He Was Not Irrelevant
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Architecture

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THE death of Walter Gropius last week at the age of 86 did not mark the end of an era; the era was already over. Three of its giants are gone—Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier — and the fourth and last, Mies van der Rohe, is a patriarch of 83. These men changed the world, and we make no apology for that sweeping statement. They turned the solid, eclectic, brick and stone cities of the 19th century into the glass and steel, sky-piercing miracles of the 20th century, a physical and structural phenomenon unparalleled in history.

But the world they changed has changed again. It has moved into absurdity, tragedy, chaos and decay. The intellectual and esthetic battle that established modern architecture has taken on the aspect of a Pyrrhic victory. At the feet of the skyscrapers are the slums. Monuments are measured against human misery. By any sensitive standard, the city, man's most sophisticated work, is his most conspicuous failure. And the problems of an urban society are a greater challenge than the art of building has ever known.

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Against this background, and at this moment, the life work of Walter Gropius takes on a curious perspective. One cannot put him in the "great architect" box and leave him there for eternity. For one thing, he does not fit. He does not share that category on the level of a Wright, Mies, or Le Corbusier. These three have stamped our age in the same definitive way that Bramante and Michelangelo, Bernini and Borromini defined Renaissance and Baroque society and culture. Architecture is not frozen music; it is frozen time.

These are the architectural talents that provide the kind of style and sublimity that give an age its stature. They invest man, and his cities, with a shaky nobility that he is increasingly hard-pressed to claim. Theirs are the buildings that are traditionally testaments to our highest aspirations and achievements. Such monuments are not irrelevant. Civilization is cheap without them.

The architects who produce such buildings are correctly called form givers, and the forms are those their age demands, shaped by both the individual creative act and the historic moment. Wright, Mies and Le Corbusier are three of the greatest form givers of art and history. But the work of Walter Gropius was uneven, seemingly influenced in quality by the men with whom he collaborated.

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His early buildings, done with Adolf Meyer, come closest to greatness. The Bauhaus, which he designed and headed as architect and educator between the wars, with tremendous impact on all the arts of design until the present day, was a distinguished, trend - setting work. The late projects, done in this country, range from the disappointingly pedestrian Harvard Graduate Center to his consistently competent group practice with The Architects' Collaborative. But he did not produce buildings that shattered stylistic norms with the imprint of personal genius.

His role in the front lines of modernism was something else again. That role was as a catalyst of ideas and practice during a period of radical change in a critically transformed world. He recognized the fact that new processes and problems of unprecedented scale demanded new approaches and solutions from architects. He saw the threat to the humanity of cities and believed that social concern was a primary architectural rsponsibility.

This is what he preached, and he was a prophet whose time had come. It is what he taught two generations, at the Bauhaus and at Harvard. There were other men who held similar convictions. But

Walter Gropius, 1883-1969
A prophet whose time had come

he was the man in whom philosophy coincided with history, and this fortuitous historicism gave him an influence and importance on the international scene that insure his place in the textbooks on the development of modern building and industrial art.

In an industrial age, Walter Gropius taught that the machine should liberate man, and that its operations should create or inspire an appropriate esthetic. If the products of that philosophy turned into handsome mannerism at the Bauhaus, it was a superb contribution to art history that also revolutionized the process of design. Bauhaus teaching has influenced almost everything we touch today. Maxwell Fry, Gropius's collaborator in London after he fled Germany, has remarked that a visit to Selfridge's (read Macy's) housewares basement could produce a tribute at random.

Gropius's central and basic philosophy was something he called "teamwork." He saw that the complexities of the modern world would no longer yield to the individual artist-artisan; that the size and quantity of construction and the specialization of technology required "teams" working together to meet contemporary needs. He himself, was always a collaborator. The necessity of teamwork in the control of today's exploding environment is acknowledged now in a way that goes far beyond anything he visualized, involving as it does a range of professional disciplines and social participation unimaginable in the earlier years of the century.

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Again, events determined Gropius's place in history when the Nazis obstructed the functioning of the Bauhaus. This sent him to England and then to the United States, carrying with him the lessons of the European modern movement.

As chairman of the Harvard School of Architecture from 1938 to 1952, he trained a generation of modernists at a time when they helped turn the tide of American architectural thinking. Until the 30's, American students had been taught in a reactionary void. But the credit for breaking the barricades of sterile tradition in this country and opening the frontiers of modern practice must go to another man, Joseph Hudnut, who preceded Gropius as the head of the school and invited him to teach there. Once more, fortuitous historicism enabled Gropius to consolidate those educational gains at the highest level.

One of his students of that period, John Parkin of Toronto, recalls that "we went for a kind of apostolic succession —we felt that through him we could reach the roots of the modern movement. We looked for dogma, but found liberal unitarianism."

Ironically, liberal unitarianism was inadequate for the task he foresaw. His answer was that of a 19th-century Utopian rationalist, still rooted in the conventional group-art practice idea of a more placid time. This was the flaw in his prescience. But only a madman or an oracle could have anticipated the crisis conditions of the sixties.

The final irony was the betrayal of his own teachings of social and urban responsibility in one of his late jobs where he acted as consultant, with Pietro Belluschi, for the "smoothing up" of the urban outrages of New York's notorious Pan Am Building. This still saddens his admirers.

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The lifelong sociological-industrial beliefs of Walter Gropius have achieved a particular timeliness at this moment. It is a moment when the art of architecture has been declared dead by the radical young. They have hoist the masters by their own masterpieces, with the pronouncement that their buildings "have nothing to say to us or a sick society." Cities, they say, need radical social surgery, not works of art.

Today's architect is suffering from an identity crisis. So are cities, awash in cheap commercial lookalikes and institutionally-styled housing for rich and poor. Corrective surgery must also determine their future character. Cities are an "interaction of urban life and forms," urban consultant Frederick Gutheim points out, that must be "stamped with contemporary values, technologies, life styles and perceptions." This is soul, city-soul, no matter what current definition is offered. It is part of the art of environment, and there is no environment without art.