

# Museum Exhibitions as Mass Media spreading Architectural Ideas from Europe to USA in 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper is aimed to illustrate the role played by architectural exhibitions in promoting debates on architecture from the early thirties to the fifties of last century. Both the exhibitions and the accompanying publications such as catalogues, books and magazines, acts as significant communication media in shaping and directing architectural discourses. The first of these exhibitions was a significant historical event, which officially announced architecture of the early 20th century as "International Style" to the USA public, professional and even educational audience. Referring to Walter Benjamin's definition of "reproduction" and to the subsequent notions of "production" and "reproduction" discussed by Beatriz Colomina, the role of the New York MoMA architectural exhibitions as architectural media in reproducing the works of architecture and reformulating the agenda of 20th century modern architecture especially in USA, are emphasized. In the light of the arguments handled by Colomina, architectural exhibitions and associated books or catalogues are considered as "critical acts", in which the work of architecture, and architecture itself in theoretic, aesthetic and functional terms, is interpreted, reproduced and publicized. Architectural exhibitions, being a subject in itself, puts the objects displayed into a critical process, as a medium of reproduction in which the works are re-interpreted and diffused through magazines and other press devices. Such a spreading diffusion becomes, in turn, a further object reproduced by critics, historians and professional architects.

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## KEYWORDS:

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## 1. The impact of 1932 N.Y. MoMa Exhibition on Architectural Profession and Education

Introducing the book *Architectureproduction*, Beatriz Colomina gives insight to the terms “production” and “reproduction” in architecture<sup>1</sup>. She mainly refers to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on “reproduction” as it concerns both the material production of the architectural work, and the works circulation and diffusion through printed and photographic media.

In her article Colomina explains the term “reproduction” by mentioning its first use in architecture. Referring to Cretan Labyrinth, she argues that, though Daedalus was the architect of the project, he could never exactly interpret its structure. According to the author, the first reproduction in architecture was given by Ariadne who interpreted the building with the help of a conceptual device of the real object of architecture. Through this particular epitome Colomina makes a strong distinction between the production of architecture, as the “practical act” of building and the reproduction of architecture as interpretive “critical act” in which design principles, or canons, are revealed in the form of theory, history and criticism. According to this point of view, exhibitions and associated books or catalogues can be considered as the critical act of architecture where architectural work is interpreted, reproduced and introduced to a public and professional audience. So the architectural work becomes an object, which is put into a critical process. The person starting this task, being either the curator or the critic or the historian, takes the role of the interpreter, i.e. the subject who identifies the production, performing the act of reproduction. As such, he/she shows the work and supplies the communication between the producer and the audience. The audience refers to the viewer of an exhibition or the reader of a catalogue. The work, which is interpreted, criticized and reproduced by the curator, is in turn reproduced by the audience or by the viewer.

Among the many worth mentioning exhibitions at MoMA, “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” in 1932 is known as the most influential event in the history of modern architecture. The plans of the exhibition were developed in the early thirties by the director of MoMA, Alfred Barr who asked Henry Russell Hitchcock, historian of modern art and architecture, and Philip Johnson, the architect known as the curator of the exhibition, to stage the first architectural exhibition at MoMA. By means of the exhibition and the accompanying publications, the architecture of the early 20th century was officially announced and labeled as the “International Style.”

MoMA had proved to be a powerful tool in promoting the modern movement in the US. For two years the exhibition “Modern Architecture” was presented in 32 installations at museums, art galleries and Department Stores in the United States. The exhibition and the book authored

1. Beatriz Colomina, “Introduction: On Architecture, Production and Reproduction,” in *Architectureproduction*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 5. For a detailed discussion on the argument see Baharak Tabibi, [Exhibitions as the Medium of Architectural Reproduction. “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition”] (MA diss., Department of Architecture of Middle East Technical University, 2005)

by Hitchcock and Johnson *International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, published in the same year, induced people to redefine the meaning of “modern architecture”. During the twenties and early thirties, in America, this name was generically used to identify the art-decò facades, the stylistic revivalism of skyscrapers, the stream-lined architecture that, as John Frederick Harbeson claimed in 1930, had to be considered “modern” because it was “quite simply, the architecture of today, the architecture which attempts to solve the problems resulting from modern social conditions, by modern methods of construction”<sup>2</sup>. After 1932 this architecture began to appear to many North American critics hopelessly dated: “modern architecture”, reproduced by MoMA curators, was now synonymous with flat roofs, prismatic volumes and white walls absolutely devoid of decoration and was associated above all with Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Oud and the Bauhaus of Gropius. The MoMA, by identifying and promoting this so-called “International Style”, had actually contributed to altering the image of modern architecture in USA. Indeed, in the book by Hitchcock and Johnson – as well as in the catalog of curators – universality represented the dominant note. It seemed almost irrelevant that the International Style had originated in a specific country. The trend that was spreading all over the world was defined by Hitchcock and Johnson as: “a single new style, unified and inclusive. The International Style is broad and elastic enough for many varying talents and for many decades of development. We have, as the Egyptians had or the Chinese, as the Greeks and our own ancestors in the Middle Age before us, a style which orders the visible manifestation of a certain close relationship between structure and function. Regardless of specific types of structure or function, the style has a definable esthetic. That esthetic, like modern Technics, will develop and change; it will hardly cease to exist. It is found in the humblest buildings, as well as in monuments, fully architectural. Those who have buried architecture, whether from a thwarted desire to continue the past or from an over-anxiety to modify and hurry on the future, have been premature: We have an architecture still”<sup>3</sup>.

