SEMINAR: MODERNISM & MEANING
NIKOLAUS PEVSNER AND THE PIONEERS OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT

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N. PEVSNER / PIONEERS OF MODERN DESIGN /  First edition: 1936
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Born in Leipzig in 1902, Pevsner's view of history was grounded in his education amongst German art historians. While writing his dissertation Pevsner embraced the idea of the zeitgeist or 'spirit of the age,' and the related assumption that national characteristics inevitably are reflected in its art, or that it is here where "national qualities are represented at their best." In 1925 he made two life-changing visits: to the exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, where he was deeply moved by Le Corbusier's Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau, and to Dessau, to witness the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Bauhaus building, designed by the architect whose work most clearly influenced Pevsner's career, Walter Gropius. In 1928 Pevsner secured an academic post at Göttingen University, where he was granted funding to travel and study art and design in England, laying the foundations for the writing of *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*.

In *Pioneers of the Modern Movement; from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, published in 1936 by Faber and Faber in London, Pevsner wrote on the origins of modern architecture and design. However, what is noticeable, is that for the second edition published in 1949 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), the title of the book was changed to *Pioneers of Modern Design*. Where Pevsner reflects on the past years for the 1949 edition of *Pioneers*, Pevsner's later revisions to his text during the 1960s are of an entirely different nature. The change of title in 1949 - from *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) to *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1949) - marked its deployment towards MoMA. Apparently, as the new title suggests, the term design took over the notion of a modern movement. This reveals the sensitivity for change in meaning of the term design at this historical time.

While the book has sustained decades of criticism, when it was first released in 1936, *Pioneers* offered a striking interpretation of the development of the movement towards modern architecture and design. The edition analyzed for the seminar *Modernism & Meaning* is the third edition from 1960, including the forewords of the first and second edition. In these, Pevsner states his gratitude, but more interesting is the the foreword of this revised 1960 edition of *Pioneers*, where Pevsner took the opportunity to say that he felt himself to be "surrounded by fantasts and freaks," and further on, to mention "the craving of architects for individual expression, the craving of the public for the surprising and fantastic." An item still actual these days. These quotes reflect Pevsner's somewhat hostile expressions to 'that other tradition', the so-called 'organic' Modernism, exemplified by the work of Scharoun, Aalto, Utzon and in a slightly different way by the 'late' Le Corbusier.

The book definitely shows Pevsner's strive in his search towards the sources of a new "universally recognized style". Like Sigfried Giedion in *Space, Time and Architecture*, published five years later, Pevsner did not aim to just find the lineage of the Modern Movement, but to demonstrate that its characteristics - as its clean lines, forms and new sense of space - were the basis for this universally recognized style. Therefore he believed it was the natural expression of the age of science, industry and the machine. Pevsner’s aim in writing the book was "to prove that the new style, the genuine and legitimate style of our century, was achieved by 1914." This partly gives away the structure of the book, where Pevsner uses his artistorical background to work towards his hero Gropius, who firstly achieved to perfectly master the new style which Pevsner so many times talks about.

Pevsner states there are three sources of the present style, being William Morris and the Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and engineering architecture. The chapters in the book are dedicated to these sources of the Modern Movement, with the first chapter being an introduction to share the theories of art from all main characters in Pevsner's movement and the chapter on eighteen-ninety in painting an attempt to clarify the upcoming abstractness in painting, and therefore, design. The three main sources Pevsner found each got their own chapter, explaining their origins and treating the most important examples representing the most important events in the development towards 1914. It are these examples that are chosen for further analysis, together with *Pioneers* praised Gropius's first two buildings on the ground that in Pevsner’s eyes, they represented all the essential goals of twentieth-century architecture; to be read on the following pages.

The treated examples are analyzed for their purpose in *Pioneers*. Pevsner's writing and way of argumentation are taken into consideration, expressed in the explanations on argument and meaning. Meaning being what the example represents for Pevsner, argument being the way he tries to prove this. Together they will construct Pevsner's ideas about his pioneers and the Modern Movement.
N. PEVSNER / PIONEERS OF MODERN DESIGN
1882 - present, Antoni Gaudí, Sagrada Familia, Barcelona, Spain
Chapter: Art Nouveau

Barcelona. It dated to the first half of the century, and it was the magnificent example of what had been built in the Gothic Revival style of the last quarter of the 19th century. It was the first major design for a church since the Renaissance, and it was not only the most ambitious project of its time, but also the most significant architectural achievement of the modern age. Antoni Gaudí, the architect of the Sagrada Familia, was the most important architect of the Spanish Modernism, and his work had a profound influence on the development of modern architecture.

