

# Modernism/Modernisms. The Two Souls of Modernity Before Modernity



Enrico Cicalò and Michele Valentino

**Abstract** The architectural and cultural heritage built in the early decades of the twentieth century is often a critical and controversial topic. “History is always written by winners”, and in the case of cultural conflicts, the narratives of the events support the prevalence of a thesis on the others that was overshadowed, denied and then forgotten. It is the case of the opposition between the two types of *Modernism*: the rigorous *Modern Movement* and the most decorative *Modern Style*. They are the two souls of *Modernism*: a democratic tendency focused on art-industry relationship, and “the other” aesthetic, elitist, decadent still tied to the handmade craft and the elitist production of luxury goods. These two opposite movements influenced each other until their competition has brought to stay out of history “the other modernity”, blurred by the pervasiveness of the *Modern Movement*. In this article will be discussed the two souls of *Modernism* and the prevailing of the *Modern Movement* with the consequent forgetting of the *Modern Style*, highlighting their different aesthetics, social and ideological features.

**Keywords** Modernism · Modern Style · Modern Movement · Art Déco · Rationalism

## 1 In Search of Modernity

Before starting a historical and critical discussion on the socio-cultural transformations at the basis of the evolution of the artistic trends that characterised the first decades of the twentieth century, it is necessary to consider some linguistic issues

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This article is the result of joint research undertaken by the two authors. EC has written the paragraphs from 1 to 3, MV the paragraphs from 4 to 6.

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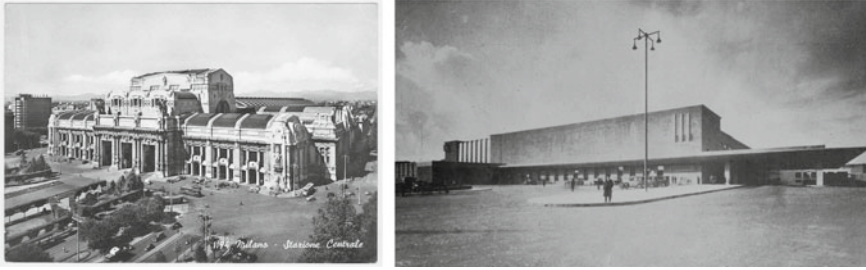
that can guide the reader into a very intense and complex cultural debate, full of contrasts and ambiguities. The strong impulse towards innovation, overcoming the past and experimenting, emerges forcefully from the search for labels and definitions capable of evoking a strong projection towards the future. The references to *modernity* are therefore numerous and the various movements, sometimes in contrast with each other, seem to be competing to appropriate the word *modernity* as a condition that represents contemporaneity and overcoming the past. This tendency to use the term *modernity* in all its different possible forms is common to all the experimentations in the artistic and cultural spheres, and it became stronger from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, when the need to go beyond traditional stylistic features and references to the past became stronger. Thus, the call for innovation is affirmed in the definition of *Art Nouveau*, and the call for *modernity* appears in its Catalan declination of *Modernism*, of *Modern Style* in England, and of Модерн (modern) in Russia.

In the subsequent evolutions, which saw the formal stylistic features and ideological principles of *Art Nouveau* being surpassed, the reference to modernity became even stronger, both in the definition of *Modern Style*, which corresponds to the movement pursuing a formal research oriented towards decorativism and artisanal production, and in the opposed *Modern Movement*, which instead tended towards minimalism and industrial production. All these exploratory paths of modernity are often encapsulated in the more generic definition of *modernisms*, a definition that is recurrently used to define very different artistic movements between the second industrial revolution and the Second World War.

## 2 The Two Souls of Modernity

The architectural cultural heritage built in the early decades of the twentieth century is often a critical and controversial topic. The history—even that of the cultural movements—is written by the winners, and in the case of cultural conflicts the narratives of the events support the prevalence of a thesis on the others, that result being overshadowed, denied and then forgotten [23]. Specifically, Portoghesi and Massobrio in their *Album degli anni Venti* refer to the opposition between two types of *modernism*: the rigorous *Modern Movement*, against the decoration and for the simplification (Fig. 2), and the most decorative so-called *Modern Style* (Fig. 1). It is possible to find buildings similar in their function and size, built or inaugurated in the same years, but belonging to these two different and opposite architectural styles, such as the Santa Maria Novella station in Florence, designed by Giovanni Michelucci and inaugurated in 1934 and the Central Station in Milan, designed by Ulisse Stacchini and inaugurated in 1931; the comparison of which gives an idea of how these two stylistic currents coexisted and competed until one prevailed over the other.

