Modernism in America: from *Hound & Horn* to an Americanized “International Style”

MARDGES BACON
Northeastern University

The Museum of Modern Art’s “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” (1932), organized by director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, is generally credited with the initial advancement of “International Style” architecture. In preparing the exhibition Barr, Hitchcock, and Johnson were confronted with an ideological conflict that had beset the new museum since its founding only a week after the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929: to introduce European avant-garde developments and yet also be both “American” and “democratic.” What I want to demonstrate is that the “International Style” was broadly conceptualized as part of Barr and the Modern’s larger project to establish an American site for modernism in all the visual arts, thereby validating its internationalism. Moreover, Barr, Hitchcock, and Johnson formed a common understanding of an “International Style” as participants in an avant-garde student organization, the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, as well as contributors to the arts and letters journal, *Hound & Horn*, with which it was associated. Within these Harvard circles, as in his later direction of the Museum of Modern Art, Barr held the dominant vision of modernism, shaped by his critical position of formalism, which defined the “International Style” as a set of principles, both transnational and cross-disciplinary. For what emerged during the Modern’s path to institutional maturity was a discourse on modernism that engaged a range of interdisciplinary issues and objectives. With the diffusion of “International Style” principles following the exhibition, its partisans sought both its Americanization and its democratization as paths to attain cultural authenticity, on the one hand, and to dilute the European project, on the other.

Alfred Barr’s vision of modernism was both intellectually complex and purposely open-ended. Barr characterized modernism as “an elastic term” that serves conveniently to designate painting, sculpture, moving pictures, architecture, and the lesser visual arts, original and progressive in character, produced within the last three decades but including also ‘pioneer ancestors’ of the 19th century.” Many of the Modern’s early exhibitions bring into sharp relief, sometimes in a tensional relationship, the dual commitment to the formal search for quality and the institutional mission to democratize an appreciation of modern art and understand in Barr’s words, “that which is different from us.” The Museum’s discourse on modernism incorporated the received tradition of European abstraction, American traditions of realism, romanticism, and folk art, indigenous art in both Africa and the pre-Columbian New World, contemporary American art, and a broad range of disciplines including architecture and the design of everyday objects. In addressing a field of modernism from international to local and from “high” to “low,” the Museum also engaged vernacular concerns.

In one sense Barr viewed modernism as a critical term associated with the European avant-garde. In another sense he understood that the essence of modernism was its pluralistic character embracing representation as well as abstraction. In 1933 Barr advanced his concept of modernism in the context of forming a permanent collection as a “torpedo moving through time.” Barr represented it graphically as a diagram, “its nose the ever advancing present, its tail the ever receding past of fifty to a hundred years ago.” From that vantage “modern” extended back to the early 1880s and beyond. Barr sought to mine the historical legacy of modernism, exhibiting the work of Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat and others as European “ancestors” and Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins and others as American “pioneers.”
The term “International Style” owes its origin to the mid-1920s when Barr, Hitchcock, and Johnson were at Harvard. In their graduate studies with Paul Sachs, associate director at the Fogg Art Museum, Barr and Hitchcock were immersed in formalism—a critical perspective based on the formal qualities of a work rather than its meaning, symbolism, or content—and aestheticism. In 1926-27 they participated in Sachs’s museum seminar, which stressed connoisseurship based on the empirical study of objects in a tradition going back to Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson as well as objective beauty following the aesthetics of George Santayana.

In addition to Sachs’s museum course, the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art and Hound & Horn, both founded and directed by Lincoln Kirstein, also shaped Barr’s views of modernism. In their orbit were not only Barr and Hitchcock but also Jere Abbott (later Barr’s assistant and associate director at the Modern) and Johnson. The art and architecture exhibitions organized by the HSCA from 1929 to 1932 served as models for the Modern. Most were devoted to contemporary painting, sculpture, and decorative art, ranging from the Schools of Paris and New York, contemporary Mexican and German art, American folk art, to international photography. With its exhibition “The Staatliches Bauhaus, Dessau” (1930-31) the HSCA introduced American audiences to the Bauhaus “as a comprehensive unit” with examples of paintings by Lyonel Feininger and Wassily Kandinsky as well as photographs from Johnson’s collection of the work of Walter Gropius and Alfred Claus as well as Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion (1929). Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion House was the subject of two exhibitions, in May 1929 and March 1930. The Harvard Society also exhibited work of Harvard graduates, including drawings of prefabricated houses by the Chicago architect Howard Fisher. As Russell Lynes recounts in Good Old Modern, Museum trustee Monroe Wheeler claimed, “the Museum of Modern Art began in Harvard.”

