

Belluschi talk
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Pietro Belluschi, and Modernism in the Northwest

Title pg: Belluschi & Modernism NW

Intro: my aims, scope

Bkgd on PB

His postwar work on West Coast (cutoff date: 1950, when moved East)

Frm time to time, will allude to the broader context of emerging Modernism, US

-Need to begin w/ brief bkgd on PB [**PBmug**], his training, and initial exposure to modernism.

-he was born 1899, tail end 19th c., in **Ancona**, a major port city on coast of the Adriatic, of a deeply religious Catholic family and son of minor bureaucrat in the Italian railway system who worked in land assessmt and acquisition;

-when he was six, family moved to **Rome**, with its many layered history of warm ochre-colored bldgs largely of brick & stone, Tiber River w/ its gently loping bridges, piazzas and fountains; bustling **commercial streets** dotted w/ age-old open marketplaces, 19th c. glazed arcades, and stylish early 20th c. department stores; and of course its great **monuments** –triumphal arches, imperial fora, the Pantheon, dating back to ancient Roman times; **Bramante's** tiny, jewel-like Tempietto, 17th c. churches such as Il Gesù; and of course **St. Peter's**, with its gt baroque nave and exuberant, light-filled apse.

-he grew up, then, in a visually rich environment surr by classical bldgs reinterpreted throughout the ages, from Roman antiquity to modern times.

-studied engineering, not archtr, at the Univ of Rome, which was yet to establ an archtr sch; and truth be known it isn't clear he wld have gone into archtr in any case, as he seemed destined to follow his father's more entrepreneurial path in construction and development, which he'd turned to having moved to Rome.

-the weak econom climate in Italy after the Great War, and the slow-down in building, then Mussolini's assumption of power in the early 1920s, threw a wrench in that. Seizing the opportunity to go abroad, Belluschi applied for and was given a grant to study archtr for a yr at Cornell;

-it was here, accord to his recollections later, that he was introduced to the Beaux-Arts curriculum and design principles, based solidly (though not exclusively) on classical monumts of the past. And it was here at Cornell tht he mastered not only the hist of archtr but also drawing skills that were to pay off handsomely in the future.

-not wanting to return to Italy at the end of the yr, he sought to remain in this country, where not only the econmy but the bldg industry was flourishing, eventually securing a job with w/ the A.E. Doyle firm in **Portland, Oregon**.

-Doyle's wk, like other highly successful firms at the time, was historicizing, mainly gaining inspiration frm the Italian Renaiss for which McKim Mead & Wht: had created a vogue on the East Coast:

Portland Pub Lib; U.S. National Bank; Arlington Club

-there was another current, however, tht Doyle engaged in, primarily for smaller houses. His Wentz Cottage on the Oregon coast was one of these modest bungalows, which he had built for Harry Wentz, a studio artist whose extesnvie collection of Japanese prints and admira for Arts & Crafts values – overall simplicity, fit with the natural terrain, its use of wood and emphasis on handcraftsmanship -- bore their influence on both the oceanside cottage and on Belluschi, who became a close friend.

Wentz Cottage, ext (very diff frm the high style Renaiss mansions Doyle designing for the well-to-do in Portland;

Wentz Cottage int (attests Doyle's and by extension, Belluschi's familiarity with the Bay Area architects, esp Bernard Maybeck, whose influence is unmistakable, esp on the int.

framed views of the ocean, with its rugged wind-sculpted pines (Japanese influ)

In the late '20s, Doyle died, then in 1930, directors of the Portland Art Museum, with whom Belluschi had establ close ties, commissioned him to design a new bldg.

PAM

-Belluschi delib picked up on the red brick and wht trim used by Doyle in a number of his Portland bldgs, most notably the **Portland Pub Lib**, which was located but a block or so away; yet at the same time the new Portnd Art Mus was unequivocally modern.

-the bldg marked the beginning of his embrace of modernism, introducing modernism to Portland, and brought Belluschi national attention.

