

Excerpts from a Conversation

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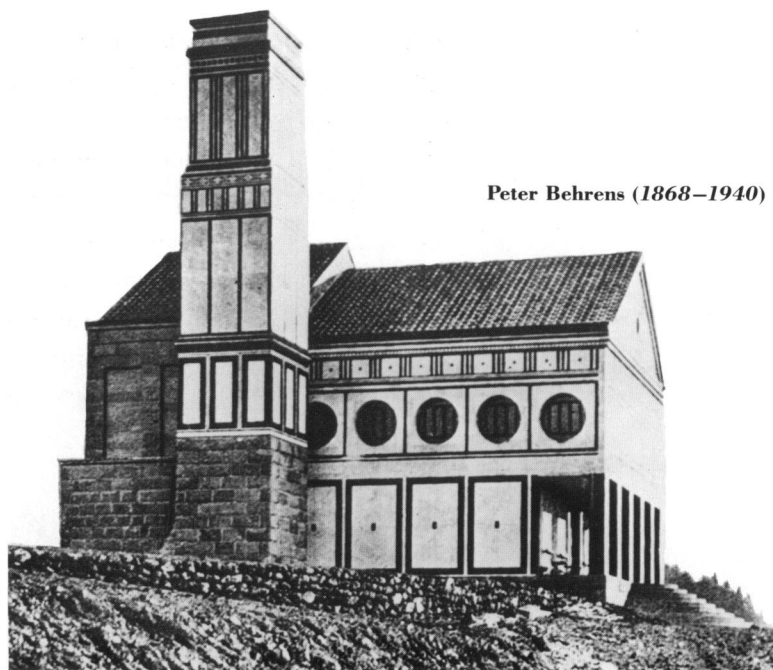
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Excerpts from a Conversation

CESAR PELLI

A GOOD ARCHITECT MUST HAVE more than a good eye. A deep understanding of other issues that affect architecture is also required. Just having a good eye is not enough.

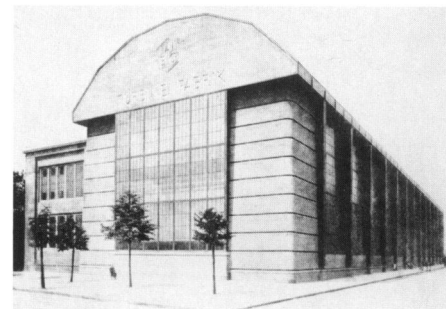
Architecture is a field that encompasses innumerable issues. Probably, no architect has ever dealt with all these issues at one time, at least not individually. When cultures were able to concentrate their architectural efforts on one building type, such as the Greek temple, each building was a distillation of the accumulated effort of generations of good architects. These buildings were so well refined and understood that they could encompass all issues, or at least all issues relevant to that building type. In the Western world

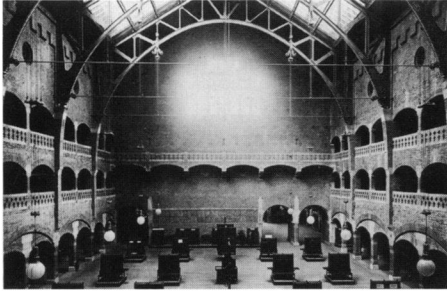


Peter Behrens (1868–1940)

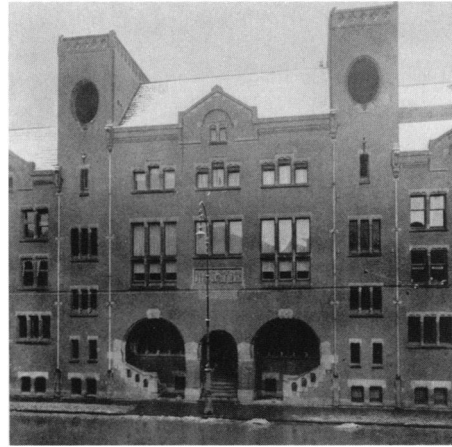
since the Renaissance, however, the architect has worked as an individual. Works of architecture are conceived as individual works of art. Today, nobody can address all the issues present in architecture, but the greater the number of issues, the healthier the architecture.

One important issue is the relationship between the formal system and the reality of construction. It is important to focus on this issue because, in the present wave of architectural nostalgia, it is being ignored. This issue is so basic to our art that failure to understand it can only result in a devitalized architecture.