The Museum of Modern Art’s discourse on modernism, which governed the 1932 “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition,” focused on three issues. The first was the idea of a unified contemporary “style” without borders known as the “International Style.” In his foreword to the catalogue Modern Architecture: International Exhibition Barr laid out the aesthetic principles that would later dominate the more famous publication The International Style by curators Hitchcock and Johnson. There Barr advanced the idea of a transnational style based on a set of now familiar formal properties—volume rather than mass; structural supports that encouraged regularity rather than the use Beaux-Arts symmetry; and fine proportions, technique, and elegant materials rather than applied decoration. The resulting “style” constituted a new international language with a range of personal expression, as noted in the work of Gropius, Le Corbusier, Oud, and Mies van der Rohe.

The term “International Style” had been used liberally by Barr, Jere Abbott, Hitchcock and others within the Harvard Society circle. It surfaced in accounts of Barr and Abbott’s study tour to Europe and Russia in 1927-1928. For example, Abbott employed “International Style” in his published account of their Russian trip in Hound & Horn in 1929. During their tour of London, Holland, Dessau, Berlin, Moscow, Leningrad, Czechoslovakia, Vienna, Stuttgart, Munich, and Paris, Barr and Abbott found expressions of modern culture. Their visits to low-cost housing estates in Hook of Holland by J.J.P. Oud and at the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and others, for example, helped to refine Barr’s formalist and transnational approach to the “International Style,” which would inform the 1932 exhibition. Moreover, their four-day visit to the Bauhaus in Dessau, and 10-week trip to Russia confirmed that these cultures interpreted modernism as an interdisciplinary project linking the arts with everyday life. At the Bauhaus Barr absorbed the idea of a “unity of style” among the fine and applied arts including architecture and industrial design, which Sybil Kantor has called “the most important idea governing the founding of the Museum of Modern Art.” In Russia Barr saw further interdisciplinary expressions of modern culture. His “Russian Diary” documents an infusion of modernism, especially constructivism and suprematism in the art, theater, film, music, and especially architecture that he and Abbott encountered.

Such an international consensus of architects responding to modern life even received the endorsement of Lewis Mumford who contributed a section on housing to the 1932 exhibition. He had been reluctant to collaborate on an exhibition devoted to the idea of an “International Style” with a European bias. In a letter to Frank Lloyd Wright, Mumford expressed his opposition to the “dreadful phrase, since architecture is architecture and never; except in a bastard form, a style.” However, he conceded that “while the phrase international style emphasizes all the wrong things architecturally, I think it is a fine sign that men off[ f] good will all over the world are beginning to face life in the same way, and to seek similar means of expressing it.”

The second issue concerned rootedness and cultural authenticity through the construction of a genealogy of style for modern architecture in America involving the congruence of modernism and vernacular. Barr’s associ-
ation with Kirstein’s *Hound & Horn*-Harvard Society circle encouraged the recognition of American vernacular buildings as models for contemporary architecture. When the Harvard journal reproduced a quartet of Jere Abbott’s photographs of the engineer-designed Necco candy factory in Cambridge, MA (1927), Hitchcock captioned them “the finest fragments of contemporary building.”15 Barr followed with an essay on “The Necco Factory” for Arts, illustrating it with Abbott’s photographs. Inspired by Le Corbusier’s polemical tract *Vers une architecture* of 1923, which praised American engineering but denounced American architecture as an expression of a regressive academic tradition, Barr called the local industrial building a “document in the growth of a new style” at once modern and vernacular.16

