The Fiction of Function

Stanford Anderson

Assemblage, No. 2. (Feb., 1987), pp. 18-31.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0889-3012%28198702%290%3A2%3C18%3ATFOF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P

Assemblage is currently published by The MIT Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/mitpress.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

http://www.jstor.org
Thu Jul 12 23:11:38 2007

Stanford Anderson
The Fiction of Function

To the memory of Roy Lamson

Stanford Anderson is Director of the Ph.D. Program for History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

1 (frontispiece). Ernst May, *Frankfurter Küche,* model kitchen for the low-income housing estates designed by May in Frankfurt, 1925–30.

The polemics of postmodernism insist on the centrality and the naïveté of the concept of function within modern architecture. It is the error and the fruitlessness of this postmodern position that I wish to reveal. My title, "The Fiction of Function," may suggest one simple and negative assessment of the role of function in the making of architecture. On the contrary, I wish to unpack several possible and related references that may be drawn from this title — references that have served architecture well, and not only in modern times.

Perhaps I should acknowledge immediately that I was driven to my topic by the thesis of an exhibition and book by Heinrich Klotz, both titled *Modern and Post-Modern.*[1] Klotz's slogan is "Fiction, not function." The slogan is an effective evocation of his thesis: that the distinction between modern and postmodern may be found in the shift of focus from function to fiction. With Klotz, this is also a normative distinction, justifying the support of postmodern architecture as against any form of continuity with the modern. Labeling modern architecture as functionalist for polemical purposes is not new, and one may wonder whether the issue needs to be joined again. However, the exaggerated association of modernism with functionalism is recurrent, and now Klotz's catalogue has received the award of the International Committee of Architectural Critics.[2]

My argument will be that "functionalism" is a weak concept, inadequate for the characterization or analysis of *any* architecture. In its recurrent use as the purportedly defin-

ing principle of modern architecture, functionalism has dulled our understanding of both the theories and practice of modern architecture. Further, if one then wishes, as many now propose, to reject modern architecture, this is done without adequate knowledge of *what* is rejected or what that rejection entails. Thus I wish first to argue that, within modern architecture, functionalism is a fiction — fiction in the sense of error. Later, I wish to incorporate function within a richer notion of fiction — that of story-telling.

The Fiction of Function in the Modern Movement as Viewed from 1932

To undermine the notion of functionalism within modern architecture, we may return to a topic that is now, perhaps, all too familiar: the exhibition and book titled *The International Style*, organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1932.[3] No doubt it is possible to exaggerate the importance of the International Style exhibition, yet its inordinate influence on the understanding of modern architecture must be admitted. "The International Style," a term coined for the exhibition to label a group of exceptional and inventive works of the 1920s, imposed itself to the extent that we now find it difficult to refer to modernist works of that period by any other name. More insidiously, the limited group of buildings exhibited in New York and the meager concepts of the International Style exhibition continue to put severe limits on what we know of the twenties — not to mention the contraints on extending the corpus of modern architecture to the thirties.

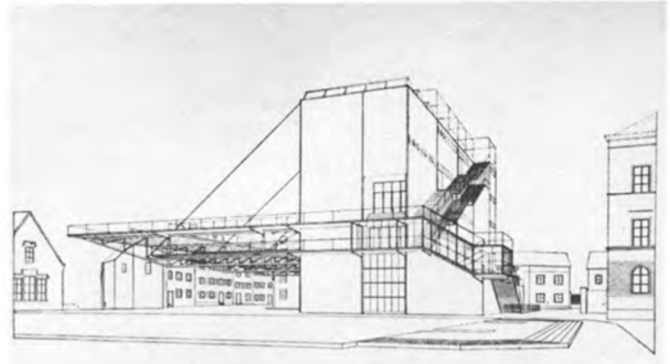
At the heart of the polemic of Hitchcock and Johnson was an exercise in connoisseurship. The authors sought to define the visual traits that assured the commonality of true modern architecture and thus established a style — the first proper style since neoclassicism. Modern architecture was not only given its place within the millenial history of art, but given a place of honor. All this was apparently accomplished despite the remarkably inadequate stylistic criteria offered: volume rather than mass; regularity rather than symmetry; and the avoidance of ornament.

