

Modernism¹

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ABSTRACT

Although the word "modernism" is commonly used today to refer to twentieth-century modern architecture, its occurrence was rare in the first half of that century. Instead, a variety of terms were used, including *Neues Bauen*, *Nieuwe Bouwen*, *Architettura Razionale*, "Modern Architecture", and "Modern Movement", reflecting the values and emphases of its various proponents. This essay gives a brief history of the evolution of the vocabulary employed to describe modern architecture during the 1920s and 1930s, and then proposes several reasons for the shift in vocabulary that began to occur after the rise of postmodern architecture.

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KEYWORDS

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Today we use the word “modernism” when we refer to modern architecture or the Modern Movement, or to what German and Dutch practitioners used to call *Neues Bauen* or *Nieuwe Bouwen*.¹ Now, we even say “early modernism” (pre-World War I) and “late modernism” (post-World War II), and even occasionally “high” and “classic” modernism (a seeming oxymoron), echoing the terms that art historians often use to characterize certain styles, such as early and late Renaissance. The question is why. Although this shift in vocabulary seems to have occurred almost unconsciously, it might be seen as indicating how the notion of modern architecture itself changed during the twentieth century: from a living movement committed to specific values and aspirations to a codified style and cultural period of the past, usually the two decades between the world wars.

The word “modern” has a long genealogy and for many years it meant simply “contemporary”, “of the present”, as opposed to signifying qualities of the past. As the dictionary tells us, its usage dates back to the late Latin *modernus*; Vasari, for example, when referring to the art of his own time – mannerist or high Renaissance works – described it as the *buona maniera moderna*. Its current application in cultural discourse is usually traced back to late sixteenth-century France: namely, the famous battle between the Ancients and the Moderns, waged in French literary circles, in which Charles Perrault, author of many of the most famous French fairy tales and brother of Claude Perrault, decisively took the side of the “Moderns”. In that period, the word referred to a variety of styles and positions, most of which can be lumped together as “not antique”: Gothic, for example, was “modern” for André Félibien (as it was earlier for Filarete, and later for Abbé Laugier); likewise, Claude Perrault’s doubling of Corinthian columns on the Louvre’s east façade was modern. A half century later, Rococo would be called the *style moderne* or *goût moderne*. Further complicating any easy division between past and present are the complex and intertwined histories of classicism and modernism; as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, this has involved both opposition and alliance, with the simplicity and timelessness of classicism sometimes seen as anticipating or leading to modernism.² It is no surprise that many modern architecture history survey classes and texts begin with the last half of the eighteenth century.

During the late nineteenth century, the word “modern” began to appear in titles of English and French architecture books, such as Paul Sédille’s *L’Architecture moderne en angleterre* (1890), which opens with a plate of Somerset House as an illustration of modern architecture, and James Fergusson’s *Modern Styles of Architecture*, the last volume of the second edition of his *History of Architecture* (1873–76). In Germany, the word shows up as early as 1883 in Rudolf Redtenbacher’s primer *Die Architektonik der modernen Baukunst*. Clearly, in these cases “modern” meant simply “new”, and, as the plural in Fergusson’s title indicates, “modern” had no particular

1. A shorter version of this essay was written in honor of Adrian Forty and published in I. Borden, M. Fraser, B. Penner (eds.), *Forty Ways to Think About Architecture: Architectural History and Theory Today*, London, Wiley, 2014.

2. J. Habermas, *Modernity - An Incomplete Project*, in H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend (WA), Bay Press, 1983, pp. 3–4.

stylistic association or programmatic agenda. This was still the case when Banister Fletcher published his diagram of architecture's evolution, *The Tree of Architecture* (1896).

It was not until the emergence of Art Nouveau in the 1890s that the word “modern” again designated a new stylistic tendency, one that stood for a radical break with past historical styles. While nearly every country gave Art Nouveau its own name — *Stile floreale*, *Jugendstil*, *Sezessionstil* — all claimed this new movement as “modern”. In fact, in Catalonia, the style was called *modernisme*, a label that sometimes extended to Art Nouveau in general.

