The fractious question of modernism has not ceased to excite and obsess.\(^1\) Reiterative and revisionary considerations of modernism abound, attesting to the difficulties and elusiveness of the very construct. A particularly bold and bountiful reevaluation is offered by *Modernism: Designing a New World*. Amid the plethora of solemn monographs and oracular collected essays on this disputed subject, a sumptuous catalog’s claims may seem slight, given that early examples of the genre, such as those produced by New York’s Museum of Modern Art, have suffered scorn and opprobrium. However, the tidy simplifications offered by curators and apologists when modernist principles were often attacked and misunderstood have given way, under the principles were often attacked and mis-

Nor do the authors overlook anomalies that influenced design receive their due. Nor do the authors overlook anomalies to depict a seamless whole. Like any revolution, modernism was messy, forged by impassioned figures competing to realize both personal and communal goals, and its path was neither consistent nor direct. The book does not gloss over contradictions but permits a workable comprehension of the cohesive elements that made the concept, and the label, of modernism viable. The particular problems of definition that arise when charting modernism’s course after World War II are avoided by concluding with that conflation. I doubt this decision weakens the value of this thoroughly satisfying volume.

Since the year 2000, the V&A has published four volumes in the series on design and architectural movements between 1890 and 1940; *Modernism* is the most recent, following *Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and International Arts and Crafts*.\(^2\) Each volume can stand independently of the exhibition that occasioned it and at the same time is enhanced by its interre-

The myriad perspectives provided by authors drawn from various areas of expertise reflect the kaleidoscopic nature of modernism itself. Opportunities to examine archives in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall have brought forth revelatory material. Shadowy figures such as Gustav Klucis, Jarosław Rössler, Katarzyna Kobro, and Vit Obrtel, known (if at all) in the English-speaking world from specialist imprints, have been reunited with more celebrated colleagues, and their design experiments, regrettably ephemeral because of subsequent events, recovered and reevaluated.

In his introduction, Wilk lays out the parameters of the investigation of what he believes to be “the most powerful force in the creation of twentieth-century visual culture” (12). It supplies a gloss on the “multiple meanings of modernism” and a brief history of the use of the term in different disciplines. For Wilk, “modernism [covers] a range of movements . . . frequently combined with social and political beliefs which held that design and art could, and should, transform society” (14).

In chapter two, “Searching for Utopia,” Christina Lodder, an authority on Russian art and architecture, surveys the diverse “isms” and avant-garde groups that appeared in response to the cataclysm of World War I and the disruptive social changes that both caused and accompanied it. These are organized under the rubrics of Spiritual (Expressionism, Suprematism, and De Stijl), Dionysian (Futurism), Rational (Purism and L’Esprit Nouveau), Communist (Constructivism and other Russian trends), and Social (Dada and the Internationalist Con-

Christopher Wilk, editor
*Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914–1939*

Tim Benton
*The Modernist Home*

Alan Powers
Photography by Morley von Sternberg
*Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain*

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and Gerrit Rietveld, respectively, Erich Mendelsohn’s Einstein Tower, Bruno Taut’s Glass House, and the Soviet Pavilion in Paris by Alexander Melnikov and Konstantin Rodchenko—she also pays ample attention to projects like Nikolai Ladovský’s Communal House (1920), Kasimir Malevich’s “Future Planets for Earth Dwellers” (1923–24), and Georgy Krutikov’s Flying City (1928).

Chapter five, Tim Benton’s “Building Utopia,” acts as the sequel to Lodder’s essay on this polymorphic formative period, exploring the consolidation and realization of these avant-garde experiments. By the mid-1920s, some of the earlier phase’s fantasies had been trimmed to pragmatic dimensions. In an attempt to ease housing misery, socially progressive municipal governments, most famously those in Germany and the Netherlands, erected hectares of dwellings based on modernist tropes. Proselytizing periodicals and books (Das Neue Frankfurt and the Czech Nejmenší Byt), institutions and organizations (Bauhaus, CIAM, and the Deutsche Werkbund), and expositions (Stuttgart 1927 and 1929, Brno 1929, and Paris 1933) receive their due, and forceful advocates like Karel Teige (the Czech architect and housing specialist recently resurrected thanks to the translation of his books) are given voice.1 Teige’s rhetorical questions, such as “isn’t modern architecture … nothing other than a utopia transformed into science, and science becoming reality in return?” pitifully reinforce Benton’s argument (155).