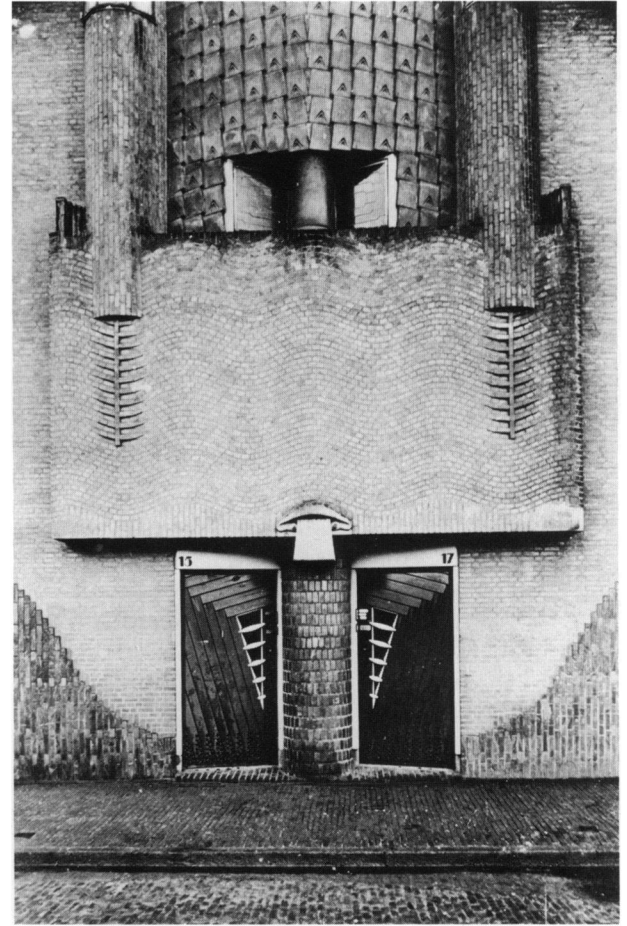
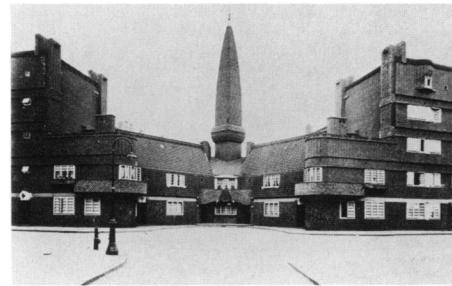




Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934)

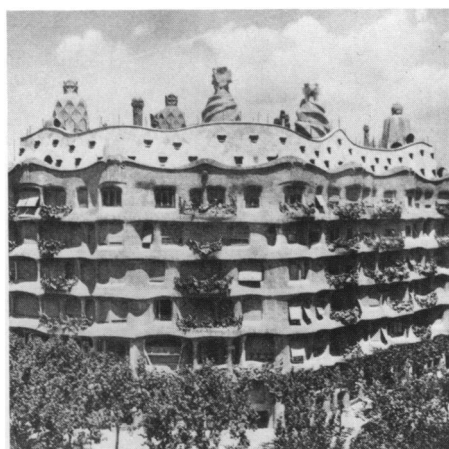
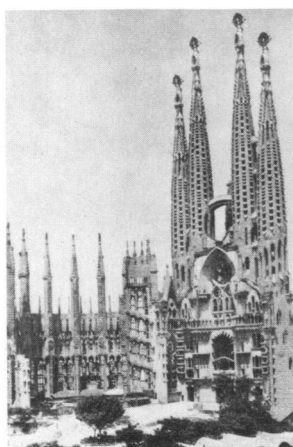


Michel de Klerk (1884–1923)



If we look at the work of H. H. Richardson we see that the forms he used were directly related to the materials and construction systems he employed. By direct, I mean a close relationship. Architecture is not mathematics, and the relationship is never one to one. There are always exaggerations; there is always some elasticity. The Marshall Field's Warehouse building is a complex and good example; it is a steel structure with stone facing. Richardson practiced in a period of transition, when bearing masonry was being replaced by skeleton structures of cast iron, steel, and concrete, but when carved stone was still readily available.

These two realities are expressed in his design, and they make the architecture. The wall is thin and tight. Though traditional bearing stone construction employs heavy stone piers with spaces left open for windows, the stone and glass in this building work together as a single space enclosure. At the same time, Richardson took full advantage of the possibilities and tradition of carved stone, and the stoniness of the building is unquestionable. When he designed the Stoughton House in wood-frame and shingles, however, he did not use the same vocabulary at all. His shingle houses are consistent with shingle construction. He expressed the lightweight, ephemeral quality of the structure. When he made an opening, the form was clearly cut from a lightweight material. His openings in stone, however, were carefully placed, and his arches speak of both craftsmanship and weight; they are eminently stone. In his work



