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**The search for modern form** / 38

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No nation was more deeply affected by the trauma of World War I than Germany. The caste-bound society of the Hohenzollern empire was replaced by the democratic Weimar Republic and its highly decentralized political structure. Architectural policies began to be shaped principally by municipal administrations, though some national organizations contributed to financing them. After the assassination of the leftist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1919 and the repression of their revolutionary party, the Spartacist League, the new Social Democratic-dominated government abandoned any serious attempt to transform radically the modes of production. This left only the utopia of a progressive “socialization” on the agenda, notably in the field of construction, where the model of the Bauhütte—or medieval guild—proved seductive. For a few years the unions considered having the Bauhütten participate directly in the reconstruction of the war-damaged north of France, as part of reparations. These political and economic strategies found a cultural and architectural response in Expressionism, an aesthetic orientation born in poetry and in painting, which favored dynamic forms that embodied the psychological torment of wartime Germany.

The Arbeitsrat für Kunst

Following the empire’s collapse, demobilized architects organized events intended to reveal new conceptions of architectural space. In late 1918, with a growing number of workers’ and soldiers’ councils being organized, the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Work Council for the Arts) was established in Berlin under the direction of Walter Gropius, Cesar Klein, and Adolf Behne. Though the council was composed of a minority of architects—Otto Baur, Bruno Taut, and Max Pechstein—and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, the former were clearly in control. In its Architektur program the Arbeitsrat put forward the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk—a total work of art—“under the wing of great architecture.” Written by Bruno Taut, this programmatic statement featured slogans such as “Art and people must form a unity” and “Art shall no longer be the enjoyment of the few but the life and happiness of the masses.”

This program laid out the new republic’s strategies by insisting on the “public character of all building activity,” the “unitary supervision of whole urban districts, streets, and residential estates,” and the creation of “permanent experimental sites for testing and perfecting new architectural effects.” It demanded the dissolution of all academies and of all monuments, including war memorials, that required an excessive quantity of materials, as well as the creation of a “national center to ensure the fostering of the arts within the framework of future law-making.”

In April 1919 the Arbeitsrat organized the Ausstellung für unbekannte Architekten (Exhibition for Unknown Architects), devoted to members of the group. In the catalog Gropius wrote that architecture was “the crystalline expression of man’s noblest thoughts, his ardor, his humanity, his faith, his religion! ... There are no architects today, we are all of us merely preparing the way for him who will once again deserve the name of architect, for that means, lord of art, who will build gardens out of deserts and pile up wonders to the sky.” Taut affirmed in the same leaflet that the desire for the future was architecture in the making: “One day there will be a Weltanschauung [world-view], and then there will also be its sign, its crystal-architecture.”

Such a crystalline architecture had been prophesied by Paul Scheerbart, to whom the Arbeitsrat’s manifesto Ruf zum Bauen (1920; Call to Build) was dedicated. In 1919 Taut published his book Die Stadtkrone (The City Crown), an urban vision full of references to pagodas and temples, propo sing to place at the center of the future city a soaring tower that would embody its spiritual aspirations. The stunning plates of his Alpine Architektur 153, published the same year, provided the most systematic expression of the new architecture to which the Arbeitsrat aspired, while expressing the ideal of brotherhood among the peoples of Europe. Indeed, he depicted the multicolored glass cupolas of this architecture as suspended above the Alps—as if in response to the pacifist texts by the French writer Romain Rolland and in anticipation of his German compatriot Thomas Mann’s 1924 novel Der Zauberberg (The Magic Mountain). The origins of these images lie both in Scheerbart’s writings and in the plates published by Ernst Haeckel in his Kunstformen der Natur (Art Forms in Nature) and Kristallschalen (Crystal Souls).

