

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1984

William Lescaze and the Machine Age

Arthur J. Pulos

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), and the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pulos, Arthur J. "William Lescaze and the Machine Age." William Lescaze and the Rise of Modern Design in America. Spec. issue of The Courier 19.1 (1984): 9-24.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Courier by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES

C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

ARTHUR J. PULOS

LINDSAY STAMM SHAPIRO

CAROL WILLIS

DENNIS P. DOORDAN

ROBERT B. DEAN

STUART COHEN

WERNER SELIGMANN

ROBERT A. M. STERN

WILLIAM H. JORDY

A BRIEF SURVEY OF
THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
ARCHITECTURAL HOLDINGS

VOLUME
X I X
1
SPRING
1 9 8 4

Contents

Foreword	
by Chester Soling, Chairman of the Syracuse University Library Associates	5
WILLIAM LESCAZE AND THE RISE OF MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA	
Preface	
by Dennis P. Doordan, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Tulane University, and Guest Editor	7
William Lescaze and the Machine Age	
by Arthur J. Pulos, Pulos Design Associates, Inc., and Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University	9
William Lescaze and Hart Crane: A Bridge Between Architecture and Poetry	
by Lindsay Stamm Shapiro, Parsons School of Design	25
The "Modern" Skyscraper, 1931	
by Carol Willis, Parsons School of Design	29
William Lescaze and CBS: A Case Study in Corporate Modernism	
by Dennis P. Doordan, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Tulane University	43
European Modernism in an American Commercial Context	
by Robert Bruce Dean, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Syracuse University	57
William Lescaze Symposium Panel Discussion	
Respondents: Stuart Cohen, University of Illinois Werner Seligmann, Syracuse University Robert A. M. Stern, Columbia University	67
William Lescaze Reconsidered	
by William H. Jordy, Professor of Art, Brown University	81
A Brief Survey of Architectural Holdings at the Syracuse University Libraries	
by Werner Seligmann, Dean of the School of Architecture, Syracuse University	105
NEWS OF THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES AND THE LIBRARY ASSOCIATES	
	113

William Lescaze and the Machine Age

BY ARTHUR J. PULOS

It seems appropriate as we approach the end of the Machine Age that we should meet to review its birth and ascendancy. Perhaps we should think of ourselves as participating at a wake that remembers a body of thought and work before it is lowered into the vault of history, or, better still, at a celebration and public expression that honor those who half a century ago were able to break the long reign of the Beaux Arts over architecture and the arts of design.

Certainly, our meeting here today provides us with the opportunity to express public appreciation to those at Syracuse University who had the vision to collect and preserve the records of thought and deed of architects and designers like William Lescaze, whose contribution in particular we will be talking about during this symposium. We are also grateful for the scholarship, research, and talent that have made possible this symposium and the fine exhibition that accompanies it. We hope that it will be the first in a series confirming the interest of Syracuse University and the Everson Museum in the evolution and maturation of the environmental arts in this country.

William Lescaze was one of the practical pioneers of twentieth-century architecture and design. While his mentors in Europe were debating theories, he and a handful of his colleagues found fertile ground for their testing and practical application on these shores. But before reviewing Lescaze's early years, we should perhaps first mention those few rebel American architects and designers who helped to set the seed of Modern Architecture and Design that germinated abroad. Louis Sullivan's Transportation Building at the Columbian Exposition in 1893 was the only structure to be honored by the French. Louis Tiffany exhibited examples of his exciting new glass in Samuel Bing's shop, L'Art Nouveau, in Paris when it opened in 1895. Frank Lloyd Wright's innovative house designs were being published and discussed in Germany by 1910, while he was being criticized by America's Beaux Arts establishment. And Gustav Stickley brought the Arts and Crafts movement to its American apogee here in Syracuse.

William Lescaze is uniquely qualified for our particular attention.

He was the product of many “ism’s”. Born in Cubism, he spent his adolescence in Futurism, began his architectural education in Constructivism, completed it in the first signs of Functionalism, and then dedicated his professional career to the Formalism of what came to be called the International Style in the Machine Age.