Even this important break, which is often seen as marking both the end of nineteenth-century historicism and the beginning of the Modern Movement, is not as important to subsequent usage of the word “modern” in architecture as Otto Wagner’s seminal book *Moderne Architektur* of 1896.³ This book had a similar impact on architects as that of Danish critic Georg Brandes’s series of critical essays *Det moderne Gjennembruds Mænd* and as Eugen Wolff’s declaration of *die Moderne* had a decade earlier on central and northern European literary circles. Like the German literary magazines of the early 1890s, Wagner’s text was filled with phrases such as “modern life”, “modern man”, “the modern eye”, “modern social conditions”; and by the second edition of his book, the words *Moderne* and *modernen* appear with insistent repetition (nine times in the two-page preface).⁴ Without question, it is Wagner’s book that led to the association of functionalism, rationalism, and the elimination of “useless” decoration with the words “modern architecture” (even if his own buildings were still a far cry from the stripped-down forms we associate with the International Style). In other words, Wagner gave the phrase “modern architecture” specific ideological content. Just a few years later, other architects such as Hermann Muthesius, Henry van de Velde, Hendrik P. Berlage, Adolf Loos, and Walter Gropius followed his lead.⁵ In *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst*⁶ of 1902, Muthesius not only repeats Wagner’s *die Moderne* but also refers to “modern style”, “modern sensitivity”, and “modern dress”.

In central Europe, Wagner’s vocabulary persisted for the next two decades but, as Rosemarie Haag Bletter has documented, by the mid-1920s German and Dutch architects began to prefer the adjective *neues* or “new” to “modern”. Bletter stated that this choice might have been influenced not only by the phrase *neue Sachlichkeit* and titles of newspapers such as “Die neue Zeit” but also — because “new” implied change — by a desire to suggest an emerging process rather than a fixed style.⁷ In fact, there seemed to be for some architects a certain discomfort with the word “modern” as an exhausted and decayed style. This may have been sparked in part by the reaction against the term that had already arisen in German literary circles before the war; in 1909, Samuel Lublinski had announced *Der Ausgang der Moderne*,⁸ and some literary Expressionists proudly declared how “unmodern” they were.⁹ Although this extreme

3. Note for example, that Alan Colquhoun begins his survey with Art Nouveau, whereas Barry Bergdoll ends his nineteenth-century survey with its emergence. See A. Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2002; B. Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750–1890*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.

4. O. Wagner, *Moderne Architektur*, Vienna, Anton Schroll, 1898, pp. 7-9.

5. See, for example, H. van de Velde’s essay *Die Rolle der Ingenieure in der Modernen Architektur*, in van de Velde, *Die Renaissance im modernen Kunstgewerbe*, Berlin, Bruno und Paul Cassirer, 1901, pp. 109-23; H. P. Berlage, *Gedanken über Stil*, Leipzig, Zeitler, 1905; K. Scheffler, *Moderne Baukunst*, Berlin, Julius Bard, 1907; and W. Gropius’s essay *Die Entwicklung moderner Industriebaukunst*, in *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes*, Jena, Diederichs, 1913.

6. H. Muthesius, *Stilarchitektur und Baukunst: Wandlungen der Architektur im XIX. Jahrhundert und ihr heutiger Standpunkt*, Mülheim-Ruhr, Schimmelpfeng, 1902; trans., *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and Its Present Condition*, S. Anderson (ed.), Santa Monica (CA) - Chicago, Getty Center-University of Chicago Press, 1994.

7. R. H. Bletter, *Introduction*, in A. Behne, *The Modern Functional Building*, Santa Monica (CA), Getty Research Institute, 1996, pp. 2–3.

8. See S. Lublinski, *Der Ausgang der Moderne: ein Buch der Opposition*, reprint, Tübingen, N. Niemeyer, 1976 (1909).

9. M. Bradbury, J. McFarland, *The Name and Nature of Modernism*, in *Modernism*, M. Bradbury, J. McFarland (eds.), Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Pelican, 1974, pp. 39–40.

aversion to the word was rare in architecture circles before World War I, and for the most part hesitations about the word did not emerge until later, the literary revolt may have had something to do with why Muthesius urged Otto Wagner to change the title of his book *Moderne Architektur* — that is, to eliminate the word *moderne* because of its association with the German noun *Mode*, and to eliminate *Architektur* because of its link to historical styles. Wagner willingly complied, and the title of the book's fourth edition in 1914 was *Die Baukunst unserer Zeit*.¹⁰ Adolf Behne's book *Der moderne Zweckbau*,¹¹ written in 1923, might be seen as representative of the early period, in contrast, for example, to Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Internationale neue Baukunst*,¹² Walter Curt Behrendt's *Der Sieg des neuen Baustils*,¹³ or Gustav Adolf Platz's *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit*,¹⁴ all from 1927, reflecting the mindset of the later period.¹⁵ Each author created his own emphasis through his choice of vocabulary — Gropius and Hilberseimer stressing the international nature of the movement (with its resonances, for some, of the Communist International), others advocating building as opposed to architecture, challenging the profession's traditional focus on aesthetic attributes. All of these early studies are much more diverse and varied in their architecture examples than the later codified lineage that Sigfried Giedion presents in his influential book *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941).¹⁶ Behne, for instance, includes "organic" and geometric works; in *Internationale Architektur* (1925),¹⁷ Gropius shows Soviet and American buildings alongside his own designs. In leftist circles in Germany, eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union, while the term "modern architecture" occasionally appeared, another vocabulary emphasizing the strictly objective or "scientific" dimensions of buildings emerged, featuring words such as "constructivism", "productivism", "functionalism", and "minimum dwelling".

