

The Survival of the International Style in the History of Architecture

La Supervivencia del Estilo Internacional en la Historia de la Arquitectura

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Recibido: 2019.05.16

Aceptado: 2019.06.15

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Resumen

Es innegable que incluso hoy en día, casi noventa años después de la exposición organizada por el MOMA de Nueva York en 1932 bajo el nombre "The International Style: architecture since 1922", los arquitectos de todo el mundo tienden a identificar el Estilo Internacional con un tipo de arquitectura que aún es particularmente moderna y parte de nuestra contemporaneidad. La confusión se produce tanto en términos de materialización como desde un punto de vista historiográfico, y este artículo tiene como objetivo encontrar las razones por las cuales una etiqueta, para muchos no muy afortunada, ha sobrevivido durante casi un siglo, pasando por todo tipo de análisis y personas que han revisado el evento y la arquitectura vinculada a esta dinámica. Una mirada más cercana a la historia de la arquitectura desde entonces podría ayudar a aclarar cómo los historiadores, empezando por el propio Henry-Russell Hitchcock, uno de los comisarios de la exposición junto con Philip Johnson, han sido muy críticos con el término y sus negativas consecuencias aun cuando este ha sobrevivido parcialmente gracias a su capacidad para fusionarse y confundirse con la etiqueta más general de la arquitectura moderna.

Palabras clave: Modernidad, historiografía, crítica, exposición, contemporáneo

Abstract

It is undeniable that even nowadays, almost ninety years after the exhibition hosted by the MOMA in New York in 1932 with the name "The International Style: architecture since 1922", architects around the world tend to identify the International Style with a kind of architecture which still is particularly modern and part of our contemporariness. The confusion is both in terms of the materialization but also from a historiographical point of view and this paper aims to find the reasons why this, for some, not very fortunate label, has survived for almost one century going through all kind of reviews and people revisiting the event and the architecture linked to the momentum. A close up look at the histories of architecture since then might help to clarify how historians, starting with Henry-Russell Hitchcock himself, one of the curators of the exhibition together with Philip Johnson, have been very critical with the term and its negative consequences but yet, the term has survived partially thanks to its ability to merge and be confused with the more general label of modern architecture.

Key words: Modernism, historiography, criticism, exhibition, contemporary

It is undeniable that even nowadays, ninety years after the exhibition hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932 with the name “The International Style: architecture since 1922”, architects and even more students around the world tend to identify the International Style with a kind of architecture which still is particularly modern and part of our contemporariness.

The confusion is both in terms of the materialization but also from a historiographical point of view and this paper aims to find the reasons why this, for some, not very fortunate label, has survived for almost one century going through all kind of reviews and people revisiting the event and the architecture linked to the momentum which, again, lasted for so long. Even more, there is a clear connection between International Style and Modern Movement, and therefore with modernism in architecture and modernity to a larger extent, which raises the question of its relevancy today as part of the uncompleted project of the modernity as Jürgen Habermas posed.

The paper will also try to demonstrate the relevancy of the discussion after such a long time and how contemporary authors are still discussing the impact and repercussion of the International Style in our recent History of Modern Architecture.

International Style: originally an exhibition, a catalogue and a book

To achieve all the previous objectives, we should have a look to the exhibition itself, which took place in 1932 and was featured as an exposition plus a book plus a catalogue, being the three formats all different in content. The aim of the exhibition was to introduce the architecture of the European modern movement in America, as part of a universal phenomenon whose curators, Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and the MoMA itself as the hosting institution, tried to present to the American public as a worldwide movement of architecture with all the advantages of modernity, the connections with technology and lack of bonds with the history and the past styles, hence, as the architecture of the future for all countries in the world.