Even Bossaglia [4] identifies two souls in *modernism*: a “democratic” tendency focused on art-industry relationship, and another “aesthetic, elitist, decadent” still



**Figs. 1, 2** Milano Stazione Centrale, designed by Ulisse Stacchini, inaugurated in 1931; Firenze Santa Maria Novella Railway Station, designed by Giovanni Michelucci, inaugurated in 1934

tied to the handmade craft and the elitist production of luxury goods. This opposition, and then the affirmation of the Rationalism as aesthetic, social and ideological models of *modernity*, has brought to stay out of the history “the other modernity”, blurred by the pervasiveness of the *Modern Movement*. It is “the other modernity” labelled as “academic” and “eclectic” [18, 26] that nowadays is associated to the label Art Déco. Also, for this reason, the studies, the surveys and the graphical analyses until now published, related to the architectural heritage of those years and in particular to the Art Déco influences, are still few [7, 9, 14], unlike the large literature supporting the opposed movement.

### 3 Modernity in Modern Style

The *Modern Style*, also known as Art Déco, can be considered an aesthetic movement established in the cultural gap between two opposed [25]. It is the gap between the end of the Art Nouveau style and the affirmation of the Rationalism. Therefore, it was a sort of movement of continuity, a kind of coding in a ‘cubist’ language of the earlier floreal motifs, in contrast to the *Modern Movement* that was a movement of fracture, in which it could be glimpsed the marks of the coming total revolution [27] which it would be soon established, eclipsing and undermining the decorative trends.

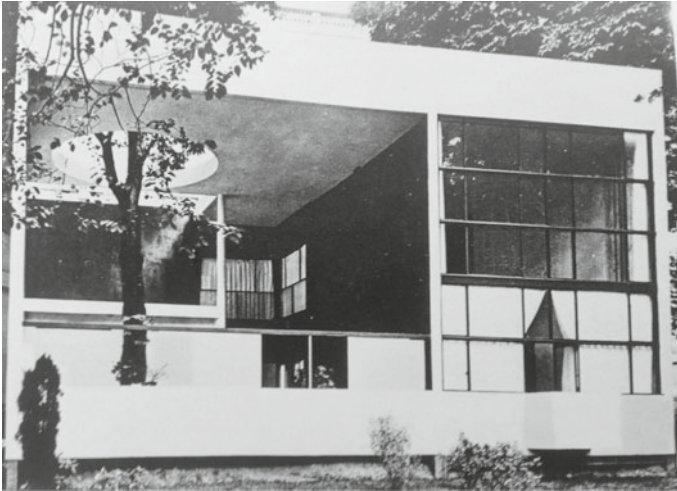
However, to have a theoretical conceptualization of the Art Déco movement it will be necessary to wait several decades. Indeed, the interpretation of this particular aesthetic sensibility can be dated in the sixties of last century, in the studies by the Italian scholar Veronesi [27] and by Hillier in the UK, which define the features of the Art Déco Style. In the same years, other studies identified this movement with the label *1925 Style*, by the name of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925 (Fig. 3, 4, 5, and 6). From this world fair’s name, that marked the moment of greatest resonance and at the same time the conclusion of this particular aesthetic trend [8], derives also the name Art Déco. From a strictly chronological point of view, these studies have supposed the period of greater affirmation of the Art Nouveau Style between 1902 and 1914 [5, 6], supposing



**Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6** Pavilions of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925

instead the affirmation of Déco in the range between 1919 and 1925 [27, 7]. Although the two styles cannot be so rigidly confined—as both are considered as evolutionary phenomena of taste whose roots lie in previous years and whose echoes were later extended in the following years—the First World War can be considered a watershed between the two artistic currents, marking a deep social, cultural, economic, and of course aesthetics rupture line.