An important corollary of Hitchcock and Johnson's emphasis on the primacy of style was their rejection of "functionalism." Thus within the progressive architecture of the preceding decade, they distinguished works of architecture that were functionalist and those that were not. Now it is true that there were those architects of the 1920s and 1930s who were prepared to fly a functionalist banner and to resist discussions of form, let alone "style." For Hitchcock and Johnson, the archdemon of functionalism was Hannes Meyer, who, for example, in his time at the Bauhaus, constructed diagrams of circulation and sunlight that claimed to show the "factors determining a plan." Far from functionalism being the crux of modern architecture, it was precisely the avoidance of functionalism, as recognized by Hitchcock and Johnson, that allowed inclusion under the mantle of the International Style. The seminal figures within the style were said to be, of course, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, J. J. P. Oud, and Le Corbusier.

Hitchcock and Johnson's insistence on style, then, might have drawn a line of demarcation between certain parties in modern architecture, as between the apparent functionalism of Meyer and the sophistication of Mies's Tugendhat house of 1930. But this line is not the one that marks inclusion or exclusion from the International Style exhibition. If we take the authors' polemic against functionalism as the crux of their work, we would have to recognize that some of those architects who were included would not have been uncomfortable with serious discussions of function. Consider Gropius's studies of the density of *Zeilenbau* housing according to a criterion of sun angle or his *Siemensstadt* housing, which is organized as relentlessly as any housing by a so-called functionalist. On the other hand, if we take as central the authors' visual criteria for the "International Style," we would be hard-pressed to understand their exclusion of the League of Nations competition entry by the archfunctionalist Hannes Meyer (which easily meets all the International Style criteria) while accepting Mies's Barcelona Pavilion (which, if not concerned with mass, is also not concerned with volume). Furthermore, we must recognize that some of the heroes of Hitchcock and Johnson were never comfortable with the "style"

enterprise, certainly not the meager formal enterprise proposed in the International Style.

More important than these first points about the demarcation attempted by Hitchcock and Johnson is the distortion their position introduced into any analysis of the thought and work of the progressive architects of that period. It may be useful to recognize "functionalism" to the extent that one can find some naïve functionalist arguments to contrast with Hitchcock and Johnson's antifunctionalist rhetoric. However, any serious examination of the buildings at issue will reveal that none of them, whatever the surrounding rhetoric, can be explained functionally. It was a fiction that function provided a crucial line of demarcation within modern architecture.



2. Hannes Meyer, Peterschule, Basel, 1927

The Postwar Fiction of Function in the Modern Movement

In an address to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1957, the justly renowned architectural historian John Summerson argued that functionalism, in the sense of faithfulness to program, provided the unifying principle for modern architecture.[4] With Summerson, function became not only a common, but also a positive, trait of modern architecture (though there is a sense that Summerson accepted this fact rather fatalistically). The modern architects who responded to Summerson accepted his claims, at best, with some diffidence. Summerson himself soon disavowed his hypothesis, but the equation of modernism with functionalism continues to recur. The advocates of so-called Post-Modernism adopt the still more untenable position that it is a functionalist line of demarcation that separates all of modernism from successor positions. They brand the whole of modernism as functionalism; the naïveté and/or inadequacy of functionalism is cogently argued; the rational rejection of functionalism then implies the rejection of modernism. Q.E.D.

But if it was a fiction to treat functionalism as a crucial feature of even part of modernism, it is a grosser fiction to treat the whole of modernism as functionalist. This fiction is used to define modernism narrowly and in indefensible

terms, and thus to denigrate modernism. Since "Post-Modernism" is typically defined not on its own principles but in opposition to modernism, the narrowest and most inadequate characterization of modernism offers both the easiest victory over modernism and the widest possible field for postmodernism.

The Inherent Fiction of Function in Architecture

No description of function, however thorough, is exhaustive of the functional characteristics of even relatively simple activities. The inadequacy of Hannes Meyer's few factors for determining a plan cannot be solved by adding more factors. No description of function, however thorough, will automatically translate into architectural form. The more thorough the description of function, the less likely that the description will hold true even for the duration of the design process. It would be difficult if not impossible to find an artifact, simple or complex, that has not functioned in unanticipated ways.

