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At the Beginning of Modernism
Furniture and First Architectural Works, 1920–1937

Marcel Lajos Breuer (called Lajkó by all who knew him) was born on 22 May 1902 in the Hungarian town of Pécs, at that time a regional center with a population of 42,000, located near the west banks of the Danube River in the western portion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With its mining, industry, and the oldest university in Hungary, the city of Pécs was the most important economic and cultural center in western Hungary during the eighteen years that Breuer lived there. In 1919, at the end of World War I, Pécs became one of five primary provincial centers of the newly established Hungarian Republic, and the Hungarian border with Yugoslavia was located just to the south of Pécs, which is 100 miles (160 km) to the south of Budapest, and almost the same distance to the east of Zagreb, Croatia, and to the northwest of Belgrade, Serbia. Breuer’s father was a dental technician, allowing the family to live comfortably and to engage in the progressive, intellectual culture of Pécs. Breuer grew up speaking Hungarian, as well as some German, and while his parents were Jewish, Breuer later decided, at age twenty-four, to renounce all religion. Breuer’s father and mother were interested in having their three children engage in the arts and culture, and they subscribed to several art periodicals, including The Studio, an English publication presenting recent international developments in fine arts, applied arts, and architecture, which was widely read throughout Europe and the United States. Steeped in this context, Breuer decided as a youth that he would become an artist—either a painter or a sculptor. At home, he painted, sketched, and modeled, and at secondary school he enjoyed mechanical drawing. An oil painting by Breuer, depicting the roofscapes of Pécs and the surrounding hillsides, remains from 1917. At the end of World War I, from 1918 to 1920, Breuer remembers Pécs being occupied by the Serbs and Yugoslavs, stating that he and his family felt “completely isolated. Consequently I had no knowledge of modern art.” However, due to his early and ongoing exposure to international journals such as The Studio, Breuer could not have been entirely unaware of the dramatic changes happening in the arts and architecture at that time.

In spring 1920, at the age of eighteen, Breuer received a scholarship to attend the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Vienna, one of the greatest cultural centers of the world. In the years before World War I, Vienna had been the context for many of the most profound developments in early modernism. Before the turn of the century, the painter Gustav Klimt had broken away from the classical Imperial Academy and established the “Secession,” which soon included a number of architects such as Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann. The Secessionist school of architecture, as well as its critics, were both inspired by the work of Otto Wagner, architect of many of the Vienna city transit stations and bridges, as well as masterpieces of early modern architecture such as the Post Office Savings Bank and the Am Steinholch Church. Hoffmann’s establishment of the Wiener Werkstätte, and the relation of many of the Secessionist architects’ works to Art Nouveau, along with their employment of newly invented ornament, was severely criticized by the architect Adolf Loos and the cultural critic Karl Kraus, whose scathing denunciations of what they saw as cultural degeneracy appeared in issues of Loos’s journal, Das Andere (The Other). Loos’s own architecture, which had restrained exteriors with complexly interlocking interior spaces, was closely related to the Arts and Crafts movement, as documented in The Studio. Among parallel cultural developments in Vienna before World War I, there was Arnold Schönberg in music, Sigmund Freud in psychology, Robert Musil in literature, Ernst Mach in science, and Ludwig Wittgenstein in philosophy, to name only the most well known. Despite his high expectations, Breuer was deeply disappointed when he arrived at the Academy of Fine Arts, finding the students uninterested and the teachers uninspiring, everyone being occupied with discussions of aesthetic theory and not with the actual making of art. He walked out of the Academy the same day, abandoning his scholarship and seeking out a position as a designer with an architect and cabinetmaker in Vienna, where he stayed for two months. As Breuer recalled, there were many Hungarians in Vienna in 1920, including a number of exiles from the failed Hungarian Communist revolution of the year before. During his...
brief time in Vienna, Breuer “studied with great interest art journals in the cafes,” and he recalls experiencing firsthand some of the city’s important modern buildings. However, he would later characterize these two months as the unhealthiest time of his life, almost despairing until one day his friend from Pícis, Fred Forbat, a recent architecture school graduate, gave Breuer “a little brochure what was written in the four-page brochure, Breuer that had drawn Breuer and other students to Weimar: were one and the same, as stated in the 1919 brochure, than anything else, it was Gropius’s “emblematic” vision declared in the four-page brochure Breuer was given. More of 1914, both of which have been recognized as early architectural education, stated in the 1919 brochure, the architect of the Fagus Factory (1911) and the administration building of the Deutscher Werkbund existing from 1919, of both of which have been recognized as early landmarks of modernism. The Werkbund had been founded to develop close relationships between art and industry in Germany, and one of its founders, the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde, had stepped down as director of the Grand Ducal School of Arts and Crafts in 1915, and subsequently urged that Gropius be appointed to replace him. In 1919, Gropius established the Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar as a combination of the Academy of Art and the School of Arts and Crafts, “in conjunction with a newly affiliated department of architecture,” as declared in the four-page brochure Breuer was given. More than anything else, it was Gropius’s “emblematic” vision for the Bauhaus — a place where the artist and craftsman would be one and the same, as stated in the 1919 brochure, that had drawn Breuer and other students to Weimar:

The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! Today the arts exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen... Architects, sculptors, painters, we all must return to the craft! For art is not a “profession.” There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman...but proficiency in craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies the prime source of creativity. Several works of instruction. Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen... Yet Gropius’s definition of the school as including architectural education, stated in the 1919 brochure, would not become a reality until 1927. In addition, Breuer’s account of working with Gropius is a bit more imaginatively phrased than in letters to his wife Lily in January 1921: “Preliminary Course class, giving a detailed account of the Bauhaus faculty Breuer found when he arrived at the school. Besides Gropius, the faculty then included the painter Lyonel Feininger, the ceramicist Garber Mareck, and the painter Johannes Itten. As if the diversity of viewpoints represented by the rapidly growing Bauhaus faculty was not enough, Theo van Doesburg, the founder of the Dutch De Stijl movement, had also arrived in Weimar that same year with the express purpose of setting up a competing “school,” giving lectures every week in the Bauhaus students, who attended in large numbers. The sculptor Oskar Schlemmer, who joined the Bauhaus faculty at this time, wrote in a letter to his friend Theo van Doesburg was “drawing the Bauhaus students under his spell—especially those interested in architecture, who deplore the Bauhaus’s deficiency in this area... He rejects craftsmanship (the focus of the Bauhaus) in favor of the most modern: the machine. [He argues for] exclusive and consistent use of only the horizontal and the vertical in art and architecture...”

The summer of 1920, when Breuer arrived, coincided with the first time Bauhaus students were taught that the Preliminary Course, or “Vorkurs,” involving six months of instruction covering the fundamentals of form, material, and design process, later known as “basic design.” One of the most important contributions to art and architecture education that has emerged from Itten’s class involved “doing rhythmic movements, designing in rhyme, reinterpreting the elementary forms and expressing our different feelings in a direct manner.”9 While Itten would leave the Bauhaus in 1923, before Breuer had completed his studies, his influence would remain in the teaching of the Preliminary Course. Josef Albers, another student who entered the Bauhaus at the same time as Breuer, would later join what was by that time a team of teachers for the Preliminary Course. Albers’s teaching at the Bauhaus, at Black Mountain College, and at Yale University, which included the training of the body to draw with feeling (inspired in many ways by Itten’s teaching of the Preliminary Course), would have the most profoundly formative affect on generations of artists and architects.10

Klee’s class notes from the period in which he was a new student at the Bauhaus, wherein Klee endeavored to teach students “how to see” and how to shape movement through space, are documented in The Thinking Eye and The Nature of Nature, which are among the most important books on modern design education.11 Breuer considered Klee’s notes to be one of the two most influential teachers he ever had, and he recalled how, during a lecture at the blackboard, Klee “drew an arrow pointing...
Furniture Designs at the Bauhaus

Armchair with plywood, 1922

Plywood children's chair, table, and table, 1923

Woman's bedroom, axonometric, Haus am Horn, 1923

Dressing table and chair, Haus am Horn, 1923
Bauwelt apartment building competition, 1923; model

Apartment building, Weimar, 1923, elevations

B3 Wassily tubular steel armchair, designed 1925; Gavina version, 1962

Bent chromed steel tube frame for B3 Wassily armchair
FURNITURE DESIGNS AT THE BAUHAUS

B9 stools and wood dining tables, Bauhaus canteen, 1927

B9 tubular steel nesting tables, 1925–6

B19 table, tubular steel and glass, 1927–8

B21 typing table, steel and plywood, 1928

B14 armchair, steel, wood, and fabric, 1928
Ise and Walter Gropius in their Bauhaus apartment, 1927; with B3 Wassily chairs.