This statement opened a frank debate also in public audience and more specifically in US Schools of Architecture. Most historians of American architecture<sup>4</sup> attribute to Joseph Hudnut – charged as Dean of the Faculty of Architecture in June 1935 by James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard University – the fundamental role of supporter and promoter of the rejuvenation process of teaching architecture. However, the need to reform the architectural studies in the *curriculum studiorum* of US universities had already been recognized for some time by distinguished teachers of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country, from Columbia, to the Universities of Ann Arbor and Chicago up to California universities, especially at Berkeley and Los Angeles. The knowledge of the contribution offered by European architects, both to the professional

2. John Frederick Harbeson, “Design in Modern Architecture, What is Modern?”, *Pencil Points* 11 (January 1930): 3-45.

3. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932), 16.

4. See for instance Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jill E. Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Anthony Alofsin, *The Struggle for Modernism: Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and City Planning at Harvard* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

practice, and to the educational programs introduced in schools of architecture and institutes of technology, had been communicated to the American audience especially by the MoMA exhibition of 1932.

The intense critical debate following the publication of the exhibition catalog had seen on the opposite dialectical fronts, on the one hand the supporters of functionalist rationalism and, on the other, the supporters of the organic approach. In fact, the unity of planning that Barr, Hitchcock and Johnson had wanted to point out in the production of the modern movement in Europe, although it could be justified under the generically stylistic profile, did not exactly correspond to the variety of the theoretical approaches that inspired the different professional architects. Despite the efforts made by some exponents – above all on the Eastern continental coast – to promote “modern” architecture in the United States, institutional associations such as the American Institute of Architects and almost all the Schools of Architecture, maintained a markedly conservative and traditionalist attitude. During the 1920s only the Columbia University School of Architecture, under the direction of Joseph Hudnut, had begun to implement a radical change in the organization of the training course program. The radical reforming process at Harvard School of Architecture began in 1935 when Joseph Hudnut replaced George Harold Edgell, dean of the Faculty of Architecture during the past thirty-years, architectural historian and teachers of Fine Arts. On 7 June 1935 a letter from Conant announced to Hudnut his appointment as Dean of the new Harvard Faculty of Architecture and the assignment of a chair of Architecture. The arrival of Hudnut at Harvard represented the beginning of a thorough transformation that would have deeply changed many of the School’s traditions and, above all, would have given a new address to the teaching of architecture in the United States. His previous experience as Dean of the School of Architecture at Columbia University had offered him the chance to meet John Dewey who had left the chair of philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1904 to take the professorship of the same course at the Columbia University. The theoretical works of the Burlington philosopher about the close relationship between education and democracy, the consequent implications on “learning by conscious doing”, his theory of art as aesthetic experience, and his attempt to recompose the dichotomy between “art and science” would have had an extraordinary impact on the reform strategies of studies planned by Hudnut at Harvard. Hence, by 1935, having “completed as much damage as I could possibly do at Columbia”<sup>5</sup>, Hudnut accepted the position of dean at Harvard. Hudnut’s reforming program at Harvard targeted three goals that he would make explicit in a series of three lectures delivered at the College of Architecture and Design, University of Michigan in 1952, titled “Three Lamps of Modern Architecture”<sup>6</sup>. The first of them shared Harvard’s aspiration to create a synthetic approach to education, to achieve “total design” based

5. Jill E. Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard*, 48.

6. The three lamps were: The Lamp of Progress, The Lamp of Nature, and The Lamp of Democracy. They suggest comparison with Ruskin’s Seven Lamps of Architecture, but whereas Ruskin intended his Seven Lamps to be positive guides that the architect should follow, Hudnut intends to demonstrate that the lamps of progress, nature and democracy are false beacons that should not be allowed to mislead the architect. Hudnut observes an increasing tendency, amongst modern architects, to adopt the methods and goals of engineering”. He believes that engineering methods and goals may lead to functional fulfillment and to beauty, but not to expression, and therefore not to architecture, for “expression is the supreme law of architecture”. Joseph Hudnut, “The Lamp of Progress,” *Architectural Record* (March 1953);139.

