ARCHITECTURE VIEW: TRANSFORMING THE AVANT-GARDE INTO AN INSTANT LANDMARK
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Transforming the Avant-Garde Into an Instant Landmark

The near-legendary, radical modern house that Walter Gropius built for himself in Lincoln, Mass., in 1937—the revolutionary architectural shot heard across the country—is about to be acquired by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The Society has just inaugurated a fund-raising campaign to create a $500,000 endowment for maintenance and other expenses, preparatory to accepting the property from Ise Gropius, the architect's widow, who is giving it complete with original Bauhaus art and furnishings, views of hills and apple orchards, and an incredible complement of birds.

It is an occasion for pleasure and a few gentle reflections. There is, first, the lovely, subtle paradox of the Gropius House, that clarion call to the future, as an authenticated antiquity. How inexorably time turns the avant-garde into history! And how much delicate irony can be obtained from the fact that this house marked the conscious rejection of history in terms of emulation of past styles (indigenous tradition was the superbly rationalized substitute) and the declaration of a new esthetic and a brave new world. Thirty-eight years later, the revolution has become commonplace, and there is revolution against the revolution. The new esthetic is the norm, and the brave new world grows old. The landmark takes its place as part of the history that it has spurned, and the movement that rewrote history becomes history. Always, history wins.

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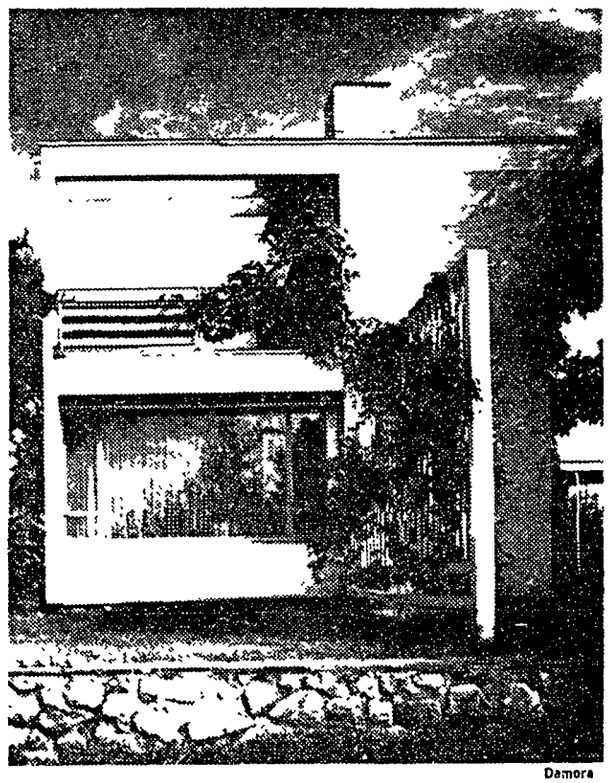
Nor are there any clear-cut definitions of art or antiquity. All those made-in-the-Bauhaus furnishings of the 1920's—a rare collection that any first-rate museum would covet jealously—were only 50 years old at the time of Walter Gropius's death a few years ago, and were therefore classified by the IRS, under inheritance tax laws, as "obsolete." When does obsolete become antique? In 100 years, by true-blue, Red Queen, IRS logic.

Brought out of Germany in the 1930's, first to England and then to America when Gropius came to Harvard to head the Graduate School of Design, they have already run the gamut from radical to camp to classics of the minor arts.

The art history books will tell you that Gropius's arrival was the signal for change, both through example and architectural education. The school had been languishing in the Beaux Arts stereotype with design exercises for regal casinos and Hôtels de Ville while the vanguard of modernism was shattering the intellectual barricades in Europe. Gropius's house, designed with Marcel Breuer, who followed the same escape route from Germany, was an instant landmark when it was completed in 1938. And the generations Gropius taught at Harvard from 1937 to 1952 went out to build and teach in turn, transforming the American landscape—to an extraordinary degree—in the image and philosophy of the master. The fact that a revolution won is a revolution lost by the very nature of victory compounds both irony and history.

