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COURIER

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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CAROL WILLIS
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ROBERT A. M. STERN
WILLIAM H. JORDY

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ARCHITECTURAL HOLDINGS

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The William Lescaze Symposium Panel Discussion

EDITED BY DENNIS P. DOORDAN

One session of the symposium was devoted to a panel discussion. The organizers of the symposium invited three prominent architects to participate as respondents: Stuart Cohen of Cohen and Nereim Architects, Chicago; Werner Seligmann, Dean, School of Architecture, Syracuse University; and Robert A. M. Stern of Robert A. M. Stern, Architects, New York City. The other members of the panel were Robert B. Dean, Lindsay Stamm Shapiro, Carol Willis, and myself.

The panel discussion began with comments by each respondent concerning the exhibition and material presented earlier in the symposium. A general discussion involving all members of the panel followed. As Carol Willis noted, the panel seemed divided between those who measured Lescaze's contribution according to the established tenets of orthodox Modernism and those who sought a new critical framework for evaluating Lescaze's contribution to the rise of modern design in America based upon typological, professional, and commercial criteria.

The session was tape-recorded and what follows is an edited transcript of the discussion. It was a difficult task. I was concerned primarily with the problem of shortening the transcript for publication. For the most part this effort involved the elimination of repetitions and passages peripheral to the major themes of the symposium. In addition, I was obliged to reconstruct spoken sentence fragments so as to make them more readable. I have attempted in every way to retain as much as possible of the actual text of the discussion. All of the comments are presented in the order in which they were made.

STUART COHEN: It seems to me that we are being asked to make some sort of retrospective reconsideration of Lescaze's career and its relationship to a certain period of American architecture. To do this, we need to ask three things. First, we should ask what have we learned about Lescaze's role in the development of Modern Architecture in America. Second, we might ask questions about the differences, both ideological and practical, between European modernism and

developments in this country. Finally, we might ask about the relevance of this material for us today.

After looking at the exhibition and listening to the presentations today, I am convinced more than ever of Professor Jordy and Robert Stern's original assessments of the importance of the PSFS building. For me, that building clearly secures Lescaze's importance. He certainly is a good architect, and, like so many other architects, he had a moment when his convictions, his interests, and his vision of architecture corresponded with the times. We need only to recall numerous other architects from the period of the early development of Modern Architecture, who, like Lescaze, lived and continued to work after this early period. Gerrit Rietveld continued to build into the 1950s. Peter Behrens practised into the 1940s, as did Henri Van de Velde. So, we are left with a sticky question regarding the absence of Lescaze's later work from this exhibition and discussion.

Certainly, there are architects who invent and there are architects who practise by the exercise of judgement. And we might ask how is it that at a particular moment in time an architect like Lescaze would know what to build and twenty years later he would have lost that sense of architectural judgement. In his paper, Robert Dean suggests that it was due to a change in patronage with respect to Lescaze. I think it was probably something more complex than that. When Lescaze came here, Modern Architecture was, by definition, an avant-garde activity. As an artist-architect, Lescaze could think of his work as a presentation and a maintaining of that avant-garde tradition. Certainly by the 1950s, Modern Architecture, as it was being designed and built in this country by people like Mies van der Rohe, had a very different meaning for Americans. Mies' skyscrapers were not seen as being progressive in the sense in which Lescaze's work was.

In looking at Lescaze's work, I hope we could focus on the differences between modernism in Europe and America. It seems to me that European modern architects focused on two building types in their proposed political and social restructuring of the world, public housing and the skyscraper. In the minds of those architects, the skyscraper constituted the first truly new twentieth-century building type, and perhaps the only type for which the argument of the structural and functional determination of form could ever be plausible. We are reminded of the differences in the skyscraper as a European symbol of a technological world of the future and the skyscraper as an American

symbol of commerce.

