

Architecture Culture 1943-1968

A Documentary Anthology

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with the collaboration of Edward Eigen

Columbia University

Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation

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1943

One of the prophetic themes to be debated in the 1940s was that of the "new monumentality." The 1937 World Exposition in Paris had been the occasion of modernism's official triumph for most of the participating countries. At the same time, though, in the confrontation that took place at the foot of the Eiffel Tower between Albert Speer's pavilion for the Third Reich, avatar of Prussian classicism, and Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilion, an embodiment of the more dynamic aspirations of social realism, the new architecture received an implicit challenge to its potency as a form of civic representation.

The accepted view was that "if it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern it cannot be a monument," as Lewis Mumford wrote in 1938 in *The Culture of Cities*. Earlier, Henry-Russell Hitchcock's *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (1929) had helped to inculcate this idea. Yet the dichotomy between "new traditionalists" and "new pioneers" was an oversimplification. Many of those within the folds of the modern movement had realized for a long time that the new aesthetic needed to be infused with a collective and symbolic content. The dispute over Le Corbusier's League of Nations project had raised the issue in explicit terms in 1927.

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On the eve of the Second World War, J. J. P. Oud, responsible for some of the most distinguished examples of international modernism during the previous decade, returned to hierarchical massing, symmetrical planning, and a cautious reintroduction of decorative elements in his Shell Building in the Hague. But the scandal provoked by Oud was only the most extreme example of the effort by architects at this time to find a synthesis between monumental expression and progressive ideology. In a catalogue introduction for an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1944 entitled *Built in U.S.A.—1932-1944*, Elizabeth Mock lauded a prize-winning design of 1939 by Eliel and Eero Saarinen and Robert F. Swanson for the Smithsonian Gallery of Art on the Mall in Washington, D.C., as a monument epitomizing "the very nature of our democracy."

Sigfried Giedion, José Luis Sert, and Fernand Léger entered the debate in 1943 with a position paper entitled "Nine Points on Monumentality." The joint pronouncement by an architectural historian, an architect-planner, and a painter—all living in New York during the war years and in close contact—was intended for publication in a volume planned by the American Abstract Artists which never appeared. A more extended discussion by each of the three from their respective outlooks was to have accompanied it. Of these, an essay by Léger appeared in 1946 in another publication by the American Abstract Artists, while Giedion's essay "The Need for a New Monumentality" came out in 1944 in a book edited by Paul Zucker entitled *New Architecture and City Planning*, a major section of which was dedicated to the monumentality question.

The approach taken in both the "Nine Points" and "The Need for a New Monumentality" was to place monumentality—"the expression of man's highest cultural needs"—within the historical evolution of modernism itself. While modern architecture had earlier been obliged to concentrate on the more immediate and mundane problems of housing and urbanism, the authors argued, its new task in the postwar period would be the reorganization of community life through the planning and design of civic centers, monumental ensembles, and public spectacles. This "third step" would involve the collaboration of architects, planners, and artists. The chief difficulty, in their view, was to invent forms of large-scale expression free of association with oppressive ideologies of the past and historicist bombast ("pseudomonumentality"). To this end, a repertory of colorful and mobile forms and lightweight, naturalistic materials was proposed. The work of contemporary artists like Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, Naum Gabo,

Alexander Calder, and Léger himself was seen as "pointing the way" for an architecture of full rather than empty rhetoric.

For Giedion this was clearly a shift from the machine *Zeitgeist* that had inspired *Space, Time and Architecture*, written in 1938-39. In an extended discussion of the League of Nations competition in that book he had commended Le Corbusier's entry specifically for its programmatic accommodation and absence of monumental rhetoric. In his article in the *Zucker* book—which began with the motto, "Emotional training is necessary today. For whom? First of all for those who govern and administer the people"—he stated of Le Corbusier's building, "the whole development of modern architecture towards a new monumentality would have been advanced for decades if the officials could have understood its quality." Giedion's reversal seems to have been in large part occasioned by the new impact of Frank Lloyd Wright. In an article on Wright's Johnson Wax building entitled "The Dangers and Advantages of Luxury" published at the end of 1939 in the journal *Focus*, he celebrated its overscaled columns and powerful central work hall, acknowledging that a modern administration building could "for once be based entirely on poetry."

