

# Towards modernist classicism

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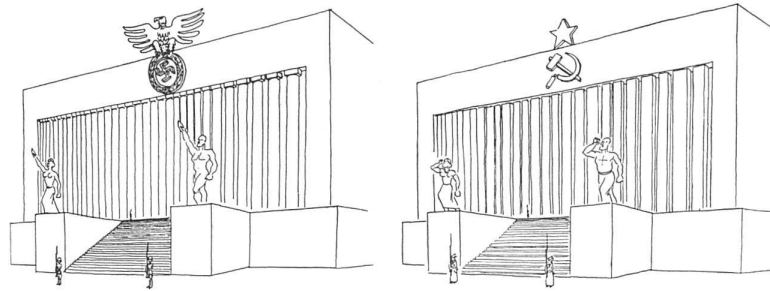
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## 2. Monumentalität?



(Zeichnungen/dessins: Osbert Lancaster)

Sehr viel Druckerschwärze ist dem Anliegen gewidmet worden, zu demonstrieren, dass klassizistische Kolonnaden in der Architektur «diktatorial», «totalitär» und «faschistisch» seien. Bevor sie das alles waren, konstituierten sie jedoch – wie Tim und Charlotte Benton im hier folgenden Aufsatz belegen – den «internationalen Stil» des Jahrzehnts. Dabei waren die Argumente, mit denen man für Monumentalität und Klassik – im Gegensatz zum kalten «Rationalismus» des *neuen Bauens* – plädierte, fast überall analog: in Genf, in Deutschland, in Frankreich,

England und der UdSSR stand bei diesem Unternehmen die Absicht im Vordergrund, eine Architektur zu bauen, die Humanität und Dauer verkörpert – und dies in einer anschaulichen, «im Volksbewusstsein verankerten» Sprache.

Die folgenden Beiträge zeigen darüber hinaus, dass die Grenzen zwischen «moderner Architektur» und neoklassizistischem «Monumentalstil» fließend waren – durchlässig, und zwar nach beiden Seiten hin. S.v.M.

TIM AND CHARLOTTE BENTON

### Towards Modernist Classicism

*Le nouvel art veut exprimer sincèrement la mentalité nouvelle. L'esprit de ce mouvement artistique se rapproche de celui de l'architecture grecque...*

*Par l'état des choses, par la marche de l'Histoire, l'homme de nos jours est forcé de devenir universel. (M. Malkiel-Jirmounsky, Les Tendances de l'Architecture Contemporaine, 1931)*

The competition for the Palais de la Société des Nations is usually seen as a struggle between modernism and the *ancien régime*.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors contribute to adding to this dialectic that of nationalism versus internationalism. Ironically, the two most “international” schemes amongst the first prize winning designs in the competition were those which might appear, at first sight, to have least in common: the project by the septuagenarian academician H.-P. Nénot (in association with Julien Flegenhaimer), and that by the “apostle of functionalism” Le Corbusier. The former could be understood as a normative solution to the problem of monumentality, the latter as a rational response to the prac-

tical problems posed by the brief.

#### A “diplomatic” language of architecture

The self professed internationalism of the “new architecture”, as well as its freedom from the historical and symbolic associations of *les styles*, seemed to its protagonists to make it the perfect vehicle for the material expression of the values of the new institutions founded to promote world peace and international justice.<sup>2</sup> But equally, the classical tradition preserved and promoted through the *Beaux-Arts* system

could claim supra-national status as the embodiment of those laws of composition, organization and symbolism with which architects of many nations were familiar from their education. By tradition, classicism provided the universal “diplomatic” language of architecture, in much the same way as French provided the international language of practical diplomacy.

Shorn of its most distinctively “French” *Beaux-Arts* qualities, and adopting the more rational features of Le Corbusier’s overall layout, the finished building may be regarded as prototypical of the

reformed monumental style of the thirties. Modern in its structure, its adoption of a standard office plan for the Secretariat building, its materials and its equipment, the Palais de la SDN nevertheless retained, in its classicizing style, those qualities of “synthesis” and “reconciliation”, “dignity” and “authority” which were considered essential to the expression of the diplomatic ambitions of the SDN.<sup>3</sup>