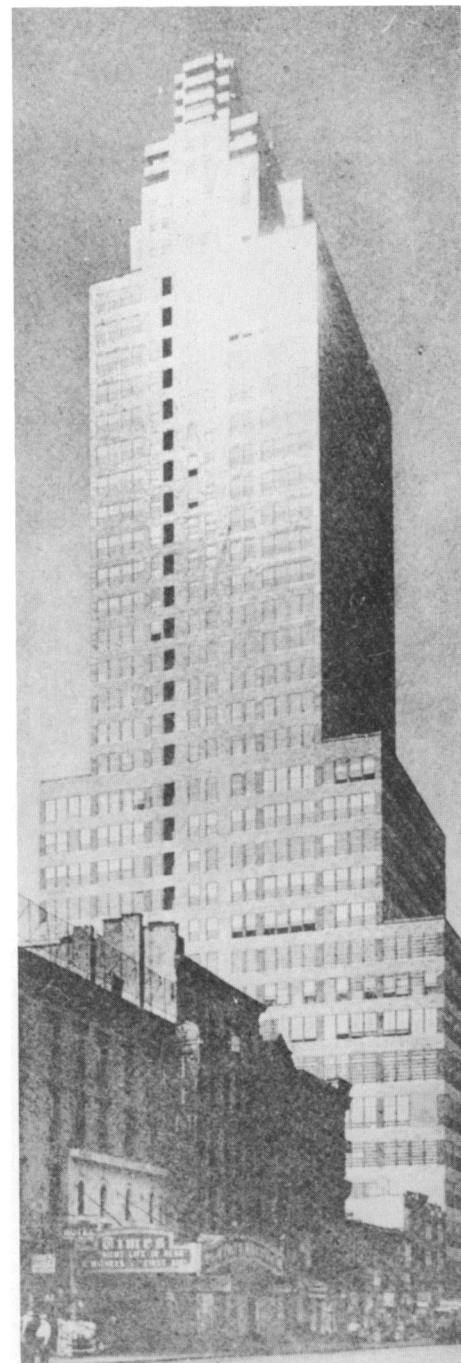
Antonio i Cornet Gaudi (1852–1926)

there is a very close relationship between form and substance. There is great reassurance and comfort in those Richardson forms.

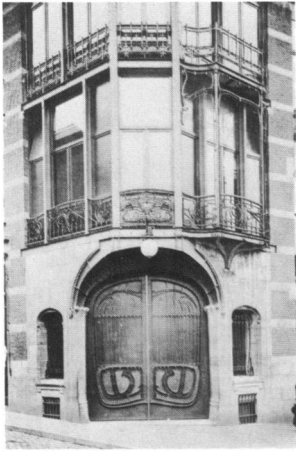
Another important issue is the relationship between form and use, and by use I do not mean just program or function, but the purpose of a building in all aspects. Richardson's Glessner House, for example, is a beautiful building that speaks clearly of how it was made and what it was made for. The Glessner House is also a very fresh design. A work of architecture can be fresh within the context of the art and thus can charge other artists or open new vistas and possibilities. Another issue is the extent to which the design remains fresh. There is sometimes a certain quality in freshness that will persist. If you do something that is stale to start with, although correct and beautiful—to me, the Boston Public Library by McKim, Mead and White is a very good example—it will remain stale as well. It was

very correct, quite handsome, never fresh, and certainly not fresh today.

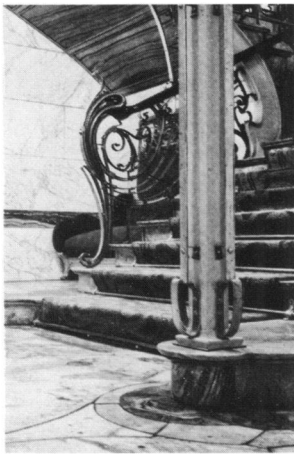
Freshness is not the same as originality. An original idea may produce a stale design and a variation on a very old idea may produce a very fresh design. Freshness, by nature, is an ephemeral quality. We are mortals, and we have a deep appreciation for things that are as mortal as ourselves. Indeed, we enjoy sunsets and flowers and youth, knowing that they are not going to remain as they are for very long. This ephemeral quality is precious. Architecture is able to capture a fresh idea or ephemeral image and give it a long-lasting form or shell. The same thing is true, of course, of sculpture and painting. And we marvel at that quality of life that was supposed to have perished, but hasn't.