In France, where the word "modern" had long been used, Le Corbusier and André Lurçat shied away from using it at all, preferring to say simply "architecture", as in *Vers une architecture*¹⁸ (1923) and *Architecture* (1929),¹⁹ or else "new", as in Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's "Five Points of a New Architecture" (1926). Like Wagner and Loos before them, they sought to make the modern both new and timeless; in this respect, their image of modernity is exactly the opposite of Baudelaire's in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*,²⁰ which extols fashion and emphasizes the changing, fleeting nature of modernity. Once again, architects seem to have resisted associations of "modern" with "mode" or fashion. In fact, even Rob Mallet-Stevens, who used the word "modern" and who was the darling of the progressive chic crowd, felt the need to distinguish sharply between modern design and fashion, declaring that the pre-war British taxi was more modern than current "stream-lined" vehicles, whose designers saw modernity as an issue of image and surface and not of function.²¹

The term "modern architecture" gained the most currency in England and the United States — in fact, just at the moment when the word "modern"

10. See H. F. Mallgrave, *Introduction*, in O. Wagner, *Modern Architecture*, Santa Monica (CA), Getty Center, 1988, p. 45.

11. A. Behne, *Der moderne Zweckbau*, Berlin, Ullstein, 1964 (1926). See also *The Modern Functional Building*. Although the book was published in 1926, Behne had written the text three years earlier.

12. L. Hilberseimer, *Internationale neue Baukunst*, Stuttgart, J. Hoffmann, 1927.

13. W. C. Behrendt, *Der Sieg des neuen Baustils*, Stuttgart, Fr. Wedekind, 1927; trans. *The Victory of the New Building Style*, D. Mertins (ed.), Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2000.

14. G.A. Platz, *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit*, Berlin, Propylaea, 1927.

15. Bletter, *Introduction*, pp. 2–3.

16. S. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1941.

17. W. Gropius, *Internationale Architektur*, Munich, A. Langen, 1925.

18. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Paris, G. Crès, 1923.

19. A. Lurçat, *Architecture*, Paris, Sans pareil, 1929.

20. C. Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in C. Baudelaire, *The Painter and Modern Life and Other Essays*, J. Mayne (trans. and ed.), London, Phaidon, 1964.

21. R. Mallet-Stevens, *La Mode et la moderne*, in *Rob Mallet-Stevens Architecte*, D. Deshoulières et al. (ed.), Brussels, Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1980, p. 372.

was loosening its hold in Germany and Austria. Examples that immediately come to mind are: Henry-Russell Hitchcock's *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* of 1929;²² the so-called *International Style* exhibition of 1932, which was actually called *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* in its original manifestation; the numerous articles of P. Morton Shand, introducing the new style to the readers of "The Architectural Review"; and the English primers of the 1930s and '40s, such as Howard Robertson's *Modern Architectural Design* (1932),²³ F. R. S. Yorke's *Modern House* (1934),²⁴ and J. M. Richards's *Introduction to Modern Architecture* (1940).²⁵ Along these lines, one might also note that Bruno Taut's *Die neue Baukunst in Europa und Amerika* (1929)²⁶ was called *Modern Architecture* (1929) in the simultaneous English edition.²⁷ In the 1930s, Herbert Read's anthology *The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture* (1934)²⁸ and, more important, Nikolaus Pevsner's early history *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936)²⁹ brought Otto Wagner's word *Moderne* to England, and it is undoubtedly due to Pevsner's influential book that the term "Modern Movement" joined the more general term "modern architecture" as the standard designations in Britain for progressive architecture until about 1970. It seems hardly coincidental that when Pevsner's book was published in 1949 by the Museum of Modern Art, its title was changed to the less charged *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1949).³⁰ More often than not, modern architecture in the U.S. was seen as a style, not a movement, as Hitchcock and Johnson's post-exhibition publication *The International Style* (1932)³¹ had already made clear.

