

WHAT HAPPENED TO WALTER GROPIUS

Revisiting the Collapse of the Modern Movement

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Walter Gropius's legacy as the originator of the Bauhaus is fundamental to the narrative of any Modern Architecture survey. Curiously, at least at the University of Texas School of Architecture, his involvement outside of the Bauhaus is little discussed and does not feature in the curriculum. The fact that he has fallen from favor is corroborated by the fact his late-life retrospective, *Total Scope of Architecture*, was last published in English in 1974.¹ None of this would be worth mentioning if his ideas did not matter anymore, but the opposite seems to be true. Take, for example, his campaign against the automobile, which he began in earnest in the 1940s, or his insistence that the education of architects should align closely with professional practice. Both are still pressing issues today, in 2019. This paper will argue that there is reason to reintroduce Gropius' thought, at least in part—as conveyed through the *Total Scope of Architecture*—into the canonical history of Architectural discourse. Before we begin I want to acknowledge the limitations of my own experience as a student of architecture, which is confined to a brief three years at a single institution. Perhaps an interest in Gropius's teachings are alive elsewhere, as the recent publication of a comprehensive biography by Fiona McCarthy's suggest.²

My inquiry centers around an exploration of themes in Gropius writing. The purpose is twofold. On the one hand, simply to re-evaluate what I find to be relevant observations, and on the other, to suggest possible reasons why these observations seem to have fallen from favor. The line of inquiry I take is roughly keyed to the following questions. I suspect the answer hangs in the balance.

The questions Gropius asks are no longer relevant.

The answers Gropius presents to these questions are no longer valid.

The discipline is no longer interested in these kinds of questions.

Gropius' involvement with CIAM is revealing. The prevailing narrative suggests that Gropius was cast aside with the Modern Movement, but on closer investigation this is unconvincing. First of all, Gropius arguments are nuanced enough that they persist despite a number of flaws evident in retrospect. Moreover, if anyone were to be discarded with the Modern Movement it should be Corbusier—the founder of CIAM and its self-appointed spokesman. This has not happened. Instead, Corbusier has enjoyed continuous popularity (evidenced both in UTSOA curricula and in publishing data), which implies that the issue with Gropius had less to do with his stature as a Modernist — which would have affected Corbusier's appeal as well — but more to do with the kind of architectural thinking that predominated after the Modernist faith was undermined.

When we associate his later work only with a bygone era of utopian dreams, à la Ville Radieuse, or to remember him only as the progenitor of the Bauhaus, we do a disservice to ourselves and to future generations of architects as we risk losing a powerful voice and a rigorous thinker who tackled the dilemma of architecture in a rapidly industrializing society head-on, with commendable courage.

¹ The edition cited hereafter as STA was printed in 1956 in the UK by George Allen Unwin Ltd.

² McCarthy, Fiona. *Gropius: the Man Who Built the Bauhaus*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, United States: 2019.

Textual Analysis

The following themes are drawn from an apologetic Gropius assembled in 1955 under the title *The Scope of Total Architecture*, which was by and large a compendium of essays published between the years of 1928 and 1953. His express purpose, he admits, was to reveal ‘the [[his]] human core’ that has been covered ‘even to the point of obscurity’ with various labels: International, Bauhaus, Functional, etc. Despite the ad-hoc nature of the essays, the volume is remarkably coherent and for this reason I have chosen to deal with the ideas as a total set without concern for the chronology of origination.

A recurrent theme in Gropius’ writing is the insistence that the human being was the focus of architectural design and city planning. While this is understood to be a common position held by many modernist architects,³ Gropius insists on the privileged place of human beings—not as one value among many—as well as a nuanced understanding of the whole person. For example: “man is to be the focus,” he writes, which includes both “his spiritual and material needs.”⁴ It is with this in mind that Gropius pleads against the growing dominance of the automobile and in favor of the need to develop wholistically healthy communities, even with respect to the ‘total habitat’ in a way which resonates strongly with the environmental movement today. All three of these issues should strike us as profoundly familiar contemporary concerns.



Fig. 44b: But what has happened now to the pedestrian?



Listen to the way Gropius describes how we have ‘indulged’ the automobile, ‘our latest pet,’ ten years before George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* was even set to take place (1962) and twenty years before it was released (1973). When Gropius was writing, it seems, Americans had hardly begun their love affair with automobiles. Nonetheless he makes his case in no uncertain terms:

³ “So the Modern Movement, which grew out of a passionate involvement with the human condition, has, via the skyscraper, become the chief apologist for the real estate speculator.” Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco*, New York: 1977, 82. Hereafter cited as FFF.

⁴ STA 63

“While we equip the individual home with every conceivable amenity we have overlooked the merits of the public meeting place; we have surrendered our streets and public spaces almost entirely to the automobile, and the pedestrian, forced to withdraw to a narrow pavement, has lost the right of way. The important neighborly contact which has been so basic for the coherence of the old cities and towns has been destroyed by the explosive force of vehicular traffic.”⁵

Nor does he stop there, but with an eerie prescience diagnoses a phenomenon we are all too familiar with today: “We roar with new techniques and new inventions for speedier means of transportation. But what do we do with all the time saved? ... We plunge instead into an even more hectic current of activity ... We obviously need a clarification as to what exactly our spiritual and intellectual aims are.”⁶ The image on the left, above, is published in *Scope of Total Architecture* in 1955, the image on the right in *Form Follows Fiasco*, Peter Blake’s damning take on the ‘Modern Movement,’ published in 1977. The only thing that seems to have changed is the infrastructure has gotten more complex—an indulgence, indeed.