### **Classicism and totalitarian ideology**

It is usual to associate the revival of classicism during this period with those totalitarian regimes which employed the style for more or less clearly defined ideological ends. Thus the “ironic” resemblances in scale and style between the German and Soviet national pavilions in the international exhibition in Paris in 1937 are often noted in the histories of architecture of the period. And this convergence of the forms of expression of opposing ideologies is usually interpreted (at least by implication) as resulting from the common totalitarian aspects in the practice of those ideologies. Yet it is an observable fact that the revival (and reformation) of classicism during the inter-war period is not at all confined to totalitarian states and that classicism may even be said to have provided the dominant choice for *most* buildings of national, civic and monumental significance in most western countries. Classicism may be found in use for government and municipal buildings, memorials, museums, art galleries and libraries, and for buildings for tertiary (but not usually primary and secondary) education. Clearly, however, this classicism is of various types – from pure neo-classical revivalism, through the legacy of the *Beaux-Arts* tradition, to a pared-down version in which classical references have become extremely residual. Paradoxically, the *raison d'être* of this international phenomenon resulted primarily from an appeal to the defence of national traditions and values.

### **Nazi architecture**

The heart of Nazi architecture was its symbolic expression of prelatism:

Der Nationalsozialismus, aus dem Geist des Soldatentums geboren, wollte und will die «Ewige Wache» seines Volkes sein, und so war es eine seiner ersten Taten, dass er dafür ein Sinnbild schuf.<sup>4</sup>

The genuine “modernity” of NS architecture lies in its use of space, movement, colour, light and human participation, to the utmost.

Die neue gestalterische Kunst ist daher auch nicht von der Kunst ausgegangen, sondern vom Leben.<sup>5</sup>

The absolute clarity of these conceptions, despite their purely militaristic context, provides the semiological primer for modernist rationalism in general. Of the NS “Feier”:

Sie ist der symbolische Augenblick, in dem Tod und Leben, Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft sich begegnen.<sup>6</sup>

The heart of NS mythology – the celebration of death and racial continuity – took place in the rallies at Nurnberg, but by implication the “message” applies to all NS architecture, not merely the Zeppelfeld.

Sie hat die Haupttribüne und in deren Mitte den Führerstand, als Abschluss aber eine alle Tribünen überragende Pfeilerhalle. Auf sie blicken die politischen Soldaten. Alle von einer Haltung, im gleichen Kleide, auf ein Ziel ausgerichtet, müssen sie die strenge Reihung der Pfeiler als Wesensausdruck der Ordnung empfinden, der sie sich unterstellt haben, am Steine des gleichen Gestaltungswillens inne werden, der sie selbst, die lebenden Menschen, ergriffen hat. Sie fühlen zwischen sich und der Architektur einen vollkommenen Einklang.<sup>7</sup>

### **Nazism and thirties Zeitgeist**

In its approach to open air activities, sport and muscular development, NS cultural leaders were seizing on a key strand of thirties Zeitgeist. And, despite a generally “lumpen” quality in official buildings, the range of NS architecture, from the modern factory to the commercial or government office building shares many features with other European architecture – hard edges, abstraction of articulation, the reliance on repetition of similar elements – picture frame window surrounds, pilaster strips, overscaled entrance openings, overscaled typography, dramatic lighting and sculpture and, occasionally, colour.

### **Adaptability: semantic and formal**

If, on the one hand, we can see the similarities of architectural language throughout Europe as a reflection of the common tendencies towards the centralization of political and social institutions in a period of economic depression and increasing international tensions, we can also see them as a reflection of the plurality of associations of classicism and of their capacity for adaptation according to circumstance and need. In the usage of the thirties this is central to the appeal of classicism: it may be “zeitlos”, in the millennial interpretation of the Third Reich; or the means to a rediscovery of cultural identity, in Mussolini’s Italy; or conveniently “en dehors de la mode”, in France; or merely “good mannered”, in England. It can be “republican”, “democratic”, “imperial” – or a combination – according to need and application. And by tradition and usage it carries associations of “universality”, “authority”, “dignity”, “monumentality”, “continuity”, and so on, which, however generalized they may seem, are capable of explicit demagogic exploitation. Further, the language of classicism is innately adaptable in scale and extension from the single building, through the grouping of a complex of buildings, to the organization of a fragment or even the whole of the larger urban context; and it offers an easily recuperable body of norms of proportion.

