

On modernity and modernism

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Introduction to the section MODERNITY

Working with the history of modern architecture implies certain problems which are specific for this period, and which come from the fact that it is difficult to get a proper distance.

There are three main problems: Modern architecture is not a past period; we are still living in it. Modern architecture has been historicised from the beginning, almost before it existed. Modern architecture is normally described with a set of concepts which are themselves part of the modern movement.

Modern architecture is not a thing of the past

Most architecture today is still modern or modernist: It uses new and advanced technology and materials. It is very much concerned with expressing the Zeitgeist. It is optimistic and expresses a belief in technology and progress. These are all typical modernist positions. Now, it is my belief that in the architecture of the twentieth century we have seen a constant struggle between modernism, classicism and populism/the vernacular.

In this struggle, modernism has appeared three times: The heroic period in the 1920s, the international style in the fifties and sixties and the actual neo-modernism which may be called a post-modern modernism. Post-modern, because it has almost no connection to any political agenda, because it is fragmented and occupied with contingency and uncertainty and because it is a revival, a conscious reuse of the language of the two earlier modernisms.

Modern architecture has been historicised from the very beginning

By this I mean that architects and art historians have tried to write the history of modern architecture almost before it existed. There were not many buildings representative of modern architecture in the twenties, but already people like Adolf Behne and Walter Curt Behrendt were writing books about it. Behne's *Der moderne Zweckbau* was published in 1926 but actually written as early as 1923. Behrendt's *Der Sieg des neuen Baustils* in 1927. In 1932 came Hitchcock and Johnson's *The International Style*. In 1936 Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* and in 1941 Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. There were even others, by Gro-

pius, Mendelssohn and Mosei Ginzburg. These writers all attempted to write the history of (the beginnings of) modern architecture, but in a very ideological or normative way. Their histories, especially the books by Pevsner and Giedion, were constructions made to legitimise the new architecture as a progressive and superbly rational movement and demonise the eclecticism of nineteenth Century architecture.

Since 1960, a new generation of historians have been trying to correct this one-sidedness and to paint a truer but also more complex and problematic picture of modern architecture. Peter Collins' *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture* from 1960 told a very different story, beginning around 1750 and giving a much more sympathetic understanding of nineteenth century historicism and eclecticism. Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* from 1965, which was the first book to go deeply into the writings of the early modernists, also ended up giving a different and more critical picture of the architecture of the twenties and thirties. One could even mention Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* from 1966 as one of the books that contributed to a new reading of modern architecture. The result of all this was a broader understanding than that of Giedion and Pevsner, with the inclusion of expressionism, futurism, classicising modern architecture à la Perret and even architects like Voysey and Lutyens. A more inclusive understanding, to use a word from Venturi's manifesto. Panayotis Tournikiotis, in his *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* from 1999, has analysed and compared some of these histories of modern architecture.

In the nineties the history of modern architecture has been re-read once more. With post-structuralism or "Critical theory" some of its "repressed" sides have been uncovered, especially the whole question of gender and architecture and, recently, questions connected to what is now called post-colonial studies. Also the relation of modern architecture to environmental problems has become an area for recent studies.

In this process the darker, more irrational sides of modern architecture and modernism in general have

surfaced. In books like H. Allen Brook's *Le Corbusier's Formative Years* from 1997 it becomes evident how much the thoughts of Nietzsche and other quasi-religious writers meant for the young Jeanneret. The same goes for several of the "pioneers" – Gropius, Mendelssohn, Melnikov and of course Van Doesburg – they all were deeply influenced by more or less irrational philosophies at the beginning of their careers. Especially Theosophy had a considerable influence.

Not only the history of modern architecture has to be scrutinised, also the language we use about it

Together with modern architecture came a new theory of art and a whole set of new concepts, which are now considered to be more or less "natural" but in reality are only about a hundred years old and connected to a specific way of understanding architecture. These concepts come from German *Kunstwissenschaft* in the late nineteenth century, from art historians like Wölfflin, Schmarsow, Brinckmann and Worringer. The most important of these concepts are Space (*Raum*), Mass (*Körperliche Masse*) and Form (*Gestalt*). Together with concepts like Rhythm, Light, Texture and Material they treat architecture as an abstract art, as something to be appreciated in a purely aesthetic way, through Empathy (*Einfühlung*), another new and very important concept. These concepts are very different from earlier nineteenth Century concepts like style, ornament, construction or function. We are still using these concepts when talking about architecture, but they are by no means neutral or innocent, they imply a certain perspective on architecture. Recently historians like Adrian Forty in *Words and Buildings* from 2000 or Mark Jarzombek in *The Psychologizing of Modernity. Art, Architecture and History* from 2000 have begun a "deconstruction" of this language and the way of looking upon architecture that comes with it. This "deconstruction" is not without its own problems – it places too much emphasis on theories and concepts and too little on the material aspects of architecture and its generation – but it is important for a more critical understanding,

so to speak, of our present understanding of what modern architecture has been about.

All this makes the history of modern architecture a rather complicated venture, but not an impossible one. It is still perfectly possible to write quite ordinary, straightforward history, based upon the study of "facts": buildings, projects, the writings of architects and clients, reviews etc. What it does mean is that in interpreting these "facts" one must be very careful not to take the traditional histories and frameworks of interpretation for granted but make allowance for these new and more critical perspectives.