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# Architecture, Regionalism, and the Vernacular:Reconceptualizing Modernism in America

Mardges Bacon

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- 1 In recent years consideration of regionalism and the vernacular has reshaped the discourse on modernism.<sup>1</sup> In a historiographical case study around 1930, I propose to challenge the polemical view that the “International Style” was *the* project that defined modernism in American architecture until the Tennessee Valley Authority program and postwar Bay Area Regionalism. My intention is to show how a diverse group of American historians and critics, including Lewis Mumford, Douglas Haskell, and even Alfred Barr and Henry-Russell Hitchcock—two figures inseparably linked to the International Style—each constructed a different archaeology of modernism based in part on local practice. To counterbalance the dominance of the European project as well as the homogenizing currents of internationalism for American consumption, these historians and critics gave voice to vernacular interests associated with ordinary building and regional identity. They considered them more consonant with the professed democratic values of the 1930s. Through European eyes Americans discovered local models of utilitarian urban building. They also pursued a new interest in the “facts” of a building and its everyday character, both linked to American Pragmatism. This reflected a broader search in American culture for authenticity, encompassing native sources of modern art within an academic tradition, the vernacular of commonplace traditions, folk art, and ethnographic studies. It paralleled the work of regional writers, artists, photographers, and filmmakers giving expression to national consciousness during the Great Depression.
- 2 My contention is that two streams of American modernism, one organic and the other technocratic and production-based, opposed the received tradition of European avant-garde architecture, formulated as the International Style in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* and related projects, including Hitchcock and Philip Johnson’s book, *The International Style*.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 The first stream was associated with an “organic tradition,” as defined by Louis Sullivan in his “Kindergarten Chats” essays and refined by Mumford in *The Brown Decades* of 1931.<sup>3</sup> In Mumford’s chauvinistic account, modern architecture did not originate in Europe but in the United States during the period from 1880 to 1895. United by a common purpose to join utility with beauty, a group of young American architects, among them Henry Hobson Richardson, John Welborn Root, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright, produced innovative and experimental work that antedated European modernism by ten years. Mumford further argued that Richardson initiated the modern movement, inferring that he broke with his own training in the European Beaux-Arts system to design such ordinary buildings as offices and railroad stations. “Ready to face the totality of modern life,” Richardson absorbed a native vernacular tradition that offered, according to Mumford, “the starting point for a new architecture.”<sup>4</sup>
- 4 Mumford also attributed Richardson’s modernity to his union of functional concerns and symbolic intentions. In his parochial mission not only to advance the American origin of European modernism but also to Americanize modernity itself, Mumford endorsed the idea that “Richardson was the real founder of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.” To support the claim, Mumford pointed to the “factualism” of the program for the Glessner House in Chicago (1885–87), in which windows were disposed according to the function. He also endorsed Sullivan’s observation that Richardson’s Marshall Field Wholesale Store in Chicago (1885–87) was both a “physical fact” and a symbol of commerce.<sup>5</sup> Mumford found further American sources for the *neue Sachlichkeit* in Roots’s Monadnock Building (1884–85), which the critic Montgomery Schuyler deemed a successful commercial building because its architectural expression was merely “a box.”<sup>6</sup> This encouraged Mumford to define the Monadnock’s factualness as “the thing itself.”<sup>7</sup> Sullivan also advanced that idea in his essay, “The Tall Building Artistically Considered” (1896) when he defined the office building in term of both its facts—structural, functional, and programmatic—and symbols associated with organic life. For example, a grid of offices was analogous to cells in a honeycomb.<sup>8</sup>
- 5 If Richardson launched modernism in American architecture and Sullivan developed its factual and symbolic expression, Wright advanced the organic tradition at the intersection of mechanization. Early on Wright promoted the machine as a tool to democratize architecture.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Mumford thought that such new forms as Wright’s prefabricated “type houses” had anticipated the “mechanical age.” Wright reconciled the machine and nature through an emphasis on the palpable character of materials and on local attachments to the land. In doing so, he gave architectural expression to what Mumford called a “biotechnic economy.”<sup>10</sup>
- 6 A second stream of American modernism was centered on a technocratic and production-based critique of the International Style. In an effort to repatriate their own factories and grain elevators, which Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier had previously appropriated as signs of modernity, productivists called for the application of advanced technology to production processes, rather than machine-age symbolism or formalist expression.
- 7 According to the cultural historian John Kouwenhoven, such utilitarian works were products of a deeply rooted vernacular tradition, which represented the efforts of ordinary people to create meaningful design. Useful things, including tools, machines, and buildings, often anonymously designed, were expressions of a “technological

vernacular.”<sup>11</sup> A mechanized society invested in everyday products suggested a consensus within American culture. In his 1948 book *Mechanization Takes Command*, Sigfried Giedion characterized the United States as a nation “where the new methods of production were first applied, and where mechanization is inextricably woven into the pattern of thought and customs.”<sup>12</sup>