The monumentality debate reached a point of intensity in an issue of the London journal *Architectural Review* published in September 1948 with invited contributions from Gregor Paulsson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, William Hofford, Walter Gropius, Lúcio Costa, Alfred Roth, and Giedion, and a late contribution from Lewis Mumford in April 1949. It would surface again at CIAM's eighth congress in Hoddesdon, England, in 1951, on the core of the city. But here, at a moment when social realism was at its height in Eastern Europe, the theme was exorcised in the West—at least for the moment. In summing up the congress's conclusions, Giedion stated, "There is no excuse for the erection of a monumental building mass," shifting the responsibility for producing symbolic forms to "creative painters and sculptors."

Yet the impulse behind the new monumentality was not to disappear. It would be transformed, *mutatis mutandis*, in the coming decades: in the mythopoetic structures of Louis Kahn and the new capitols built in India and Brazil, reemerging in the 1960s and 1970s in the historicism of the Italian *Tendenza* and the grandiloquent facades of postmodernism. Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe the theme would have a mirror image in the continuing struggle between social realism and functionalism.

The verse from the French song with which the "Nine Points" opens is meant to convey the preciousness of great monuments of civic architecture: "What would you give, my beauty, to see your husband again? I will give Versailles, Paris and Saint Denis, the towers of Notre Dame, and the steeple of my native countryside . . ." A partial summary of the literature on monumentality may be found in Christiane C. and George R. Collins, "Monumentality: A Critical Matter in Modern Architecture," *Harvard Architecture Review* 4 (1984).

First published in S. Giedion, *Architektur und Gemeinschaft* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), pp. 40-42. English edition: *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 48-52. Copyright © 1958 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Nine Points on Monumentality J. L. Sert, F. Léger, S. Giedion

*Que donneriez vous ma belle
Pour revoir votre mari?
Je donnerai Versailles,
Paris et Saint Denis
Les tours de Notre Dame
Et le clocher de mon pays.
Auprès de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon.*
—From an old French song, "Auprès de ma blonde"

1. Monuments are human landmarks which men have created as symbols for their ideals, for their aims, and for their actions. They are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations. As such, they form a link between the past and the future.
2. Monuments are the expression of man's highest cultural needs. They have to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for translation of their collective force into symbols. The most vital monuments are those which express the feeling and thinking of this collective force—the people.
3. Every bygone period which shaped a real cultural life had the power and the capacity to create these symbols. Monuments are, therefore, only possible in periods in which a unifying consciousness and unifying culture exists. Periods which exist for the moment have been unable to create lasting monuments.
4. The last hundred years have witnessed the devaluation of monumentality. This does not mean that there is any lack of formal monuments or architectural examples pretending to serve this purpose; but the so-called monuments of recent date have, with rare exceptions, become empty shells. They in no way represent the spirit or the collective feeling of modern times.
5. This decline and misuse of monumentality is the principal reason why modern architects have deliberately disregarded the monument and revolted against it.
Modern architecture, like modern painting and sculpture, had to start the hard way. It began by tackling the simpler problems, the more utilitarian buildings like low-rent housing, schools, office buildings, hospitals, and similar structures. Today modern architects know that buildings cannot be conceived as isolated units, that they have to be incorporated into the vaster urban schemes. There are no frontiers between architecture and town planning, just as there are no frontiers between the city and the region. Co-relation between them is necessary. Monuments should constitute the most powerful accents in these vast schemes.
6. A new step lies ahead. Postwar changes in the whole economic structure of nations may bring with them the organization of community life in the city which has been practically neglected up to date.
7. The people want the buildings that represent their social and community life to give more than functional fulfillment. They want their aspiration for monumentality, joy, pride, and excitement to be satisfied.

The fulfillment of this demand can be accomplished with the new means of expression at hand, though it is no easy task. The following conditions are essential for

it: A monument being the integration of the work of the planner, architect, painter, sculptor, and landscapist demands close collaboration between all of them. This collaboration has failed in the last hundred years. Most modern architects have not been trained for this kind of integrated work. Monumental tasks have not been entrusted to them.

As a rule, those who govern and administer a people, brilliant as they may be in their special fields, represent the average man of our period in their artistic judgments. Like this average man, they experience a split between their methods of thinking and their methods of feeling. The feeling of those who govern and administer the countries is untrained and still imbued with the pseudo-ideals of the nineteenth century. This is the reason why they are not able to recognize the creative forces of our period, which alone could build the monuments or public buildings that should be integrated into new urban centers which can form a true expression for our epoch.

8. Sites for monuments must be planned. This will be possible once replanning is undertaken on a large scale which will create vast open spaces in the now decaying areas of our cities. In these open spaces, monumental architecture will find its appropriate setting which now does not exist. Monumental buildings will then be able to stand in space, for, like trees or plants, monumental buildings cannot be crowded in upon any odd lot in any district. Only when this space is achieved can the new urban centers come to life.