Every age has its own character, with a technology and methodology affecting and being affected by social and economic values. The culture of an age is simply the aesthetic amalgamation of all these components. The things that people build and manufacture not only serve their needs and aspirations, but also preserve for all time the essence of their period. Thus, designers in all fields bear the burden of culture, for it is by their sensitivity and their mastery of the tools of their times that knowledge of their era is passed on.

In 1917 the *Literary Digest* referred to America as a Mechanical Athens, a world of machines where products were being “turned out rapidly, cheaply and accurately . . . releasing . . . man . . . for analyzing the machines as they work so that betterment may be achieved and new methods may be evolved by those who are thus enabled to think as they work”.¹ In this light it is interesting to recall that a century earlier Thomas Carlyle, reflecting Schiller’s fear that the machine had reduced man to a fragment of the whole, lamented the changes brought on by the Age of Machinery. “Men are grown mechanical in head and heart as well as in hand”, warned Carlyle. “In our rage for machines we shall ourselves become machines.”² But now, in the twentieth century, the phrase “the Machine Age” was being used in praise rather than condemnation as a respectable stimulus for modern art, design, and architecture.

A machine is essentially an assemblage of elements that transmits forces, action, and energy from one to another in a predetermined manner to some desired end. The unique character of a machine includes both geometricity in obeisance to technological rationalization, and minimalization in commitment to economy of means. Design for industrial production must consider every eventuality in the process of production. Machine-made products must be designed especially for mass production rather than one-by-one hand processes. Parts must be interchangeable from product to product and all operating systems

1. “America—A Mechanical Athens”, *Literary Digest*, 1 September 1917, 24.

2. Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Boston: Dana Estes, 1869), 469.

must be pre-tested to meet established standards of performance and endurance. Time, space, facilities, and capital must be sufficient to support the volume of work and to sustain the organization until it becomes self-supporting. Distribution methods, marketing structures, and advertising programs must be commensurate with projected production quantities. And, finally, the machine-made object must be conceived on the forefront of technology, in order to be better than the competition. The goal of the machine is to produce a maximum number of useful products from a minimum amount of materials and energy. Thus the terrible legacy of the designer of manufactured products is to carry before him the familiar banner, "Less is More".

There is really nothing new in the observation that machines and machine-made products are capable of arousing respect for their utilitarian value and admiration for their aesthetic impact. In fact, industries in the United States and other countries were manufacturing products that appealed to the public years before they were "discovered" early in this century as a source of inspiration by artists and architects and elevated to the status of a machine art. Banham refers to a "'machine aesthetic' that saw machinery as the agent of collective discipline and an order that drew nearer and nearer the canons of classical aesthetics",³ thus confirming the ancient philosopher who recognized geometry centuries ago as a source for absolute beauty. "Understand me", Socrates is quoted in Plato's *Philebus*, "to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures that are formed out of them by turning-lathes and rulers and measurers of angles; for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally and absolutely beautiful."⁴

The mechanical form of the machine and its parts is dependent upon the instruments of the designer. His straight edge and compass behave in a geometric manner; that is, they are capable of making straight lines and circles that are the natural coefficients of the linear and circular motions of the simpler machines of production. Thus, there is an inescapable geometric visual and sensual symbiosis among the instruments of design, the machines of industry, and the form of the products that result. "From the very beginning," Frank Lloyd Wright wrote, "my T-square and triangle were easy media of expression for

3. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1960), 153.

4. Walter Dorwin Teague, *Design This Day* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), vii.

my geometric sense of things.” As every architect knows, Wright preferred “clean-cut, straight-line forms that the machine can render far better than would be possible by hand”. The same innocent empathy may very well have been behind the modern styles that were to come. Wright was, even so, aware that geometric solutions were not necessarily sympathetic to the human figure. “I have been black and blue in some spot, somewhere, almost all my life from too intimate contact with my own furniture.”⁵

Theo van Doesburg, one of the principal theorists of the De Stijl movement, pointed out in 1921 that if culture in its widest sense means independence of nature, it should not be surprising that the machine has created its own aesthetic, and this he referred to as the “Mechanical Aesthetic”. In fact, most of the new waves of expression of the time, Futurism, Elementarism, Constructivism, and the like had their origins in artists’ and architects’ responses to the form and action of the machine.