What is interesting about image above supplied by Peter Blake in his well known polemic, *Form Follows Fiasco* (1977) is that its force is not directed at the automobile as such, but rather the problem of single-use zoning and its correlated symptom of commuter traffic.⁷ Yet in ways that would distinctly *prefigure* Blake’s critique, Gropius had already cautioned 22 year earlier about the withering effects of suburbia, both as an aesthetic phenomenon and as a social one. The former is perhaps less surprising—for what architect appreciates tract developments—but it is still worth noting that Gropius’ position is a nuanced critique of suburban monotony which commends its “economic achievement” while condemning its aesthetic⁸ and social consequences. “Housing alone” he states, “a mere conglomeration of people—does not create an organic community.”⁹

The ‘organic’ community Gropius refers to is centered around the neighborhood unit which not only includes a mix of services such as schools, gyms, markets, and places for worship,¹⁰ but which is also planned on a pedestrian scale, such that the points of interest would be “within ten to fifteen minutes walking distance, at most.”¹¹ This he claims, would not only provide ‘a good chance to improve social contact,’ but would also create the condition in which the community itself would be able to grow, heal and thrive on its own. Citing a sociological study from the UK, Gropius, in a turn that closely resembles what Jane Jacobs will discuss seven years later, describes how it is the quality of the social fabric, more than any other factor, *even the elimination of poverty*, that contributes to the health of the community.¹² Curiously, using Peter Blake’s polemic as a barometer of the reaction to Modernism,¹³ we find Gropius once more in front of the mounting storm. When Blake suggests, for example, that the fixation on ‘housing’ should be replaced by the idea of ‘living’¹⁴ this seems to merely rearticulate Gropius’ claim decades earlier that “housing is not enough.”¹⁵

⁵ STA 140

⁶ STA 158

⁷ “The daily exodus from Manhattan” (FFF 115).

⁸ “Housing is not enough: [The suburbs] may be made up of pleasant, individual houses and often present an admirable economic achievement, but the layout of the town is usually but a dull, imaginative conglomeration of endless strings of houses” (STA 168). “Cf. 139: “I am deeply convinced that building community centers is of even greater urgency than housing itself...”

⁹ STA 134

¹⁰ STA 134

¹¹ STA 133

¹² The study referenced is by Dr. Scott Williamson & Dr. Innes Pearse of London’s Peckham Health Centre. “Delinquency and crime,” Gropius writes, “will also decrease with the improved social character of the neighborhood unit; for it has been found that social ills result from the lack of coherence and effectiveness of the social group rather than from biological or psychological factors, or even from poverty” (STA 134).

¹³ Ackerman, James S. “Reviewed Work(s): Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn’t Worked by Peter Blake.” In the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38, no. 1 (March 1979): 49-50.

¹⁴ FFA 123

¹⁵ Section heading in final essay of STA, 168.

The third aspect of human-centered design that seems pertinent has to do with Gropius' conception of the total environment, which he describes as 'habitat.' Here, the progressive nature of his vision hardly needs to be stressed. Given their eloquence, his words are worth quoting at length:

“The greatest responsibility of the planner and the architect, I believe, is the protection and development of our habitat. Man has evolved a mutual relationship with nature on earth, but his power to change its surface has grown so tremendously that this may become a curse instead of a blessing. How can we afford to have one beautiful tract of country after the other bulldozed out of existence, flattened and emptied for the sake of smooth building operations and then filled up by a developer with hundreds of insipid little house units that will never grow into a community, and scores of telephone poles added in place of the thoughtlessly cut trees? Native vegetation and the natural irregularities of the topography are destroyed by negligence, greed, or the lack of ideas, because the average type of developer regards the land first of all as a commercial commodity from which he feels entitled to reap a maximum profit. *Until we love and respect the land almost religiously, its fatal deterioration will go on.*”¹⁶

This paragraph, excerpted from the conclusion of *Scope of Total Architecture*, articulates a position to the double question “who is an architect/what is architecture” with force and pith, on a topic both nebulous and politically charged with a courage that is worryingly absent among educators today. Whether you agree with Gropius' assessment or not, I would hope we can agree that it should not be out of print.

Another prominent theme throughout Gropius writings is his repeated insistence that architecture should draw closer to building, both in practice and with respect to the education of students. The model relationship, for Gropius, is showcased in the medieval conception of the 'master builder' who was deeply familiar with the materials and techniques of construction and was able to leverage these in service of design—and who was also able to refine the design during the process of construction.¹⁷ In the 20th century, as things have become more complex, Gropius maintains that a fundamental understanding of construction logistics and expense is even more critical in order to close what he refers to as a 'fatal gap' between design and building.¹⁸

The advantages of a closer relationship between the two disciplines, for Gropius, are numerous, but can be roughly collected under three categories. First, Gropius argues that their coordination is necessary *economic* condition for developing an affordable, commodity-type building for mass-housing. Secondly, he warns that architects risk increasing irrelevance in the production of *any* building the more they ignore rapid developments in building technology. Finally, he makes the case that exposure to the bona-fide logistics of construction is what is needed to avoid the development of 'precocious' young designers who know nothing but the fantasy of their 'platonian drafting boards.'

