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'What belongs to architecture?'

Avant-garde ideas in the modern movement

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The Modern Movement is often given the role of the avant-garde in architecture. Recent theoretical developments, however, argue for a differentiation in meaning between 'avant-garde' and 'modernism'. It is claimed that the avant-garde was a radical and disruptive phenomenon, which aimed at a total unification between art and life and which resisted the divide between high art and mass culture. The avant-garde is thus theoretically distinguished from modernism, which is seen as a calmer and less revolutionary movement of aesthetic renovation. This article points out how this differentiation in meaning can elucidate some important divergences in the discourse of the Modern Movement. It focuses on some early writings of Sigfried Giedion and on Walter Benjamin's interpretation thereof, in order to highlight their fundamental questioning of architecture's role vis-à-vis society. This questioning means that, in the considered texts, both authors are closer to an avant-gardist sensibility than to a modernist one.

Introduction

Taken literally, the avant-garde refers to the front part of a marching army, the scouts that first head into unknown territory. As a metaphor the word has been used from the 19th century onwards to refer to progressive political and artistic movements which considered themselves to be ahead of their time. The avant-garde radicalises the basic principle of modernity: the urge towards continual change and development, the rejection of the old and the longing for what is new. According to Matei Calinescu, its very radicality drives it to a conscious quest for crisis:

Aesthetically the avant-garde attitude implies the bluntest rejection of such traditional ideas as those of order, intelligibility, and even success (. . .): art is supposed to become an experience – deliberately conducted – of

failure and crisis. If crisis is not there, it must be created.¹

Already, earlier on, Renato Poggioli described the avant-garde as characterised by four moments: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism.² The activist moment meant adventure and dynamism, an urge to action that is not necessarily linked to any positive goal. The antagonistic character of the avant-garde refers to its combativeness; the avant-garde is always struggling against something – against tradition, against the public or against the establishment. Activism and antagonism are often pursued in such a way that an avant-garde movement finally overtakes itself in a nihilistic quest, in an uninterrupted search for purity, ending up by dissolving into nothing. The avant-garde is indeed inclined to sacrifice itself on the altar of progress – a characteristic that Poggioli labels agonistic.

During the last decades the word 'avant-garde' has acquired an even more precise theoretical meaning, due to the work of Peter Bürger. The avant-garde is by now clearly distinguished from modernism, in that it is confined to a more limited range of ideas and movements.³ According to Bürger, the avant-garde in the visual arts and literature was concerned to abolish the autonomy of art as an institution.⁴ Its aim was to put an end to the existence of art as something separate from everyday life, of art, that is, as an autonomous domain that has no real impact on the social system. The avant-gardists aimed to achieve the 'sublation' of art in practical life:

The avant-gardists proposed the sublation of art – sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form. (. . .) What distinguishes them (. . .) is the attempt to organise a new life praxis from a basis in art.⁵

The avant-garde, says Bürger, aims for a *new* life praxis, a praxis that is based on art and that constitutes an alternative for the existing order. This alternative would no longer organise social life on the basis of economic rationality and bourgeois conventions. It would rather found itself on aesthetic sensibilities and on the creative potentialities of each individual.

Andreas Huyssen takes over this conceptualisation of the avant-garde in his discussion of the 'Great Divide'.⁶ He depicts the scenery of 20th century modern art as a complicated field where divergent trends and opposing viewpoints competed for

control over what art was supposed to be about. Huyssen uses the term 'Great Divide' to refer to the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture that was installed by the discourse of modernism. It has been a major characteristic of modernism, according to him, to reject not only tradition but also mass culture. Modernism legitimised itself through a strategy of exclusion, which was directed against both tradition and mass culture. The latter was being disclaimed as kitsch. Huyssen argues, however, that this strategy of modernism has also known some moments of disruption. Among these disruptive tendencies he counts the efforts of the historical avant-garde, which aimed at the sublation of the distinction between high art and mass culture.⁷

It is my intention to show that the distinction that Bürger and Huyssen install between avant-garde and modernism can be made productive in the realm of architectural history too. The issues and themes around which the Modern Movement in architecture crystallised were surely related to the avant-garde logic of destruction of the old and construction of the new. The Modern Movement was based on a rejection of the bourgeois culture of philistinism that used pretentious ornament and kitsch and which took the form of eclecticism. In its stead the Movement gave precedence to purity and authenticity.⁸ In the twenties these themes acquired a distinct political dimension: the New Building became associated with the desire for a more socially balanced and egalitarian form of society in which the ideals of equal rights and emancipation would be realised.⁹ The architectural vanguard nevertheless did not become as uncompromising

and as radical as its counterpart in art and literature. Most architects, for example, never renounced the principle of rationality, even if it stood for a bourgeois value. As Michael Müller has pointed out, the protagonists of the new architecture were not in principle opposed to every rational ordering of things. On the contrary, they argued for a more thoroughgoing rationalisation that combated the irrational remnants of tradition.¹⁰

One can nevertheless recognise certain avant-garde moments within the discourse of the Modern Movement. For the Movement was hardly a unified whole, but rather consisted of widely differing trends and tendencies.¹¹ Some of these were clearly much closer to genuine avant-garde sensibilities than others. I will highlight how an avant-gardist impulse, which aimed at the 'sublation' of architecture, has played an important role in the Movement's initial phase. This impulse was soon to be neutralised and emasculated, but it cannot be denied that some texts written between 1928 and 1933 testify of an aspiration to abolish architecture as an institution and to connect it with the vulgar reality of everyday life. This aspiration is also present in the early writings of Sigfried Giedion.

Sigfried Giedion: 'What belongs to architecture?'

As an art historian and secretary of CIAM – the International Congresses on Modern Architecture – Giedion developed what Tafuri called an operative criticism. His intention was to legitimise modern architecture as the worthy heir to the most important historical developments of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This operative criticism is most

visible in Giedion's famous *Space, Time and Architecture* from 1941.¹² It was also present in his first book on modern architecture, *Bauen in Frankreich, Eisen, Eisenbeton* from 1928, which was only recently translated as *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete* (hereafter *Building in France*).¹³

Building in France drew a picture of the development of French architecture in the 19th and 20th centuries with particular reference to the influence of new materials and construction technology. The key expression that Giedion used in this book to describe the qualities of the new architecture is *Durchdringung* (interpenetration). The almost archetypal spatial experience that gave rise to this expression was the result of the sensations aroused by 19th century girder constructions such as the Eiffel Tower (Fig. 1) or the Pont Transbordeur in Marseilles, a very specific kind of bridge where a moving platform makes the connection between the two landings (Fig. 2).