### **Rationalization, Standardization**

Nous assistons aujourd’hui à un phénomène de concentration: concentration de capitaux, à cause de l’augmentation du prix de la construction, des terrains et de la diminution du pouvoir d’achat de l’argent, d’où spécialisation des quartiers (zoning), spécialisation de la main-d’œuvre (taylorisation), spécialisation des formes (standardization).<sup>8</sup>

Whatever its claims, the new architecture did not have a monopoly of the understanding of the relationship between architecture and its economic and social context; nor, by the thirties, did it have a monopoly of the use of modern materials and techniques of construction, nor of theories of rationalization and standardization in construction

and design. The forces which moulded what Hitchcock and Johnson dubbed the “International Style” also effected a transformation in the field of monumental architecture:

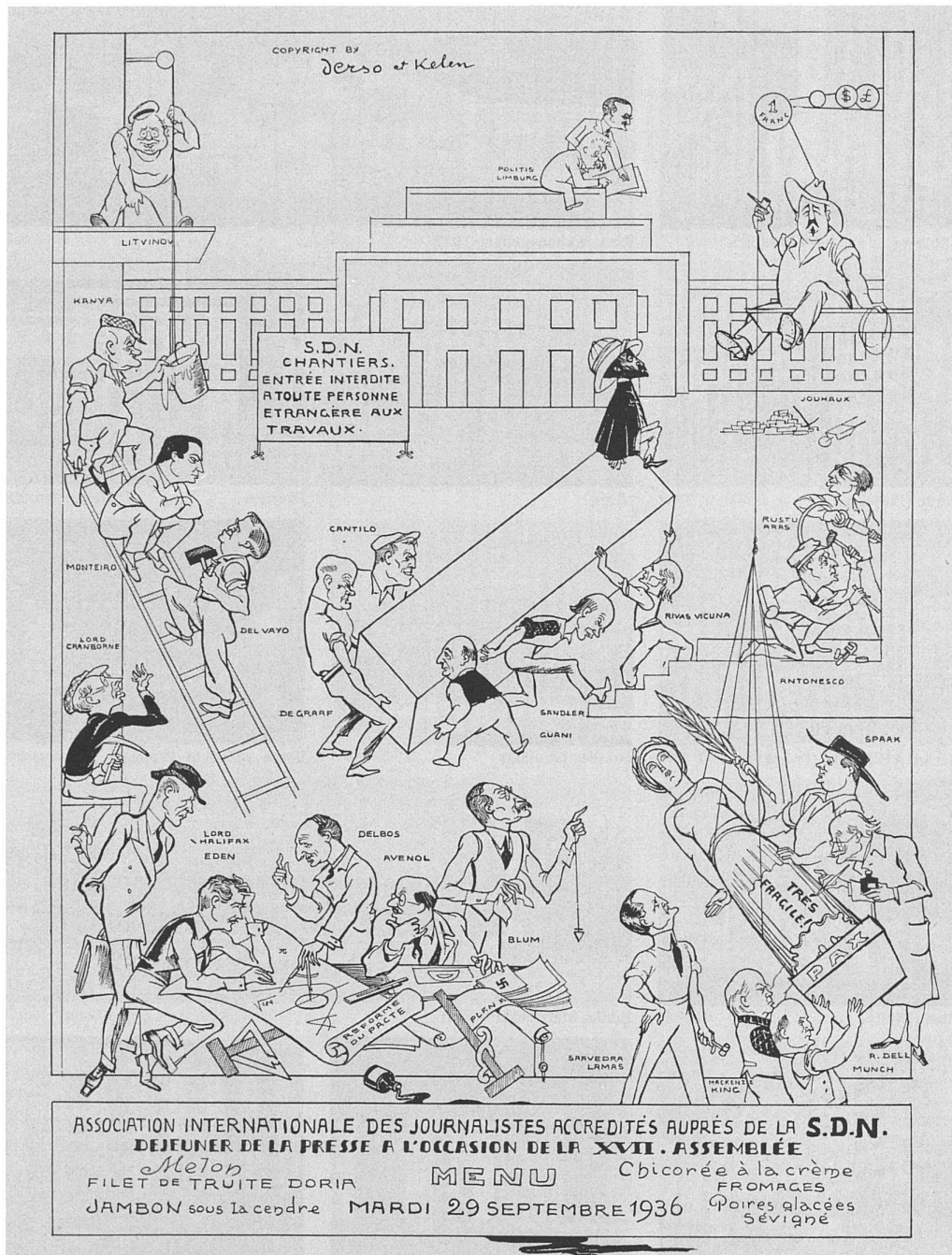
L’architecte recherche avant tout, lorsqu’il bâtit, l’économie, le confort, le pratique. Il élimine toutes les formes qui étaient l’héritage d’un passé aujourd’hui aboli. Le ciment armé, les matériaux imperméables lui permettent la construction de terrasses, lui imposent des formes rigides, géométriques. Le caractère artistique est donné par la justesse des proportions et non plus par le pittoresque des éléments, par l’harmonie des revêtements et non plus par la richesse du détail.