on American traditions and to unify art and architecture. The second goal pursued by Hudnut was to closely link the teaching of design to the scientific and technological aspects of professional practice. Finally, the third goal was to transfer all the cultural training disciplines, and therefore not considered to be strictly professional, as part of the preparatory diploma of first level degree courses. In January 1936 Hudnut transmitted to the Harvard Corporation a final report in which for the first time he proposed to establish a Graduate School of Design under the control of the existing School of Architecture, which in turn would have been called Faculty of Design. Hudnut proposed to dismember the Faculty of Architecture and to unify its three Schools of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and City Planning in the Graduate School of Design. The three schools were transformed into Departments of the new GSD, each related to a chairman who should have collaborated with the others under the direction of a single dean. As Hudnut himself explained "Design" described the fundamental and shared activity of architects, urban planners and landscapers. Each of them capable of interpreting ideas and realizing them in practical and aesthetic ways, translating them into "visible patterns. To design a chair and to design a cathedral is the same process: the same evolution of form, the same evolution of technique."<sup>7</sup> In 1936 it happened an event which opened the chance of a radical change in GSD. Jean-Jacques Haffner, decided to resign, starting from the spring semester, freeing up a chair of Architecture. Hudnut had therefore to face the problem to find a new teacher capable of countering conservative forces and of promoting the integration of the arts and sciences following the approach given by the Modern Movement. In the summer of 1936, three candidates were in the running to replace Jean-Jacques Haffner and to steer the GSD decisively onto the modernist route: the Germans Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Dutch J.-J. P. Oud, who had been among the first architect to formulate the "Neue Sachlichkeit" and to believe that architecture should be inspired by technology and social needs. They had been three of the four most important "Modern Architects" in the MoMA exhibition which, in 1932, had presented the International Style to the North Americans. The fourth was Le Corbusier who, despite having stayed for two months in the USA in 1935, and given lectures at various architecture schools, was not on the list of Harvard candidates. Most probably one of the reasons for the exclusion was his poor knowledge of English, to which was added the additional circumstance that, unlike Gropius and Mies, he had no experience in managing a school.

In July Hudnut, accompanied by George Holmes Perkins, traveled in Europe, meeting Mies in Berlin, where the XI Olympic Games were held, Oud in Amsterdam and, before returning to Boston in early September, he saw Gropius in London. The latter had moved to England, with his wife Ise in 1934, owing to the German political turmoil. Although his arrival

7. Jill Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism: Joseph Hudnut, Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Legacy at Harvard*, 58.

in London was not generally accepted in a triumphant way that, perhaps, he hoped, he still managed to break into small “modernist” circles – as Isokon and the MARS Group, the British section of CIAM – starting a professional collaboration with Edwin Maxwell Fry. When the two Harvard teachers met him in London, Gropius was leaving for La Sarraz, where he would spend the summer holidays together with other members of the European circles of the Modern Movement including László Moholy-Nagy. Back in Boston, Hudnut reported the results of his meetings to President Conant and gave him the biographical notes of Mies and Gropius. Oud was soon removed from the list of candidates: he suffered from depression and his psychological conditions were, probably, decisive for his exclusion. The biographical profiles of Mies and Gropius written by Hudnut were decidedly impartial. However, the explicit mention of Gropius’s publications and a reference to the taciturn nature of Mies, seemed to show that, all things considered, the former was considered the most suitable candidate. The two German architects were friends and Gropius had urged Mies to take over the Bauhaus in 1931 to replace Hannes Meyer. Mies held the direction of Bauhaus for two turbulent years until the school closed in 1933, both due to the excessive controls by Gestapo and to the continuous lack of funds. In retrospect one can undoubtedly affirm that perhaps Mies, despite his reserved nature, was the architect closest to the Hudnut’s conception of planning. However some misunderstandings, discussed in detail by Pearlman, arose during the selection process that put Mies out of the competition.

In December 1936 the Harvard Faculty officially approved the call of Gropius, and included him in the ranks of the GSD starting from 1 April 1937 without yet assigning him any specific chair. On 12 March 1937, the Berlin architect embarked for USA on the transatlantic “Europa”, reaching New York after five days, where he received a telegram of greetings from Hudnut: “Welcome to America where Happiness and Success await you!”

At Harvard Gropius managed to bring other European *Bauhauslers* to Harvard among which Marcel Breuer, Martin Wagner, and Joseph Albers. However, according to Pearlman, Hudnut neither wanted nor could the GSD become the “Harvard Bauhaus”<sup>8</sup>, which the reforms imagined by Gropius intended to implement. The German architect believed that all architecture students should begin with a Bauhaus-inspired “preliminary course” to instill them in the fundamentals of form, composition, space, and materials. According to Hudnut, in the formation of the modern architect the collaboration between architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning was necessary: a triad of well-rooted activity in the historical schools of the Faculty of Architecture. Gropius believed instead that the collaboration should involve architects and engineers, interpreting it as a team effort. He did not fully understand how important was the role played by urban planning and landscape architecture in North

8. Jill Pearlman, “Joseph Hudnut’s Other Modernism at the Harvard-Bauhaus,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, n. 3 (December 1997).

