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Robert Bruce Dean

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C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

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THE RISE OF  
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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A BRIEF SURVEY OF  
THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
ARCHITECTURAL HOLDINGS

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# European Modernism in an American Commercial Context

BY ROBERT BRUCE DEAN

This is a talk about a young Swiss designer who came to the United States with the simple immigrant goal of practising his craft—and found out what it meant to be an American architect. He groped his way in, he figured out how to operate here, and he articulated goals for himself and his profession. Eventually, he completed a group of buildings which helped to further these goals and to shift the course of American art. But, much as he may have wanted to, Lescaze never quite confronted the underlying dilemmas of the artist in a democratic, mercantile society. Ultimately, he separated himself from his sources of patronage. His contemporary influence and his place in history were both encumbered by this loss of position, and yet he never fully realized how or why it happened.

I hope to shed some light on why Lescaze's career took this course—on why this was perhaps inevitable. I also hope to make some observations, based upon Lescaze's career, about the novel characteristics of the artist's role in a democratic society and a secular, materialist age. I'll sum up in advance by saying that Lescaze was buffeted by three basic, cultural forces, two of which were indigenous to his adopted country and alien to him. The third was brought by Lescaze and a few of his contemporaries and was introduced as an alien force within American architecture. Our profession of architecture is still torn by the competition of these three basic forces.

I will speak first about the third force, which consisted of the influences which Lescaze carried with him from Europe and sought to implant in a new ground. The basis of these ideas was, quite simply, the concept of architecture as abstract modern art, strongly influenced by cubist aesthetics, functional planning, and a socialist political vision. Lescaze in Zürich had been attracted to the study of architecture by his exposure to the new art and had rejoiced at the opportunity to work with a great proto-modernist teacher, Karl Moser.

Of course, we know that Lescaze's education in Zürich does not place him at the seat of basic innovation in abstract Modern Architecture—at least as history has recorded it. The students of Behrens in Berlin were much more ready to codify and polemicize their work. The ascen-

dancy of the Bauhaus and the Werkbund under the leadership of Behrens' students created an environment in which the new architecture could be pursued idealistically. The field became identified less as a building craft and more as an ongoing discussion of formal, spatial, technical, and political concepts.

Lescaze's education under Moser, by contrast, was less polemical—more involved with evolutions of form than with avant-garde revolutions in the entire sociocultural structure. Thus, while it was natural for the German group to promulgate their ideas in the purest possible way through state-financed demonstration projects and through the institution of a school, it was equally natural for Lescaze to seek out an environment where society had issued its architects a real mandate to build. In the 1920s this environment was New York—a city undergoing an incredible building boom and, at the same time, a center of tremendous artistic dynamism. However, New York emphatically was not a place where ideals were pursued for their own sake.

Into this environment Lescaze would carry the teachings of Moser and his early employer Henri Sauvage. In New York Lescaze would have to work out on his own what he meant by Modern Architecture.

He would succeed faster than he had dared hope in building under his own name works which reflected his ideals. As the principal carrier of Europe's new cubist design ethic to the headquarters city of American architecture, Lescaze would exert an important personal influence upon American practitioners. Yet, the very nature of his chosen place of work would preclude the kind of finished polemical statement—whether in print, in built work, or even in his own mind—that would be on a par with the Bauhaus or the Jeanneret studio. For instance, Lescaze could persuade the American architecture magazines to publish some speculative drawings of houses, as long as they contained a powerful gimmick, like an airplane hangar. And in the 1920s his one opportunity to build a demonstration design project would be financed not by the Werkbund, but by the furniture department at Macy's.

Considering the degree of professional solitude in which he worked (though I should not give the impression here of artistic solitude) and the steady pressure which his early clients exerted to avoid becoming art patrons, one must admit that Lescaze grew enormously as a designer during the 1920s. By the time his two big breaks came along in 1929—Leopold Stokowski's commission for the Oak Lane Nursery

School and George Howe's invitation to collaborate on the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society building—Lescaze had established his credentials as one of only two or three true American interpreters of European cubist architecture.

Eventually, the American architectural profession would turn vigorously toward this architecture. They would modify its polemic to suit the needs of American corporate society. Of course, responsibility for this evolution does not belong solely to Lescaze. Hitchcock and Johnson's International Style exhibition of 1932 popularized both the people and the ideals of European modernism. And eventually, the arrival in America of Gropius, Mies, Breuer, and others focused enormous attention on Modern Architecture. But William Lescaze must be given a full measure of credit for initiating and shaping this interest, because he presented some of the very first striking images of the new architecture to American eyes.

