

Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and the Road to Modern Architecture

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On the Problem of Accessing and of Reassessing Modern Architecture in a Broader Cultural Context

Frey not only distinguished between the initial design and the design as executed – in other words, he did historical work. By means of this distinction, he uncovered the line of demarcation between the early and the high Renaissance – in other words, he did art historical work.

Paul Frankl on Dagobert Frey's analysis of Bramante's planning for St. Peter's (P. Frankl, review of "Dagobert Frey, Bramantes St. Peter-Entwurf und seine Apokryphen" [Vienna: 1915], in: *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*, XLII [1920], p. 128/129).

In truth, there is hardly any other scholarly pursuit that requires such sobriety in its proofs, such refinement in its perceptions and comparisons, and such manifold knowledge of discipline-specific and historical matters as the theory of art, especially in architecture.

Aloys Hirt, *Die Baukunst nach den Grundsätzen der Alten* (Berlin: 1809), p. ix.

Need it be repeated? "Modernist ideology" has long been in the process of dissolution. It has receded sufficiently into history to allow one, in the meantime, to predict that architectural Modernism – its specific achievements and qualities critically reconsidered at a distance – will be rediscovered. This is precisely the act that is necessary to prevent the most recent permutations of the history of architecture from dissolving in the primordial soup of endlessly expanding, undifferentiated singular historical phenomena. Much of what is currently being studied in response to a legitimate need is nonetheless presented in the narrow framework of a monograph or in an analysis limited to a single building. And only a small portion of the fundamental insights gathered in this fashion – at least in this phase of research on Modernism – has been reintegrated into a holistic overview and synthesis.

Excepting singular points of contact, the factors that constitute the conceptual and humanistic framework and cohesion of Modernism are most frequently ignored. There is indeed a danger that greater knowledge of subtly differentiated historical relationships could be directed *against* the inherently simplified programs of the era, as if this standard of truth – the coincidence of theory and practice – were the appropriate one. Admittedly, the "Modernist ideology" – even more

reduced and recombined as a result of other contingencies – used its rhetoric and its programmatic character as provocation. In this sense, it has always willingly opened itself to attack. Nonetheless, whether one likes it or not, the coincidence of an architectural Modernism, of the new “style,” or even only of affirmedly common architectural aspirations, arose despite all sentiment to the contrary, first and foremost at the level of the program, of contemporaneous points of view and interpretations.¹

This insight has, of course, been made difficult: more often than not, the physical objects were subject to a considerable loss of their self-sufficiency. They were instead subordinated – if not yoked – to programs “in order to demonstrate the commonalities postulated.” This process is exemplified by Walter Gropius’s statement, not exactly indicative of modesty, as it appeared in the second edition of his book *Internationale Architektur* in 1927: “Since the first edition appeared, the Modern architecture of the different cultural nations has followed with surprising alacrity the lines of development sketched in this book.”²

That posture was shocking then – and apparently still is. There is a desire to “expose” this programmaticism and rhetoric and finally to avenge the Dadaist claim that “Art is dead, long live art,” as well as the Futurist battle cries, “distruggere il culto del passato” and “considerare i critici d’arte come inutili e dannosi.”³ But rather than condemn manufactured ideologies in toto, it is more important to situate them in a broader historical framework and to follow them through their various furcations. Those people who today continue to combat the “tabula rasa” tone of these manifestos, rather than try to understand the way in which the pronouncements were rooted in the early Modernist era, still lack historical distance some two generations later. They risk obstructing an open rapprochement with history.

This intellectual history is an exceptionally rich one. Its polyvalence and self-contradiction were, of course, as already has been mentioned, suppressed or sometimes concealed even then by an unquestionably reductive form of propaganda – or simply sacrificed to a systematic reticence about sources, as with Le Corbusier, for example. This situation produces an even greater task for critics and historians. They must not merely dismiss the ideology of Modernism – or, phrased more simply and less contentiously, dismiss the propagandistic way in which Modern architecture represented itself – nor adapt it blindly as a nominal standard, whether affirmatively or as a “demon” is unimportant. Instead, they are called upon to situate it in relationship to an intellectual history that is rich in commentary and texts on all imaginable issues.