Giedion treated the fascinating spatial experiences of interpenetration and intermingling in a very specific way, transforming them into a description of the new architecture that at the same time served as a guideline for future developments (Fig. 3). He uses the term *Durchdringung* in different constellations. First and foremost it refers to certain spatial configurations, characterised by the interpenetration of different volumes or the intrusion of a smaller element into a larger one. *Durchdringung* however also evokes all kinds of metaphorical meanings.¹⁴ It stands for a disabling of hierarchical models and for a weakening of borders, on all levels – social as well as architectural. In this manner a

Figure 1. Eiffel Tower, Paris. (From Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*; Santa Monica, CA, USA, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995, Fig. 57).

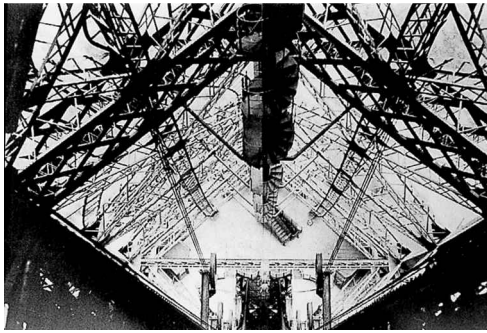
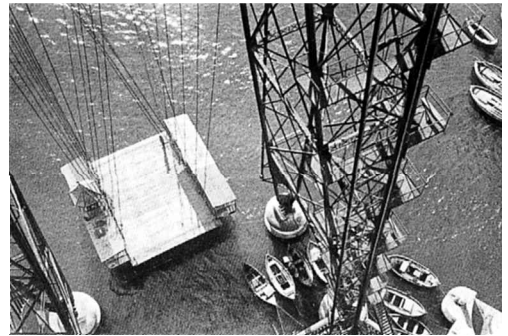


Figure 2. Pont Transbordeur, Marseilles. (From Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*; Santa Monica, CA, USA, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995, Fig. 61).



mutual relation is created between the new concept of space and a social reality. Both are considered to be characterised by interpenetration in many ways. The new architecture thus was deliberately presented by Giedion as being closely bound up with social developments or even as anticipating them, the metaphorical use of the term *Durchdringung* contorting social mobility, emancipation and liberation.

The multilayeredness of the concept of *Durchdringung* also comes to the fore in Giedion's questioning of the idea of architecture:

It seems doubtful whether the limited concept of 'architecture' will indeed endure.

We can hardly answer the question: What belongs to architecture? Where does it begin, where does it end?

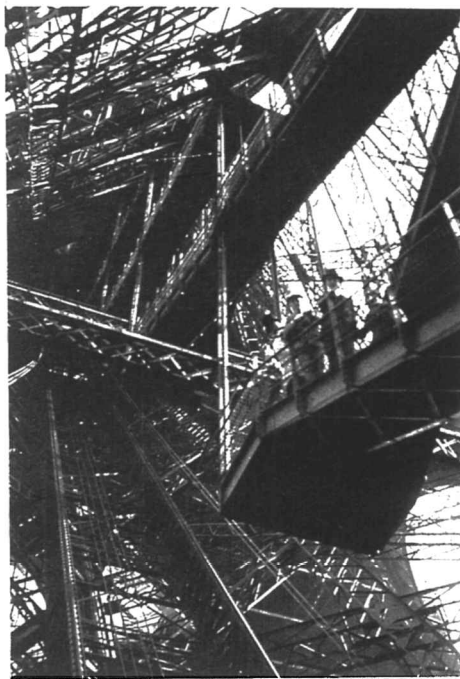
Fields overlap <Die Gebiete durchdringen sich>: walls no longer rigidly define streets. The street has been transformed into a stream of movement. Rail lines and trains, together with the railroad station, form a single whole.¹⁵

Here Giedion links the question of the autonomy of architecture as a discipline with the observation that spatial realities such as streets and stations no longer represent sharply defined entities; instead our experience of them is essentially defined by patterns of movement and interpenetrating elements. His implicit suggestion is that architecture no longer has anything to do with objects: if it is to survive at all it must become part of a broader domain in which it is not so much objects but rather spatial relations and ratios that are of central importance.¹⁶ Herewith Giedion formulates as a goal for architecture that it would break out of the limits imposed upon it by tradition and by its functioning as an institution.

What could be the result of such a strategy is hinted at in a caption for some illustrations of an industrial landscape in *Building in France* (Figs. 4 and 5). The landscape consists of a montage-like superposition of heterogeneous elements (a petrol tank, a railway bridge, a factory with smoking chimneys, a shed, electricity cables). Giedion comments:

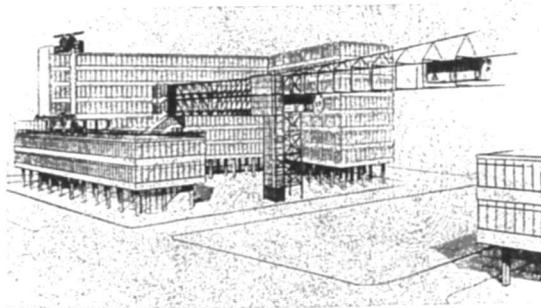
Fig. 58. SUSPENDED STAIRS within the EIFFEL TOWER
(Connection from the ground floor to the first platform.)

One sees the elevator track next to the stairs. Our modern intentions find precedents even in the detailing of forms such as the horizontal railings of the airy staircase. Cf. fig. 62.



1889

1926



**Fig. 59. MART STAM:
SUPERSTRUCTURE OF THE
ROKIN DAM AMSTERDAM
1926**

Only now do the seeds that lie in structures such as the Eiffel Tower come to full fruition. The affinity with a building such as the Eiffel Tower lies not merely in the connection and interpenetration by suspended transportation or free-hanging stations; one reaches the conclusion viewing both buildings: ARCHITECTURE NO LONGER HAS RIGID BOUNDARIES.

Figure 3. A page from *Building in France* which shows how Giedion links the new experiences of space, which he designates with the term *Durchdringung*, with the characteristics of the New Building, here illustrated by Mart Stam's project for the Amsterdam Rokin from 1926 (Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, *Building in Iron*, *Building in Ferroconcrete*; Santa Monica, CA, USA, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995).