From arguments such as these, let us assume that functionalism is an untenable position. If so, then it is reasonable for the postmodernist not to be a functionalist. However, for the same reason, I argue that few modernists even had functionalist intentions. Nonetheless, even if functionalism offers an unreasonable analysis of architecture, it does not follow that all concern with function is wrong or that a globally antifunctionalist position is correct.

Stories About Function

If functionalism is inherently a fiction, then any claims for functionalism in the modern movement must be a fiction. This is true, but in more than one sense. It is a fiction in the senses to which I have already alluded: a) not even self-proclaimed functionalists could in fact fulfill their program without recourse to other form generators; and b) not all modernists, indeed rather few modernists, ever endorsed functionalism. However, a concern with function could also be a fiction under a more positive connotation of that word, with the sense of storytelling rather than falsehood.

Architecture is, among other things, a bearer of meaning — as the postmodernists will tell us. Yet this was no less so in modernism than in other periods. Furthermore, it is surely not unique to modern architecture that part of the story it tells is about function. It may be sustainable, however, that modern architecture, more than that of any other time, emphasized stories about function.

Fragments of such stories can be carried even in rather obvious details: direct evidence of the functional features of a building, as in the differentiation of windows at stairs or large spaces; or building elements designed to reveal the function of the building, as when large windows display printing presses or other mechanical installations.

Certain features of buildings may reveal internal functions sufficiently directly to be seen as more than metaphors for those functions: the length and repetitiveness of a factory elevation refers to similar characteristics of the processes it houses.

Structural details may reveal their own function, but may also serve metaphorically: the great pin-joints of the arches of Peter Behrens's Turbine Factory in Berlin, beautifully machined and displayed on pedestals just above street level, insist on their own objectness while suggesting themselves as the engines of their own structural system and cognate to those engines of another mechanical system fabricated within.

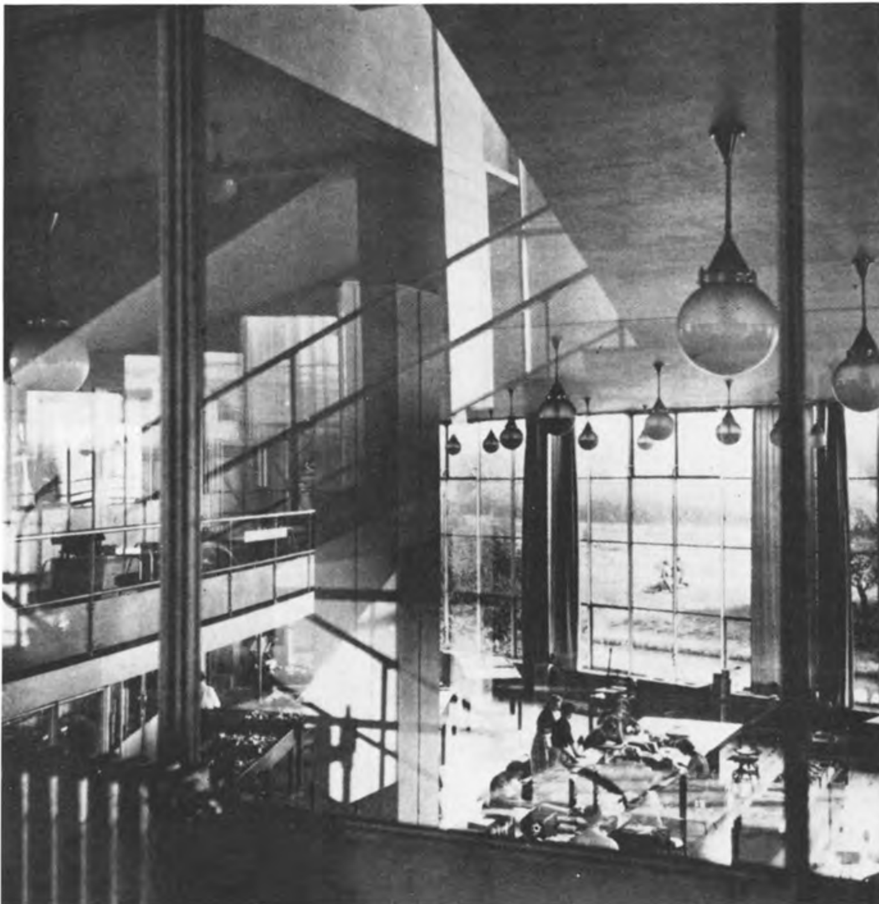
For that matter, it is virtually impossible to deprive building elements of metaphoric qualities associated with various functions: portals and doors loaded with the significance of arrival or departure; windows as the eyes of the building or as the frame through which a controlled view of the world is afforded.