If we accept the International Style as the definition of Modern Architecture, then PSFS was certainly the first modern skyscraper. It heralded what seemed like a terribly easy transformation of the skyscraper from the ultimate symbol of revolutionary modernism into a form that symbolized stability, power, and ultimately a total association with the conservative point of view of corporate America. In that respect, one of the interesting things that has come out of the presentations today, has to do with Lescaze's relationship with CBS and the whole notion of the architect in relation to the creation of a corporate identity.

Finally, I would like to comment very briefly on two things that were said at last night's session. Dean Seligmann, in his opening remarks, commented that the notion of Total Design, heralded in the PSFS building, was, in fact, not taken up in the United States. It seems to me that what Dean Seligmann was actually referring to is a certain type of doctrinaire modernism, the desire to totally control an environment from an aesthetic point of view. Yet, one of the things we find remarkable about the PSFS building is exactly the degree to which all the details, the furnishings, the interiors, et cetera, appear to be part of a seamless fabric. When that building was done, the whole conceptualization of what that space was—both formally and aesthetically—was so different from what had happened before that to simply take available furnishings and put them into that space seemed an impossibility. That building seemed to demand the invention of the fittings, the furniture, the lighting fixtures, and the clocks by the architects. I think that has a parallel with things going on today. Architects are now designing furniture to go into their interiors. Given the reconceptualization of architecture today and the introduction of traditional elements, it no longer seems possible to simply go out and buy some Mies or Wassily chairs.

The other remark that I found interesting last night was Professor Pulos' comment that he felt like he was coming to a wake, remembering a body of thought as it was being lowered into the vault. In terms of the way architecture, architectural education, and the professional all seem to have changed in the last ten years, it seems to me that nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, architects have been reconnected with an ability to look at and appreciate history in a useful way. Certainly that seems to me to be why we are here today.

WERNER SELIGMANN: I think there are a number of issues that one can raise in connection with Lescaze. One that is of particular interest to me is the difference between Europe and the United States, and in particular, the effect the First World War had on the minds of the people of Europe that it did not have on the minds of the people of the United States.

In Germany and in Russia, the old social and political order was turned upside down. Architecture was now going to give a unique expression—a specific face—to the great experiment of the Weimar Republic and Communist Russia. The housing programs were concerned not just with replacing old housing, but with expressing the fact that housing was now the task of the nation as a whole.

It is significant that Lescaze came from Switzerland and not from Germany, Holland, or France. Knowing Switzerland and the work of Karl Moser, I cannot believe that cubism or anything having to do remotely with modern painting had a big impact on architectural design. Even though there was an active Werkbund in Switzerland, there was a very different cultural climate there. This must be kept in mind when one discusses the artistic as well as the social and political program of Lescaze's work.

In America, there was a sense of relief that the war was over, but also, I think, a sense that Europe and European concerns were very remote. In the 1920s, commercialism reached new heights in America. Lescaze arrived at a moment when whatever was a saleable item, stylistically speaking, was a wonderful commodity to have. He fell into a situation in which a country was ready for a new style, and Lescaze did very well in this situation.

Looking at the work of Lescaze, I have the feeling that he was a very astute man. Although he had observed quite a few things, he was not able to make any kind of serious claim for an intellectual framework for his work. There is a peculiar absence of plans in all of his work. There is not one memorable plan in any of Lescaze's work. If you attach any kind of meaning to the plan then, intellectually, Lescaze does not exist.

The only thing we can seriously discuss is the PSFS building. I think the striking thing about PSFS is that it was really the only modern skyscraper built before the Second World War. I think it is a fantastic building and will remain a fantastic building.

There is another question that is bothering me, as it did Professor

Cohen, and that is: What happened to Lescaze after the Second World War? It might be compared to what would happen to the New York Cosmos soccer team if someone bought several of the great European teams and brought them to this country. Suddenly, the Cosmos, the best team in America, would find itself at the bottom of the heap. I think that was very much the case for Lescaze when Gropius and Mies arrived in this country. Although I will say that there is not one skyscraper standing in this country by Gropius that one wants to take a second look at.

