MODERNISM: DESIGNING A NEW WORLD 1914–1939

Modernism in design and architecture emerged in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution – a period when the artistic avant-garde dreamed of a new world free of conflict, greed and social inequality.

It was not a style but a loose collection of ideas. Many different styles can be characterised as Modernist, but they shared certain underlying principles: a rejection of history and applied ornament; a preference for abstraction; and a belief that design and technology could transform society.

Initially, Modernism was largely experimental, but from about 1925, as economic conditions improved, it moved from the sketchbook to the real world. In the 1930s designers were forced to reassess their work, adapting it to the mass market and sometimes even to the demands of Fascism. But Modernism survived, and it remains a powerful force in the designed world of today.
SEARCHING FOR UTOPIA

At the core of Modernism lay the idea that the world had to be fundamentally rethought. The carnage of the First World War led to widespread utopian fervour, a belief that the human condition could be healed by new approaches to art and design – more spiritual, more sensual, or more rational. At the same time, the Russian Revolution offered a model for an entirely new society.

The desire to connect art and life led to a spirit of collaboration between artists and designers, with architects playing a leading role. Aesthetic conventions had been overturned before the war by the advent of Cubism and Expressionism, but now designers took the process further. Focusing on the most basic elements of daily life – housing and furniture, domestic goods and clothes – they reinvented these forms for a new century.
DIONYSIAN UTOPIA

Many artists were intoxicated by the endless possibilities offered by science and technology. The Italian Futurists based their vision of utopia on the potential power of technology. They envisaged a world entirely recreated in terms of the machine: everything from clothing to architecture, from music to theatre.

The Futurists celebrated the energy, violence and dynamism of contemporary urban life. This wild Dionysian response was essentially emotional and sensual rather than practical.
RATIONAL UTOPIA

Rational utopia rested on the idea that mechanisation could improve daily life and transform the products of the designed world. Like much of Modernism, it was formulated in opposition to the perceived evils of the present – above all, the repressive political structures and glaring social inequalities.

Its solutions were highly rational and practical. A new environment – clean, healthy, light and full of fresh air – would transform daily life. There was no need for revolution, only for social change.
MACHINE

No idea was more central to the dreams of a new utopia than that of technology, represented in word and image by ‘the machine’.

Modernist designers and artists saw the mechanisation and rationalisation of life as a key objective of a new society. Advocating machine-based mass production (Fordism) as the means of achieving a better world, they applied it to everything, from the production of art to the design of kitchens.

Machines and machine parts were seen as models of functional, unselfconscious design, of beauty without ornament. Artworks, as well as domestic objects and buildings, were conceived as machines or the result of machine manufacture (which they rarely were).

Photographs were images made by machines that also depicted or evoked the world of machines. Film, the latest image technology, brought the machine even more vividly to life.
THE NEW PERSON

It was important for Modernists to find appropriate clothing for the new era in which they were living. Some spiritually oriented artists wore a type of cassock. Others preferred the traditional tailored suit (often, the English suit) for its essentially Modernist qualities of simplicity and standardisation.

The more radical outfits often looked like boiler suits or laboratory uniforms. They evoked the idea of the factory, and the designer or artist as worker or technocrat.
FACTORY

The factory as a building type had special meaning for Modernists. It was a site of production (a key word) and was associated with the worker. Honest, practical and egalitarian, it epitomised the qualities that many Modernists aspired to in their own work.

The factory product was the opposite of art, untainted by pretence, as was the factory building. The purpose of a factory was clear: it housed, or was, a product of the latest technology.
PERFORMING MODERNISM

Modernist theatre and cinema was a laboratory for utopia, an arena for experimentation. Here designers could try out new materials, new ideas for mechanised or robotic bodies, and new ways of organising the body in space.

In exploring these ideas, designers collaborated with choreographers, directors and performers. But they also took the concept of performance and theatricality beyond the stage into other spheres, including exhibitions, shops, cafés and events, both indoors and out.

Performance has been largely overlooked in the study of Modernism. Though highly significant, it is by its nature ephemeral. Yet, it is central to the Modernist enterprise of creating a new world.
BUILDING UTOPIA

In the mid 1920s, as the post-war economy improved, the new utopia began to take shape. Avant-garde, Modernist design moved from little-seen exhibitions or small circulation magazines to a wider audience.