Less than a century ago, the plastic arts drew their inspiration directly from nature. Designers and architects transformed its forms and details into decorative elements that concealed the structure underneath, while painters and sculptors were trying to capture it in all its aspects: the mysterious and grand, as well as the bucolic. In the Machine Age artists are not so stimulated by the natural world as by what has been man-made. They respond to the affluence of technology as well as its effluence. They emulate its mechanization as well as its microscopic, macroscopic, and electronic images. They are entranced by the glittering maze of our lives and as awed by the fortresses and palaces of industry and commerce as they are alarmed by the rubble of our ghettos. With our blessing, they prefer to erect monuments to technology instead of to social and cultural heroes and events—and in doing so, they often imitate the practices of the designer, who himself is utilizing mechanical and construction drawings and even placing orders to the factory over the telephone. In these days artists tend to seek totems in the man-made world and to see humans as depersonalized and mechanized, or even transformed into polyester, super-real beings leading lives, it is said, of quiet desperation.

In Europe the impact of the Machine Age on the practice of architecture and design was largely restrained by social unrest and the weight

5. Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Horizon, 1977), 145.

of history. The best minds of Europe were, nevertheless, developing theories and seeking to establish their credibility by publishing manifestos and organizing schools to indoctrinate others before putting their theories into practice. On the other hand, Americans, then as now, preferred to put empirical action before dogma, or as one observer wrote, to “form an organized philosophy from the results [of their action]”,⁶ as if in confirmation of Aristotle’s dictum that art runs ahead of its theory. However, this impetuosity is entirely in harmony with the American’s unique ability to react freely to the opportunity of the moment and to be sustained by an instinctive faith in technology and its promise for the future.

The opportunities for practice in an open and burgeoning economy on this side of the Atlantic, therefore, attracted the attention of young designers who were impatient with the status quo and discouraged by the economic conditions in Europe. Thus, in the twenties a number of artists, decorators, designers, and architects—including Bernhard, Frankl, Hoffmann, Kiesler, Jensen, Loewy, Muller-Munk, von Nessen, Neutra, Schoen, Vassos, and William Lescaze among others—made their way to the United States. It is fair to say that they found a warmer reception for their innovative concepts and theories here than they might have at home.

William Lescaze began his professional studies in art and then for some reason, perhaps motivated by the war’s destruction in Europe, decided to become an architect. Accordingly, he entered the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale in Zürich in 1915 and graduated in 1919 with the degree of Master of Architecture. For a while he worked with a French organization for the repair of war damage and followed that with a few months in Paris in the office of Henri Sauvage, who was dedicated to collective housing and to the manufacture of architectural components. However, disappointed first by the fact that the general direction of post-war architecture seemed to be to put Europe back into its original shape and second by the lack of opportunity to try his hand at the new architecture, Lescaze decided to emigrate to the United States in 1920. He carried with him a letter of reference from his former professor in Zürich, Karl Moser, in which prospective employers were advised “to utilize his [Lescaze’s] training to solve the