Christopher Green’s “The Machine,” neither an easy nor an elegant read, is crammed with insights that illuminate and problematize a subject that, thanks to the involvement of the different “isms” and media (photography and film hold their own in his account), is extremely complex and difficult. Green excavates the motivations of artists, designers, and architects, working as often against as with each other, to make the machine both image and agent of modern life. He points to the paradox that in capitalist America, the leading exponent of mechanization and rationalization, the presumed logic of these forces did not immediately translate into design, whereas in countries that came late to industrialization, such as the Soviet Union and Italy, the machine was a powerful generative icon in artistic and socioeconomic terms. France, due to its chauvinistic belief in the virtues of fine craft, viewed the machine with ambivalence despite its desire to reach the forefront of modernity. Green employs the Marxist concept of commodity fetishization to argue that “despite the differences, on one question machine modernists from Paris to Dessau to Prague to Moscow agreed: the convergence between art, design and the machine meant . . . the restoration of use-value, along with an accent on collective consumption at the expense of the original consumer” (85). This proposition helps account for the ferocious struggle against “Art” (for art’s sake) by many left-wing machine modernists.

The machine with all its momentous consequences was perhaps the most ubiquitous and pervasive motif within modernism. Yet in chapter nine, “Modernism and Nature,” Benton traces the reactions against a number of modernists’ presumed tyranny of the machine. This is the only section where a work by Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, is discussed. As we learn from chapter four, “Performing Modernism,” the machine’s metaphorical power influenced sets, costumes, plays, and films, as well as the buildings that sheltered them, and at times led to mechanical devices that usurped the role of living actors and directors. Here Tag Gronberg paints a captivating panorama of the vital choreographic, musical, and theatrical events characteristic of the period and emphasizes their oft-overlooked role in the popularization of modernism. Another aspect integral to the evolution of modernism is chapter seven, “Healthy Body Culture.” In this section, Wilk demonstrates how preoccupation with physical well-being and transformation not only infiltrated design decisions regarding sanatoriums, gymnasiuems, and sports palaces but also affected lighting, circulation, ventilation, and furnishings in domestic architecture.

“National Modernisms” by the historian David Crowley refreshes observations on the geographically diverse fortunes of the modern movement. Crowley does not agree that modernism was necessarily incompatible with regionalism; architects in countries like Sweden, Japan, Poland, Turkey, and Mexico “sought to reconcile modernity with local culture” (348). In the totalitarian states, suspicious of “international” connotations, modernist strategies might have been restricted in architecture but continued to be employed in the less monumental and symbolically charged areas of typography, cinema, transport, and mass-produced consumer goods. It seems fitting retribution that the exodus of talented individuals from fascist regimes disseminated modernism to the very nations that tended to disdain it, Great Britain and the United States, so that the stigmata of modern design enjoyed a new, if different, life just before and long after World War II.

As official catalogs like Modernism have become increasingly extensive and expensive, precious to the academic and professional communities and the design buff but daunting to the casual visitor, smaller and cheaper “accessory” volumes have appeared. British institutions like the Tate Gallery and the V&A seem to have pioneered this practice, of which The Modernist Home provides a typical instance. Benton’s attractively illustrated little book serves as a primer for those who crave an introductory text and pictorial mementos of the exhibition’s most accessible subject: private and public dwellings, their furnishings and equipment. He employs the word home, so gratuitously misappropriated by real estate agents, to show an audience skeptical about modernism (as many members of the British public still are) that, as readily as past architectural manifestations, this movement could satisfy demands for beauty as well as functionality in domestic design. Benton links individual houses, most of them familiar to the readers of this journal, with such

There is a certain irony that the compelling catalog Modernism and its popular offshoot The Modernist Home were produced in London by mostly British authors (Wilk is American), for modernism was at first resisted in the Anglophone lands of Britain and America, with their anxieties about tradition and their fixation on the private family home. Thus few buildings from either country are represented in these publications. For a view of architectural events during the interwar period in the British Isles, one turns to Alan Powers who, in his habitually perceptive, sensitive, and persuasive prose, explains how cultural singularities shaped responses to modernist architecture in the United Kingdom.