As Barr mined antecedents to modern painting and sculpture in the work of Cézanne and Seurat, based on formal principles, he situated Wright as a “pioneer ancestor” of “International Style” modernists.17 In their book *The International Style* Hitchcock and Johnson expanded the list of pioneers into a family tree. It was undoubtedly a belated response to Mumford who had unsuccessfully lobbied Johnson to designate a section of the exhibition to “the history of modern architecture, so that no one would think it was invented by Norman Bel Geddes and the Bowman Brothers...the day before yesterday.”18 Under the influence of Mumford’s *Sticks and Stones* (1924) and *The Brown Decades* (1931), Hitchcock advanced American sources of modern architecture that allied modern with vernacular.19 Toward a search for the roots of modern architecture Hitchcock organized a didactic exhibition in 1933, “Early Modern Architecture: Chicago 1870-1910,” and produced a catalogue. Although the theme of the exhibition was the Chicago School, its focus was the technical, aesthetic, and pragmatic developments associated with the skyscraper, which he called “the conspicuous achievement of American architecture” after 1850. Hitchcock emphasized the originality of these pioneers: Jenney’s precocious use of “steel skeleton construction,” Richardson’s “integrity [in] his use of traditional construction,” Sullivan who turned the early skyscraper into an “aesthetic invention,” Wright who developed a “new type of domestic design,” and Burnham and Root who “organized and specialized [the] American architectural office and methods of practice.”20 In his monograph for a subsequent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, “The Architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson” (1936), Hitchcock continued to uphold Richardson’s work as an ancestor of contemporary architecture, suggesting that such buildings as the Cheney in Hartford (1875-1876) solved “modern problems in a spirit not wholly dissimilar to that of the men of the twelfth century.”21 To Hitchcock it meant that the American architect shared with medieval builders a common approach to style as well as technical innovation. Moreover, in the Museum of Modern Art publication of 1934, *Art in America in Modern Times*, Hitchcock also designated Richardson’s “simplification of design” and “direct expression of structure” as antecedents to both *The International Style* and the skyscraper.22

Hitchcock drew other comparisons with American architecture. He proposed that the “International Style” recalled an earlier episode in American city building, which had produced a local language. In 1934 he curated an exhibition at Wesleyan University, “The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties: American Cities Before the Civil War.” It consisted of fifty photographs by Berenice Abbott, a photographer predisposed to modernism and urban architecture.23 Hitchcock advanced the idea that formal elements in the unadorned but well-proportioned row houses, warehouses, and other utilitarian buildings in American port cities during the Antebellum period were analogous to those of the “International Style”: “extreme rationalist discipline,” “the sense of fine proportions,” and “simple expanses of the best obtainable materials.”24 Alexander Parris’s granite structures on North Market Street [Quincy Market] in Boston (1823) were among the many examples that confirmed the “communal ordering of design” and “high general level of excellence” of American urban building, which compared favorably with their counterparts in European cities. “The real architectural quality of a fine city,” Hitchcock emphasized, did not reside in individual monuments but “in the general consistency and order of its vernacular building.”25

As he predicted, some architects would adhere to the narrowly defined aesthetic parameters of the “Interna-
During the 1930s architects sought to identify modernism with place and enduring building traditions. Their emphasis on local conditions and region meant that buildings might respond directly to such environmental conditions as contours, views, and access to sunlight. Architects employed more earth-bound materials and often used curvilinear forms. From an American perspective the "International Style" was gravitating toward a synthesis of the machine-inspired forms of European modernism, native technical proficiency, human-centered forms recalling the organic tradition of Wright, and vernacular expressions of both materials and building methods. The 1932 exhibition had already explored the possibilities of a new synthesis in the work of European modernists and Wright, notwithstanding the latter's individualism. In his catalogue essay Hitchcock suggested that Le Corbusier's Villa Mandrot at Le Pradet near Toulon (1929-1931) and Wright's R.L. Jones House in Tulsa, Oklahoma (1931) shared in common a new sense of plasticity and economy of ornament. A partisan of Wright, Mumford observed in his review of the 1932 exhibition that the architect's importance should not be restricted to that of mere pioneer. Like Mies van der Rohe, and J.J.P. Oud's design for country houses, Mumford argued, Wright's could be "intellectually grasped, humanly embodied, architecturally expressed." Wright's "love for natural materials, his interest in the site and the landscape, his feeling for the region," Mumford concluded, made him a new source of interest to European modernists.