9. Modern materials and new techniques are at hand: light metal structures; curved, laminated wooden arches; panels of different textures, colors, and sizes; light elements like ceilings which can be suspended from big trusses covering practically unlimited spans.

Mobile elements can constantly vary the aspect of the buildings. These mobile elements, changing positions and casting different shadows when acted upon by wind or machinery, can be the source of new architectural effects.

During night hours, color and forms can be projected on vast surfaces. Such displays could be projected upon buildings for purposes of publicity or propaganda. These buildings would have large plane surfaces planned for this purpose, surfaces which are nonexistent today.

Such big animated surfaces with the use of color and movement in a new spirit would offer unexplored fields to mural painters and sculptors.

Elements of nature, such as trees, plants, and water, would complete the picture. We could group all these elements in architectural ensembles: the stones which have always been used, the new materials which belong to our times, and color in all its intensity which has long been forgotten.

Man-made landscapes would be correlated with nature's landscapes and all elements combined in terms of the new and vast facade, sometimes extending for many miles, which has been revealed to us by the air view. This could be contemplated not only during a rapid flight but also from a helicopter stopping in mid-air.

Monumental architecture will be something more than strictly functional. It will have regained its lyrical value. In such monumental layouts, architecture and city planning could attain a new freedom and develop new creative possibilities, such as those that have begun to be felt in the last decades in the fields of painting, sculpture, music, and poetry.

1943

The figure of **Frank Lloyd Wright**—Whitmanesque genius, charismatic master, prolific creator of a self-described American architecture—looms over the post-World War II period even more imposingly than the earlier part of the century. In fact, Wright, born in 1867, was continuing to proselytize, in his buildings, writings, and teaching, the very same ideas he had first articulated half a century before. As early as 1894 he had written an article exhorting architects to "bring out the nature of the materials." This theme, closely linked to his idea of organic architecture—itself derived from his "lieber Meister" Louis Sullivan—would preoccupy him for the rest of his life. In 1928 Wright wrote an eloquent series of articles for *Architectural Record* under the title "In the Cause of Architecture" focusing on the respective characteristics of different materials: stone, wood, tile and brick, glass, concrete, metal; "the logical material under the circumstances," he wrote succinctly, "is the most natural one for the purpose. It usually is the most beautiful . . ." Not surprisingly, in 1940, for the large retrospective of his work held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York he chose the same theme, "The Nature of Materials," a title that also served for the comprehensive volume by Henry-Russell Hitchcock that appeared two years later as an *ex post facto* catalogue. The credo that follows here, comprising a section of Wright's *Autobiography* as published in 1943, does not differ in substance from these earlier pronouncements.

On the other hand, Wright's impact at a moment when orthodox modernism was undergoing revision was enormous. His indictment of the functionalist "box"—"a white sepulture for unthinking mass-life"—reversed the equation of what he saw as an architecture dedicated to the machine with the alternative of a machine technology in the service of architecture, an architecture whose values were, above all, "humane." His major accomplishments of the middle to late 1930s—the completion of the Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wisconsin, and of important residences like the Kaufmann house at Connellsville, Pennsylvania ("Falling Water"), as well as his elaboration of the Usonian house type and its suburban extension, Broadacre City—amply demonstrated the fertility of the architect's vision in his sixth decade. If earlier he could be relegated by a modern movement that did not know how to subsume him to being "the last great nineteenth-century architect," or by an Anglo-Saxon world remembering the reception of the 1910 Wasmuth edition of his work to being "Germanic," by the 1940s he would appear prescient and fully original. For Bruno Zevi, who would return home to Italy with a transliterated concept of organic architecture after spending the war years in America, and for the stream of architects who would seek out the architectural cult at Taliesin West, Wright's thought represented a powerful antidote to the dispersed and war-damaged culture of Europe.

It may be helpful to identify the "five new resources" on which Wright's argument below is predicated, as these get somewhat buried in the idiosyncrasies of his writing style. They are *spatial*, an interior concept of room-space; *material*, the advent of glass as a "supermaterial" allowing maximum penetration of light and the disappearance of the wall; *structural*, "tenuity" or continuity of structure, especially through the use of steel and plastics; *constructional*, fidelity in building to the inherent qualities—the nature—of materials; *expressive*, integral ornament, the giving of "natural pattern" to structure.

From Frank Lloyd Wright, An Autobiography (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), pp. 337–49. Copyright © 1943 by The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.