
Adolf Behne

The Modern Functional Building

Introduction by Rosemarie Haag Bletter, translation by Michael Robinson


Adolf Behne’s Der moderne Zweckbau has long been acknowledged as a key document in the struggle for a modern architecture in Weimar Germany. Written in 1923 and published in 1926, it is here available for the first time in English translation. This seventy-page book and the many articles from which it sprang were instrumental in mobilizing a radical shift in German architectural modernism during the mid-1920s; from the romantic, craft-oriented attitude of Hermann Muthesius, the German Werkbund, and the early Bauhaus, toward a more progressive emphasis on the machine, technology, and social causes, as in the work of Hannes Meyer and Martin Wagner. The combination of history, criticism, and theory in Behne’s text is both typical of the period and an important precedent for the canonical studies of architectural modernism by Sigfried Giedion (Beaux en France, 1928), Henri-Russel Hitchcock (Modern Architecture, 1929), and Nikolaus Pevsner (Pioneers of the Modern Movement, 1936). Only Walter Gropius’s Internationale Architektur (1925) was published earlier; and it was little more than a picture book, with none of the trenchant critiques found in Behne’s text.

Behne’s (1885–1948) was one of the most influential and prolific cultural critics of his day. The references in this book reveal the tremendous breadth of sources from which he drew ideas and inspiration, especially on the subject of technology and society. Influenced by the lectures of the sociologist Georg Simmel, Behne was a...
committed socialist and lifelong student of German society. He was trained as an art historian and began his career writing about Berlin’s theatrical scene and the circle of Expressionist artists around Herwarth Walden’s Sturm gallery. He wrote incisively on modern photography, film, graphic design, art, and urbanism in addition to architecture. Much like Simmel, Behne was acutely aware of the dialectical aspects of production in modern capitalist society, with its tendency toward both formal reification and communal dynamism. He constantly warned of extremes in either direction.

Behne made it his cause to find the analogues for this dialectic in architecture, seeking a balance of function and form. In his many books and hundreds of essays in literary journals and socialist newspapers, he tried to forge both a formal, artistic policy for the various socialist parties and a working-class art and architecture for Germany. Behne mediated between politics and architecture in his criticism, but the architectural critiques were often thinly veiled propaganda for his socialist politics. This was particularly evident in his promotion of a broad range of “constructivist” architects, from Le Corbusier and De Stijl artists in the West, to the Vesnin brothers and other Russians, many of whom Behne introduced to German audiences. El Lissitsky’s famed Cloud-hanger (Wolkenbügel) project, for example, was first published on the dust jacket of this book.

*Der moderne Zweckbau*, Behne’s most important book, is organized into three chronologically arranged chapters. The first analyzes the earliest attempts of pioneers such as Hendrik Petrus Berlage, Otto Wagner, and Alfred Messel to replace the nineteenth-century emphasis on ornamental facades with a more functionally oriented architecture. In the second chapter Behne criticizes the stylized functionalism and “exaggerated character” of pre—World War I and Expressionist buildings, such as Peter Behrens’s A.E.G. Turbine Factory and Erich Mendelsohn’s Einstein Tower. He has praise only for Walter Gropius’s Fagus Factory, because it approached the unselfconsciously “shaped spaces” of American industrial architecture Behne so admired.

The third and longest chapter examines the architecture of Behne’s immedi-
growing trend in scholarship to uncover a
more complex, self-critical picture of mod-
erism by analyzing critics like Behne, as
seen in Alan Colquhoun’s article, “Criti-
cism and Self-Criticism in German Modern-
ism” (AA Files 28 [autumn 1994]: 26–33).
Earlier articles by Francesco Dal Co (Op-
positions 22 [1980]: 74–95) and George Baird
(Harvard Architecture Review 7 [1989]:
82–89) identified Behne’s essay “Art,
Handicraft, Technology” (1922) as a turn-
ing point in the drive toward the anony-
mous, machine-based production of late
twentieth-century capitalism and helped
to place Behne’s rejection of craft in favor
of technique into much larger socioeconomic
frameworks. Bletter’s introduction opens
many new intriguing avenues of explo-
ration and makes clear that more work
remains to be done on Behne, about whom
relatively little is known. Only archival re-
search will reveal the impact of his career
as a teacher in Berlin’s schools of continu-
ing education, the political engagement
he brought to the many avant-garde circles
in which he participated, and the wide
range of audiences he targeted through
various forms of the emerging mass media.
Indeed, Behne, along with a host of other
critics, played a crucial yet rarely acknowl-
Wedged role in defining and promoting mod-
er architecture: credit is given to archi-
tects, patrons, or technology, but seldom
to the critics and the press.

