

COLONIAL MODERNISM IN CAPE TOWN

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INTRODUCTION

The promise of modernism: that it would provide a better life for all -was not to be the case in the colonial context of Cape Town in South Africa. It reticently adopted modernism for mass housing projects aimed at moving people of colour from the city and located them on the periphery. These enabled planners to engage in ambitious modernist planning schemes in the late Forties for the city that were linked to an extensive land reclamation scheme.

This paper highlights the manner in which modernism was used in Cape Town as a mechanism for controlling marginalised communities.

THE COLONIAL CONTEXT

Lying close to the southernmost point of the African continent, Cape Town started out as a victualling post of the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) in the mid-seventeenth century. By the end of that century it had grown to become a thriving settlement. This growth continued throughout the eighteenth century, gradually expanding beyond the rectilinear grid that was laid out by the VOC. By the beginning of the nineteenth century it had begun to stretch up the sides of the eponymous Table Mountain, with a string of farming settlements to the east along the Liesbeek River. The balance lay between Table Bay, as a busy port for shipping between Europe and the East- Dutch settlements in Indonesia being the main link - and the farming hinterland. But by the end of the eighteenth century the VOC was bankrupt and in the period of gradual collapse of this merchant empire, the British briefly occupied the Cape for the first time. They were ousted in the early nineteenth century, but returned again in 1806 to establish the Cape as British territory, to be known as the Cape Colony, with Cape Town as its capital and chief city.

The nineteenth century saw considerable further growth of the city. The development of a railway line in the 1860s, that linked the city to the naval port of Simon's Town to the south, led to the growth of a string of suburbs along the railway line. These hugged the side of the mountain and did not move out onto the so-called Cape Flats that was open, sandy, windswept and dotted with low-lying salt marshes that were subject to winter flooding.

In the nineteenth century, a hierarchy based on race (as had existed under the Dutch) was to be strengthened and reinforced, laying down the framework for the 'apartheid' policies of the mid-twentieth century. The indigenous population formed a completely subordinate class against whom all manner of prejudices and preconceptions were held. At the Cape the so-called Coloureds were seen as an intermediate grouping who held a position above that of the Africans- but below that of the Whites.

These relationships always had a spatial fix in terms of people's residential spaces in the city, although there was a great deal more mixing, particularly among the poorer classes and this was generally tolerated in the nineteenth century. The outbreak of the Anglo- Boer War in 1899 marks the end of this period. As the war dragged on into the new century, a new threat emerged- one that had swept the rest of the world at the close of the nineteenth century- plague. The city responded to the threat by using the Public Health Act of 1897 to move Africans, from the working class area called 'District Six' to a camp set up by the colonial government at *Uitvlugt* forest station, forming the basis for the segregated settlement of *N'dabeni*. This was established in terms of the Locations Act of 1901, which is significant in that it was the first act in South Africa to legislate for racially segregated 'townships'. The township was to remain until after the outbreak of the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. It is once again symptomatic of the form of colonial modernism that took hold at the Cape in place of an ad hoc social discrimination that had been part of the earlier colonial phase. Issues of health, central to programmatic modernism, were used as instruments of social engineering.

MOVING TOWARDS MODERNISM

1918 marked the beginning of a period of change. On the one hand relief at the ending of the Great War was tempered by the outbreak of the Spanish Flu epidemic. The death toll was horrific and the city looked once again very carefully at issues around public health. In addition, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution created concern about the conditions and the attitude of the workers in the city. Slums were seen to take on a more sinister role as potential breeding places for unrest and uprisings.

The new architecture of central Cape Town in 1918 was still stylistically characterised by the Baroque Revival of the Edwardian period architects such as Sir Herbert Baker and the so-called 'Baker School'. This reflected the architectural style of cities of the British Empire world-wide and locates the prevailing architectural discourse in the city within the context of contemporary, essentially British, architectural developments.

But Modernism and the development of an avant-garde Modern Movement had, by the early 1920s, swept through Europe, and was reflected in the teachings of schools of architecture as exemplified by the Bauhaus in Germany; and in the architectural output of many European architects. (Colquhoun 2005) In Cape Town the reaction to modernism was considerably more reticent than elsewhere in South Africa and it was not until the late Thirties that it was taken up with enthusiasm. But the perceived threat of inner city slums eventually led to the use of modernist design for housing projects for people other than the white elite.

