

Horror in the Modernist Block review: engaging and ‘insidiously unsettling’

Ikon Gallery exhibition explores how modernist buildings became ‘emblems of horror’



A still from Ho Tzu Nyen's film *The Cloud of Unknowing*

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Modernist architects were inspired by the “utilitarian dream” of building “machines for living”, said Skye Sherwin in [The Guardian](#). But their buildings would become the stuff of nightmares. By the 1970s, tower blocks and modernist housing schemes had become bleak symbols of “social breakdown”, used as settings for dystopian novels and horror films. In many other countries, meanwhile, modernism became a favoured style of authoritarian regimes.

This exhibition in Birmingham brings together the work of 20 contemporary artists who explore how modernist buildings became “emblems of horror” in the collective imagination. It takes the postwar

reconstruction of heavily bombed Birmingham itself as a starting point: in *Brutal*, a film by the artist NT, ominous music plays over night-time footage of the city's postwar housing blocks. The show features a mix of video, sculpture, conceptual art and photography: Karim Kal's photos, for instance, capture social housing on the outskirts of Lyon at night.

There's "much to recommend" this exhibition, said Will Wiles in [Apollo](#). Highlights include *Mies 421* (2010), a video by Maria Taniguchi that leads viewers around the dark and desolate spaces of Mies van der Rohe's landmark 1929 Barcelona Pavilion. Birmingham artist Richard Hughes contributes a giant sculpture resembling "a Calder-esque mobile", decorated with "lumps of broken concrete" and "a deflated space hopper"; it projects "an uneasy air of both pleasure and neglect".

Equally interesting is Sudanese-born artist Ola Hassanain's video work examining British and Soviet modernist influences on post-independence Khartoum. Closer to home, Ismael Monticelli fields an "absorbing" sculpture "decked with arcane symbols", in which Birmingham's notorious Spaghetti Junction interchange leads directly into Brasília, Brazil's "showpiece modernist capital".

Yet while the show is "often stimulating", its "cumulative effect never convinces". Its scope of reference is "too broad" and its arguments never really add up. Above all, it is curiously lacking in "atmosphere" – a prerequisite for an exhibition about horror.

Nevertheless, this is a "thought-provoking" show, said Alastair Sooke in [The Daily Telegraph](#). Roaming the world, it explores the dark underbelly of 20th century hopes and dreams: Shezad Dawood's

“eerie” tapestry depicts an abandoned modernist US embassy in Karachi, while a sculpture by Poland’s Monika Sosnowska resembles a “smashed-up fairground ride” – a “stark, frightening symbol of urban desolation”.

Abbas Zahedi provides a small but “distressingly powerful” piece – a “charred” and “inverted” exit sign that refers to the Grenfell Tower catastrophe. *Horror in the Modernist Block* may lack “cheap thrills”, but this is an engaging exhibition full of “insidiously unsettling” moments.