At first glance, Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain appears chiefly to be a picture book; certainly the illustrations are lavish in number and quality. However, these images are an indispensable accompaniment to Powers’s instructive exposition, for Albion’s relatively few modernist buildings are little known even on its own soil and rarely celebrated elsewhere. Yet, the peculiar and precarious trajectory of modern architecture in the British Isles supplies an important coda to the larger history and evaluation of modernism itself and prefigures its anomalous fortunes in the present. The hostility and confusion that the movement provoked are telling symptoms of its reign.

Like Modernism, Powers’s book is shaped by an overarching conceptual construct, the modern movement, with its multifarious sources and outcomes. Yet, instead of a carefully distilled assemblage of modernist icons, we encounter a pluralistic potpourri of physiognomically distinct buildings that may be modern (qualified by adjectives like medieval, ambiguous, classical, or deco) but not necessarily modernist (generally designated “formalist”). The text is narrower chronologically, for Powers concentrates on the decade of the 1930s when Britain finally could boast some modern buildings, but is more inclusive as to the philosophies represented. To deal with the “unavoidable confusions of the period,” Powers inevitably resorts to the unfashionable notion of style, which certainly is a required tactic in Britain’s case (19). He does not, however, neglect the critically important social, political, and economic factors. He also provides a welcome account of professional education, as by the early twentieth century, architectural schools were becoming an increasingly important influence on practice.

Works by English or Commonwealth architects like Edwin Maxwell Fry, Patrick Gwynn, Welles Coates, and Connell, Ward, & Lucas could have graced the pages of The International Style, though only one, by Emberton, was actually chosen for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition. Others were inspired by alternative twentieth-century manifestations, like the Amsterdam School and the International Exposition des Art Decoratifs, or maintained continuities with a major source of modernism, the Arts and Crafts movement, without jettisoning its handicraft ethos. Of the émigrés who endowed England with her first unarguably Modernist buildings in the 1930s, Berthold Lubetkin, Peter Moro, and Ernö Goldfinger chose to stay while Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Serge Chermayeff, William Lescaze, and Mendelsohn (via Palestine) eventually left for the United States. The Modernists were represented by the MARS (Modern Architecture Research Group) founded in 1933 to represent Britain at CIAM. Its name suggested a reliance on scientific inquiry as opposed to aesthetic speculation, a complex disposition that influenced the famous London plans of the 1940s and postwar rebuilding, much of it reviled today. After an informative introductory narrative, Powers offers work produced between 1930 and 1939 in an alphabetically organized array of ninety-one architects and firms, supplying biographical data and particulars on each of the buildings. To his credit, he is at pains to include women architects and comes up with nine, some of whom practiced with male partners. Four pages summarize the “Post-War Legacy,” and two pages address conservation, a burning issue in Britain because of a general unwillingness to appreciate twentieth-century modern buildings.

The V&As Modernism deserves a prominent place among the multitude of books on the topic. Powers’s Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain admirably fills a sorry gap where the volumes on British architecture are waiting to be shelved.

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Notes
2. Art Deco and Art Nouveau were reviewed in JSAH 63, no. 1 (Mar. 2004), 114–16; International Arts and Crafts was reviewed in JSAH 64, no. 4 (Dec. 2005), 580–81.

Michael John Gorman
Buckminster Fuller: Designing for Mobility

One of R. Buckminster Fuller’s most memorable drawings depicts a giant scale on which a traditional single-family house outweighs a novel multistory apartment tower designed according to the principles outlined in the early manifesto 4D Time Lock (1928). In this sketch for a potential advertisement, the tower’s light weight emblematizes its many “four-dimensional” efficiency advantages, including speedy erection, easy maintenance, extensive daylighting, shared recreational amenities, and unprecedented mobility, since the tower would be light enough for a dirigible to transport from place to place according to need and desire. The mobilization of