The Architecture of Repression: The Built Environment of George Orwell’s 1984

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In this year of Orwellian hype and futurist fantasy, much has been written concerning Big Brother and the Anti-Utopian State. The pessimistic image of an omnipotent government oppressing the individual and creating a society of mass conformity pervades every chapter of Orwell’s classic novel.

For many the re-reading of 1984 a generation after it had been an assigned text in some English or Political Science course has been an unsettling experience. The obvious drift towards a dehumanizing expansion of bureaucracies and the seemingly unquestioning commitment to the computer has reinforced some of our worst fears of a totalitarian society. The disillusioning realization is that 1984 was not a science fiction prophecy but a powerful warning of the danger to human freedom inherent in the use of technology to achieve and maintain political power.

The despair and fear which surround Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell’s novel, is made evident in his loss of individuality. This subjugation of the human spirit is manifested by Orwell in his depiction of the frightening techniques of mind control: from the ubiquitous posters of Big Brother with eyes that follow you, to the electronic eye of the telescreen which invades even the privacy of the bedroom.

The negative Utopia described in 1984 is one of the repression supported by a complex technology in the service of the State. But in Orwell’s dehumanized world it is not only the psychic environment that oppresses the individual but the physical environment as well. For the architecture of Orwell’s “future” function as a metaphor of totalitarian repression.

But how does Orwell conceive of the architecture of the built environment of Fictional London, chief city of Airstrip One? Interestingly, Orwell is quite specific in his description of the physical environment through which his characters move.

From the very first paragraph in which Winston Smith returns to his apartment, the author creates a stark and depressing setting characterized by an ill-functioning and delapidated structure. This first introduction to “Victory Mansions... old flats built in the 1930’s and... falling to pieces,” presents us with one half of a juxtaposition between the surviving architecture of the so-called pre-Revolutionary period and the monumentally scaled structures of the State bureaucracies.

The four Ministries of Truth, Peace, War and Plenty are described as similar in size and appearance. The Ministry of Truth, where Winston worked, was an “enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up terrace after terrace, three hundred meters into the air.” Its appearance suggested an impregnable fortress too strong to be stormed.

Orwell’s symbolic expression of a society controlled through its architecture is a continuing theme throughout the novel. The Ministry of Truth was said to contain “three thousand rooms above ground level and a corresponding ramification below.” This image of a subterranean complex where people worked in “long windowless halls, with a double row of cubicles...” characterizes not only the repressive society of the Orwellian future but sadly also describes the conditions of too many contemporary work environments. The technological advancements of the mid-20th century that made practical the hermetically sealed interior and its so-called controlled environment is simply another variation of repression.

In contrast to the Ledoux-like pyramids that towered over Orwellian London was the “vista of rotting houses, their sides shored up with balks of timber.” Orwell’s description of the general architectural condition of the city creates a visual image not far removed from the corrugated roofed shanty towns on the fringe of today’s Brazilia. For amidst the bombed out sites “had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings like chicken houses.” To Winston Smith, who shuttles between the rubble of the decaying city and the symbolic pyramids of the State, architecture became an analogy for power. For the Ministry was said to
... a dwarf, the surrounding architecture" just as Big Brother towers above the Party and the people. 9

Victory Mansion, the apartment house complex where Winston lived, seems remarkably similar to the worker housing projects built between the two World Wars. From the elevator which "... even in the best of times was seldom working," to the "heating system which was usually running at half steam," the utopian dream associated with Bauhaus design. Worker Housing has been transformed into a nightmare. Winston's lament of flaking plaster and burst pipes and the need to have even the simplest of repairs sanctioned by committee is a recurring echo of the failures associated with public housing projects.11

If there is one constant in the life of Winston Smith it is that of surveillance. From morning until night the "eyes" of Big Brother watched him. The instrument for this procedure was the telescreen, which Orwell described as "an oblong metal plaque like a dull mirror which formed part of the surface of the . . . wall." The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously, giving out Party information as well as observing every move of the individual. This fearsome invasion of personal privacy was not a science fiction fantasy that Orwell invented, for by the late 1940's the technology for such an instrument was already more than a decade old. One of the most startling exhibits at the New York World's Fair of 1939, "World of Tomorrow," was a video telephone which allowed for two-way visual communication. The Orwellian twist was that technology in the service of the State created an instrument that could not be turned off.