6. Grace Alexander Young, “Designers That Work in America”, *PM Magazine*, August-September 1938, 26.

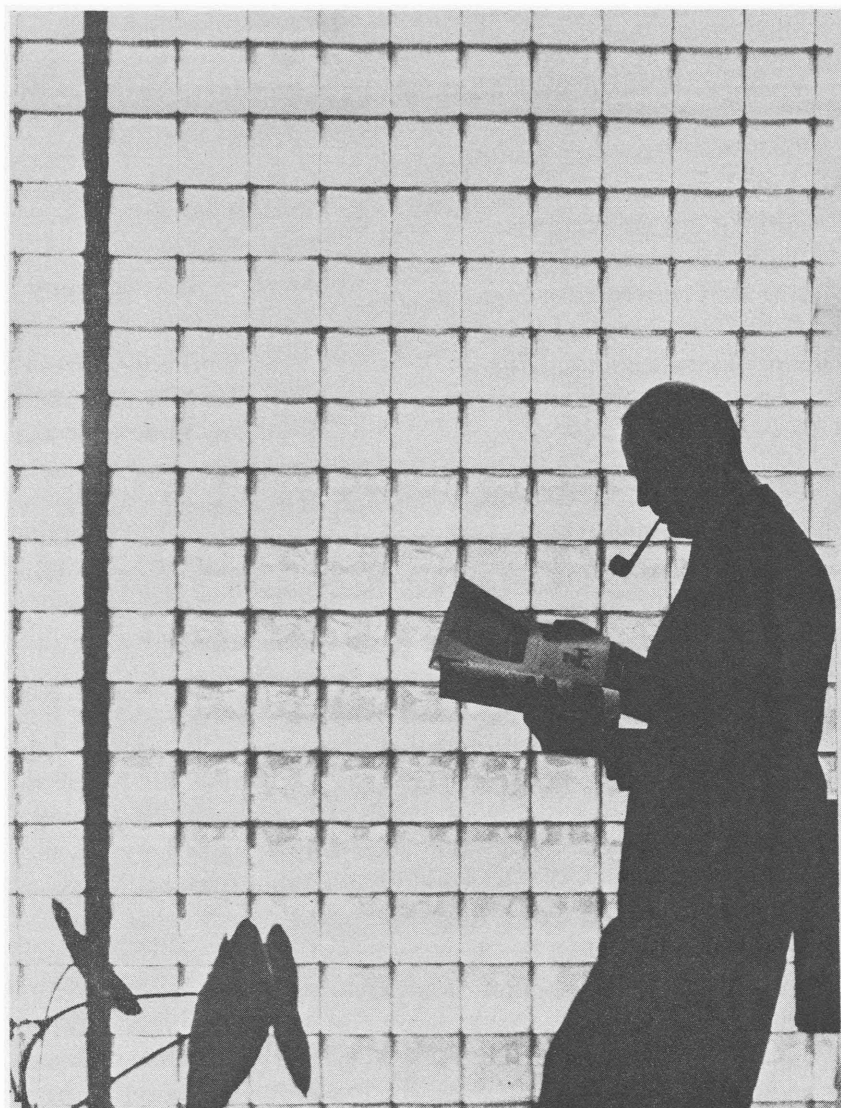
problems of practical workers' housing".⁷ For the remainder of his career, Lescaze maintained an interest in the area of public, low-cost housing and both designed and served as a consulting architect on major public housing projects in the New York City area.

The Beaux Arts influence persisted in the United States in one form or another through the early years of the twentieth century until it was laid to rest, at least for a while, in the National Gallery in Washington. Before its demise, however, the new twentieth-century architecture was already underway, as evidenced in the work of several American architects who were urging before 1900 that architecture should be original, not imitative; that it should be suited to the New World environment and technology; and that it should fit the needs of those who were to occupy the buildings. Although their ideas were largely neglected and even ridiculed in this country, they were taken up abroad and added to the distillate that was emerging as the modern movement in architecture. One dimension of the movement was Functionalist—based upon an understanding of the practical problems of technology and economics and upon the development of a structure to meet them. The second was Formalist—stemming from the conviction that function was not enough and that true architecture begins where function leaves off, with forms that are expressive of the purpose of a building and symbolic of the times of which it is a part. There is also a third dimension, the Moralistic, and it is this one that in the end tends to override the other two. A building, according to this point of view, should be conceived in the best interest of man and society. The moralistic attitude seeks to humanize technology and acknowledges that beauty rests, as Emerson once pointed out, on the foundation of the necessary.

As early as 1921 Lewis Mumford sensed that a modern style was reaching maturity, a stage at which the machine could be reconciled with the decent requirements of society. He suggested that architecture had a dual responsibility: namely, to respect the logic of the machine as well as the vagaries of human psychology.

William Lescaze later made his own peace with the three dimensions of the modern movement. "Architecture is a social art and every architectural movement has a social origin", he wrote; and because he

7. Ann Lorraine Lanmon, "The Role of William Lescaze in the Introduction of the International Style to the United States" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1979), 20.