With respect to housing costs Gropius is emphatic: “Something must be wrong with the whole building trade if the rent of even these [[subsidized]] dwellings, only about half paid for by their tenants, remain out of reach of the poorest.”¹⁹ And elsewhere: “The enormous waste of materials, time and labour, caused by the fact that the extensive housing developments are still being built by hand according to countless unrelated individual designs instead of being

¹⁶ STA 169

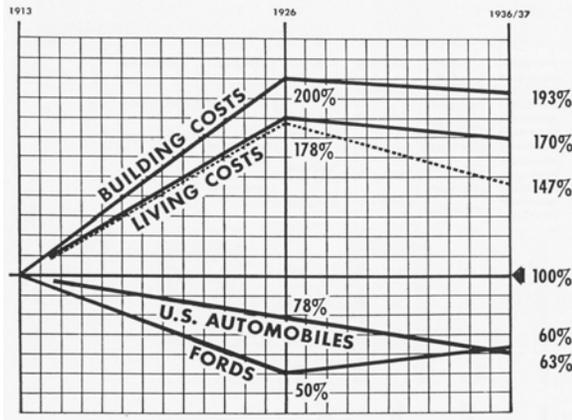
¹⁷ “We are expected to put all our design ideas, unto the last screw, into drawings and specifications. Then an army of workman has to execute our design [[without making any changes, even]] though there is no genius who could have sufficient foresight or imagination properly to judge the effect of every detail of his preconceived design; even less so the more he stays aloof from the practical process of building and making. Nor has the workmen of today any chance to contribute to the design of a building” (STA, 90).

¹⁸ STA 88. Cf. chapter 7: “The Architect in our Industrial Society,” pp 82-93.

¹⁹ STA 152

mass-produced according to standardised though flexible plans, can no longer be defended on any grounds.”²⁰ For Gropius, the standardization of building construction was an ethical burden that architects should bear—people *need* what architects can do, he argues, and architects are not delivering.

A critical moment in the development of his thought occurred when he stumbled across a diagram in the mid 1920’s that showed the price of building costs skyrocketing while the cost of automobiles steadily declined relative to their



pre-war indices.²¹ Hoping to achieve similar cost-reductions, Gropius put an enormous amount of faith in the ‘mass production’ of building components and extensively researched techniques for prefabrication of building elements as early as the 1920’s.²² While he would admit the weight of this burden fell primarily upon engineers,²³ he would also stress the extent to which it was important that architects have a hand in developing building components, if for no other reason that they would need “to learn how to compose beautiful buildings from those industrialized parts.”²⁴

Gropius’ willingness to consider architecture as a commodity sets him apart from many in the profession today, who often deride the ‘builder’ aesthetic and dread the proliferation of ‘revit-driven’ designs. While these *aesthetic* positions are tenable, it is a matter of significant importance whether architects have a duty that extends beyond a responsibility the beauty or artistry of their designs. For when Gropius’ account of ‘affordable’ housing could be applied directly to the 21st century city with little modification, we might wonder whether architects have simply lost interest in the question. Is the moral directive no longer incumbent upon them? Even if it is within their power to design more economic structures? Or does this matter fall to engineers and policy makers? Gropius stresses the point: “What is the reason for this devitalizing process? What must be changed in the economic structure in order to rebalance the market price of adequate dwellings?”²⁵ Though it may remain open, the question is no less valid today than when he posed it over 70 years ago.

Gropius’ second cautionary tale recounts how architects are losing control of their profession. “More than 80 per cent of US buildings are being built without an architect,” he writes. “When a client is in a building mood, he wants to buy the complete building for a fixed price and at a definite time of delivery [and] he usually concludes that the architect may be the unknown ‘X’ in his calculations ... And what can we expect? ... It keeps many clients from seeking our services altogether.”²⁶ The point should be clear: the more architects ignore the economics of building, the worse off they will be. Again, it is nearly tautological to say that people who make buildings should know what goes into them and how much it will cost, but what seems to be at stake is whether architects *want that control, whether they even want to build*. The premium on ‘high-design’ today suggests otherwise.

Concerning the education of students, Gropius avers that integral training in design and construction is instrumental in two ways. First of all, he maintains that the act of making is essential for the holistic development of the creative

²⁰ STA 150

²¹ “A dwelling became unobtainable to the lower class, but the car became everyman’s tool” (STA 152).

²² STA 143

²³ “The realisation of this economic and organizational scheme is above all the engineer’s problem” (STA, 147).

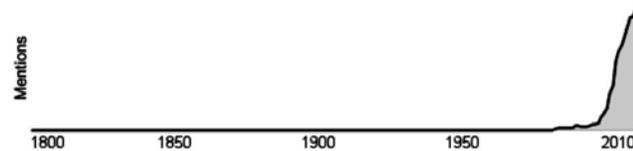
²⁴ “That is why we have to speed up to regain lost ground by training our young generation of architects for their twofold task: 1) to join the building industry and to take active part in developing and forming all those component parts for building and 2) to learn how to compose beautiful buildings from those industrialized parts” (STA, 88).

²⁵ STA 152

²⁶ STA 86

individual.²⁷ And secondly, he reckons field experience will critically mitigate the seductive allure of fashionable styles, and the risk of being indoctrinated into the ‘cult of the ego.’²⁸ The first claim is wrapped up in the pedagogy of the Bauhaus, about which much has been said elsewhere, and for our purposes it will be sufficient simply to note. His second claim, however, that field-experience will balance precocious design, is worth investigating as it seems to have gone unheeded. It is arguable in fact that the opposite is true today: in schools “precociousness” —perhaps known by another name—seems to be a quality that is cultivated and even celebrated. And while we begin to see some resistance to this phenomenon in the derisive use of the word “starchitect” in the culture at large,²⁹ it is hard to ignore the fact that the most visible commissions fall to those practitioners to whom this moniker can be applied. Gropius’ argument is still valid: we could use new role models, and the profession has been reluctant to generate them.

