THE SPIRIT OF MODERN ART

BY

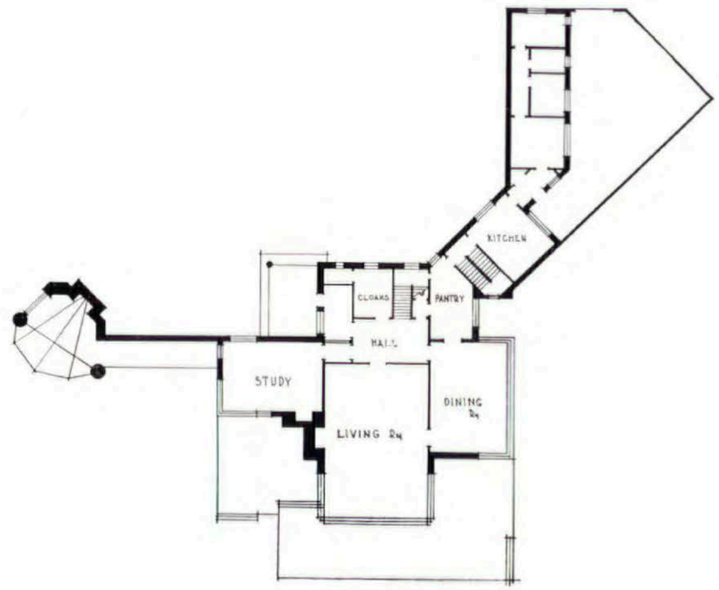
RAYMOND M. HOOD

THERE is no need to tell anyone that art has "gone modern," but very few people know what "going modern" really means. The common conception is that it means a radical change in the looks of things, that the time has arrived when precedent and the accepted standards of beauty are all to be thrown overboard, and that with a new philosophy as a base, new standards and wholly new conceptions of beauty are to be manufactured. Nothing could be further from the truth. The modern movement does not concern itself with looks at all. It does not care whether we abandon or follow precedent, nor is it interested as to whether the new rules of art are derived from the machine, nor even whether there are to be any rules at all. This misconception is the result of the shallow propaganda of the art critics and the dilettante magazines, as well as because of the stupid exploitation by those who traffic in art. For there is in the new movement such a value, both as news and otherwise, that nobody in the business of exploiting art has made any attempt to dig beneath the surface to find out what modern art really is. They have merely dished out what they found on top, made a grand living out of it, and let it go at that.

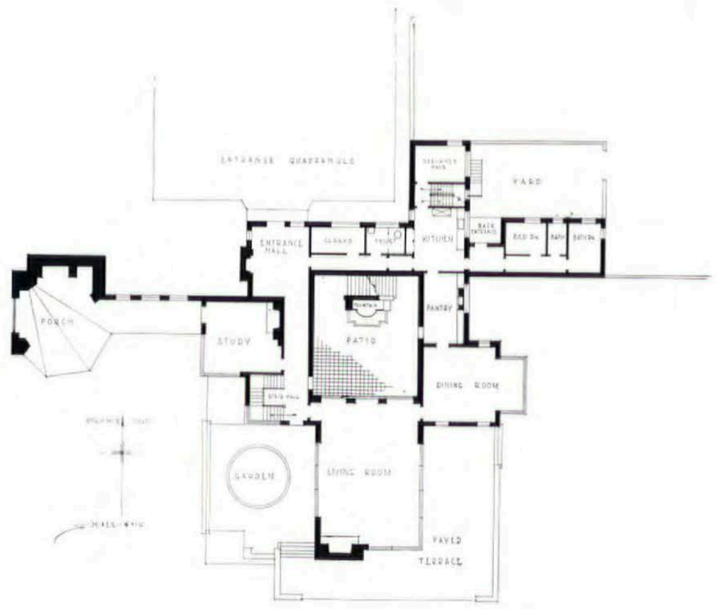
There is a general idea that after a certain length of time a style of art must be changed, merely because it has become monotonous, and because people tire of one aspect of things. Minor changes and fashions of the moment may be explained that way, but the reason for great changes, such as the development of Greek or Gothic art, lies much deeper than that. And the movement that is going on today transcends in importance even movements of those epochs, great as they were. I doubt if a new era of art has ever developed where a desire for a change of appearance, or a change for the sake of a change, had less to do with it than is the case today. If anything, it is safe to say that people had never been more content with the looks of things than they were just prior to the time when the modern movement began to take form. Certainly the antique business bore witness to this fact. Patronizing art was a comfortable and easy pastime. The rules were well formulated, and with the authority of centuries behind them, they were generally accepted. Standards were so well established that beauty could be determined almost by rule of thumb, and a certified work of art had a value as sound as a government bond. There was nothing disconcerting in the business for either the artist, the merchant or the buyer. Everybody was happy as far as looks and beauty were concerned, yet it was at this very time when art and beauty were so comfortably organized, so apparently secure in their hold on the imagination of people, that the modern movement began to force itself upon us.