All these examples, though, when taken in isolation or in accidental groupings, are little more than anecdotal. Only when a builder or architect has a larger vision of his or her work do these individual, sometimes unavoidably metaphorical details, attain a higher level of organization that we might call a fiction, a story. That story may be about function, and not only the literal function of the work.

Perhaps no work has been considered such a pure demon-

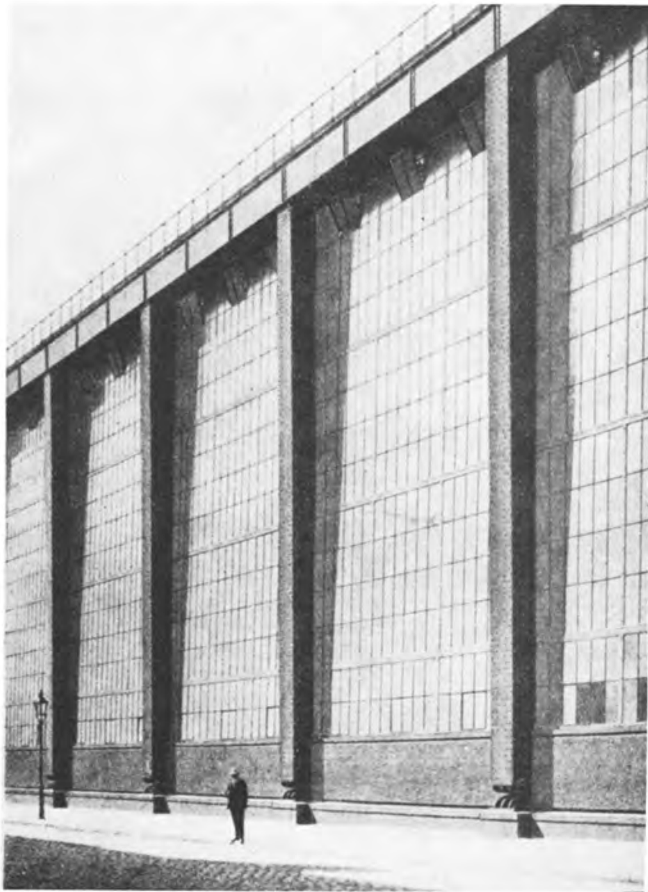
3. Mart Stam, project for a stock exchange building, Königsberg

4. J. A. Brinkman and L. C. Van der Vlugt, Van Nelle Factory, Rotterdam, 1926–30



5. Brinkman and Van der Vlugt, Van Nelle Factory, workers' cafeteria

6. Ernst May and others, Bruchfeldstrasse, Frankfurt 1926–27



7. Peter Behrens, AEG Turbine Factory, Berlin, 1908–9

stration of the functionalist thesis as the kitchens designed for the social housing of Frankfurt under the direction of Ernst May in the late twenties. The *Frankfurter Küche,* such as the one for the Römerstadt estate, is evidently concerned with economy in size and in organization; yet such an observation just as evidently only touches the surface. The kitchen must also be seen in its political and social context. For all its economy, this kitchen offers more than had been available to some of the residents and is part of a program to assure an adequate environment to all within a state of limited resources. Furthermore, its economy is to be assessed not only in terms of steps within the kitchen, but also in a reassessment of the role of the kitchen within the household and within the community. One may or may not endorse the life that is envisioned here, but envisioned it is, and also realized with eloquence and not a little beauty.