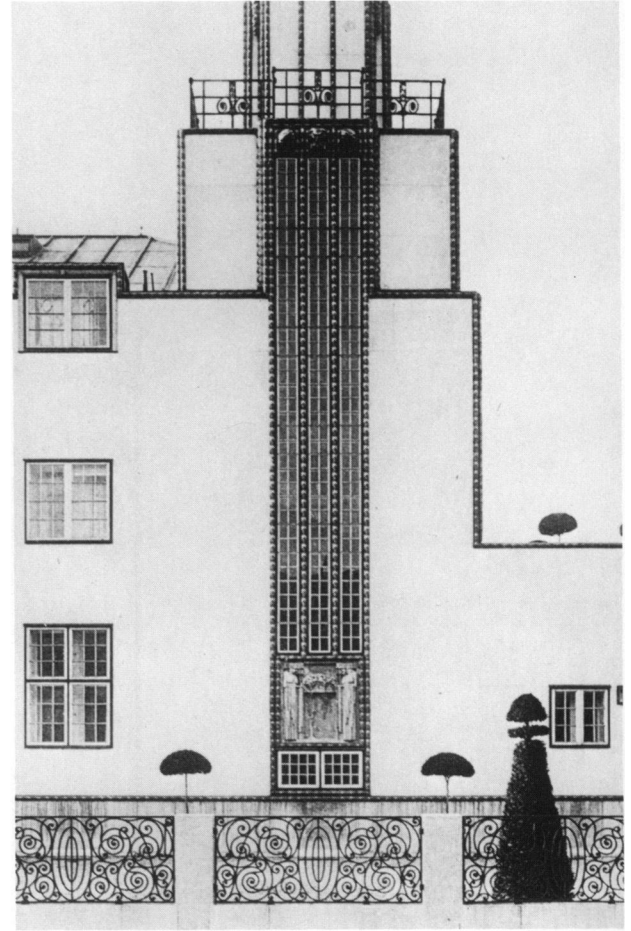
Raymond Mathewson Hood (1881–1934)



Victor Horta (1861–1947)



Josef Hoffman (1870–1956)



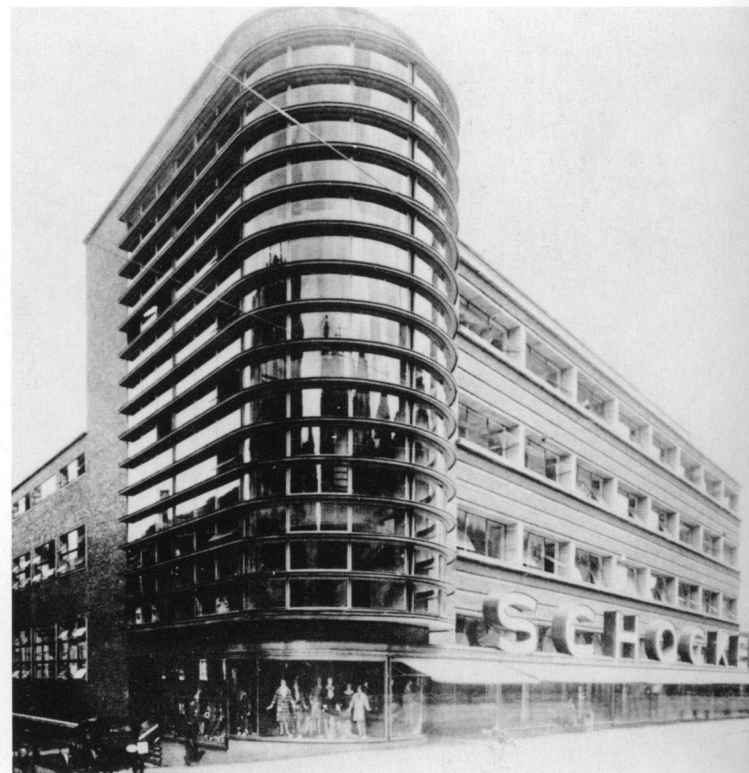
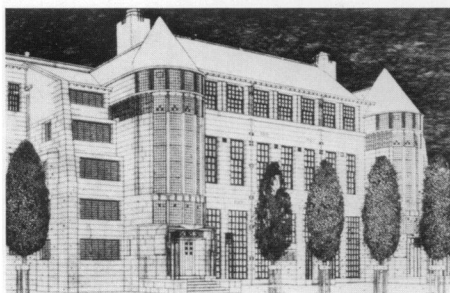
There are other aesthetic qualities in architecture that we could analyze; for example, the intellectual content of buildings. This is very interesting. We can respond strongly and be attached to buildings because they are beautiful in a sensual way or because they are beautiful in an intellectual way. These are very different qualities. The order expressed in a building may resonate with our ideas about order and so provoke an intense aesthetic pleasure that is not necessarily sensual or perceptual, but intellectual. This is clearly true of the later work of Mies van der Rohe. Mies's early work—the Barcelona Pavilion, for example, and his designs for an office building in the Friedrichstrasse—although intellectually sound, were primarily sensual expressions of space, materials, and light. On the other hand, buildings like the Lake Shore Towers became cages of black steel. The

pleasure that you derive from seeing these towers is primarily an intellectual pleasure. This is Order become Architecture. Mies's architecture, even at its most sensual, is intellectually clear. We feel certain that, by studying the drawings and photographs of his designs, we can understand buildings that no longer exist or that never existed. I could never feel that I understood a Frank Lloyd Wright building by its drawings or photographs. In the Barcelona Pavilion, you felt like walking back and forth or sitting quietly to see the sun change the depth of the shadows or the reflections on the water. With the buildings for the Friedrichstrasse, you would just love to see the transparencies and reflections, the play of light and shadows, the clouds moving by. Those are very direct sensual pleasures. When designing a building, you are forced to choose the qualities that will be prime in your architecture. These choices separate one architect from another, one epoch from another, and one style from another.



