**Eulogy for the Ugly**

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**“Modernity certainly does not have to be characterized by ugliness, but we may well have to make some revisions in our standards of beauty.”**

**—Edward J. Logue**

At a lecture in Chicago of 1882, Oscar Wilde remarked on the Chicago Water-Works Tower of 1869, terming it “a castellated monstrosity with pepper-boxes stuck all over it.”[[1]](#footnote-2) A century later, Prince Charles famously railed against a proposed modern extension to London’s National Gallery, calling it a "monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Mark Twain is said to have described the State, War, and Navy Building (later the Old Executive Office Building) in Washington, D.C. as the ugliest building in the country, a sentiment later echoed by Harry S. Truman when he reportedly referred to the building—though in fondness—as “the greatest monstrosity in America.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Its architect, Alfred B. Mullett, committed suicide two years after the building opened in 1888, perhaps in part due to the structure’s dismal reception.

Monstrosities are generally thought of as ugly, looming horrors in urgent need of removal from our cities and landscapes. This all-too-pervasive label has led to repeated patterns of demolition and rebuilding, particularly when it comes to concrete masterworks from the 1960s and 1970s. Our own advocacy surrounding Boston’s concrete modernism—an era we prefer to call Heroic rather than Brutalist—has seen the term monstrosity invoked across social and traditional media formats, particularly used as a line of attack against monumental civic complexes like Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles’ Boston City Hall or Paul Rudolph’s Government Service Center.[[4]](#footnote-5) Our research on concrete modernism began in response to the proposal of Boston’s former mayor, Thomas Menino, to sell (or demolish) Boston City Hall. We felt an urgent call to expand the discourse around a generation of buildings that was widely disparaged and poorly understood. Other cities have already lost or may soon lose exceptional buildings of the era because they are currently unloved and dismissed as monstrous by those who would seek to remove them.

Monstrosity appears to be a favorite word for those who wish to bully and belittle architecture into obscurity and onto a demolition list, in the more alarming cases. The discussion of concrete has been hard to wrest apart from the idea of monstrosity within contemporary debates. Google’s definition of the word—not once, but twice—uses *concrete* architecture as an example of such a monstrous presence (are there really no stone or steel monstrosities today?) and lists equally offensive synonyms such as: eyesore, blot on the landscape, excrescence, horror. Monstrosity has been used by previous generations to describe Victorian architecture, French Second Empire buildings, and many other styles seen as outmoded at the time.[[5]](#footnote-6) In order to survive, even the best of these buildings navigated the perils of what we call the ugly valley, the nadir of public taste that occurs around forty to sixty years of age when architecture is not quite new enough to be in good repair nor old enough to be valued as historic. Our contempt for this system of cyclical destruction should give pause when these buildings are rashly judged as unsightly or alien.

The following pages include some examples from the most recent course of this cycle of derision leading to destruction. These haunting images show an architecture once praised, yet a half-century or so later, now at its most vulnerable and vilified to the point of demolition. Suspended between life and death, these buildings remind us not only of the power that architecture can possess upon its inception, but also of the forces that conspire against it when it is judged as old, out-of-shape, obsolete, or ugly.

Some monstrosities may be getting a reprieve. The Supreme Court of Vermont ruled in 2017 that it is not illegal for works of architecture to be ugly. This brings us hope. Ugliness is not merely in the eye of the beholder; rather it is subject to fickle forces that change over time. Preservationists often argue that buildings face their greatest risk near their fiftieth anniversary—the end of their first useful life—when many require significant investment to maintain or appear out of step with changing aesthetics and functional needs. Concrete modernism is only the latest era of building to face these dangers. Sadly, the rush to judgment appears to be speeding up. Marcel Breuer’s Atlanta-Fulton Central Public Library (1980) and Michael Graves’ Portland Building (1982) have both been considered for demolition well before reaching their fortieth year of use (after considerable pushback from the preservation community, Breuer’s building now appears to be safe, but Graves’ is being insensitively reclad).

If there is a lesson in the disfigurement and demolition of concrete masterworks, we do not believe it lies in exposing or punishing the hubris of the generation that created them. Rather, the current wave of destruction speaks to our own pessimism, the weakness of our potential building legacy, and our lack of patience to supersede the cycle of ugliness and make these monstrosities our own.

1. “Oscar Wilde: The Esthetic Apostle Greeted by an Immense Audience. Chiefly Drawn to Central Music-Hall by a Marked Curiosity. ‘The Chicago Water-Works Tower a Castellated Monstrosity.’ ‘Only an Oriental Beauty Can Wear the Sunflower.’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 14, 1882: 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. HRH The Prince of Wales, “Speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Royal Gala Evening at Hampton Court Palace,” May 30, 1984, https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-150th-anniversary-royal-institute-british-architects-riba-royal-gala*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. While Truman’s statement is often dated to 1958, in response to the proposed demolition of the building under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the quote appears not to have been published in national newspapers before 1965. See Wolf Von Eckardt, “Let's See Those Gilded Sights,” *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1965: G8; Louise Hutchinson, “Washington’s ‘Grand Old Lady’ to Have Her Face Lifted: 21 Millions to Be Spent on Beauty Job,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 1966: A4. An appearance of the Twain quote is Hugh A. Mulligan, “On The Street Where They Live,” *The Sun*, March 17, 1963: E1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Mark Pasnik, Michael Kubo, and Chris Grimley, *Heroic: Concrete Architecture and the New Boston* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Terry Kirk, “Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentality,” *Perspecta 40: Monster* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 6–15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)