America and especially at Harvard. Another reason for disagreement was the teaching of architectural history: Hudnut believed that knowledge of architectural history was fundamental for the training of professional architects and, above all, that it should be taught in the context of first level degree programs and therefore before the students tackled the most rigorous and specific topics of post-graduate training. For his part Gropius believed that the study of the history of architecture represented an obstacle to creativity and experimentation: the students could have attended courses in architectural history, only after having learned and assimilated in depth the formal language of Modernism thus avoiding dangerous historicist drifts. Finally, Hudnut, as a strong supporter of American Modernism, saw in the architecture of Gropius and in his teaching at GSD the expression of a functionalism so rigid as to deprive the architecture of its fundamental humanistic soul. But another Gropius autonomous initiative would have made their relationship even more conflicting. In 1945, in fact, Gropius proposed to establish a basic design course similar to the "Vorkurs" taught by Hitten and Albers in the early years of the Bauhaus. The courses at GSD should have trained the students to become familiar with a visual language focused on function, space, scale, light, shape, color and structural types. It was such an important vocabulary for Gropius that he hoped it was applied to all levels of American education, from kindergarten onwards. Furthermore the school was going through an economic and organizational crisis induced by WWII. The faculty watched the Hudnut-Gropius disagreements that finally erupt into a bitter personal challenge. During the lucrative after war years, when the G.I. Bill, i.e. the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, swelled the school's enrollment, inflation began to slice the endowment. Hudnut rearranged his program, dropping some courses and firing some instructors, mostly Gropius' friends. Finally, he turned to Gropius' own course, "Fundamentals of Design", which had been running on a special Corporation grant. As soon as the money ran out Hudnut discontinued the course. Despite the integration of the three departments of GSD and the decision to keep active only one first common course for all three, since 1948 and due to Hudnut's tenacity, the situation was out of control. It was for this reason that Gropius suggested a solution that his successor would necessarily have had to adopt: *"I suggest promoting the closest integration of the School's departments by placing it under the direction of a single director who becomes the key figure, the person in charge; he will also direct the architecture department at the same time, because from a historical point of view the architecture and the mother of the design art from which all the others have developed"*<sup>9</sup> at GSD. With this gone and the general prospect of forced economy, Gropius left the school, leaving behind the dregs of his battle and a discouraged group of people. He resigned from the academic position in the autumn of 1952; the same year Hudnut retired from the deanship, while in 1953 president Conant was appointed US Ambassador in Berlin by Dwight D. Eisenhower.

9. Quoted by Josep M. Rovira, *José Luis Sert: 1901-1983* (Milano: Electa, 2000), 87.

## 2. Reproducing the American mood: the 1944 MoMa Exhibition “Built in USA: 1932-1944” and aftermaths

In just a few years after 1932 Exhibition the situation at the MoMA would change: Johnson had left the Museum in December 1934 to follow an unfortunate political adventure and was replaced as head of the Department of Architecture by Philip Goodwin and Ernestine Fantl who, in turn, resigned in 1937. Just after that date, in numerous publications and exhibitions, the New York museum began a progressive detachment from the “doctrine of universality”. Now the emphasis was shifted to the climatic and cultural priorities of the geographical site, to the recognized impossibility of achieving “universal” solutions and to the emergence of “regional” architectural trends. From this point of view it could be said that the MoMA limited itself to faithfully recording the development of events as they occurred or, more cynically, intended to enhance new trends in architecture with the primary aim of attracting public attention to its halls and consolidating its position of undisputed “temple of modern taste”. But in putting the accent on regionalism, and in particular on the American one, the MoMA establishment mirrored and reflected the national mood<sup>10</sup>. This mood permeated a conspicuous part of the North American culture and art of the period: from the murals of Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, to the poems of Robert Frost and Allen Tate; from the novels of Mary Austin and Willa Cather, to the economic and social policies implemented by the presidency of F. D. Roosevelt that clearly indicated the crisis of the American Exceptionalism.

Once again, as in 1932, the MoMA would have publicized that sort of loss of cultural content and authentically human values that seemed to affect international architecture and announced the new regional trends in USA.

In 1944, Elizabeth Bauer Mock, sister of the most famous Catherine, acted as curator or narrator of the exhibition “Built in USA: 1932-1944” for the Department of Architecture and Design. The exhibition, while explicitly recalling the contents of the 1932 exhibition, reproduced the new lines of regionalist development taken by North American architecture through the works of William Wilson Wurster, Harwell Hamilton Harris, Pietro Beluschi and other architects of the US North Pacific Coast and thus providing a faithful testimony of the regionalist “resistance” of residential architecture during the 1930s to the narrow functionalist orthodoxy of the International Style. In the catalog’s foreword Philip Goodwin connected the aims of the show in tight bond with 1932’s exhibition: “In the spring of 1932 they [Barr, Hitchcock and Johnson] prepared an exhibition of foreign and native examples of true contemporary design collect an International Exhibition of Modern Architecture, held in the Museum’s first quarters in the Hecksher Building in New York. The architecture was so new and surprising that hostile and ill-informed critics and architects still frequently

10. Robert Dormann, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).



assert that the Museum is trying to impose a foreign style on the United States. Such was not the Museum's intention, in the first place, nor has it been the Museum's program since"<sup>11</sup>.

So Goodwin, while asserting MoMA's pride of starting in the US a fruitful and stimulating debate, defended the Museum from the charge of having promoted in the US an imported and alien architecture and significantly referred to North European "New Empiricism" and to the focus on "city planning". The most important development elements were mainly referred to single-family housing buildings: *"It is perhaps in the field of domestic architecture that our list is strongest; and that is only natural, for that is where American architect has had the most opportunities and the freest hand. Yet the small number of West Coast houses which have been included is rather misleading, for here, as we know, California has led quantity and average quality"*<sup>12</sup>. But it is perhaps relevant to underline the reference to the challenging "crusade" that, according to Goodwin, the MoMA has contributed to, with the American research institution, to fight in the seek of modern architecture's identity.