This discussion leads us neatly into the mainstream of twentieth-century architectural history, in which the innovations of Modern Architecture were seen to transform American culture. However, Lescaze is interesting to me for a somewhat different reason. His career prefigures the fate of Modern Architecture as it became influenced by the climate of American culture. To examine my point, we must look at the two indigenous cultural forces which Lescaze encountered in New York—forces which he never could have fully anticipated and, yet, which determined his fate as an architect.

The first of these I will call Romantic Materialism.

The early shapers of America's great experiment in democratic culture were strongly focused on the material world and belong, at least in some tangential way, to the history of materialist philosophy. They mistrusted existing European traditions of art as distractions from their societal mission—and even as destructive sources of artifice. For instance, John Adams, while visiting Europe and marvelling at its history, associated the great European works of art with tyranny and despotism. About his own land, he wrote, "The age of painting has not yet arrived in this country, and I hope it will not arrive very soon."<sup>1</sup> A democratic culture was supposed to look forward, through eyes of homely simplicity, and should not lend its support to the non-productive practitioners of luxury and self-reflection.

1. As quoted by Constance Rourke in *The Roots of American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 5.

Adams did envision the gradual development of artistic expression in America, but he was nervous about it. He feared that, lacking the European art patrons' sophisticated taste, the American people were likely to bestow "their applauses and adorations too often . . . on artifices and tricks".<sup>2</sup> In addition, Adams realized that since the artist does not contribute to material production, the public would expect to receive the fruits of his efforts for free.

The dilemmas which Adams described have confronted every person who has tried to render American culture into physical form. Not surprisingly, the commercial arts—including commercial architecture and industrial design—have fostered some of our solidest and most natural aesthetic traditions. In these media the underlying romanticism of the American experiment come through. But, only at brief moments (and usually only by coincidence) has our commercialized romanticism communicated in an understandable way with the high-art traditions of our parent cultures in Europe. This connection was obviously essential to the ability of Lescaze the European to operate as an American commercial architect. However, the ghost of John Adams might disdain such a connection as irrelevant or counterproductive.

Lescaze, coming to the United States in 1919, adopted American culture willingly in the manner of the traditional immigrant. He chose not to shrink from the commercial orientation that he found—in fact, he played a major role in converting Modern Architecture into a commercial medium. This is in clear distinction to the later group of modernist immigrants, who had built their reputations under highly centralized government patronage in Europe. Almost universally, they sought the shelter of academic and governmental institutions when they arrived.

But, whatever may have come later, we are still speaking of the post-World War I years when Lescaze was building his practice. During this period the maturing of our romantic material culture into a worldwide force was moving toward a climax, already exerting its influence along the kinds of mercantile paths that might have pleased John Adams. Henry Luce, the magazine magnate, described this phenomenon in his famous *Life* magazine essay "The American Century". Luce noted that "American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products are . . . the only things that every

2. Rourke, *Roots of American Culture*, 4-5.

community in the world, from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common.”<sup>3</sup>

Lewis Mumford, in his book *The Brown Decades*, had applied a similar ethic specifically to architecture. He was describing the Chicago architects of the 1880s, but could have been describing William Lescaze’s own self-image: “The architects of the day were not dwarfed by the business men, but stood shoulder to shoulder with them supplementing their deficiencies and sharing their strengths.”<sup>4</sup>

Incidentally, Lescaze knew and admired Mumford, and recommended *The Brown Decades* as essential reading. Lescaze also was aware that he could draw upon the forcefulness of this romantic material culture and, so, shaped his interpretation of the new architecture from within the values of that culture. He implicitly understood that, as opposed to the ongoing socialist experiments of central Europe, America already had an ingenuously mechanistic, machine-age society. Such a society was not going to accept an architecture that was, to use Lescaze’s own negative description, “machine-rhapsodic”. Instead, American commercial culture during the 1920s was trying desperately to humanize and romanticize its machinery. Lescaze’s rich play of materials, of planar surfaces, and of volumetric devices springs from that understanding. However, it was precisely his responsiveness to American commercial values that weakened his ability to communicate ideologically with the German leaders of Modernism.

But paradoxically, the sponsorship of Modern Architecture as an aesthetic force in this country eventually shifted almost entirely toward the ideologies that were coming out of central Europe. Lescaze’s desire to be an American professional—a member of a commercial culture—became his undoing. This strange turn of events reflects the other indigenous cultural force which greeted Lescaze when he arrived in America.