Despite the plurality of terms for modern architecture in the 1920s and 1930s and the diversity of examples in the early surveys, the word "modernism" was rare in architecture circles during this period. American author and critic Sheldon Cheney used it as a general descriptive term in his book *The New World Architecture* (1930),³² a book that was widely read in the States, though almost completely unknown in Europe.³³ In Britain, "modernism" seems to have been primarily a literary term, employed to describe the work of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.³⁴ When the word was occasionally applied to architecture in Europe before World War II (and even afterward), its meaning was usually derogatory, and this was true both for advocates of modern architecture and for its detractors. As already mentioned, it carried connotations either of superficial fashion or of puerile rebellion. In 1929, W. R. Lethaby, who had in 1915 written the essay *Modern German Architecture and what we can learn from it*, declared «Modernism [is] another sort of design humbug to pass off with a shrug—ye olde Modernist Style». ³⁵ From the traditionalists, one of the most vehement attacks came from Reginald Blomfield. Originally an Arts and Crafts practitioner and employee of Norman Shaw, Blomfield advocated a kind of stripped-down "neo-Georgian" architecture. In his polemic *Modernismus* (1934),³⁶ he railed against modern architecture's

22. H.-R. Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration*, New York, Payson & Clarke, 1929.

23. H. Robertson, *Modern Architectural Design*, London, Architectural Press, 1932.

24. F. R. S. Yorke, *Modern House*, London, Architectural Press, 1957 (1934).

25. J. M. Richards, *Introduction to Modern Architecture*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1940.

26. B. Taut, *Die neue Baukunst in Europa und Amerika*, Stuttgart, J. Hoffmann, 1929.

27. Bletter, *Introduction*, p. 3.

28. H. Read, *The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture*, London, Cassell, 1934.

29. N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London, Faber & Faber, 1936.

30. N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1949.

31. H.-R. Hitchcock, P. Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1932.

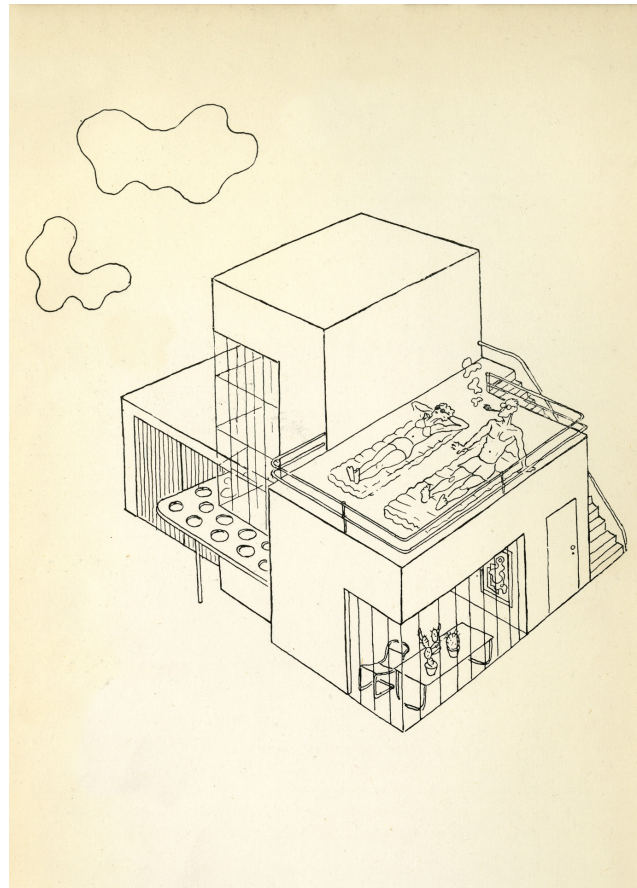
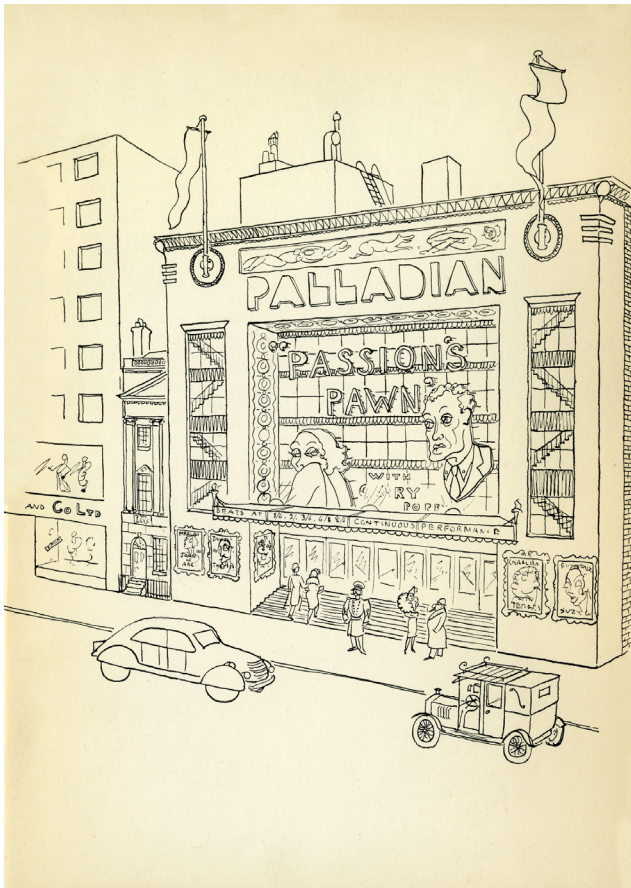
32. S. Cheney, *The New World Architecture*, New York, Tudor, 1930. I am grateful to Joan Ockman for this reference.