Winston's desire to escape the spying eyes of Big Brother led him to take a dangerous risk. And once again Orwell uses an architectural setting to symbolize an aspect of the oppressive State. When Winston enters the London district inhabited by the Proles, a subculture of Oceanian society, we find ourselves catapulted into the squalid condition of Victorian London tenements. It is here that Winston finds some relief from the constant surveillance of Big Brother. In a rented room "... in the vague, brown colored slum to the north and east of what had once been St. Pancras Station ..." Winston found a refuge from the automatont existence of the Party.

Orwell's description of this blighted area, with its cobbled streets of little two story houses was just as depressing as Victory Mansions. Yet the experience awakened in Winston "a sort of ancestral memory." Seated in an armchair beside an open fire, a vague feeling of nostalgia gripped Winston. In both its human scale and its assortment of Victorian furniture, Winston felt that this was a "... room meant to be lived in."

Another feature of Winston's secret room was a picture in rosewood frame which hung above the fireplace. It was a 19th century steel engraving of an oval building with rectangular windows and a small tower: St. Clement's Dane was the name of the building originally built as one of Wren's parish churches after the Great Fire of 1666. Although Winston recognized it as a still extant ruin not far from the Law Courts he had no way of knowing the history of the building in the Orwellian year of 1984. For since the Revolution, the State had systematically altered anything that might throw light upon the past. In Orwell's future "one could not learn history from architecture any more than one could learn from books . . . Anything large and impressive . . . was automatically claimed to have been built since the Revolution, while anything that was obviously of an earlier date was ascribed to some dim period called the Middle Ages. The centuries of capitalism were held to have produced nothing of value."17

Winston's discovery that the old engraving depicted a church led to an even more startling revelation that there existed in London many former churches, which had "... been put to other uses." Among the most dramatic examples was the great St. Martin's in-the-Fields which had been converted by the party into "... a museum . . . of propaganda," displaying such objects as "scale models of rocket bombs . . . and waxwork tableaux illustrating the enemy atrocities . . . ." Again, Orwell's depiction of the recycling of churches into Museums of the State is not a futuristic fantasy, but a clear reference to a contemporary campaign of the late 1940's being carried out by the government of the Soviet Union for the conversion of Eastern orthodox churches into State museums.20

The world of London in 1984 was one in which "the past had . . . been abolished. Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building renamed, every date has been altered. Anything that might throw light on the past has been repressed. History has stopped. Nothing exists except the endless present." Atop the enormous fluted column in what was once Trafalgar and had become Victory Square, Big Brother replaced Lord Nelson and a telescreen filled the pediment of the converted St. Martin's in-the-Field.

Late in the novel Winston's visit to the dwelling place of O'Brien offers a jarring contrast between the delapidated condition of Victory Mansion and the smoothly functioning structures of the Inner Party. Located in their own quarter of the city, the elite of the Party lived in huge blocks of spacious flats. The softly carpeted passageways with their cream papered walls and white wainscoating were exquisitely clean. The symbolic contrast between the faulty elevators of Winston's building and the "... silent and incredibly rapid lifts sliding up and down," in the towers of the Inner Party suggest that it was more than the color of one's overalls that distinguished one's position in the hierarchical society of 1984.

In Winston Smith's desperate grasp for freedom, he was betrayed by the very man he thought shared his hatred for Big Brother. For it was the Inner Party member O'Brien who had given him Goldstein's subversive book. Orwell's device of a book within a book allowed the author to create an historical context for 1984. It is Goldstein's words that describe the chaotic pre-Revolutionary period before the establishment of the State. It is also through Goldstein that we learn "that the imaginary future to which people . . . (of) the early 20th century aspired was a vision of a society unbelievably rich, leisureed, orderly and efficient. Set in an architectural ambiance of . . . glittering antiseptic structures . . . of glass and steel and snow white concrete and predicated on the continuing development of science and technology."23 The
The control of the State depended on the falsification of the past and the subjugation of the human spirit. In a world in which "nothing was your own except the few centimeters inside your skull", individuality had to be abolished. The architecture of such a world, whether the surviving relics of the 1930's or the pristine architecture a linkage to the past. To Winston the concept of worker housing to the company towns of the Industrial Revolution which he contends were designed to keep the residents under company control. He goes on to suggest that the mass worker housing settlements (Siedlungen) designed in the twenties and thirties had a similar controlling effect and become most popular in the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy.