In conclusion, I will repeat my thesis that underneath it all, Lescaze probably never had the kind of intellectual foundation that could stand up once people like Mies and Gropius arrived. Once they arrived, Lescaze was no longer the hero he had been once.

ROBERT STERN: I would like to record my thanks to the speakers for their very stimulating talks and to the organizers and the designer of this exhibition. Most architectural exhibitions are cloying or repellent in their installations. This exhibition is one of the few really beautiful architectural exhibitions I have seen in a long time.

Obviously, I have a long-abiding relationship of one sort or another with Lescaze as an architect and as a personality. I actually met him a number of times before and during the writing of my book on George Howe. There are, I think, a number of issues which are very important in connection with Lescaze.

The first and most important one I wish to speak about is the issue of a person's career cut off from one country and culture when he goes abroad to another country. I think we have over-romanticized Mr. Lescaze. Switzerland was very remote. While he did study at the ETH under Karl Moser, the school was not a high-flying aesthetic hotbed. It was a technical institution and Moser, as an architect, was known for a very simple, almost engineering-like approach to architecture.

The full documentation of Lescaze's career in the 1920s, which is available in the catalogue but not in the exhibition, indicates he was a complete eclectic. Whether his eclecticism was based on conviction, confusion, mere expediency, or a combination of all three is something I think none of us will ever really know.

He was well patronized in New York as an architect. The Swiss consul in New York helped him get a start. He went to a very good firm, in all fairness, in Cleveland. I think he really had no idea about his

artistic intention when he got off the boat in America, except for a vague twenty-year-old's notion of doing something great. Contrast that, for example, with the fact that five years later, Moser's son Werner Moser came here and went straight to Frank Lloyd Wright. That's where you went if you knew what you were doing at that time. That's where Schindler went, that's where Neutra went, and that's where Mendelsohn went. I don't think Lescaze knew about Frank Lloyd Wright. There is certainly no documentation of any knowledge at that time.

I do think Lescaze aggrandized his position enormously. He was certainly quick. On the other hand, he was part of another tradition in New York architecture. In those years, there were many German and Austrian in particular, with some French, architect-decorators. It is an aspect of the interest in Total Design which Arthur Pulos discussed. There were many people in New York, all foreign-born and growing out of a craft tradition, who were architect-decorators. Lescaze was definitely part of that tradition.

Paul Frankl was trained as an architect in Germany. He came to practise in America. Frank Lloyd Wright wrote a few words of introduction to Frankl's 1928 book *New Directions*. Frankl published Wright's work at a point when Wright's career was at its nadir. The leading figure of that group in terms of his relationship to architecture and creative practice was Joseph Urban. He came here first in 1904 to install the display of Viennese furniture at the St. Louis World's Fair. He came back to design sets for the Metropolitan Opera and was more or less stranded here by the outbreak of the First World War. Lescaze was part of that group but he was absolutely the most marginal figure in that group.

Carol Willis opens the window on this whole period in her talk. If you look at what Lescaze was doing in those years, it was all nickel and dime stuff in terms of the size of the projects and their intellectual content. It was the great commercial architects, Hood, Kahn, and Walker—the so-called Little Napoleons of New York architecture—who really understood the American experience, who really understood the iconic power of the skyscraper as a corporate symbol. It was that power that was behind the Chicago Tribune competition in 1922. Europeans like Duiker or Gropius, who had never been to America, misinterpreted the competition while Loos, who had been to America, understood the nature of the American Skyscraper as a symbol and

as an advertisement.

