

## **"PRO AND CONTRA CIAM": MODERNISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

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### **Abstract**

*The history of the CIAM organization and of its breakaway group Team 10 is one of the best documented and researched themes in recent architectural historiography, thanks to well-organized archives and doctoral programs. Its main protagonists, conferences, internal conflicts, communication and organizational systems have been discussed in numerous publications. Still, the method of dichotomization – generational conflicts, political divisions – tends to divert the attention from continuities and from the complex interrelations between the various lines of thought in- and outside CIAM. The lecture will trace three notions as three threads in the web: ruralism, humanism, and realism, to show their constitutive and transformative role in the fabric of post-war architecture.*

**Keywords:** CIAM, post-war architecture, vernacular, humanism, realism, Team X.

### **Introduction**

On July 17, 1953 eight German architects took off in a Volkswagen minibus to a 36-hour trip from West Berlin to Aix-en-Provence, to participate at the CIAM 9 conference. The "German group" of the CIAM was re-established just three years earlier. However, at the same time when West Germany's international isolation just ended, a new border between East and West was drawn – called the Iron Curtain.

The frontispiece of the brochure has the subtitle "Pro and contra CIAM IX" and the cover lists the "pros" and the "contras", organized in four speech bubbles, in French and German:

"–Against the grid and the rectangular principle – Hail to the curve and everything oblique!

–Against 'architecture end formalism' – For 'Neues Bauen' [Modernism], organicism and Hugo [Häring]!

–Against concentration and skyscraper – For nature- and earthbound building!

–Against rationalism and extreme rationalization – For art and the primacy of feelings!"

The conference in Aix-en-Provence was the CIAM congress where the future members of Team X met for the first time, and where "a split between the younger and older generations" emerged, resulting in the dissolution of CIAM – at least this is the account that we find in most publications. The "generational gap" theme is supported by evidence like Alison Smithson's account who remembered that the "old" generation, "the rotten core of CIAM" housed in hotels in Aix-en-Provence, keeping the young generation in "isolation".

The theme of consecutive generations was famously addressed in art history by the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder (1878-1947). Pinder wrote a book titled *The Problem of Generations in the Art History of Europe* (1928): the overlapping layers of generations coexisting in one historical period, each of them with their own understanding for the epoch, with their own "Kunstwollen", resulting in what Pinder describes as the "non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous". His aim was to establish a concept of history consisting of rhythmical waves, that are determined, in the final analysis, by biology, by the life-span of humans. The explanation of CIAM's fate (I use this world here consciously) based on this organic model might seem appealing, but the problem with Pinder's theory is that it is impossible to identify the *entelechy* of these different generations: the inner, self-determined force striving to form.

The history of the CIAM organization and of its breakaway group Team X is one of the best documented and researched themes in recent architectural historiography, thanks to well-organized archives and doctoral programs. The main protagonists, conferences, internal conflicts, communication and organizational systems – all have been discussed in numerous publications. However, most of the studies seem to follow the storyline of the main actors. Sigfried Giedion, the Swiss-born co-initiator and general secretary of the CIAM

was interested in strengthening the unity of organization, and therefore lending consistency to a rather promiscuous body of material.

The method of dichotomization – generational conflicts, political divisions – tends to divert the attention from continuities and from the complex interrelations between the various lines of thought in- and outside CIAM. This lecture will trace three notions as three threads in the web: ruralism, humanism, and realism, to show their constitutive and transformative role in the fabric of post-war architecture. It is significant that none of these three terms has a clear-cut definition, their meaning is defined by the interests of the actors.

## **1. Ruralism**

As a result of the CIAM 9 congress in Aix-en-Provence, participating architects drafted a statement on the concept of "habitat, which referred originally to the French colonies in Africa, and it is rooted in the discourse of urbanization in Morocco or Algiers. CIAM architects intended to introduce the term as an alternative to the traditional European concept and typologies of housing. In the year before the congress, in 1952, *the Office de la Recherche Scientifique Outre-Mer* published a book, *L'habitat au Cameroun*. The book was the result of an ethnographic research, conducted 1949/50 by seven young architects, graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, who spent 6 months in Cameroun, at that time a French colony.

Irene Zander, a journalist whom Hubert Hoffmann frequently quotes, spoke with the participants. She noted: "The early, rational phase of modern architecture is gone. The architectural revolution born in the cool air of Middle Germany is followed by an evolution, fed by creative forces stemming from entirely other layer of the personality, from other countries and other times. [...] CIAM architects speak about the freshness and expressivity of primitive dwellings, about vitality and beauty as elements of building design, about rhythm, organic essence, about the new sensibility of the architect." Enthusiastic young French architects think "that a hut in Cameroun has more dignity and beauty than most prefabricated houses. What started 40 years ago in the arts and in Frank Lloyd Wright's

architecture will gain new actuality maybe tomorrow: the turn toward the archaic and the primitive, to the pure and strong human expression."

