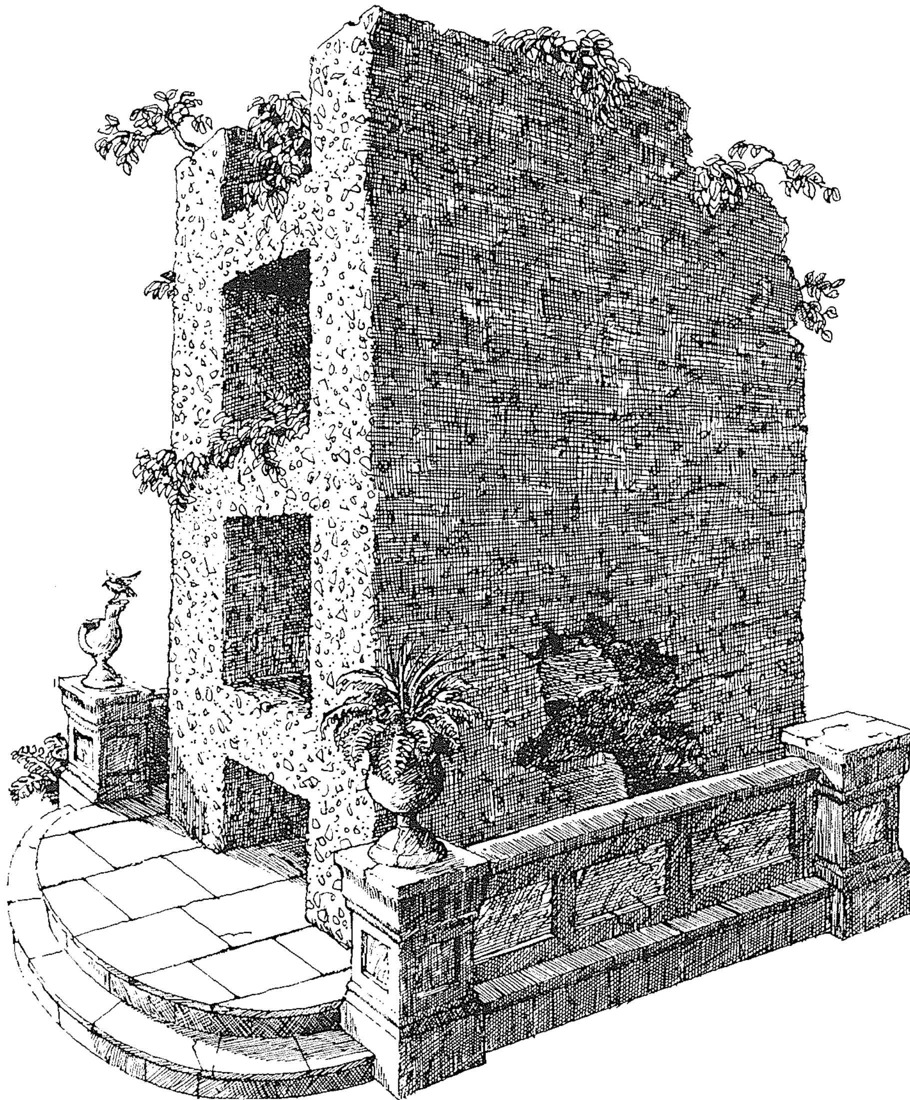

From Great Moments in Architecture *by David Macaulay. © 1978. Published by Houghton Mifflin Co.*

Improvements in building materials, such as steel, glass, and concrete, have allowed architects to erect structures never before thought possible. The results have been mixed. Some modern buildings complement their environments while remaining aesthetic treats in themselves. Others seem to have been conceived by architects bent on erasing the distinction between art and parody.