From late 1919 to late 1920 another allusion to crystalline transparency, the utopian correspondence known as the Gläserne Kette (Glass Chain), brought together the Taut brothers, Wenzel Hablik, Hans and Wassili Luckhardt, and Hans Scharoun. The pseudonyms adopted for this series of chain letters—among them Anfang (beginning), Mass, Stellarius, Prometh, and Angkor—allude to the reconciliation of man and the cosmos, an aspiration typical of the immediate postwar period. Taut rounded out this series of utopian pronouncements with Die Auflösung der Städte, oder die Ende einer guten Wohnung (1920; The Dissolution of Cities, or the Earth as a Good Dwelling), in which he imagined a great migration from the corrupt cities to the redeemable countryside, adopting as his own the anti-urban arguments of Piotr Kropotkin and other anarchist and socialist theorists. Taut also founded the periodical Frühlicht (Dawn) and from 1921 to 1923 devoted his services to the city of Magdeburg in an effort to bring about the social program prescribed by the Arbeitsrat. Some of the participants in the Gläserne Kette exchanges prudently avoided putting their words into action on the building site. This was the case with Hablik and with Hermann Finsterlin, whose projects, despite their apparently realistic programs, were mainly situated in an imaginary world, Hablik’s Ausstellungsbauten (1921; Exhibition Constructions) consisted of pyramidal superimpositions of prisms, while Finsterlin’s Architekturentwürfe (1919–20; Architectural Projects) were unmistakably zoomorphic, evoking snails, seashells, and sea urchins.

Dynamism in architecture

The fluid and indeed elusive Expressionist movement in architecture that was embodied in these projects shared with contemporary pictorial experiments a world of broken but dynamic forms. It also attracted older architects like Peter Behrens, who transformed his former architectural language in several new structures 5. The headquarters he built for Hoechst in Frankfurt am Main (1920–24) was a more lyrical version of his classic pre-war buildings. By reflecting the vertical light coming through glass roofs onto multicolored enamelled-brick walls, he created one of the most striking interiors associated with Expressionism. Hans Poelzig’s new projects responded to Taut’s call for transparency by playing with solid masses. His contribution to the competition for the Haus der Freundschaft (1916; House of Friendship) in Constantinople, the magical grotto he devised within the Grobes Schauspielehaus 157 (1919; Great Playhouse)
Fritz Höger, Chilehaus, Hamburg, 1922–23

Michel de Klerk, Eigen Haard housing cooperative, Amsterdam, 1917–21

Michel de Klerk and Piet Kramer, De Dageraad housing cooperative, Amsterdam, 1918–23

De Klerk and the Amsterdam school

The obvious parallels between these buildings in Hamburg and Bremen and those erected in Amsterdam by Michel de Klerk beginning in 1915 were not coincidental. Though partly attributable to a shared culture of brick construction, the correspondences went deeper. To some extent, Weimar policies were a continuation of Dutch housing legislation, notably the Woningwet, which had guaranteed public financing for working-class housing since 1901. Regulated by a system of controls and standards, Dutch housing was built through municipal or cooperative programs. The neutrality of the Netherlands during the war had allowed the country to launch programs more advanced than those of the combatant nations. While German cities were struggling to reactivate their construction industry, Amsterdam was already flush with building sites.

German and Dutch projects originated in a shared architectural matrix that incorporated the Theosophical theories of J. L. M. Lauweriks and the teaching of Hendrik Petrus Berlage, which had widely circulated in Germany. Meetings of Architectura et amicitia (Architecture and Friendship), a society of Amsterdam professionals established in 1855, hosted an intense debate on the question of Gemeenschap Kunst, or social art. Johan Melchior van der Mey’s Scheepvaarthuis (1911–16; House of Shipping Companies) in Amsterdam, which deconstructed and recomposed the traditional architectural language, also seems to anticipate Höger’s buildings of the 1920s. Among the assistants on the Scheepvaarthuis, was the young de Klerk, many competition projects before building the Hillehuis (1912), an apartment house echoing the complex vertical organization of Van der Mey’s building.

