Architecture Culture 1943–1968

A Documentary Anthology

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be the first time in my efforts that I went back a bit to make myself fit for going further on the way I seek to explore: in this case a more difficult way to tread than the way of the laborer-dwellings!

Should you have time and opportunity to study the "Shell building" in reality I make bold that you shall have to establish the fact that I succeeded in finding new solutions. I agree with one of the critics you quoted that my ornament is not at all traditional. That it is developing after new directions and that it functionally is well placed into the composition.

And by the way: do you know that the "Shell Building" up to now already has been used for 5 years—sometimes by 600, sometimes by 1,000 employees—and that I never heard one complaint about the practical functioning of the building? What do you think could "functionalism" do more in this respect? And why should it be forbidden to give functional doing a spiritual form? Functioning alone as a leading principle—my experience taught me this—results in aesthetical arbitrariness. Don't forget this.

Yes, I am sure the "Shell Building" is an effort to arrange new practical needs in a well-considered and aesthetically well-shaped form. I must confess here that I have no belief in the application of the form of laborer-dwelling and factories to office buildings, town halls, and churches!

The whole world in laborer-dwelling-style must be unorganic and dull!

To resume: I tried to bring all that what we gained up to now in the field of new architecture to a cultural higher level. You think I went back on my way. I am not so sure of it. Look for instance one day at the building itself and see what I reached in the light and bright tone of the building as a whole: not like with plastering in a semipermanent manner but by the use of fine and durable material. Well, trials of the same kind you will find in the whole shape as well as in the form of the details of the building. Trials to come to a new architecture on a more spiritual base.

Did I succeed? Other people may judge this. I can only say for myself that I hope to be able to try it again and again to make further progress in this direction. To have the opportunity to help new building rise to new architecture. And this, my dear editors, still in the base of my old device: "seeking clear forms for clearly expressed needs."

With my very best wishes, etc.

J. J. P. Oud

1947

With this article for his Skyline column in the *New Yorker* magazine, **Lewis Mumford** touched off a debate that in some respects paralleled that
114–20 surrounding the "New Empiricism" in England. Against the abstract functionalism of the machine aesthetic, Mumford here champions a "native and humane form of modernism which one might call the Bay Region style." The latter was exemplified by a West Coast tradition that originated at the turn of the century with Bernard Maybeck and John Galen Howard, and continued in the work of an architect like William Wurster. Mumford found in this work "a free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate, and the way of life on the Coast." In contrast to the English reception of Swedish architecture, however, Mumford's regionalism was not primarily aesthetic. His idea of the region, which emerged as early as 1924 in his book *Sticks and Stones*, had to do with understanding and managing the natural environment. He saw this approach not only as a potential form of resistance to the "relentless spread of venal and mechanical civilization," but as an index of the advancement of modern culture.

Mumford's prime target in his *New Yorker* article was the International Style
137–48 as codified by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (to which catalogue Mumford had himself contributed an article on housing), and now practiced by "academic American" epigones of the European masters. But he also took the opportunity to chide critics like Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Sigfried Giedion for recently switching stripes—Hitchcock to the "personalism" of Frank Lloyd Wright,
27–30 Giedion to monumentality, which in Mumford's view only amounted to new formalisms. Not surprisingly his attack provoked a heated conference at the same museum in February 1948, entitled "What Is Happening to Modern Architecture?" Among the participants were Hitchcock, Johnson, Gropius, Alfred Barr, Marcel Breuer, Talbot Hamlin, George Nelson, and Serge Chermayeff. Mumford, accused of chauvinism and sentimentality, attempted to clarify his position in a letter directed to Barr shortly afterward, writing, "I am utterly bewildered at the general extent and depth of misunderstanding of what I thought I had very plainly expressed in *The New Yorker*. For the point about the Bay Region style, in which it definitely departs from your restricted definition of an International architecture, is that it cannot be characterized by any single mode of building; and it certainly cannot be reduced to redwood cottage architecture, as you almost said in so many words. It is precisely the variety and range and universality of it that I was stressing . . ."