-to put this into context: by this time, the archtr community in Portland as elsewhere knew of the Bauhaus and the wk of the European Modernists through articles published in the ArchRecord and elsewhere in the late '20s.

-but what one sees in the Portland Art Mus was not the modernism of the **Bauhaus crowd** (there were actually only a handful of them), but that of the **Italian modernists** he'd experienced in Rome on his visits home around this time.

-both trends [**PAM; Bauhaus; ItaMod**] were marked by:

- a rejection of the kind of literal historicizing inherent in the old traditional Beaux-Arts approach, a preference for horizontal rather than vertical lines, simplified geometric forms, and minimal ornamenta;
- but they differed in the lingering classicism, – the preference for stable, balanced, symmetrical compositions, bldgs articulated by abstracted classical mouldings, and the con't use of tradit stone and brick rather than new, frankly exposed indust materials and wht stuccoed exteriors.

-You see the influ of both trends in the NW in the '30s: the Bauhaus, for example, and orthodox European Modernism in Paul **Thiry's** wk in Seattle, with its asymmet composition of simple cubic vols, unadorned white stuccoed walls, and complete absence of or any allusion to overt historical references.

-well known as Belluschi's Portland Art Museum was, it was mainly his pre-WWII hses/churches that established him as one of the leading figures in what soon became known as regional modernism on the west coast. In the sm, low-budget **St Thomas More** church (1939-40), one sees his deft use of both the new modern idiom and tradition – the traditional basilican plan with its long nave articulated by rows of columns forming regular bays and flanked by aisles on either side, the stained glass, and most especially the use of light. Instead, however, of dazzling décor, splendid mosaics, lavish frescoes and the like, of the traditional baroque ch, Belluschi believed the essence of the ch lay in the experience of space, a space created by a simple logical, readable structure, humanistically scaled archtr forms, craftsmanlike use of natural materials, and the adroit handling of light – the darkened longitudinal nave culminating in a dramatic climax of brilliant light in the apse straight out of the tradition of the classical & baroque chs he'd known in Rome.

The legacy of the Arts & Crafts tradition pervasive throughout the ch, which one sees esp in the handling of natural materials, is clear in the main **portal**, a tradit symbol of the gateway to heaven, designed and executed by local artisans with matched-grain cedar panels in a lozenge pattern, so that the properties of the natural materials themselves create the visual interest otherwise generated by applied décor.

One sees the legacy of Arts & Crafts values equally clearly in the **Sutor Hse**, roughly the same time - the clear rational structure, the simplified form, absence of applied ornamentation, and the deliberate integration of the bldg into the natural landscape, – much of this suggesting not only the Arts & Crafts, but also the influence of the Japanese in Belluschi's thinking.

How vastly different Belluschi's regional modernism was frm the more orthodox European Modernism proselitized by Hitchcock and Johnson in the 1932 Interna'tl Style exhibition at MoMA exhibition can be seen in the comparison betw his Sutor hse and Paul Thiry's houses in Seattle designed roughly the same time.

Sutor hse and Paul Thiry's Barrett and Shroat hses, Seattle

Belluschi con't working in this regional approach to modernism in the

Platt (1940) and the **Kerr** (1941) hses in the early 40s,

and in the **Burkes Hse**, conceived during the war but not built until after peace was declared, and bldg materials again became available.

Burkes House (1944-48).

-Mrs Burkes had seen Neutra's wk, and was dead-set on having a 'modern' hse.

-Belluschi did his best to accommodate his client's demands with his own aesthetic predilections.

-the flat roof, for example, was atyp of his residential work, but was handled in such a way as to allow him to nestle the bldg into its site, integrating it the bldg with the natural terrain rather than playing it off against it with clearly machine-inspired geometric forms, use of natural unpainted wood rather than wht stucco, and so on.

-but at same time, the simplified cubic forms, the asymmet composition, the unadorned walls, the expansive windows, (a better sense of which you'll get when I show views of the int), lack of any applied ornamentation, and avoidance of any overt historical references such as dormers, Tudor-inspired steeply pitched roofs, or colonial white trim, yielded a design fully and unmistakably modern.