HOUSING AS A METHOD OF CONTROLLING THE MARGINALISED

After the First World War, the South African economy improved and another wave of urbanisation began. This resulted in overcrowding in both District Six, often the first place of call of new arrivals, and ultimately, in areas such as *N'dabeni*.

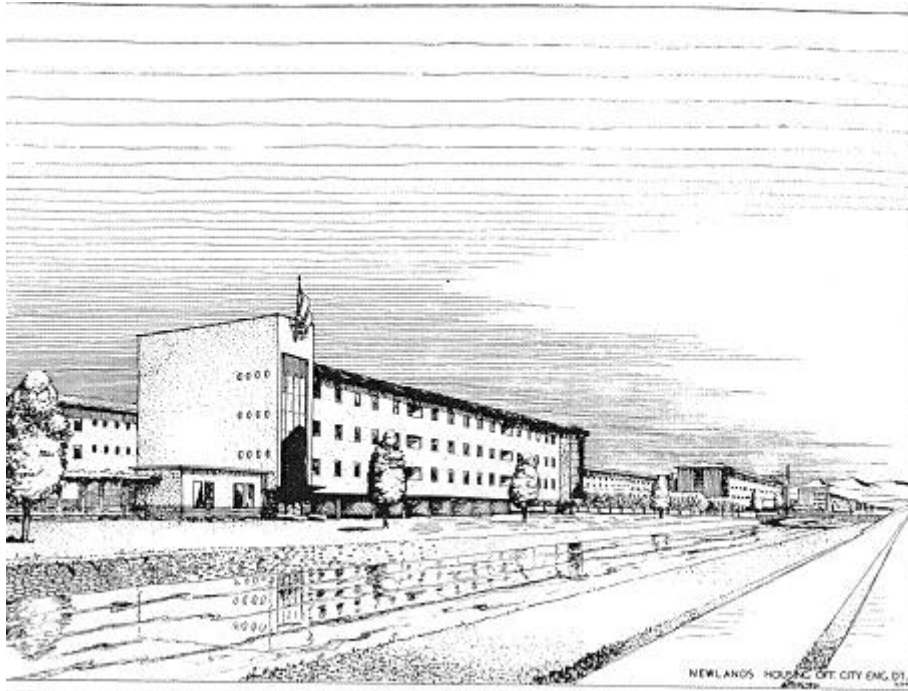
In 1919 the City Council had been asked by the Union government to take control over the township, but they were unwilling to take this on with little prospect of financial assistance from the government. Instead, they proposed building a new township that would also allow the land at *N'dabeni* to be used to meet the increasing demand for industrial land. The government granted the council 400 morgen of land at *Uitvlugt* in 1922 for the establishment of the new location. A Native Townships Committee recommended that the location should include both barracks for male migrant workers and married quarters for town residents. There was opposition to the proposed development both from within the City Council as well as among Cape Town residents, but this opposition was based on racist concerns rather than humanitarian grounds.

The location at Langa, as the township was known, was planned by the same town planner responsible for Pinelands Garden Suburb in the city, an Englishman - Albert Thompson. It incorporated elements of the Garden City town-planning model, first piloted in the design of Pinelands- an exclusively white residential development promoted under the aegis of Richard Stuttaford, founder of the successful eponymous department store in Cape Town. Stuttaford's actions had also been a response to the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. The scheme as executed was to receive critical acclaim. But not only was the periphery of the city being redefined -the city itself was undergoing a metamorphosis, with the momentum of change picking up in the late Twenties before the stock market collapse in 1929.

The essential characteristic of Langa, despite the subsequent adoption of modernist design principles, was the acceptance of the principle as laid down by the Stallard Commission of 1922 that Africans were only temporary urban residents. Any family life was to be discouraged- families were to remain in rural areas- while men were accommodated in hostel blocks. Racism remained the underlying concern in the design of the hostels. The temporary nature of African urban residence is highlighted in the comment in journal *The Architect, Builder & Engineer*.

The estate has been laid out as far as possible on town planning lines, and with the idea that in the future the natives may possibly be cleared away and this may become an extension of the suburbs of Cape Town. It is a very beautiful site and it is a great pity that it has to be used for such a purpose.