Figure 4. Industrial landscape (from Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, Fig. 4). For Giedion this landscape, with its different levels of transportation, prefigures the future development of cities where the interpenetration of different domains will be evident (Siegfried Giedion, *Building in France*, *Building in Iron*, *Building in Ferroconcrete*; Santa Monica, CA, USA, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995).

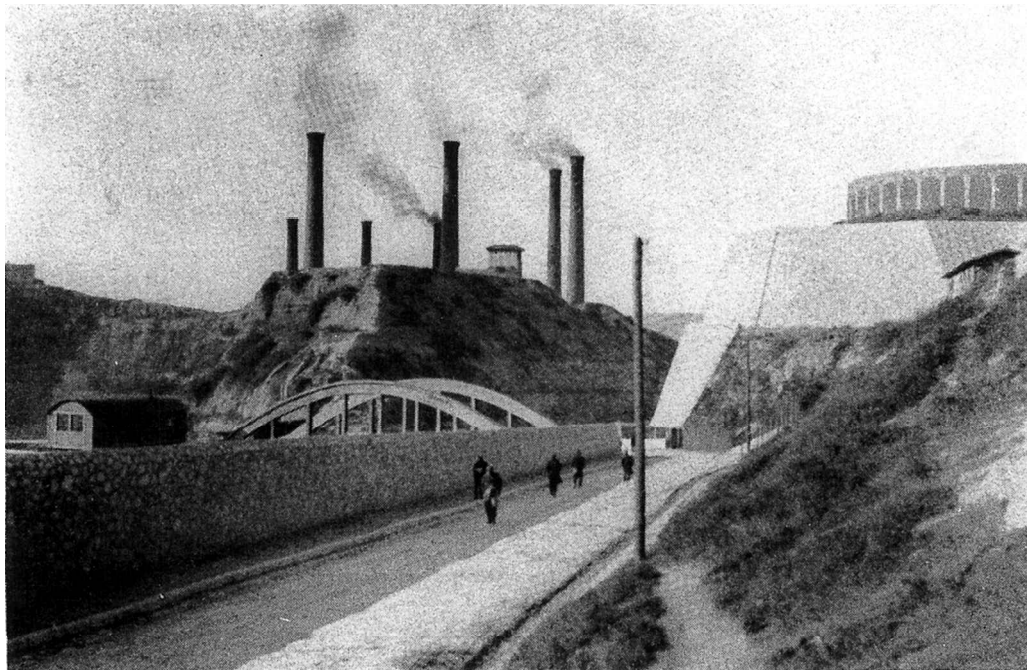


Figure 5. Petroleum tank, concrete bridge, street, trestle (Marseilles). A detail from the same industrial landscape. (From Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, (Siegfried Giedion, *Building in France*, *Building in Iron*, *Building in Ferroconcrete*; Santa Monica, CA, USA, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995, Fig. 3.)

The various traffic levels, the juxtaposition of objects determined only by necessity offer – so to speak unconsciously and as raw material – possibilities for how our cities may later be designed openly without the constraints of preestablished levels.¹⁷

These illustrations along with Giedion's commentary contain for me the most telling moment in the book: the point at which there is a clear indication that architecture may well have to merge with vulgar reality and accept juxtaposition and montage as design principles which allow for this merging. In this passage one can clearly see that the idea



of 'montage' – a key-concept for the avant-garde, according to Bürger¹⁸ – is at work, even if the term as such is not used explicitly.

The idea of *Durchdringung* was also instrumental in Giedion's arguing in favour of a merging of architecture and life:

We are being driven into an indivisible life process. We see life more and more as a moving yet indivisible whole. The boundaries of individual fields blur. (. . .) Fields permeate and fertilise each other as they overlap. (. . .) We value these fields not as hierarchically but as equally justified emanations of the highest impulse: LIFE! To grasp life as a totality, to allow no divisions, is among the most important concerns of the age.¹⁹

In this quotation Giedion indeed comes very close to the idea, typical for the avant-garde, that social life should be organised on the basis of art.

The sensitivity to the encompassing aspects of modernity is still more pronounced in Giedion's next publication. *Befreites Wohnen* (1929) is a small book that gives a picture of the aims and achievements of the New Building with the aid of photographs accompanied by a commentary. Whereas *Building in France* is at some points hesitant to embrace wholeheartedly the new spatial sensibility,²⁰ the second book takes it up in a more radical fashion. Here Giedion opposes in an explicit manner traditional ideas such as, for example, that the house should be attributed an eternal value. Instead he argues:

The house is a value of use. It is to be written off and amortised within a measurable time.²¹

This objective is feasible, according to Giedion, when building production is organised on an

industrial basis, so that building costs and rents are reduced. Houses should not look like fortresses then; rather they should allow for a life that requires plenty of light and wants everything to be spacious and flexible. Houses should be open; they should reflect the contemporary mentality that perceives all aspects of life as interpenetrating:

Today we need a house, that corresponds in its entire structure to our bodily feeling as it is influenced and liberated through sports, gymnastics and a sensuous way of life: light, transparent, movable. Consequentially, this opened house also signifies a reflection of nowadays mental condition: there are no longer separate affairs, all domains interpenetrate.²²

Openness, lightness and flexibility are in this little book associated with the other slogan words of the New Building: rationality, functionality, industry, experiment, *Existenzminimum*. All this, states Giedion, leads to liberation, not only from the weight of tradition, but also from too high rents. He even adds that women too will take advantage from the new outlook on dwelling, since their household chores will be reduced to a minimum. Thus they will be capable of emancipation from their narrow focus on house and family.

Giedion's early books take up the challenge of an avant-garde position in architecture. Based on an antagonism against a traditional notion of architecture, they display an attitude, which celebrates the new and is fascinated by the idea of transitoriness. Giedion argues in favour of a new conception of architecture, questioning the nature itself of the discipline. Most interesting in this respect is the thought that architecture might no longer limit

itself to the design of representative buildings but should develop instead into a more comprehensive discipline that is focusing upon the whole environment and that merges with social reality and with life itself. Taken seriously, this means that architecture should break out of the limits imposed upon it by its traditional confinement to the designing of important buildings. Architecture should rather wholeheartedly embrace vulgar reality, because this is where real life is at stake and where modernity is really at work. Architecture should penetrate into realms it did not know before, it should master techniques and domains which previously belonged to engineering and it should enjoy its contamination by the practicalities and requirements of everyday life.