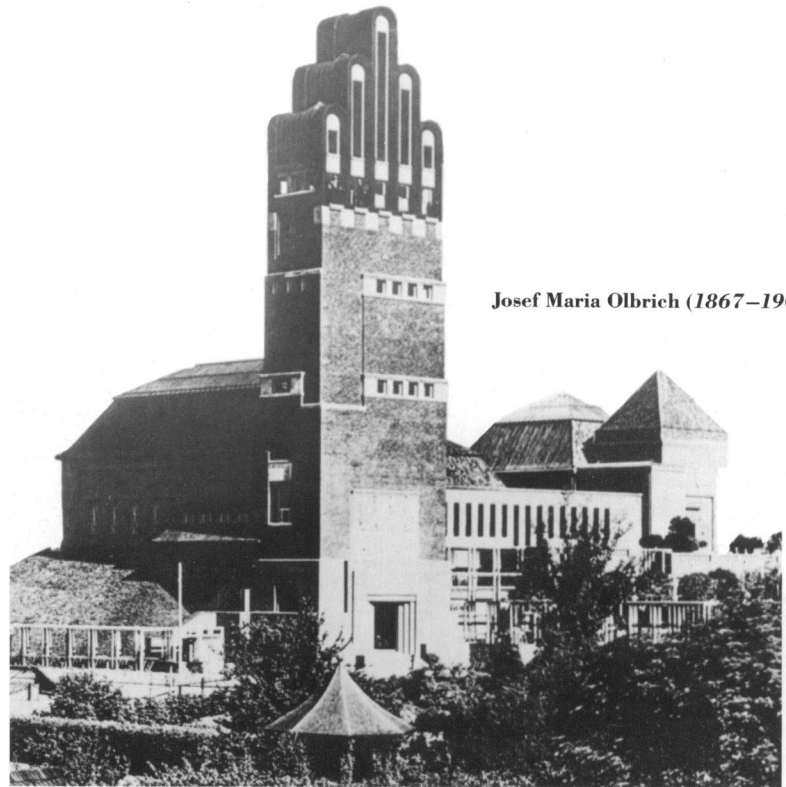
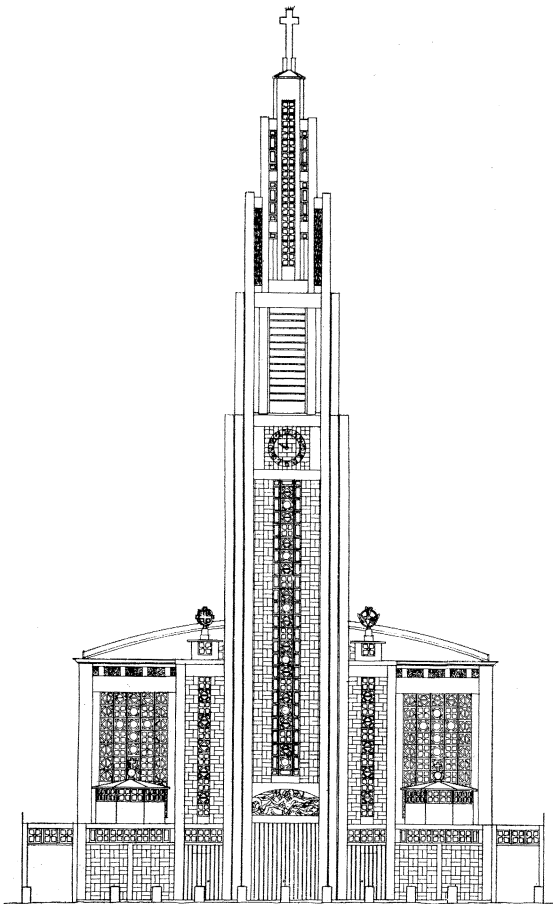
Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953)

Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928)

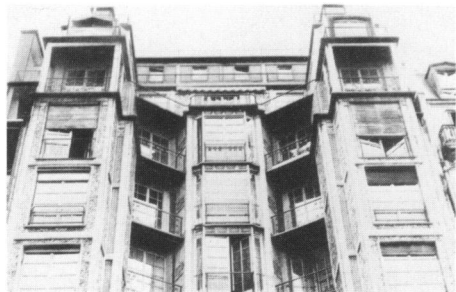


Style is an overused word. Good healthy styles have high intellectual content and rigor. There is a considerable amount of order built into them. There is consistency in the aesthetic, intellectual, and pragmatic realities of the architecture. That is, for me, the only time when the word *style* can be properly used. In some ways, therefore, only the Greeks ever practiced something that can be called “classical style.” Nobody else did. They were the only ones for whom that style was genuine, the only ones for whom the classical order had meaning. Anybody who used those forms later was working not in that style but in the manner of that style. The word *style* means something when you apply it historically to a period, and it means something else when you apply it to a person’s work or to contemporary or recent attitudes as if it were a code or fashion.