Une nouvelle architecture est née, ... qui comme toutes les architectures, est en grande partie le résultat des conditions économiques et sociales.<sup>9</sup>

### **„Modernist Classicism“**

The style which is particularly a feature of the public architecture of the thirties may be understood as a synthesis of classicism and modernism and perhaps best be described as “modernist classicism”. We can distinguish it from the “stripped” classicism to be found in such buildings as Speer’s New Chancellery, or Troost’s *Haus der Kunst*, where explicit references to the full repertoire of classical forms are retained. “Modernist classicism” shares with stripped classicism the rules of symmetry, proportion, grandeur and “correctness”. But it absorbs from the Modern Movement a new sense of space, a treatment of walls as surfaces rather than load-bearing masses, and a completely “modern” approach to materials. But if the determinist principles which Hauteccœur describes led to an elimination of architectural detail, this was compensated for in the revival of monumental sculpture (itself stripped to a telegraphic generality of form), the use of giant decorative relief panels and of mural paintings and mosaics.

An architect like Albert Laprade, whose Marbeuf Garage (1928) was hailed as milestone of the Modern Movement, moved naturally into the language of „modernist classicism“ for the design of the Musée Permanent des Colonies built for the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931. The change in style represented both



29 Derso & Kelen: Speisekarte für den Presseempfang anlässlich der XVII. Vollversammlung des Völkerbunds / Menu pour la réception de la presse à l'occasion de la XVII. Assemblée Générale de la Société des Nations, 29. Sept. 1936. (Nachlass C. Broggi.)

the difference in the nature of the commission (different styles for different building types), Laprade's new status as an "official" architect, and a general cultural shift towards classicism which was widespread from around 1930 onwards.

#### Reorganization of the profession

"Modernist classicism" and the classicizing tendencies which can

be detected within the Modern Movement can be identified partly with the realization by "academic" architects that the old forms were no longer economically practicable without compromise and partly with the desire of "modernist" architects to achieve official recognition and commissions. A relevant factor here may be the increasing agitation to regulate and control the profession. Most European coun-

tries moved towards making architecture the closed profession it is today. The Architectural Registration Act in England, the various attempts to establish an "Ordre des architectes" in France (finally instituted under the Vichy regime in 1941) and the more blatantly political and racist restrictions imposed by Goebbels' *Kulturkammer*, all result from the same fear and uncertainty, the professional insecurity, which is

characteristic of the period. It is worth remembering that even Perret was victimised throughout the thirties, for his activity as an entrepreneur which was held to "contaminate" his status as member of a "liberal profession".

#### "Les communistes du béton"

First generation modernists like Perret and Garnier began to make increasingly overt classical references in their work of the thirties, in proportion to their increased acceptance by the establishment. Camille Mauclair, one of the most virulent of critics of the International Style, could describe Perret and Garnier as:

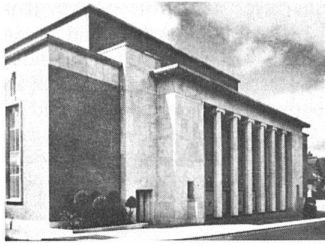
des constructeurs sérieux et logiques, ayant cherché, avec loyauté et intelligence, à donner à notre temps une neuve physionomie architecturale. Je ne les confonds pas aucunement avec les iconoclastes, les demi-fous et les communistes du béton.<sup>10</sup>

A similar, but less easily classifiable, shift can be identified in the work of architects such as J.J.P. Oud, Mies van der Rohe, and Erich Mendelsohn, which shows an increasing pre-occupation with monumental planning, with *Beaux-Arts* axial development, and with the use of facing materials such as marble and stone, as the decade progressed. Now here is the rapprochement between "modern" and "classical" more marked than in Italy, where the dividing line between International Style and "modernist classicism" is often difficult to draw. Terragni's *Casa del Fascio* (which finds a place in every anthology of the International Style), explicitly classical in its proportions, materials and programmatic content, stands exactly on the watershed. In the work of architects as varied as Charles Holden in England, Michel Roux-Spitz in France, and Emil Fahrenkamp in Germany, one can see tendencies towards a similar kind of synthesis, even if less consistently and elegantly resolved.