Most significant, de Klerk’s three projects for the Eigen Haard (Own Hearth) cooperative in Amsterdam, built from 1913 to 1921, created a neighborhood in which urban form was absorbed into a continuum of interrelated sculptural effects. The play of the bricks’ colors, which range from crimson to orange; the way they are laid both horizontally and vertically; and their diverse shapes—which can be rectilinear, convex, or concave—combine to create a rich world in which the modest size of the housing units is partly compensated for by the buildings’ sensuous opulence. The facade is an undulating spectacle with unusual-shaped openings that call to mind woven and embroidered textiles. For the third building (1917–21), nicknamed “The Ship,” de Klerk combined a village theme with a mechanical motif. The housing wraps around a courtyard in which the meeting hall plays the role of rural church, while the post office serves as a locomotive pulling the entire complex, which in fact stood beside the city’s main railroad tracks.

Next de Klerk collaborated with Piet Kramer on the housing units of the De Dageraad (1918–23; The Dawn) cooperative, built as a component of Berlage’s plan for Amsterdam-South. Here de Klerk presented a clearer, more open image of low-income housing. He aligned the houses along the street in a continuous wave, in which each unit appears to be woven together with its neighbor. Once again he created the illusion of a village community by grouping the units two by two on a central square to form large houses separated by tall chimneys.

Paula Modersohn-Becker (1926–27), which combined an oneric layout of oddly convoluted rooms with a rough exterior.

Chapter 09 | Expressionism in Weimar Germany and the Netherlands
While the rest of the world was drained of its resources, the United States came out of World War II as a creditor to most of the combatants, holding an unprecedented amount of economic and symbolic power. Thanks to the general admiration for American technology and culture and to the effect of U.S. foreign policies, the appreciation of American culture that had prevailed during previous decades now led into a more or less potent process of Americanization, as countries were transformed by American cultural models and capital. But in the United States itself, the hopes for a continuation of the kind of socially oriented policies that had characterized the Depression and the war years were dashed. With the Cold War and McCarthyism, progressive and dissident voices in the field of architecture were silenced and public housing programs were sometimes suspended; in Los Angeles, such programs were brought to a halt after being denounced as Communist inspired.

The second skyscraper age

After a hiatus of two decades, skyscrapers reappeared on Manhattan’s skyline in the early 1950s. The first building project to symbolize American hegemony to the world was the headquarters of the United Nations, an institution created by the Allies in 1945. An international advisory committee was established the next year under the direction of Wallace K. Harrison, composed of Le Corbusier, Josef Havlíček, Oscar Niemeyer, Ernest Cormier, Sven Markelius, and Max Abramovitz (as Harrison’s assistant). Once the Rockefellers donated a site along New York’s East River, they got down to work. The committee ended up adopting Niemeyer’s project, which was based on an idea by Le Corbusier, who was stung in turn by what he felt was insufficient recognition of his contribution. Harrison designed the details of the office tower as well as the low General Assembly building (1948–52). No newcomer to the New York scene, Harrison was able to win other significant commissions as well. He built the Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh (1951–53) with Abramovitz and Oscar Nitchik, creating the first curtain wall made of aluminum panels. The skyscraper’s rounded windows, punched into the panels and similar to those found in railroad cars, made it look like a stack of television sets. MoMA’s curator Arthur Drexler described the play of light across these panels, which were stamped with a lozenge pattern, as “a shifting diagonal movement and a sculptural interest reminiscent of, say, the rustica- tions of the Czernin Palace.”

The modern office building may have found its first West Coast incarnation in Pietro Belluschi’s Equitable Building in Portland (1944–48)—the first anywhere to be fully air conditioned. The firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) was also key in the development of the postwar office building. With Gordon Bunshaft as chief designer, SOM built Lever House (1952) on New York’s Park Avenue. The building broke with the principle of setbacks established by the zoning regulations of 1916 and set the new norm with a rectangular tower standing on a low plinth occupying the entire area of the block. The lightness of its glass facade and the airiness of its interior volumes made it the prototype for a new generation of modern, open work spaces.