These are the implications of some of the thoughts formulated by Sigfried Giedion in 1928–29. Although he did not develop these considerations in any radical way in his subsequent work, they were not completely idiosyncratic either. For the ideas he presented at the time can be said to be shared by many prominent modern architects from the twenties. As Sibyl Moholy-Nagy would point out later, the whole Bauhaus idea was founded upon the absolute unity between building and architecture.²³ The Bauhaus architects believed that their mission had to do with the design of all aspects of life, and they aimed at a reconceptualisation of the whole process of building, including construction techniques, housing typologies and urbanism. Architects such as Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer or Ernst May were convinced at the time that their efforts were to be oriented towards the whole of social reality. They clearly aimed to

transform the built environment on all levels. The most radical interpretation of such beliefs, however, was to be found in the work of Walter Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin's call for a 'new barbarism'

Benjamin, who died in 1940 and thus never came to know Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, was quite impressed by *Building in France*.²⁴ References to the book are scattered throughout the *Passagenwerk*, giving rise to many interesting remarks and intriguing observations.²⁵ Giedion was doubtless a major source for Benjamin's assessment of modern architecture, even if Benjamin radicalised ideas which Giedion formulated in a more subdued and hesitant tone.²⁶

Giedion's favouring of the idea of *Durchdringung* clearly appealed to Benjamin, who often used the same term in his descriptions of the spatial qualities of certain architectural constellations, such as the Parisian arcades. Benjamin argued, for example, that the glass roofs give the arcades a transparency that allows for the *Durchdringung* of inside and outside, and that gives the arcades the character of a transitional zone between street and home. Like Giedion, Benjamin gives full prominence to the link between 19th century iron and glass construction and 20th century modern architecture. Benjamin's interpretation however was more daring because he treats architectural features as 'dialectical images' that bear witness to social reality. He recognised, for example the iron and glass architecture of the arcades and of the great exhibition halls as a kind of dream image, in which contradictory aspects play a role (Fig. 6). On the one hand, he claimed, this architecture displays a fraudulent



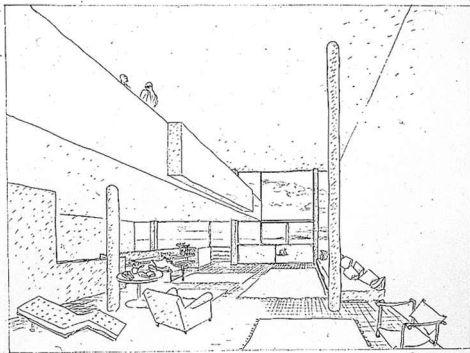
Figure 6. Crystal
Palace, 1851.

aspect because it testifies to the glorification of capitalist culture. It was here that the new urban masses revelled in gazing at 'nouveau-tés'; it was here that the cult of commodities began. The huge exhibition palaces and the arcades were for Benjamin 'sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish'.²⁷ In these spaces the commodity was enfolded in an almost fairyland aureole produced by the brilliant light during the day and by the flickering gaslight at night. The 19th century iron and

glass architecture thus glorified the commodity as a fetish – seducing people to buy while at the same time preventing them from gaining insight into the real nature of the commodity.

Next to this fraudulent aspect, however, Benjamin also recognised an utopian aspect in that same glass architecture. It provides in his eyes an image of the classless society to come. The dream image of the arcades also refers to the transparency and penetrability of the future social reality.²⁸

Figure 7. Le Corbusier, Project for a Villa in Carthage, 1928, drawing of the interior.



Benjamin argued moreover that the dreamlike character of the 19th century iron and glass architecture of the arcades and exhibition halls made way in the 20th century for a more sober reality.²⁹ A new architecture flowered in the 20th century, an architecture that, with its qualities of transparency and spatial interpenetration, anticipates the new (classless) society. A clarity and openness that are much more pervasive than the preceding age characterise this new society.

Where Giedion only hinted at a possible interconnection between *Durchdringung* as a feature of architecture and as a social phenomenon, this was a key element in Benjamin's assessment of modern architecture. Benjamin perceived it as the fulfilling of an important promise. He links spatial interpenetration and transparency with the openness and flexibility that are characteristic of a new form of society:

Giedion, Mendelsohn, Corbusier turned the abiding places of man into a transit area for every conceivable kind of energy and for electric currents and radio waves. The time that is

coming will be dominated by transparency. Not just the rooms, but even the weeks, if we are to believe the Russians, who want to abolish Sunday and to replace it with movable days of leisure.³⁰ (Fig. 7.)

The motive of transparency has clearly more than merely literal connotations for Benjamin. In this quotation he even links transparency and *Durchdringung* with flexibility in the structure of time as well. That time has become transparent amounts to a writing on the wall for Benjamin. It is a feature of revolutionary moments that the linear course of time is interrupted and that a new calendar is introduced or that the clocks are stopped. He thus sees the new architecture as an anticipation of a future social reality, which will be emancipated and classless.

Benjamin thought that the destructive gestures of the avant-garde, which aimed at purification, were necessary in order to free the way for a revolutionary future. The avant-garde, he argued, took its leave from notions of 'Gemütlichkeit' and cosiness, it negated familiar expectations and it did away with warm and nice environments. The avant-garde put forward the principle of montage to replace more organic principles of design. Thus the avant-garde strove towards a world where the bourgeois ideal of interiority would be liquidated in favour of a radical transparency and publicity.

The short essay from 1933 'Erfahrung und Armut' (Experience and Poverty) contains the most intriguing formulation of Benjamin's striving towards the liquidation of bourgeois culture.³¹ In this text Benjamin argued that modernity calls forth a 'poverty of experience', because it does away with

the continuity that is inherent in tradition and that is a prerequisite for the gaining of genuine experience. This new condition, he stated, must not be seen in a negative light. It rather should be seized on as a new opportunity for humanity to make a completely fresh start. For it brings a new barbarism into being, a new barbarism that claims victory over an old culture that could not be called human any longer. This, said Benjamin, constitutes the bottomline of the work of the avant-garde. The avant-garde wages a struggle against the traditional humanistic notion that prettifies humanity by dressing it up with elements of the past. The avant-garde doesn't prettify but calls for destructive gestures, thus freeing the way for a new beginning. For Benjamin the activity of destructive characters was essential for the preparations for revolution if it was to succeed.

