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Marcel Breuer: Last of the First Moderns / First of the Last Moderns

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Abstract: Marcel Breuer (1902–1981) is one of the most important architects and designers of the second generation of Modernism. Yet today, more than 35 years after his death, Breuer is most often remembered for his furniture designs, while his architectural works have largely disappeared from disciplinary discourse. Breuer may be said to have stood between the first generation of modernists, such as Mies van der Rohe, whose accomplishments he matched, and the second generation of modernists such as Louis Kahn, who were his true contemporaries. Yet Breuer could be said not to belong either to the first or second generation, never embracing what he characterized as the dogmatic modernism of the glass curtain wall, but also rejecting the idea that modern architecture was a monolithic conception. Having begun his career with his 1934 lecture critiquing modernism from the inside, Breuer consistently rejected the critiques of modernism coming from the outside during the last 25 years of his career, when modernism was declared to be dead, and practitioners such as Breuer were labeled "late modernists." Standing between the first and the last moderns, Breuer may be understood as the last of the first moderns and the first of the last moderns.

At the Beginning of Modernism

In spring 1920, Marcel Breuer left his hometown of Pécs to attend the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna. Despite his high expectations, Breuer was deeply disappointed when he arrived to the school, finding everyone occupied with discussions of aesthetic theory and not with the actual making of art. He walked out of the Academy the same day, and two months later his architect friend from Pécs, Fred Forbát, gave Breuer "a little brochure from the Weimar Bauhaus."[1]

When Breuer, then 19, arrived in Weimar to join the Bauhaus, the school was only a year old, and his arrival also coincided with the first time Bauhaus students were taught the *Vorkurs* or Preliminary Course, a six-month course of instruction required of all Bauhaus students that imparted the fundamentals and principles of form, material and design process. Arguably the most important contribution to art and architecture education of the Bauhaus, the *Vorkurs* was initially taught by Johannes Itten, who left the Bauhaus before Breuer had completed his studies, at which time the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy took over the teaching of the *Vorkurs*, joined a few years later by Josef Albers, who entered the Bauhaus as a student at the same time as Breuer.

Paul Klee joined the Bauhaus faculty as a Master in 1920, the same year that Breuer enrolled. In his courses Klee endeavored to teach students "how to see" and how to shape movement through space, and Breuer considered Klee to be one of the most influential teachers he ever had. Breuer later recalled how, during a lecture at the blackboard, Klee "drew an arrow pointing to the right, wrote over it 'Movement,' then another one pointing towards the left with the

[1] Isabelle HYMAN, *Marcel Breuer, Architect: The Career and the Buildings* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2001), 39–41.

caption 'Counter Movement.' It took the audience some time to discover that with the second arrow he changed the crayon into his left hand and wrote 'Counter Movement' from right to left."[2]

From the beginning, Breuer's Bauhaus furniture designs indicated his interest in the shaping of forms to the structural and functional demands of occupation, and the way the weight of the human body caused the frame to flex was a foremost reason for his favoring cantilever spring steel tube chair structures. In contrast to the chairs, Breuer's wood cabinetry and tables were characterized not so much by lightness and literal transparency as by complexly interwoven rectangular volumes of layered thickness and mass, their surfaces clad in rotating, pinwheeling, asymmetrical compositions. Breuer's later architecture was ordered by the same principles as his chairs and cabinetry—forms boldly shaped to structural and functional demands, which were often enclosed by surfaces composed of dynamically interlocking patterns.

In his preface to Klee's notebooks from his Bauhaus courses, posthumously published as *The Thinking Eye*, the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan wrote:

> It was Breuer who perceived the real significance of Klee's teaching at the Bauhaus. [...] The tubular furniture invented by Breuer in 1925, thread-like, suspended in improbable yet faultless equilibrium [...] animated by a silent and vaguely ambiguous vitality [...] is certainly born of Klee's nervous and intense graphics, and the currents of strength which he infuses into his lines. The furniture inhabits man's space like Klee's images inhabit the space of his slanting and oblique perspectives, and of the mobile depths of his tonal layers. The furniture too is born of an invisible dynamic of space, and whilst fulfilling its function with impeccable accuracy, traces a new dimension in which relations are clarified."[3]