Sometime during the 1920s and, I think, by virtue of his experience with George Howe on the PSFS building, Lescaze began to paint a picture for himself of what he might become as an architect. I believe, with Dean Seligmann, that the exhibition reveals interesting work for which we have a certain nostalgia. But it is very unimportant work in terms of carving a new vision of something. That is not to say that every architect must create a new vision. Many architects work within a given framework. But if you work within a framework, you don't work alone. This is one of the keys to understanding the success and failure of Lescaze's career. Lescaze not only did not arrive here in 1938 with an established philosophy like Gropius, Breuer, and Mies did, he did not associate himself with a university or other institution that might have sustained his growth as an artist through discourse. He was disassociated from the milieu of the so-called café society. He hustled to get jobs. I noticed Mr. Paley did not entertain Mr. Lescaze at his house, only the other way around. That means Lescaze was having parties and inviting potential clients to his townhouse.

I think the problem of isolation became critical for Lescaze after World War II with Mies sitting in Chicago and Gropius sitting in Cambridge, each attracting the best and most innovative talents to their schools and offices. Lescaze was a man without a constituency and without a clue why.

Not only should Lescaze's early career be placed in the milieu of the Frankls and the Hoods of the 1920s, but his middle career, when he was at his best, should be placed in a milieu also. As a growing modernist in the 1930s, his career paralleled the rising career of Edward Durrell Stone. Stone was trained at MIT, worked on the Radio City complex, then went out on his own. He absorbed lessons from Frank Lloyd Wright on the one hand and from European modernism on the other. He produced buildings such as the original Museum of Modern Art in New York and a succession of houses which really do define a kind of American modernism.

If we move on into the 1950s, when Lescaze fell apart, I think it is interesting to note who did get the CBS commissions for example. CBS didn't go to Mies or Gropius or Frank Lloyd Wright. CBS went first to Pereira and Luckman who did Television City in Los Angeles. Luckman had been a vice-president of Lever Brothers. He then became an architect. He understood the corporate situation perfectly. CBS

commissioned Eero Saarinen to do the corporate headquarters in New York. Saarinen is really the legitimate psychological inheritor of the spirit of Hood, Walker, and Kahn.

In conclusion, I have found this symposium an extremely valuable occasion because it has reminded me of the milieu and the goals of the architects of that era. It also reminded me of the role in architecture of the people who worked in the office with the designer. They are people we must not forget. Howe and Lescaze put together a group of talented people in the Philadelphia and New York offices—there were two offices in those critical years. Howe understood how to deal with the clients. He understood the first rule of architecture, "Get the job". He got the job and he understood how to keep the job. Beyond that, there were younger men in the offices, Walter Baermann, George Daubs, Alfred Clauss, who understood how to put the building together. I am not referring here to nuts and bolts, to the structural stuff, but rather, how to make the conception of the PSFS building come alive in astonishing detail. The irony of the whole thing is that if you examine the *curriculum vitae* of each member of that team, none of them had it all together. But for one certain moment, in one certain place, this group of people came together and put together this remarkable icon of American architecture. We must never forget that, at least in America, the making of the greatest building is frequently the direct product of an assemblage of talents in what we call an office. This is very different from the atelier operation of European practice or certain romantic notions of design.

DENNIS DOORDAN: Since CBS has been mentioned a couple of times in the responses this afternoon, I should add that during my research I spoke to a number of present and former officials at CBS. They attributed the end of Lescaze's relationship with CBS to two factors. One was the growing size and sophistication of CBS's own in-house design staff. As the design department grew in size, it took on an increasing amount of work that previously had been commissioned out to Lescaze. The other factor was the decision in the early 1950s to build Television City in Los Angeles. That was a major project with a twenty-five-acre site and a multi-million-dollar budget. CBS was concerned about the size of Lescaze's office and its location in New York City. They wanted a larger office located in the project area for Television City. When I asked about Pereira and Luckman, people at CBS spoke

more of Luckman than Pereira. As a former assistant to Paul Kesten put it, "We had a confidence in our ability to communicate with Mr. Luckman. He spoke our language and because he also spoke an architect's language, he could translate, supposedly, our desires to Pereira." There was a concern about communication and CBS felt confident, because of Luckman's business background, dealing with Pereira and Luckman.

