Rossellino’s project for the choir and transept sponsored by Pope Nicholas V, and the first of his own attempts at the central-plan church he presented to Pope Julius II between 1505 and 1506. The Rossellino church was represented by a 1:200 model (on display in the show), proposed by Christoph Frommel and based on the U20A drawing and the dimensional information given in Giannozzo Manetti’s De vita ac gestis Nicolai V Summi Pontefici (1455, also on view). Reconstructing the section of the transept and the choir, and juxtaposing the interior with the exterior, the model gives new insights about the project, particularly the interior corner between the choir and the transept where the solution of a pilaster flanked by a half column is similar to what Rossellino himself designed for the corner of the Pienza Cathedral façade. However, the structural system of the roof, reinforced by strong, oddly shaped brackets placed on top of massive half-octagonal pillars around the perimeter of the building, is problematic and unconvincing. The brackets, placed outward in a position where no thrusts exist, are structurally useless.

In sum, the quantity and value of the objects in the exhibition were astonishing; however, the show’s logic was unclear to a non-expert in the same way that fifteenth-century Rome was unclear to anyone who lacked Alberti’s intellectual abilities. Captions were extremely concise, and unfortunately the highly sophisticated and brilliant criteria used to visualize Alberti’s methods of understanding antiquity were not apparent. Furthermore, it would have been useful for the viewer, and easy and inexpensive for the curators, to have included some images of Alberti’s buildings that show how he transformed his knowledge of antiquity into modern architecture. At least a picture of the capital at the second level of the Palazzo Rucellai’s façade might have been hung beside that of Hadrian’s Mausoleum, and an image of the corner of the Church of Santa Maria Novella included in the presentation on the Basilica Aemilia. The beautifully illustrated catalogue, however, compensates for these omissions; it explains very well and easily (at times too easily) every object in the exhibition.

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Publication related to the exhibition:

Notes
5. Manoscritto Vaticano Chigiano M. VII. 149, 3r–3v, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican. See Di Teodoro, “Descrizio Urbis Romae,” in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 176–81, where the manuscript is dated to the mid-sixteenth century.
9. This sketchbook includes mostly views of Rome and its antiquity. Cod. 28-II-12, Biblioteca San Lorenzo del Escorial, Monastery of San Lorenzo el Real Escorial, Madrid.
10. This happens, for instance, in front of the drawing Spola Chiesti, by the Pseudo-Cronaca, Album II, 1, 429, 50v, Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, and Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Trattati di architettura, Codice Saluzziano 148, Biblioteca Reale, Turin. Other sketches on view were Cod. S IV 6, Biblioteca Comunale, Siena, and the Codice Chiunczasny, inventario MS XVII A6, Library of the National Museum, Prague, open at 70v–71r, representing a section and an elevation of the Pantheon. This sketchbook once belonged to Nesselrath in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 200.
13. See catalogue entry by Nesselrath in Fiore and Nesselrath, La Roma di Alberti, 312, one of the best parts of the book.

Robert Mallet-Stevens Architect
1888–1945
Centre Pompidou, Paris
27 April–29 August 2005

Robert Mallet-Stevens was a fascinating and central figure of the French modern movement in the 1920s and 30s, but his historiographic reception has been mixed. A condescending, if not disapproving, critical response to his work and the lack of established archives (the architect having himself ordered the destruction of much documentation after his death) have made him difficult to understand. Sigfried Giedion called him “elegant” and “formalist,” Theo van Doesburg labeled him “illusionist,” and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (who thought Mallet-Stevens was a Belgian architect!) described him as “crude” and “superficial.” Ultimately, the critics and historians of the modern movement saw Mallet-Stevens as a secondary figure who valued aestheticism over real innovation. No critical reappraisal followed his death, and the few known drawings and documents did little to overturn his reputation as a “dandy architect.” At the same time, the paucity of information created a certain mythical aura around him.

The exhibition on Mallet-Stevens at the Centre Pompidou was the first major retrospective dedicated to the architect and its clear intent was to reestablish the stature he once had. The show presented an array of images of the man and an impressive number of documents—many...
exhibited for the first time—including all his original drawings; a massive selection of original photographic prints; a range of furniture he and his collaborators designed; extracts of films for which he conceived the interiors; and essays and manuscripts written by and about him. The curators, Olivier Cinqualbre and Aurélien Lemonier, organized the presentation chronologically, re-creating the universe of the architect through elaborate installations. Enlargements of period photographs served as backgrounds for furniture. Continuous digital projections allowed the visitor to explore the buildings from different angles, and a number of models specially executed for the show complemented the documentation. Extracts from period films, such as those made for the inauguration of rue Mallet-Stevens in Paris, and for the 1925 and 1937 International Exhibitions there, enlarged the context of the presentation.

The general color scheme and aesthetic of the installation, designed by Paulo Roberto Dizio, reminded one of Mallet-Stevens’s chromatics (yellow, blue, green, and red in tempered tones) and his interest in neo-plasticism.