Although from the chronological point of view the definition of the two styles appears clearer (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), from a stylistic point of view their features are more difficult to define. As known, the Art Nouveau stylistic references are clearly inspired to the floral and natural world, mostly related to the Symbolist roots [6, 4, 19]. Instead, the literature on Déco style lists a long series of iconographic references and inspirations as ethnic influences (African tribal art, Aztec and Mayan architecture, Far East), the revival of historical styles (Egyptians, Babylonians, Aztecs, Mayans, Roman, Greek, Byzantine until arriving at the Louis XV and Louis XVI), the modernist art movements (Fauvism, Futurism, Constructivism, Cubism) and peculiar social phenomena (Russian ballets) [2, 8, 12]. The transition from Art Nouveau to Art Déco is thus marked by an enrichment of the iconographic and cultural references as well as by a different use of the line. It moves away from the sinuous and irregular forms of nature that inspired the Art Nouveau, becoming more rectilinear into more regular patterns and geometric forms inspired from time to time by Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism or also often by a combination of these with each other and with also other elements related to other influences. The drawing of the line starts its path towards the essential and minimal forms of the Rationalist

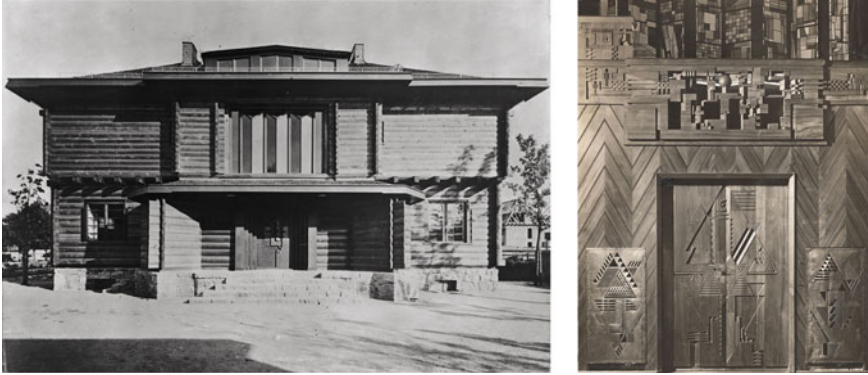


**Fig. 7** Pavilion of the Esprit Nouveau, designed by Le Corbusier for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925

style, moving from being superfluous decoration to being the limit and boundary of essential surface areas. The straight line, together with geometry and proportion, returns to be an expression of beauty, as well as the return of the rigidly symmetrical compositions that characterize not only individual decorative elements, but also their composition and the entire design of architectural facades.

#### **4 Modernity in *Modern Movement***

Art Nouveau, in its various geographical variations—*Jugendstil* in Germany; *Wiener Secession* in Austria, *Modern Style* in England, *Liberty* in Italy and *Catalan Modernism* in Spain—has opened a line of research linked to empathy: an identification where nature is essentially stylized in fluid and continuous geometric shapes, which remind to the sinuosity of ornamental plants and at the same time opens to the use of new technologies and materials such as cast iron which allowed to reduce the sections and make these visually light architectures. The artistic work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, for example, is aimed at the fluidity of forms that docilely folds, as well as in Thonet's chairs—where the woods were docilely bent by the heat of the steam to obtain the desired shapes—and in the *Maison du Peuple* in Brussels (1896–1899) drawn by Vicor Horta. Within this architecture, the cast iron pillars and beams were deformed and molded to create a stylistic and harmonic continuity, recalling on the one hand the links with nature, on the other those with Pre-Raphaelite art cited above.



**Figs. 8, 9** Front Façade and entrance hall of the Sommerfeld House in Berlin: Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer, 1920–1921

Therefore, the modernism art movements were also at the root of the *Modern Movement*. The Bauhaus, one of the most crucial European schools in which modern architecture flourished, together with the Vchutemas laboratories, was marked by Expressionism [11, 16]. Masters of the calibre of Lyonel Feininger, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Johannes Itten proposed, in the early years of the foundation between 1919 and 1922, proposed an art deeply linked to the craft experiences. An emblematic example is the Sommerfeld House (1920–192) by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer, which saw the collaboration of almost all the workshops of the Bauhaus Weimar and their students for the realisation of the interior fittings and furnishings. The design of the space is accompanied by the design of geometric decorations, as evidenced by the entrance door, which was a direct descendant of Vasilij Kandinskij's abstract geometric research [20] (Figs. 8 and 9)..