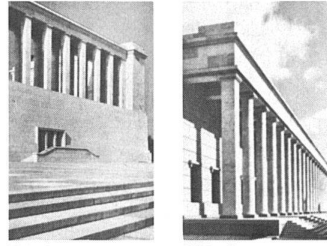
#### Politics and the international exhibitions: Paris (1937) and New York (1939)

It was an uneasy alliance, revealing the profound disturbing schisms which underlay European society in the inter-war period. The symptoms became acutely visible in the international



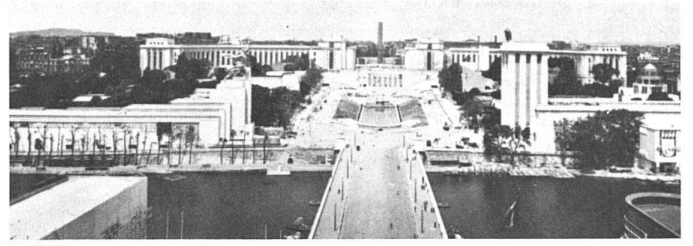


Wolverhampton, England

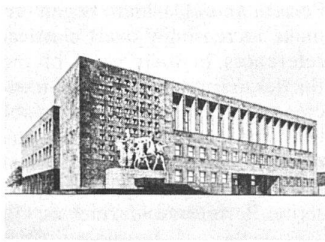


Nürnberg

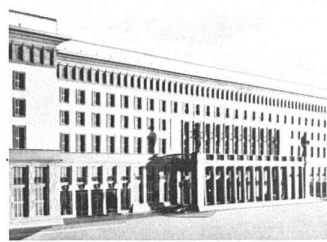
München



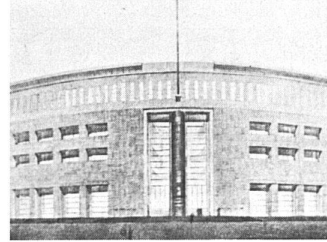
Paris, Weltausstellung 1937



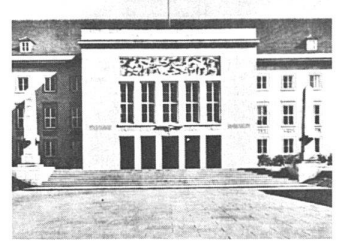
Livorno (Projekt)



Berlin (Projekt)



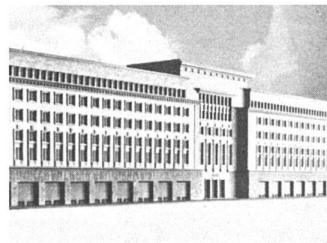
Neapel



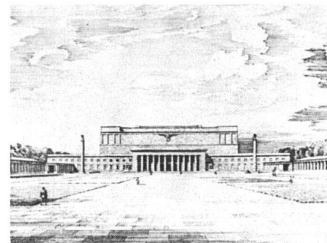
Dresden



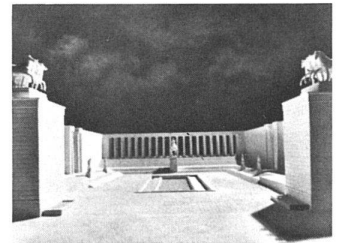
Paris



Berlin, AEG-Haus (Projekt)



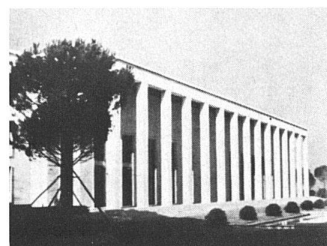
Dresden (Projekt)



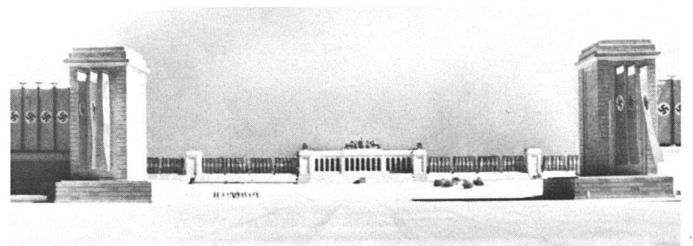
Berlin, Märzfeld (Projekt)