The chronological organization allowed the curators to construct an efficient discourse on Mallet-Stevens while leaving visitors to arrive at their own view of the architect’s complexity. Letting the work speak for its creator was a neutral way of displaying a large quantity of new material. Mallet-Stevens’s approach to architecture was forged under double auspices—his academic studies and his family milieu. He received his training at the École Spéciale d’Architecture, which had a technical as much as an artistic emphasis, encouraging him to understand architecture as a total work of art. He learned much about Gesamtkunstwerk through the Palais Stoclet (1905), which Josef Hoffmann had designed for his (Mallet-Stevens’s) uncle Adolf Stoclet in Brussels. Hoffmann’s influence was pervasive in Mallet-Stevens’s work and fundamental for his first projects: drawings of dwellings and interiors for architectural magazines and for the Salon d’Automne from 1912 to 1920.

World War I changed the architect’s vision, a transformation clearly visible in the two sets of drawings for Une cité moderne (Paris, 1922), which display a complete range of architectural programs, from dwellings (including worker houses) to public edifices (a city hall, a library, a cinema, a museum, and so forth). While the first set, executed in 1917, still bears a strong Viennese imprint, the second, made around 1923, shows a radicalization of his idea of modern architecture. This radicalization is also reflected in the projects of the 1920s—the “villa 1924” and the châteaux he designed for Paul Poiret at Mézy (1921–23) and the Viscount de Noailles at Hyères (1923–28). At this point, the exhibition suggested that Mallet-Stevens was undeniably influenced in part by de Stijl. He invited members of the movement to join him and his students at the annual show of the Ecole Spéciale in 1924, an invitation that cost him his teaching position.

On close examination, Mallet-Stevens’s formalism turns out to be motivated by a particular sense of the “mise en scène,” a capacity that was present in his projects before he started his career as a film set designer in 1920. This interest in the setting reflected the intimate connection he drew between architecture and nature: from his early projects on, he conceived of the garden as a “plein-air room”—as at villa Les Roses Rouges in Deauville (1913)—a concept he perfected at the villa Noailles. From the outside, the building appears, as described by Man Ray, to be a “modern castle.” From the inside, the garden wall with its rectangular openings frames chosen views of the landscape.

Mallet-Stevens claimed that “appearance matters,” a view that made him an “illusionist” for Theo van Doesburg and an “aesthete” for the art critic Marie Dormoy. While the axonometric technique of his “scenographic” vision showed the influence of de Stijl, it also revealed his experience as a film set designer. The architect moved easily from the virtual space of the set to real space, intertwining them: elements from actual projects were used for his sets, especially for Marcel L’Herbier’s films Le vertige and L’inhumaine, while other movies took place around his architecture on the rue Mallet-Stevens. Man Ray’s famous short film Les mystères du château du dé exploited the dynamics of the spaces in the villa Noailles, a major subject of the exhibition.

Mallet-Stevens learned from film that architecture needs a dynamic dime-
sion. The architect created this effect even in two-dimensional media by adopting an oblique point of view, as in his project for Place de la Victoire, or the photos of villa Cavrois (published in 1934). There is a certain “photogeny”—which for the interwar avant-garde meant an image reinforced by movement—in Mallet-Stevens’s architecture, visible both in his film sets and in his actual projects. His film experience contributed to his obsession with light and the way volumes are sculpted by it. With his collaborator, the engineer André Salomon, he conceived a dramatic lighting scheme for several of his buildings, such as the Bally stores in 1928.

The Pavilion of Light and Electricity, which he designed for the 1937 International Exhibition, summed up his principles regarding the importance of the image in shaping modernist aesthetics.

Related to these themes of Gesamtkunstwerk and setting was Mallet-Stevens’s strong belief in collaboration. In the 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris—where Mallet-Stevens clearly emerged as a leader in the French modern movement—his hall for a French embassy and, particularly, the tourism pavilion that Giedion praised for its “floating” qualities showed the importance of group work for the architect. The exhibition also marked the beginning of his long collaboration with the brothers Joël and Jan Martel, both sculptors. The garden of concrete trees designed by Mallet-Stevens and executed by the Martels, one of the most discussed objects of the exhibition, demonstrated the architect’s interest in the plastic expressivity of the material. The collaboration with the Martels mirrored the earlier influence of the Wiener Werkstätte, which led Mallet-Stevens to conceive architecture as a collective work and to invite artists and fellow architects to join him on his projects. The villa Noailles is undoubtedly the most outstanding example, but the practice extended to his designs for rue Mallet-Stevens (1926–34) and the villa Cavrois (1929–32). With partners such as the sculptors Martel, the stained-glass creator Louis Barillet, and the lighting expert engineer André Salomon, Mallet-Stevens combined his interest in Gesamtkunstwerk, manifested in his work as a decorator, with the conviction that the architect acts as a sculptor. The importance he accorded to the model, as documented by several period photographs, was generated by this view.

Mallet-Stevens not only designed elegant sculptural villas, but also developed more practical programs for stores, offices, and industrial buildings. The exhibition presented his showrooms for Bally and particularly for Alfa-Romeo, revealing his concern with both technical solutions and expressive rendering. On a smaller scale, some of his furniture projects—his collaboration with OTUA, the Technical Office for the Use of Steel—also demonstrate an interest in economy and serial production.