As wealth had grown in this country, this force had grown with it, countervailing the Romantic Materialism which I have just been describing. I won’t honor this force with such an imposing name—I’ll simply call it cultural insecurity. Ironically, Lescaze owed much of his early success to being surrounded by this insecurity. He presented himself and his work as sources for achieving European-style refine-

3. Henry R. Luce, “The American Century”, *Life*, 17 February 1941, 65.

4. Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), 146.



ment and artistic significance.

Lescaze was on hand to witness the unfinished edifice of democratic art—of Romantic Materialism, if you will—being bequeathed to later generations almost solely within the commercial media. (Frank Lloyd Wright inherited a small portion of this legacy, but he spent it primarily to glorify himself.) Meanwhile, the sons and daughters of America's mercantile elite chased the magic of what one of my teachers used to call "cultural density" in the capitals of Europe. In a previous generation this phenomenon had first been represented in architecture by a shift toward French neoclassicism. But, in the 1920s American cultural insecurity became the primary medium of influence for abstract Modern Architecture. Lescaze, while beguiled by the dynamism of American commercial culture, could never assimilate into that culture as fully as his fellow naturalized-American, Raymond Loewy. Lescaze could modify and adapt, but could not abandon, the avant-garde sources of his art. Nor would it be wise for him to do so, since his association with European trends lent him credibility in the social circles which were capable of generating patronage.

Curiously enough, when Europeans had begun abandoning their own nineteenth-century romantic traditions in favor of revolutionary aesthetic movements, they drew inspiration from such American commercial sources as the Chicago School skyscrapers, the movies of Charlie Chaplin and D.W. Griffith, and the grain elevators of Buffalo. But, by then, the American intellectual elite had largely abandoned these indigenous artifacts as evidence of anything profound. By the time William Lescaze established himself in New York social circles in the late 1920s, American art had become a totally schizophrenic environment. A mass commercial culture of huge proportions and tremendous dynamism was reaching out to the people at large and even beginning to colonize the parent cultures of Western Europe. Meanwhile, the American social elite appeared more and more like a colony, looking almost entirely to foreign and expatriate sources for art and expecting only good will and gentlemanly behavior from the local practitioners.

Thus, Lescaze was finding acceptance in two conflicting realms of patronage, and this was a unique platform among American architects, with unique opportunities for promulgating the ideas he believed in. But, at the same time, he was in a highly unstable position from which to launch a career. And I doubt that a self-involved, egoistic personality

like William Lescaze was very much aware of the complexities of his situation; instead, his primary perception during the 1930s appears to have been that he had found the route to the successful practice of his art.

In 1942 William Lescaze published his autobiography. At that time he was ostensibly at the height of his career, although the war was holding down the overall level of architectural activity. But, in terms of his primary goal of advancing the state of the art of architecture, Lescaze's career was over. He would live and practise architecture for twenty-seven more years, but he would become increasingly overshadowed by the newly arrived figures of Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, and the home-grown talent following their lead. The spotlight of public attention would not shine again through the glass blocks of Lescaze's house and studio on Forty-eighth Street and would not bring with it the client patronage upon which Lescaze's art depended. Ironically, Lescaze's youthful goal of establishing cubist Modern Architecture in America had been achieved (Philip Johnson could declare that the Battle of Modern Architecture had been won); but the postwar building boom would bring Lescaze only the most constrained commercial commissions. Meanwhile, Mies, Gropius, and Breuer would all find the opportunity to complete monumental projects in Manhattan. And CBS, Lescaze's best client of the late 1930s, would not even consider him when they built their huge, new television production facilities or their long-delayed, new headquarters in Manhattan. Lescaze only gradually recognized the degree to which he had lost his position in the profession, but by 1960 he was bitterly asking himself how and when the curtain of silence had dropped around him.

The answer to Lescaze's question lies in the nature of the professional role he carved out for himself, far more than it does in the skill or character of his design work. Lescaze had managed to make himself into a unique bridge figure, who brought European avant-garde forms into contact with American traditions of democratic and commercial art. Unlike the newly arrived Bauhaus architects, Lescaze intuitively understood the fundamental differences between American materialist traditions and the German materialist culture that was fostering abstract art in Europe. He was not an intellectual; he did not theorize about these differences, but an awareness of them shows up in his work and his professional attitudes. Lescaze, the immigrant, chose to straddle

the schism between a utilitarian, mercantile America and a socialist, utopian Germany.