33. Alan Colquhoun confirmed this point in a conversation with the author, September 2006. Cheney uses the term "modernism" several times in his introduction, but rarely in the text as a whole.

34. But even in English and American literary circles, the word "modernism" is rare before the 1970s. See A. Eysteinson, *The Concept of Modernism*, Ithaca (NY)-London, Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 1–5. The word "modernism" does appear in American periodicals occasionally in the 1930s and 1940s, including in the title of Philip Johnson's negative review of Cheney's book *Modernism in Architecture*, appearing in "The New Republic" (vol. LXVI, 18 March 1931, No. 850, p.134). See also an interesting article by Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Modernism in Architecture: Rockefeller Center* appearing in "The Sewanee Review" (vol. XLIV, April–June 1930, No. 2, pp. 179–87), in which Jackson calls "Modernism" in architecture a bourgeois style and distinguishes it from German and Soviet socialist developments in architecture. Hugh Morrison also uses the term "Modernism" in his essay *After the International Style – What?* ("Architectural Forum", May 1940, pp. 345–47) but now as a general term, which has historical phases, ranging from the early International Style to more recent regional and ornamental variations.

35. W. R. Lethaby, *Letter to Harry Peach*, March 1929, quoted in J. Holder, "Design in Everyday Things": Promoting Modernism in Britain, 1912–1944, in *Modernism in Design*, P. Greenhalgh (ed.), London, Reaktion Books, 1990, p. 123.

36. R. Blomfield, *Modernismus*, London, Macmillan, 1934.



FIGS. 1, 2 Osbert Lancaster, "Modernistic" (left) and "Functional" (right) architecture, *Pillar to Post: English Architecture without Tears*, 1939. Lancaster captured in these cartoons the differences between fashionable "Modernistic" architecture and "Twentieth-Century Functional" architecture. He called the former «revolting», whereas he described the latter as having an effect an «excellent and revivifying» effect, although it too was subject to ridicule (to wit, a Le Corbusier-like figure sunbathing in the often «impossible» English climate.)

complete rejection of tradition and custom [Figs. 1, 2]. His use of the German word *Modernismus* was hardly accidental, linking the new cultural developments to cosmopolitanism — i.e., to the Communist tendencies of some of the hard-core German practitioners. However, one should note that the book was a general indictment of modernism, including modern literature, music, and architecture. When Blomfield referred to architecture specifically, the term he employed was "new architecture", just as Cheney did.

At this early date, one of the few instances of modernism being used in Britain in an architecture context either neutrally or positively was in an article published in "The Architecture Review" in 1930 on new architectural sculpture. But given the wide range of examples in that text (American Art Deco, late national romanticism, Viennese social housing), it is evident that the word hardly carried the connotations that it has today: it had not yet become either an ideological movement or a codified style.³⁷ Such diversity, also present in the architecture histories of the 1920s, was largely absent from the teleological and operative trajectories of two of the most influential books of the 1930s or 1940s, Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* and Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. As Pevsner candidly admitted in 1966, «To me what had been achieved in 1914 was the style of the century. It never occurred to me to look beyond».³⁸

37. S. Casson, *Modernism*, "The Architectural Review", September 1930, No. 68, pp. 121–26. Christopher Wilk cites this source in his very useful introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914–1939*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006, p. 415, n. 300. The word "modernism" was also used positively in 1930 by Howard Robertson and Frank Yerbury in their article on two early women designers Adrienne Gorska and Sara Lipska, but again their designs, while modernist, would hardly meet Hitchcock and Johnson's stylistic criteria; it is interesting to note that Robertson and Yerbury also refer to the "Modern Movement" in their discussion of women and modern design. See H. Robertson, F. Yerbury, "The Woman Modernist": Some Striking French Interiors, in "The Architect and Building News", 4 April 1930, No. 123, pp. 449–52. Just three years earlier, "modernism" was used as a derogatory term in the annual address that Gilbert Jenkins, the president of the Architectural Association, gave. Jenkins claimed that Le Corbusier's two houses at *Weissenhof Siedlung* in Stuttgart were only fit for a "vegetarian bacteriologist". G. Jenkins, *Modernism in Architecture*, in "Arena: The Architectural Association Journal", vol. XLIII, November 1927, No. 489, p. 160.