This architecture, which is considered a sort of Manifesto of the unity of all arts in the building sanctioned the crisis of the school. The building used the “block-house” construction method, recently developed by the construction company of industrialist Adolf Sommerfeld, who commissioned the work. Precisely the opening to the industrial world, unavailable to Gropius, led to the break with Johannes Itten—usually wearing monastic clothes—replaced by László Moholy-Nagy, who preferred to dress in mechanic's overalls.

At the same time, Le Corbusier himself, author of the Villa Fallet (1906–07) still of decorative matrix, breaks with all his previous research in architecture [21]. In 1914 he elaborated the model of the *Maison Dom-Ino*, consisting of three slabs-attics supported by pilots, which found in the shape of the plan, open and free, the winding staircase that led to the different levels. In those years Le Corbusier had displaced current literature with a house that was a clear serial and reproducible example of industrial derivation, far from the research conducted in the first houses that referred to Art Nouveau and the principles of regional architecture. Even today we find, scattered in the external territories of the city, unfinished looms that are an



**Fig. 10** AEG turbine factory in Berlin: Peter Behrens, 1909

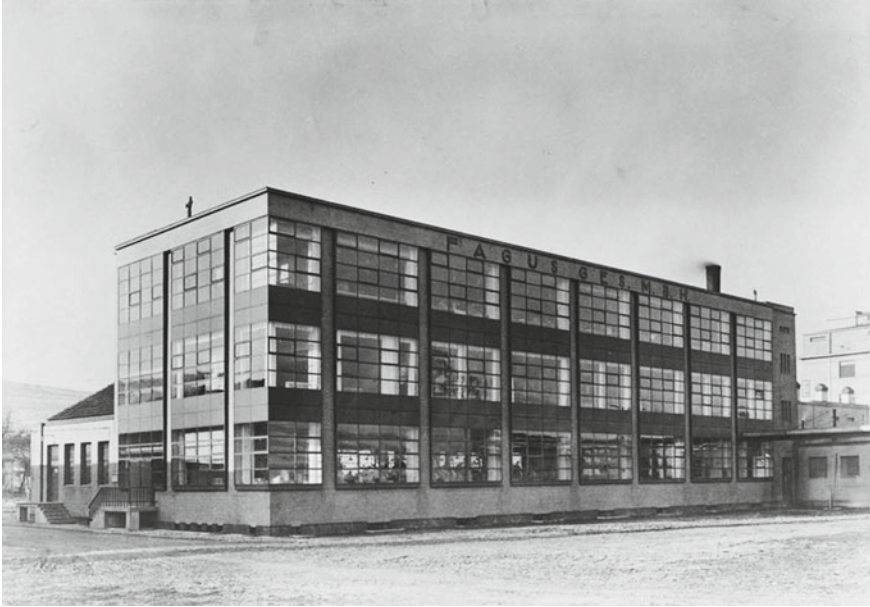
exact derivation of that model, far from the geographical and territorial peculiarities, but which for the internal functioning were perfect.

In order to understand the passage from a symbolic dimension, to which modernisms referred, we must analyse two works made in the same years: Peter Behrens' AEG Turbine Factory (1909) and Walter Gropius' Fagus Factory (1911–24) (Figs. 10 and 11).

In the first case, the factory, seen in the main façade, was an apparent reference to the archetype of the Greek temple and, at the same time, in the side facades with large windows, the modernity that loomed anticipated. The symbolic element of the temple reminds every one of the links that architecture established with previous times [1]. With the Fagus Factory, Gropius breaks the link with all the past, and the factory becomes a secular cathedral of work. The large windows made it possible to look from the inside to the outside and at the same time to be observed from the outside. The building introduces an ethical principle of modernity in which the symbol disappears, and everything could be readable. The elimination of the wall made it possible to break, through transparency, power and its instrumental use.

## 5 Winning and Losing Modernities

The discontinuity between the two movements occurs in the ethical and ideological field when, following the First World War and with the cities primarily destroyed by bombing, it was necessary to rebuild not only the physical city but more deeply the sense of community.