Use over time for: starchitect



He is unequivocal in his call for greater integrity—chiding those who ever seek “the unique, the unheard of, the stunt”³⁰—and the educational systems that encourage it. “I personally have grave doubts” he laments, “as to whether the present bookish climate of universities can offer at all a healthy breeding ground for architects.”³¹ Often critical of an over-reliance on the ‘platonic’ drafting board, he swears by the value of field experience as a critical aspect of developing visionary and competent architects who are suited to take a leadership role in a profession that is rightly understood as ‘a fusion of art, science, and business.’³² An over-reliance on paper designs, he contends, is likely to have the opposite effect, developing students who are easily swayed by the ‘current ideas, fads and clichés,’³³ rather than aspiring to the noble humanitarian and ecological ambitions discussed above. For all these reasons, Gropius contends that construction experience should be integrated into the curriculum of schools—‘part and parcel’—not as a separate experience after years of academic training, after the damage has been done.³⁴

From one perspective, Gropius’ position can be seen, with the wisdom afforded us by history, as exceedingly idealistic. He was a vocal proponent of the idea of the architect as a great ‘co-ordinator’³⁵ of all the aspects of building construction—someone who is “trained not ever to lose a total vision, in spite of the infinite wealth of specialized knowledge which he has to absorb and integrate.”³⁶ And, as if the totality of *specialized* knowledge was not enough, he draws generous bound around the scope of inquiry as well, stating that the architect must “comprehend land, nature, man and his art, as one great entity”³⁷ Indeed it is difficult not to read this as hyperbole, but I believe were are intended to understand this quite literally (he presents the image of a very serious man). The title of the book, *The Scope of Total Architecture*, alludes to this as well.

²⁷ “Making is certainly not auxiliary to thinking. It is a basic experience indispensable for the unity of purpose within the creative act. It is the only educational means which interrelates our perceptive and inventive faculties” (STA 59).

²⁸ STA 96

²⁹ Data from Google Books, showing relative usage over time in English language publications. Accessed 5/10/2019.

³⁰ STA 96

³¹ STA 59

³² STA 87

³³ “As long as our teaching centres only around the platonic drafting board we are perpetually in danger of raising the ‘precocious designer.’ For it is almost unavoidable that the lack of practical experience in the field, in the crafts and industrial processes of building leads at least some students to an all too ready acceptance of current style ideas, fads and clichés. This is the consequence of an all too academic training.” (STA XX)

³⁴ STA 63-64

³⁵ “The architect is to be co-ordinator—a man of vision and professional competence—whose business it is to unify the many social, technical, economic and artistic problems which arise in connection with the building.” STA, 62. Cf. 75, 87, 160.

³⁶ STA 160

³⁷ STA 160

What is curious though, is that while Gropius was almost quixotic in his vision for the potential of architecture to transform the world, he was also profoundly pragmatic. Nowhere is this strange mixture of dogged idealism more evident than in his proposal for an Institute of Building Integration. Understanding the monumentality of the task he had set before himself (in this case affordable housing) he would propose some sort of entity in which “federal, state and municipal authorities would co-operate with architects, engineers, contractors, manufacturers, realtors, bankers and trade-unionists as their advertisers, to produce a final solution for the pressing need for adequate housing.” He was acutely aware of all the players involved, aware of the perverse incentives of capital economies toward land speculation³⁸ and that private firms must take profits to shoulder the burden of research and development,³⁹ sensitive to the difficulty that arises when jurisdictions have different regulations and codes⁴⁰ and that varied climates need unique solutions,⁴¹ and yet still, *against all the odds, he simply thought it could be done.*

The Collapse of CIAM

It is well known that ‘Modern Movement’ was indexed to the activities and publishings of the International Congress of Architecture (CIAM), a professional organization that operated from 1927-1959 notably under the leadership of Le Corbusier.⁴² Along with many prominent intellectuals, Gropius joined its ranks and served as a vice president from 1929 onward, a self-avowed “devoted member.”⁴³ It is not within our scope to delve into the complicated proceedings of the organization, its many conventions or the ongoing flux of imposing personalities, but it would be insufficient to discuss Gropius’ work without a mention of his involvement.

A couple of points are worth making. The first is to acknowledge that Gropius’ vision was sympathetic with the organization’s purpose, roughly speaking, to resist Beaux-Arts classicism and bring architecture up to speed with the machine age. That said, it would be a mistake to conflate the two as a way of suggesting that Gropius’ fading influence can be simply correlated with the collapse of CIAM. To this end it is revealing to analyze the subtle dissimilarities between Gropius’ argument for high-rise housing and Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse, which became the de facto icon of Modernist urban planning. The second point I would like to make involves a textual analysis of *The Scope of Total Architecture* viz-a-viz what is markedly absent concerning both Corbusier and CIAM itself.