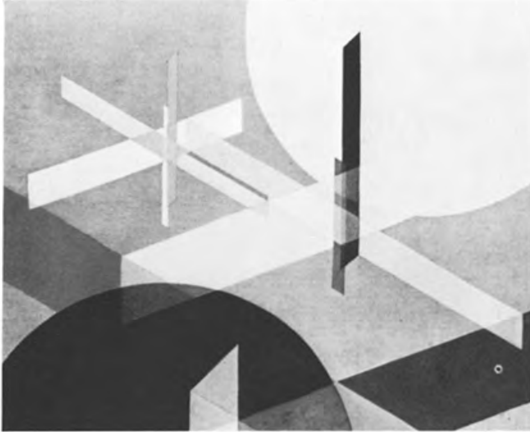
What might be considered the functionalism of the workshop elevations of Gropius's Bauhaus in Dessau is much more deeply tied to the modernist metaphysics of dematerialization espoused by László Moholy-Nagy in his constructions and teaching.

Ozenfant and Le Corbusier conceived the *Esprit Nouveau,* an interpretation of the quality of life that was coming about through, or was potential in, the conditions of modern times. The same vision informs Le Corbusier's still lifes, the spatial and formal ingenuity of the Villa Savoye, or yet again the select perception of the kitchen of that same villa. Le Corbusier offered a vision of certain eternal goods: the loaf of bread, the can of milk, the bottle of wine, light and air, access to the earth and the sky, physical health, all made available more fully and to greater numbers thanks to new potentials that were both spiritual and technical. There is hardly a detail of the Villa Savoye that does not contribute to this story. The *pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* and the *immeubles villas* tell the same story more economically, seeking to make the same goods more generally available.

Making a World

To the extent that the Villa Savoye *tells us of a vision* that Le Corbusier once had, it is indeed a story. Thus we en-

8. Behrens, AEG Turbine Factory, detail



9. László Moholy-Nagy, *ZYIII,* 1924

10. Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus, Dessau,1925–26. Bauhaus photograph by Itting.

11. Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), *Still Life,* 1920, hung in Le Corbusier's Jeanneret House, Paris, 1923

12. Ernst May, house of Ernst May, Frankfurt, 1925

13. Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928–31

14. Le Corbusier, kitchen of the Villa Savoye

15. Johannes Duiker, Open Air School, Amsterdam, 1929–30

gage the iconographic dimension of architecture. To the extent that the Villa Savoye permits that *we live according to that vision*, it does something more. It "makes a world" that does not determine, but does allow us to live and think differently than if it did not exist. If this fiction can only exist, precariously, in the Villa Savoye, it may indeed be "merely" a fiction, as valuable to us as other great stories. If its vision or principles can be generalized, we may have a literal grasp on a world that could not have been ours without the originating fiction.

We have moved far from the limited notions of function with which we began. Yet to provide the enabling physical conditions for a way of life is to address function at its highest level; and the more limited details or references may remain integral to such a larger ambition. There is not only one way in which these larger ambitions may be pursued. Each time that Louis Kahn sought to reconceive an institution and give it the physical surrounds that would allow it to reach its full potential, he "made a world" in that place for that group of people, but also instructed us both in principles and in specific performances.

