

Modernism's Hereafters: Reports from the Welfare City

Jennifer Mack

I am currently carrying out revisions on my forthcoming book, entitled *Modernism's Hereafters: Reports from the Welfare City* (University of Texas Press, 2027), and will focus on this during the first part of my stay at the Rachel Carson Center. In it, I use methods from the history of the built environment, social anthropology, and the environmental humanities to analyze the modernist architecture and landscapes of mid- and late twentieth-century Nordic welfare states, positioning them as political objects, subjects, and targets for reform from their inception into the present. Theorized as “welfare cities,” these designs involved a complete overhaul of environments—usually greenfield sites—and were intended as tools to shape citizens and boost economies. Today, however, such neighborhoods (and their working-class and immigrant residents) appear in newspapers, in campaign speeches, and in casual conversation as sites of environmental, social loss, and imminent danger. When representations have crystallized into “truths,” they also precipitate physical and social interventions in the name of the public good. I historicize and problematize this stigmatization while labeling these indelible representations “hereafters.” I argue that such dystopian “hereafters” have made welfare cities into convenient scapegoats for both far-right political symbolism and corporate profit-making (often in combination).

Modernism's Hereafters also focuses on cross-border approaches to both modernist housing and its rehabilitation, and how political discourses travel. Architectural modernism is typically investigated through its housing (or its landscapes, but as a separate concern). Instead, I consider “welfare cities” holistically as interlinked ecological and social worlds, foregrounding a broad environmental history that analyzes both housing and landscapes, along with animals, plants, building materials, and more. Interrogating the legacies of welfare cities in physical and narrative spaces, I draw attention to how past and present residents of welfare cities have actually described and experienced them and how they have challenged proposed changes coming from outside their communities over time. Asking whose agendas are served by the repetition of stigmatized stories and narratives that support environmental destruction over preservation, I question experience-far critiques and draw closer to lived experience. In this, I explore the environmental, political, social, and material effects of “hereafters” and call for new ones.

After submitting the revisions for the book (in June), I will use my last two months at the Rachel Carson Center to continue pilot research for a new project on architecture and farming in European wetlands, focusing on the East Anglian Fens, UK. I presented my first conference paper on this work, entitled “Earning by Eel,” at the Society of Architectural Historians’ annual conference in April 2025. I am particularly interested in the social and environmental dimensions of wetlands and the architectures that drained or siphoned their waters for agriculture, built from the Early Modern Period to the twentieth century. I emphasize both human social conditions, such as how working-class residents have navigated old and new drainage projects, as well as the animals, plants, soils, and more that respond to (and often suffer from) human decisions about water control and removal.