Benjamin was convinced that these destructive characters were the ones that gave a face to the age and were capable of paving the way to the future:

Some pass things down to posterity by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called destructive.³²

It is these destroyers who have the most to offer humanity. It is their work that is genuinely worthwhile. In Benjamin's view destructive work is essential for the process that humanity is obliged to go through in its historical confrontation with technology and with modern civilisation. Only by way of a process of purification, with all the inevitable pain that that involves – implying as it does the destruction of the old – will it be possible to create

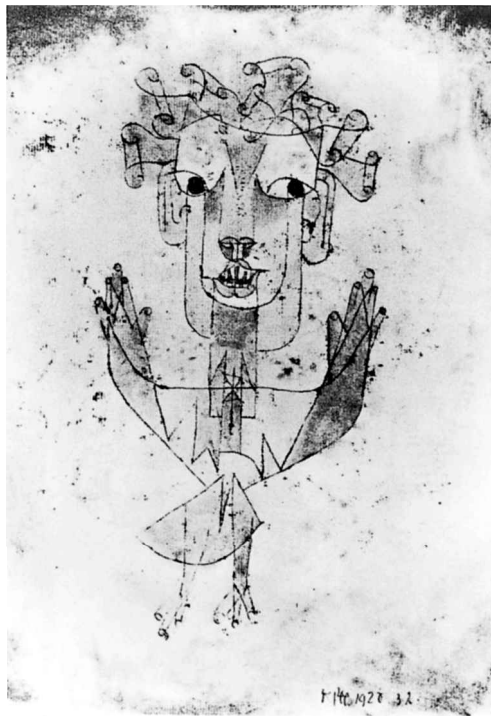
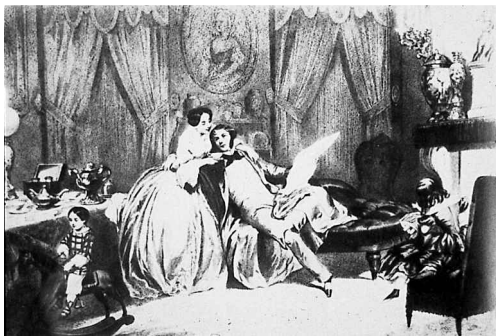


Figure 8. Paul Klee,
Angelus Novus, 1920
(The Israel Museum,
Jerusalem).

the conditions for a new humanity, a humanity that will be intrinsically committed to the gesture of destruction:

The average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he has clung to the fetish of creative existence. One must have followed Loos in his struggle with the dragon 'ornament', heard the stellar Esperanto of Scheerbart's creations, or seen Klee's New Angel, who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them

Figure 9. Henri Montant, *Soirée parisienne, au coin du feu* – the interior as the 'etui of the private person' (from Donald Olsen, *De stad als kunstwerk*; Amsterdam, Agon, 1991, p. 162).



happy by giving to them, to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.³³ (Fig. 8.)

Destruction is crucial just because purification is essential for every form of creative life. To make something, to create it, does not have so much to do with originality or inventiveness, but with a process of purification. Creativity is a false ideal, an idol. The real aim of those who have the concern of 'true humanity' at heart, can be found in the act of destruction that exposes pretence and illusions. This is where the hope for the survival of culture lay concealed. For Benjamin it is clear that the ideology of a false humanism, subscribed to by so many people, offers no prospect whatsoever of any mode of life that is equal to the challenge of the new conditions of existence. The industrial era requires something else to let its promises come true.

For Benjamin the activity of destructive characters was essential in this respect. The destructive character explodes one's familiar environment; it is

averse to comfort, abandoning itself to the cold sobriety of glass and steel:

The destructive character is the enemy of the etui-man. The etui-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined track that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.³⁴

The 19th century concept of dwelling claimed the interior as 'the etui of the private person' (Fig. 9).³⁵ This 19th century figure of dwelling however is in decay in the 20th. The new barbarism represents a radical change, bringing with it another notion of dwelling – one that is no longer founded in security and seclusion, but in openness and transparency:

The 20th century with its porousness and transparency, its longing for light and air put an end to dwelling in the old sense of the word. (...) Art Nouveau shook the etui existence to its foundations. By now it is deceased and dwelling is reduced: for the living by hotel bedrooms, for the dead by crematoria.³⁶

Dwelling as seclusion and security has had its day. Hotel rooms and crematoria teach the individual to adapt to the new conditions of life that have more to do with transience and instability than with permanence and being rooted. Things no longer allow themselves to be really appropriated; the notion of dwelling as leaving traces behind one withers away. Dwelling takes on a 'hurried contemporaneity' that is no longer recorded in ineradicable imprints, but which expresses itself in changeable constructions and transitory interiors with hard and smooth surfaces (Fig. 10). Glass is

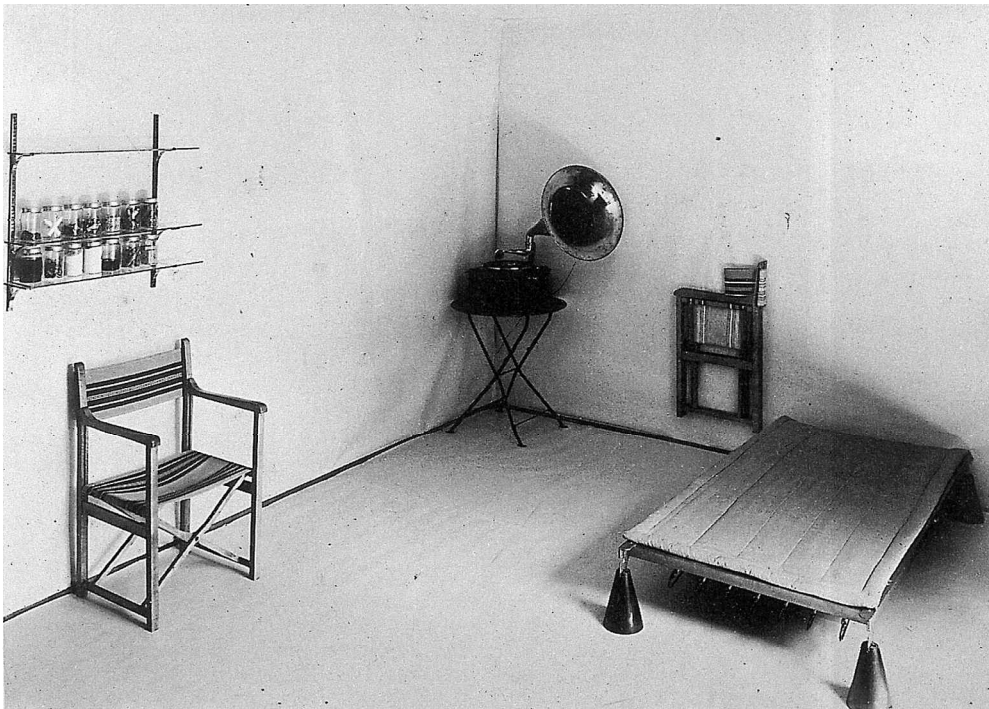


Figure 10. Hannes Meyer, Co-op Zimmer, 1926 – a visualisation of a new, nomadic way of living, based on transience and instability rather than permanence and rootedness.