Architecture Today

The Swiss urban planner Le Corbusier regarded his own brand of high-rise, mass-produced architecture as the only alternative to political revolution. Four decades later, it seems, an architect's most revolutionary act is not to build at all. Facing public disenchantment with everything from skyscrapers to urban renewal projects to suburban tract housing, many architects are "thinking small"—or leaving their wilder schemes on the drawing board. Others taunt their colleagues and the public with towering glass-and-steel parodies. Unfortunately, architects, unlike doctors, cannot bury their mistakes. Here Peter Blake surveys the products of the past half century; Reyner Banham describes the latter-day tug-of-war between architectural "hawks" and "doves"; and Rem Koolhaas looks at the future.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

by Peter Blake

It is not too difficult to figure out what has gone wrong: The theorists of modern architecture simply promised too much. They promised that modern buildings would be cheaper to build, solve the problems of war and peace, and put an end to social and economic injustice. Modern architecture promised bliss. But the so-called Modern Movement, the clean-lined, often massive, essentially urban, "skin-and-bones" architecture that developed in Europe and the United States between 1910 and the 1950s, delivered on few of its promises.

The propagandists of the Modern Movement—Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Charles Edouard Jeanneret (Le

Corbusier), and many others—were hardly con men, though they were, perhaps, a little starry-eyed. Yet the public and the critics—and those who commissioned buildings—certainly shared their belief that modern architecture was "functional and efficient."

Modern buildings were thought to be cheaper to build, even after many buildings of lightweight metals and plastics proved to be much more costly than conventional structures built of conventional materials—brick, stone, wood. Because cheapness seemed to be a virtue, people were willing to overlook modern architecture's frequent failure to stand up to normal wear and tear. Mies believed, in any event, that technologists were about to achieve a spectacular breakthrough and invent a new, universal, sound-, weather-, damp-, and heat-proof material that could be used to envelop us all—without leaking. The architects of Boston's new, all-glass John Hancock Tower may have shared his belief—until they had to remove some 10,000 sheets of mirror-coated, double-glazed glass from the Tower before the winds did it for them.

"Machines for Living In"

People also felt that certain recurrent concerns of the modern masters—"public housing," for instance—suggested that modern architecture would be a major weapon against social and economic injustice. Plato had observed long before that architecture (as well as the other arts) could help transform a society. But despite the graphic descriptions of slums by Western writers in the 19th century, not much was done in the way of public housing until the 1920s. The *Siedlungen* ("Settlements") of Weimar Germany—medium-rise, concrete-frame buildings housing low-income factory workers—then began to enchant do-gooders around the globe. In the United States, similar, drab, windswept apartment clusters have been a mainstay of urban renewal efforts since the Housing Act of 1949.

While few echoed Le Corbusier's assertion that modern architecture was an alternative to war, a good many people *did*

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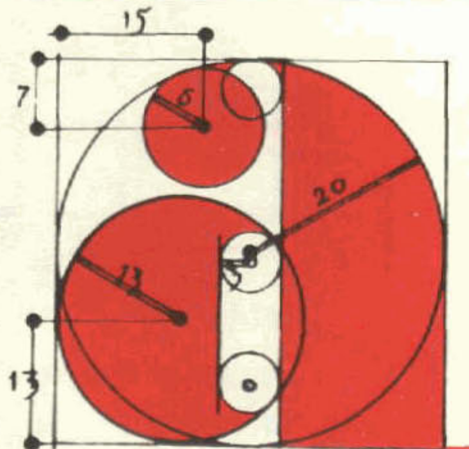


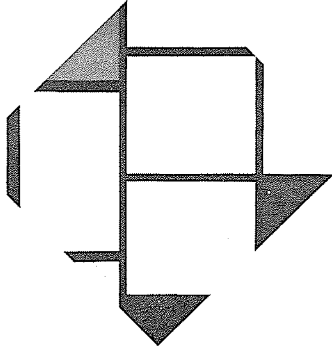
Construction design, letter "a" (c. 1930) by the Bauhaus's Joost Schmidt. The Bauhaus influence was felt in everything from typography to wallpaper to buildings. Tubular armchairs, indecipherable clocks, nickel-coated lamps, bare walls, everything written in small letters—such was the issue of a marriage of art and technology.

From The Bauhaus *by Hans M. Wingler. © 1969 by The Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Reprinted by permission.*

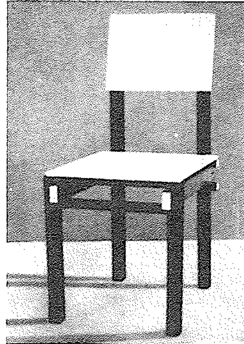
regard modern buildings as far healthier than old-fashioned ones. Richard Neutra, who helped import the modern movement from Europe to the United States, and who was something of a hypochondriac besides, actually thought that modern architecture would cure whatever ailed you, and he called some of his sunny, breezy California creations "health houses" to buttress that curious claim.