Probably, the biggest mistake is embedded in the title itself. Presenting a new architecture uprooted in the past in two words, being one of them “style”, was not a lucky decision. Still, the curators had a bigger challenge from the very beginning which was how to wrap a predominantly European architecture in a nice package which was really International and, therefore, balanced with American architects of that time. The challenge was not easy to achieve and the final success of the exhibition relied somehow in that inclusion which was handled by the curators with some difficulties. That was clear for the Board of the museum and consequently the members of the board imposed a representation of American architects equal to the European one.

In order to disclose some aspects about the setting of the exhibition, a special issue of *Progressive Architecture* published in 1982 is more than revealing. Helen Searing, Richard Guy Wilson and Robert A. Stern reflect on the exhibition in its 50 years anniversary, which is meaningful to prove the relevancy of the exhibition some five decades after.

1 Searing, Helen. "International Style: the crimson connection", *Progressive Architecture*, 2 (February 1982), 88-97.

2 Wilson, Richard Guy. "International Style: the MoMA Exhibition", *Progressive Architecture* (February 1982), 98-100.

Helen Searing clarifies¹ how the exhibition was composed by ten models and seventy five photographs, apart from plans and other explanatory documents, being that package the one who travelled to eleven different cities throughout twenty months. Another lighter package in which models were substituted by photographs for transportation purposes was on tour for six years, which gives us the dimension of the success of the exhibition eventually. About the catalogue, Hearing specifies that there were two, one entitled *Modern Architects* and the other one *Modern Architecture*, with slight variations in authorship and distribution.

Richard Guy Wilson explains² how Philip Johnson divided the exposition in three parts to disguise the European predominance in order to answer to the already mentioned requests from the Museum Board to include American architects. The first part was devoted to the achievements of modern architecture, the second to a detailed study of the leaders and the last one to housing buildings. This content plus some essays and a smaller number –and in a smaller scale– of the illustrations, would be the body of the catalogue.

Another important role was the one done by Alfred H. Barr. According to Richard Guy Wilson, not only he picked the names of the curators, the young Philip Johnson and the well-known historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, he was the first director of the Museum of Modern Art and, as such, he wrote the introduction for the catalogue, which turned out to be a very polemical one as he connected the aesthetic principles of the International Style with the nature of modern materials and the structure, and modern determinants related to the planning. Although the last part of the statement is very vague, within the first one, Barr is proclaiming the many mistakes of the built works tagged as International Style so far as they were not always but rarely relying on the modern materials but trying to imitate or leading to an industrial appearance regardless of the essence of these materials. This failed aspect of the architecture of the twenties has been highlighted many times through many buildings like Villa Savoye for example, where the slenderness of the vertical parameters and the flat roof are hiding an endless number of constructive problems whose technical solutions were still unknown by the time.

On the same note, although not related to the International Style but to the same period only, would be the Einstein Tower by Eric Mendelsohn where the appearance of a plastic and expressive pretended concrete façade is just a mere stucco coating. Still, as it was said before, the exhibition would feature the most important European architects (Le Corbusier, Mies, Gropius and Oud) and without Frank Lloyd Wright, none of the American (Hood, Howe & Lescaze, Bowman brothers, Neutra) would be at the same level.

The complexity about the event itself and its different parts (exposition, catalogue and book) are still part of the discussion even though the contents are accessible thanks to the MoMA itself. Terence Riley wrote the most comprehensive and clarifying book about the exhibition, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, published in 1992 when he was also appointed senior curator of the MoMA before becoming The Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design till March 2006.

In that book, Riley would explain the contents in depth but also the subtle nuances and the intrigues of the production. Answering to some questions³ these authors proposed to him recently, Riley delved into this particular one and pointed out how Wright, if eventually excluded, would have been very antagonistic with the exhibition as he had no problem to spread their opinions and the media was happy to share with the public and he had already started doing it. Since happily he was included, he asked to redraw part of his former work to look more modern and less dated. Wright –continued Riley– did not feel very well among his American partners but he respected Mies' work and all in all, he took part in the exhibition and that contributed to its success.