William Lescaze in the living room of the Lescaze Townhouse.
This photograph was used as the poster image for the Lescaze exhibition.
(Photo: William Lescaze Papers, George Arents Research Library
for Special Collections, Syracuse University).

believed functional order to be the essence of architecture, he further proposed that architecture “must grow out of our life, answer its needs, and fulfill its material and technical wealth. So we try to erect forms expressive of our life and appropriate to our needs, and insofar as we succeed they must be beautiful.”⁸ The “real architect . . . chooses from the many possible forms, all functionally adequate, *that one* which is aesthetically most satisfying.”⁹

Many architects, including Le Corbusier in the twenties, were suggesting that the forms and products of the Machine Age should be looked to for inspiration. Gropius also insisted that architecture should seek an accommodation with the Machine Age. Outlining the curriculum of the Bauhaus at Dessau, he wrote in *Idee und Aufbau* in 1923: “We aim to create a clean organic architecture whose inner logic will be clear and radiant. We want an architecture adapted to the world of machines, radios and fast cars.” He proposed that the schools’ responsibility was “to educate men and women to understand the world in which they live and to invent and create forms symbolizing that world.”¹⁰

Gropius saw Rationalism as one aspect of Functionalism and as a purifying force only. But Formalism, he warned, was nothing more than a fashion in modern art. Nevertheless, a mannered style had already begun to appear at the Bauhaus by which objects were being styled to give an illusion of manufactured products whose geometric form and construction details were their only ornament. In this context, it is interesting to recall that, some fifty years earlier, machine methods were used to manufacture things so that they would appear to have been made by hand. And now, in the twenties, the Bauhaus workshops were using handcraft methods, as were the French decorators, to produce objects that seemed to have been made by machines. At the Bauhaus, for example, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy criticized Wilhelm Wagenfeld for having changed cylindrical ceramic milk jugs into drop-shaped forms. “How can you betray the Bauhaus like this?” he scolded. “We have always fought for simple basic shapes, cylinder, cube and cone, and now you are making a soft form which is dead

8. William Lescaze, “The Meaning of Modern Architecture”, *North American Review* 244 (1937), no. 4: 117.

9. William Lescaze, “The Classic of Tomorrow”, *American Architect* 147 (December 1935): 11.

10. Banham, *Theory and Design*, 279.

against all that we have been after.”¹¹

Indeed, Gropius himself was more of a Formalist than a Functionalist. He praised the “trilogy of the sphere, cone and cube” as honest sources for form; and eventually, as the Functionalists began to dominate the Bauhaus, he found it prudent to relinquish his position as director of the Bauhaus to Hannes Meyer. A short time later the National Socialists closed the Bauhaus and ran Meyer and his fellow travelers off to Moscow.

William Lescaze did not interpret international architecture to be “a bag of tricks”, as he called it, to which everyone would subscribe. Nor did he think of it as a fashion that one adopted until the next one came along. His aim was “to express in clean moving lines with functional order and with harmonious proportion all the qualities of life that have come to mark our times”.¹²

It is to his credit that Lescaze did not conceive the form of his expression as anything more than the only way to say what he had to say. Although Lescaze did not consider himself a stylist, the Machine Age character carried across his entire spectrum of design from architecture and interiors to furnishings, accessories, and graphics. His commitment to modern materials and the Machine Age in general has resulted in a body of work that is consistent in quality and clearly in tune with his times.

Lescaze maintained his contacts with professional friends in Europe and made periodic trips abroad to keep up with the latest developments and theories, which he then shared, cleansed of the polemics of post-war Europe, with his colleagues and clients in the United States. In this sense Lescaze fits John Fiske’s description of a “carrier” of culture, that is, one who moves freely across national borders and thus helps to shape a more unified world philosophy of design. Certainly, Lescaze’s contribution to twentieth-century architecture helped break down the hold of traditional styles of architecture.

In this changing scene the new architecture was developing a distinctive aesthetic character that included an appreciation for volume rather than mass. Its overall form was essentially horizontal in a balanced asymmetrical order. Roofs were flat and walls were white panels—not unlike the “flats” that are used in stage settings. Windows were horizon-

11. Banham, *Theory and Design*, 232.

12. William Lescaze, “A Modern Housing for a Museum”, *Parnassus* 9 (November 1937): 12.

tal ribbons of glass. Indeed, Modern Architecture was conceived as comprised of precise and pure shapes that captured the spirit of the Machine Age. In a way, the new buildings were reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's earlier buildings, now scraped clean of ornament or any evidence of natural materials. However, unlike Wright's buildings that were set organically into a site so that they became part of the earth itself, the new buildings were perched defiantly on their sites. In this they resembled machines standing free of nature, defying man to come into the world of tomorrow.

