

Exhibitions

Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain, 1933–1966

Royal Institute of British Architects, London
1 October 2019–1 February 2020

Amid a slew of publications, broadcasts, and events marking the centenary of the founding of the Bauhaus, the Royal Institute of British Architects launched its autumn/winter 2019–20 exhibition *Beyond Bauhaus*, which looked beyond the origins of the school to its influence on British architectural culture and practice from the 1930s to the 1960s. Taking as its starting point the departure from London in 1937 of three Bauhaus teachers—Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, and László Moholy-Nagy—after a brief sojourn in the city, the exhibition sought to probe the impact of these figures on the contemporary architectural scene and to ask in turn whether the émigrés’ short time in Britain had any ongoing significance for their practice. Materials from the RIBA’s rich archives, including photographs, models, drawings, and letters, were gathered to shed light on “both the well-known and the overlooked British architects with whom the Bauhaus émigrés collaborated and inspired.”

Valeria Carullo and Pete Collard of the RIBA curated the exhibition, the Chilean architect Pezo von Ellrichshausen designed the exhibition space, and Wolfe Hall provided its graphic design. The RIBA also offered parallel events and workshops

addressing professional, academic, and public audiences, including a series of collaborations with external organizations such as the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain.

Staged within the RIBA’s Architecture Gallery, the exhibition focused thematically and spatially on three “chapters.” The first set the scene, making use of photographs of Gropius-designed buildings in Dessau as well as Moholy-Nagy’s film of the 1933 meeting of the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne to introduce the concept of urban scale. Letters recorded the arrangements that various modernist figures in Britain made to prepare for the arrival of the émigrés; menus recorded the commemorative dinners held upon their departure. Further materials documented the high-density Garden City of the Future proposal by Breuer and F. R. S. Yorke, with whom Breuer entered into partnership, as well as the 1938 exhibition organized by the MARS Group (Modern Architectural Research Group, the British wing of CIAM), to which Moholy-Nagy contributed.

The second chapter explored British architecture in the 1930s, examining one-off houses and interior designs as well as experiments with an increasingly diverse range of materials. Projects realized by Breuer, Gropius, and Moholy-Nagy stood alongside formally similar projects by other designers working in Britain. Finally, the third chapter looked beyond the home, and beyond the work of the three émigré designers, to focus on buildings for health care, industry, and education, exploring the rise of modern design as the default idiom for the emerging postwar welfare state.

The focus of this exhibition on the 1930s through the early 1960s was welcome after a period in which postwar architecture (and especially Brutalism) had attracted particular attention. It usefully highlighted the

extensive range of the RIBA’s collections and suggested how the study of architectural history may be illuminated by many different kinds of materials, including drawings, photographs, texts, and films. The curators also demonstrated a concern for inclusivity by drawing attention to women’s contributions to architectural culture and practice.

However, the actual arrangement of objects in the exhibition was somewhat problematic. The designers opted for a presentation that was deliberately “oblique” (to use their word), choosing to place a majority of objects inside large wooden columns (echoing the gallery’s own columns) painted in a color palette intended as an homage to Bauhaus designs of the 1920s. Viewers often needed to peer through small openings—some circular, others triangular or square—that limited visibility (Figure 1). The varying heights of the openings made the objects even less accessible to many viewers. The consequences of these design choices were particularly unfortunate for the sections on mass housing and education; for example, the 1937 film *Kensal House* (documenting the housing scheme designed by Elizabeth Denby and Maxwell Fry) was presented on a small screen placed at waist height, and without the original sound track. The repeated use of small images also impaired viewers’ understanding. Had these small images been original drawings, these choices might have been understandable, but many were facsimiles, thus inviting the question of why they were not enlarged.

The decision to present material with little context was equally frustrating. The show offered minimal information on the circumstances that generated a modernist architectural culture in Britain, other than mentioning the substantial expansion of the English and Welsh school systems through the landmark 1944 Education Act.

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Figure 1 Installation view of *Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain, 1933–1966*, Royal Institute of British Architects, London, 2019 (photo © Edmund Sumner).

It provided few references to significant issues, such as the fact that this period included a world war, or the key ideas that supported the expansion of the welfare state. By the same token, the show's emphasis on qualified architects and "actual monuments" left little room for others' contributions. Housing consultant Elizabeth Denby and engineer Owen Williams numbered among the few exceptions, but even then Denby was "othered" in terms of profession and gender, as in a caption in the display for Kensal House that read, "Designed by E. Maxwell Fry and others, including Elizabeth Denby." The exhibition barely acknowledged either the clients who commissioned the designs featured or the government reports that informed the design of public buildings and public housing.

The captions also included a number of inconsistencies and mistakes. Mary Crowley, for example, was not the codesigner of the Kensal House nursery, and the concrete-and-glass Pioneer Health Centre in South London could hardly have influenced the construction of the nearby Sassoon House, given that the latter was built first (as confirmed by dates noted elsewhere in the exhibition). Leslie Martin did not design the Festival Hall alone, but developed a concept

proposed by his colleague Robert Matthew and then collaborated on the building's realization with others in the London County Council Architects' Department. There were also some odd omissions, chiefly in the exhibition's silence on the work of the noted architectural practice Tecton, which designed the highly regarded Finsbury Health Centre in the 1930s as part of a wider reformist program introduced by the socially minded London Borough of Finsbury.

The absence of Tecton was perhaps a signal of an underlying tension in the concept of the exhibition: it adhered to the canonical narrative of Britain's rescue from moribund traditionalism by the Bauhaus masters (no place for Tecton's Russian founder Berthold Lubetkin in that "story") even as it sought to draw upon more recent and revisionist architectural histories of British modernism. Archival evidence unearthed by these more recent histories has shown that modernism in Britain was a broad-based affair, one that was shaped by women and men from a range of professional backgrounds that included advocacy and journalism as well as design. These unresolved tensions led to the exhibition's

sometimes rather unsophisticated attempts to highlight women's contributions to modernist culture as well as to explain the links between the projects on display and the Bauhaus. Other key sources that shaped contemporary British practice—such as the Scandinavian architectural tradition, of fundamental importance for the work of Mary Crowley, or even the usually omnipresent Le Corbusier—received hardly any attention. Despite its title's call to look "beyond" the Bauhaus, the exhibition fell short of that expectation as a result of its persistent focus on the great men of the Bauhaus and their designs. More confident grounding in recent historiography would have critically strengthened the exhibition: its problematic presentation not only obscured its potentially rich subject but also, in the end, failed to take us very far beyond the Bauhaus at all.

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