulation of health and safety signage, this is shown in the stairwell, which is intended as a space for reflection and communal mourning.

Brazilian artist Ismael Monticelli found inspiration in the way Birmingham had reinvented itself post-war, which for him resonated with how Oscar Niemeyer had designed a new capital – Brasilia – around the same time. His wall installation *Spaghetti Junction* explores these parallels. Several artists explore materiality. Polish artist Monika Sosnowska manipulates the steels, concrete, rods and pipes used for foundations in her sculptures, while Simon & Tom Bloor have created sculpture in the form of furniture made from urban scraps.

Some touch on urban alienation. Hong Kong-based Firenze Lai's work suggests a deep sense of anxiety while Karim Kal's photographs capture hostile-looking passageways on housing estates in Paris.



Spaghetti Junction (2022) by Ismael Monticelli, referencing The National Congress of Brazil designed by Oscar Niemeyer.

Presented over two floors, the exhibition is designed to be suitably atmospheric, opening with a dark and empty film zone that sets the scene for two floors of exhibits. In the film area, four exhibits – including Taniguchi’s Mies 421 and NT’s film BRUTAL, shot on two modernist Birmingham estates – are projected consecutively on different walls. In addition to the artworks themselves, there is a display of images supplied by the artists as touch points for the show relating to architecture. These include Richard Hughes’s photos from his time skateboarding in Birmingham’s now redeveloped Paradise Circus close to the site of the Central Library. Amba Sayal-Bennett provided an image of Le Corbusier’s Palace of Assembly in Chandigarh, chosen as part of her interest in failed utopic project and the role of modernism in expressing their ideologies.

Pocock hopes that visitors to the exhibition will gain an understanding of the international breadth of modern architecture.

‘I’d want people to feel that horror isn’t just one thing, but is very different for different people in different cultures,’ she says, adding that she hopes people will feel

moved in quite an emotional way, and realise how much of a psychological effect the built environment can have on how we feel:

‘Often it takes art and exhibitions to heighten our awareness of these things.’