At stake here is not the generalized recourse to roughly sketched contours and ideas of a distanced, abstracted history of culture. The inextricabilities – not the

points of concurrence! – of theory and practice are much more concrete. Even such topics as the relationship between Modern architecture and the art history of that period lie largely fallow, although everyone knows that, without Wölfflin, without the simplifying categories of the “fundamental concepts” (*Grundbegriffe*) or without the differentiated use of the concept of “artistic form” (*Kunstform*) and its complementary correspondents from “core, or fundamental, form” (*Kernform*) to “purposive form” (*Zweckform*) and “technological form” (*Technikform*) – all borrowed from Bötticher and Riegl – much would be unimaginable.⁴ Anyone who does not understand that a qualitative difference (*the* topic of Giedion’s *Building in France*) existed between industrial architecture, including its artistic complement (in accordance with an ideal still current at the beginning of the century),⁵ and the declaration that industrially produced components represented Modern architectural form, will overlook the essential point. He will have to be satisfied with tracing the history of Modernism back, perhaps to 1851 or perhaps to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England, but always in a manner limited to partial aspects.

Even greater deficiencies exist in the consideration of that period’s architectural theory that was phrased “in addition to the manifestos” in the form of a discourse. Friedrich Ostendorf himself has become a victim of petty moralism because no one wanted, or wants, to see that a traditional, Classicist understanding of architecture can be reconciled with a radically Modern theoretical position (“To design means to find the simplest formal manifestation”).⁶ Even more obscure are those theoreticians who could not insure their place in posterity’s memory by leaving behind works of architecture. Who has heard of Hermann Sörgel or Leo Adler, to mention only two theoretical voices – between 1918 and 1926, respectively – who should be taken seriously? Of course, forgetfulness has its ineluctable place. Even then, the literature made it apparent that everyone was speaking about “space” but that almost no one knew the father of that concept – Schmarsow – much less his work, *Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung* (The essence of architectural creation) (1894). And Paul Frankl – another important figure in the definition of a theoretical realm between architecture and art history – wrote in a 1920 book review that Schmarsow’s predecessor Richard Lucae and his 1869 lecture “On the Power of Space in Architecture” (Über die Macht des Raumes in der Baukunst) was “never cited”! Although contributions such as these remain forgotten or without consequence – however one makes that determination – they retain extraordinary significance in elucidating the intellectual historical background.

These comments are enough to suggest an approach in which the gaze does not remain fixed on a specific object (whatever that may be) but instead takes in



Figure 1. *The True Variety of the Architecture of the Twenties*
(from: Bruno Taut, *Bauen. Der neue Wohnbau* [Leipzig and Berlin: 1927], “Bilanz,” p. 5)

the respective branches of theory and practice and their various related or unrelated levels. A “hermeneutic” but unfortunately less than oft-fulfilled assumption! It would be worthwhile interrogating Postmodern “arbitrariness” and its concomitant pleasure in attacking a – complementary – “compact” Modernism about its disregard for the richness of the earlier period’s architectural positions as well as its explanatory paradigms and theories. Not everything associated with Modernism is “monothetic” or “monocausal” – or even only conclusive and compact. The idea that contention and reality, in all their various hues, were bonded was too widespread. And that is exactly the point at which criticism should begin. Because it is in this respect that Postmodern critiques of Modernism are founded upon an

