

Chapter 9: THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE

It was a major architectural trend of the 1920s and 1930s. The basic design principles of the International style usually refer to the buildings and architects of the formative decades of modernism, before World War II. After World War II, it matured into modernism. The naming of the international style was; as one that transcended any national or regional or continental identity. The design solutions were indifferent to location, site, and climate. This style dominated progressive architectural design well into the 1960s.

The term International Style was first used on May 1, 1932 in the title of the book, “The International Style: Architecture since 1922”, which appeared at the same time at a mobile exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. (Gossel P. ed, p 464)

Aesthetic features of International Style were:

- Patterns in straight lines
- Asymmetry
- Steel and Glass Constructions
- Large horizontal Ribbon windows
- Lack of ornamentation
- White, plaster facades
- Free outlines and flat roofs

It accepted industrialized mass-production techniques and the **machine aesthetic**, acceptance of the **automobile**, design decisions that support the **function** of the building and sense of the **future**.

9.1 IN EUROPE

By the 1920s, the big three Le Corbusier in France, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius in Germany became prominent figures.

(Sharp D.p 60) writes that “The nineteen-twenties were the most important years for the formation of the principles which controlled the modern movement in architecture up to the Second World War. The individualism and the experiments of the previous two decades were followed by the consolidation of viewpoints on which constituted the “new” architecture. By 1926, the Swiss-French architect **Le Corbusier** was able to reduce its characteristics to five points:

The liberation of the ground floor by the introduction of free standing supports; the independence of the structural skeleton of a building from the wall surfaces, which allowed the introduction of horizontal windows; the free plan; the free design of the façade; the introduction of new free level of the roof, the roof garden; which overcame the maintenance problems of the flat roofs and offered the possibility of a new ground level.”

Le Corbusier had introduced these principles in his own designs such as Citrohan (1921) and Villa Savoye (1928–1931)



Citrohan Haus in Weissenhof, Germany (1927)¹



Villa Savoye (1928–1931)²

Many architects across countries were opting for rational architectural development where there was higher acceptance for “functionalist” architecture. In Germany; development of Bauhaus style by Walter Gropius in Dessau demonstrated spatial arrangements in the plan and arrangement of building elements being picturesque.



Bauhaus at Dessau, 1926³

In 1927, one of the first and most defining manifestations of the International Style was the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart. Under Mies van de Rohe’s direction, a representative group of European Architects had been brought together to design a model of modern estate of “modern” houses of people with moderate means as well as for a client with aspirations towards villa life. (Sharp D, 1991, p86)

¹ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/WeissenhofMuseum-pit.jpg>

² <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/3/3c/VillaSavoye.jpg>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus#/media/File:6265_Dessau.JPG

The Van Nelle Factory (1927-1929) in Rotterdam by Dutch architects Johannes Brinkman and Leendert van der Vlugt represented as a rationalist building perceived to be an International Style building. (Gossel P. ed., p162) Despite its size, the building has light than solid appearance because of its transparent curtain wall façade made of reflecting glass which hangs in front of steel frame. The building can be reached through glass corridor to curved glass cafeteria.



The Van Nelle Factory⁴

Another house designed by them is **Sonneveld House** (1931-1933), **Rotterdam**- an important steel framed house of the 1930s with rectangular envelope. The interior was flexible with living room on the first floor with flat roof used for open air living. (Sharp D, 1991, p128)



Sonneveld House (1931-1933)⁵

Zuev club, Moscow (1927-29) by Ilia Golosov has an auditorium within a simple rectangle of club room and dramatized by a glazed circular stair tower on the corner. (Cruickshank D ed,1997, p1434)



Zuev club, Moscow (1927-29)⁶

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van_Nelle_Factory#/media/File:VN5_HDR2.jpg

⁵ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Rotterdam_sonneveld.jpg

⁶ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Zuev_Workers%27_Club_-_Moscow_%281928%29.jpg

9.2 In US

Walter Luther Dodge House, Los Angeles, USA (1916) by Irving Gill has been called one of the first modern movement buildings in the USA. It was a two storey, white cuboid house with recessed rectangular window openings and a flat roof which was conceived not similar as fellow Europeans. (Sharp D, 1991, p86)



Dodge House, Los Angeles, USA (1916)⁷

Lovell Beach House, Los Angeles, California (1926) by Rudolf Schindler

A reinforced concrete structure with flat roof and bold cantilevered elements

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959)

His approach to design developed into a strong personal style. **The Robie House**, Chicago (1909-10) has a character where horizontality predominates in Prairie Style of Architecture. The house sat isolated in suburban context. (Cruickshank D ed, 1999, p 1491)

The 1930s and postwar years witnessed numerous new approaches to the design of low and moderate cost intended to improve domestic life. His **Usonian Houses** were popular bungalows, plan is arranged for economy and convenience; dining room bridging the living area, compact kitchen and no basement. (Ibid, p 1505)



The Robie House, Chicago (1909-10)⁸

Another masterpiece is **Falling Water (1937)**, Bear Run, Pennsylvania seems like a brilliant response to that site. The house is built over a waterfall; cantilevered slabs of concrete jut out over a rushing stream just where it becomes a waterfall. Being creator of his own modernist style; he didn't want to be categorized in some group.

