

## FROM MANHATTAN TO MAINHATTAN: ARCHITECTURE AND STYLE AS TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE, 1920–1970

Conference at Columbia University, New York, March 6–8, 2003. Organized and jointly sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Europe, Columbia University, and the GHI. Conveners: Volker Berghahn (Columbia University), Cordula Grewe (Columbia University), Christof Mauch (GHI). Participants: Adrian von Buttlar (Technische Universität Berlin), Fabienne Chevallier (Paris I University), Jeffry Diefendorf (University of New Hampshire), Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University of California, Berkeley), Peter Krieger (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), David Lazar (GHI), Christian Maryska (Austrian National Library, Vienna), Peter Müller (Office of the Federal Commission for Culture and the Media of the Federal Republic of Germany), Dietrich Neumann (Brown University), Mary Nolan (New York University), Daniel Purdy (Pennsylvania State University), Alexander Sedlmaier (Technische Universität Berlin), Beate Störckuhl (Bundesinstitut für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa, Oldenburg), Wolfgang Thöner (Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau).

The appearance of high-rise buildings in cities around the world in the decades after World War II was widely seen as evidence of creeping American influence. Like so much deemed “typically American,” however, the glass and steel tower was more hybrid than autochthon. In tracing the roots of architectural modernism, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson pointed to a series of developments in both the United States and Europe, and the name they coined for this movement underscored its multifarious origins: the International Style.<sup>1</sup> The transatlantic interaction Hitchcock and Philip sketched in their pioneering 1932 study would continue, not least with the emigration of two of the four architects Hitchcock and Johnson had designated the leaders of the International Style—Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe<sup>2</sup>—from Europe to the United States. The conference “From Manhattan to Mainhattan: Architecture and Style as Transatlantic Dialogue, 1920–1970” was conceived as an opportunity for interdisciplinary examination of cultural exchange between Europe and the United States that had profound social, economic, and even political resonance.

The three papers presented during the first session of the conference explored some of the associations and expectations modern architecture and urban planning inspired. Fabienne Chevallier traced the growth and decline of French interest in the buildings rising across the Atlantic in her paper “The Skyscraper and the Reception of American Society in France,

1920–1961.” Following the First World War, it was above all French engineers and public officials, rather than architects, who sought to adopt the building technologies and construction techniques pioneered in the United States. Hopes that new ways of building could help solve social problems were strong in the years immediately following the Second World War, but gave way in the late 1950s to a growing concern among the French public and architectural profession alike about the baleful impact of American influence on local lifestyles and cultural traditions. Jeffrey Diefendorf’s paper “Planning the ‘Healthy City’: From Germany to America in the Work of Gropius, Wagner, and Neutra” examined how Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra, and Martin Wagner—like their French contemporaries—were deeply interested in the buildings rising across the Atlantic. They gave much attention during the 1920s to the possibilities that new construction technologies offered for improving housing. Their careers took very different paths after each emigrated to the United States, Diefendorf explained, and their views on architecture’s social potential changed as well. After emigrating to the U.S. during the 1930s, all three came to see the small neighborhood as the core element of a healthy city and a democratic society. Only Wagner, though, remained committed to pursuing social reform through architectural design. Neutra and Gropius, on the other hand, adapted to the realities of the American scene and were to enjoy considerable success in the postwar United States. The commercial rather than social potential of modern architecture was the subject of the session’s third paper, Christian Maryska’s “Paper Skyscraper: The Representation of ‘Tall Buildings’ in Austrian and German Commercial Art in the Twenties and Thirties.” Maryska presented numerous examples of the different ways commercial artists tried to draw upon the skyscraper’s iconic value as a symbol of urbanity, modernity, and prosperity.

The second session took up architectural debate and the extra-architectural forces that influenced the development and transmission of architectural ideas. In her paper “A Cathedral of Work and New Social Life,” Beate Störkuhl outlined the career of architect-planner Max Berg and his part in the German debate on the appropriateness of the skyscraper. Berg, in his capacity as the head municipal architect in the city of Breslau from 1910 through 1925, championed high-rise buildings for civic, commercial, and residential projects. Although he was an admirer of the Chicago School of architects and clearly borrowed both design and construction ideas from the United States, Berg was highly critical of American architectural and planning practices, and he joined in the call for a “German” skyscraper. His criticism of the “American” skyscraper stemmed in large measure from aesthetic and social concerns, but