Making a Modern Tradition

Peter Blake began his book, the first on Breuer's work, with a story: "One day, in the late 1920s, Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier were talking together about southeastern Europe and its architecture. When Breuer mentioned that he had been born in Pécs, Le Corbusier at once began to describe the [Hungarian vernacular] buildings in that area as he recalled them from his travels."[4]

Breuer gave a lecture at the Swiss Werkbund in Zurich in 1934, entitled "Where do we stand?," in which he argued against the "traditional" works of academically-trained architects, and for vernacular architecture, which he maintained shared with modern architecture two common traits; "the impersonal character of their forms; and a tendency to develop along typical, rational lines that are unaffected by passing fashions." Breuer held that vernacular works are the result of "their uninterrupted transmission through local and family associations, which conditions their development and ultimately standardizes them as type-forms." Arguing against architecture as fashion, he stated; "We are not out to create something new, but something suitable, intrinsically right and as relatively perfect as may be. [...] Though we have no fear of what is new, novelty is not our aim. We seek what is definite and real, whether old or new." Breuer went

[2] Marcel BREUER, *Buildings and Projects, 1921–1961* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 256.

[3] Paul KLEE, *Notebooks: The Thinking Eye*, 2 Vols. (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 1:17. [1956 German original.]

[4] Peter BLAKE, *Marcel Breuer: Architect and Designer* (New York: Architectural Record Books and Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 7.

on to say, "Architecture seems worthy of notice to me only in proportion as it produces an effect on our senses. I care a great deal whether I feel at ease in the finished building."[5]

In 1938, one year after hiring Breuer to teach at Harvard, Dean Joseph Hudnut organized an exhibition of Breuer's work, inviting Henry-Russell Hitchcock, America's foremost modern architectural historian and co-curator (with Philip Johnson) of the 1932 Museum of Modern Art "International Style" exhibit, to write a critical essay. In "Marcel Breuer and the American Tradition in Architecture," Hitchcock argued that, unlike American modernists, the European modernists were able to look past the historicist "traditional" architectural styles typically applied to American architecture built of wood, brick and stone, and to see the potential of these materials to be used to construct modern architecture:

> Breuer, working from the special facilities of modern civilization, was ready to use rough stonework and timber construction with the ease and simplicity of a rural American carpenter-builder, and yet with all the technical imagination and aesthetic purity of the modern.[6]

As an example of this modern use of wood, in 1948-9 Breuer designed two vacation cottages at Wellfleet, Massachusetts, for his family and that of his friend, György Kepes, a Hungarian-born visual designer who taught at the Institute of Design in Chicago before being appointed as Professor of Visual Design in the architecture school at MIT. Kepes was the author of a series of important books on visual thinking, such as *The Language of Vision* (1944) and *Structure in Art and Science* (1965), which built on the Bauhaus educational legacy.

Breuer's 1949 MoMA model house, with its fusion of contemporary forms and traditional materials, served as his definitive answer to the debate that ensued at the February 1948 MoMA symposium, entitled, "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?" The symposium included presentations by the historians and critics Henry Russell Hitchcock, Frederick Gutheim, Peter Blake, Talbot Hamlin and Lewis Mumford, and the architects Walter Gropius, George Nelson, Ralph Walker, Gerhard Kallmann, Breuer and the landscape architect Christopher Tunnard. In a "Skyline" article in the *New Yorker* magazine, Lewis Mumford, the American historian and critic, set the main themes of the discussion by arguing against "the impersonal and the aesthetically puritanical," which he said were characteristics of the "mechanical rigorists" who practiced International Style architecture. He charged that, by ignoring "the non-formal elements" of architecture, the "rigorists [...] neglected the feelings, the sentiments, and the interests of the person who was to occupy" the building they designed. Rejecting Le Corbusier's famous aphorism, Mumford said "the modern accent is on living, not on the machine," and he championed the "native and humane form of modernism" represented by the architecture of the San Francisco Bay Region that he said "took root" fifty years ago.[7]

Breuer's talk responded almost point by point to Mumford's article, and was also a forceful statement of what he believed about architecture:

> I don't feel a very strong impulse to set

[5] Ibid. 119–122.

[6] Henry Russell HITCHCOCK, *Marcel Breuer and the American Tradition in Architecture* (Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University Archives, 1938), 2, 17.