38. N. Pevsner, *The Anti-Pioneers*, 3 December 1966, in N. Pevsner, *Pevsner: The Complete Broadcast Talks: Architecture and Art on Radio and Television, 1945–1977*, G. Games (ed.), London-New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 295.

So when did our vocabulary change and why? How did the word “modernism” suddenly become so ubiquitous in architecture? What does this change mean? In hindsight, it appears the present-day usage can be traced to three phenomena: first, the gradual realization that modern architecture itself could no longer be seen as a collective ongoing project, sharing common goals and a unified aesthetic; second, the widespread influence of other fields on architecture writing and criticism from the 1970s to the present; and third, the increasingly international dissemination of architecture theory – more specifically, the increasing hegemony of American and British architecture history and theory in shaping historical narratives and ideas – and by extension our language in architecture.

Many architecture historians would trace the first of these generating tendencies, what might be called “modern architecture’s self-critique”, back to the 1930s and early 1940s, with its new attention to regionalism and monumentality. But for the profession at large, the dissatisfaction with the dogma of the heroic first generation emerged full-scale in the 1950s, after the tragedies of World War II, when architects became increasingly aware of the Modern Movement’s failure both to generate social reform and to create a formal language with broad popular appeal. A whole new set of “isms” and styles (the New Empiricism, the New Humanism, Brutalism, Regionalism, Neo-Liberty, etc.) came to the fore, along with a new critical examination of the limits of functionalism by younger CIAM members, such as the Smithsons and Aldo van Eyck, who would go on to form Team 10. During the 1950s, the word “modernism” was rarely used. Clearly, though, modernist dogma (its functionalism, structural rationalism, and visions of social regeneration) and the increasingly formulaic language of the “International Style” (namely, its flat roofs, simple geometric forms, and austere white walls) no longer comprised the only, or even the dominant mode, of making architecture. This reaction against the universalist doctrine and reductive aesthetic of modern architecture intensified in the 1960s with the publication of Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*³⁹ and Aldo Rossi’s *L’architettura della città*,⁴⁰ both 1966, gaining further momentum from an even earlier public critique, launched in part by Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).⁴¹ It culminated in the arrival of “postmodern” architecture, which soon became seen as part of a more general cultural transformation dubbed “postmodernism”.

The increasing currency of the term “modernism” correlates directly to this sense that the Modern Movement was no longer a vital, ongoing development, but instead something past. Modernism by now connoted a historical movement and style. The term was most prevalent in the United States, not surprising given both its early usage there and Hitchcock and Johnson’s early introduction of the notion of an international style. Already in the late 1950s and 1960s, “modernism” was heard in revisionist contexts,

39. R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, V. Scully (intro.), New York, Museum of Modern Art; distributed by Garden City (NY), Doubleday, 1966.

40. A. Rossi, *L’architettura della città*, Venice, Marsilio, 1966.

41. J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Random House, 1961.

such as the second *Modern Architecture Symposium*, held at Columbia University, in May 1964. The young Robert A. M. Stern was one of the speakers who employed it with most ease (though still within quotation marks in his written text). Several other participants employed the word as well, including Avery librarian Adolf Placzek and architecture historian William Jordy, who would be one of the first scholars to use “modernism” in the title of a survey book, *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (1972).⁴² However, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, one of the conveners of the conference, still referred to “modern architecture”, finding it, as he explained in his 1958 survey, less tendentious than his earlier term “international style”.⁴³ Nor was this event at Columbia University unique. Kenneth Frampton recalled that when he arrived at Princeton University from England in 1965, he kept wondering «where all this “modernism” was coming from». For him, it was still the “Modern Movement” or “Modern Architecture”.⁴⁴ But for the young designers at Princeton’s School of Architecture, namely Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman, modern architecture was already a historical style, one that they could readily cannibalize in their own early work. If this use of “modernism” permeated the rarefied halls of Ivy League academia, it was not until after the official arrival of “postmodern architecture” in the late 1970s, proclaimed by Charles Jencks’s *Language of Post-Modern Architecture*⁴⁵ in 1977, that the word gained wider public currency. While Jencks still primarily used the capitalized adjectives “Modern” and “Postmodern”, especially in his titles and subtitles, the nouns “modernism” and “postmodernism” slipped occasionally into the text. It was not long before they were standard terms. Indeed, it is interesting to compare the two editions of Jencks’s own *Modern Movements in Architecture*. In the first edition, of 1973,⁴⁶ the word “modernism” is not used at all (at least from what I could tell in skimming the book quickly); by the second, 1985,⁴⁷ in the preface and in the added last chapter (*Late Modernism and Post-Modernism*) it is everywhere. Jencks succinctly summed up the shift in vocabulary: «Since this book was written ten years ago, . . . the Modern Movements of the title have dropped their main ideology of Modernism, or modified it in radical ways». ⁴⁸ In other words, there was no longer a modern movement that sustained the belief that architecture was an agent of technological progress and social reform.