Störkuhl suggested that the assumption of German cultural superiority—particularly prevalent in the wake of Germany’s defeat in the First World War—also played an important part in Berg’s critique. Kathleen James-Chakraborty, in her paper “Proportions and Politics: Marketing Mies and Mendelsohn,” used the careers of Eric Mendelsohn and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to challenge the picture of the diffusion of the International Style as a “seamless transition” between the old and the new. Mendelsohn and Mies competed for commissions in Germany during the brief period of economic recovery between 1924 and 1929. Mendelsohn was considerably more successful, not least, James-Chakraborty suggested, due to his understanding of the appeal of “technological spectacle” among his commercial clients and the public they hoped to serve. In postwar America, on the other hand, concern over construction costs and the changing self-perception of the taste-making elite prepared the way for Mies’s success and influence. Mies was cast as the heir to the Chicago School architects of the late nineteenth century, and the International Style he helped create was adopted by Cold War America as a symbol of its cultural sophistication. The International Style eventually took hold in postwar Germany, too, but not before conservatively inclined architects in the Federal Republic tried to adapt “Germanic tectonics” to a new political context, Adrian von Buttlar argued in his paper entitled “‘Germanic’ Structure versus ‘American’ Texture in German Postwar High-Rise Buildings.” From the classicists of the early nineteenth century to the beneficiaries of Nazi patronage during the Third Reich, German architects and theorists repeatedly turned to tectonics and the emphasis of structure in their search for a distinctly “Germanic” architectural style. “Germanic tectonics” survived the collapse of the Third Reich, von Buttlar noted, because, as a result of the emigration of Germany’s leading modernist architects during the 1930s, responsibility for postwar reconstruction in both eastern and western Germany was largely in the hands of architects who had been active or even leading figures in the profession during the Nazi era.

Attention shifted in the third session to perceptions and experiences of the skyscraper. The rise of glass and steel towers around the globe during the 1950s and 1960s paradoxically did little to reduce the identification of such towers with the United States, Peter Krieger argued in his paper “New York Skyscrapers Made in Hamburg: Jerry Cotton as Visual Educator.” Jerry Cotton is the hero of a popular series of German crime thrillers set in New York City. Several Cotton adventures were adapted for the screen during the 1960s, and all, Krieger explained, could be filmed in West Berlin and the Federal Republic—much more cheaply than they could be in New York itself—thanks to the presence of “typi-

cally American" skyscrapers that could pass for those in New York in the eyes of German film-goers. New York, particularly Rockefeller Center, was very much on the minds of everyone involved with the development of West Berlin's "Europa-Center" in the mid-1960s, Alexander Sedlmaier noted in his paper on the prominently located shopping and office complex. Sedlmaier underscored the importance of the Cold War context in which the Europa-Center took shape: the complex was to symbolize West Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* and political integration within the West. In Sedlmaier's view, it also reflects the postwar stress on consumer consumption; as the United States was the pioneer in "consumer modernity," he argued, the Europa-Center can also be seen as a symbol of the process of Americanization. A less direct, more complicated form of cultural interchange may have been at work in the recent redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz, Daniel Purdy suggested in his paper "Urban Experience Below the Towers of Potsdamer Platz." Purdy, considering Potsdamer Platz from the pedestrian's perspective, suggested an affinity between Potsdamer Platz and lower Manhattan. He called particular attention to the impressions created by the density of the buildings at Potsdamer Platz and the narrowness of the streets.

The final session of the conference considered the reception and practice of modern architecture in the German Democratic Republic. In his paper "From 'Unpatriotic Symptom' to 'Poetry of the Future,'" Wolfgang Thöner sketched the changes in the reputation of Bauhaus in Eastern Germany from the end of World War II to roughly 1970. Early postwar plans to rebuild and reopen the Dessau Bauhaus as a school of design initially had Soviet backing, but were abandoned as communist officials came to see Bauhaus ideas and aesthetic values as expressions of capitalism and "cosmopolitanism." In the first half of the 1950s, official policy favored "national traditions" and classicism as the proper architectural expressions of the new society being created in the GDR. After about 1956, according to Thöner, experimentation in design and construction methods became possible, and debate on architecture and planning became possible, within limits, during the 1960s. By the end of the decade, the Bauhaus tradition had come to be seen as a positive model. The last of the papers presented, Peter Müller's "Power to the Center!" took the *Fernsehturm*, the dominant element in the East Berlin skyline, as the point of departure for a discussion of the ideological concerns behind urban planning in the GDR. Official resistance to modernism began to give way in the mid-1950s as East Germany tried to compete for prestige on the international scene. Economic difficulties in the early 1960s put an end to the discussion of high-rise development in East Berlin but did not derail the construction of the *Fernsehturm*. The tower, Müller argued, served

multiple symbolic and propaganda functions. Its Sputnik-like form, for instance, was to herald a future of socialist progress and plenty.

The organizers envision a publication based upon the conference.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style*, with a new foreword and appendix by Henry-Russell Hitchcock (New York, 1966; originally published in 1932 under the title *The International Style in Architecture Since 1922*). In his preface to the 1966 edition, Russell notes that he and Johnson had not capitalized the label “the international style” in their text, but Alfred H. Barr had in his preface to the book.

<sup>2</sup> The other two architects whom Hitchcock and Russell designated as leaders of the International Style were J.J.P. Oud and Le Corbusier.