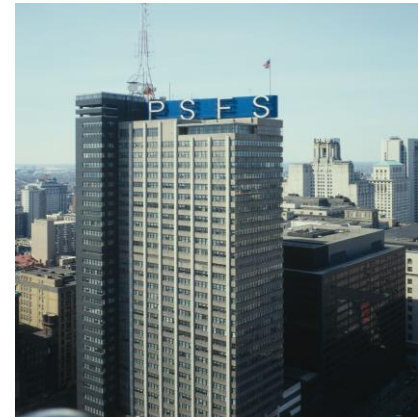
⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_L._Dodge_House#/media/File:North_elevation_and_garden_-_Walter_Luther_Dodge_House,_950_North_Kings_Road,_West_Hollywood_District,_Los_Angeles,_Los_Angeles_County,_CA_HABS_CAL,19-LOSAN,27-4.tif

⁸ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Frederick_C._Robie_House.JPG

Striving towards **simplification**, **honesty** and **clarity** are identifiable in US architects of the same period, notably in the work of **Louis Sullivan** in Chicago.

Philip Johnson coined the term on completion of the world's first International Style skyscraper: Philadelphia's **PSFS Building, Philadelphia, 1932** designed by **George Howe** and **William Lescaze**.

The building featured an innovative and effective design of a T-shaped tower that allowed the maximum amount of natural light and rentable space. The tower sat on a base with a polished marble facade. The building designed was in the International style, a term that would be coined two years after the building was designed. The main characteristics of the style, focus on volume over mass, balance rather than preconceived symmetry, and the lack of ornamentation are all in the design of the skyscraper.⁹



PSFS Building, Philadelphia, 1932¹⁰

CHARACTERISTICS

- **Radical simplification** of form
- **Rejection of ornament**
- Adoption of **glass, steel** and **concrete** as preferred materials
- The **transparency** of buildings and **honest** expression of structure
- Acceptance of **industrialized mass-production techniques** and **machine aesthetic**
- Design decisions that logically support the **function** of the building, and a vague but exciting **sense of the future**.

In 1932, American architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and architect Philip Johnson wrote an influential catalog; “International Style: Architecture Since 1922”, which outlines new architecture as; Emphasis was on volume, not mass; on regularity not, symmetry; on proportions and sleek technical perfection rather than ornament; and a preference for elegant materials that included those of the machine age. (Gossel P. ed,2007, p 464)

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSFS_Building#cite_note-skyscrapers-8

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSFS_Building#/media/File:PSFSBuilding1985.jpg

The ideals of the style are commonly summed up in four slogans:

- **Ornament is a crime**
- **Truth to materials**
- **Form follows function**
- Le Corbusier's description of houses as "**Machines for living**".

Skyscrapers of the 1930s commonly had setbacks at their upper stories to permit light to reach the street. The typical International Style **high-rise** usually consists of the following:

- **Square or rectangular** footprint
- Simple **cubic** "extruded rectangle" form
- Windows running in broken horizontal rows forming a **grid**
- All facade angles are **90 degrees**



Lake Shore Drive Apartments¹¹

Some examples

- **Life Assurance building (1944-1947)** in Portland, Oregon, by Italian-born architect Pietro Belluschi
- **Lake Shore Drive Apartments (1948-1951)** in Chicago by Mies van der Rohe
 In this twin 26 storey tower, steel remains the dominant material. The structural frame is encased in insulation for fireproofing. I section steel "pilasters" attached to the external wall.
 .(Cruickshank D ed,1999,p 1512)
- **Lever House (1951-1952)** in New York City by **Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill**

The outer appearance of this building has emphasis on the skin i.e. a curtain wall of aluminum and glass with pale green spandrel panels, wrapped around and



¹¹ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/860-880_Lake_Shore_Drive.jpg

concealed. It had neither mullions nor grid shown. (Ibid)

Lever House¹²

- **Transamerica Pyramid** (1972, San Francisco, California) by **William Pereira** and Associates
- The 60-story **John Hancock Tower** (1976, Boston, Massachusetts) by **I. M. Pei & Partners**
- **Pennzoil Place** (1976, Houston, Texas) by **Philip Johnson** and **John Burgee**.

- **Seagram Building** (1958) in New York by **Mies van der Rohe** with **Philip Johnson**

- **Helsinki University of Technology auditorium** - by Alvar Aalto
- **Hickory Cluster townhouses**, Reston, Virginia (1964) - by Charles M. Goodman

OTHER ARCHITECTS:

Walter Gropius

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Alvar Aalto

Le Corbusier

Philip Johnson

Rudolf Schindler

Adolf Loos

Richard Neutra

Welton Becket

Louis Kahn

Oscar Niemeyer

Charles M. Goodman

Frits Peutz

Dirk Roosenburg

Dirk Brouwer

Reference Books:

1. Cruickshank D ed,1999, Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture, North America Since 1900 to 1950, CBS Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, p1491-1512
2. Gossel P. ed. 2007. The A-Z of Modern Architecture, Brinkman J A, TASCHEN, p162
3. Gossel P, 2007, The A-Z of Modern Architecture, International Style, TASCHEN, p 464
4. Sharp D. 1991. Twentieth Century Architecture A Visual History, Decade 1920, The Bath Press, p (60,86,128)

¹² https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c7/Lever_House_390_Park_Avenue.jpg