The calculated rejection of the past and of all historical association in architecture is strongly reminiscent of the writing of the Italian Futurist Antonio Sant'Elia. In his Messaggio of 1914 Sant'Elia asserted that the architecture of the future must abolish "... the discipline of historical styles" and substitute designs created for a "... scientific and technological culture. See Curtis, op.cit., p. 73.

At the end of the novel, Winston, and his lover Julia are arrested in their secret hiding place by the Thought Police who have been observing them from a hidden telescreen, ironically placed behind the rosewood framed engraving of the Wrenian church. Brought to the ominous fortress of the Ministry of Love, Winston begins a long period of personal humiliation. Imprisoned within the windowless labyrinth Winston is unable to tell if he was high up near the roof or many meters underground. It is within this hermetically sealed interior, as repressive and degrading as any of the techniques of brainwashing, that Winston finally breaks down. However, even at the moment of the Party's triumph over the individual we are aware of a fatal flaw in the State's attempt to destroy the past. For Winston had already realized that only in "a solid object with no words attached" could history survive. For there exists in architecture a linkage to the past. To Winston the "pale-colored pleasure of identifying St. Martin's church" meant that history was not stopped and although the church had been recycled for the use of the repressive State the continuity of architectural style as a document of history continued to exist.

Notes
2 ibid. p. 21 Orwell's description of Victory Mansions as a multi-level housing complex built in the thirties strongly suggests the "water-down version of modern architecture" which was constructed in England before the outbreak of World War II. Lubetkin and Tecton's High Point I flats, High gate (1933-35), an eight story concrete apartment building derived "from both LeCorbusier and Soviet collective housing of the twenties," may have been Orwell's model. See Curtis, William J. R. Modern Architecture Since 1980 Prentice-Hall Inc. (Englewood Cliffs) 1983, p. 225.
5 Orwell, op.cit. p. 7.
6 ibid. p. 38.
7 Orwell, op.cit. p. 7.
8 ibid. p. 7. The shanty town squatter settlements of Brazil are called favelas. Rapid growth of the favelas occurred in the thirties with a sudden influx of low income people into urban centers. The dwellings of the favelas are often primitive one-room hovels and are often shared by pigs, goats and chickens. See Evenson, Norma Two Brazilian Capitols Yale University (New Haven and London) 1973, p. 20-23.
9 ibid. p. 8. The massive fortress-like appearance of the Ministries seem associated with the monumental architecture employed by totalitarian regimes between the two World Wars. In Italy, Germany and Russia the architecture of the State was meant to be a reinforcement of nationalist sentiment. Both in its overwhelming scale and disciplined repetition of motifs government architecture became a symbol of the power of the State. See Curtis op.cit., p. 211.
10 ibid. p. 21.
11 Blake, Peter Form Follows Fiasco Little Brown and Company (Boston/Toronto) 1977, p. 121-132. In Blake's polemic chapter entitled "The Fantasy of Housing" he links the concept of worker housing to the company towns of the Industrial Revolution which he contends were designed to keep the residents under company control. He goes on to suggest that the mass worker housing settlements (Siedlungen) designed in the twenties and thirties had a similar controlling effect and became most popular in the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy.
12 Orwell, op.cit. p. 6.
13 The communication section of the 1939 New York World's Fair "dealt with effects of modern communication...as a socializing force." One of the exhibits was an experimental "television-telephone" which had been developed in the 1930's. The perfection of the cathod ray tube which made possible electronic visual transmission was first utilized by the British Broadcasting Corporation in November of 1936. The picture was viewed by reflection in a mirror placed above the mechanical console. See Harrison, Helen Dawn of a New Day The New York World's Fair, 1939—1940 New York University Press (New York, London) 1980, p. 82-83.