As the characteristic forms of the new architecture began to crystallize, the name International Style gained currency as appropriate to its disassociation from tradition and national allegiance. The first use of the name is taken by some to have been made by Walter Gropius in 1925 as the title of his book *Internationale Architektur*. In 1932 the term International Style was given its strongest support when Alfred Barr used it in his preface to the catalogue of the International Exhibition of Modern Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art. Incidentally, examples of the work of William Lescaze and his partner, George Howe, were included in the exhibition. It is also interesting to point out that with this exhibition the Style had been cleared of any European socialist implications and thus made palatable to Americans as Formalist rather than Functionalist architecture.

The monuments of the International Style are generally conceded to be the Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 by Mies van der Rohe and the Ville d'Avray of 1928-1930 by Le Corbusier. The first was an extraordinarily handsome exhibit, set forth in the form of a house built of exotic materials and equipped with custom-built furniture. The second was an elegant country retreat. In effect, both were stage settings. The first is now destroyed and the second abandoned, so far as I know.

It may be presumptuous to suggest that two of the buildings associated with William Lescaze should also be considered as monuments of the International Style—at least in the United States. The Philadelphia Saving Fund Society building (built between 1929 and 1932 by the partners Howe and Lescaze) is certainly one, in my opinion. Virtually all of the furnishings and accessories were especially designed and manufactured on a custom basis. Later, duplicates of some of the pieces were offered for sale to the public. The building's special appeal is the introduction of building forms that seem like jazz improvisations laid over the calmer melody of the International Style. The second monu-

ment that I have in mind is William Lescaze's own house, designed and built in 1934—the first International Style private home in New York City. It was selected as a historic monument in 1976 by the Landmark Preservation Society. Both buildings support Lescaze's conviction that the modern of today will be the classic of tomorrow.

The International Style, despite its acceptance as the central style of the architectural Machine Age, is derived from a simpler earlier period when machines were more innocent extensions of hand processes. The instruments of the designers were available to every school boy. Every design, whether for machine, product, building, or city, was conceived in two-dimensional elevations and plans formulated by two-dimensional thinking, a fact which is still evident in most so-called avant-garde products and even parodied by Memphis and the misnamed Hi Tech. Thus the International Style is not a guide to the future of design and architecture because it does not allow for the organic and electronic expansion that is underway.

Moreover, as Reyner Banham has suggested, architecture and technology may not be compatible disciplines. R. Buckminster Fuller rejected the International Style out of hand as being conceived without knowledge of scientific principles and concerned only with superficialities that were merely the side effects of technical obsolescence. Modern Architecture, he believed, had fallen behind in the twenties because it had halted its forward progress in order to refine a vocabulary of style that was derived from rather naive simulations of machine forms. His own philosophy of design was distinctly Futurist—dedicated to steady technological progress. Futurism forges relentlessly ahead while style moves in erratic stages, stopping on occasion to consolidate its expression and savor its distinctive character, even taking an aesthetic backward step on occasion in order to gain enough momentum to leap forward to the next stylistic plateau. Such pauses in the evolution of style are not without their value to those industries that support the architectural profession because they permit the stabilization of inventories and catalogues. The danger, of course, is that this practice results in vested interests that discourage change when opportunity dares to knock. Moreover, there is the ever-present risk that the style may collapse into a pile of lifeless clichés to be picked over and used by anyone of modest or no talent at all. Lewis Mumford observed that a style must be living (and this is almost a contradiction in terms) in order to be able to produce new forms; otherwise it is, as he wrote, “as in-

capable of yielding fresh designs as a mummy is of begetting a family".¹³

The catalytic agents for change, today as in the past, are the tastemakers (to borrow Russell Lynes' term), who serve to break down resistance to change. They operate by disparaging an existing style in order to clear the way for a new one that they will then extoll as being more honest and thus more appropriate for those who wish to keep up with the times. The tastemakers who established the International Style had first to breach the walls of the Beaux Arts with the same tenacity of purpose as drives today's champions of the Post-Modernist movement in their chopping away at the fortifications of the International Style.