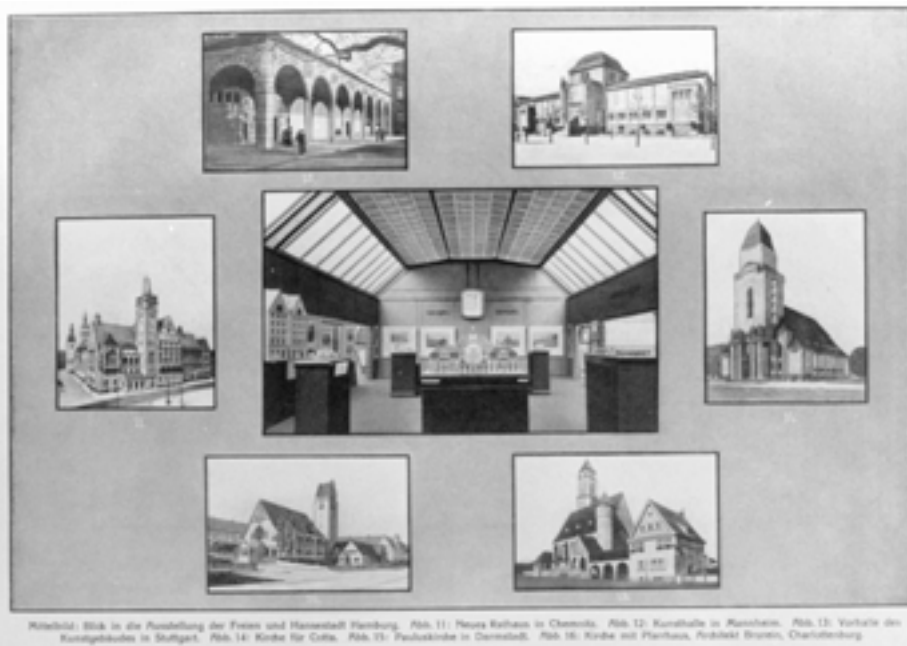


Figure 2. Panorama of German Architecture circa 1913

German Architecture of the Twentieth Century – “Deutsche Baukunst des XX. Jahrhunderts” at the International Building Industry Exposition, Leipzig, 1913. (from: *Bericht über die Internationale Baufach-Ausstellung mit Sonderausstellungen, Leipzig 1913* [Leipzig: 1917], p. 139/141)

error. Concerning the topic of “Postmodernism and Architecture,” this is, of course, as true of those critics, such as Jürgen Habermas, who wanted to use a compact ideology of the Modern as a shield against the destructive dissolution of Modernism (including architectural Modernism).

The Smithsons, naturally, reduced Modernism to cubic, white and autonomous, just as the “international style” had previously tailored all selected images to conform to these qualities. But it is necessary to leaf through the books and magazines of the period to discover that the variety of forms assumed by Modern architecture is as large as that of what is nowadays called “arbitrariness.” When Bruno Taut subjected every conceivable form of architecture to his ridicule in the publication *Bauen. Der neue Wohnbau* (*Building. The new residential building*), published by the “Ring” – the “most Modern” architectural circle in pre-Weissenhof Germany – he referred not to the past, but to the present. It was a present that considered itself sometimes more and sometimes less Modern and, as such, was assigned such epithets as “Field, River and Meadow Style,” “Mr. Biedermeier . . .,” “An Architecture of Staircases – ergo ‘Neue Sachlichkeit,’ ” “Charlotte 1926,” “Aunt Meier’s Cottage!” or “Not Made of Cardboard.”⁷ Seen in this way, the heterogeneity of twentieth-century architecture is second to none. At the International Building Exposition in Leipzig in 1913, the panorama entitled “German Architecture of the Twentieth Century” paraded this heterogeneity officially at a time when the form of Modern architecture had “yet to be found.”⁸ Also in the twenties, in 1927, Peter Meyer not only differentiated between “Modern” and “pseudo-Modern” buildings (buildings by the Dutch architects, from de Klerk to Rietveld, who misused a modern formal language for decorative purposes), he also employed categorizations such as “Functionalist Symbolism” or “Sacral Faustic, Nordic, Vienna” to explain his precise understanding of Modernism. It is plain that his categories were quite specific but nonetheless deviated considerably from those of the “Ring.”⁹ And shortly after World War I, when Modernism began its triumphal march in earnest, Franz Schuster still saw a “chaos of forms and opinions” rather than a unified Modern architecture. He went so far as to subsume both Le Corbusier’s work and Frank Lloyd Wright’s masterpieces Falling Water and Johnson Wax under the category of deceptive form, which he opposed to the “unified world of essential forms.” (These essential forms were in turn to nurture the “root of the style.”)¹⁰ Despite programs and rhetoric, the three positions selectively presented here bespeak little of the perceived compactness of a Modern style, even if the smallest common denominator still seems interesting enough. In fact, the three, somewhat arbitrarily chosen, examples do not prove that there is, and that there can be, no “Modern architecture.” All the authors



Figure 3. *The Permutations of Modern Architecture in Departure from the Mainstream Functional Symbolism.* (from: Peter Meyer, *Moderne Architektur und Tradition* [Zurich: 1927], plate VIII)



Figure 4. *Sacral Faustism, Nordic Directions, Vienna.* (from: Meyer, op. cit., plate IX)

quoted are concerned at least with moving toward the ability to define Modern architecture with some clarity.

