Spring 1984

William Lescaze and Hart Crane: A Bridge Between Architecture and Poetry

Lindsay Stamm Shapiro

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

Part of the American Studies Commons, History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

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.
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 XIX
SPRING 1984
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 Hart Crane: 
A Bridge Between Architecture and Poetry 

BY LINDSAY STAMM SHAPIRO

The following is a curious note about the influence that William Lescaze had on Hart Crane after Lescaze’s emigration to the United States. In 1920 Lescaze worked in Paris for Henri Sauvage, an architect noted for his set-back apartment blocks and his involvement with workers’ housing. Lescaze grew impatient with the lack of architectural projects after the war and, at the same time, longed to start his own practice. His former teacher, Karl Moser, asked, “Where are you ever going to find the chance of doing monumental work? Egypt? It’s too late. Maybe America.” At that point, Lescaze determined to emigrate to America, as did so many other European figures during this period. Thus, in any assessment of Lescaze’s work, it is necessary to emphasize his situation as a European émigré. Lescaze was attracted by a myth of America, a myth which was, in any case, partly of European invention. He arrived in New York with a letter of recommendation from Moser auf deutsch, only to discover that Moser’s reputation had yet to reach the New World. Unable to find work in the metropolis of his dreams, Lescaze settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where he exhibited paintings and worked, ironically enough, in a bastion of architectural conservatism, the office of Hubbel and Benes.

Also in Cleveland during the 1920s were the composers Ernest Bloch and Roger Sessions, and the painter Charles Burchfield; but it was with Hart Crane that the architect forged a lasting relationship. Crane’s and Lescaze’s rapport undoubtedly stands as one of the most interesting liaisons between architecture and poetry in America. It has not been sufficiently noted that Hart Crane received inspiration from the cosmopolitan background of Lescaze, who provided the prodigious American poet with literary sources of symbolism. One may surmise that Lescaze became a symbolic “bridge” for Crane, the future poet of The Bridge, as well as a link to the technological dream of modernism. The influence of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Laforgue, whose work Lescaze first introduced to Crane, is evident in Crane’s first book, White

1. This quotation was discovered in the William Lescaze Papers, Series II, box 1, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.
Buildings (1926), with its rather purist title. Crane himself wrote, "Lescaze has proved an inspiration to me. Knowing intimately the work of Marcel Proust, Salmon, Gide, and a host of other French moderns, he is able to see so much better than anyone else around here, the aims I have in my own work. . . . I never found a more stimulating individual in N.Y." Lescaze's portrait of Hart Crane, published in the Parisian journal Gargoyle in 1923, accentuated the utopian element in Crane. Crane praised the portrait for its almost melodramatic, visionary quality, a quality brought out by the emphatic right eye that suggested for him the notion of the voyant (fig. 1).3

Crane needed at that point to discover the means to counteract the pessimism of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", which he considered to be a collage of the accumulated debris of Europe and Asia. Also, Crane, like William Carlos Williams, wanted to create a vernacular affirmation of the machine age without resorting to the use of naturalistic mimesis. Crane's poetry aspires to a gigantic scale, a new maximalism, that is comparable to Lescaze's quest for the monumental in architecture. There is no doubt that Crane was involved in something like a "skyscraper poetry"; similarly, Lescaze alluded to skyscrapers even in his furniture designs. In Crane's work there is an insistence on inserting canonic American diction: "Stick your patent name on a signboard/brother—all over—going west—young man. . . ."4 Yet Crane wanted America affirmed not only in diction, since he also used Christopher Columbus, Pocahontas, and Rip Van Winkle as American heroes and myths. This was his response to the overly Europeanized modernists and expatriates like Eliot and Pound, who disdained the American mainland. Lescaze, a European, resembles Crane in that he attempted to adapt European modernism to an American context. Although he started from the opposite direction geographically, Lescaze, like Crane, sought to move beyond the facile architectural symbolism of the Moderne Style to an aesthetic truly appropriate for the new epoch. Both men maintained a balance between the American and the European elements of their respective art forms.

Fig. 1. Hart Crane, portrait by William Lescaze (1923). Published with the permission of the Hart Crane Collection, Columbia University Library.
And just as Crane never gave up his poetic inheritance of metrics and tensions, neither did Lescaze give up the traditions of architecture. Surely one does not want to build a complete structure of correspondences between Crane and Lescaze, based on their skyscraper imagery of affirmation and collage, but one should not overlook their relationship.