A second source of the word “modernism” in architecture writing is art criticism and cultural theory. The writings of art critics such as Clement Greenberg, of literary figures such as Irving Howe, Renato Poggioli, Matei Calinescu, Peter Bürger, and Andreas Huyssen, and of philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas all influenced architecture critics and historians, and soon, in turn, architects. The meanings of the word “modernism” of course varied widely from individual to individual. Greenberg, who had used the term “avant-garde” in his pre-war essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939)⁴⁹ to refer to progressive art currents (that is, those works that retained their artistic integrity in the face of

42. W. H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972.

43. The proceedings of the *Third Modern Architecture Symposium*, held in March 1964 at Columbia University, are published in a special issue of the “Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians”, vol. XXIV, March 1964, No. 1. For the use of the word “modernism”, see especially the contributions by R. A. M. Stern, W. H. Jordy, A. Placzek, and E. Kaufman, Jr. in that issue. Kaufman’s essay, *Frank Lloyd Wright’s Years of Modernism, 1925–1935*, indicates clearly that the word in the U.S. already designated a historical period. See also H.-R. Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1969 (3rd. ed.), p. 618, n. 487.

44. Kenneth Frampton, in conversation with the author, especially in September 2006.

45. C. Jencks, *Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York, Rizzoli, 1977.

46. C. Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, Garden City (NY), Anchor Press, 1973.

47. C. Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1985.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

49. See C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1961.

political forces), preferred after World War II the less politically charged word “modernism”, which he defined as essentially artistic self-critique, art that focused on the aesthetic properties of its medium to criticize itself.⁵⁰ Michael Fried, Bürger, and Huyssen followed, in part, his usage, although for Huyssen and Bürger, concerned with broader political issues, modernism was distinguished from another cultural tendency: for Bürger, this was the avant-garde, which he defined as artistic currents that sought to destroy the institutions of art, such as Dada and Surrealism; in the case of Huyssen, it was art forms that embraced mass culture. Adorno’s notion of autonomy, while more complex, associated modernism with a similar disengagement from daily life. In other words, whether modernism was embraced (as Greenberg and Adorno did) or criticized for its political and social withdrawal (as Bürger and Huyssen did), both positions linked modernism to formalism and the autonomous pursuit of a discipline. But for others, such as philosophers Henri Lefebvre and Jürgen Habermas and sociologist Marshall Berman, modernism was a more encompassing term: it was the cultural expression of modernity (the experience of modern life), which in turn was a product of modernization, arising from the forces of rationalization in capital and technology. Although a few architecture critics attempted to apply Bürger’s bipartite model to modern architecture, these efforts were problematic and seemingly contradictory: architecture by its very nature resisted autonomy; nor did formal exploration in modern architecture preclude social engagement and a preoccupation with everyday life – note Le Corbusier’s airplanes and automobiles or, later, the Smithsons’ household gadgets and advertising. In architecture writing, theoretical constructs of “modernism” soon began to blur with notions of the word as a historical or stylistic designation, making its meaning vague and ambiguous. In fact, the very ambiguity of the term may have led to its popularity and broad usage, giving it an applicability beyond the terms “Modern Movement” or *Neues Bauen*, which were typically associated with a specific programmatic agenda.

Thus, by the 1980s, when postmodernism and cultural theory began to coalesce in writings about architecture, the word “modernism” began to be employed regularly by a younger generation of historians and critics, especially in Britain and the United States, supplanting “modern architecture” or “Modern Movement”. Once again, however, there was a lag between its usage in academic journals and conferences and the general press; the one exception was design history, where its traditional links to style and fashion seemed to have had immediate appeal. By the early 1990s, at the height of the theory wave in American academic circles (coinciding in the United States with the dot-com bust and a recession in the building industry), the word “modernism” began to appear in titles of architecture books, and within a few years with some regularity – for example, in Michael Hays’s *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject* (1992),⁵¹ Robert Bruegmann’s *Modernism at Mid-Century* (1994),⁵² and Sarah Goldhagen’s *Louis Kahn’s Situated Modernism* (2001).⁵³ The diversity

50. Clement Greenberg gives this definition in his oft-quoted essay, *Modernist Painting*, originally delivered as part of *Voice of America’s Forum Lectures* in 1960 and then published the following year in “Arts Yearbook”, 1961, No. 4. A revised version was published in “Art and Literature”, Spring 1964, No. 4, pp. 194–201.