The truth is that, way down deep, art was really in a bad way. For centuries the romantic sentimentalist and the artistic genius, with his capacity for giving infinite pain, had been in the saddle. They held a tight rein, and their authority was bolstered up by everything that was called culture and tradition. Art had become a smug, fashionable game in which the world was the victim, for while the world paid the bill, the artist took nothing seriously save himself. He might be commissioned to create something to achieve a certain purpose, or to express a particular idea, but from his point of view the only purpose to be achieved was the perpetuation of his own brand of beauty, and the only thing to be expressed was his own soul. Creative work might be stimulated and paid for by others, but for him it was only an opportunity to express himself and his cult and to achieve immortality. Humbly doing the business that was set before him to do was not in his code of ethics. A timid remonstrance that a table was not suited to its purpose or that it was rickety, elicited a scornful reply that if this slight sacrifice could not be made to beauty, it would be better not to have a table at all. A person brave enough to insist on an article's being useful got in return a contemptuous toss of the head and was promptly put back in his place along with the other low-brows. The public was bullied, browbeaten and buried beneath an avalanche of historical reminders about the Greeks, the Medici, and men of the other golden ages when people lived, suffered and died for beauty.

A mechanic would make a comfortable chair, and a designer would calmly ruin it in the interest of art. A railroad company would try to build a station, and its architect would blandly set aside one after another of the practical elements that had been worked out, because they prevented his developing in the building his theory of composition and beauty. The chair designer would not permit the chair manufacturer to make a good chair, neither would the architect permit the railroad company to build a good station. The mentality of the designer, at times, was so far twisted that the chair must be built to satisfy Mr. Hepplewhite, and the station Tiberius Cæsar, in spite of the fact that both have been dead for a long while, and neither of them would either pay for or use