Lescaze states this perception simply in his autobiography, using fewer “ism” words than I find myself using:

There is nothing more or less ‘international’ about ‘modern’ architecture than there is about ‘modern’ man. They are both international and national. . . . The Prussian general, the Spanish fisherman, the Eskimo, the cowboy, the American tycoon, . . . [all follow] the same basic design. The nationalism always shows up in the details, in the way of walking, talking, language, the food eaten, the clothes worn—and so it does in buildings. Modern architecture is as international and national as was Gothic architecture.<sup>5</sup>

He went on to describe how scholars of the Gothic focused on the *differences* in form from country to country, while scholars of Modern Architecture focused on the lowest common denominator of *similarities* from place to place—thus limiting the scope and cultural relevance of the new architecture.

To Lescaze, the international denominators of Modern Architecture were functionalist planning and a vaguely cubist sense of form. The national denominator of an American Modern Architecture pursued our romantic tradition of democratic art. As Lescaze wrote, “Architecture is the art of making the content and the forms of a civilization coincide. . . . Architecture [expresses] a people and [gives] to them and to others a visible image of their aspirations.”<sup>6</sup> He fondly quoted Louis Sullivan, and even Walt Whitman, in his attempt to connect with American traditions of art.

American democratic art, as Henry Luce had pointed out, was probably a commercial art. Lescaze understood this fact and articulated it by describing the symbiosis between business and art in architecture:

If the definition of a businessman implies an ability to think solely in terms of a profit from one’s business, then the architect is not a businessman. But if the definition implies the ability to think first of all in terms of the client’s interests, how they can best be served, by what kind of services, . . . then the architect is a businessman. . . . Although I feel that our greatest

5. William Lescaze, *On Being an Architect* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1942), 76.

6. Lescaze, *On Being an Architect*, 22-23.

need at the present time is that our architects be artists—creative artists—to be successful artists they must be good businessmen. . . . That sense of happy balance which comes from every work of art . . . must be constantly maintained between the respective costs and purposes of so many [individual] items and the cost and purpose of the whole.<sup>7</sup>

Lescaze presented himself as a commercial artist who could deliver businesslike services when speaking with clients like CBS or Libby-Owens-Ford. But he also stressed the importance of art—the magic of his design work. Lescaze envisioned himself as a commercial designer, producing not only architecture and design, but also a pervasive corporate identity. Lescaze helped to pioneer this dual role for the American architect. He did not develop that role into the mature form later achieved by firms such as Eero Saarinen and Associates, but he understood that giving personality to the mechanistic institution of the American corporation could be consistent with the goals of both modernism and American art.

However, Lescaze never escaped from his other role as a plaything of café society. Indeed, his social connections constituted his first and by far most successful source of architectural patronage. For example, even his most famous commercial design commission, for the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, came about through connections within a social milieu in which he was seen to represent Europe's superior artistic traditions.

When the “real” European modernists—the architects who had come of age in the polemical atmosphere of the Bauhaus—arrived in America, Lescaze, the European artist, became an obsolete concept. Suddenly, he was solely Lescaze the American commercial architect. Paradoxically, this was exactly what he had set out to be—but the nature of patronage for an American architect was rapidly changing. No longer would the architect be asked to assume any role as interpreter of romantic art traditions. Suddenly, business was business and art was strictly a strange visitor from another culture. And the commercial architect was a businessman. Lescaze observed what was happening to him, as the new European faces supplanted his in the salons:

The men and women who promote these [avant-garde] cliques form small packs and run, baying, after the newest modern

7. Lescaze, *On Being an Architect*, 103-4.

architect to appear on the horizon. . . . They then put vine leaves in his hair, a fine apple between his teeth, and show him off, with his work, wherever they have showing resources. . . . After a while these cliques cool and rush off in other directions leaving their most recent exhibit to starve in his cage or gather his own nuts in his own tree or to be a man and stand on his own feet again.<sup>8</sup>

William Lescaze came to this country to be a creative man of action—the kind of man Henry Luce admired and Lewis Mumford wrote about—commercial in outlook yet profound in impact and cultural representation. There was a much more ready reception, however, for the kind of artistic charlatan predicted by John Adams—the man who could arrive from a more ancient land and play to America’s cultural insecurities. The conflict between these opposing roles offered, and continues to offer, a difficult challenge for the American architect.

Lescaze blundered into the latter identity decried by Adams. He strove, sometimes desperately, to achieve the romantic ideal perceived by Luce. And for a brief but significant period, extending for twelve years from the PSFS in Philadelphia to the Longfellow building in Washington, Lescaze connected with a few of Luce’s creative men of action. He began to achieve his goal of making cubist modernism fit in Walt Whitman’s rustic empire.

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8. Lescaze, *On Being an Architect*, 74-75.