Modern architecture began with a number of clear-headed people in the early nineteenth century who had a tremendous desire to regain those roots of architecture that respond to the reality of what you build and what you build for. By the end of the nineteenth century, the historical models had become disconnected from the reality of building—not only from the construction systems, but also from the purposes of the buildings required by society.



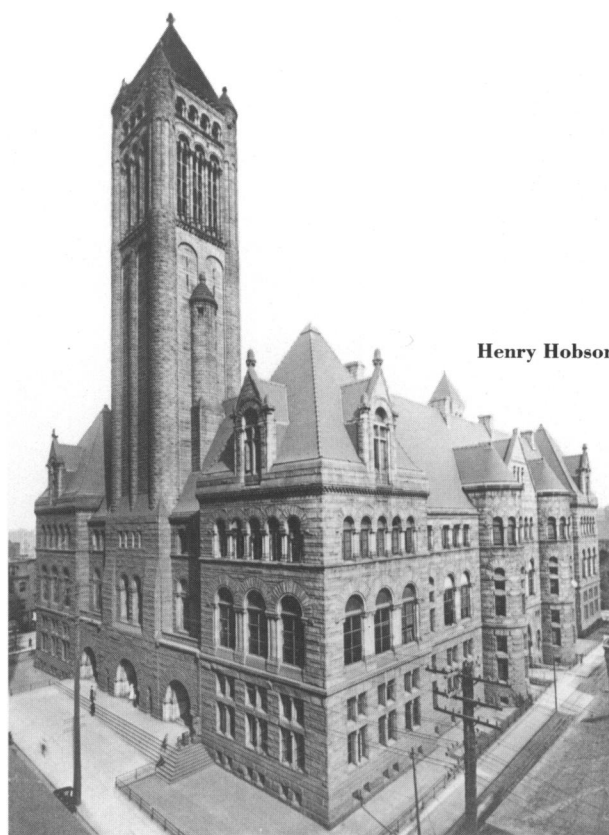
Josef Maria Olbrich (1867–1908)



Auguste Perret (1874–1954)

Architecture can learn from its own past. Indeed, it must. The question is, and to me this is a very important one, whether we should learn in a more immediate way or a more literary way. We cannot avoid literary knowledge today. By literary knowledge, I mean the knowledge of architecture that comes from writings or drawings or photographs. This is different from our more immediate knowledge of those buildings that we use and see and with which we are familiar enough to know how and why they were built. Literary knowledge has a useful part to play, but I believe that the most critical learning about architecture comes from the recent past or from the buildings that we experience immediately. We must be in contact with reality because architecture is an art of reality. It cannot survive for long in an ivory tower.

This is a moment in which it is most difficult to see the permanence of ideas and thoughts. It is as if we were born in a choppy sea that has remained continuously unstable. What we want to find out is where the line of calm water lies. We know that there is a point where the water settles, but we have never seen it ourselves. We have been going through one set of ideas after another. There was a period in the Modern Movement when it was possible to believe that the new yardstick had been found, when indeed you could start talking about permanent, immutable issues; but right now, in 1981, we know that this yardstick has turned into rubber. Although new rules are being proposed, I don't see an intellectual construct to replace the Modern Movement. If there were such a construct, then the need for change could manifest itself in a movement toward a discipline. It could become unavoidable or unstoppable.



Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–1886)



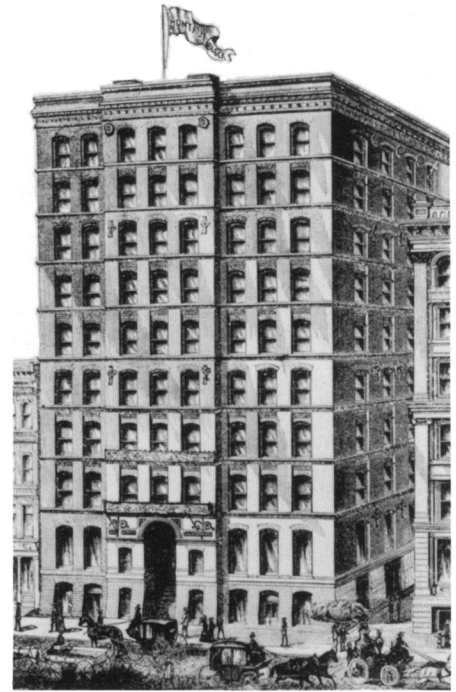
Let me share a personal and tentative observation. I believe that, in general, the process of learning to do architecture and the actual development of architecture were much simpler until Brunelleschi. Architecture developed very slowly; it could have been called the glacial art because changes in architecture occurred at the speed of glaciers—very slowly. Architecture was always based on what immediately preceded it. Occasionally, there would be an individual who would jolt it a little, but, by and large, architects worked within a given aesthetic system and responded to what directly preceded them. Architecture was perceived to be quite stable.