This translation is part of a commend-
able series published by the Getty to make
seminal works of architectural theory avail-
able to English-language readers. The pre-
sent volume is less fussy in design than
earlier volumes, and the layout of illus-
trations is arguably more readable than that
of the first German edition, but it would
have been desirable to maintain the origi-
nal proportions, orientations, framing, and
pairings of photos and illustrations. Behne
was fastidious about the graphic effect of
his publications, often hiring such avant-
garde designers as Walter Dexel and Jo-
hannes Molzahn to help with innovative
layouts, and complaining when publishers
altered his texts.

The shifting terminology mentioned
above also makes for arduous translation
work, especially with Behne’s sometimes
abstruse German. The present translation
is not without its awkward passages, incon-
sistencies, and errors. One example: the
word Sache is consistently translated as “ob-
ject,” even though Bletter discusses in
depth Behne’s insistence on a more so-
cially oriented definition (e.g., 92, 106,
108); “essence” would have come closer to
Behne’s ideas. A typographical error makes
it easy to miss the reference to the conser-
vatve architect Friedrich Ostendorf (111).

As with other volumes in the Getty se-
ries, the unattributed editor’s notes, in-
tended to clarify obscure references in the
translated text, are erratic and frustrating.
At times they give little more information
than the original text; at other times, origi-
nal citations are not commented on at all,
even when the sources are readily acces-
sible, such as Le Corbusier’s articles in
L’Esprit Nouveau (131–132). While earlier
volumes included complete bibliographies
of the author’s writings, Behne’s prolifi-
cacy makes this a daunting task. The bibli-
ography in the present volume, drawn from
Ochs’s anthology, includes nearly 600 en-
tries, but it is woefully incomplete and
riddled with errors. Let us hope the Getty
will continue to publish key texts from the
everal early century; as this volume dem-
strates, they are crucial to a proper un-
derstanding of the development of mod-
er architecture.

— Kai K. Gutschow
Columbia University

Wilma Fairbank
LIANG AND LIN: PARTNERS IN
EXPLORING CHINA’S ARCHITECTURAL
PAST
Foreword by Jonathan Spence:
Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 1994, xvii + 208
pp., 30 illus. $41.95 (cloth).
ISBN 0-8122-3278-X.

Although few western scholars are
familiar with the Chinese architectural historians
Liang Sicheng (1901–1972) and his wife
Lin Whei-yin (1901–1955), this biographi-
cal memoir is a page-turner; their life will
fascinate, humble, engage, and enlighten
architectural historians in all fields. The
passion of the Liangs for China’s historic
architecture was all the more remarkable
given the tumultuous times in which they
worked. They were swept up in the cyclone
of Chinese cultural upheaval and pre-
vented from pursuing their research, but
the work of the Liangs has inspired later
Chinese architectural historians.

Before one another Wilma Fairbank,
wife of the eminent historian of China
John Fairbank, could have written so inti-
mately about the saga of Liang and Lin.
The Fairbanks and the Liangs shared much
as friends; they met in Beijing in 1932,
when the Fairbanks arrived in China.
Wilma Fairbank is the last survivor of the
toursome. Correcting her memory with
personal correspondence, supplemented by
recollections of contemporaries and
some secondary materials, she writes with
a familiarity, frankness, and eloquence that
will hold the interest of readers with only
a limited knowledge of China. For those
more familiar with China, the Liangs’ story
will be further confirmation of the signif-
ificant impact of political events on twenti-
hundredth-century Chinese culture.

Liang, the eldest son of Liang Ch’i-
ch’ao, one of China’s most important late
nineteenth-century intellectuals, met Lin,
the daughter of the poet Lin Ch’ang-min,
in 1919. Educated in Chinese and western
traditions, they dreamed about studying
architecture in the United States. They
were admitted to the University of Pennsyl-
vania, where the distinguished architect-
ural educator Paul P. Cret (1876–1945)
was teaching and where a few other Chi-
nese students had already been welcomed.
However, Lin was not permitted to matricu-
late as an architecture student because of
her gender; she studied art instead and
pursued her architectural interests infor-
mally. The couple settled in Philadelphia
in 1924, graduated in 1927, and were mar-
ed a year later.

By then Liang began to wonder why the
field of western architectural history was so
much more advanced than its counterpart
in China. He spent a year at Harvard learn-
ning about China’s rich architectural heri-
tage and was encouraged in his pursuit by
Chu Ch’i-ch’ien’s republication of the impe-
rial construction manual, Ying-tsao fuh-shih,
written by Li Chiieh in 1103 (facsimile edi-
tion, Shanghai, c. 1920). Liang and Lin
embarked on a lifelong research program
to understand Chinese architecture, espe-
cially wood-framed temple structures of
the T’ang, Sung, and later dynasties. Liang
and Lin toured Europe and then returned to
China, where they began to teach in a
newly formed department of architecture