

**Remarks Presented by Jack S. Nyman, Director
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at

**Greening Modernism:
*How a Defining 20th-Century Movement Can Advance
Sustainability Goals and Enrich Our Quality of Life***

February 17, 2011

Good morning. I'm Jack Nyman, director of the Steven L. Newman Real Estate Institute at Baruch College, CUNY, the sponsor of this conference. We're proud to co-host it with the American Institute of Architects.

It's a particular pleasure to welcome you all, because this conference holds tremendous personal meaning for me. I am schooled as an architect. I'm a lover of Modernism. I'm a fan of Carl Stein's – the author of the book, [*Greening Modernism: Preservation, Sustainability, and the Modern Movement*](#), from which this conference takes its name. I'm immersed in projects related to sustainability. I'm dismayed by how rapidly environmental damage is accumulating and by how slowly we're progressing toward sustainability goals.

The Newman Institute has hosted many conferences, but this is the first one related to the publication of a major book. *That's how important we think this book is.* We wanted to share its messages and also to convene experts to explore its implications for their own fields and discuss how their work relates to it.

As you look through the bios in the conference program, you'll see that Carl Stein is speaking in the company of similarly talented professionals. Michael Adlerstein, Bruce Fowle, Sean Neill, Bill Woods, Margery Perlmutter, Kevin Healy, and Tony Vidler are *all* working at the very top – and at the cutting edge – of their fields. We're going to benefit from a great deal of knowledge and insight this morning.

Modernism

So, why, in the year 2011, does Modernism, a defining movement of the last century, matter to us – and matter enough to be the subject of a major book and a conference? Why is Modernism of more than historical interest?

Modernism is of course an elastic term that means different things to different people. A great deal of intellectual horsepower has been expended on trying to define it. But there's wide agreement that Modernism was essentially a rejection of tradition and outdated cultural norms, forms, and ways of thought. It co-evolved with technological advances, and responded to increasing industrialization, political currents, and barbaric wars.

It became a transforming force in art, architecture, design, literature, music, and the general culture. It expressed new ways of viewing the self and society, new expectations and aspirations.

To my mind, its defining hallmark is the liberation of a more assertive, questioning self, a self that's less bound by received wisdom and more motivated to think independently, originally, and to *engage directly with what is at hand*. Modernism unleashed tremendous creative forces.

Sustainability

I view today's movement toward sustainability as being, like Modernism, a rejection of outmoded thinking and an unleashing of creative forces. Modernism was experienced as a kind of "enlightenment." The sustainability movement enlightens *us*, as well. But what *we're* redefining is our fundamental relationship to our vital life-support systems: we're confronting the nature of "nature." We're acquiring a far better understanding of resource constraints, our climate system, the intricacy of ecosystems, and the consequences of our actions for all these things, and for future generations.

Because the sustainability movement is driven by nature's constraints, I think it will yield change that's more profound and pervasive than Modernism. It expands our consciousness spatially to extend around the globe, and temporally into the future. We know, for example, that wherever carbon emissions originate, they affect the global climate system and will affect future generations even more severely than ours.

In our mass consumption society, consumers have been largely oblivious of the impacts of their daily choices and behaviors. Developing a consciousness in which awareness of global interconnectedness and the dimension of *futurity* are internalized and shape routine, daily choices and behaviors will be an epochal change.

Public discourse and the slow rate of progress

So, nature – and, as it happens, our battered economy – are *demanding* that we do much, much more with much, much less. And how is society responding? I'll cite three shifts in the public discourse as indices:

- Public agencies' agendas are changing. What was not so long ago an academic subject is now portrayed *as a clear and present danger*. An upcoming meeting at the New York Academy of Sciences is just one example: speakers from the National Climate Data Center, the NYC Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, the NYC Departments of Environmental Protection and Transportation, and the MTA will address "Facing the Elements: Transportation System Resilience in an Era of Extreme Weather and Climate Change."
- That word "resilience" is another index. New York City's Climate Change Adaptation Task Force aims at creating a climate-resilient city – a clear acknowledgment that we *must* adapt to changing climate. Indeed, the goal of climate resilience is being adopted by other cities, around the world.
- Another shift in terminology is significant, too. President Obama's science advisor John Holdren is referring to *global climate disruption* rather than the more benign sounding "climate change" and "global warming." That puts the issue squarely before us.

So our discourse suggests the pace of progress is quickening. But the evidence of environmental damage keeps pouring in: severe storms, flooding, drought, crop shortages, rising sea level, environmental refugees, species extinction, sinking water tables, the toxic chemicals we continue to dump into the air and water, coastal dead zones, and on and on. I fear we're losing ground, and as a piece in the February 7th [New Yorker](#) magazine put it about climate,

. . . Mother Nature is growing impatient, and she has a hot temper.

