

# The Modern Style

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by enormous social and political changes and a radically changing lifestyle, driven mainly by strident advances in technology, engineering, and through all the arts and sciences. Travel, communications, transport, structural engineering, steel and reinforced concrete were among the developments that shaped a radically new way of living. Mass production was now the standard as very little was being made by hand using traditional methods. This was a worrying time for people who struggled to find their identity, value, and usefulness in an increasingly machine dominated age.

The ideals of the advocates of the Art and Crafts movement demonstrated their desire to retain a strong link with nature in the midsts of increasing industrialization. The Art Nouveau movement that followed shared similar sentiments, but whilst acknowledging the usefulness of mass production. The protagonists of the subsequent Modern movement embraced the new technologies, recognizing their immense benefits, but tried to steer its might toward the ultimate benefit of society, and humankind as a whole. They realized that such a different way of living needed a new design vocabulary that was appropriate to the modern world of advanced technology and the new patterns of life that it brought about.

The Modern movement was also a reaction to the popularity of the Victorian Eclectic styles and lavish stylistic excess of Edwardian Art Nouveau. The heavy elaboration of 19<sup>th</sup> century ornamentalism and the superficial historicism of eclectic work became a focus for attack, prompting a revolutionary response from the leaders of modernism.

The Deutscher Werkbund, an association of German architects and designers which was founded in 1907 sought to integrate the traditional ideals of the Arts and Crafts with industrialization and mass production, effectively trying to manage a transition between the old and new. The Dutch De Stijl movement, the Bauhaus school, pioneering architects and designers like Le Corbusier, van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius found common ground under a style direction which tried to reconcile traditional craftsmanship with industrial technology, later to be called the International Style.

The common characteristics of the International style include: a radical simplification of form, a rejection of ornament, and the adoption of glass, steel and concrete as preferred materials. Furthermore, the transparency of buildings, construction (called the honest expression of structure), and acceptance of industrialized mass-production techniques contributed to the International Style's design philosophy.

Modernist design seems to have evolved out of a combination of influences: technically innovative materials and manufacturing methods; the new philosophies that emerged from the Werkbund and the Bauhaus School; from exotic foreign influences; from Art Nouveau; and from the tremendous creativity of the artists and designers of that era.

**Art Nouveau** became the first popular 20<sup>th</sup>-century style, a successor to the more rustic Arts and Crafts. Inheriting the great traditions of French colour and form, fed further by Europe's craze for Japonisme, this turn-of-the-century style replaced a dependency on historical design formulae with organic form derived largely from nature. Familiar motifs included curvilinear elements, sinuous contours of tendrils and floral arabesques, whiplash lines, and later, exaggerated embellishment. Art Nouveau responded well to inlaid wood veneers, wrought iron and glass. While it tried nobly to reconcile art and industry, it was essentially an artist's style and failed to satisfy the demands of mass production, prompting designers to seek new style directions to satisfy the needs of the new era.

During the tumultuous decade following World War I, **De Stijl** artists set out to create a universal style in painting, architecture and design, using rectangles and squares in flat planes of bold primary colors and black, gray and white, all carefully orchestrated with straight lines. The compelling geometric paintings of Piet Mondrian and equally striking furniture of Gerrit Rietveld have become classics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century design. The linear, geometric, and functional elements of De Stijl

ensured its early acceptance into the emerging Modern style.

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 served as the great divide between the '20s and the '30s, and between European and American **Art Deco** designs. The distinct moods of the two decades dramatically affected the arts of each. The '20s, characterized by heavily stylized interiors, curvilinear forms, exotic materials and outlandish designs gave way in the '30s to the Art Moderne phase, with rectilinear forms, sleek streamlined finishes, synthetic materials and an infatuation with speed, dynamism and futuristic elements. Many Art Deco designers focused on developing products specifically for industry, which in turn sparked the emergence of modern Industrial Design.

The development of design styles came to a shuddering halt during the second World War, and it was only until the war ended and economies began to recover that focus again turned to design. The need to rebuild the infrastructure and to stimulate economic activity across Europe led to an urgent need for more commercial building. New materials such as mouldable plastics, vinyl, and toughened glass, among many others, allowed new structural techniques and designs to be made, along with more advanced building services, which made for more comfortable, and productive working environments. For example, air-conditioning reduced the need for windows to be opened, therefore allowing bigger expanses of uninterrupted glazed areas to be installed. The glass-walled skyscraper, which could provide plenty of office space for relatively smaller ground area became financially attractive to build, dotting the urban skyline in greater numbers, even in traditionally conservative cities like London and Paris. A need to house growing urban populations demanded new approaches to urban design, with some of these radical "solutions", such as high-rise flats and speculative building, were ultimately to contribute to social problems and urban sprawl.