- 8 For a frontier nation structured by democratic institutions, such vernacular innovations as the balloon frame made possible much of its housing. The balloon frame provided a systems approach to design and construction. From the 1890s building companies offered both stock plans and factory-made housing components, marketing prefabricated housing as consumer products. On the one hand, the intervention of industrial capitalism commodified housing in the years before World War I. On the other hand, this practical and empirically based development was consonant with a late nineteenth-century strain of American thought called Pragmatism, which privileges facts over abstract ideas and accounts for the way people think and act in a culture shaped by utilitarianism. Such packaged housing of machine-made standardized parts reflected a form of technological vernacular. First, the efficiency movement, led by Frederick Winslow Taylor with his influential *Principles of Scientific Management* (1913), promised increased productivity through improved factory plans, assembly lines, and cooperation among workers, notwithstanding the charge of exploitation by big labor. Second, Henry Ford’s methods of mass production turned out the stripped-down Model-T car, a product of vernacular utilitarianism.
- 9 Based on Taylorism and Fordism, a new and more technologically advanced type of factory-made shelter emerged during the 1920s. No design was as central to the evolving discourse on modernism as Buckminster Fuller’s revolutionary project for the Dymaxion House in 1927. More than a symbol, Fuller’s “house as a machine,” according to the critic Douglas Haskell, was a technological fact.<sup>13</sup> Fuller’s prototypes for the Dymaxion House and multi-deck apartment houses each contained a central mast of “pressurized duralumin,” which served as both a supporting structure and a container for services and utilities.<sup>14</sup> Designed like a standard Ford, they could also be marketed like one.
- 10 With the downturn in housing demand and production during the 1930s, greater urgency was attached to the economic advantages of industrialized housing, none more than Fuller’s experimental prototypes. Haskell suggested that the standardized unit of the Dymaxion House was analogous to the Pullman car with its lightweight metal construction, strip windows, and air conditioning. It could also be built at half the cost of a conventional house.<sup>15</sup>
- 11 Unlike Haskell, Mumford was wary of industrial housing. Skeptical of the cost effectiveness of Fuller’s prototypes and opposed to their social implications,<sup>16</sup> he excluded them from the housing section he organized for the 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*. Of course, they also failed to meet Hitchcock and Johnson’s formalist standards. In response to the exhibition, Fuller mobilized a critique of the International Style. As Marc Dessauce analyzed with great acuity, Fuller turned to the Philadelphia-based *T-Square Club Journal*, which had undergone a transformation in the early 1930s from an organ of Beaux-Arts design to modernism. Fuller and Wright published critical reviews of the exhibition. Fuller took issue with the curators’ transmutation of a European “quasi-functional style” associated with metaphorical allusions into aesthetic dogma. By April 1932 Fuller had taken control of the journal,

renamed it *Shelter*, and turned it into an avant-garde revue advancing the productivist project.<sup>17</sup>

- 12 On another tack, the discourse on modernism among the true believers of the International Style was not as one-dimensional as historians have assumed. While Alfred Barr and his colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art promoted the International Style to establish an American site for modernism and thereby validate its claim to be an international lingua franca, they also understood the ways in which it could be informed by vernacular and regional considerations. For Barr and his colleagues were confronted with an ideological conflict that shaped the Modern since its founding only a week after the Wall Street crash in 1929: to promote European avant-garde developments and, at the same time, be both “American” and “democratic.”<sup>18</sup>
- 13 In an effort to “Americanize” modernism, Barr and his museum colleagues searched for rootedness and authenticity by engaging vernacular concerns and constructing genealogies based on style. By the late 1920s, according to Sybil Kantor, Barr, Hitchcock, Johnson, and Jere Abbott had conceptualized the International Style as participants in an avant-garde student organization, the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, and contributors to the arts and letters journal *Hound & Horn*, both under the direction of Lincoln Kirstein.<sup>19</sup> Within the Kirstein orbit Barr explored America’s technological vernacular, which he had previously absorbed from Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture* and other European manifestos while a student at Princeton, and published an essay on the Necco factory in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1927) for *Arts*.<sup>20</sup>
- 14 If Mumford founded his alliance of modern and vernacular on American culture, Barr and Hitchcock constructed genealogies based on style. Barr used diagrams as discursive tools to situate movements in visual culture and identify pioneers of modernism. While Barr explored African art and the “primitive” to mine early sources of European modernism, his colleague Holger Cahill looked to pre-colonial art of the Americas for early sources of American modernism. Under Mumford’s influence, Hitchcock tapped American sources of modern architecture in such didactic exhibitions as *Early Modern Architecture: Chicago 1870–1910* (1933) and *The Architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson* (1936), both at the Museum of Modern Art. Hitchcock also promoted modernism and the vernacular in a Wesleyan University exhibition *The Urban Vernacular* (1934).<sup>21</sup> Such historical and case studies were congruent with the design work of Wright, William Lescaze, Wallace Harrison, and Edward Durrell Stone; of Richard Neutra and other “Bay Area Regionalists”; and of Bauhaus émigrés Gropius and Marcel Breuer, which led to what Elizabeth Mock called a more “differentiated contemporary architecture.”<sup>22</sup>
- 15 The social deficit of the Depression gave new significance to low-cost housing communities. The Carl Mackley Houses in North Philadelphia (1935), a Public Works Administration project designed by the German-born American architects Oscar Stonorov and Alfred Kastner, effectively integrated housing with community and a sense of place. Like many European counterparts, it was financed by public loans to and controlled by a labor union, the American Federation of Hosiery Workers. Mackley’s three-story perimeter block design formed courtyards. With little reference to historical details, its terra-cotta façade and rubble walls were more consonant with a local vernacular than the formal clichés of the International Style.<sup>23</sup>