[7] Lewis MUMFORD, "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?", *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 15, No. 3 (1948): 2.

'human' (in the best sense of the word) against 'formal.' If 'human' is considered identical with redwood all over the place, or if it is considered identical with imperfection and imprecision, I am against it. [...] If 'international style' is considered identical with mechanical and impersonal rigor-ism, down with international style. [...] However, this controversy was in order, I am afraid, about 25 years ago. Since then, many things have happened. For instance, just as Sullivan did not eat his functionalism as hot as he cooked it, Le Corbusier did not build his machine for living: His houses are not so much machines for living as, for instance, the three thousand family housing developments of the West Coast, the same pseudo-prefabricated houses, hill up, hill down, in rigid rows or in rigid curves. [...] 'Human' it seems to me should mean more that just a pleasant tolerance of imperfection and an easygoingness as to the precision of thinking, as to the quality of planning, as to the consequences of materials, details, and construction. [Rather] the most contrasting elements of our nature should be brought to happiness at the same time, in the same work. [...] The drive towards experiment is there, together with and in contrast to the warm joy of security at the fireplace. [...] The perfection of construction and detail is there, together with and in contrast to simplicity, broadmindedness of form and use. The courage of conception is there, together with and in contrast to humble responsibility towards the client. The sensation of man-made space, geometry, and architecture is there, together with and in contrast to organic forms of nature and of man.[8]

Perfecting the Types

Breuer began his 1934 Zurich lecture by stating; "In the past I have been opposed to much of this theorizing about the New Architecture, believing that our job was to build, and that our buildings sufficed, since they speak plainly enough for themselves. [...] The danger of all theorizing is that, by carrying one's arguments too far, one is apt to leave the world of reality behind." Breuer argued for a kind of autodidactic approach to engaging contemporary reality that comes directly from his Bauhaus beginnings; "What we believe is what we have perceived, experienced, thought, proved and calculated for ourselves." Yet Breuer noted that, rather than clarifying common principles and passing them on to the younger generations:

> The protagonists of the Modern Movement have been occupied with the classification and development of their own intellectual principles and the carrying out of their individual designs.[9]

The most important characteristic of modern architecture, according to Breuer, was "the principle of clarity," which was reflected in a building's structural precision, appropriate enclosure of practical functions, and simplicity and rationality of form. In arguing for the close relation between vernacular works and modern architecture, Breuer found that both involved the search for typeforms that were appropriate to the task and perfected through repeated refinement over time:

> One element of such clarified architecture is the type. That is an object or building that can be said to have been established and relatively perfected

[8] Marcel BREUER, "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?", *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 15, No. 3 (1948): 4–20, 15.

[9] BLAKE, *Marcel Breuer...*, 119–122.

> through a comparatively large number of decisions. The Modern Movement has tenaciously pursued the type, the standard.[10]

In this, Breuer was following the lead of, among others, Frank Lloyd Wright, whose early Prairie Houses, from 1900-20, later Usonian Houses, starting in 1930, were developed from a few primary plan-types. Many other characteristics of Breuer's architecture were inspired by Wright's ways of conceiving and constructing what he called "the space within," as can be heard in Breuer's 1955 definition of architecture as "the art of space:"

> The nature of the space within our buildings and between them is indeed the reality of architecture. [...] The eye is the only receiving instrument in the experience of painting. But we have seen that the experience of architecture is received by the whole body, by all our senses—including our sense of logic. It is not only an eye aesthetic, it is a *physical aesthetic*.[11]

It should be remembered that the large majority of Breuer's houses were built during the period in which Wright, the greatest American architect of houses, was still actively practicing. Despite working in Wright's shadow, Breuer's house designs nevertheless exercised considerable influence on his contemporaries (including Louis Kahn) because they offered, alongside the houses of Wright and very few other architects, a materially rich, spatially varied and place-based alternative to the stultifying uniformity of typical suburban developer housing.