CAROL WILLIS: I have had my say already today so I will keep my comments brief. I want to make one observation about the remarks, including Professor Pulos' lecture last night. The remarks seem to be divided. On one hand, the traditionalists, who now represent (paradoxically) orthodox embattled modernism, have maintained a fairly hard-line attitude towards what Lescaze's contribution was. On the other hand, there are those who are more skeptical of the modernist point of view and evaluate Lescaze's contribution with more perspective.

As for the exhibition, I think it is beautiful. I think if people read the subtitle of the exhibition, "The Rise of Modern Design in America", and think of it as a show about design in the 1930s and 1940s rather than as a show about Lescaze, it is enormously successful in giving insight into this period.

ROBERT DEAN: I have some general reactions to what has been said so far. First, I don't think Lescaze ever really did understand his role. I think he understood that he had a goal, but it wasn't an architectural goal in the manner of the German modernists. It was a Swiss goal, one very much influenced by a sense of craft. It did not proclaim the whole socialist-cubist modernism position. But Lescaze knew that somehow he was supposed to come into contact with this modernist vision. He knew that was what was "happening" and he was trying desperately to figure out how to come into contact with it. At the same time, he knew, respected, and, I think, almost deified people like Paley and he wanted to come into contact with them.

I think if he really understood his role in all its complexity, he would have ended up operating a firm like Skidmore, Owings and Merrill or Pereira and Luckman. He would not have had an atelier in his house and come down in his bathrobe, as Bill Scarbrough remembers. [Editor's note: William Scarbrough teaches in the Syracuse University School of Architecture and worked for Lescaze in the 1950s.] Lescaze would

have been the dynamic, business-like creator he tried to describe in his autobiography. His artistic output during his first decade in this country was definitely eclectic. The eclecticism represents, for me, Lescaze's search for a way to come into contact with two very different things, the avant-garde art trends of the period and the commercial art reality he saw in the skyscraper designers in New York. The important thing about Lescaze for me is that search for a connection. He attempted to bridge those two worlds. He was not the only person in this country that tried to bridge those two worlds, but his significance certainly rides on that attempt.

LINDSAY SHAPIRO: I agree with Werner Seligmann that Lescaze did not have a strong intellectual framework. One can't really find any decent plans in his work. After his experience at the ETH in Zürich, he was primarily self-taught. He made a few trips to Europe and looked through the latest periodicals.

I would like to say one thing about the PSFS building. Howe sought out Lescaze to be his partner in the design of this project. Howe was searching for a sense of modernism and felt he could not do it on his own. The contract between Howe and Lescaze specified that Lescaze was the designer for the project and Howe was responsible for client relations and business management.

ROBERT STERN: I am sure that's true in general, but it is a matter of degree as well. Also, we have this romantic notion of the design of the PSFS building—Lescaze's famous Christmas sketch dedicated to his wife, for example. But before Howe called Lescaze, there were schemes done by Howe that included the plan idea with the separated tower and slab. Also, you must remember that Lescaze insisted to the last possible moment that the columns be kept inside the building. This would have made it the biggest marshmallow sandwich of all time.

ROBERT DEAN: For me, the key to the PSFS building is not the question of who was the big honcho in charge of designing the building. A project of that size is not an individual effort. The key is the fact that George Howe, who was an infinitely sophisticated person, sought out the best designer he could find to apply the proper imagery to this gigantic commission. Later, after he and Lescaze found their partnership to be intolerable, Howe sought others to fill that role. But in 1929,

the person he sought was William Lescaze. What that indicates is that Lescaze, who, as Lindsay Shapiro pointed out, was basically self-taught over the course of a decade, had developed a sensitivity to something that was recognizable. Neither Lescaze nor anyone else ever really tried to explain what that something was until the 1960s, but Lescaze had somehow put "something" together.