Le Corbusier and his students also believed that a city of tall skyscrapers, spaced far apart, separated by acres of parks, and linked by elevated superhighways, would be "radiant" and ideal for man; that narrow streets were disgusting; that large, monumental plazas were "for people" (and not for icy winds and driving rains). In *Towards a New Architecture* (1920), Le Corbusier argued that buildings should be designed in a functional manner, just as airplanes and ships were. A house was a "machine for living in"; a city, a machine for efficiently organizing industrial society.

Walter Gropius believed in much of the above. It was Gropius who in 1925 helped bring the Modern Movement to maturity by moving the Bauhaus, the German design institute in Weimar, to a new building in Dessau. There the institute's fledgling architecture seminar grew into a full-blown department as the Bauhaus continued to preach the unity of design: in fabrics and paintings, in graphic art, furniture, and sculpture. A spare, industrial kind of design—"a program for Everyman"—came to be known as the Bauhaus Style. When Nazi pressure forced the Bauhaus to close in 1933, its staff fled to Harvard and the Illinois Institute of Technology, carrying the vision around the world.



Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild.



Courtesy of the Stedelijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

From the Museum of Modern Art. Courtesy of Julius Schulman.

Form followed fashion: Lozenge in Red, Yellow, and Blue *(above left, 1925) by Piet Mondrian; chair (above right, 1923) by Gerrit Rietveld; house and studio (right, 1949) by Charles Eames.*

Most of the architects commonly identified with the "international style" of the Modern Movement dreamed of a dazzling, geometric urban world of mass-produced prisms, vast and pure, surrounded by greenery and bathed in sunlight. They first gave form to that sparkling image at *micro* scale—designing houses, for example—whenever they got the chance. Their students continue to recreate it at *macro* scale, from Brasilia to Teheran, from Boston to Osaka and beyond. The charming sketches for Ideal Cities produced by Le Corbusier in the 1920s are today a grotesque reality on the edges of Isfahan and the outskirts of Munich and Zagreb.

Why? In part because the images created by these talented propagandists were rooted in a seemingly compelling logic. The

earth's population explosion surely dictated high-density living and mass production of buildings; high-density living just as surely dictated vertical cities. Vertical cities would need lots of space between their towers (to let the sun in), and high-speed, high-capacity transportation networks—including highways—to connect them.

That logic has turned out to be seriously flawed. High-density living turns out to be quite easily attained with clusters of low-rise patio-houses, and the densities achievable, without much trouble, are about five times the average densities now existing in New York City.* Mass production of buildings has turned out to be more costly than conventional technology, and often much less efficient and durable. Moreover, transportation costs have gone up due to fuel prices and generalized inflation.

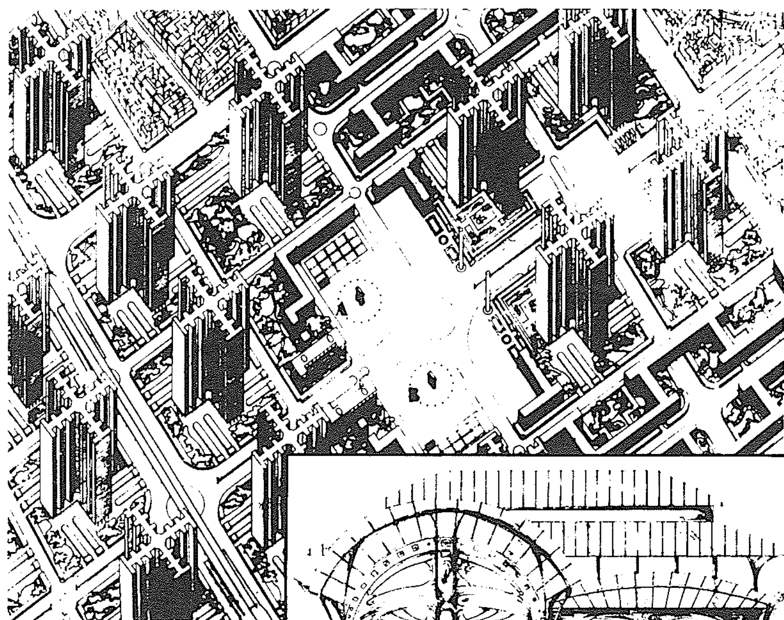
Life Mirrors Art

Still, at least two generations of younger architects—my own included—were seduced by the modern dogma. In the first place, the prototypes offered by pioneers like Mies, Le Corbusier, and others were easy to copy, as they were meant to be. Mies liked to say that he didn't see any reason to invent a new architecture every Monday morning—nor would mass production allow it.