important in this respect, for it connotes for Benjamin transparency and openness:

It is not a coincidence that glass is so hard and smooth a material to which nothing can be fastened. It is also cold and sober. Things that are made of glass have no 'aura'. Glass is the enemy par excellence of secrecy. It is also the enemy of property.³⁷

Benjamin regarded glass as a material that literally expresses the transparency of the new society that would be founded on revolutionary lines. Elsewhere he confirms that:

To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence.³⁸

Benjamin implied that, because it is inimical to secrecy and property, glass should be regarded as a material that literally expresses the transparency of the new society that would be founded on revolutionary lines. A society of this sort, he claimed, has the political 'radioscopy' of sexuality and the family, as well as of the economic and physical conditions of existence, as part of its programme and therefore it is completely uninterested in protecting privacy in the home.³⁹

The transparency and openness of the New Building thus pointed for Benjamin to a revolutionary, classless society based upon emancipation and flexibility. He interpreted the New Building as part of the avant-garde's attack on bourgeois culture. Just like surrealism and constructivism, it was preparing humankind for a new life to come. The New Building schooled inhabitants and users to adapt to new social conditions, which prefigured the future transparent society. Architecture was seen by Benjamin as a non-auratic discipline, that was capable of stimulating people to align their attitudes with those required by the future society.

From avant-garde to modernism

The alignment between modern architecture and politically progressive tendencies was thus clearly present in the twenties and the early thirties, in the self-understanding of its representatives as well as in the discourse of major critics. This avant-garde position claimed a new, more open and more socially relevant mission for architecture, and refused to understand architecture as clearly distinct from building. This position however did not dominate for very long. Already, in 1932 a completely different picture was drawn. When Hitchcock and Johnson introduced modern architecture to the United States, they presented it as the latest and most topical style. Hitchcock and Johnson took a clear anti-avant-garde stance in that they ignored all social issues. They even argued against any widening of the notion of architecture, simply reaffirming the old distinction between 'architecture' and 'building'.⁴⁰ But also in Giedion's own work, one can notice how the avant-

garde impulses of the twenties, and their radical implications, withered away in his subsequent development.

In comparing his later (and more famous) *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) to the earlier books, it is clear that his outlook changed rather fundamentally. At first sight there would appear to be little more than a shift in terminology (space-time instead of *Durchdringung*). Closer analysis however shows that there is more at stake. One can indeed discern a shift in Giedion's notions about the social role of architecture. Whereas in the first book the new architecture was bound up with processes of social emancipation, in *Space, Time and Architecture* this connotation was no longer crucial. The social implications that were inherent in *Durchdringung* were not transferred to the concept of space-time. Social and political connotations have been purged along with all references to social experiments and to the revolutionising aims of the new architecture. The question 'whether "architecture" can have any future' was no longer raised. Nor were the liberatory character of modern architecture and its social dimension in any way highlighted. Explicit references to a socio-political purpose were no longer present. Instead of *Durchdringung*, an expression with a whole range of connotations, the notion of space-time appeared. This concept does not have any obvious social connotations; instead it suggests that developments within architecture correspond to those on a 'deeper' level of reality – Giedion's so-called 'secret synthesis' that would lie hidden behind chaotic appearances. Behind the two apparently parallel terms, *Durchdringung* and space-time, two different notions

about the scope of architecture and its social role are concealed. The avant-garde aspirations which were characterising Giedion's initial effort to describe modern architecture, disappeared and gave way to a fairly univocal programme in which the need for a permanent redefinition of one's own aims no longer played a crucial role.

This tendency towards a certain 'orthodoxy' in modern architecture was only reinforced in the post-war years, when modern architecture was accepted by many administrations as the most appropriate answer to the building needs of the Reconstruction Era. Modern architecture thus became institutionalised as part of the establishment, and, consequentially, it took its leave from the avant-garde aspirations of the twenties. It was therefore no coincidence that after World War 2 a gap opened up between modern architecture and the avant-garde in the arts. They soon drifted quite apart. The most vehement criticism that was levelled against modern architecture in early post-war years came from movements such as Lettrism or International Situationism, rather than from right-wing conservatives. Take, for example, the words issued at Le Corbusier in Potlatch, the little magazine of the Lettrists:

In this epoch which becomes more and more characterised by oppression, there is a certain man who is especially repugnant. He builds cells as housing units, he builds a capital for the Nepalese, he builds vertical ghettos, morgues for a time which can use them very well, . . .⁴¹

One can discern no lining up any more between modern architecture and the avant-garde in the

arts. After the Second World War it became very obvious: modern architecture was no longer avant-garde.

Notes and references

1. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1987), p. 124.
2. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (London, Harvard University Press, 1982, translated from *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, 1962).
3. Jochen Schultesasse, 'Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde', in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, translated from *Theorie der Avant-Garde*, 1974), pp. vii–xlvii.
4. Peter Bürger situates his interpretation of the avant-garde in the context of an historical evolution. According to him, the history of art in Western society is characterised by an increasing autonomy of art as an institution and as a system in society as a whole. The summit of this autonomy was attained in the 19th century with aestheticism, the tendency that extolled the idea of *l'art pour l'art*. Artists no longer saw themselves as artisans in the service of the rulers or as interpreting some higher ideal, such as religion. Art was now pursued for its own sake; it was answerable only to itself. According to Bürger the avant-garde was a reaction against this notion. The corollary of the fact that art had become an autonomous institution was that it became socially isolated: by retreating into a world of its own – with its own system of values and means of distribution – it had lost any broader relevance and was no longer capable of exercising any influence on social events. The avant-garde wanted to break out of this confinement and to escape from the institutional frame it was trapped in historically.