(Architect, Builder & Engineer Nov 1924:27)



So-called 'Bachelor Quarters' at Langa Township- 1939

A strange pride was expressed about the position and layout of this 'model' township. This attitude remained in the somewhat parochial comments that were made in the architectural press and highlights the concept of the Colonial 'Other' both in the sentiments about living practices of Africans as well as a smug sense of doing their civic duty.

From the 1930s housing at Langa was always in short supply. The emphasis on the provision of single quarters in the first phase had made the forced removal of residents from the area known as *N'dabeni* difficult, as there was nowhere to accommodate them and there were inadequate funds for new building. This was coupled with an official reluctance to allow the permanently settled African population to expand. Growth of the Coloured sections of the predominantly 'White' suburbs was similarly contained. This was partly as a result of the housing schemes, which were being built for the poor of all races, and partly caused by the policy that all residents of an area could use local schools. The way to overcome this 'problem' was to create new Coloured housing areas at a distance from the white suburbs.

The Slums Act of 1934 gave the Medical Officer of Health sweeping powers to expropriate property that he deemed to be a health risk. (Jeppie 2001:118) Slum owners would be served notices to repair their property or have the occupants evacuated. This happened to Coloured tenants, but never to Whites. 'Slums' and 'Coloureds' as Shamil Jeppie points out were almost interchangeable terms. In fact, the slumlords were very largely white. Large areas of District Six and the Bo Kaap were expropriated by the City Council in the years between 1935 and 1945.

The newly established 'Coloured' dormitory suburbs on the Cape Flats were also part of the new plan for the city and followed German models such as those designed in Frankfurt.

Ernst May's modernist planning proposal for Frankfurt was based on the concept of the *Trabantenstadt*, or satellite city, which consists of a core surrounded by a series of satellites (*trabanten*). It creates a system of spatial hierarchy and functional segregation that is based on the English planner Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model. These satellites appeared, as some critics suggested, floating in space to become what the Italian theorist Manfredo Tafuri (as cited in Heynen 1999: 52) describes as "islands" in an "anti-urban utopia." These negative characteristics were to be part of the defining elements of the post-war segregated cities of South Africa, and identifiable in modern Cape Town. Don Pinnock describes these open spaces in Cape Town that separated the new suburbs as buffer strips that were not "the new

playgrounds of the urban proletariat but the horizontal walls of a defensive city.” (Pinnock 1991: 159)

The architecture of the *Neue Frankfurt*, Heynen asserts, “lacks a number of salient features that are fundamental to the work of other avant-garde architects. Flexibility, mobility and dynamism, for instance- essential elements in Giedion’s concept of modern architecture- do not predominate there.” (Heynen: 64) Since there was not any intention to destroy the old but rather to create juxtaposition between old and new, nor is there any radicalisation of modernity, but rather a desire to build as much as possible within the shortest time, Heynen identifies this as a characteristic of programmatic modernism. The architecture of Cape Town’s housing projects mediates between programmatic requirements and site. Possibly, the economic constraints of the projects led to a ‘purer’ form of modernism being applied. The schemes were clearly part of a comprehensive strategy for planning the city. The strategies for the implementation of the housing schemes were extensions of social and political domination by spatial control of people by the city. Whether the architects were consciously part of the process or merely the instruments is hard to say from the available evidence. They appear to be applying norms that had been used in more egalitarian societies, but as Bozdoğan (2001) points out, architectural form does not necessarily reflect only one political ideology. That the forms and layouts adopted make access, visibility and observation easier is apparent. Was this intentional or inherent in the design decisions taken? They seem to reflect a *Zeitgeist* that placed society above the individual, and the State above society. Individual identity is subservient to the needs of the authorities.

In 1927 Bishop Lavis, the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, expressed concern about the living conditions of the poor who were condemned to live in squalor, particularly in the inner city areas such as District Six and the so-called ‘Malay Quarter’ or *Bo Kaap*. District Six was a mixed residential area with White, Coloured and African people living in the same area. They were all characterised by the fact that they were poor, and this posed a threat to the City authorities beyond any humanitarian concerns about the well being of the citizenry. There was a concern Growth of the urban poor came from all sides. Immigration from Eastern Europe and Italy was supplemented by the influx of poorer Afrikaners. The latter moved to the cities in great numbers following the failure of agriculture and the displacement of tenant farmers. Their numbers gave cause for concern to the Government and policies were put in place to deal with the so-called ‘Poor White Question’. Part of this was to offer incentives to industry so that industrial growth could provide work opportunities to these often-unskilled people.