But there was another reason, a rather more insidious reason. The Modern Movement surrounded itself with a certain aura that made all of us architects feel as if we were riding the crest of a wave. It wasn't just that modern dogma seemed to make sense in functional terms; it seemed to make sense in aesthetic terms as well. There seemed to be a straight and steady progression from the Purist paintings of Amédée Ozenfant to Machine Art, to Le Corbusier's and Charlotte Perriand's tubular, chrome furniture of the 1920s. There seemed to be a straight progression from Miro's paintings and Calder's mobiles, to Charles Eames's furniture and to some of Oscar Niemeyer's fanciful buildings.

We felt, in short, that we were part of a broad, all-encompassing movement, like *Art Nouveau* at the turn of the century, when all of the visual (and sometimes even the musical and literary) arts were clearly acting in unison. Just as *Art Nouveau* saw the whiplash curves of Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec translated into the Paris *Métro* stations of Hector Guimard and the buildings of Antoni Gaudi, so architecture's

*The population density in New York City is about 50 persons per acre.



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From Hector Guimard *published by the Landesmuseum, Münster. © 1975 by Laurent Sully Jaulmes.*

Le Corbusier's "Plan Voisin" for the center of Paris (1925) and Hector Guimard's contrasting notion of a Parisian architecture (Metro station, 1900). The former is consciously abstract, geometric, and mechanistic; the latter is regarded by critics as naturalistic and "organic."

Modern Movement seemed to spring from new developments in the graphic arts.

Which was, demonstrably, silly.

Art Nouveau was so all-pervasive in part because it was rooted in "organic" forms found in nature, and these forms could be translated, without effort, into objects and other structures designed to serve humanity. There were, of course, certain limitations. The shape of a wave breaking on a beach might be a very good shape for a wave and a beach, but not necessarily for the facade of an apartment house. Still, natural forms by and large seemed to be appropriate as a source of design ideas.

By contrast, forms derived—as the Modern Movement derived them—from two- or three-dimensional geometry are much less flexible, much less adaptable to real life. For example, Piet Mondrian's exercises in plane geometry, when translated by

abstract designer Gerrit Rietveld into the shape of a chair, resulted in some terribly funny, and totally un-besittable home furnishings. The Purist/Cubist abstractions of the 1920s became the aesthetic norm in architecture.

Modern architecture still strives to stay à la mode. It is right up there with the latest examples of pop or minimal art. In fact, some of its practitioners are really much better than the artists with whom they claim kinship. Joern Utzon, with his opera house in Sydney, Australia, can hold his own as a Futurist sculptor. And Robert Venturi's design for a Football Hall of Fame (a huge football) exceeds a good many things that pop sculptor Claes Oldenburg has done. In short, the dictum of architect Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) that form should follow function often seems to be practiced in reverse.

And now some nasty questions have arisen. Is it appropriate for a building to be, primarily or solely, a Work of Art? Should not a building be a Work of Accommodation—accommodation to the human condition, to all of its demands, including, of course, the demand for beauty? The most important form to be considered in the design of the human habitat, is, after all, the human form—not that of the cube, the sphere, or the cone (Cézanne's trilogy). Yet somewhere along the line, modern architecture became, almost exclusively, a captive of modern art. And it has not flourished in captivity. It is not necessarily all that much fun to live in a work of art, or to work, play, procreate, or learn in one. It may often be better to inhabit, say, a recycled loft or factory.

H. G. Wells once wrote of his own work: "I refuse to play the artist, . . . I write as straight as I can, just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there." He added, parenthetically, that "if sometimes I am an artist it is a freak of the Gods." Architects, too, should design as straight as they can: And if the end product turns out to be a work of art, then we may all be grateful for the windfall.