With Natalie De Blois’s more modest building for Pepsi-Cola (1956–60), the “Park Avenue School of Architecture” created what critic Ada Louise Huxtable would describe as nothing less than a “post-war miracle.” SOM also built the lower-rise Manufacturers’ Hanover Bank Building on Fifth Avenue, with an entirely glazed facade that, when illuminated at night, makes it
materiality of the Whitney, Breuer explored the various possibilities of exposed concrete. 18

Saarinen’s lyricism and Johnson’s anxiety

Eero Saarinen’s career, abruptly ended with his early death in 1961, was characterized by buildings that each proposed a unique and powerful idea, taking into account function, overall image, and structural invention. After working with his father Eliel, he made the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan (1948–56), into an upbeat campus where offices and lab buildings with steel structures were disposed around a large lake and transfigured by the vivid color of glazed brick. The potential value in building monumental complexes was confirmed for major companies with Saarinen’s office headquarters for the tractor manufacturer John Deere in Moline, Illinois (1957–63). The slab construction utilizes Cor-Ten steel for the first time, exploiting its weathering, rusty coloration against the pastoral green of the landscape. At Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Saarinen juxtaposed two ideas: while Kresge Auditorium (1954) is a thin-shell structure resting on three points—the very embodiment of lightweight construction, which he compared to an “eighth of an orange”—the adjacent chapel (1952–54) is a solid cylinder of brick into which sunlight is directed through an oculus so that it hits the altar vertically, evoking the theatrical devices of Gianlorenzo Bernini in Baroque Rome.

These two contradictory orientations—light and solid—would determine Saarinen’s major projects. Among the light structures he built were the thin barrel-vaults of the TWA Terminal at Idlewild—now John F. Kennedy—Airport. In 1959 he wrote that he intended the architecture of the terminal to be “distinctive and memorable” among the terminals at Idlewild, but also that he aspired to design “a building in which the architecture itself would express the drama and specialness and excitement of travel,” thus a “place of movement and of transition.” 19 His terminal at Dulles Airport, near Washington, D.C., has a cable-supported roof that evokes the pitch of an airplane wing and looks as if it were about to lift the building off the ground. Among his more solid structures are the Ezra Stiles and Samuel Morse Colleges at Yale (1958–62), a labyrinthine complex evoking Italian hill towns, and the granite-covered “black rock” of the CBS Tower in New York (1960–64), in which he rejected glass curtain walls to return to the idea of a concrete load-bearing facade, as expressive as it is thick. 20 The diversity of responses to specific functional and symbolic programs is also characteristic of the work of Philip Johnson, who went along with change more than he generated it. His work often looks like an anxious reaction to the new paradigms being invented around him. The Glass House he built for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut (1949), was an effete echo of Mies’s Farnsworth House, as well as a frontal, static one. It does not achieve Mies’s sophisticated three-dimensional play despite the fact that it is built on a more spectacular site, dominating an idyllic valley. Johnson would erect a series of playful pavilions on his property at regular intervals, like an eighteenth-century British aristocrat building temples and pagodas. Responding anxiously as well as methodically to the architecture’s successive changes in orientation he would cast a long shadow over the American profession as well as its cultural institutions. 21 In 1954 Johnson distanced himself from the precepts of functionalism in a lecture whose title alluded to John Ruskin’s Seven Lamps of Architecture (1894). Johnson’s “seven crutches of modern architecture” were history, “pretty drawing,” utility or usefulness, comfort, cheapness, service to the client, and struct-
Frank Lloyd Wright, drawing for the Robie House, Chicago, 1908–10

The design committee for the United Nations Building, including Le Corbusier and Wallace K Harrison, New York, 1947

Louis Kahn, Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, 1959–65

Page 1:
Mies van der Rohe, on site at the Illinois Institute of Technology Alumni Memorial Hall, Chicago, 1945–46

Page 10–11:
Rudolf Steiner, Second Goetheanum, Dornach, 1924–28