THE SLUM PROBLEM

There was a constant complaint in the late 1920s and early 1930s about the inadequacy of existing legislation in dealing with the slum conditions in the cities of South Africa. The Minister for Health, in recognising the call of municipalities, promulgated the Slums Act No. 53 of 1934, which gave the Medical Officers of Health sweeping powers to expropriate property that they deemed to be a health risk. (Jeppie: 118) Slum owners would be served notices to repair their property, reduce the number of residents or face having the occupants evacuated. The legislation set out the process with rights of appeal. In cases of overcrowding it was required that the occupiers had to agree amongst themselves who would move out and lodge a list of these occupiers with the Council. The slumlords were very largely White. Jeppie gives examples of people who owned as many as 400 properties, with 20% of these falling into District Six. (Jeppie: 118) Large areas of District Six and the *Bo Kaap* were expropriated by the City Council in the years between 1935 and 1945. The City Council had used civic authority to demolish the overcrowded Well Square in District Six in 1932 after calls in the newspaper that:

“it is high time we awoke from our civic slumbers and got busy sweeping before our own doors with relentless brooms and at any cost” (Jeppie: 117)

The array of housing legislation was used in Cape Town to implement the City Council’s policy with regard to the identification, classification and rehousing of the city’s poor. James C. Scott (1998) and Edward Soja (1989) both draw attention to the modernist programme of

dealing with the poor of the world in a much more comprehensive way than had ever been undertaken before. Poverty, ethnic difference and slums represented a threat to a controlled colonial society. The legislation rendered visible the problems of the city's slum areas and, furthermore, created environments where the poor were either clearly visible, for example in the inner city schemes with their open spaces, easy access and hence controllable spaces; or removed to separate areas, isolated from the White populace and thus like Foucault's leper, identified and excluded. The first level of the process of control was the dehumanisation of the problem. Thus, in the late 1920s, there is a call for "comprehensive housing schemes for various Classes". (Housing & Estates Committee minutes: 30 Aug.1927)

The people who are possibly more concerned with the poor as people rather than merely statistics are groups such as the Citizens' Housing League. The League was strongly opposed to the erection of 'tenement buildings'. "The feeling is universal among the poor. Privacy, individuality and home feeling cannot be obtained except in a separate house." In greater Cape Town they pointed out "there is no argument by reason of scarcity of land, either for tenements or terraces", adding, "if a Scheme is set forth which will remedy present evils, responsible opinion here, as in England, would allow a reasonable sub-economic element in such a scheme." (Housing & Estates Committee minutes: 22 September 1927) This point of view recalls Heidegger's view of the dwelling as a utopian rural structure, inextricably linked to the concept of *heimat* or home.

This was to be the thrust of the proposals considered for Cape Town, with the aforementioned Garden City model as the preferred housing mode for all sections of the inhabitants. There was at first no support for any other form of dwelling despite the recognition that this could not be achieved in the inner city areas.

The evidence suggests that the Slums Act was not as effective a tool as the Council had imagined it to be in the elimination of overcrowding and slums. There was now a perceived need to tackle a much more comprehensive planning exercise that would create a modern city unencumbered with the problems of the past. These views, calling for a more comprehensive way of dealing with slums reiterates the views of Le Corbusier. Scott indicates the attitude of Corbusier who condemned the 'misery, confusion,' rot', 'decay', 'scum' and 'refuse' that he believed needed to be overcome. He regarded the slum inhabitants as "a dead weight on the city, an obstacle, a black clot of misery, of failure, of human garbage." He objected to the lack of discipline of these people, which he regarded as being against nature, which was all discipline. He was also concerned about the potential revolutionary threat posed by these people. Scott says that Corbusier understood, as Haussmann had, that crowded slums were and had always been an obstacle to efficient policing. He goes on to say, "Le Corbusier proposed to clear the decks completely and replace the centre of Haussmann's city with one built with control and hierarchy in mind." (Scott:115) Foucault's description of panopticism is the underlying order of the modern city as proposed by the modernist vision of Le Corbusier.