The most exciting event in the twenties was the Paris Exposition of Modern Decorative Arts and Industries that introduced in 1925 what is now known to the world as Art Deco. (Incidentally, the United States turned down an invitation to participate because Herbert Hoover, as Secretary of Commerce, had concluded after discussions with manufacturers that this country had nothing original to show.) In 1927, after many designers and architects (including Lescaze) had visited the exposition and caught the spirit of the modern movement, it surfaced in New York City, making that the seminal year in modern American design. At the same time, the American Association of Museums began circulating a collection of examples from the Paris show, and Macy's in New York staged an experimental exposition to show the advances that American manufacturers had made in introducing modern design into everyday products. This, by the way, was followed in 1928 by a major exhibition at Macy's, "The International Exposition of Art and Industry", to which Lescaze contributed a penthouse concept with furnishings of his own design.

Also in 1927, the little, but in no way minor, "Machine Age Exposition" was staged in New York City under the auspices of the *Little Review* magazine. It was organized by Jane Heap to demonstrate that utility does not preclude the presence of beauty. On the contrary, it showed that a machine cannot be entirely efficient without the element of beauty. Its goal was to bring the engineer and the artist together in a way that would forecast the future. There followed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1932 a second exhibition, "Design for

13. Lewis Mumford, "Machinery and the Modern Style", *The New Republic*, 3 August 1921, 264.

the Machine”, conceived to illustrate that machine-made products can provide the utensils and furnishings of everyday life. Lescaze participated with a design for a drawing room equipped with machine-made furnishings. In 1934 the Museum of Modern Art installed an exhibition entitled “Machine Art”, in which Lescaze was again represented with desk accessories and lamps that were designed originally for the PSFS building and were now apparently on the open market. The objective of the show was to demonstrate how human needs can be met by mechanical means and found its expression in the geometry of solid shapes. It is fair to say that virtually no exhibitions of modern buildings and accessories were held between 1927 and 1935 in which the work of Lescaze was not included.

As Robert A. M. Stern and others have pointed out, developments in 1927 in communication by radio and national periodicals were drawing the public together and helping to stimulate demand for mass-produced appliances that were rapidly following electricity into every home. Ernest Elmo Calkins, head of a successful advertising agency, published an article “Design, the New Business Tool”, which focused the attention of business and industry on the importance and value of design. The Cheney’s recognized that one group rooted in modernist architecture was obviously broadening the acceptance of industrial design as it related to other contemporary design activities. This they were doing not only by their creative work in accessories and furnishings but also with buildings. “There is a spreading machine-age consciousness.”¹⁴

It was inevitable that the Depression would steer more than a few architects into industrial design, not only the younger ones but others too, who, like Lescaze, already had a strong inclination toward a broader approach to design. Architects, with building commissions few and far between, found new challenges in the design of furniture and furnishings, first on a custom basis for their architectural clients and later in the open marketplace for mass-produced products. Some, like Raymond Sandin, were pleased to find an alternative career. Others, like Dave Chapman, viewed product design as an attractive and lucrative, but nevertheless a substitute, career. Eliot Noyes regretted the fact that, despite his contributions to architecture, he was better known as an industrial designer than as an architect. George Nelson

14. Sheldon Cheney and Martha Cheney, *Art and the Machine* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), 8.

moved sideways to become the wisest observer of the design scene in this country as well as a highly regarded designer.

William Lescaze was critical of industrial designers who, he believed, were primarily concerned with superficial aspects of form. He was of the opinion that architects, as creative designers, had traditionally been responsible for the development of furniture and furnishings for manufacture that would be appropriate for their buildings. He was also aware that the architect had “started the improvement of the design situation even though the objects that he designed were not at that time manufactured in large quantities and were, therefore, expensive.”¹⁵ Such objects were essentially handmade from readily available materials on custom order without the benefit of the specialized tooling that is mandated for products to be mass-produced. They were, in effect, conceived as miniature buildings because they followed the same technique of design and specifications as those used for architecture. In all fairness it should be pointed out that many designers of machine-made products followed similar methods, because the products in the early Machine Age were often made from available finished materials such as sheet metal, tubing, and rods. Even when they were to be made in molds, the same influence was present because the models, whether of wood or plaster, were made by geometrically-based machine processes.