All of this proves just how one-sided and misrepresentative it is to measure the “Ideology of Modernism” against built reality alone and vice versa. This practice is especially inappropriate in view of the discrepancies, the lack of correspondence, between theory and practice, and in view of the dissynchronicity of the simultaneous – this, too, being a particular approach in the art history of the twenties.¹¹ All of these inconsistencies often more articulate, not to mention being the ingredients of every vital culture throughout history. Consequently, we may not ignore the relative autonomy of the intellectual historical framework – also as the prerequisite to all concepts based upon simplifications and typifications – even if we give close attention to the relationship between theory and practice. It might be contended that the typical models that describe the derivation of Modernism from construction and industry, and from abstract art forms, produce only a partial solution to the problem of defining clearly this “Modern” style. In that

case, the integration of statements of intention, of programs or even of mere “opinions” is even more important. The goal of “Modernism” – and, of course, at least *mediatedly*, of the accompanying rationalizations and legitimations as such – remains the actual object of scrutiny if we are to speak about Modernism and not about only a few of its representatives. It is no accident that Hugo Häring – here in accord with his “opposite,” Le Corbusier – derived his first principle of “intellectual content”¹² from the quickly recognizable multitude of plausible Modern positions. Thus, “architecture – pure création de l’esprit” assumes additional significance.

Both time and patience are needed to arrive at such differentiated views – or even merely to rediscover them! And in each case, the first requirement is sufficient distance to see both the forest and the trees. In this sense, it is legitimate and necessary to attempt to evaluate Modernism’s historical value, despite all deep-seated internal objections to the enterprise. Modernism has become part of history. Like the Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical and Historicist eras before it, it demands new and distanced evaluation. At issue in Modernism, too, is the way in which a qualitative standard was applied to a sea of knowledge and facts. Just as such concepts as Baroque or Renaissance retain their currency despite all objections – either because of or despite the minimal consensus that inheres to them – the concept of Modernism will retain its currency. Perhaps this is even truer for Modernism, since the discussion of Modernism and its aims, especially those related to Modernism as a “stylistic concept,” were part of the ongoing discussion even at the movement’s genesis (and not in retrospect, as with the Baroque movement).¹³

An additional difficulty, however, must be taken into consideration. Because the discussion of Modernism’s specific orientation or particular distinctions develops along with Modernism itself, there can be no hope of finding coherent, distanced, complete theories in the primary source material. Much is expressed quickly and aphoristically in “Manifestas.” At the same time, the “hasty reader” is also the quintessence of, even the standard for, the stenographic style used to communicate difficult theoretical material.¹⁴ The “visual discourse” represses more comprehensive argumentation, a fact that has also already been criticized.¹⁵ And thus, an even greater number of different communicative forms, each possessed of a theoretical ambition, must be considered – and with them all, the incompatibilities arising from this kaleidoscope.

It is not merely that the image replaces the word. (To cite Gropius again, “In order to serve a broad lay audience, the editor has essentially limited himself to exterior images.”)¹⁶ There is also a language of images. There is metaphor. And one of these semitheoretical metaphors is the image of “Stilhülse und Kern”



Figure 5. *Simple Architectural Forms, in Contrast to Deceptive Forms*

“Deceptive Forms and Others.” (from: Franz Schuster, *Der Stil unserer Zeit* [Vienna: 1948], p. 74)

Figure 6. “The Confusing World of Deceptive Forms.” (from: Schuster, *op. cit.*, p. 78)

(stylistic hull and kernel). It attracts such great interest not only because it is understandably “graphic” but also because it bespeaks the very tangible theories upon which it is based – from Bötticher’s “tectonics” to Semper’s “theory of raiment.” No one will deny that this metaphor is eminently suited to represent so plausible a development, which otherwise might not be recognizable as such. Once again, our irritation might lead us to demand a better fit between reality and (theoretical, if not, in this case, rather graphic) explanation. Here, there is merely a need for affirmation, especially if one considers the need to explain the concept of Modernism within a contemporary context. One should affirm that this image developed parallel to the phenomena that it describes: it is not an afterthought that springs from the workshop of an inventive historian or theoretician.