**Bauhaus** was the term given to a new style movement, and school, by its founder Walter Gropius under the original title of the Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar. The school existed in three German cities (Weimar from 1919 to 1925, Dessau from 1925 to 1932 and Berlin from 1932 to 1933), under three different architect-directors: Walter Gropius from 1919 to 1927, Hannes Meyer from 1927 to 1930 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe from 1930 to 1933, when the school was closed by the Nazi regime.

Its intellectual origins lay with the Arts and Crafts movement and its early years were dominated by Expressionist arts, thought and behaviour. Under Gropius the Bauhaus became an art school of immense creativity and influence. The approach to design was to stress aesthetic fundamentals and strive for geometrically pure forms, but unlike the practitioners of the Arts and Crafts movement, machines were not disdained. One of the main objectives of the Bauhaus was to unify art, craft, and technology. The machine was considered a positive element, and therefore industrial and product design were important components. There was no teaching of history in the school because everything was supposed to be designed and created according to first principles rather than by following precedent.

One of the most important contributions of the Bauhaus is in the field of modern furniture design. The ubiquitous Cantilever chair by Dutch designer Mart Stam, using the tensile properties of steel, and the Wassily Chair designed by Marcel Breuer are two examples. Bauhaus interior style stressed geometric, streamlined designs, the use of new, often synthetic materials, and mass production of the objects created. For the architects and other designers of the Bauhaus the beauty of a building and its interiors lay in the simplest possible expression of function. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe created a classic piece of Bauhaus-inspired furniture in his 1929 Barcelona chair, with curved steel legs and back supports, which are covered by leather-covered foam-rubber cushions. The influence of the Bauhaus was also largely responsible for the popularity of built-in furniture toward the end of the decade. The Bauhaus school became the seat of the Modernist movement through its efforts to reconcile principles of design with industrial mass production. Some of the greatest painters, graphic designers, architect/designers and thinkers of the period participated in the movement. The Bauhaus had a profound influence upon subsequent developments in art, architecture, graphic design, interior design, industrial design, and typography.

## Key Figures of the Modern Style

Four architects and designers associated with the Modern movement are Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. They defined new directions with such clarity and force that they can be thought of as originators of Modernist design and other elements that characterize 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism.

**Walter Gropius (1881-1969)** became director of the Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar. He designed a new school building and housing for the Bauhaus when it moved to Dessau (1925); with its dynamic International Style composition, asymmetrical plan, smooth white walls set with horizontal windows, and flat roof, the building became a monument of the Modernist movement. At the Bauhaus and as head of Harvard's architecture department, he established a new prototype of design education, which ended the 200 year supremacy of the French École des Beaux-Arts. Among his most important ideas was his belief that all design, whether of a chair, a building, or a city, should be approached in essentially the same way: through a systematic study of the particular needs and problems involved, taking into account modern construction materials and techniques without reference to previous forms or styles.

**Le Corbusier (1887-1965)** Often known simply as "Corbu," he was one of the most influential architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his buildings and writings had a revolutionary effect on the international development of modern architecture, especially the International style. In 1908, Le Corbusier worked with Auguste Perret, a pioneer in the architectural use of reinforced concrete. He also worked and studied under Peter Behrens in Berlin. In 1915 a series of architectural sketches made evident his new and radical approach to the technical and aesthetic problems of building.

In the following years Le Corbusier produced schemes for houses, apartments, and for a city built on pillars, often drawing his inspiration from industrial forms, such as steamship construction. In 1919 he settled in Paris and in 1921 his "Citrohan" model for dwelling houses expressed a need for new construction methods. Two years later, at Vaucresson near Paris, the first building (a villa) embodying his principles was erected. He also contributed articles to the review *Esprit nouveau*, which he had founded in 1920 with Amédée Ozenfant. Collected under the title *Le Modulor*, a prolific writer, he was also the author of more than 50 other books and pamphlets including "Vers une Architecture", which attained him international recognition.

Among Le Corbusier's many well-known buildings are a workers' housing project at Pessac near Bordeaux, the Villa Savoye at Poissy, and the Swiss and Brazilian students' pavilions at Cité Universitaire, Paris. After World War II, his plan for a "vertical city" was in part realized in the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (1946-52). After 1940 Le Corbusier developed the modulator system of harmonious but not identical proportions; the system was devised to offer architectural individuality and yet serve the needs of modern mass production.

**Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969)** first great work was the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain, a travertine platform with chromed steel columns and spaces defined by planes of extravagant onyx, marble, and frosted glass. The steel-and-leather Barcelona chair he designed for the space went on to become a 20<sup>th</sup>-century classic. He was director of the Bauhaus in 1930 - 33, first in Dessau and then, during its final months, in Berlin. After moving to the U.S. in 1937, he became director of the School of Architecture at Chicago's Armour Institute, where he designed the school's new campus. The International Style, with Mies its undisputed leader, reached its zenith during the next 20 years. His other projects included Chicago's Lake Shore Drive Apartments (1949 - 51), and the Seagram Building (1956 - 58, with Philip Johnson) in New York City. These buildings, steel skeletons sheathed in glass curtain-wall facades, exemplify Mies's dictum that "less is more." Modernist steel-and-glass office buildings influenced by his work were built all over the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Seagram Building, NYC; L.M. van der Rohe and Philip Johnson**

**Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959)** produced over four hundred constructed buildings, among many other projects, in a career which can be divided into two phases. The first, up to about 1920 clearly established his role as the first major modern architect. From the 1930's onwards saw his development of the minimally decorated, organic style of the Usonian or Taliesin Fellowship, which were in contrast to the Eclecticism and International styles that were becoming more widely applied in America at that time. As Modernism became more accepted, it was the European International style that was more widely admired than Wright's more organic work, with its emphasis on natural materials and a highly personal idiom. Wright's freely expressed contempt for virtually all work but his own did nothing to draw other practitioners' sympathy or understanding. The architectural design and the philosophy of Frank Lloyd Wright represent his interpretations of an ideal democratic society. Wright's design and use of symmetry to maximize living space and to bring about a greater connection with nature are evident in many contemporary homes. His philosophical view was highly critical of the corporate capitalist cities, as he advanced a view that centered on individual freedom, democracy, and nature.

Nearly fifty years after his death, Frank Lloyd Wright continues to be recognized as the greatest American architect of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His seventy-two year career was punctuated with worldwide fame, hostile derision and artistic triumphs. Wright's acknowledged masterpieces outnumber the entire output of many other architects.



**Gropius House, Walter Gropius**



Products of De Stijl

### Modern Style Features

Modernist architecture emphasizes function. It attempts to provide for specific needs rather than imitate nature. The roots of Modernism may be found in the work of Berthold Lubetkin (1901-1990), a Russian architect who settled in London and founded a group called Tecton. The Tecton architects believed in applying scientific, analytical methods to design. Their stark buildings ran against common expectations and often seemed to defy gravity.

Modernist architecture can express a number of stylistic ideas, including:

**Structuralism, Formalism, Bauhaus, The International Style, Brutalism, Minimalism** which featured:

- Little or no ornamentation
- Factory-made parts
- Man-made materials such as metal, glass and concrete
- Emphasis on function
- Rebellion against traditional styles
- flat roofs, ribbon windows, corner windows, bands of glass
- steel frame construction

Modern architecture is usually characterized by:

- an adoption of the principle that the materials and functional requirements determine the result
- an adoption of the machine aesthetic
- a rejection of ornament
- a simplification of form and elimination of "unnecessary detail"
- an adoption of expressed structure
- form follows function



Products of the Bauhaus

Prior to Modernism there was an emphasis on furniture as ornament, where the length of time a piece took to create was often a measure of its value and desirability. During the first half of the 20th Century a new philosophy emerged shifting the emphasis to function and accessibility. The modern movement sought newness, originality, technical innovation, and ultimately the message that it conveyed spoke of the present and the future, rather than of what had gone before it. The use of new materials, which had no links to the past, was essential, such as steel in its many forms, or moulded plywood, such as that used by Charles and Ray Eames. Plastics were formative in the creation of these new designs. They would have been considered pioneering, even shocking in contrast to what had gone before. This interest in new and innovative materials and methods - produced a certain blending of the disciplines of technology and art.

The Modern movement still exerts a strong influence over today's architecture and interior design, and many of its ideals and aspirations are as relevant today as they were in their peak. Furniture produced in the modern era is as popular now, if not more, than they were when first produced. The slogans of the Modernists like "form follows function" still bears true even today, although their other mantras, like "ornament is a crime", "truth to materials", or even "machines for living" to describe their concepts of the ideal living environment, would probably gain few followers nowadays.

Many current architects are still heavily influenced by the Modernist ethos of simplicity veering towards minimalism, especially when charged with the task of also having to design the interior finishes. The fact that all white, bright and shiny surfaces provide the optimum reflectivity to show the true nature of the interior space is undeniable, but it is often an irresistible draw that influences the designer to adopt the Modernist approach to colour, or lack of, with a few accents here and there to excuse the sometimes cold, stark look. The resultant "white box" so prevalent in today's architectural design can too often be the victim of lazy or "safe" design leading to blandness and a dilution of the visionary aspirations of the originators of the style.

The current trend towards sustainable living and re-engaging ones lifestyle with the ecosystem that supports it will undoubtedly adopt and cherish the functional and eminently sensible ideals of the Modernists, but in a manner that will see a decreased dependence on technology and more towards self sustainability in terms of energy consumption and our impact on the environment.

If we can use new technologies to embrace our natural environment and appreciate all that it gives us, and still find a way of progressing ourselves through art, then we will be fulfilling the aspirations of the visionaries that dared to dream of a better world for their time, and a future that they could scarcely imagine.

As long as the ideals of forward thinking designers like the Modernists, either in the past or in contemporary influence remain to the fore, then in the development of living spaces that contribute to the health and well-being of their occupants, the future of intelligent design will always be assured.

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