Designers now had official positions as city architects or organisers of large international exhibitions. This gave them a stage on which to promote the ‘New’, and to do so in ways that proclaimed the unity and internationalism of the arts. The New Architecture, the New Dwelling, the New Photography, the New Typography were all terms used during the period.

Underpinning this movement towards the New was the idea of the ‘New Spirit’, one that reflected new social and economic relations, as well as new technology. This, so designers hoped, would seize the imagination of everyone and fundamentally transform the way people lived.
SOCIAL AGENDA

At the heart of Modernism in the designed world was a commitment to social reform, if not revolution. Political views varied among Modernists, but they were generally left leaning.

Tackling economic inequality was central to their agenda and many architects devoted their energies to housing. Affordable housing was one of the most urgent needs of the inter-war period, and massive changes in investment, land tenure, planning controls and building practices were enlisted to resolve the problem.

Hundreds of thousands were re-housed throughout Europe, but the Modernist approach was particularly influential in Holland and Germany under Social Democratic governments.
NEW MATERIALS

In their drive to transform society, Modernist architects set out to industrialise the building process. New construction techniques and the use of materials such as steel, concrete and glass would reduce costs and so allow more housing to be built.

Economy was not the only motivation for using these materials. Architects saw them as inherently 'new'. They admired steel for its tensile strength, concrete for its resistance and glass for its ability to admit light. They sought innovative and expressive ways to reveal these properties, and used steel and glass to create visual transparency – a quality that was greatly prized in the New Architecture.
PROMOTING MODERNISM

The crusading nature of Modernism generated many exhibitions and countless books, journals, posters and advertisements. In both design and content, these argued the case for the ‘New’, often with a generational and political bias against the old.

Modernist graphic design and advertising came to be known as the New Typography. It favoured sans-serif lettering, sometimes without uppercase letters, and ‘Typo-Photo’, in which photographic images were montaged alongside type. Colour and composition were influenced by abstract painting.
SITTING ON AIR

In Modernist circles, the chair represented a particularly important and popular design challenge. This was partly because the new interiors required suitable furniture, but also because it was easier to make a chair than to construct a building.

Literally hundreds of architects and designers produced chairs. The most innovative contribution was the cantilever chair, with two legs rather than four, first designed in 1927 by Dutch architect Mart Stam. It sprang from a recent design innovation, the use of tubular steel for furniture, pioneered by Marcel Breuer at the Bauhaus.

In their shiny, chromed surfaces and mechanistic, hygienic appearance, these chairs declared the radical nature of the new interior. Visually and physically light, they embodied the Modernist goal of weightlessness and transparency.
HEALTHY BODY CULTURE

Modernism was permeated by a deep concern for health. World war and the flu epidemic that followed had killed millions. Poor housing conditions continued to blight people's lives and made tuberculosis a major disease. Alongside these negative factors, there was a positive one: the new, and more open, response to sexuality and the body.

Health was seen as a metaphor for a bright new future. In practical terms, it meant that buildings, both private and communal, should have modern amenities. These ranged from indoor toilets and hygienic kitchens, to swimming pools, gyms and sun decks.

The connection between health and the body can be seen throughout the mass media and the visual arts. Everywhere there were images of sports men and women, dancers and gymnasts, swimmers and sunbathers. These images were not merely a celebration of health and exercise. Often they had deeper social and political resonances.
MODERNISM AND NATURE

During the 1930s many designers and architects, especially the more avant-garde, turned away from mainstream Modernism. Eschewing objectivity, geometry and machine imagery, they shifted their attention to Nature. Here they found organic, curvilinear forms and a more satisfying outlet for their emotional and psychological needs.

Nature provided a new guiding principle (the ‘laws of nature’) in which form was derived from function and natural geometry. It was also a source of materials that could be shaped by human creativity. Designers now saw that brick, stone and above all wood had expressive qualities that were lacking in steel, concrete and glass.