In her catalogue for the Modern's "Built in USA — 1932-1944" exhibition more than a decade later, Elizabeth Mock recognized that the new architecture had undergone "a process of humanization" shedding its "romanticism of the machine which had produced...cold abstractions." She argued that American architecture had been transformed through a fusion of influences: Wright, vernacular building, and "Le Corbusier's experiments with natural materials" evinced in such works as the de Mandrot House at Le Pradet and the Swiss Dormitory at the Cité Universitaire in Paris (1930-1931). Both Wright and Le Corbusier, Mock suggested, had encouraged Americans to look at their own native folk architecture, including California redwood houses of the late nineteenth century and Pennsylvania stone and timber barns for "their straightforward use of material and their subtle adaptation to climate and topography." Sharing similar design objectives, the American and the European together, could provide "local encouragement for the growing international movement toward a friendlier, more differentiated contemporary architecture." This synthesis had become increasingly evident in the work of European émigrés William Lescaze, Gropius and Marcel Breuer as well as Americans Wallace Harrison and Edward Durrell Stone, and Bay Area Regionalists. The Modern continued to endorse the response to local conditions when it featured the work of Neutra and other West Coast modernists, including William Wurster's Colby House in Berkeley (1931), in its subsequent exhibition "Modern Architecture in California" (1935). The Museum gave Wright's Fallingwater (Kaufmann House) in Mill Run, PA (1934-1937) a solo exhibition in 1938. That year it also advanced the European synthesis of modern and vernacular in its exhibition "Alvar Aalto: Architecture and Furniture." Such works as the Finnish Pavilion for the 1937 Paris International Exhibition underscored the ways in which organic forms, local materials, and sensitivity to both site and region joined with personal invention and proficient technical means. As regionalist artists turned to local traditions in an anxious effort to counter loss, so architects of the 1930s engaged vernacular culture and folk traditions to counter the consumerism of modern culture, thereby anticipating what in recent times has been called "critical regionalism." With the increasing economic and social deficit of the Depression the Modern placed a new emphasis on low-cost housing. Mumford's housing section of the 1932 "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" introduced the general public to both European and American models while his catalogue essay stressed its social need in the context of community planning. Two years later Carol Aronovici, Director of the Housing Research Bureau of New York City, organized "Housing Exhibition of the City of New York," at the Modern in conjunction with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and other organizations in the public and private sectors. Charged with a pragmatic agenda the exhibition showed existing housing conditions in the city, identified impediments to reform, and endorsed new European and American housing models. It featured Williamsburg Houses, a NYCHA project designed
by Swiss-born Lescaze and a team headed by Richmond H. Shreve (1934-1937). To accompany the exhibition, Aronovici published an influential collection of essays by leading European and American housing experts bearing the provocative title, America Can’t Have Housing.35

In the fall of 1934 the Museum also sponsored a radio program “Art in America” and published Art in America in Modern Times, with didactic essays on architecture and other forms of visual culture. For an essay on “House and Cities” editors Barr and Holger Cahill brought in housing expert Catherine Bauer, who proffered a social and political response to the urban housing crisis. Basing her argument on the European models in Rotterdam and Frankfurt, such as Ernst May’s Siedlung Bruchfeldstrasse (1926-27), she advised Americans to “plan for use and not for profit.”36

In promoting the Americanization of the “International Style” Barr, Hitchcock, and Johnson constructed an archaeology of modern architecture following the example of the Harvard Society-Hound & Horn circle at Harvard. At once avant-garde but linked to historical sources and vernacular traditions, modern architecture was advanced in ways inextricably linked to developments in the other visual arts. In establishing New York City as the principal site for modernism in North America, the Museum of Modern Art confirmed its nationalism and its internationalism as evidence of the movement’s diffusion within and across cultures. With its Americanization the “International Style” adapted to local conditions. In embracing both avant-garde expressions of modern times and vernacular traditions, American modernism arrived at an expression of visual culture more globalized than isolated, interdisciplinary, and critically examined.

NOTES


5 On Barr’s formalism, see Kantor, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., xx, xii, 38, 42-43, 77-80, 141, 328, 330.


12 Kantor, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 155.


17 Barr, foreword to Modern Architecture: International Exhibition, 15.

18 Letter Lewis Mumford to Catherine K. Bauer [Wurster], February 9, 1931, Mumford Papers, folder 6345; as quoted in Wojtowicz, Lewis Mumford and American Modernism, 92, 180n83.


23 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties: American Cities Before the Civil War ( Wesleyan University Architectural Exhibitions, 1934).

24 Hitchcock, The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties, 2, 7, 8.


American modernism, much like the modernism movement in general, is a trend of philosophical thought arising from the widespread changes in culture and society in the age of modernity. American modernism is an artistic and cultural movement in the United States beginning at the turn of the 20th century, with a core period between World War I and World War II. Like its European counterpart, American modernism stemmed from a rejection of Enlightenment thinking, seeking to better represent reality in a Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, american dream, self-conscious. Such directions found a fertile land for American writers to sow their seeds and grew new conceptions and recreate a new route of perception to the actuality of the world afield from "dictated dreams". Many American writers were dissatisfied with social norms and prominence that had affected American literature, folks and art since the accouchement of the American nation.