During pre-War years the perception that the strong professional "establishment" from the East-Coast was committed basically to give credit to the idea that modern architecture's only exponents were Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Breuer, whom were all US immigrants during the 30's, started to spread, while it tended to deliberately neglect the existence of a "modernist" design orientation practiced by the West Coast architects well before the great European exodus. Elizabeth Mock performed a retrospective analysis on European architecture's impact on professional culture and on public opinion in the previous decade. She recognized to Barr, Hitchcock and Johnson the merit of introducing European architecture to the USA and especially a critique towards functionalism: *"The insistence upon aesthetic principles was particularly healthy at that time, as it deliberately opposed the highly materialistic theory of "functionalism" a credo so unrealistic, that it was never actually practiced even by those who were most articulate in its support. In a period of depression the popular slogan of "functionalism" was valuable promotion for modern architecture, but it was too often used as a specious excuse to bad design"*<sup>13</sup>. She underlined the fact that the curators of the 1932 exhibition contributed to the re-evaluation of Wright's organic architecture and its diffusion over the East Coast: *"The positive influence of Frank Lloyd Wright upon the development of the new theories was carefully traced in 1932 catalog and his separate and unique position was sympathetically defined. His out-reaching houses, with their warm materials and their affinity with the earth, had little to do with the weightless, closed forms and cool austerities of the Europeans"*<sup>14</sup>. So, a humanizing process was necessary for American architecture, to meet users' expectations, in opposition to the current myth of mechanization which led by Le Corbusier to define house as "machine à habiter".

11. Philip L. Goodwin, "Foreword", in *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, ed. Elizabeth Bauer Mock (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 2.

12. Philip L. Goodwin, "Foreword", in *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, ed. Elizabeth Bauer Mock (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 3.

13. Elizabeth Bauer Mock, *Built in USA: 1932-1944* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 10.

14. Elizabeth Bauer Mock, *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, 11.

Precisely from West US, where the values of North American tradition are profoundly rooted, came signals of a different approach to architectural design practiced since the century's beginning by Bernard Maybeck. This regional approach, in strong contrast with International Style-inspired cold austerity and rules code, was characterized by a closer attention to the surrounding context and by a different usage of building materials and techniques with important morphologic implications: *"Then, if the shift from masonry to steel or concrete frame, one thought to see a certain biological evolution from crustacean to vertebrate. Suddenly the vertebrate seems no more advanced than new types of crustacean. It was reinforced concrete which really started this development, but it was the use of plywood as a 'stressed skin' which encouraged it. If these skin sheets of plywood are properly glued or otherwise bonded, rather than nailed, to either side of light wood frame, this full structural exploitation of the plywood 'skin' gives the panel amazing strength. We are only beginning to explore the possibilities of this type of construction"*<sup>15</sup>.

1944's MoMA exhibition has been a particularly important turning point because dedicated exclusively to US-produced works during the previous decade from North American architects, naturalized Europeans to be precise, such as Richard Neutra, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Raymond M. Hood - present in 1932 exhibition - and Albert Kahn, Louis Kahn, Eero Saarinen and Pietro Belluschi. Greatly significant was the West-Coast architects', William Wilson and Harwell Hamilton Harris, presentation that testified the emancipation from a sort of American architecture's subordination to the European, underlined by 1932 exhibition. On the other hand, from a theoretic perspective, in 1945, Bruno Zevi's essay *Verso un'Architettura Organica* (Towards an Organic Architecture)<sup>16</sup>, which borrows the title from the 1921 Le Corbusier's programmatic manifesto, tried to supply a systemic fundament to Wright's organic design. Indeed in the US a different methodological approach manifested towards housing. While in Europe, in the decade between 1920's and 1930's, single family housing represented for architects an experimental phase to solve the mass social housing problem, across the ocean during the following decade the social housing topic was absorbed within "city planning" and "civic design" with a shifting that privileged the concept of house as family's "home" and "shelter", totally contrasting the "unité d'habitation" idea, with a significant downscaling in size and aesthetic principles<sup>17</sup>.

So, beginning from the 30's, West Coast architectural regionalism and design organic approach gained increasing energy reaching the climax during the 40's. The economic explosion of the second after war period eased demographic development and financial and real estate market expansion; a huge amount of underdeveloped territory was available in which to grow and build, traditional cultures were less elitist than in

15. Elizabeth Bauer Mock, *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, 16.

16. Bruno Zevi, *Verso un'Architettura Organica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1945).

17. In November 1940 the exhibition "Frank Lloyd Wright" was opened at MoMA and in its garden was showed a low-cost house prototype designed by Wright and completely furnished. This 5000 dollar proposal was considered by MoMA as a contribution to the debate focalized on the theme of industrialized buildings and on series-produced houses. Wright's prototype anticipated the 1941 project of 100 house units to be build in Pittsfield Massachusetts, for the "Division of Defense Housing". See Donald Albrecht (ed.), *World War II and the American Dream. How Wartime Building Changed a Nation* (Washington-Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

the East Coast and the clients less conservative. This happened where new creative approaches were experimented and new design ideas were explored by William Wilson Wurster, Gardner Daily and John Dinwiddie in the Bay Area, Raphael Soriano and Charles Eames in Los Angeles, John Yeon, James Van Evera Bayley Paul Thiry and Pietro Belluschi in North-West. Themed periodic press, especially *magazines, journals* and *reviews* played the important role both of contrasting the European pressure from the East Coast and of critical architecture information that, with autonomous experimenting, was produced on the Pacific Coast.