Walthamstow, England



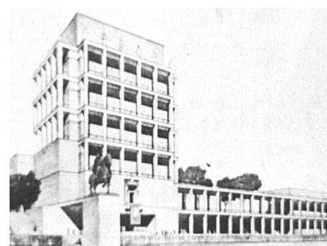
Rom (EUR)



Berlin, Märzfeld (Projekt)



Lyon



Paris, Weltausstellung 1937



München, Ehrentempel



Moskau

exhibitions in Paris (1937) and New York (1939).

L'exposition de 1937 est le reflet très précis de notre "état d'âme 1937". On y discerne, au milieu d'une discipline généralisée, une sorte d'aspiration très vive vers "autre chose", encore assez vague, vers le grandiose, le hors d'échelle, l'ordre, l'héroïsme, l'idéal, la solidarité, le sens social. Conséquence des troubles économiques et politiques, on voit s'entremêler avec le courant "technique pure", des courants "nationaux" très nets.<sup>11</sup>

The great powers were staking their claim to world leadership and the language was the universal one of modernist classicism. It was a style which pleased no one – the product of a curdled alloy of dissimilar ingredients in the intense heat of impending world war. To many Modern Movement architects, any "monumental" commission would remain unacceptable, at least until after the war. To the old guard, the new style was as brutal and unsatisfac-

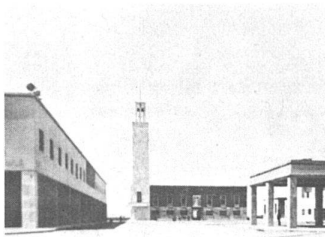
tory as the "panbétonisme intégral" which was their chosen target. The regular critic for the official French architectural journal described the projects for the new Museums in Paris in scathing terms: Il est vraiment fâcheux que tant d'entre eux n'aient réussi qu'à donner à leurs musées l'aspect de bâtiments industriels ou de magasins... Pour les façades, je crois que l'époque est peu favorable; le nudisme actuel, la mode des colonnades minces et hautes, sans chapiteaux, sans couronnement, et

celle des terrasses, quand même, donnent une architecture peu monumentale et assez déplaisante.<sup>12</sup>

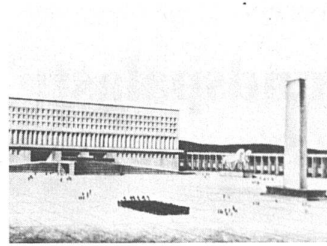
And the defenders of "modernist classicism" have yet to come forward to reinstate the last chapter of *Beaux-Arts* planning and the first chapter of modern monumental architecture.

**Footnotes**

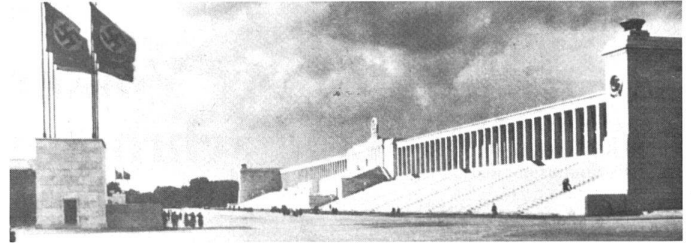
<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Christian Zervos: "La bataille... c'est d'esprit ancien contre esprit moderne...", *Cahiers*



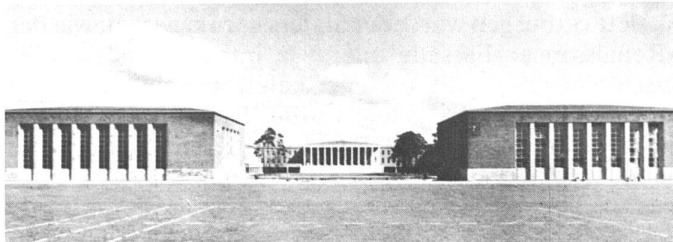
Sabaudia



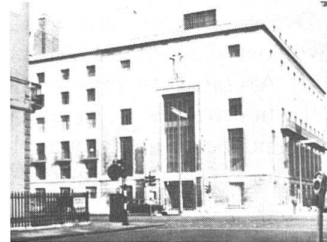
Rom (Projekt)