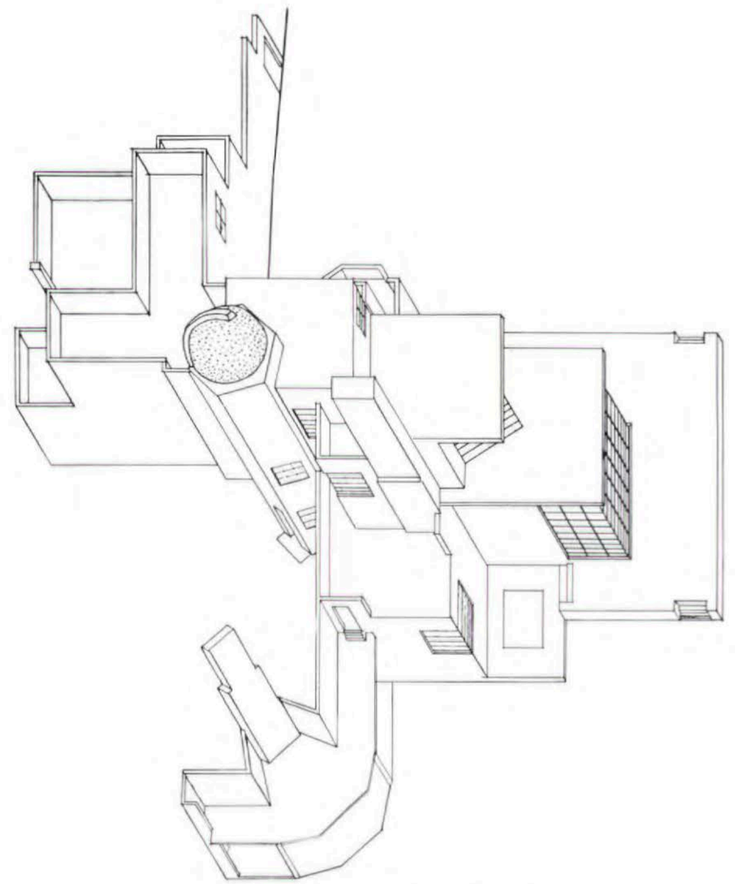


SCHEME W

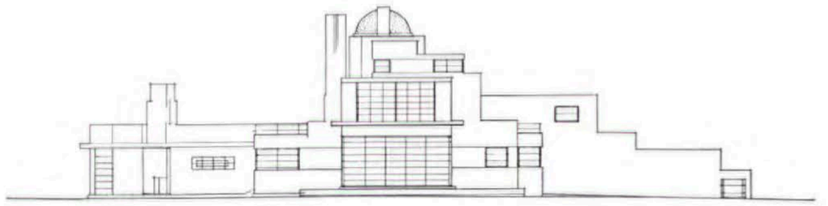


SCHEME X

TWO PLANS FOR A MODERN HOUSE
JOHN M. HOWELLS AND RAYMOND M. HOOD, ARCHITECTS



BIRD'S-EYE PERSPECTIVE, SCHEME W



SOUTH ELEVATION OF SCHEME W

DESIGN FOR A MODERN HOUSE
JOHN M. HOWELLS AND RAYMOND M. HOOD, ARCHITECTS

the object that had been designed to suit him.

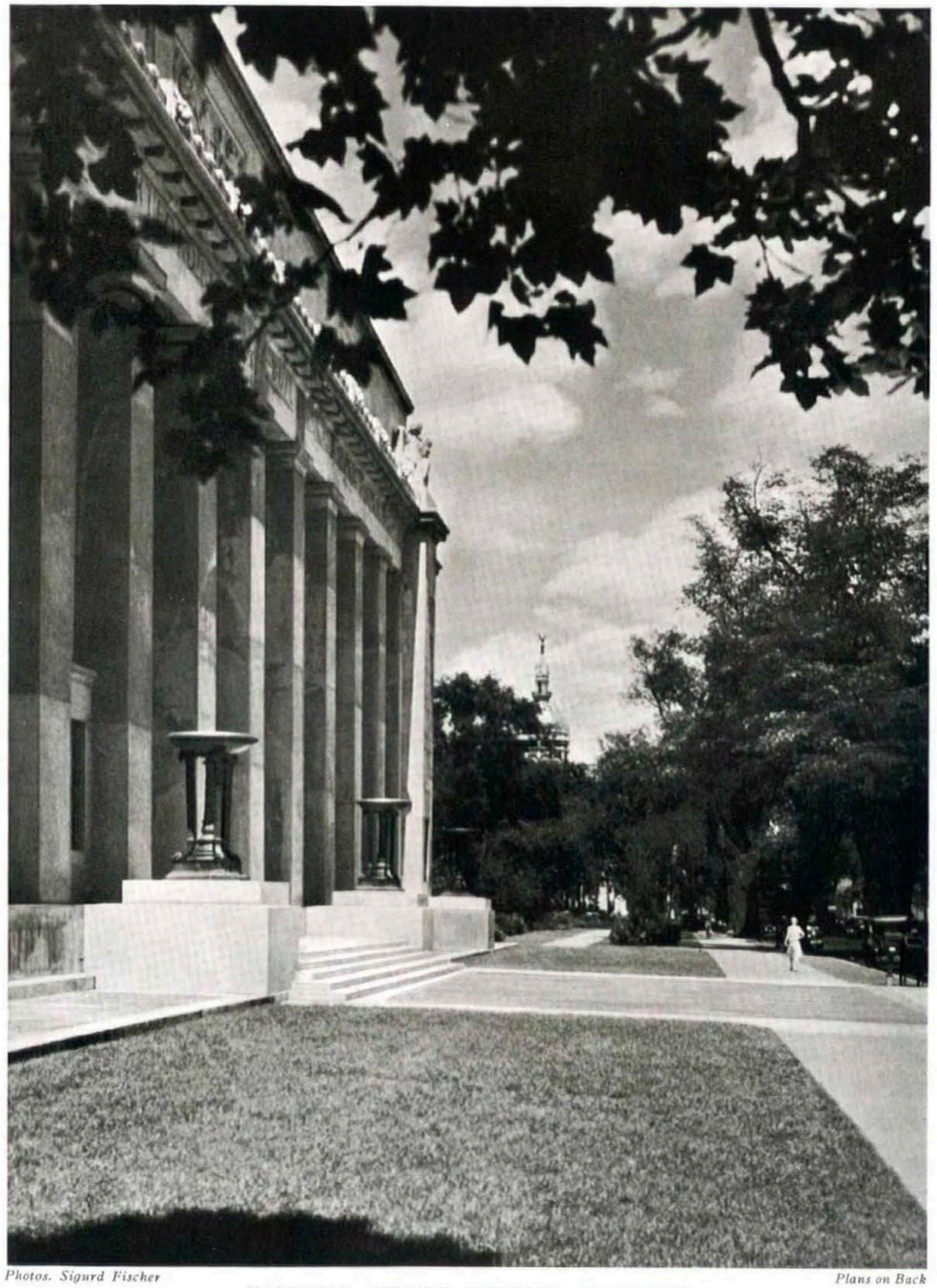
To take an example from my own profession, the architect might tell you that the symmetry, the balance of a composition, or the character of the exterior would prevent your having a room of the size and character you required. He might even prevent your putting windows and doors in the places they should go for the comfort of living, for similar æsthetic reasons. In fact, art had become a hard master, and yet in spite of its pretentiousness, it was really shallow. It concerned itself only with externals,—how it impressed people,—and it paid little heed to what went on underneath. It was like a man who insists on being perfectly dressed and on having perfect manners, but who pays no attention to his character.