Further development of the argument came from Mumford in 1949, on the occasion of an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art entitled "Domestic Architecture of the San Francisco Bay Region." In his statement for that catalogue Mumford again affirmed that "the main problem of architecture today is to reconcile the universal and the regional, the mechanical and the human, the cosmopolitan and the indigenous." Repercussions of the Bay Region argument would be heard over the next decade, with some of Mumford's original antagonists, if not converted, at least searching for their own compromises. See, for example, "The New Regionalism" (*Architectural Record*, January 1954) by Giedion, where the latter recasts the issue as a matter of building under specific
176–80 geographic conditions; and Gropius's "Eight Steps toward a Solid Architecture" in the present volume. The issue would remain an abiding theme of Mumford's social vision of architecture to the end of his career.

The Skyline [Bay Region Style]
Lewis Mumford

[. . .] new winds are beginning to blow, and presently they may hit even backward old New York. The very critics, such as Mr. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who twenty years ago were identifying the "modern" in architecture with Cubism in painting and with a general glorification of the mechanical and the impersonal and the aesthetically puritanic have become advocates of the personalism of Frank Lloyd Wright. Certainly Le Corbusier's dictum of the twenties—that the modern house is a machine for living in—has become old hat; the modern accent is on living, not on the machine. (This change must hit hardest those academic American modernists who imitated Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe and Gropius, as their fathers imitated the reigning lights of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.) Mr. Sigfried Giedion, once a leader of the mechanical rigorists, has come out for the monumental and the symbolic, and among the younger people an inclination to play with the "feeling" elements in design—with color, texture, even painting and sculpture—has become insuppressible. "Functionalism," writes a rather pained critic in a recent issue of the *Architectural Review* of London, "the only real aesthetic faith to which the modern architect could lay claim in the interwar years, is now, if not repudiated, certainly called into question . . . by those who were formerly its most illustrious supporters."

We are bound to hear more of this development during the next decade, but I am not alarmed by the prospect. What was called functionalism was a one-sided interpretation of function, and it was an interpretation that Louis Sullivan, who popularized the slogan "form follows function," never subscribed to. The rigorists placed the mechanical functions of a building above its human functions; they neglected the feelings, the sentiments, and the interests of the person who was to occupy it. Instead of regarding engineering as a foundation for form, they treated it as an end. This kind of architectural one-sidedness was not confined to the more arid practitioners. Frank Lloyd Wright, it is said, once turned upon a client—let's call him John Smith—who had added a few pleasant rugs and comfortable Aalto chairs to Mr. Wright's furnishings, and exclaimed, "You have ruined this place completely, and you have disgraced me. This is no longer a Frank Lloyd Wright house. It is a John Smith house now."

Well, it was time that some of our architects remembered the nonmechanical and nonformal elements in architecture, that they remembered what a building says as well as what it does. A house, as the Uruguayan architect Julio Vilamajó has put it, should be as personal as one's clothes and should fit the family life just as well. This is not a new doctrine in the United States. People like Bernard Maybeck and William Wilson Wurster, in California, always practiced it, and they took good care that their houses did not resemble factories or museums. So I don't propose to join the solemn gentlemen who, aware of this natural reaction against a sterile and abstract modernism, are predicting a return to the graceful stereotypes of the eighteenth century. Rather, I look for the continued spread, to every part of our country, of that native and humane form of modernism which one might call the Bay Region style, a free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate, and the way of life on the Coast. That style took root about fifty years ago in Berkeley, California, in the early work of John Galen Howard and Maybeck, and by now, on the Coast, it is simply taken for granted; no one out there is foolish enough to imagine that there is any other proper way of building in our time.

The style is actually a product of the meeting of Oriental and Occidental architectural traditions, and it is far more truly a universal style than the so-called international style of the 1930s, since it permits regional adaptations and modifications. Some of the best examples of this at once native and universal tradition are being built in New England. The change that is now going on in both Europe and America means only that modern architecture is past its adolescent period, with its quixotic purities, its awkward self-consciousness, its assertive dogmatism. The good young architects today are familiar enough with the machine and its products and processes to take them for granted, and so they are ready to relax and enjoy themselves a little. That will be better for all of us.