-most important of all was the new sense of space, a distinctively *modern* characteristic.

plan

-one sees here the influence, to be sure, of FLW's plan explored in his series of Prairie hses beginning with the Ladies Home Journal project of 1901; Wright's innova: not simply to widen int openings so that the interior of one rm might be more fully visible frm another, but also to have rooms interpenetrate one another, overlap each other so the space expands; Wright's sense of space was geared to the perspective of the viewer, which changed as his or her position shifted, hence the diagonal views, the views through discreet spaces and beyond - the subjective apprehension of space which as Sandy Isenstadt pts out led to an entirely new kind of *experience* of space as one moves thru it.

-the emphasis on the diagonal vista, which one gains upon entering the house [**int: liv rm**], with a view through the liv rm to the view of Portland and Mt Hood beyond, as well as the progression thru space [influ BA here?], the opening up of the hse

to the view and the garden by means of expansive spaces -- all reflect the influ of Wright, but also of the Japanese, Alvar Aalto, and Mies.

-the sense of expansive space despite the structure's relatively small dimensions (it *is* small, esp compared to the McMansions of today, a sm hse – one bedrm, with sm office, and a guest room which PB used as his drafting room) was maximized by the continuous cork floors throughout, and by the stained-only, grained boards of the fir ceiling which con't interrupted through the glazing of the walls to form protective porticoes for terraces on both the city or view and garden side;

-the overall simplicity of the interiors and use of mullion-less expanses of lrg plate glass windows denying any sense of a containing wall on both the view and garden side– more Miesian than Wrightian, and the wrapped

-then too absence of curtains, strategically placed mirrors, lack of or wall paper or wall decorations with only a limited use of pictures all of which wld emphasize a solid wall plane, enhanced the sense of space;

interiors

-instead of applied décor, visual delight was created instead by a the adroit handling of natural materials – wood, cork, local bluestone quarried from nearby Mt. Adams for the masonry mass defining the fireplace and hearth, as Wright had done; the masonry mass, symbolic of the heart of the home, served also as a solid wall plane that divided the otherwise open space into living area and den, more Miesian than Wrightian.

Burkes/ Farnsworth

-on the other hand, the two exposed columns defining the entry and the liv rm were wrapped in hemp, suggesting the influ of Aalto, with whom Belluschi had a lot in common.

Burkes/Villa Mairea

-How very diff Belluschi's approach to modernism, tailored to the particularities of the locale, was frm the wk of the European Modernists, who aimed at universality, can be seen in comparing the Lovell Hse in L.A., [**Burkes/Lovell**] w/ its frankly exposed steel frame, planar stuccoed surfaces, wht unornamented walls, simple geometric forms, flat roof, and overall machine aesthetic, to the Burkes hse, a brilliant synthesis of Arts & Crafts sensibility, of FLW esp in the plan, Mies in the openness and expansive use of unmullioned plate glass, and Aalto, with his legacy of Scandinavian classicism and the Arts & Crafts; but then too, a subtle but unmistakable Japanese sensibility, all rendered in PB's own modernist idiom w/ its distinctive regional inflection.

These were expensive houses for Portland's well to do; but at the same time, Belluschi, trained in engineering as you remember, was not indiff to more general needs, and was exploring new directions in modern technology, employing glulams, radiant heating, plywood in prefabricated hses for the average Amer family, solar energy – all geared to the particularities of the region.

So too for his postwar churches in the Portland area:

Zion Lutheran, Portland, where he combined the use of still-new glulams in the framing, and glass block in the ingenious exterior walls, which both and insulated the int from the noise of the heavily trafficked street outside and provided privacy, *and*, let in natural light, in his efforts to integrate his own modernist predilections with the congregations's demand for a tradit pitched roof, spire, and longit nave.

Central Lutheran, Portland.

See again the use of glulams in the nave, used logically as part of the structure and frankly exposed in the Gothic manner, combined here with a strong dose of both Aalto (in the richly textured exterior brick work) and the Japanese (in the Torii-like gateway, which provides a transitional zone betw the secular world and sacred shelter).