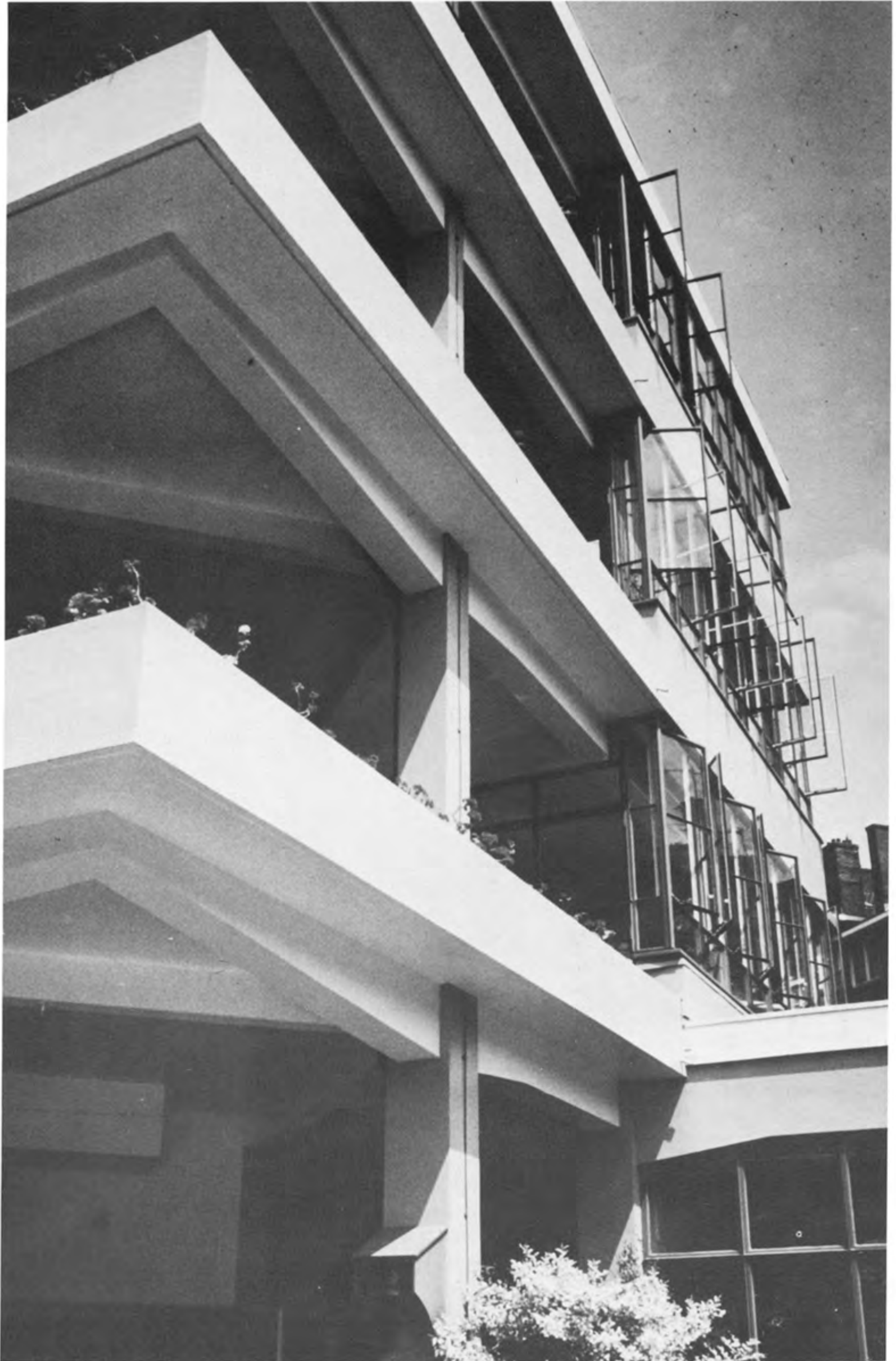
Alvar Aalto did much the same but with important differences in the "world" he envisioned. It is a world in which the various institutions are less different from one another, share more with one another. There is less institutional control. There is more of the complexity and conflation of the natural and the man-made, of the new and the old. An important and too little explored aspect of Aalto is his continuing concern to find a reciprocity between "his world" and the world. "His world" was held back from utopian idealism and was informed by the conditions of the world around him. Both a reason for, and a fruit of, that restraint was Aalto's refusal to renounce the ambition to make the world better, and not only for the privileged. Throughout Finland's long wartime and beyond, Aalto was concerned with the improvement of conventional housing under severe constraints. Compared with *l'Esprit Nouveau*, or even with Aalto's more famous works, this was a modest story, but the making of a world that goes beyond the literal task nonetheless. Exactly how, and to what degree, these more modest works by Aalto go beyond the conventional raises important isues not unlike those that Adolf Loos explored at the beginning of the century in Vienna.

Loos, Le Corbusier, Kahn, Aalto: about each of these architects one can make several claims. In the specificity of architectural making, they made *places* that "make a world" for those who inhabit them. As different and, no doubt, as mutually untenable as those "worlds" may be, none of their "worlds" is a matter of mere design whims that provide passing comfort or titillation for consumers of architecture. Their buildings tell stories, but not just any story that is different or amusing or ironic or calculated to sell. Rightly or wrongly, not somberly, but rather with ample recognition of the potentials and joys both of life and of architecture, they challenged themselves to find how architecture could serve the people of their cultures in their times. To do what they did involved not function *or* fiction, but both and more. Their work required an integral understanding of architecture and the life it supports and addresses.