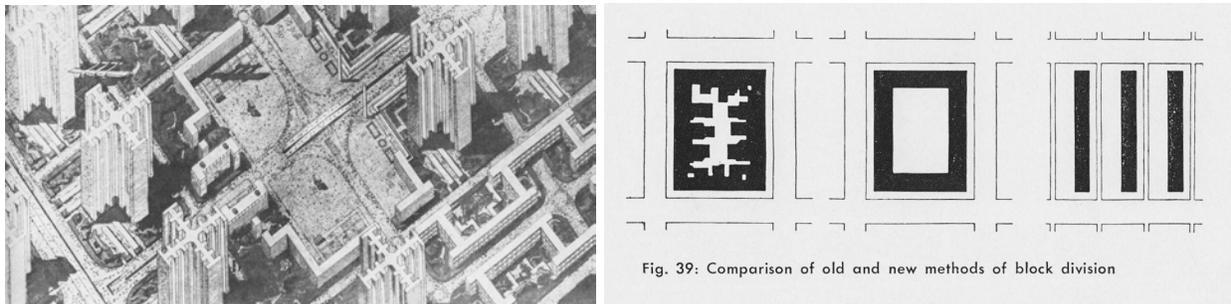


Fig. 39: Comparison of old and new methods of block division

Corbusier’s Plan Voisin and Gropius’ massing diagram

³⁸ STA 137, 169

³⁹ STA 115

⁴⁰ STA 121

⁴¹ STA 98

⁴² Martin, Lewis. “History, Theory, Criticism.” *Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America*. eds Joan Ockman & Rebecca Wilson. MIT Press, Cambridge: 2012 (337).

⁴³ STA 103

Gropius advocated fiercely in favor of high-rise apartments. It is undeniable that he, for example, advanced an image of a building type that appears decidedly similar to those notoriously demolished at Pruitt Igoe: 10-12 stories, north-south orientation, with vegetated open space between them and centralized services, etc. And not only would he militate for their adoption (“we must fight in all countries in favor of the construction of high-rise apartment blocks”⁴⁴), but he was also a proponent of urban renewal its worst form, evident clearly in retrospect. Gropius would express, for example, an antipathy to low-rise walk up apartments (“the elimination will be welcome progress”⁴⁵) as well as the desire to ‘remove’ unproductive members of society to new regions where they could regain their economic footing, as well as sweeping, square-mile’ rehabilitation policies in light of the fact that ‘lot and block’ style has not worked.⁴⁶ None of the above seems remotely acceptable today, and it would be tarnishing record indeed if that was the end of it.

History has proven Gropius wrong in a number of ways. That is clear. The point I want to make is simply to stress the point that he wanted to make: for Gropius the issue of building type, height, and spacing was at its heart a question of costs vs. sunlight vs. living space. He obsessed over the minutiae of these multifaceted relationships, for example, considering the demand on infrastructure (roads, sewers) which added density entails. “In my opinion the optimum height of an apartment house is a purely economic problem,” he writes, discounting claims that low-rise walk ups offer a more natural relationship to the earth. “The limits of economic expediency are defined by the height beyond which the increase in construction cost is no longer compensated by savings in site and road requirements. The most economic building height ... depends upon the cost of land in each particular case.”⁴⁷

To the right is a full plate (one of only 16) which Gropius dedicates to a diagrammatic analysis of relationships that are so subtle they almost seem absurd to worry about—but this precisely what Gropius did. (Obviously the relationships within each set are clear, but to Gropius there is an important distinction between sets A/B & B/C—can you find it?) He was fastidious and dedicated in his rational approach to building type—which brings us to the larger point I want to make.

When you set *this* mode of thinking against that which is manifest in Corbusier’s drawings of Ville

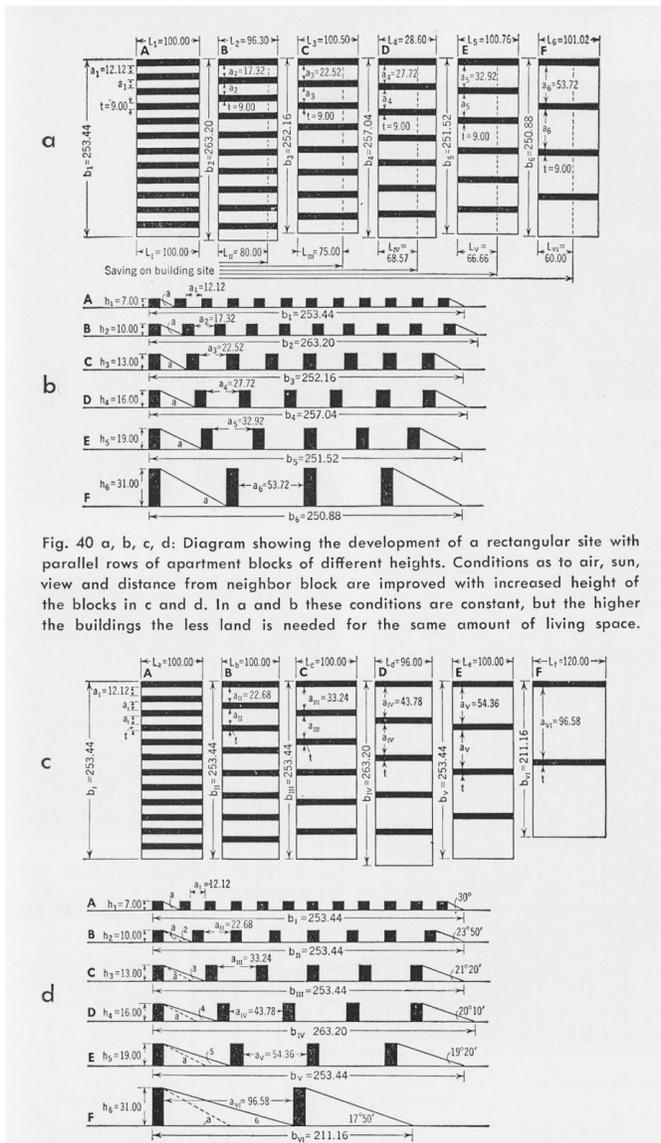


Fig. 40 a, b, c, d: Diagram showing the development of a rectangular site with parallel rows of apartment blocks of different heights. Conditions as to air, sun, view and distance from neighbor block are improved with increased height of the blocks in c and d. In a and b these conditions are constant, but the higher the buildings the less land is needed for the same amount of living space.