The International Style aftermath: a tag that turns into modern architecture

To measure the impact of the International Style, not just as a MoMA exhibition, but also as a long-lasting term in history, we need to look at the different histories of modern architecture to analyse how it has been accommodated and how the confusion between terms was somehow an issue from the very beginning.

Starting with Zevi, the champion of Wright and the organic architecture in Europe, in his book *Verso un'architettura organica* (1945) he is inclined to use indifferently a number of concepts such as rationalism and functionalism (previous and inferior stages of organicism for Zevi), or even modern, which he uses as contemporary. Rational, rationalists, functional or functionalists will be for Zevi Le Corbusier's Ville Savoye, Mies' German pavilion in Barcelona and Gropius' Bauhaus, whereas he would use the adjective International when talking about the United States of America.

Differently, in *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950*, Peter Collins uses with some accuracy the term International Style as he tags Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and the other International Style architects as form-givers⁴ who distorted the fundamental principles of architecture as they leaned towards artistic parameters rather than rationalism. That would be indeed in line with the criticism of Hitchcock⁵ himself and others about the rigidity and formalism of the architecture depicted as International Style.

Texts from the sixties and seventies will give different room to the International Style. Jürgen Joedicke will publish in *L'architecture d'ajord'hui* in 1960 part of his forthcoming book of 1962 where he would not even mention the International Style at all, but some of the architects featured in the exhibition. Similarly, John Jacobus in 1966 acknowledges the architects' work but does not concede a significant relevance to the exhibition. Even Philip Drew in his seminal *Third Generation*, published in 1972, would just mention in a few lines the architecture of the International Style. These three texts barely reflect on the exhibition and that might reflect the criticism aroused previously in the decade of the 50s and particularly with the well known text of Henry-Russell Hitchcock in 1951 for *Architectural Record*:

“The International Style Twenty Years Later”.

3 Conversation and questionnaire sent from the author to Terence Riley on the occasion of the symposium “On the verge of criticism” on 2014, hosted by Roca Madrid Gallery and curated by Brijuni arquitectos.

4 See also Collins, Peter. *The Form-Givers. Perspecta 7* (1961), 91-96.

5 Hitchcock, Henry-Russell. “The Evolution of Wright, Mies & Le Corbusier”. *Perspecta, 1* (1952), 8-15.

The International Style in the eighties: Frampton and Curtis

The disambiguation of the International Style and its dissolution in the stream of modern architecture continues in the first critical history of modern architecture (1980) the one by Kenneth Frampton, who devotes one entire chapter to “The International Style: theme and variations, 1925-1965”. Interestingly, the third part of the book covers from 1925 to 1991, connecting therefore the beginning of the chapter for International Style with the present (by the time he published that edition in particular). The reason why he starts in 1925 is very revealing and it is no other than at that time, Rudolf Schindler, censorious with the exhibition, built the Beach House for Dr. Lovell between 1925 and 1926. Needless to say that Schindler was a former partner of Richard Neutra, who built the House in Griffith Park in Los Angeles for the same client, Dr. Lovell, in 1927.⁶

Once again, Frampton, like other authors, is critic with the International Style which he tags as a fortunate expression related to a cubist trend in architecture with great problems to be adapted to the different cultural and climatic contexts, not to mention the lack of ideals and the constructive problems.

All of it is true but it is no less truth that how Frampton arranges the book time-wise lead us to think that he is supporting the idea of an International Style that, like it or not, is still part of the modern architecture as it was defined, or has dissolved into it, drawing some very undefined and blurred limits that now maybe are difficult to accept after all the criticism.

This parallelism and confusion between the works of the exhibition tagged International Style and modern architecture can be also traced in William Curtis' book⁷ *Modern architecture since 1900* (1982) where the author tackles the challenging task of answering the question of what modern architecture is and, to achieve that, he manages to review the most important histories of architecture in the introduction to his own one.