A trip to the Gropius house today, whether one knew it personally at the time of its greatest impact or as a standby of art history courses, is an exercise in nostalgia. The neat, white structure sits on a hill, in a proper New England landscape of fields and woods—both timeless and a period piece. Last week a reluctant spring had barely greened the grass over the stony earth; an almost invisible cloud of yellow and russet suggested buds on bare branches.



Damora

The 1937 Gropius house—once radical, now *gemütlich*

It is hard to remember that the house was built as a daring object lesson in the compatibility of 20th-century technology and art—an ardent polemic as well as a home. To anyone expecting a doctrinaire, Teutonic, textbook exposition of functional purity and rebellious doctrine, it can only be a surprise. This is a conventional house now, familiar, lived in, *gemütlich*. The scale is intimate, the ambience informal. Plants run riot in the light rooms, there is all the impedimenta of accumulated family living, and the birds—the amazing birds—dart, fly and feed beyond the glass window walls that frame huge tree trunks and distant views.

The famous innovations are all standard practice now; you must look closely to see them: the fireplace stripped of traditional mantel trim and frame that became a modern cliché and embattled anachronism (the argument raged for years about the romantic vestigial hearth versus "honest" mechanical heat); the wall of bracket-held bookshelves; pictures not hung, but placed casually on shelves and surfaces; the lightweight, movable, casual furniture with emphasis on function: rooms that flow into each other; and of course, the glass walls with panel heating and exterior overhangs that both let in, and regulate, enormous amounts of seasonal light and sun. It is a handbook of the new rules of 20th-century domestic architecture, grown old gracefully.

The famous Bauhaus furnishings of tubular steel, canvas and wood are comfortably shabby now, and some of the chairs have achieved their original objective of mass production. The tables of curved tubes connected to wood surfaces with carefully visible screws no longer have the conscientiously handcrafted machine look with which they came out of the Bauhaus workshops. To the uninitiated, they would look a little like something put outside of a thrift shop as a come-on bargain. To the knowing, they are a delightful historical curiosity: esthetic morality (the implied honesty of modern materials and machine manufacture) married to an élitist industrial art.

Is it unsuitable to say that the house is charming? The delightful guest bedroom with its toe-to-toe beds in white, black and red, and the small master bedroom with its glass-walled dressing room, liberated forever from "bedroom suites," were startlingly different in their day, but are extremely comfortable and inviting now. The downstairs and upstairs porches that united indoor and outdoor living areas with such novelty seem routine. The use of the horizontal wood siding of traditional New England construction in the inside hall is suitable, not startling. And what was most unconventional at the time—the selection of all hardware and built-in accessories *from standard catalogues and frequently from industrial* sources—gives a distinct nostalgic flavor, although they were among the most radical of the house's modern features.

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The building was not only not custom-made, in this sense, but it was constructed rapidly, from spring to to fall in 1938. The cost, $18,000, was financed by a Lincoln sponsor, Mrs. James J. Storrow, because the Gropiuses had no funds. They paid rent until they could buy the house from Mrs. Storrow's estate after her death.

There is a strong scent of Art Deco and Industrial Style in such details as door and cabinet handles and lighting fixtures, including a fine torchère. An angled glass-brick wall, in spite of its pleasant logic as a light conductor and divider, cannot escape the stamp of camp. The famous outdoor industrial steel spiral stair that was almost a symbol of stark new esthetic drama against the flat white wall plane is now a pure 1930's touch.

Taken in its entirety, the house is as much a period statement as any Bulfinch treasure. It meets the same standards of style, significance and authenticity. The rationale of its acquisition by the Society is incontestable.

The Gropius house is, in a sense, a symbol of a simpler and more innocent time; it was a moment when esthetic rebellion was seen as a social need and as "the puritanical devotion to truth which characterized everything Gropius did," according to G. Holmes Perkins, a former Harvard colleague. Truth was so much more easily perceived then; right was so clearly distinguishable from wrong. The angels were an identifiable band. If the results, with the hindsight of years, seem more complexly shaded, they are no less remarkable. This is indeed the kind of history that changed the world.