⁴⁴ STA 128

⁴⁵ STA 130

⁴⁶ STA 137

⁴⁷ STA 124

Radieuse / Plan Voisin,⁴⁸ the contrast is stark: Gropius did not glorify his idea, and if he did envision schemes similar to Corbusier's he took no pains to publish them. Corbusier, on the other hand, dedicated an entire book to his concept, and the widely published images of the large format models of the Plan Voisin attest to the energy he spent demonstrating the aesthetic appeal of its extravagance, evidently relishing the scale of the tiny people-specks. Compare that to the figure/ground diagram on page 6, in which Gropius respects the limits and scale of the existing city block and one can see they are hardly the same. And yet *even if* Gropius did advocate for 'square mile rehabilitation' (an idea which he never elaborates in this book), his purpose was utilitarian, not utopian. Gropius expresses his case for the high-rise most succinctly as a solution to a problem: "The large city must assert itself; it requires a development of its own, a type of dwelling adapted its own life which provides a maximum of air, sunlight and vegetation with a minimum of traffic and maintenance needs. The high-rise apartment block is capable of fulfilling these requirements, and therefore its promotion is among the most pressing tasks of the housing policy." The superficial similarities between Corbusier's Ville Radieuse and Gropius' high rises—tall buildings with space between them—seem negligible compared to manifest differences in intention and effect. One is rooted in pragmatism, the other drenched in utopian dreams.⁴⁹

Secondly, a word on the text. Two things are conspicuously absent: 1) a prolonged discussion of CIAM, and 2) any mention of another architect's name. Gropius does not use this book as a platform for espousing the views of CIAM; rather, the chapter Gropius dedicates to CIAM is but a few hundred words, not even two full pages, and behind them one can already sense a premonition about the way things would break down. One feels, for example, a profound sense of resignation when he concludes: "CIAM, I confidently hope, will go on fighting for its original conception of the totality with man as the measure for all our problems in planning and architecture."⁵⁰ And despite the distasteful effect of the patronizing, ponderous language with which he ascribes feelings and aspirations to the generic "they" of the sum-total of people residing in "underdeveloped countries," there is a tinge of heroic sadness in his words when he remarks: "I wish there would be more research by architects into what exactly are the prerequisites for this thing called 'happiness' ... In our daily struggle to put that non-leaking roof over the heads of unsheltered millions we forget this [essential condition]] too easily."⁵¹

Gropius also avoids using his book as a platform for polemics. He talks very little about other buildings or architects—except once. After extolling the civic qualities of the Piazza San Marco in Venice he remarks, tellingly: "When we look at the modern plaza in front of the United Nations buildings in New York we find that it is hardly used as a community centre; it is more a monumental approach to entrances."⁵² Just once, he pulls back the curtain. And the stage is empty. In this light Gropius veiled jibes at the prima-donna architect⁵³ who is concerned with 'memorializing his own genius'⁵⁴ seem more focused. The point here is Gropius' discontent with CIAM and some of the major players is, despite ostensible claims to the contrary, not hard to infer. It is plausible to locate behind this retrospective apologetic the sense that modern movement has begun to sail on without him and forgotten that one essential tenet which for Gropius sounds like a refrain throughout the entire book: *what matters is the whole human being, in body, both corporeal and civic, and in spirit.*

⁴⁸ Reprinted above as shown in Blake's *Form Follows Fiasco*.

⁴⁹ "Even during the fifth CIAM congress in Paris in 1937, it was already becoming clear that Le Corbusier in particular was gradually reinterpreting the fourth congress's rather provisional conclusions. Some of the analyses were presented in public again in his Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the 1937 World Exhibition, *but they were incorporated there into a fundamentally new, highly symbolic narrative universe describing the history, present state and future of the city.* The central lecture hall was emblazoned with a large panel on which a keyword summary of the substance of the conclusions could be read under the tendentious title 'Charte de l'Urbanisme.'" Emphasis added. *Atlas of the Functional City: CIAM 4 and Comparative Urban Analysis*. eds Evelien van Es, et al. Gta Verlag, Zurich: 2015.

⁵⁰ STA 104

⁵¹ STA 104

⁵² STA 140

⁵³ STA 88

⁵⁴ STA 96

It follows that if we are to understand the fading popularity of Gropius' work as tethered to the crisis of faith which shattered Modernist dogma, evidenced in polemics like Peter Blake's, we would also see the same effect with Corbusier who was arguably more complicit in the actions of CIAM than anyone.⁵⁵ But the opposite is true. Corbusier has hardly been more popular. In 2016 seventeen of his buildings were inducted as UNESCO world heritage sites specifically for their 'unprecedented' contributions to the Modern Movement with which he was 'directly and materially' associated, noting among other things their 'powerful' demonstration of the principles of CIAM, the materialization of the Radiant City ideal in Chandigarh, and his 'exceptional, pioneering' spirit of invention of a new architectural languages and techniques that respond to the 'social and human needs of modern man.' And lest there be any question as to whether these commendations merely reflect their historical value UNESCO is clear: "The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier represents a masterpiece of human creative genius, providing an outstanding response to certain fundamental architectural and social challenges of the 20th century."⁵⁶ Nor does this simply represent a resurgence in his popularity. Corbusier's well known treatise *Vers Une Architecture* has been printed in 21 languages over 68 times (including reprints) with significant new editions released every decade.⁵⁷