It is clear that the agenda of the City was to overcome both overcrowding and racial mixing; characteristic of the inner suburbs, by establishing cheaply planned settlements on the Cape Flats, well away from White residents. The Provincial Administrator Fourie, in examining Cape Town's housing proposals for an area adjacent to Maitland Garden Suburb did not like

The scattering of non-Europeans from one end to the other of the city (which) was not in the best interests of Cape Town...The City should be completely zoned... so that certain sections should be set apart as European areas, others as Non-European areas and areas where noxious trades might be established."

(Housing & Estates Committee Minutes: 10 May 1928)

This, *de facto*, creates the model of an ethnically segregated city that was to be reinforced in 1950 by the Group Areas Act. As part of the concept of ethnic segregation between sub-economic housing schemes and White housing, Bokmakierie, Bridgetown, Silvertown, Gleemoor, and Alicedale were laid out on the Cape Flats in the mid 1930s.(Bickford- Smith et al:149) Rylands and Belgravia townships followed in 1936.(Housing & Estates Committee minutes 15 June 1936) These were all intended as segregated suburbs for Coloured residents, removed from the slum areas of the city. They were primarily dormitory suburbs, consisting solely of 'cottages' at this time, although flats were built during the war years.

But the most significant implementation of a modern architectural approach was in the field of housing, in Cape Town as in Europe, and, interestingly enough, on a much broader scale as housing was not the focus of the Transvaal Group of architects whose interest in houses remained with the elite of their cities.



Q-Town Housing scheme based on Corbusian principles

From the late 1920s on, the City Council had started to look at potential sub-economic housing sites both in the City and on the Cape Flats. A number of inner city sites were proposed, but they were, in the main, small parcels of land and not adequate for the large scale housing projects that the Central Housing Board wanted. Of the three slum areas that both Council and media attention had been focussed on, only the two inner city housing schemes were carried out in the 1930s. They were the Bloemhof Flats adjacent to Canterbury Square, and the Schotsche Kloof Flats. No other schemes were carried in the inner city. Other housing projects were developed on the Cape Flats and in Kalk Bay. Of these, the divergence of approach taken is remarkable. The Kalk Bay Flats are designed in an extremely conservative way along 'traditional' lines. The Q-Town scheme was the most ambitious modernist scheme undertaken and it is clear that all the modernist precedents were applied to the scheme, which, alongside the Foreshore Plan of 1947 mark the high water of early modernist planning in Cape Town.



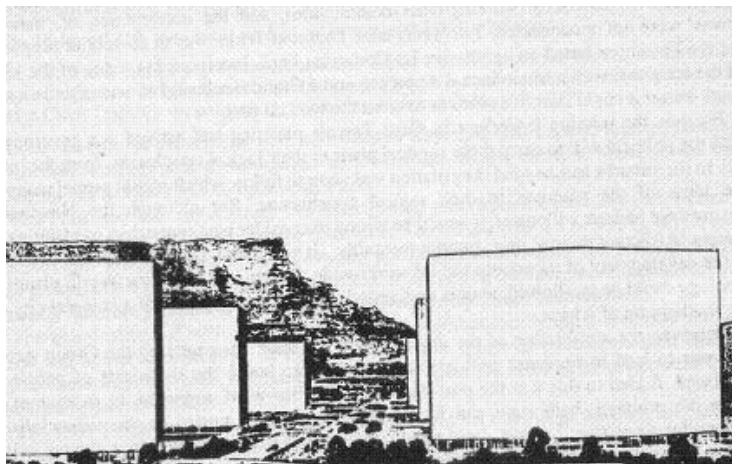
The Schotsche Kloof Housing Scheme of 1939-1942

THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THE FORESHORE



Cape Town harbour seen in 1939 from the pier

The Cape Town that emerged at the end of the Second World War was no longer a colonial town, but an industrialised city. The replanning of the city had been a matter of debate for more than a decade. The Government, through the agency of the Railways and Harbours ministry had begun to reclaim a significant area of the Table Bay as it created a new dry dock. The negotiation with the city was protracted. The outcome was a new Town Planning Scheme known as the Foreshore Scheme, which was approved in 1947 and set out the framework of an ambitious new modernist city. It had however dealt with the issues that face all expanding cities in a way that reflected the lack of a political and moral will to consider the impact of growth and change on its populace in an egalitarian manner. Instead, it firmly laid the foundations of segregation and set the stage for the political changes that followed the coming to power of the National Party under the leadership of Dr. D.F. Malan in 1948.