Nürnberg, Zeppelinfeld



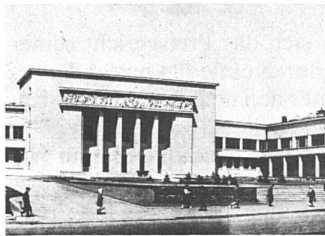
Reichssportfeld



London, RIBA



Chichester, England



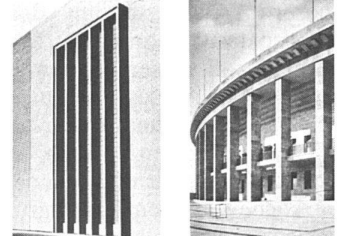
Moskau



Novosibirsk



New York, 1939



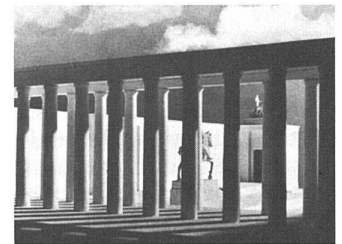
Kokerei Nordstern Berlin



Rom (Projekt)



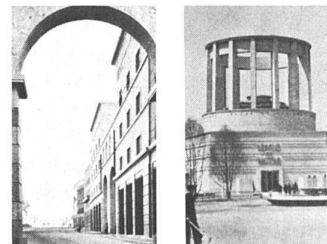
Moskau



Rom (Projekt)



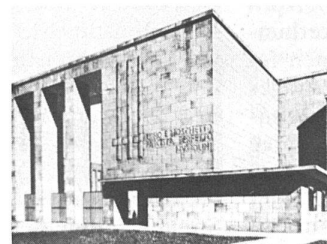
Turin



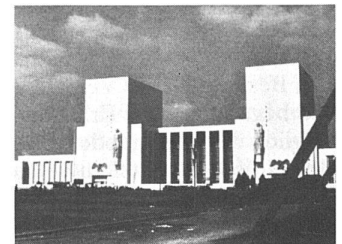
Rom



New York, 1939



Rom, Città Universitaria (Projekt)



New York, 1939

*d'Art*, 1927, 8 and subsequent issues, Siegfried Giedion: "For the first time present day architects challenged the routine of the academy in a field which it had dominated for generations. The Academy won this particular engagement but its victory injured the prestige of its methods..." *Space, Time and Architecture*, Harvard University Press, 1944, p.417.

<sup>2</sup> A point particularly brought out in the *Schweizerische Bauzeitung* discussion of the competition results, 9th July 1927. The problem of a symbolism appropriate to buildings representing international co-operation is

not confined to the Palais de la Société des Nations. Georges Epitoux's building for the Bureau International de Travail, completed in 1926, on the same site as that allocated for the SDN, prompted the following thoughts in a French review: "Est-ce un palais? Est-ce un temple? Ces appellations ont paru quelque peu prétentieuses; les deux mots sonnent mal... l'un rappelant les somptuosités des régimes monarchiques et blessant le dogme sacré de l'égalité, l'autre pouvant paraître excessif pour un simple bâtiment administratif où des hommes de tous pays viennent appor-

ter leur bonne volonté... ce qu'ont voulu les auteurs du programme, c'est une sorte de grand bâtiment administratif comprenant avec des services généraux, une série, une sorte de ruhe, de bureaux-cellules..." (A. Louvet, "Le Bureau International du Travail", *L'Architecture*, vol. XL, 1926.)

<sup>3</sup> It may be noted here that the SDN's effectiveness in mediating disputes between nations, or between itself and its members, had begun to break down well before the Palais de la SDN was completed.

<sup>4</sup> H. Schrade, *Bauten des Dritten*

*Reichs*, Leipzig, 1939.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>8</sup> L. Hauteceur, "Les conditions économiques de l'architecture", *L'Architecture*, 1931, pp.103–104.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Camille Mauclair, *L'Architecture va-t-elle mourir?*, Paris, 1934.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Laprade, "La Trop Belle Exposition", *L'Exposition de Paris*, Paris, 1938.

<sup>12</sup> A. Louvet, "Concours pour la construction des Musées d'Art Modernes", *L'Architecture*, 1935, p.37. ■