Something does not hold up. In the light of the unqualified adulation from UNESCO it appears the Modern Movement never fell from grace; in the afterglow of this praise it makes accounts like Mary McLeod's, printed in the ASCA's centennial publication, sound absurd. "Almost anyone who studied or taught in American architecture schools from the late 1960s to the 1980s would probably agree," she writes, "that architecture education had changed dramatically during those years and that this change centered on the collapse of a belief in the principles of modern architecture."⁵⁸

The Triumph of Art-Architecture

Professional historians will tell you that writing history is an intensely creative act. A path is tread across time, and of the wealth of information available only a few treasures can be brought along; great exertion must be spent on what to leave behind. When Vincent Scully commends his own prescience, for example, in correctly identifying Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* as "the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*,"⁵⁹ he leaves out much—intentionally.

The story of architecture as marked by its most 'important' treatises, described as an arc from Corbusier's often bombastic and disorganized collection of suppositions in 1923 to Venturi's admittedly careful examination in 1966 should strike us as unusually reductive. The question is worth asking as to whether Scully inadvertently mistakes 'importance' with 'influence.' For while there is little debate that Corbusier was influential, to take the next step to importance presupposes a value judgment that is evidently suppressed—and there can be no mistake that the narrative Scully

⁵⁵ "The fact that [The Athens Charter] is only one specific appropriation and interpretation – by Le Corbusier – of the conclusions of the fourth CIAM congress and that it was first published ten years after the conference itself is more than a mere footnote in publication history in this context. Le Corbusier's initiatives and independent manoeuvres had already repeatedly triggered severe personal disputes and arguments over matters of content inside the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), ever since the organization's founding congress in La Sarraz in 1928. [The Athens Charter], as a publicity seeking manifesto condensed into the form of specific instructions for action, concealed not only the variety of opinions that existed inside the CIAM regarding the challenges of urban development, but also in particular the deliberately open-ended process of analysis with which the organization had been attempting to approach the topic of the city collectively since 1930." *Atlas of the Functional City : CIAM 4 and Comparative Urban Analysis*. eds Evelien van Es, et al. Gta Verlag, Zurich: 2015.

⁵⁶ See "The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1321/>. Portions are reproduced in Appendix D.

⁵⁷ Notably in 1946 (English), 1958 (French), 1963 (German), 1970 (English), 1977 (French), 1987 & 1989 (English), 1995 (French), and 2008 (English). Data compiled from WorldCat.org, accessed 5/11/2019.

⁵⁸ The essay features as a chapter in the history of the ASCA's centennial publication: *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America*. ed. Joan Ockman. MIT Press, Cambridge: 2012 (162).

⁵⁹ Scully makes this claim in the introduction to the first edition (1966), and is 'pleased' to find that it was borne out in the 11 years that elapsed before the release of the second (1977), during which time could be credited with 'the breadth and relevance' of the succeeding architectural discourse. See *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Robert Venturi. Museum of Modern Art, New York: 2nd ed, 1977 (12).

describes certainly is based in a worldview that preferences a certain kind of architectural expression. In this world the value of architecture is found to be almost exclusively correlated to its meaning, or more specifically, the relationship of its physical manifestations—be they spatial, formal, symbolic or linguistic—to their meaning. The extent to which Scully is embedded in this discourse is evident when he asserts (as the opening statement in the introduction to the second edition): “There is no way to separate form from meaning; one cannot exist without the other. There can only be different critical assessments of the major ways through which form transmits meaning to the viewer.”⁶⁰

The value of meaning, however, is by no means axiomatic. It is a methodological position that operates primarily in an art-historical context, and it follows that the validity of its application depends on the extent to which we understand architecture as art. Scully is unabashed in his identification of the two,⁶¹ but this perspective deliberately ignores the tremendous differences between them—art and architecture—their purpose, and the forces that bring them into being. At this point it should be clear that these differences are precisely those that Gropius deemed so important. Architecture, no matter how idealistic your position, is tied up with the real world logistics of its production, and *its medium is the building*. To ignore this, as Scully does so brazenly when he declares that the “making ... of architecture, as with every art, is critical-historical act,”⁶² seems bizarre. The *design* of architecture may be so, but to so casually conflate ‘design’ and ‘making’ only indicates how at this point, in 1977, the aspect of construction had been rejected, ignored, or otherwise forgotten in architectural discourse by its main interlocutors.



86. Piazza S. Marco, Venice

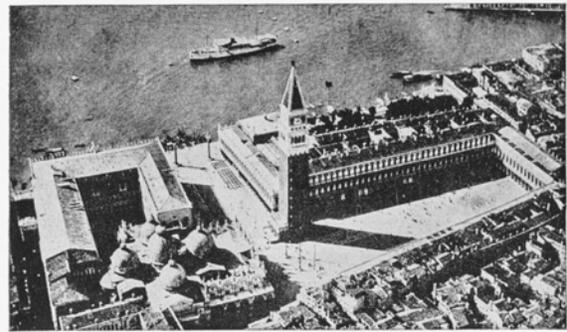


Fig. 41: Piazza San Marco, Venice

On the left, *Complexity on Contradiction* (Venturi, 1966), on the right, *Scope of Total Architecture* (Gropius, 1955)

