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| **MARS Group (1933-1957)** |
| Modern Architectural Research Group |
| The Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS) was a coalition of architects, academics and critics united by the aim to promote modernist architecture in Britain. Founded in 1933 as a British branch of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM), the group was an attempt to bring together practitioners and polemicists committed to the ideals of European modernism, who had previously been isolated in the conservative design establishment of 1930s Britain. Most of the participants were British, but many were émigrés fleeing oppression in Nazi Germany. The acronym MARS was chosen to express the group’s futuristic nature. |
| The Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS) was a coalition of architects, academics and critics united by the aim to promote modernist architecture in Britain. Founded in 1933 as a British branch of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (CIAM), the group was an attempt to bring together practitioners and polemicists committed to the ideals of European modernism, who had previously been isolated in the conservative design establishment of 1930s Britain. Most of the participants were British, but many were émigrés fleeing oppression in Nazi Germany. The acronym MARS was chosen to express the group’s futuristic nature.  The MARS Group came into being when CIAM secretary Sigfried Giedion invited the critic P. Morton Shand to assemble a group to represent Britain at future CIAM events. Shand founded the MARS Group with Canadian-born architect Wells Coates as chairman, Maxwell Fry as vice chairman, and Francis Yorke (1906-1962) as secretary. The Georgian emigré Berthold Lubetkin (1901-1990) was sceptical about the group’s apolitical stance, but contributed to several MARS projects. Engineer Ove Arup and architect Denys Lasdun were also members, along with poet, architecture aficionado and conservationist John Betjeman.  File: Cover.jpg  Figure 1. Edward McKnight Kauffer, Cover for the catalogue of the MARS Group’s New Architecture exhibition (1938)  Source: <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/the-mars-group>  The aim of the MARS Group was to develop solutions to the problems facing modern British architecture. However, the group lacked the financial resources to do so in a comprehensive manner. Instead it formed committees to debate subjects such as schools, housing and building costs. For example, when Joseph Paxton’s pioneering iron and glass Crystal Palace (1851) was destroyed by fire in 1936, the group initiated a debate on the loss of Britain’s ‘most important claim to have made an original contribution to modern architecture’ (MARS Group quoted at <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/the-mars-group>).  In 1938 the MARS Group organised an exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in London to showcase the social benefits of modern architecture. Former Bauhaus designer László Moholy-Nagy organised the exhibition, but delegated to Misha Black (1910-1977) when he left Britain for the USA. The introductory essay to the catalogue was written by George Bernard Shaw. Modernist master Le Corbusier attended the exhibition and wrote a favourable report in *Architectural Review*, one of Britain’s leading architectural journals, exclaiming ‘I dropped out of an airplane into the midst of a charming display of youth’. He went on to praise ‘the lyrical appeal of those poems in steel, glass and concrete. The New Architecture can no longer be reproached with being mere insensitive and soulless technics’ (Le Corbusier quoted at <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/the-mars-group>). The show was a resounding success with the public, but was a financial failure.  The group’s subsequent Plan for London (1938) was an example of modernist master-planning. Echoing Le Corbusier’s own utopian town-planning proposals, this radical scheme advocated the demolition of much of the existing city and its replacement by a series of ‘hubs’ combining housing, workplaces and leisure facilities, within a ring-road. Influenced by the Soviet urbanist Nikolai Miliutin, the plan would have featured a series of linear forms extending from the Thames, composed of social units and based around the rail network. The dwellings would have consisted mainly of flats. The plan was highly controversial and was never implemented. The MARS Group fragmented in 1957 due to political differences and lack of momentum. Lubetkin famously dismissed it as ‘a ‘flat roofs club’ based on a gentleman’s agreement,’ (Berthold Lubetkin quoted at <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/the-mars-group>) while the younger generation of British architects found it too conservative compared to the emerging Brutalist movement.  File: Panel.jpg  Figure 2. Panel exhibited at the MARS exhibition at Olympia, London (1934)  Source: <http://design.designmuseum.org/design/the-mars-group> |
| Further reading:  (Korn and Samuely)  (Lasdun)  (Korn, Fry and Sharp, The M.A.R.S. Plan for London)  (Mumford, Defining Urban Design: CIAM architects and the formation of a discipline, 1937-69)  (Mumford) |