Underlying these designs was his commitment to the modern movement as he understood it. He defended its principles as a participant in the creation of the Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM) in 1929. His activity within the UAM reflected both his belief in creating the Gesamtkunstwerk, and his opinions about the role of interior design in shaping modern life. Seeking to unite artistic creation and industrial production, he designed a prototype for a metal-tube chair—which became a classic edition of the Tubor company—a project for a steamer cabin in steel, and an avant-garde school furniture set conceived in steel and Bakelite.

The economic crisis of 1929 limited the architect’s commissions, and in 1935 he accepted the position of director at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Lille, where he could apply the UAM principles to the curriculum. He worked on developing a coherent teaching theory and established a close working relationship between local industry and the students. His commitment to the modern movement culminated in his participation in the 1937 Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne in Paris. Initially nominated to the planning committee, he soon resigned in protest against the dominance of regionalism, which saw architecture as rooted in the local, a position that had gained recognition in the interwar years despite the opposition of modernist architects, who discredited its products as picturesque pastiches. Eventually, Mallet-Stevens was commissioned to design several pavilions for the exhibition, including one for hygiene and one for national solidarity;
not only were the two structures emblematic of the new politics of the Front Populaire, but they also synthesized the architect’s principles of social architecture. He went on to concentrate on complex projects, responding to the massive urban operations undertaken in connection with the exhibition. In association with Georges-Henri Pingusson, Mallet-Stevens took part in all the important competitions of the 1930s, and proposed monumental solutions. Although none of their projects was built, they were visionary concepts. The war and a serious illness put an end to all of the architect’s important activity. After several years of refuge in the south of France, he died in Paris in 1945, leaving behind a sketchbook with drawings from Penne-d’Agenais (1940–44) and the manuscript “The Reconstruction of the Devastated Regions” (1944).

The exhibition clearly confirmed that Mallet-Stevens contributed to the development of the concept of modern architecture. As Giedion observed, he was more preoccupied with an “aesthetics of representation” than with the social issues debated by the modernists. However, the cultural elite his clients represented actively contributed to the shaping of modern architecture. Mallet-Stevens was an inventor who, particularly in his “paper architecture” and his ephemeral exhibition pavilions, experimented with new expressions and solutions in aesthetic and technical terms. He was preoccupied by the relationship between architecture and light, not only from a formal point of view, but also from the perspective of hygiene. He effectively argued the idea of a synthesis of arts, another notion specific to modern architecture. Influenced by the Wiener Werkstätte and de Stijl, he favored the association between aestheticism and technicality, as well as close collaboration with industry.

While the exhibition allowed viewers to draw their own conclusions, it did not supply the context that could have situated Mallet-Stevens’s work in a wider architectural framework in France and abroad. It provided limited written information on the work, though glimpses of Mallet-Stevens’s complex personality were afforded by supplementary architectural tours, complementary exhibitions at the villa Cavrois and the Barillets’ studio, and publications. The organizers apparently conceived of the show as part of a whole, and only by connecting the pieces could one get a complete picture. Fortunately the catalogue, edited by the chief curator, Cinqualbre, with essays, several texts by the architect, and an exhaustive catalogue of his works, is now undoubtedly the major reference on Mallet-Stevens.

CARMEN POPESCU
Centre André Chastel
Paris

Publication related to the exhibition:

Notes

Cedric Price—Doubt, Delight and Change
Design Museum, London
25 June–9 October 2005

The location of this modest exhibition—just behind a show on the evolution of the surfboard on the top floor of what can only be described as a dumpy little building perched precariously on the geographical edge of London’s cultural orbit—brought home the dilemma that comes with appreciating Cedric Price (1934–2003). It is no coincidence that this is the same gallery that a year and a half earlier showed a similarly user-friendly show of the equally enigmatic Alison and Peter Smithson (The Smithsons: The House of the Future to a House for Today). To the majority of U.S.-educated architects, myself included, neither Price nor the Smithsons were ever really a factor, let alone an influence or an employer. In London, the reverence for the three, but particularly Price, is priestly. Drop a hint to an architect friend, colleague, or stranger that one is writing on the titanic figure nicknamed CP and everyone has a story to tell, branded featuring in almost all of them. One wonders, however, how much all the social headiness that surrounds Price is meant to make up for his architectural marginalization. Only in the glory days of the Architectural Association in the 1970s and ’80s, when its inimitable chairman Alvin Boyarsky (1928–1990) turned architectural publishing into pornography, was Price a frequent feature. In a capital city that let loose a load of roosters, including Sidney Kaye, Eric Firmin & Partners, and Gollins, Melvin, Ward & Partners, its cock was cooped up at 38 Alfred Place. To be in Camden and not strutting out of Sydney Cook’s office with a commission was rare indeed.

If it were not for a couple of lords and a sir, the fate of our hero in this show’s warped story would have been dramatically different. Without Lord Snowdon, Price’s one infamous surviving structure—the aviary at the London Zoo (1961), finished before the architect was