Above are two images of the same place. One is supplied by Gropius; the other by Venturi. Gropius provides the image as evidence of “the most famous example of a beautiful [[civic plaza, which]] for centuries served its community most effectively as a receptacle for its public life.”⁶³ Venturi, for his part, supplies it as evidence of successful heterogeneous composition, in which “a consistent spatial order” is manifest, but “not without its violent contradictions in scale, rhythm, and textures, not to mention the varying heights and styles of the surrounding buildings.”⁶⁴ Both are apt, both are informative, and the contrast is revealing. Venturi looks in one way, Gropius in another. For Gropius what matters is not what architecture *is* (a manifestation of meaning) but what it *does*, and how it comes into being. This position is evident throughout *The Scope of Total Architecture*, and while it is true that in the Bauhaus building one can sense the

⁶⁰ *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Introduction to the Second Edition, (11).

⁶¹ “The making and the experience of architecture, as of every art...” *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (12).

⁶² CCA, 12

⁶³ STA 140

⁶⁴ CCA 54

struggle with form and meaning, one can just as easily infer how weary he had grown of these debates. He writes, in 1952:

To begin with, let's stop squabbling about styles; every architect owes it to himself to defend the integrity of his design effort. What matters to the profession as a whole is to close ranks, to do some hard thinking together, and then to come to constructive decisions as to how we may reopen the gate leading into the field of building production for the benefit of the younger generation of architects.⁶⁵

Concluding Thoughts

There is a world of difference between making things *artfully* and making *art*. One describes a process which is rooted in technique, the other describes an object or an event; *most importantly, neither presupposes the other.*⁶⁶ The primary difference here, is whether the value is determined by intellectual content (the critical-historical act), or in the execution of technique honed over years of practice—which is a knowledge stored entirely within the body. This second kind of 'artful making' is exactly what Gropius was after when he championed the medieval cathedral guilds. It is also the kind of knowledge that the contemporary discourse has been so willing to ignore.

The degree of equivocation though, when architecture is described a blend of 'science and art,' is notorious in architectural discourse, and I believe a great degree of strife would be avoided if we could simply clarify this one point. The fact is most architecture relies on a combination of the two. Yet when we accept a historical lineage that moves from Corbusier to Venturi, such as Scully describes, we tend to treat architecture primarily as a sculptural object and in the same measure we lose the rich, important aspect of its peculiar conditions of production. Even if architecture were programmatically identical to sculpture, it is not a trivial fact that buildings are far more complex or that this difference in degree is so significant that it is effectively a difference in kind. Gropius knew this; Scully, we have to assume, just didn't care. But while Gropius' focus on economics and construction may seem mundane, any skilled builder knows the difficulty of executing a simple task well and efficiently, and is no less aware of just how inelegant so many architectural designs are in terms of their actual execution.

Nevertheless, the critics' votes are cast. It is undeniable that the almost exclusive fascination with architectural sculpture as opposed to buildings, *built artfully*, has been de rigueur for decades now among the cultured elite in academic circles. Form functions, evidently, as an endlessly compelling source of interest. The works of the great masters which are paraded time and again in school all exhibit one defining characteristic: namely, that it is obvious who made them, a quality that is emphasized to such an extent that the ability to recognize in a work of architecture the hand/mind of its creator has almost become the *sine qua non* of excellence. Even as students may be reluctant to appreciate some of the more decadent examples, the argument for this characteristic of visibility as an essential quality of good architecture goes unchallenged. And make no mistake: it is not hard to understand why Corbusier continues to be so popular—*that* is easy. What is hard to understand is why academics continue to overlook the glaringly deficient aspects of both his writing and his work while they pass so easily over Gropius, who dedicated an extraordinary amount of energy toward a comprehensive vision of designing *and* building *and* teaching that is commendable in nearly every way Corbusier is not.

⁶⁵ STA 88

⁶⁶ Abstract Minimalists, for example, such as Robert Irwin, famously flout the pretense of technique — while Japanese ceramicists and carpenters, for example, exhibit a level of craftsmanship that has no real analog in the west, without the slightest conceit that what they are making is "art" or even an interest in doing so. (Irwin once placed a piece of tape across a gallery entrance to a 1975 MoMA Chicago exhibition. Anyone could have done this; the value was, to use Scully's terminology, the 'critical historical act'.)

The irony of this story though, is not about academic politics and who deserves credit for what. What is deeply concerning is that the issues Gropius wrestled with for most of his life: the plight of the pedestrian, the intractable problem of affordable housing, and in general the toll on our 'habitat' which our faith in technology is exacting, *have gone unresolved*. If anything, the situation is worse.

What might be seen originally as a mark of humility when Venturi admits that "the architect's ever-diminishing power and his growing ineffectualness in shaping the whole environment can perhaps be reversed, ironically, by narrowing his concerns and concentrating on his own job,"⁶⁷ can also be interpreted as the beginning of a long slide into an insular, didactic mode of design-thinking that is primarily concerned with its own autonomy as a creative discipline. It may be true that architects cannot do everything. That does not mean, however, they cannot do *anything*. What is sometimes justified in schools as 'free-play' to stimulate 'design-thinking' comes at a real cost when the means becomes the end, when 'design' itself, e.g. the formal manifestation of some idea, becomes the ultimate goal. In their continual search for expression, for identity, for novelty, for beauty or for recognition, architects are among the first to forget that most of the good work in this world goes unnoticed. It doesn't help when we so easily forget those, like Gropius, who would help us remember.

⁶⁷ CCA 14