Contrarily to other authors such as Alan Colquhoun where the relevance of the International Style is almost despicable, very soon the term appears in this introduction to his, on the other hand, more ambitious than Colquhoun's in size, history of modern architecture. Even more, Curtis goes to Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 book to quote how, for the first one, Hitchcock

“was preoccupied with describing the visual features of the new architecture”

and

“suggested in The International Style that modern architecture synthesized classical qualities of proportion with Gothic attitudes to structure”⁸,

neglecting one more time the idea of a new style completely detached from history, a goal that, anyway, not all the modern architects were pursuing whatsoever.

6 This building is dated in 1929 in the catalogue of the MoMA exhibition.

7 Curtis, William, *Modern architecture since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1982), 11-17.

8 Ibid, 14.

Curtis will also agree with the rectification of Hitchcock about the future of modern architecture and, in particular, he writes that “no single tag such as the “International Style” will do justice to the range and depth of modern architecture produced between the wars”⁹ meaning that of course the limited expectations of an univocal modern architecture style were overcome in the period in between wars, not to mention in the following decades. For Curtis, a less dogmatic view of previous approaches of modernity to the machinist and new versions of the primitive and the vernacular did the job.

9 Ibid, 16.

The book also offers a complete chapter¹⁰ on the “the international Style, the individual talent and the myth of functionalism” where he discusses extensively the impact of the so called International Style after admitting that there were so many works with so many features in common that the book and the exhibition immediately jumped in to institutionalize a real worldwide production and a feeling which was in the air but, in hands of Hitchcock and Johnson, achieved a historical peak and a greater meaning. Nonetheless, Curtis reflected the criticism and the difficulties they faced through giving voice to others such as Frank Lloyd Wright and his challenging inclusion, that we outlined and discussed briefly earlier, and others like Rudolf Schindler, who wrote a letter to Philip Johnson before the opening of the exposition, complaining about the lack of creative architecture in pursuit of concentrating all attempts around the narrowness of the International Style.

10 Ibid, 257-273.

The International Style in the contemporariness

11 Montaner i Martorell, Josep Maria. *Después del movimiento moderno: arquitectura de la segunda mitad del siglo XX* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1999), 7.

Josep María Montaner is one of the most clarifying authors in order to support our initial thesis of a singular blending between modern architecture and International Style throughout history. In his book¹¹ *Después del Movimiento Moderno* (1993), his breakdown of the second half of the 20th century starts going back to the period between 1930 and 1945 in which he analyses in one small chapter the International Style, all of it embedded in a larger epigraph that reaches out 1965 just before the postmodernism. Montaner, similarly to Ernesto Nathan Rogers when the Italian becomes the director of the journal *Casabella*, adding continuity, names the period between 1930 and 1965 “Continuity or crisis” in an attempt to explain how modern architecture was debating whereas they should continue evolving from history or this should be completely neglected. What is interesting for us is how Montaner reflects on, first, “modern architecture, “International Style” and the “second generation of Modern Movement” in a time linear sequence in which it can be deferred that modern architecture is presented as International Style in the MoMA exhibition to be further developed into this second generation (and even a third later if we take Philip Drew’s interpretation of this evolution of modern architecture). It is clear for Montaner that he prefers the continuity to the mere crisis and rupture although he underlines how modern architects will react to the simplicity of the International Style in the same way as others have already done.

12 Ockman, Joan, *Architecture Culture 1943-68. A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture/Rizzoli, 1993), 137.

From the same year as Montaner’s book is Joan Ockman’s anthology¹² *Architecture Culture 1943-68*, which includes the already mentioned article by Henry-Russell Hitchcock in which the co-curator or the International Style exhibition reviews the accompanying book published twenty years before.¹³

13 The article “The International Style Twenty Years Later” was published in February 1951 in *Architectural Record*. It is no mistake the title (20 years later) as Henry-Russell Hitchcock explains in the article that the book was prepared by 1931 but published in 1932 at the same time as the exhibition at MoMA.