Proposed design for Cape Town presented at a Town planning conference in 1943

The South African-born British town planner, Lord Holford, in a speech made in Cape Town in 1956, described the city as having been 'infected' by the diseases of modern city planning, including monumentality and cutting the city off from the sea. Bickford-Smith et al (1999) claimed that this monumentality was "*both the aesthetic and political product of twentieth century 'modernism'*" (Bickford-Smith, van Heyningen, & Worden, 1999:144).

By 1930, the Government department of Railways and Harbours had begun with the creation of a new dry dock and at the same time there are proposals for a new Foreshore Scheme. Initially this considered the existing land only but by 1937 it became clear that the new dry docks would result in a significant land reclamation project, which would add significant new land to the city. The new land would be in the hands of the government and would result in a political tussle to gain control over the development of this area. This took more than a decade to resolve with proposals and counter proposals being made.

The new professor of architecture at the University of Cape Town, Leonard Thornton White (formerly the deputy director of the AA in London), as well as the British planner F. Longstreth Thompson was appointed as advisers on the master plan. The city engaged a French planner, E. E. Beaudouin, who was given special leave by the French Army to take up his appointment. His French Parisian background made him conjure up the ideals of Baron Haussmann and he thought that Cape Town 'lay on one of the pivotal points of the world's (sea) routes' which gave it a very special value among the sentinel towns of the globe. (Bickford Smith et al 1999:150) he went on to suggest that as the Mother City its status should be expressed in a monumental approach.

Cape Town has two approaches- by sea and land- the lines of approach being at right angles to each other... The Monumental Approach from the sea- the 'Gateway to South Africa' (The Cape Town Foreshore Scheme 1947: 40)¹ and the monumental approach by land the Grand Boulevard. The design proposed demolishing the City Hall and replacing it with 'a new Civic Centre of which a new City Hall would be an important element' (Foreshore Scheme: 55) The proposal lay down quite clearly that the architectural idiom of the new work would be modern.

"An even more serious difficulty may arise over the establishment of the architectural idiom to which buildings must conform. Although the modern movement in architecture has, for the most part, ended the rather misguided predilection for clothing modern structures in the stylistic trappings of earlier architectural periods long gone by, the modern idiom itself is still in the process of crystallization; in fact, the continuous re-examination of its aesthetic tenets is a sign of its vitality and readiness to face new problems as they arise".

(CT Foreshore Scheme: 106)



Artist's perspective of the Foreshore Scheme-1947

The Foreshore scheme, significantly, provided a *tabula rasa* in keeping with le Corbusier's modernist approach of sweeping away the old form of the city and enabling a modern city to rise in its stead. Here was a new city with all the portent of Edinburgh's New Town of the

¹ "It has been the aim and object of the planning to give tangible form to the Prime Minister's wish that the Foreshore Plan should provide a dignified gateway not only to Cape Town, but to the whole of South Africa. In achieving this objective, a balance has had to be struck so that the Foreshore should not be planned in such a grandiose manner that it would be out of harmony with existing Cape Town and the great mountain amphitheatre setting." (The Cape Town Foreshore Scheme 1947: 59)

eighteenth century. Town planning would allow Cape Town to adopt the mantle of modernism on a scale undreamt of anywhere else in South Africa. The Grand Boulevard that swept to the east destroyed the fabric of the working class District Six, but this was seen as a benefit for the city as it would remove the blot of 'slumdom' from the city that had blighted it from the nineteenth century. The slum inhabitants had no voice and modernist planning had also provided the means for their displacement from the city.

Thus modernism as a colonial legacy in Cape Town, as in many parts of Africa, was used as a mechanism of control and displacement. It failed to provide a more humane living environment and became instead synonymous with loss of identity and dignity. It led to vast dormitory developments across South Africa that bred crime and fear. The challenge for many African countries today is to find ways of healing the scars of the misplaced use of modernism.

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