I mention Brunelleschi because, with him, this ceases to be true. He made a new architecture by reusing the forms of the architecture of the Roman Empire. The interiors of those old Roman buildings had long been forgotten, and the meaning of their forms was as lost as the Roman society that had built them. Since

then, architects haven't learned from what immediately preceded them, but have been allowed, even encouraged, to leap and learn from periods of architecture considerably removed from their direct experience. Once you take one thing out of order, why not take something else? Why not Egyptian architecture? Or science fiction? And once you start interpreting it, why do you have to interpret it straight? Why can't you interpret it crooked? You can also interpret anything else and use it however you please. I see this process as a see-saw out of control, with its movement becoming faster and more exaggerated. Because architecture has become so dependent on the intellectual and literary basis of change, it has lost touch with the pragmatic reality of building. This reality has always allowed architecture to maintain its continuity and to renew itself.



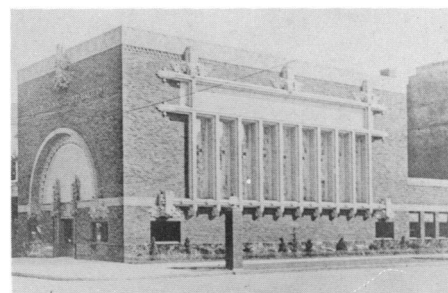
John Wellborn Root (1850–1891)



Each time allows us to do certain things well. There are certain things we can do that are charged with the vigor of the times. In times like ours, which are very permissive times, we can also do a number of things that may go against the grain. The only problem is that, if you do those things, you do them at the cost of the vigor of the times, which could otherwise be injected into your work. You are also losing continuity with the rest of the architectural world, and so your work becomes disconnected. If it's too disconnected, it can become meaningless and only valuable as a curiosity.

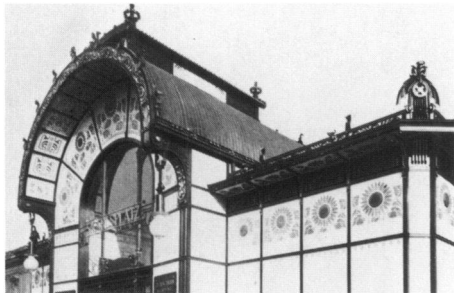
The process of modern architectural analysis, in my mind, was healthier before the International Style, before Le Corbusier or Gropius, because it was more modest. I'm talking about the work of people like Sullivan, Root, Frank Lloyd Wright, the work of Mackintosh, Hoffman, Berlage, Perret, de Klerk, or the work of a number of other architects. That's a good collection of people. They were all practicing before or outside the International Style, but they were searching independently and sometimes in isolation from one another for a way of designing buildings that dealt with the reality of their own times. This is a very modest goal that, given a couple of hundred years or so, would produce an architecture with its own iconography and history and in every way consistent with the realities of its time. Some hundred years of extraordinary accomplishment and a treasure of

Louis Henri Sullivan (1856–1924)

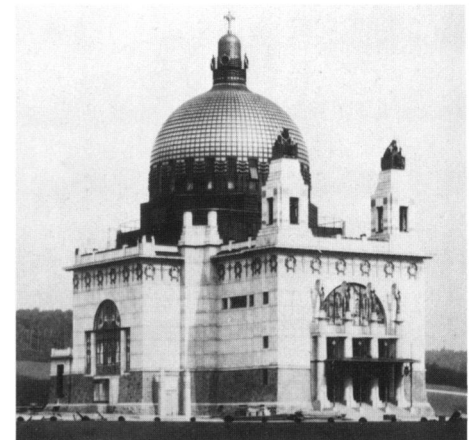
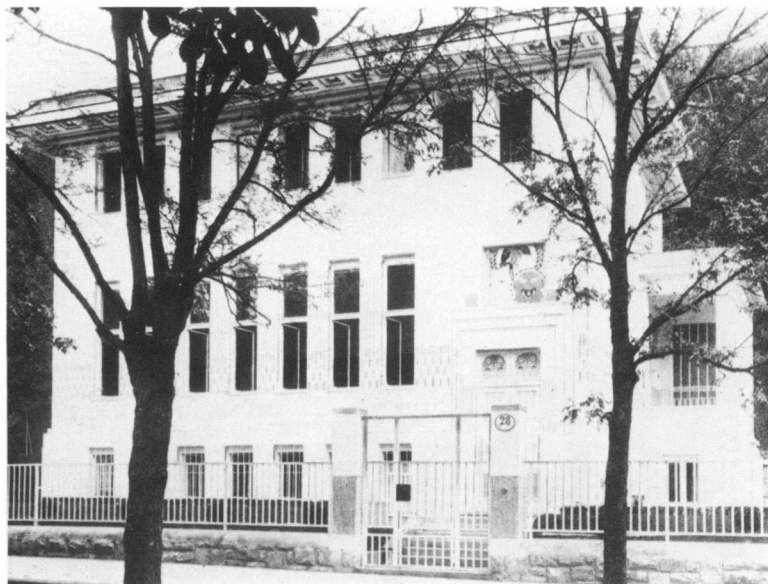