Cantilevered steel tube chair frame experiment, welded by plumber, c. 1924

B33 cantilevered tubular steel chair, 1927

B32 Cesca chair, cane seat and back, 1928. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, photography, and Herbert Bayer, graphic design.

B34 Cesca armchair

B35 lounge chair, steel, wood, and fabric, 1928–9

FURNITURE DESIGNS AT THE BAUHAUS
Clarifying the Themes
Public Buildings, 1960–70

In the religious, institutional, and commercial build-
ings that were built to his designs in the 1960s, Breuer evolved his characteristic emphases on the expression of structure, and on surface depth and modulation of the building skin. Breuer held that clarity was an essential quality of architecture, and that it was inextricably linked to the expression of structure and function. In 1964, he stated: “To us clarity means the definite expression of the purpose of a building and a sincere expression of its structure. One can regard this sincerity as a sort of moral duty, but I feel that for the designer it is above all a trial of strength that sets the seal of success on his achievement; and the sense of achievement is a very basic instinct.”

While the structure had been at least partially clad, and sometimes completely hidden in a number of his earlier works, by the time he made this statement in 1964, it is clear that Breuer shared with his contem-
porary Louis Kahn the belief in the moral imperative to express structure. Like Kahn, Breuer also embraced structure as a fundamental component of the design of a building: “I like to see structure, to emphasize it, and to develop it—not just as a means to a solution. It is also a principle and a passion.”

The emergence of visible structure, and its “sin-
cere expression” in Breuer’s work, was paralleled and made possible by his engagement, beginning in the 1950s, of reinforced cast-in-place structural and finish concrete as his building material of choice. In this way, as Breuer said: “The structure itself became art.”

With the buildings completed in the 1960s, Breuer established himself as the American master of reinforced concrete—extending Le Corbusier’s efforts in developing an aesthetic of board-formed béton brut. Regarding reinforced concrete, Breuer believed “no other material has the potential of such complete and convincing fusion between structure, enclosure, and surface—between architecture and detail, between the minute great form and the great small particle.” Of equal importance was Breuer’s parallel engagement of the rapidly developing pre-
cast-concrete industry during the 1950s, which began employing steam-curing, vibration, and steel forms in factory settings, producing high-quality surface finishes. While Kahn aggressively employed the abil-
ity of the precasting industry to fabricate prestressed and post-stressed concrete structural components, Breuer was more interested in engaging the possibil-
ities of making building skins from prefabricated, repetitive, sculpted precast-concrete elements.

Based on his critique of the glass curtain wall skin of modern architecture, which had become ubiquitous by the 1950s, Breuer evolved a highly plastic sculptural interpretation of precast-concrete construction, used as facade and structural cladding, to create strong shadow patterns and sun shielding. In 1966, Breuer described his reasoning for employing precast-concrete for facades, noting how the building structure, insula-
tion and sun shading, and mechanical heating-cooling components of contemporary construction were al-
most impossible to incorporate into the iconic modern glass exterior wall:

“The glass wall—as an expression of modern technology—seems to conflict with technology itself. The search for an exterior which would integrate the demands of an enclosure goes parallel with a new approach to the technique and aesthetic of precast-concrete. Both lead us to architectural solutions which can be called “molded,” and which have the characteristics of a facade unattainable in any other familiar mod-
ern material. The large prefabricated panels can be designed for a variety of technical require-
ments: they may be load-bearing and structural;
they may offer chases and hollows for pipes, ducts and heating-cooling equipment; they may form projections for sun protection; they may be solid or may contain large openings; they may combine all of these. What about aesthet-
ics? A new depth of facade is emerging; a three-
dimensionality with a resulting greatly expand-
ed vocabulary of architectural expression.”

4 Breuer, Architectural Record, April 1966; Papachristou, op. cit., 19.
Armstrong Rubber Company, view of complex from north.
Armstrong Rubber Company; floor plans of lower building (above) and tower (below)

Armstrong Rubber Company; south elevation

Armstrong Rubber Company; recent view from northwest

Armstrong Rubber Company; view of front facade with concrete sign
New York University Technology II; view of classrooms and building beyond.

New York University Technology II; view of classroom wing/roof from street.

New York University Technology II; view of court above library, laboratory facade.

New York University Technology II; floor plans, typical upper floor (above) and ground floor (below).