Clarifying the Themes

In the religious, institutional and commercial buildings that were built to his designs starting in the 1950s, Breuer evolved his characteristic emphases on the expression of structure, and on surface depth and modulation of the building skin, stating in 1964:

> To us clarity means the definite expression of the purpose of a building and a sincere expression of its structure. One can regard this sincerity as a sort of moral duty [and] a very basic instinct.[12]

The emergence of visible structure, and its "sincere expression" in Breuer's work, was paralleled and made possible by his engagement of reinforced cast-in-place structural and finish concrete, as well as precast concrete façade components. In this way, as Breuer said; "The structure itself became art."[13] Regarding reinforced concrete, Breuer believed; "no other material has the potential of such complete and convincing fusion between structure, enclosure and surface."[14] Breuer engaged his remarkable skills as a maker of plastic form, first developed at the Bauhaus, in the construction of folded and faceted concrete enclosures:

> The art of architectural composition lies in assembling simple, elemental forms [...] The space bounded by such elements can be free and fluid [...] but the components encompassing it will be crystalline.[15]

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[10] Joachim DRILLER, *Breuer Houses* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 40.

[11] Peter BLAKE, ed., *Marcel Breuer: Sun and Shadow: The Philosophy of an Architect* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), 64.

[12] BREUER, *Buildings and Projects...*, 258.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Tician PAPACHRISTOU, *Marcel Breuer: New Buildings and Projects* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1970), 22.

[15] Paul HEYER, *Architects on Architecture* (New York: Walker and Co., 1966), 267.

Breuer described his reasoning for employing precast concrete for facades:

> The glass wall—as an expression of modern technology—seems to conflict with technology itself. The search for an exterior that would integrate the demands of an enclosure goes parallel with a new approach to the technique and aesthetic of precast concrete. Both lead us to architectural solutions that can be called 'molded,' and which have the characteristics of a façade unattainable in any other familiar modern material. The large prefabricated panels can be designed for a variety of technical requirements: they may be load-bearing and structural; they may offer chases and hollows for pipes and ducts [...]; they may form projections for sun protection [...] What about aesthetics? A new depth of façade is emerging; a three-dimensionality with a resulting greatly expanded vocabulary of architectural expression.[16]

Starting in the early 1960s, Breuer characterized the often highly praised office buildings by many of his leading contemporaries, particularly those following the glass curtain wall and skeletal structure school of Mies van der Rohe, as being dogmatic *modern* architecture, as opposed to what he called *good* architecture that achieves a balance between solid and void, thick and thin:

> The ancient temples could be considered sculpture. So could Stonehenge and the Maya buildings of Yucatan. [...] [Today] space itself is again sculpture into which one enters. [...] 'Sculpture' has not signified in this talk a three-dimensional decoration of a building, but rather the three-dimensional nature of the whole and of its organic details—the sun and shadow of its modulation, the contours of its structure, the surface relief and texture of its material. [...] We are now in the flow of transition from *modern* architecture to *good* architecture, from transparent architecture to one that sets solid elements next to transparency, and a new plasticity next to lineal purity. An architecture unifying vivid contrasts and demonstrating a much broader vocabulary.[17]

Last of the First Moderns / First of the Last Moderns

When Breuer died on 1 July 1981, he was hailed in *Newsweek* as "the last modernist." (August 17th 1981). While this is an accurate assessment of his unique place in the modern movement, it does not capture the complexity of his position in relation to his contemporaries. Breuer was preceded in death by all of the first generation of modernists, including Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Gropius, as well as by many of the second generation, including Saarinen, Kahn, Aalto and Scarpa. As an architect, Breuer was caught between the first generation of modernists, whose accomplishments he matched, and the second generation of modernists such as Kahn, who were his true contemporaries. Yet Breuer could be said not to belong to either generation, having never been willing to embrace what he characterized as the dogmatic modernism of the glass curtain wall, but also rejecting the idea that modern architecture was a monolithic conception. Having begun his career with his 1934 lecture critiquing modernism from the inside, Breuer consistently rejected the critiques of modernism coming from the outside during the last 25 years of his career, when modernism was declared to be dead, and practitioners such as Breuer were la-

[16] PAPACHRISTOU, *Marcel Breuer...*, 13.

[17] DRILLER, *Breuer Houses*, 216–218.

beled "late modernists." Standing between the first and the last moderns, Breuer may be understood as the last of the first moderns and the first of the last moderns.

