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Berlin Architectural Designs of the Twenties

Text and illustrations by Monica Hennig-Schefold

The new challenges

In 1907 the AEG entrusted Peter Behrens with the designing of products and with the expansion of the plants. This new and different assignment caused Behrens to evolve simple designs. The matter-of-factness of the turbine gallery of 1909 contrasts with the classicist tendencies of his later buildings (small engine factory, 1911).

New materials

Glass, steel and reinforced concrete make possible more unrestrained designs than conventional construction materials. In particular, the employment of glass is promoted by the utopian literature and is assuming the character of a dogma. A typical construction is the seamless glazed circular building of the German Metal Workers' Association of 1929/30.

Dynamics

'Dynamics – this term designates the internal processes of a motionless stable construct', wrote Mendelsohn in 1924. In reinforced concrete he found the material best suited to realize his conceptions.

The circular motive

The dynamic designs are followed by the geometrical ones, giving rise to an objective design idiom. Circle and semicircle are widely employed, for they yield an individual character despite the mathematical form.

Organic curved designs

In many cases the line bends, not to form a perfect circle, but in the shapes derived from organic nature. This applies not only to architectural details but also to town-planning in general. The streets and rows of houses are given irrational, concave or convex curves.

Single-family houses

The above-mentioned tendencies achieved their most obvious realization in the single-family house. Here the aim of the architects of the Twenties could best be concretized: the interplay and the telescoping of cubes and other bodies. In this field we find the leading names of the period: Mies van der Rohe, Hilberseimer, Neutra, Mendelsohn, Luckhardt and Taut.

Problems of alignment

The application of the idiom worked out in connection with single-family house construction to the building of row houses presented problems of rhythmic organization and variation. The fact that several flats are located in one house was supposed to be expressed in the elevation. Bruno Taut attempted to achieve these effects by the use of colour and by the employment of coloured materials. However, the highest degree of rhythmic organization was achieved by Emil Fahrenkamp on his Shell Building with the sevenfold recessing of the elevation line.

After 1000 years

Since the fall of the Thousand-year Reich Berlin has been given a number of significant buildings, the Convention Hall, the Academy, the Philharmonic, which exceed the scope of this article. They can be understood in a certain sense as the continuation of the achievement of the Twenties. Unfortunately, these ideas are having very little broad influence on the average architecture of the city, their effect being seen merely in certain surface aspects.

The Third 'Merz' Building of Kurt Schwitters

by Lucia Moholy

Of the three 'Merz' buildings, created one after the other by the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, the first two, those in Hanover and in Norway, were destroyed. In England, where he had taken refuge in 1940, he began, after the war, in a shed of Cylinders Farm at Langdale near Elterwater, with a third construction, into which he intended to integrate the garden implements he found lying about, in the sense of his refuse-collages. At the time of his death on January 8, 1948, only one wall of the structure was completed. Since it was showing the effects of exposure to the weather, the large 'Merz' wall, measuring nearly 8 m², is now being transported to the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

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Jean Tinguely

by Jean-Christophe Ammann

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The author investigates the significance of movement in the work of Jean Tinguely (born in 1925 in Fribourg), whose work he regards as being some of the most vital sculpture of the 20th century. In Tinguely's creations since 1954 he distinguishes three phases of a penetration of plastic material by way of movement; first of all there are experiments with the most various materials: non-representational painting, wire structures, metal, wood and paper constructions. In the constructive conceptions of the period between 1954 and 1959 movement enters as a complementary factor: reliefs in the shape of white metal surfaces, which rotate against a black background, and 'painting' machines. In the second phase, the assembly compositions of 1960–1962, movement is identified with the material as such. Example: the 'self-destroying happening-machine' which was arranged to destroy itself progressively in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on March 17, 1960, the vibrating machines and the water-squirting machines. In the third phase, since 1963, the movement is restricted again, and the machine possesses meaningful form both at rest and in motion. Example: the 'Eureka' sculpture at the Expo 64 in Lausanne.

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