At the same time, the sense of a grand, collective Modernist enterprise began to wane. Designers no longer necessarily set out to change society. Instead, they focused on enhancing the human experience.
NATIONAL MODERNISM

During the 1920s, Modernism had been closely associated with left-wing politics. In the 1930s, however, it proved surprisingly adaptable to different political systems, including dictatorships.

At the same time, the rise of totalitarian regimes triggered the emigration of many leading designers and artists. This hastened the spread of Modernism from its historical centres to countries such as Britain and the United States, but also to South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and the nascent state of Israel.

The five case studies in this section of the exhibition look at the way in which Modernism changed in the 1930s, especially in terms of politics. They focus on national settings where Modernism had originated (Germany, Russia, Italy), as well as those where it was adopted later (Sweden, Britain).
GERMANY

When the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, they initiated a purge of Modernist culture in favour of a romantic, conservative vision of the nation. They immediately closed the Bauhaus and prevented many Modernists from working. Jewish designers suffered especially.

Avant-gardism of any kind was snuffed out by Hitler but various strains of Modernism continued throughout the 1930s. In engineering, industrial design and even products for the home, the authorities actually favoured modernity as a sign of progress. For designers who avoided politics and high-profile public commissions, it was sometimes possible to continue working.
RUSSIA

The competition for the Palace of the Soviets, held in 1931–3, represented a remarkable flourishing of Modernism in Russia but also its death knell. Over 400 Russian, European and American architects submitted entries, many of them significant Modernist designs.

However, at precisely this time Stalin tightened his paranoid and sadistic grip on the nation, directing his attention to cultural policy. After 1933, only realistic, optimistic and heroic art and architecture was permitted. Most forms of creative experiment were cast as degenerate and pessimistic. Despite this, the techniques of Modernist design were put to political use in international exhibitions, films and graphic design.
ITALY

Although the Italian Fascists were enamoured of ancient Roman architecture, they also welcomed Modernism. For Mussolini, a diversity of artistic tendencies was evidence of the richness and vibrancy of Italian culture.

This positive view of Modernism was a legacy of the Futurists (many of whom had Fascist inclinations). Obsessed with modernity, they saw Modernism as a true reflection of a dynamic, industrialised and technologically oriented regime.

To suggest that there was no obstacle between political leaders and the people, Mussolini often described Fascism as a ‘glass house’. Modernist architects looking for patronage seized on this as a means of securing work.
SWEDEN

Modernism arrived in Sweden with the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. Critics and the government admired Modernism as a suitable symbol for Swedish social democracy, and four million people – two-thirds of the population – came to the show.

The exhibition offered mass production, standardisation and utility as solutions to pressing social problems. However, it was not the rational or scientific character of the exhibition that drew praise, but its human qualities and everyday practicality. Critics claimed that Swedish Modernism reflected traditional 'national' virtues, founded in Lutheranism and the age-old struggle against the harsh climate.

Swedish Modernism was highly regarded elsewhere, especially in Britain, for its humanism and its distinctly local character.
MASS-MARKET MODERNISM

By the early 1930s Modernism had extended its reach far beyond an avant-garde or elite audience. It was becoming part of everyday life.

Modernist design was increasingly imitated for its aesthetic qualities alone. Stripped of its social ideals, it became identified as a style, one among many that designers and consumers could choose from.

Published widely in magazines and shown in exhibitions, Modernism clearly signified the new and began to make inroads into the mass consumer market and the home. Modernism was readily accepted as a selling tool – in advertising and typographic design, shop display and product design.

Transport organisations – from airlines to municipal rail systems – encouraged the public to engage with Modernist design, while popular cinema provided glimpses into Modernist worlds, both real and imagined.
DOMESTIC INTERIOR

The radically new character of Modernist architecture led designers to re-consider virtually every aspect of the interior, from the arrangement of walls and furniture to the choice of lighting and tableware.

Architect Bruno Taut urged householders to ‘get rid of everything that is not essential for living’. Although not all could afford or wanted to follow this injunction, a new market did evolve. Reflecting the ‘rational’ vision of the home, these Modernist products were described as ‘household equipment’.

In the 1920s Modernist products were made in very small quantities, but after 1930 the selection grew. Small firms found their market niches and established manufacturers launched Modernist lines.