Breuer was the last of the first moderns in his attitude towards the history of the discipline. Reflecting less the historically engaged approach of those who taught at the Bauhaus, where students analyzed historical examples, and more the "scientific" approach taken by Gropius at the GSD Harvard, where the history of architecture was banished from the curriculum, Breuer's design process centered on function, structure and modern form, not historical precedent; "The architect of our day works without formal precedents. His methods are analysis, synthesis, invention, and experiment."[18] Yet in later years Breuer voiced reservations about the modernist refusal of history:

> A great many tendencies are emphasized today: inventiveness, structure, plastic modulation, preoccupation with scale, and regrettably, the all-is-permissible-to-the-genius tendency. This is due partly to the original emphasis of modern architecture on freedom from traditional precedents.[19]

Breuer was both the last of the first modernists and the first of the last moderns as regards environmental tempering. While in the early European work, he employed passive methods of heating and cooling that today would be called "sustainable," when the scale of his work increased starting in the 1950s, the solar-glass and louver sunshade systems he deployed repeatedly failed. Breuer claimed it was his abandonment of the thin lightweight materials typical of modernism, and his adoption of massive precast concrete facades that made for better climate tempering in his later buildings, but in fact it was the universal application of air-conditioning that made interior comfort possible.

Breuer was the first of the last moderns in that, after his death, Klaus Herdeg characterized Breuer and his Harvard students' works as "decorated diagrams," where simple building volumes are given facades with strong formal patterns and material textures. But Breuer was hardly alone in this emphasis on the formal patterning of the façade, particularly of office buildings, and in fact this debate goes back to the beginning of modern architecture in the US; to the contrast between the focus on the shaping of facades and parallel lack of plan development in the office buildings of Louis Sullivan, and the focus on the shaping of interior space in plan, with the exterior facade as later resultant, to be found in the designs of Sullivan's protégé, Frank Lloyd Wright.

In Breuer's case, critics and historians have argued it was his repetitive use of precast concrete elements on building facades that was the problem. However the repetition of façade elements underlies both the neo-classicism with which the post-modern historicists wished to replace late modernism in the 1970s, an idea for which Breuer had only contempt, and the prefabricated terra-cotta façade panels cladding Louis Sullivan's early modern office buildings, which are the primary precursors for Breuer's precast cladding. Repetition alone is not the problem, and Breuer's facades are closer in spirit to those of Sullivan than to those of the post-modernists primarily because of their capacity to represent the functional variations of the spaces within the building. In this last case, it was the uniformity that characterizes the space within bureaucratic office buildings challenged both Sullivan and Breuer, as there is quite literally nothing on the inside to re-present on the outside.

Breuer, not having the stature of the first generation of modernists, such as Wright, Le Corbusier or Gropius, was criticized for the

[18] BREUER, *Buildings and Projects…*, 252.
[19] HEYER, *Architects on Architecture*, 269.

failings of all of them. While Mies van der Rohe, when accused of repeating designs, forms and details, could dismissively—and quite accurately—state; "You don't invent architecture every Monday morning," Breuer remained remarkably balanced in his assessment of modern architecture, often pointing out both the strengths and weaknesses of what, to his way of seeing, was not and had never been a monolithic movement. He was also balanced in his assessment of his own stature and achievements as an architect, pointedly stating that his goals were to make what he defined as "good" architecture and, equally important, to run a successful professional architectural practice. Breuer succeeded at both, a rare feat virtually unmatched by any of his contemporaries, who tended to choose between these goals, considering them mutually exclusive.

Breuer's remarkable dual success went largely unnoticed by the architectural critics and historians of his time, who, never having practiced architecture, often failed to recognize that, while they were free to select which buildings to critique, the architects they criticize rarely if ever had the chance to select which commissions they were given, which buildings they were asked to design, and which designs that circumstances will allow to be built. Yet, as the years pass, the criticisms of Breuer's works have faded, while the larger lessons the buildings teach, and their exemplary qualities as places of inhabitation, have grown ever stronger. Breuer's goal of "good" architecture, and his concomitant refusal to use the word "great" to describe the architecture he was endeavoring to make, were paralleled by his self-deprecating humor, evidenced in a letter to his client and friend Jacques Koerfer; "All my life I have been wondering how somebody can be a genius from morning to evening."[20]

[20] HYMAN, *Marcel Breuer, Architect…*, 19.

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