John Entenza, editor of Los Angeles *California Arts & Architecture* magazine, aware of New England's historical-critic authoritativeness, played an important role in calling attention on architecture that was being built in the West. In 1940 he asked Henry-Russell Hitchcock to write an article<sup>18</sup> on West-Coast architecture, as if to ratify the end of a sort of ostracism stated by the East Coast professional culture. On the other hand, Howard Myers, publisher of New York's *Architectural Forum* carefully followed new significant developments in the country as well and, with an open minded approach, contributed to focus critical attention Westwards.

In 1947, *Architectural Record* magazine, on Elizabeth Kendall Thompson's initiative, opened an editorial session dedicated exclusively to the US continental Western, highlighting style and approach differences compared to East, different materials – wood and natural stone specifically – and the totally different orientation related to built space's modeling and fruition. Cultural roots were considered similarly different: New England and US continental Eastern was typically more "style-conscious", opened towards European tendencies with its "modernism" influenced by Bauhaus' machine aesthetic and other International Style's doctrinal paradigms, while in the West sight was oriented towards nature, and its architectural roots to be looked for in vernacular "cottages" and "bungalows", in Arts & Crafts, in Bernard Maybeck and Greene & Greene brothers, in artisans, in Japanese East, in the organic theory and later in Alvar Aalto's work, distinctive elements of a less aggressive, less doctrinal and especially more human "modernism". Especially in the second after war period, during which the US continental Western was strongly under construction, the East Coast architects tended towards an abstract theorization, while on the North Pacific Coast were oriented towards a practical design experimentation. In the decade's last years, the overturn started to come out clear. William Wilson Wurster, in 1948, stated that US architecture "had enlarged its base". There was no longer New York's "old backward" itself; modern and good quality architecture was being produced elsewhere as well - especially in the West - and the regional challenge level was increasing. Lewis Mumford fueled the critical debate's fire and, from *The New Yorker* "Sky Line"<sup>19</sup> columns in October 1947, compared

18. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "An Eastern Critic Looks at Western Architecture," *California Arts & Architecture* (December 1940).

19. Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line: Status Quo," *New Yorker*, n. 11 (October 1947): 94-99.

the Eastern “stodginess” with Western “freshness”, and saw in the latter a new, promising alternative to International Style.

Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre<sup>20</sup> argue that the reason why Mumford’s article started so much controversy was that, for the first time, it was considered as an alternative to International Style and, for the first time after its rooting, architecture really challenged to that “top-down”, elitist, artificial and prescriptive International Style architecture sponsored by New York’s MoMA. Bay Region Style’s identification represented his North American architecture researches and personal aspiration landing point, oriented to recognize, within this architectural expression, a genuine regional development process. The Bay Region showed an architectural design school that Mumford believed to be not only unique, but capable of realizing his regionalist philosophy as well. As the exponents of Arts and Crafts in the late nineteenth century, so the Bay Region architects collected in their work regional history, but for the first, past represented an aim, whereas for the second past only built a part of broader and more motivated philosophy of history. Furthermore, twentieth century Bay Region architects were considered “modernists” by Mumford, but their skill in incorporating and integrating the local and historical elements made their “modernism” more eloquent and mature than the coeval European “modernism” of International Style. In November 1947 Mumford suggested the idea to hold a Symposium at MoMA. Promptly he received the agreement by Alfred Barr and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, to organize a debate centered on the arguments discussed by Mumford’s in article on *The New Yorker*. On February 11, 1948, at the MoMA auditorium, was held the Symposium “What is Happening to Architecture”<sup>21</sup>, with Lewis Mumford as “chairman & discussant”. The debate was presented as an opposition between the supporters of the so called “New Empiricism” and “Bay Region School” and the ones whom coined the term “International Style”, Hitchcock first of all. Formally, the Symposium was a failure: the audience waited in vain to listen to appropriate answers to difficult questions. However, from the meeting emerged the representation of a significant gap in architectural thinking, which addressed professional orientations within that cultural season. Two opposite points of view dominated the debate: on one side, the inventors of the “International Style” term, and on the other side the supporters of “New Empiricism” and its American counterpart, the new-humanist “Bay Region School”. The controversy was quickly reduced to its essential opposition terms: on one side the ones whom expressed in term of style and functionality and on the other the ones whom judged labels and “-isms” as a secondary term compared to the major issue of building production. The first group was constituted by Alfred Hamilton Barr Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson whom defined the basic principles of International Style. Alfred Barr insisted particularly on the fact that, in 1932, the invention of the term

20. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Critical Regionalism, Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World* (Munich: Prestel, 2003).