**Fig. 11** Fagus factory: Walter Gropius, 1911–24

The architects of the *Modern Movement*—among which Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier—understand that ornament, as already announced in the book *Ornament and crime* by Adolf Loos in 1913 [17], should be put in crisis in favour of an architecture that is easily executable, reproducible, economically advantageous, such as to allow the creation of a home for everyone. However, over time these democratic ideals did not correspond, with the end of the Second World War, to adequate responses in terms of the realisation of the democratic project. Nevertheless, certainly, from the historical point of view, we can understand the reasons.

Although *Modern Style* have generated architectures of great interest—both in the innovative space systems and in the decorations—its crisis is linked to the need for architecture to become “popular” and to take charge of the greatest crisis of the twentieth century that will give rise to the *Modern Movement* with the construction of neighbourhoods designed from a functional point of view, at low cost and ideally for everyone.

The world of decoration, with the symbols attached to them, has a very long history in architecture. A story that can be traced in the Greek temple—where the column refers in the grooves to the trunks of the trees and in the capitals to the leaves of the foliage—which could still be found in the Secession Building of Joseph Maria Olbrich, where the dome of gold leaves reminded in the decoration the link with the world of nature. The decoration that for many centuries had been the expression of superior power, now we find it in the search for interiors or design objects where



architects try to leave a mark and a memory that has always belonged to the design culture. Reading a shift from a political and public axis to a more private one. Finally, to understand the transition from decoration, concerning nature, to abstract geometry, an expression of modernity, we can read the stylistic and conceptual evolution of the trees developed by Piet Mondrian between 1908 and 1913. The sequence of trees shows a progressive departure from a figurative to an abstract way where only the lines of force remain of the tree that reminds us of a link with life [3]. The compositions are starting from 1914. They break all ties with the world of nature and remind us of the need to bring architecture and design back into the geometric world of industry. A passage that we can only understand by analysing the historical phase that has determined new needs for modern man, marrying decoration with the clay world of nature to that of abstract and concrete orthogonal geometry.

However, with the Second World War, as Aldo Rossi wrote in his *Autobiografia scientifica* [24], also the ideals of the *Modern Movement* collapsed together with the bombs that destroyed substantial portions of the cities. The challenge that architects will have to develop in the 1950s will be linked to the reconstruction of communities where the symbol passes from a stylistic and physical dimension to a community one. The various neighbourhoods built in Europe will try to rebuild the sense of community. It was no longer a single house for an ideal man, but a village designed to build a collective identity.

## 6 Conclusions

Observing the Wiener Secession, it is possible to observe a fundamental passage that starting from Olbrisch's work leads to the *Sanatorium Purkersdorf* of 1903 by Josef Hoffmann, a work without decorations that addresses a symmetrical and classicistic system that in fact anticipates the *Modern Movement* [10, 13]. Thus, these two parallel and different movements coexist within the twentieth century. The first addressed the movement led by William Morris of the Arts and Crafts, the second, of medieval origin, which puts a classicist austerity at the centre.

Starting from the considerations written in the 1936 work of the German theorist of Jewish origin Pevsner [22], *Pioneers of modern design: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, it is possible to understand how these two souls are strongly intertwined and never univocal and why the *Arts and Crafts* movement is to be considered one of the main chapter of architectural, graphic and design research of the twentieth century. Unlike these, Sigfried Giedion in *Space, time and architecture: the growth of a new tradition* [15] discusses the most conventionally known soul of the *Modern Movement* and the aesthetic research moves towards the elimination of decoration in favour of functionalism aimed at materialising a new relationship between space and the functional identity of environments. The Bauhaus building by Walter Gropius in Dessau from 1925 to 1926 becomes the paradigm of a new architecture, the glass bodies create new spatial relationships between inside and outside. The function becomes the new *deus ex machina* of the modern, in asymmetrical systems,

autonomous in their construction, intended as real architectural models. The function replaces the complex references of the decoration becoming the fulcrum of a new democratic architecture.

The reasons that led to the transformation of the concept of decoration towards a clinical and aseptic function are to be found in the historical crisis that invaded the first decades of the 1900s. Moving away from a historical gaze, we are aware that the decorativism/minimalism dichotomy or organic/abstraction is a theme in constant tension, so much to move the axis of architectural poetics once again with the birth of post-modernity at the turn of the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century, years in which the themes of the classic and the symbols linked to decorativism re-emerge strongly.

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