experience have already passed. That's our heritage. There are the roots for healthy architectural development. That may be an optimistic vision, but I believe it is still possible. I say still because we are again at a point when we are confronted by the same choices.

We are, indeed, at a very fortunate period in the history of architecture. We are, at this moment, free of the dogma of the International Style, but the memory of its accomplishments and the knowledge acquired by its experience is still fresh. This condition is very temporary. We have to be careful because the most vocal architects are arguing for a substitution of one set of dogmas for another. We should be arguing, instead, for clear-minded searching and careful experimentation. We should be busy analyzing the successes and failures of the Modern Movement in general and the International Style in particular to see what we should keep and what we should abandon.



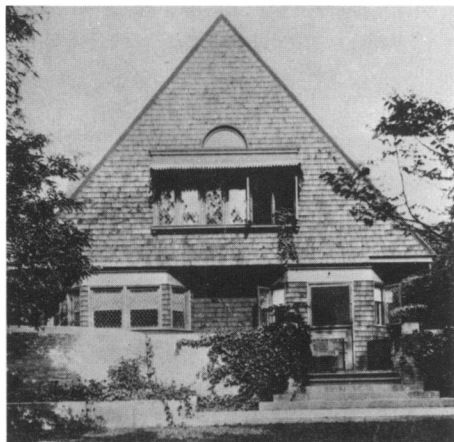
Otto Wagner (1841–1918)



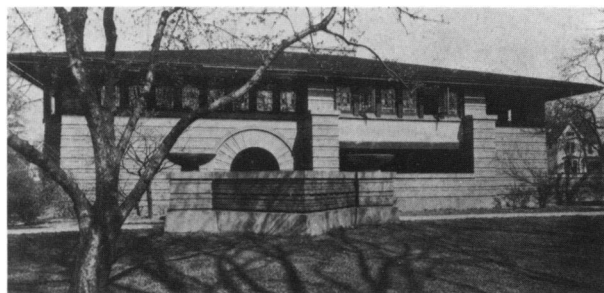
The attitude of search is an essential attitude for an architect. I believe Nehru said that the best advice his father ever gave him was to follow those who search for the truth, but to avoid completely whoever claims to have found it. In the search for truth, you may find yourself. In searching you establish certain points of reference that are, if not immutable, then at least less changing, more dependable, than those choppy waves around you. As you move through those points of quest, you make a path, and if you have been good, it may be straight. If it isn't, you may remember what changes in direction you made and so determine how much you have deviated from your initial path, and you can then compensate for it. Develop an attitude of continued search, and distrust those who claim to have answers. I believe there are times when societies are healthy or stable. When philosophical

ideas are widely shared and there is social consensus, it is possible to express in your art the most intimate hopes and fears of any society. Stability in art is impossible if society itself does not feel stable.

I am, indeed, a child of my times. I do not believe in the ideal world, Plato's ideal world. On the other hand, I do believe in a real world outside my perception. Beauty for me exists not in the abstract but in the perceived object. What I'm more doubtful of is the existence of beauty in an object without perceiving it. That the object exists with certain characteristics that no one perceives, there is no question. That beauty exists without being perceived, however, I question. Beauty is a quality that depends on our being what



Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959)



we are. The perception of beauty is triggered in us by certain qualities in the object. We sense it and project it back onto the object. If we were different sensory mechanisms than human beings, we would not perceive beauty in the places we do or of the kinds that we do.

In a way, all architecture depends on collective contribution. No architect invents architecture. Learning from the immediate precedent is critical, because that is our tie with our past and with our near contemporaries. In this manner we become part of a historical continuum. When we design a building to be as fresh and as new as possible, all we have really done is reinterpret ideas, thoughts, formal devices, and solutions that others, including, perhaps, ourselves, have used before. We give them a new twist or add a few new things, but most of that design

comes from the past. Nobody can invent all that we need to solve the simplest design problem in one lifetime. It is totally impossible. We depend completely on the past, but how you use the past is critical. If you use it like a treasure chest, from which you pick the pieces that you like and implant them in your design, then the past comes to you without life. If you see it as a continuum, and you recognize that you are part of a living sequence of architects, and that many of them are coexisting with you, then you are supported by a vast net and your role is clear. Your task is to make a good and fresh variation, because variations are what architects do.