Robert M. Coates in his profile on William Lescaze in *The New Yorker* observed that: “Formerly, he used to throw such little inventions as this in gratis, but lately he has grown less prodigal, and has turned his facility to more practical account in the field of industrial design.”¹⁶

As time passed, Lescaze became convinced that the architect should try to “market his designs for the accessories for his own financial gain”. And, in fact, he as well as others, did cross the line to take out patents for special products that were designed originally for architectural application. The desk accessories that Lescaze designed for the PSFS building were in all likelihood priced and sold separately under a royalty agreement with their manufacturer. On a point of ethics, however, it should be noted that when this was done (as, for example, in the

15. William Lescaze, “On Being an Architect”, typescript for autobiography, William Lescaze Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University: 171.

16. Robert M. Coates, “Profile—William Lescaze”, *The New Yorker*, 12 December 1936, 32.

case of porcelain lighting fixtures that were designed by Lescaze for low-cost housing projects and manufactured by the former Alabax Division of the Pass and Seymour Company of Syracuse), patents were assigned to the client with the proviso that no royalty was to be paid for any sales that were part of the Williamsburg project in Brooklyn, for which the original design was developed. However, this arrangement did not preclude the payment of royalty when the fixture was subsequently offered on the open market and selected for installation in other similar projects, such as the Parkchester group in the Bronx or the Red Hook project in Brooklyn.

Lescaze also took on assignments outside the realm of architecture for manufactures such as a billiard table for the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company, as well as a concept for a weighing machine and ideas for small post-war radios for the Emerson Company. However, such assignments spread over a long, illustrious career in architecture were really too few to justify the title of industrial designer. Lescaze was really in his element as a designer of special products for his architectural clients, such as (with George Howe) the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society and later (on his own) the Columbia Broadcasting System. The assignment with Columbia Broadcasting was a dream assignment, including as it did a corporate mark, signage, adaptation of existing theatres to radio studios, new building, and equipment such as microphones and even a sound truck built over a GMC one-and-a-half-ton truck chassis and fitted with a Plexiglas roof.

Over the years design and architecture have enjoyed a warm but wary relationship. Architecture has largely ignored what it chooses to think of as its upstart friend, yet has turned to it either in times of economic stress or in search for that instant fame that comes from having one's name attached to a unique chair that is elevated to sculpture—to be admired but never disgraced by use. Design, on the other hand, continues to hunger for the status of architecture and looks to catch the flame of the latest Formalist fashion from its senior associate.

During the Design Decade, as *Architectural Forum* dubbed the thirties, American designers began to reach beyond the shorter vision of manufacturers in order to quicken the pace by which the science and technology of the machine could be put to human service. The public was flattered by the attention being paid to it and began to look upon manufactured products as indispensable to living in the modern world.

For all of the criticism that has been laid on them, manufactured products come closer to Futurism than buildings. Products must constantly be either revised in order to keep up with advancing technology or forced, unhappily, to fall back on superficial changes in order to imply progress that does not exist. For they serve a free and volatile public in a competitive atmosphere in which the investment for design and production must be made and the product must be offered and accepted before there is any return to the manufacturer. And, in a strange circle, it is the income from that service that provides the resources that build the building.

In the beginning of this paper I noted that William Lescaze was the product of many "ism's". He would not have liked hearing me compartmentalize his career so glibly. Moreover, I am certain that he would have taken issue with my simplistic description of the three dimensions of Modern Architecture as being Formalist, Functionalist, and Moralistic. For this facile categorizing, I apologize to his memory.

Nevertheless, Lescaze had a sense of history and of his relation to the ideological issues and aesthetic conflicts that were prevalent in the Machine Age. While he might have rejected the tags they attracted, his work gave substance to the principles they embodied.

Someone once wrote that the only vanity that may be pardoned persons of lofty spirit is the desire to leave behind a part of themselves. William Lescaze was such a spirit. "I still hope", he once wrote in a note to himself, "that sweet history will show . . . that I did influence the current of modern architecture."¹⁷

© 1984 Arthur J. Pulos

17. William Lescaze [Autobiographical Notes], William Lescaze Papers, Series II, box 1, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.