NOTES

- 1 Instead of unnecessary repetition, I prefer to cite the following series of articles: W. Oechslin, “A Cultural History of Modern Architecture: 1. The ‘Modern’: Historical

- Event vs. Demand,” in: *a+u*, no. 4 (1990), p. 50 ff. “2. Modern Architecture and the Pitfalls of Codification. The Aesthetic View,” in: *a+u*, no. 6 (1990), p. 29 ff. “3. The ‘Picture’: The (superficial) consensus of modern architecture?” in: *a+u*, no. 2 (1991), p. 28 ff.
- 2 W. Gropius, *Internationale Architektur*, 2nd ed. (Passau: 1927), p. 9.
 - 3 “Manifesto dei Pittori futuristi” (Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini) of February 11, 1910: “Conclusioni” (quoted here are articles no. 1 and 5).
 - 4 The latter was emphasized with the greatest clarity, for example, by W. Nerdinger (*Walter Gropius*, exhibition catalogue [Berlin: 1985], p. 36).
 - 5 This fact is already expressed in the title of the publication by H. Jordan and E. Michel, *Die künstlerische Gestaltung von Eisenkonstruktionen* (Berlin: 1913), which resulted from a like-named prize given by the Royal Building Academy in Berlin on January 15, 1908. It is useful to compare it with the entirely different approach of such publications as Werner Lindners, *Die Ingenieurbauten in ihrer guten Gestaltung* (Berlin: 1923) and *Bauten der Technik. Ihre Form und Wirkung* (Berlin: 1927). Lindners, who sought a connection with the “cultural issues of the present,” is attentive to “manifestations in form” (*Formerscheinungen*) and – inspired by Wölfflin’s statement that “revealed regularity is the highest form of life” – aspired to a “unified basis for architectural production.”
 - 6 W. Oechslin, “‘Entwerfen heisst, die einfachste Erscheinungsform zu finden.’ Missverständnisse zum Zeitlosen, Historischen, Modernen und Klassischen bei Friedrich Ostendorf,” in: *Moderne Architektur in Deutschland, 1900 bis 1930. Reform und Tradition*, ed. V. Magnago Lampugnani and R. Schneider (Stuttgart: 1992), p. 29 ff.
 - 7 B. Taut, *Bauen. Der neue Wohnbau* (Leipzig and Berlin: 1927), p. 1 ff., “Bilanz.”
 - 8 H. Herzog and H. Miederer, *Bericht über die Internationale Baufach-Ausstellung mit Sonderausstellungen, Leipzig 1913* (Leipzig: 1917), p. 142 ff. and plate no. 139 ff. At the very least, the text on p. 144 stated “that German architecture of the Twentieth Century wishes to be taken seriously and to represent some eternal value, as did the famous historical architectural styles of earlier periods.”
 - 9 P. Meyer, *Moderne Architektur und Tradition* (Zurich: 1927 and [corrected second edition] 1928).
 - 10 F. Schuster, *Der Stil unserer Zeit. Die fünf Formen des Gestaltens der äusseren Welt des Menschen. Ein Beitrag zum kulturellen Wiederaufbau* (Vienna: 1948).
 - 11 The reference here is to Wilhelm Pinder’s book *Das Problem der Generationen in der Kunstgeschichte Europas*, published in 1926 and 1928. In this book, the author demonstrates his debt to his teacher, Schmarsow, and to Wölfflin’s dictum – here also intended as a correction to unified concepts of style – that “not everything is possible at all times.” (See Pinder’s preface of 1926.)
 - 12 W. Oechslin, “‘Das Neue’ und die moderne Architektur,” in: *Daidalos*, no. 52 (1994), p. 125.
 - 13 W. Oechslin, “‘Baroque’: Zu den negativen Kriterien der Begriffsbestimmung in klassizistischer und späterer Zeit,” in: *Europäische Barock-Rezeption*, ed. K. Garber (Wiesbaden: 1991), p. 125 ff.
 - 14 On the occasion of a Giedion Colloquium organized in 1989 by the gta Institute, much was made of Giedion’s relevant commentary in *Bauen in Frankreich*. The concept was evaluated in various ways. See, for example, S. von Moos, “Kulturgeschichte für den ‘eiligen Leser,’ Giedion, Mumford and Their Iconography of the ‘Machine Age.’”
 - 15 See Karl Vossler on Wölfflin, especially his criticism on the adepts, “Über Vergleichung und Unvergleichlichkeit der Künste,” in: *Festschrift für Julius Schlosser zum 60. Geburtstag* (Zurich, Leipzig and Vienna: 1927), p. 25 ff. (For comparison, see W. Oechslin, “Fragen zu Sigfried Giedions kunsthistorischen Prämissen,” in the catalogue *Sigfried Giedion 1888–1968. Der Entwurf einer modernen Tradition* [Zurich: 1989], p. 191 ff., p. 197.)
 - 16 See note 2, p. 5

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