The business-as-usual mindset

What is hindering progress? Many factors. But the one I want to focus on this morning is the insidious *business-as-usual* mentality that governs so much of our lives. It's perfectly human. That's the problem. Climate scientists label their baseline model the "business-as-usual" model. That mindset's hallmark is acceptance of incremental change.

But we don't have the luxury of waiting for incremental change. The real estate sector in particular must break free of that mindset, because day after day our city's building stock is generating the lion's share of greenhouse gas emissions. This pattern repeats itself in cities around the globe. With responsibility for a disproportionate share of damage comes a disproportionate responsibility to minimize it. And, a disproportionate and exciting opportunity to drive historic change.

Why the book Greening Modernism matters

The good news is that *we know how to do this*. Our speakers are doing it every day. The sustainability knowledge base has grown tremendously. And Carl's book offers a powerful inspirational guide and resource that can help us replace the prevailing business-as-usual mindset with a new one that's suited to 21st-century challenges.

How? Carl urges us to reclaim the power of 20th-century Modernist thought, harness it, and use it as a tool. Crucially, applied to architecture and design, as he stresses, Modernism at its root did not concern mere style. Rather, it offered a *way of thinking* and working that's holistic, analytical, integrative, and rooted in deeply considered human values and attention to the specific characteristics of the conditions at hand.

Carl will explain this to you himself, of course. But I'll say what he's too modest to say. That in making his case, he applies remarkable intellect, serious scholarship, and deep knowledge of the physics of energy systems. He's read widely and thought hard about the values, habits of mind, and methods that characterized the 20th-century Modern movement. He's related them to his own long experience of practicing sustainable architecture.

And what he contends – and the reason we think his messages warrant this conference – is essentially twofold:

- First, that – with the benefit of our understanding of resource constraints and environmental impacts – applying the power of Modernist thinking will *by its very nature* serve sustainability goals. Informed reuse of our existing building stock is central to the case he makes.

- And second, that by applying Modernism's discipline and rigor and attention to specific conditions, we can honor values that yield a more authentic, richer quality of life. That is, sustainability need not diminish our lives – a refreshing and appealing corrective to the sackcloth & ashes view that using less impoverishes us.

As a fabled designer once put it: if you have three apples and you take away two apples, you have more apple.

So I think Carl has fired a shot across the bow –

- at the perpetrators of a "throwaway culture."
- at preoccupation with superficial style.
- at the application of mindless formulaic approaches to design.
- at mindless consumption of finite resources and infliction of environmental damage.
- at degradation of place and community.
- at disregard of our moral obligations to future generations.

This is a rallying cry for the cause of environmental and cultural integrity, and for unifying those two values. It's the focus of this conference.

And it prompts me to wonder where this intertwined pursuit of sustainability and a richer quality of life will lead us. The sustainability movement is certain to evolve. Twenty years from now, what agenda topics will conferences like this one be exploring?

Adapting our city's building stock to climate change is certain to be one of them. The challenge will demand *a lot* of the real estate sector. Modernist thinking, as Carl applies it, can help.

Reuse and preservation

Our building stock, by the way, includes one of the largest inventories of Modernist buildings in the world. This makes "Greening Modernism" particularly germane to us. Preserving buildings with historic value and aesthetic merit serves more than sustainability goals, of course. They're part of our cultural heritage and can become a legacy for future generations. I hope this conference will bring them into sharper focus, heighten appreciation of their significance, and spur interest in their potential for reuse and preservation.

The case for reuse of our existing buildings turns on the resources they embody. Methodically *and* engagingly – it never plods – Carl's book illuminates the immense store of resources that are cumulatively embodied in the built environment through every step of a building's creation. For readers who've never before encountered the concept, his analysis will permanently alter their perceptions of the built world. And even for those of us who know the concept well, those chapters are quietly stunning. They build a compelling case for avoiding the exorbitant environmental costs of demolition and new construction.

What Carl terms "informed reuse" means – as he has remarked – that "development" *becomes* reuse, and vice-versa – a major market shift. Whether a building should be reused is a decision made and shaped by property owners and managers, architects, and engineers. When their judgments are routinely informed by a "greening modernism" mindset, the business-as-usual mindset will have been redefined.

The book's appeal

I'll close my remarks by observing that one reason "greening modernism" will be widely influential is that it does all of this heavy lifting in a wonderfully appealing way. Aesthetically, it's a joy to handle and leaf through. It's generously illustrated and elegantly formatted. It integrates visual pleasures with the pleasures of text that's beautifully written. The book itself embodies the values it promotes. I hope you'll all run out and buy it!

Now, let me invite its author to the podium. Because you have Carl's bio in your conference program, I'll just note that, in addition to having written this indispensable book, he is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and the founding partner of an award-winning architectural firm here in New York City: Elemental Architecture. And he was absolutely instrumental in helping us organize this event.

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