Most widely acclaimed was the First Presbyterian Ch in Cottage Grove, a sm timber town south of Portland, which was published on the cover of Progressive Architecture.

First Presbyster, Cottage Grove

-here again see Belluschi's retention of enough of the symbolism of the traditional church to please the congregation (which orig. had demanded gabled roofs and a spire, some including the pastor wanting a Gothic, others somethg colonial) combined with his own aesthetic preference for the modern, and a hefty dose of both Aalto and the Japanese.

-rather than the dimly lit dark wooden walls of his previous churches, which focused attention on the brilliantly lit chancel, the nave and chancel were here united, amply lit throughout. Walls were wht, sand-plastered for texture, and the high flat ceiling of sound-bsorbing grooved fir undulated gently up over the chancel, symbolically endowing it with special importance. A stained glass window wall of pale rose, amber, and violet hues cast a softly colored light into the chancel,

while the nave itself was illuminated by series of plate glass windows opening onto a landscaped courtyard, symbolically uniting the constructed space of the church and that of the natural world.

By this time, Belluschi's name known internationally, largely for the regional modernism of his postwar houses and churches. But what really cemented his reputation world-wide was the Equitable Building.

Equitable Bldg (1948)

-conceived during the early years of American involvement in the war, it was the first major office building to be built once building materials were available after the war.

-**crisp clean forms** sheathed in gleaming aluminum the building struck a chord in the architectural community, departing radically from the prewar tradition in the States of masonry exteriors, historicizing detailing, and regular window grid.

-so too the absolutely smooth **flush surfaces**, and **street level**, where broad display windows were recessed, exposing the bearing members such that they read as *pilotis*, or piers.

-the building was recognized as momentous, as the technical advances alone made it exciting: an experimental heat pump heating and cooling system, specially manufactured oversized, hermetically sealed, thermopane windows, utterly flush, tinted glass and aluminum skin, wholly without projecting sills, moldings, or applied décor, ingenious window-washing device suspended from the roof and running on tracks around the building's periphery, acoustical paneling, fluorescent lighting, radiant heating.

Opening in 1948, the Equitable was conceived years earlier, beginning with a project for a postwar office building published in the **Arch Record in 1943**, there as a high-rise office slab elevated on stilts and pulled back on the site to allow for a low, 2-story retailing building and landscaped court.

Note the date: 1948. It wasn't for another four years that the Lever House opened in New York, incorporating many of the same features.

Lever House, most notably the aluminum exteriors and tinted glass.

The **Seagram Building** didn't open for another decade.

For all of its avant-garde look, however, structurally Belluschi's Equitable was *retardataire*, of concrete in the interest of cost, not steel.

There were other commercial buildings bearing again unmistakably modern characteristics, such as:

Oregonian Building (1945-48)

Federal Reserve Bank (1948-49)

Which brings us to 1950, when Belluschi, then at the height of his fame was asked to become dean of architecture & planning at MIT, and moved to the East Coast.

His practice as well as his work changed fundamentally at this point, as he gave up his Portland office selling it to SOM and operating henceforth as a design consultant in association with local firms, and his buildings were now of a very different nature and scale.

Boston Lutheran Church, Boston [1955-1957]

Rohm & Haas Building, Philadelphia (1962-1964)

Juilliard School for the Performing Arts, in Lincoln Center, NY (1963-1969)

with Eduardo Catalano (which raised questions of authorship, as turns out, Catalano was primarily responsible for the design)

St Mary's Cathedral in S.F. [1963-1970]

which raised even more of a controversy especially over the question of scale;

Bank of America building, also in San Francisco, in association with SOM [1964-69]

-By far and away the most controversial, however, was the **Pan Am Building**, designed in association with Walter Gropius and executed with Emery Roth & Sons, in New York.

-But this is the topic for a whole other book, and well past my cut-off date of 1950, when Belluschi moved east.

I thank you, and would be happy to entertain comments & questions.