It is against this despotic sway that modern art has risen in revolt, and it is not because the old rules of composition, color harmony, unity and so on must go by the board. The artist or critic who tells you that tempo, rhythm, dynamic symmetry, color discordance, motion, pattern, or the inspiration of the machine are the basic qualities of the new art, is passing out the same old hypocrisies that the new art is trying to overcome. These qualities may occur in modern art, but they are incidental and not essential to it. Modern art involves a sincere attempt to be honest. If a man asks for a fork, he isn't offered a spoon. If he wants a work bench, he isn't given an Italian altar piece. If the glare of a light hurts his eyes, he is not told that his eyes are wrong; the fixture is re-designed. A door is a door, something to walk through, something to open and shut, not a recall of a dominant motif in a facade, nor the expression of some æsthetic emotion. And the same spirit, the same effort, is the basis of all modern design, from that of the pen holder up to that of the great skyscraper. We try to be honest and give a man, his ideas and his money an even break.

To put the case briefly, the modernist is trying to "debunk" art. He reverses the common philosophy of the past centuries, when the manner of doing a thing, its form and appearance had become more important than the thing itself, when the iron-clad rules of art and beauty came first and utility trailed along as best it could. Today utility leads the way, and although the result may not always send emotional shivers of beauty up the spine, it offers a good substitute in that it satisfies the intellect. The practical elements of a problem are solved before our old friends, — art and beauty,—are given a crack at it. So, if chromium is used in modern work, it is not because it is the fashionable metal of the new period, but because it is more practical, cleaner and requires less care than other metals in the same place. When plain surfaces and color decorations take the place of elaborately modeled forms and ornament, it is not because simplicity and color constitute the keynote of modern art, but because to produce the elaboration and ornament of the older styles required an effort and cost far out of all proportion to the importance of decoration, and because the article is more serviceable when done in a simpler fashion. That appearance of things has changed is inevitable, for in his search for truth and honesty, the designer of today must avail himself of every new material and process that is superior to the old. And in so doing, the inherent qualities in the new materials and processes that he uses force a new external expression.

I need hardly point out that the new movement has freed the spirit not only of the designer, but of the world at large. Art is no longer cloistered religion, shrouded in mystery in order to better keep up its authority. We do not have to stand in awe of it lest we be outcasts from the world of culture. We need not fear when we ask for bread that the artist will give us a stone. We ask for what we need and we get it,—and, strange to say, the artist now tells us that this is the only true path that leads to beauty—and that real beauty is only achieved when utility is the goal. For ages we have been searching frantically all over the world for the path to beauty, and now we have come to find that the path lay at our feet all the time, and that common sense and logic will keep us in it if we will only accept and use it.

I am far from saying that all the artists who have "gone modern" have turned away from the hypocrisy and cant of the periods gone by, and that those who haven't are still sunk in sin. Many who have adopted the external trappings, the color, decorations and details of modernism are far less modern than others whose work may still bear an external resemblance to that of older periods, but whose conception is fundamentally modern. In fact the same fellows who were hypocritical and dishonest in their art yesterday, are hypocritical and dishonest in their art today, no matter how they may be classified in the public mind. The sincere artists through all ages have worked as honestly as the sincere modernist is working today. The only difference is that now he can come out into the light, without fear, for at last he has the weight of opinion and culture at his back. The man in the saddle today is the artist who wants to help and not to clutter up the path of progress. The man who says "It can't be done, because it wouldn't be beautiful," is supplanted by the man who says "Of course it can be done." It is the beginning of a great era for the world, as well as for the worker in all fields of art.



Photos. Sigurd Fischer *Plans on Back*

HARTFORD COUNTY BUILDING, HARTFORD

PAUL P. CRET AND SMITH & BASSETTE, ASSOCIATED, ARCHITECTS