5. Peter Bürger, *op. cit.*, p. 49. German version: 'Die Avantgardisten intendieren also eine Aufhebung der Kunst – Aufhebung im Hegelschen Sinn des Wortes: Die Kunst soll nicht einfach zerstört, sondern in Lebenspraxis überführt werden, wo sie, wenngleich in verwandelter Gestalt, aufbewahrt wäre. (. . .) Was die (. . .) unterscheidet, ist der Versuch von der Kunst aus eine *neue* Lebenspraxis zu organisieren.' (Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avant-garde*, p. 67).
6. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. vii–ix and 3–15.
7. Often the avant-garde of the interbellum is referred to as the 'historical' avant-garde, in order to distinguish it from the post-war avant-garde movement of the fifties and the sixties.
8. Miriam Gusevich, 'Purity and Transgression: Reflection on the Architectural Avantgarde's Rejection of Kitsch', *Discourse X.1*, (Fall-Winter 1987–88), pp. 90–115.
9. The terms used to refer to modern architecture are different in different language areas; these differences also have implications for the concept. The Dutch *Nieuwe Bouwen* and the German *Neues Bauen* explicitly avoid the term 'architecture' (which exists in both languages); this suggests an explicit longing for an architecture that is not limited to representative buildings but which embraces the whole domain of building and dwelling. This connotation is absent from the French expression 'architecture moderne' and from the English 'modern architecture'. In order to retain the broader concept contained in the German and Dutch expressions I prefer to use the term 'New Building'.
10. Michael Müller, 'Architektur als Aesthetische Form oder Aesthetische Form als lebenspraktische Architektur?' in Michael Müller, *Architektur und Avant-garde. Ein vergessenes Projekt der Moderne?* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 33–92.
11. Giorgio Ciucci, 'The Invention of the Modern Movement', *Oppositions*, (N° 24, 1981), pp. 69–91.
12. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941), (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1980).
13. Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig, Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928); translated by J. Duncan Berry, with an introduction by Sokratis Georgiadis, Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete* (Santa Monica (Cal.), The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995).
14. Walter Prigge argues that the term *Durchdringung* had acquired a very specific and appealing meaning in the twenties, referring to progressive ideals and to the new reality of social mobility. Cf. Walter Prigge, 'Durchdringung', in Volker Fischer, Rosemarie Höpfner (eds), *Ernst May und Das Neue Frankfurt 1925–1930* (Frankfurt a.M., Deutsches Architektur Museum, 1986), pp. 65–71.
15. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, p. 90; German version in Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 6: 'Es scheint uns fraglich, ob der beschränkte Begriff 'Architektur' überhaupt bestehen bleiben wird. Wir könnten kaum Auskunft über die Frage geben: Was gehört zur Architektur? Wo beginnt sie, wo endet sie? Die Gebiete durchdringen sich. Die Wände umstehen nicht mehr starr die Strasse. Die Strasse wird in einem Bewegungsstrom umgewandelt. Gleise und Zug bilden mit dem Bahnhof eine einzige Grösse . . .'
16. The title of this paragraph consequentially should have been 'Architecture?', but the question mark was left out by the publisher of the book – much to Giedion's annoyance. The correspondence on this subject is commented upon by Sokratis Georgiadis in the introduction to, *op. cit.*, *Building in France*, pp. 49 ff.

17. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, p. 92; German version (*Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 8): 'Die verschiedenen Niveaudifferenzen der Verkehrswege, das nur durch Notwendigkeit bestimmte Nebeneinander der Objekte, enthält doch – gleichsam unbewusst und im Rohstoff – Möglichkeiten, wie wir später unsere Städte offen und ohne Zwang starren Niveau-beibehaltung gestalten werden.'
18. Bürger outlines the character of the avant-garde work of art as relying upon the principle of 'montage'. In traditional aesthetics, he argues, a work of art is regarded as constituting an organic unity: the whole and the parts should be linked with each other in a self-evident relationship, based on principles of balance and harmony. The avant-garde work on the other hand is non-organic: it does have a unity, but this unity does not come about in a self-evident way. The avant-garde work contains discrepancies and dissonances, because it is constructed on the basis of a montage of fragments: elements that are separated out from a contextual totality and are combined in a new relationship. Archetypal examples of this are the Cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque or John Heartfield's photomontages. In literature one can refer to texts such as *Le Paysan de Paris* by Louis Aragon or André Breton's *Nadja*.
19. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, p. 87; German version (*Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 3): 'Wir werden in einen Lebensprozess getrieben, der nicht teilbar ist. Wir sehen das Leben immer mehr als ein bewegliches, aber unteilbares Ganzes. (...) Die Gebiete durchdringen sich, befruchten sich, indem sie sich durchdringen. (...) Wir werten die Gebiete gar nicht untereinander, sie sind uns gleichberechtigte Ausflüsse eines obersten Impulses: LEBEN! Das Leben als Gesamtkomplex zu erfassen, keine Trennungen zuzulassen, gehört zu den wichtigsten Bemühungen der Zeit.'
20. Giedion has reservations with respect to the applicability of the new ideas on housing. He states for instance that 'One would not wish to carry over into housing this absolute experience that no previous age has known. Yet it remains embryonic in each design of the new architecture: there is only a great, indivisible space in which relations and interpenetrations, rather than boundaries, reign.' (*Building in France*, pp. 91–93); German version: 'Man wird diese absolute Erlebnis, das keine Zeit vorher gekannt hat, nicht auf Häuser übertragen wollen. Keimhaft aber liegt in jeder Gestaltung des neuen Bauens: Es gibt nur einen grossen, unteilbaren Raum, in dem Beziehungen und Durchdringungen herrschen, an Stelle von Abgrenzungen.' (*Bauen in Frankreich*, p. 8).
21. Sigfried Giedion, *Befreites Wohnen* (1929) (Frankfurt a.M., Syndikat, 1985), p. 8: 'Das Haus ist ein Gebrauchswert. Es soll in absehbare Zeit abgeschrieben und amortisiert werden.'
22. Sigfried Giedion, *Befreites Wohnen*, p. 8: 'Wir brauchen heute ein Haus, das sich in seiner ganzen Struktur im Gleichklang mit einem durch Sport, Gymnastik, sinngemässe Lebensweise befreiten Körpergefühl befindet: leicht, lichtdurchlassend, beweglich. Es ist nur eine selbstverständliche Folge, dass dieses geöffnete Haus auch eine Widerspiegelung des heutigen seelischen Zustandes bedeutet: Es gibt keine isolierten Angelegenheiten mehr. Die Dinge durchdringen sich.'
23. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, 'The Diaspora', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, (Vol. 24, No 1, 1965), pp. 24–25.
24. See the letter sent by Walter Benjamin to Sigfried Giedion, published by Sokratis Georgiadis in his introduction to *Building in France*, p. 53.
25. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* (1982), 2 vol., (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M.), 1983.