The reference to Frank Lloyd Wright as the initiator of an ethnographic turn in architecture was not quite correct; in reality the ethnographic research into the vernacular by architects can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Gottfried Semper and at the end of the century, Josef Hoffmann, published their travel sketches of Mediterranean fishermen's houses as models for modern architecture. Particularly in Otto Wagner's school at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna were young architects interested in the culture of the village and made study trips, and published their sketches and photographs in the journal of the Wagner circle, *Der Architekt*. For the Hungarian architect István Medgyaszay, the lessons of his study trip in 1904 to a mountain region in Transylvania were important to envision an "artistic language" for reinforced concrete architecture. Architects such as Richard Neutra, Rudolph M. Schindler, Edoardo Gellner and Bernard Rudofsky were rooted in this culture, before they moved to the United States, or – in the case of Gellner – to Italy.

What started in the countries of Central Europe, became a strong current in modern architecture: Europe-wide, in- and outside of CIAM. The political context of the ruralist movement has been the nation-state. However, in the 1930s the village was not seen anymore as a disappearing 'totality' where life, and labour are part of an organic world in decay that still can fertilize the new urban ground, but as a settlement type, where more than half of the country's population lived under almost feudal conditions, facing huge and largely unresolved problems.

The Hungarian architect Charles Polónyi, who later became a Team X member, finished his university studies after the war, and was influenced by the 'ruralists'. In 1956, when a flood destroyed an area on the shore of the Danube near the Yugoslavian border, he rushed there with students to develop a resettlement plan. The 'new village' of Újmohács ('New-Mohács') was created on the Danube bank. In 1983, Polónyi started a series of international summer schools (the International Workshop Seminars) on Lake Balaton and on the Danube, where his Team X friends Alison and Peter Smithson were regular guests. The first two took

place in 1983 and 1985 in the town of Ráckeve, focusing on the development of the small agricultural settlement. But, to sum up the “ruralism” theme, the interest of the “post-CIAM generation” in the vernacular is not the result of a radical re-orientation. As the work of architects like I. Medgyaszay, J.L. Sert, A. van Eyck or Ch. Polónyi demonstrates, it was present throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Humanism

Under the surface of an apparently unified aesthetics, despite the assurance of its recognized leaders, in the debates surrounding Post-War CIAM we can easily uncover a high grade of unease. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno’s returned to Germany from the US in 1949 (the year of the Bergamo conference), and started to teach next year at in the Institute for Social Research of the University of Frankfurt, as acting director for Max Horkheimer (who was on leave). His friend, the architect Ferdinand Kramer, back from the US exile like Adorno and Horkheimer, was appointed head of the building office of the university, and he designed the offices and lecture rooms, including the office of the rector. What followed was a public outcry, Kramer was denounced as “barbarian”, therefore Horkheimer ordered to remove the furnishing. When Adorno, in his famed lecture “Functionalism today” spoke about the bleakness of German reconstruction, he was also referring to his dissatisfaction with the building of his institute, when he said in a lecture at the German Werkbund’s conference: “...the style of German reconstruction fills me with a disturbing discontent”: “The future of *Sachlichkeit* could be a liberating one only if it sheds its barbarous traits. It could no longer inflict on men — whom it supposedly upheld as its only measure — the sadistic blows of sharp edges, bare calculated rooms, stairways, and the like. Virtually every consumer had probably felt all too painfully the impracticability of the mercilessly practical. Hence our bitter suspicion is formulated: the absolute rejection of style becomes style.”

The term humanism is omnipresent in the debates about modern architecture during and after the war. A look at Giedion’s notion of “humanization” shows, however, that this stance is not surprising, since it was driven by the intention of creating a broad basis for the modern movement. Architecture’s main task is to

embody collective emotions; therefore, monumentality was the right response, considering the historical period when this program was formulated: the years of the second World War. An important document that might have contributed to Giedion's widening of the ideological basis of Modern Architecture was Alvar Aalto's article "The Humanizing of Architecture", published in November 1940 in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's *The Technology Review* – just weeks after Aalto's research professorship at MIT began.

Giedion gave the Charles-Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 1938/39, which he published in 1941 in revised form as *Space, Time and Architecture*. But just two years later, in 1943, he wrote with Josep Lluís Sert, Fernand Léger and Sigfried Giedion the manifesto "Nine Points on Monumentality". The invitation came originally from the group "American Abstract Artists", whose members they were, and they found that the notion of monumentality is something that they are all interested in. However, the manifesto remained unpublished until Giedion included it in his book *architecture, you and me*.

This was not the first modernist statement on Monumentality: French architect André Lurçat wrote in his 1929 book *Architecture* that monuments are important for urban life.

The "revisionism" of the Nine Points was an important message for Giedion's American audience, which was looking already for possibilities to modify the program of European modernism, to make it fit the needs of post-war American society. The chapter on New Monumentality in Paul Zucker's *New Architecture and City Planning*, which is the most important early contribution to the American discourse in the topic, contains Giedion's text "The Need for a New Monumentality", Louis I. Kahn's "Monumentality", and José Luis Sert's essay "The Human Scale in City Planning", emphasizing the importance of civic and cultural centers. Sert criticized suburbanization and pleaded for organic growth, what already hints into the direction of the "heart" metaphor. Sert's text also reflected the triumphalist mood in the United States that persisted after the war.