21. Alfred H. Barr et al, “What is Happening to Modern Architecture? A Symposium at the Museum of Modern Art” (New York: The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, Vol. XV, n. 3, 1948), also reproduced in Vincent B. Canizaro, *Architectural Regionalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

"International Style" was based on an historical-artistic matrix scientific interpretation, reflection of Harvard's cultural environment in which himself and Hitchcock were trained: soon after the end of the exhibition in 1932 the distortion process that "International Style" idea was undergoing was focused. The belief that the international concept in architecture should mean the gradual awareness of a cultural centrality's disappearance in favor of a much more diffuse polycentrism was making its way. Hitchcock highlighted its methodical setting continuity and, refusing to insist on the assimilation of "Modern Architecture" and "International Style" terms, emphasized on "Architecture": modern architecture criticism during the 20's and the 30's, originated from the "Bay Region Style" and Scandinavian architecture discovery, denounced a narrow and limited conception of "International Style". The problem faced by the post-War debate was rather *"expression in architecture"*. British architect Gerhard Kallman defended the "New Empiricism"; Christopher Tunnard insisted on the need of reconciling public taste with the creation of good architecture, suggesting the study of past monumental buildings as a possible solution approach; Frederick Gutheim argued that the reference to a style canon was essential for a critical evaluation. Historian Talbot Hamlin contested the actual existence of an modern architecture internationalism, quoting Oscar Niemeyer instance, to whom the access in the US, for political reasons, was forbidden. Strongly opposed, though with different reasons, to the historical approach were Marcel Breuer, Ralph Walker, Peter Blake, Eero Saarinen, George Nelson and Carl Koch. The latter, unable to reach New York for tough weather conditions, sent his intervention paper, that was subsequently published on MoMA's Bulletin. Walter Gropius, while reducing Mumford's argumentation to a *"sentimental national prejudice"*, added that he had been *"struck by [Mumford's] definition of the Bay Region Style as something new, characterized by an expression of the terrain, the climate, and the way of life, for that was almost precisely, in the same words, the initial aim of the leading modernists in the world twenty-five years back"*<sup>22</sup>, Gropius accused him of stating that the "redwood cottage style" in architecture should have been replicated over the Pacific coast. Nelson, Blake and Koch posed the accent on immediate, practical aims of architecture, on the need of incrementing productivity and on industrialized construction. Lewis Mumford, concluding his discussion pretty late, observed that his definition of "Bay Region Style", opposed to International Style, has been broadly misunderstood, meaning that Hitchcock and Barr's stiff definition did not allow to fully comprehend "the variety and universality degree" of new architectural streams. While MoMA's Symposium have seen the contrast between a small number of academicians and professionals, without a doubt polemic but confined within a frame marked by historical and critical contents, totally different by intensity and tone has been the debate that took place in Salt-Lake City, Utah, during the American Institute of Architects eightieth "Convention", same year's late

22. Alfred H. Barr, "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?", 12.

spring. In this case, the debate was more “political” and witnessed the strong opposition of the whole professional “establishment” - dominated by the East Coast exponents - to the young architects’ generation - mainly for the West Coast - represented by Pietro Belluschi, freshly registered at the A.I.A. fellowship. Yet again the confrontation over US architecture identity rotated around the bi-polar opposition between International/Regional, International Style/Bay Region Style, but almost paradoxically, in this case the supporters of the first were considered “conservatives” while the latter “progressives”. But it was also a questioning about the technical orientation that implied a much more invasive mechanization and appear to menace or even to try to suppress the genuine *élance vitale* of social communities and their natural environment. *“Modern architecture reflects the beauty of its environment, not borrowings from the past. Machines, people, climat, local traditions cannot be disregarded, but neither can they stand in the way of logical development. Architecture must not be dictated by the machine. It must express an emotional understanding of its environment”*<sup>23</sup>. Pietro Belluschi stated, in a conference in Spring 1948 at the University of Washington, appealing to emotive suggestions, and not only rational ones, that architecture should be capable of inspire. European modernists’ works, such as Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler’s in Los Angeles, or Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer’s in the Eastern area, was contested from many of their US colleagues. Not the same happened for Wright, whose work kept being of great impact, especially in the West area. Largely underestimated by the East Coast architectural “establishment”, Wright was admired and venerated by the youth, especially from Mid-Western, North-Western and Western architects.

The American Institute of Architecture is *“notoriously undemocratic”*, as can be read in the Convention’s report published on July’s issue of *Architectural Forum*, and many decisions were assumed unilaterally by its conservative “leaders”.

But, in 1948, the usual, stiff, unanimous annual *meetings* schedule was shocked by a harsh dissent. A *“rebellious younger group”*, including 150 members and delegates, signed an agenda asking that the A.I.A.’s following year Gold Medal was assigned to Wright. Despite the organizers’ efforts to erase the agenda’s argument, it was *“steam-rolled there by newly-made fellow Pietro Belluschi and passed with a few timid bleasts of ‘no’ ”*.

After all, during the previous year, Belluschi sent a letter to Arthur Mc Voy, Cambridge territorial planning consultant, in which he stigmatized A.I.A.’s leaders’ clearly conservative orientation. Belluschi argued that the Association’s Journal published, in April 1947 issue, a letter by Walter Gropius explaining the reasons why young architects faced great difficulties in obtaining A.I.A.’s “membership”.

23. Meredith L. Clausen, *Pietro Belluschi: Modern American Architect* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 190.

In the meantime, the West Coast party drafted an increasing number of supporters on a national base within the A.I.A. 1948 "Convention" was organized significantly in Salt-Lake City, Utah, and Belluschi was invited as speaker for two congress sessions – one on shopping malls and the other on inexpensive housing and "retail buildings" – and as coordinator for a seminary about housing project's regional characters. The meeting was attended with great attention, as to demonstrate that regionalism represented a crucial argument in the current debate over housing. *"There has always been a powerful need for the human race to harmonize itself with all the forces of nature which surround it by that token, contemporary design - as all creative architectures in the past - reflects the will to create forms which are alive, and by alive I mean appropriate, in tune with the life which flows everywhere around it"* Belluschi argued in his address<sup>24</sup>.