26. For an extensive treatment of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of modern architecture, see Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique*, (MIT Press, London, 1999); also of interest is: Detlef Mertins, 'The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass', *Assemblage*, N. 29, (April, 1996), pp. 7–23.
27. Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (1978) (New York, Schocken, 1986), pp. 146–162, p. 151.
28. *Reflections*, p. 148: 'In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements of pre-history, that is, of a classless society. '; German text: 'In dem Traum, in dem jeder Epoche die ihr folgende in Bildern vor Augen tritt, erscheint die letztere vermählt mit Elementen der Urgeschichte, das heisst einer klassenlose Gesellschaft.' (*Das Passagenwerk*, p. 47).
29. 'Die rauschhafte Durchdringung van Strasse und Wohnung, die sich im Paris des 19ten Jahrhundert vollzieht – und zumal in der Erfahrung des Flaneurs – hat prophetischen Wert. Denn diese Durchdringung lässt die neue Baukunst nüchterne Wirklichkeit werden.' (*Das Passagenwerk*, p. 534).
30. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 8 (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp) pp. 196–197. German text: 'Denn in der Signatur dieser Zeitwende steht, dass dem Wohnen im alten Sinne, dem die Geborgenheit an erster Stelle stand, die Stunde geschlagen hat. Giedion, Mendelsohn, Corbusier machen dem Aufenthaltsort vom Menschen vor allem zum Durchgangsraum aller erdenklichen Kräfte und Wellen von Licht und Luft. Was kommt, steht im Zeichen der Transparenz: Nicht nur der Räume, sondern, wenn wir den Russen glauben, die jetzt die Abschaffung des Sonntags zugunsten von beweglichen Feierschichten vorhaben, sogar die Wochen.'
31. Walter Benjamin, 'Erfahrung und Armut', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1969), pp. 291–296.
32. *Reflections*, p. 302; German text: 'Einige überliefern die Dinge, indem sie sie unantastbar machen und konservieren, andere die Situationen, indem sie sie handlich machen und liquidieren. Diese nennt man die Destruktiven.' (*Illuminationen*, p. 290). See for an interesting comment on this essay by Benjamin: Irving Wohlfarth, 'No-man's-land: On Walter Benjamin "Destructive Character"', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (Eds.), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience* (London, Routledge, 1994), pp. 155–182.
33. *Reflections*, pp. 272–273; German text: 'Der Durchschnittseuropäer hat sein Leben mit der Technik nicht zu vereinen vermocht, weil er am Fetisch schöpferischen Daseins festhielt. Man muss schon Loos im Kampf mit dem Drache 'Ornament' verfolgt, muss das stellare Esperanto Scheerbartscher Geschöpfe vernommen oder Klees 'Neuen Engel', welcher die Menschen lieber befreite, indem er ihnen nähme, als beglückte, indem er ihnen gäbe, gesichtet haben, um eine Humanität zu fassen, die sich an der Zerstörung bewährt.' (*Illuminationen*, p. 384.)
34. *Reflections*, p. 303; German text: 'Der destruktive Charakter ist der Feind des Etui-Menschen. Der Etui-Mensch sucht seine Bequemlichkeit, und das Gehäuse ist ihr Inbegriff. Das innere des Gehäuses ist die mit Samt ausgeschlagene Spur, die er in die Welt gedrückt hat. Der destruktive Charakter verwischt sogar die Spuren der Zerstörung.' (*Illuminationen*, p. 290.)
35. *Das Passagenwerk*, p. 53; *Reflections*, p. 155.
36. *Das Passagenwerk*, p. 292. German text: 'Das zwanzigste Jahrhundert machte mit seiner Porosität, Transparenz, seinem Freilicht- und Freiluftwesen dem Wohnen im alten Sinne ein ende. (. . .) Der Jugendstil erschütterte das Gehäusewesen aufs tiefste. Heut ist

es abgestorben und das Wohnen hat sich vermindert: für die Lebenden durch Hotelzimmer, für die Toten durch Krematorien.'

37. *Illuminationen*, p. 294. German text: 'Glas ist nicht umsonst ein so hartes und glattes Material, an dem sich nichts festsetzt. Auch ein kaltes und nüchternes. Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine 'Aura'. Das Glas ist überhaupt der Feind der Geheimnisse. Es ist auch der Feind des Besitzes.'
38. W. Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in W. Benjamin, *Reflections*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1986), pp. 177–192, p. 180; German text: 'Im Glashauss zu leben ist eine revolutionäre Tugend par excellence.' (*Gesammelte Schriften II*, p. 298.)
39. Cf. *Illuminationen*, p. 360; *Reflections*, p. 247: 'Indeed to secure private life against morality and concepts in a society that perpetrates the political radioscopy of sexuality and family, of economic and physical existence, in a society that is in the process of building houses with glass walls, and patios extending far into the drawing rooms that are no longer drawing rooms – such a watchword would be the most reactionary of all were not the private life that Kraus had made it his business to defend precisely that which, unlike the bourgeois form, is in strict accordance with this social upheaval; in other words, the private life that is dismantling itself, openly shaping itself, that of the poor, from whose ranks came Peter Altenberg, the agitator, and Adolf Loos.'
40. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (1932), (New York, Norton, 1966), pp. 78–84. For more specific discussions of the discourse on modern architecture in America, see R.E. Somol (ed.), *Anatomy and Ideology. Positioning an Avant-Garde in America*, (New York, Monacelli, 1997).
41. Internationale Lettriste, 'Les gratte-ciel par la racine', *Potlatch*, N° 5, (20 juillet, 1954) (quoted from *Potlatch 1954–1957* (Paris, Lebovici, 1985), p. 34): 'Dans cette époque de plus en plus placée, pour tous les domaines, sous la signe de la répression, il y a un homme particulièrement répugnant, nettement plus flic que moyenne. Il construit des cellules unités d'habitations, il construit une capitale pour les Népalais, il construit des ghettos à la verticale, des morgues pour un temps qui en a bien l'usage, ...'