DENNIS DOORDAN: One comment I would like to make concerns Lescaze's decision to come to America. Lescaze told an anecdote about a discussion he once had with Karl Moser while still a student at the ETH. According to Lescaze, Moser said to him, "Where are you ever going to find the chance of doing monumental work? Egypt? It's too late; maybe in America." That is the European version of "Go west, young man." And that's what Lescaze did. He did not come to this country to sit at the feet of Frank Lloyd Wright or join a particular architectural cult; he came to build. He did not go to Taliesin or to California; he went to the center of corporate America, New York City.

STUART COHEN: I come to this panel in something of an awkward position, as I am not particularly knowledgeable about the career of William Lescaze. I am, therefore, an impartial judge, willing to accept Lescaze at face value, based upon the buildings themselves. I am convinced that Lescaze could not have done the PSFS building by himself. It must have been a collaboration. He may have been the person who pulled it all together, who lent the design process a unifying vision. But none of the architecture that preceded it nor the architecture that followed it has any of the sense of detail and finesee that is exhibited so extravagantly in the PSFS building.

How can you look at Lescaze's houses, for example, on any level of detail? In many of them you get a favorite detail of Lescaze's, where he will take one of the planes and pull it out away from the building, in a De Stijl or Neo-Plastic manner. He stands the plane on a column, but then he wraps a strip window around the corner. The notion of dissolving the house into a series of articulated planes and the volumetric idea of rounding a corner are simply put together as if Lescaze pulled them out of a bag of tricks. The control of those aspects of making architecture is, for me, what constitutes detail. There doesn't seem to be much evidence of that kind of control, either visually or intellectually, in any of the work except the PSFS building.

ROBERT DEAN: I think the key to understanding Lescaze is *not* in seeing clumsy detail because there are also extremely elegant details. The level of detail depended on the budget and on the client; the details were negotiable. I would like to respond to what Stuart Cohen and Robert Stern said earlier by referring to Eero Saarinen. I think Saarinen and Lescaze can be compared in a productive way. Saarinen is the person who finally put together the concept of American commercial architecture. Lescaze was struggling desperately throughout his career to figure out that concept. At the high point of his career, he understood what the product was supposed to be, but he never understood what the organization or the productive structure for that product was supposed to be. Saarinen finally figured that out and he took over from people like Lescaze. The atelier gave way to the corporate firm. So I see Lescaze as the product prefigured, not finished.

ROBERT STERN: I think that is very interesting, but I disagree with you. Saarinen wasn't the first to do it. Raymond Hood and those characters had done it brilliantly for their generation and Daniel Burnham and Charles McKim had done it for their generation.

ROBERT DEAN: But they weren't burdened with the task of presenting Modern Architecture at the same time.

ROBERT STERN: Saarinen is a fascinating character. While he did not quite have a bathrobe atelier, it was almost that. It was a very small office. Saarinen farmed out the working drawings, in the tradition of Hood, Walker, and Kahn. On a corporate level, however, Saarinen was able to convey the idea that he was the master of an armada of technicians.

STUART COHEN: We have been looking at the relationship of Modern Architecture to commercial architecture and I think there are a few things we have failed to acknowledge. One thing is the fact that commercial buildings rarely have wonderful plans. More importantly, the relationship between Modern Architecture and business and commercial concerns changed after the Second World War. In Europe, before the war, Modern Architecture was a style associated with social revolution. In America, it was a novelty associated with commerce at the most immediate levels—shops, for example—and as a novelty, Modern

Architecture had a commercial and advertising value.

After the war, we are looking at a far different situation. Modern Architecture is sold as a style representative of power, stability, and corporate identity. There is really a transformation of Modern Architecture here with the arrival of Mies, Gropius, and the rest of the Europeans.

DENNIS DOORDAN: In connection with that phenomenon I want to point out that in the 1950s there was an increasing number of homegrown American modernists. It was not just the arrival of the European figures that was decisive. Large American architectural firms—such as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill or Pereira and Luckman—combined an ability to produce the "look" with a smart, savvy commercial approach to practice.

I see we are running out of time. I would like to thank all of the participants.