- 16 In probing the polemical view of the International Style through an exploration of vernacular impulses and discursive practice, my intention has been to reconceptualize modernism in American architecture during the 1930s. The two streams of American modernism, one organic associated with Chicago and the other production-based, anchored the pragmatic tradition of a native technological vernacular. The Americanization of the International Style, and its transformation into a more human-centered synthesis responsive to regional and vernacular conditions, reflects a pluralistic view of modernism in the 1930s.
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## NOTES DE FIN

1. On the role of the vernacular in the discourse on modernism, see essays in *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization, and the Built Environment*, Maiken UMBACH and Bernd HUPPAUF, eds., Palo Alto, California, 2005.
2. *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, New York, 1932. Henry-Russell HITCHCOCK, Jr., and Philip JOHNSON, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, New York, 1932.
3. Louis H. SULLIVAN, *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, New York, 1947. Lewis MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America 1865–1895*, New York, 1955; originally published 1931.
4. MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades*, pp. 118–119.
5. MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades*, pp. 120–121, 124–126.
6. Montgomery SCHUYLER, *American Architecture and Other Buildings*, William H. JORDY and Ralph COE, eds., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, p. 411; MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades*, p. 136.
7. MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades*, p. 136.
8. SULLIVAN, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, pp. 202–213.
9. Frank Lloyd WRIGHT, “The Art and Craft of the Machine,” in *Modern Architecture: Being the Kahn Lectures for 1930*, Princeton, 1931, pp. 7–23.
10. MUMFORD, *The Brown Decades*, pp. 165, 168, 170.
11. John A. KOUWENHOVEN, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization*, Newton Centre, Massachusetts, 1948, pp. 15–16.
12. Sigfried GIEDION, *Mechanization Takes Command*, New York, 1948, v.
13. Douglas HASKELL, “The House of the Future,” *The New Republic* 66 (May 13, 1931), p. 344.
14. Buckminster FULLER, “Universal Architecture,” *T-Square Club Journal* 2 (February 1932), pp. 22–25, 34–41.
15. HASKELL, “The House of the Future,” pp. 344–345.
16. Lewis MUMFORD, “Mass-Production and the Modern House,” *Architectural Record* 67 (January 1930), pp. 17–20.

17. Marc DESSAUCE, "Contro lo Stile Internazionale: 'Shelter' e la stampa architettonica Americana," *Casabella* 57 (September 1993), pp. 46–53, 70–71.
18. See Mardges BACON, "Modernism and Vernacular at the Museum of Modern Art, New York" in *Vernacular Modernism*, pp. 25–52, 205–215.
19. Sybil Gordon KANTOR, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, pp. 197–210.
20. Alfred H. BARR, Jr., "The Necco Factory," *Arts* 13 (May 1928), pp. 292–295.
21. Henry-Russell HITCHCOCK, Jr., *The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties: American Cities Before the Civil War*, Wesleyan University Architectural Exhibitions, 1934.
22. Elizabeth MOCK, ed., *Built in USA—1932–1944*, New York, 1944, pp. 13–14.
23. "The Carl Mackley Houses in Philadelphia," *Architectural Record* 78 (November 1935), pp. 289–298; Richard POMMER, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1978), pp. 237–243.

## RÉSUMÉS

Recent attention to regional and vernacular influences has reshaped the discourse on modernism. In a historiographical case study of modernism in America, I show how such historians and critics as Lewis Mumford, Douglas Haskell, Alfred Barr, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock each advanced a different archaeology of modernism. My contention is that two primary streams of American modernism countered the received tradition of European avant-garde architecture. The first was associated with the "organic tradition," as defined by Louis Sullivan and refined by Mumford in his book, *The Brown Decades* (1931). A second stream of American modernism was centered on technocratic initiatives. In an effort to repatriate their own vernacular forms based in mechanization, which European architects had previously appropriated as signs of modernity, such productivists as Buckminster Fuller and Knud Lönberg-Holm called for advanced technology over machine-age symbolism.

## INDEX

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