By now the critical awareness of the existence in the USA of a tendency in architecture which was strongly opposed to International Style and in line with audience's taste, penetrated even the most conservative segments of the Western professional culture as evidenced by July 1948 issue of the Journal published the text of Pietro Belluschi's lecture at the 80th "Convention" seminar on the housing topic.

24. Pietro Belluschi, "Shopping centers," *American Institute of Architects. Address at Annual Convention, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1948.*



**FIG. 1** "Modern Architecture. International Exhibition", Heckscher Building, New York, 1932.



**FIG. 2** Richard Neutra, Lovell House, Los Angeles, 1927-29.



**FIG. 3** Frank Lloyd Wright, Coonley House, Riverside, Illinois, 1908.



**FIG. 4** Charles e Henry Greene, Gamble House, Pasadena, California, 1907-08.





**FIG. 5** Alvar Aalto, Baker House, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 1947-1949.

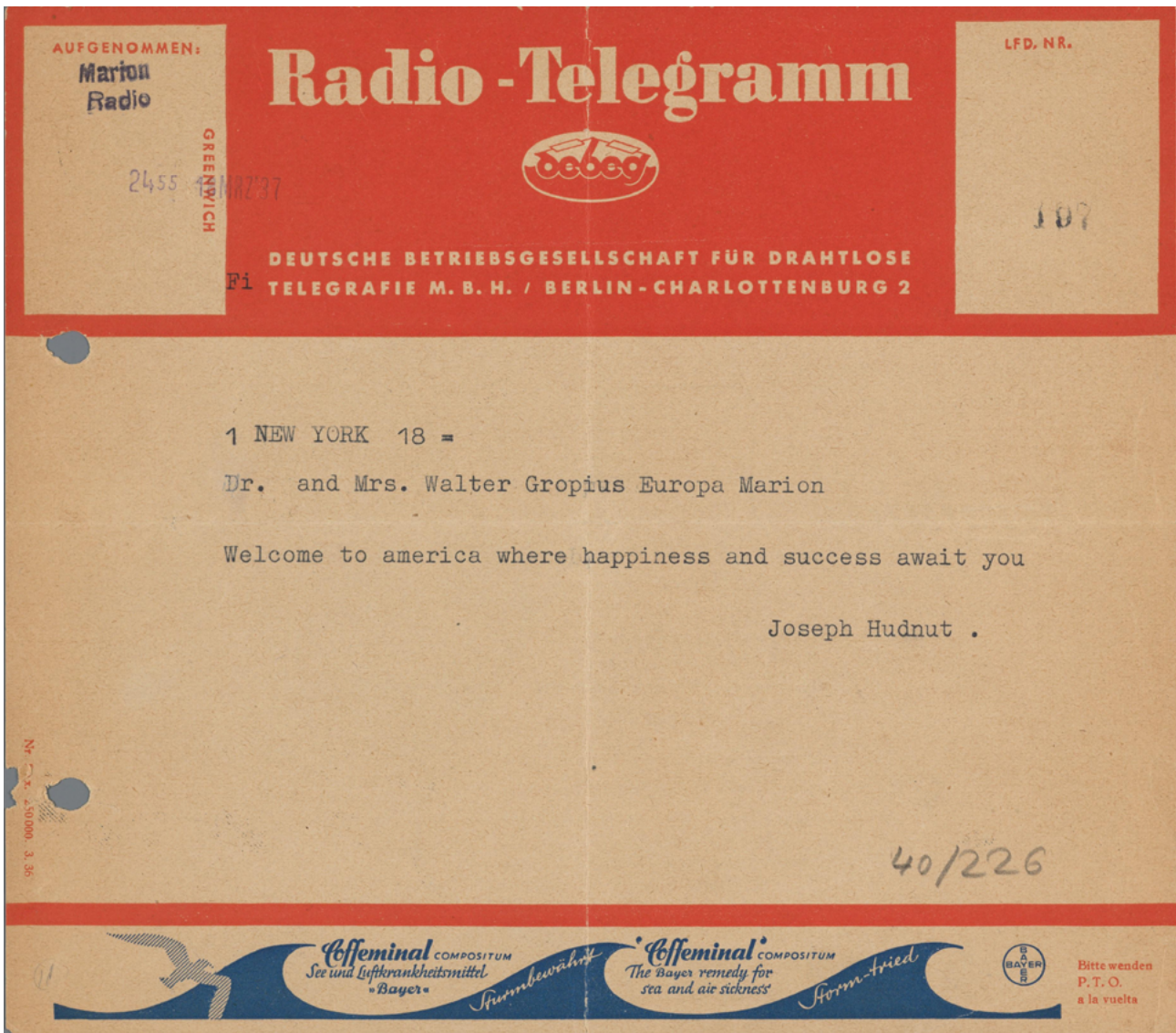


FIG. 6 Telegram from Joseph Hudnut to Walter Gropius, 1937..