In July 1951, Zurich celebrated the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city's joining the Swiss Confederation with a festival that has been annually repeated ever since as

*Zürifäscht*. In the coming year, 1952, Sigfried Giedion wrote about the *Zürifäscht* again in his essay "Die Humanisierung der Stadt" (The Humanization of City), published in the November issue of *Werk*, and he included this text as "The Humanization of Urban Life" in the volume *Architecture, you and me* in 1958. He emphasized: "[...] the suppressed demand for social contact, which has lived on imperishably in the human soul ever since men first met in cave during the ice ages [...] breaks out spontaneously when man is shaken by some great event." Speaking about the Zurich festival, he stressed "spontaneity" as the key to its success: "To be actor and spectator in one person is what we wanted! Clearly the public is ready. The question is whether we are! Let us not wait for a structurally well-defined society to arise. Let us ask what is alive in the bare and naked man that needs to be given form and expression. Let us ask what there is that lives in the bare and naked man, who is not just a symbol but is you and me". – Spontaneity, the heart of the city, the artists and the role of symbols: these were the main ingredients of Giedion's program for a New Monumentality, announcing a stronger relationship between society and architectural form.

In 1958, in the 2. issue of *Le Carré bleu*, the journal supporting the aims of the Post-CIAM generation, editor Aulis Blomstedt published his article "La deshumanización de la arquitectura". The Spanish title was a reference to the essay "La deshumanización del arte" by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. With de-humanization, Blomstedt meant the new emphasis on the formal, even geometrical aspects of design. While New Humanism created a basis for the Monumental, the Symbolic, the Collective, the Communal, the fading of such ideals in the 1960s allowed for a re-focusing on questions of form, technology and the environment. However, the term and the program of humanism did not disappear. It is by no coincidence that Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefebvre gave their book on Aldo van Eyck the subtitle *Humanist Rebel*. Humanism reemerged in the Post-CIAM generation as the recognition of the role of the human agency in history and later as a postmodern emphasis on multiculturalism and individual difference.

### 3. Realism

The split between modernism and socialist realism is a key assumption in the discourse of post-war architectural culture. This dichotomy reflects the political situation during the Cold War years: West and East, Capitalism and Communism, divided by the Iron Curtain, were the twin empires on the European map. In architectural history, this symmetry finds its parallel in the modernism/socialist realism divide.

Clement Greenberg, the influential American art critic argued that the "rationale" of modernist art was a purification of its media: e.g. painting could not be representational, since it is the domain of literature. A political message is irreconcilable with avant-garde practice. Greenberg advocated formalism, but as his younger followers like Rosalind Krauss pointed out, this artistic program goes back to Russian literary criticism between 1914 and 1930. Later, in the period under Stalin, "formalism" became a negative term, as an expression not accessible to "the people" – unlike Socialist realism.

The program of Socialist realism became a rallying cry for a group of CIAM architects at the Bergamo congress. Helena Syrkus, a very vocal and active CIAM member, has championed this program, resulting in a growing distance from the "purist" wing. In September 1946, Syrkus, the Swiss architect Hans Schmidt and Mart Stam penned a document, titled "Déclaration des CIAM / Statement by CIAM", and proposed to change the name of the organization to International Congresses for Social Architecture and Town Planning". Marcela Hanáčková, in her recent doctoral thesis *CIAM and the Cold War: Helena Syrkus between Modernism and Socialist Realism* carefully reconstructed the positions of the protagonists, showing how Helena Syrkus was working in preparation of the CIAM congress in Bergamo to convince the participants to coopt the Socialist Realist position.

The Formalism-Realism question shows a lasting presence across pre- and post-CIAM generations. In Bergamo, the clash between purist and realist positions has to be seen against the background of Post-War political polarization. But after 1968, in the time of intensified social consciousness, realism has lost this clear-cut meaning.

In 1975, the Swiss architecture theory journal *Archithese* dedicated its 13<sup>th</sup> issue to the theme Realism in architecture. While Socialist realism has been discussed, it is the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and their book *Learning from Las Vegas*, which is clearly in the focus of the editor, Stanislaus von Moos. He interprets Venturi's and Scott Brown's emphasis on the "ordinary" as architectural realism.

## Conclusion

Giedion's 1957 postscript to his strongly edited account of the Bergamo conference sounds almost ironic, if we consider the positions of all protagonists:

"It seems that the architectural horrors of the ruling taste (which has prevailed with dictatorial powers behind the Iron Curtain, suppressing to a tragic degree all contemporary development) are now nearing their end.

It is somehow comforting that our unwavering contemporary consciousness has shown itself able to outlast dictatorships – whatever their nature".

These reassuring words conceal the CIAM's deep institutional crisis, that had other roots than the gap between generations. We need to consider alliances and confrontations that lead us to historical precedents, and developments outside of the organization. Clearly, the clash in Bergamo reflects the confrontation of the two political blocks, but also shows the complexities, for instance the role in the American intellectual culture of social criticism, rooted in the tradition of a non-Marxist communitarian vision.

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