This book is not a canonical history of architecture whatsoever but a commented by the editor (Ockman in this case) collection of key articles to understand a particular period of modern architecture between the dying moments of War World II and the early stages of postmodernism. However, Ockman explains how, in the article, Hitchcock is partially critical with the book as he regrets for example the very narrow definition of the International Style and its dogmatism. She also applauds the turn in the forecast that Hitchcock had foreseen for the next twenty-five years; broadening the limited scenario he predicted to a more inclusive and varied one in the 1951 article. Nonetheless, the most important criticism Ockman celebrates in Hitchcock's text is when he regrets the homogenization of the architecture and its academicism and sterile outcome as a consequence of the *a priori* aesthetic and stylistic rules the book had outlined for modern architecture from the International Style. The interest of the International Style does not decay in texts such as the comparative historiography (1999) of Panayotis Tournikiotis. One of the histories of architecture he analyses is the one by Henry-Russell Hitchcock entitled *Modern Architecture. Romanticism and Reintegration*, and Tournikiotis writes that the book on International Style is an extension of the other one that helps to clarify and broaden its meaning. Critically and probably sarcastically and in relation with the predominant stylistically concerns of the book, the Greek author brands it as a guide for architects who want to be modern.

If Joan Ockman's anthology focused on the figure of Hitchcock and his review of the term twenty years after the MoMa exhibition, which is the first in depth review of the term and its value is larger because it was done by one of the creators of the term, Alan Colquhoun's book *Modern Architecture* (2002) can help us to understand other angles of the disambiguation between International Style and Modern Architecture, one of the questions we set out at the beginning of this text. In that sense, Colquhoun also underlines the problem of an International Style as a translation of the European modern movement but only in terms of evolution of the style without the important social content it had in Europe, in parallel with the argumentation of Beatriz Colomina quoted before. This is not a superficial aspect because, again, it undresses the International Style turning it into something related to the aesthetics and therefore, unpromising in its further development as modern architecture. Colquhoun is generous with this notable absence and points out the different cultural and political circumstances of Europe and America to excuse the lack of social content of the International Style.

To be fair, it must be said that Colquhoun only refers to the International Style at the beginning of chapter twelve of his book and only to the 1932 exhibition but never to the label as a whole. Then, he agrees with the general acceptance of it as the moment in time where modern movement is introduced in America, that is to say, as a historical milestone but no more.

Adding to the debate of the definition of modern architecture, Colquhoun discusses that in the introduction of the book. He finds the expression *modern architecture* ambiguous as it can be understood independently from the ideological fundamentals or, more specifically, as an architecture aware of its own modernity that pushes in favour of changes.

In this sense, the author is consistent with the former consideration of the International Style and its lack of social commitment in a way, and thus, both may be identified as one at least in that period. Even more, later in the introduction, Colquhoun clarifies that he will use the terms *modern architecture*, *modern movement* and *avant garde* indifferently in the book, all of them in reference to the decades of 1910 and 1920 as a whole. Could here be granted that, since *International Style: architecture since 1922* deals with the so called modern architecture (European modern movement plus American) in the same period (the twenties), Colquhoun may match also International Style with modern architecture in that period? Probably not because the exhibition was just a sample but, reversely, it could be said that, in the twenties, modern architecture was the International Style and nothing else. More recently and in line with this long-lasting interest in the exhibition, Beatriz Colomina, shed more light to the subject. In her book *Privacidad y publicidad: la arquitectura moderna como medio de comunicación de masas* (2010), The aim of Colomina's book is to emphasize the role of modern architecture in the modernity as a vehicle to spread propaganda and, when analysing the International Style exhibition, she does not hesitate in confirming this but at the same time, she also criticizes the fact that modern architecture in Europe had a social, ethical and political components that were completely neglected in the exhibition which, in her words, would be the (American) translation of Le Corbusier, in favour of mere aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the resulting architecture.¹⁴