I would assert that architects such as Loos, Le Corbusier, Aalto, and Kahn sought to "put modernism in its place," or perhaps better, to give modernism its place. Loos spoke of "creating buildings in which a modern way of living could naturally develop."[5] I like that formulation, for it opens a space between the place provided and the life lived. Thus it breaks any sense of determinism from architecture to modern life or vice versa. In his buildings, Le Corbusier, relative to Loos, projected a more radical change both in architecture and in modern life — still, I believe, without determinism. His *machine à habiter* is a provocative play on a recurrent French construction: the "machine to live in" poses new conditions but no more determines how life will be lived than the *machine à écrire* determines what will be written.[6]

In their works, the architects just evoked sought to make places that support modern fictions. Similarly, we can assume a position for the historian or critic: the necessity of providing an adequate story about modern architecture if we are to criticize it and grow from it.

It would hardly appear necessary to make such a seemingly unexceptionable claim, but apparently it is. When a rea-



16. Duiker, Open Air School

soned dismissal of functional*ism* can be used to dismiss modern architecture and to avoid a more integral understanding of architecture including function; when the iconographic capacity of architecture can be isolated as *the* dominant feature of architecture and all concern with *what* is communicated is neglected; when architecture becomes communication rather than *place*, place tied to communal responsibilities and potentials, then we need a return to a more critical discourse. Only works that are strong enough to challenge us facilitate such a discourse.

Notes

I thank Malcolm Quantrill and Texas A&M University for the opportunity to present this paper within the 1985 Rowlett Lectures. The present paper is only slightly revised from that which appeared in the pamphlet edited by Quantrill, *Putting Modernism in Place: Rowlett Report 85* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University, 1985), pp. 27–32.

Shortly after the Texas lecture, I enjoyed the opportunity of exploring this material at greater length in a seminar sponsored by the St. Botolph Foundation at the St. Botolph Club in Boston. That seminar was organized by the late, wise and beloved Roy Lamson, then Professor Emeritus of Literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Subsequent to the initial draft of this lecture, Peter Eisenman published an essay, "The End of the Classical: the End of the Beginning, the End of the End" (*Perspecta 21* [1985]: 155–72), in which he argues that "architecture from the fifteenth century to the present has been under the influence of three 'fictions.' . . . *representation*, *reason*, and *history*." Eisenman's more ambitious argument and the one advanced here have only tangential relations.

1. Heinrich Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne: Architektur der Gegenwart, 1960–1980* (Braunschweig: Vieweg & Sohn, 1984).

2. Klotz's 1985 CICA Award is for "the best architectural exhibition catalog."

3. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (Princeton: W. W. Norton & Co., 1932).

4. John Summerson, "The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, ser. 3, 64 (June 1957): 307–14.

5. Adolf Loos, as referenced by Heinrich Kulka, "Adolf Loos, 1870–1933," *Architects Yearbook* 9 (1960): 13.

6. Le Corbusier's defense of architecture contra functionalism is familiar from his 1929 response to the Czech critic, Karel Teige. Le Corbusier confronts the worth of the functionalists while, through their works, recognizing them as fellow poets. The Teige–Le Corbusier exchange is available in English in *Oppositions* 4 (October 1974): 79–108.

Figure Credits

1. J. Buekshmitt, *Ernst May* (Stuttgart: A. Koch, 1963), p. 47.

2. *Das Neue Frankfurt* 2 (1928).

3, 4, 5. Giovanni Fanelli, *Architettura moderna in Olanda* (Florence: Marchi and Bertolli, 1968).

7. Karl Bernhard, *Zeitschrift des Vereines deutscher Ingenieure* 55, no. 39 (30 September 1911).

8, 15, 16. Photograph by Stanford Anderson.

9. H. Weitemeir, et al., *Lászlό Moholy-Nagy* (Stuttgart: G. Hatje, 1974), p. 50.

10. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929; Mainz-Berlin: F. Kupferberg, 1968), p. 234.

11. M. Besset, *Who Was Le Corbusier* (Geneva: Skira, 1968), p. 66.

12. M. I. T., Rotch Visual Collections, lantern slide 36306.

13. Le Corbusier, *Creation is a Patient Search* (New York: Praeger, 1960), p. 92.

14. W. Boesiger, ed., *Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: The Complete Architectural Works, 1929–1934*, vol. 2 (Zürich: Les Editions d'Architecture, 1935), p. 29.