51. K. M. Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1992.

53. S. Goldhagen, *Louis Kahn’s Situated Modernism*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 2001.

52. R. Bruegmann, *Modernism at Mid-Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

of these three books reveals the very malleability of the term: from a theoretical construct indebted to neo-Marxist periodization (Hays), to a straightforward monographic account (Bruegmann), to a revisionist reading of a major postwar architect, who is seen as perpetuating the legacy of modern architecture while transforming it (Goldhagen). If the meaning of the word remains nebulous today, its usage is now ubiquitous, with the highly regarded exhibition *Modernism* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2006 demonstrating its widespread acceptance. Any qualms that the original proponents of the Modern Movement may have had about “isms”, which they associated with the plurality and fickleness of artistic tendencies, were long gone.

Related to but not quite synonymous with the rise in usage of the word “modernism” was an increasing understanding of modern architecture as a diverse and varied phenomenon. While early historians of modern architecture often spoke of distinct tendencies or strains – sometimes setting up dualities (see, for example, Hitchcock, Behne, and Behrendt) and acknowledged national differences (Theo van Doesburg and Shand) – the canonical histories such as Giedion’s and Pevsner’s stressed modern architecture’s shared and unifying characteristics (notably functionalism, structural rationalism, and simplicity) rather than its geographical or cultural differences. Indeed, these seemingly common attributes were asserted as universal truths, ones that swept into the dustbin the historicism and stylistic eclecticism of an earlier era. The Weissenhofsiedlung at Stuttgart and the CIAM meetings were two of the most overt manifestations of this desire to create a single movement with a single set of common objectives. Again, it was in the postwar period that this unified vision began to fracture, owing to an increasing recognition of, and value placed on, local traditions and customs, on the one hand, and personal expression, on the other. With the advent of postmodernism and poststructuralist theory, critics began to celebrate this plurality and variety, although they debated at times whether these qualities were characteristics of modernism (Berman and the early Charles Jencks) or of postmodernism (Jencks after 1975). By the 1970s, it was increasingly difficult to speak of modern architecture in singular absolutes. Always attentive to changing currents, Jencks was one of the first in architecture to proclaim this diversity. His doctoral thesis (1971), written under Reyner Banham, and given the polemical title *Modern Movements in Architecture* when it was published in 1973,⁵⁴ was not only a pointed critique of his mentor’s seminal book *Theory and Design of the First Machine Age* (1960)⁵⁵ and a challenge to the synthetic unity proposed in Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture*, but it was also an attack, as the title made clear, on Banham’s own adviser, Pevsner, and on his groundbreaking history *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. The awareness of architectural pluralism coalesces with the somewhat awkward use of “modernisms” in the titles of books, such as Sarah Goldhagen and Rejean Legault’s *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (2000),⁵⁶ and in the 2006

54. Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, 1973.

55. R. Banham, *Theory and Design of the First Machine Age*, London, Architectural Press, 1960.

56. S. Goldhagen, R. Legault (eds.), *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture*, Montréal-Cambridge, (MA), Canadian Centre for Architecture-MIT Press, 2000.

Docomomo conference, titled *Other Modernisms*.⁵⁷

The use of the plural raises questions about the word “modernism” itself. As this brief chronology shows, the adoption of “modernism” to characterize the Modern Movement and modern architecture largely emerged in the English-speaking world. The ascendance of English in publications, teaching, and conferences, the proliferation of American doctoral programs in architecture, and the growing numbers of foreign students in British and American schools, have all led to a form of globalization – an English-dominated globalization – not only of architecture culture but also of architecture history itself. One issue to consider is whether the rapid and widespread dissemination of the word “modernism”, despite its new plural form, might not risk being another form of homogenization wiping out the linguistic diversity that characterized the original names given to the Modern Movement itself, and with them some of the movement’s distinctive national and regional aspects those names signified. Has the term given modern architecture a universalism that it never initially had despite its self-proclaimed objectives or subsequent claims? Or, more positively, does the very generality of the term “modernism” and its many different connotations encourage us to consider a much broader range of modernist architecture work, alerting us to the richness and variety as well as to the wide geographical influence of the Modern Movement’s forms and ideas?

57. In literary criticism, the word “modernisms” already appeared in book titles with some frequency by the 1990s.