14 Colomina, Beatriz, *Privacidad y publicidad: la arquitectura moderna como medio de comunicación de masas*, 137.

A more recent history (2012) by Jean-Louis Cohen deals only superficially with the MoMA exhibition, included within other expositions in the epigraph "Modern architecture enters the museums" as part of chapter 15 "Internationalization, its networks and spectacles". Nevertheless, Cohen highlights the key role of the MoMA as a remarkable exception, which outstands among the very little significance he concedes to the rest of museum institutions. Particularly, he underlines the activity within the new department of architecture, created in 1929, and the International Exhibition of 1932. Cohen states how the exposition excluded constructivists and expressionists to focus on Gropius, Oud, Le Corbusier and Oud, mainly.

15 Cohen, Jean-Louis. *The Future of Architecture Since 1889. A Worldwide History*, 190.

Cohen digs deeper to recall the origin of the term, which he attributes to a slogan formulated by Walter Gropius in Weimar in 1923.¹⁵ Finally, the author summarizes the impact of the exhibition as the show travelled to sixteen¹⁶ different American cities although, conspicuously, he frames the success to the American territory for decades. Cohen makes one more important remark about the disambiguation of the different terms used to define the modern architecture in the introduction of the book. He acknowledges how he has preferred to avoid the use of the term International Style in favour of a broader definition of Modernity. Moreover, he also avoids the use of the term Modern Movement, which he links with Pevsner's book *Pioneers of Modern Design*.

16 Eleven according to other sources.

Conclusions

To summarize the previous, we may quote Spanish architect and Professor María Teresa Muñoz who, with a certain sadness, wrote about the peak and decline of the International Style in a few sentences in which she described the style as powerful and unified, but also as something that could have been but never was.

It is also possible to say that it really was but it lasted only a blink. Among the many characters and protagonists of this long story, there is a key one in this process who must be taken into account from the beginning but whose relevance did not diminish but grew as time passed. That is the figure of Henry-Russell Hitchcock, one of the two curators of the exhibition. He was the one who first started the critical review of the International Style in his article in 1951 for *Architectural Record* and, in a way that was the kick off of the survival of a term which probably would have vanished in a few decades.

Even the anecdotic diagram by Charles Jencks gave us an important clue about the survival of the International Style. On the one hand, it was placed (by mistake?) close to the CIAM and the TEAM X, being the first a consequence or partial outcome of the International Style as most of its members were part of both events; and the second, the Dubrovnik born group led by the Smithsons, Aldo van Eyck and so on, their avengers, confronted with the old by then masters of modern architecture who were revenged in Otterlo. On the other hand, the *Neo International Style* as main tag sharing space with Mies van der Rohe, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Belluschi, winners of the battle for the American corporate architecture in the 50s and 60s by making a pragmatic and bureaucratic, following the Jencks' terminology, use of it turning the International Style into an official and institutional grand scale theme for architecture moving from the smaller scales of the 1932 exhibition and the mostly domestic spaces.

This is when the International Style probably wins the battle for its survival through the history and, although sometimes ignored by historians as we have seen, it becomes a major issue that transcends the history of the exhibition and its little disputes about contents and intrigues, to blend into modern architecture as the curators, the sponsors and the MoMA itself always wanted to be, in a winning celebration of the forms and the modern superficialities against the social, ethical and political components, which are left abandoned in favour of the market forces and the representation of a new monumentality of the power of corporations and institutions.

The exhibition was, like it or not, a partial story of a particular moment and, above all, was again a history of names and authors, as the Pevsner and later Giedion's histories were; that is to say, the history of individual architects more than the possibility of a universal style, regardless what the curators tried to defend and his attempt to create an international homogeneous style, something that, as María Teresa Muñoz said, never was, and which probably only represented the cubic buildings of orthogonal forms and smooth and white walls where horizontal window were trimmed in the fashion of the *fenêtre en longueur* of le Corbusier. Nonetheless, historians and probably the still associated mythology to most of the participants, have achieved the impossible, making the unfortunate term to survive through history almost one hundred years, until today.

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