Below left / Gaudí: Spires of the Sagrada Familia, Barcelona, 1903-26
ARGUMENT

According to Pevsner, Art Nouveau directs its appeal to the aesthete, and creates ‘art for art’s sake.’ In his search for the sources of the Modern Movement, Pevsner says the following about Art Nouveau: “For a revolution it is suspiciously sophisticated and refined, and - an even more portentous doubt - it was entirely lacking in a social conscience.”

Throughout the entire book Pevsner shows his aversion for the individual expression of the architect; in this case of Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia with its ‘uncompromising style.’

MEANING

Concluding the chapter on Art Nouveau, Pevsner states that a ‘universally acceptable style’ could not derive from the endeavors of Art Nouveau. With the Sagrada Familia he tries to illustrate ‘the highest achievement’ of Art Nouveau, where other architects and designers followed another path towards this universally acceptable style, and Gaudí continued his branding of Art Nouveau in Barcelona.

In the 1960 edition of Pioneers, Pevsner mentions Gaudi’s work as a link towards Expressionism and late works of Le Corbusier in the 50’s, on which he has such a critical point of view. In the following quote - being the final alinea of the chapter - Pevsner expresses this thought.

“Gaudi’s art indeed - a flowering of Art Nouveau long after saner architects and designers had discarded it - is a link between that revolt of the nineties and the Expressionism of the early collages, the Expressionism of Picasso’s pottery, and some of the more outrageous innovations of the architecture of 1950. Ronchamp has more in common with the Sagrada Familia than with the style whose early development is the theme of this book.”

OBSERVATION

The image of the Sagrada Familia is shown next to an image of Gaudi’s Parque Güell (1900) on the last page of the chapter on Art Nouveau. The two images together directly give the reader an idea about Gaudí’s unconventional way of using material.
N. PEVSNER / PIONEERS OF MODERN DESIGN

1889, Gustav Eiffel, Eiffel Tower, Paris, France

Chapter: Engineering and Architecture in the Nineteenth Century
Eiffel: Construction of the Eiffel Tower, Paris, 1889

OBSERVATION

By choosing an image of literally constructing the Eiffel Tower, the reader directly relates to construction. The tower was a pioneer in height, being surpassed in its height only after the First World War. By using three pictures on the left, two in the middle and the finished tower on the right, the height of the tower is emphasized. Noticeable is the fact that the two pictures in the middle are exactly the same, trying to reach this effect of the ‘growing tower’.

ARGUMENT

Engineering architecture in the nineteenth century was largely based on the development of iron. The Eiffel Tower relates to the new capabilities in the way of constructing with iron by engineers during the Industrial Revolution. The constructing method, or the development of constructing in this time, is the ‘pioneering’ factor.

The Eiffel Tower is taken as an example because it is showing perfectly the new capabilities of construction during the late nineteenth century.

MEANING

Pevsner refers to the works of the nineteenth-century engineers as the third source of the present style, next to the Arts and Crafts movement guided by William Morris and Art Nouveau. Thereby he says these are the three sources of the Modern Movement.

The Eiffel Tower represents the innovative attitude of the engineers during the nineteenth century.
1909, Peter Behrens, Turbine factory, Berlin, Germany
Chapter: The Modern Movement Before Nineteen-fourteen

Below / Behrens: Turbine factory, Huttenstrasse, Berlin, 1909
ARGUMENT

First of all, Pevsner praises the Turbine factory deeply, trying to convince the reader of its greatness.

“[...] the most beautiful industrial building ever erected up to that time.”

“The result is a pure work of architecture [...]”

Pevsner supports these statements by describing the factory on its symbolic features; composition, balance, materiality: “The steel frame is clearly exhibited; wide, perfectly spaced glass panes replace the walls on the side and in the middle of the ends; and if the corners are still expressed by heavy stone with banded rustication and rounded at the angles, the metal frame projecting its sharp corners above these stone pylons redresses the balance boldly and effectively.”

Pevsner’s main argument is that the factory is groundbreaking on these aspects. He continues: “This design has noting in common with the ordinary factories of that time [...].”

MEANING

Together with other architects of the situation about 1900, Behrens started to break with ‘the applied arts’ of that time, Art Nouveau. Curves were straightened and Pevsner already calls it a ‘new simplicity’. Pevsner: “Honesty and saneness became the ideals that replaced the sultry dreams of Art Nouveau aesthetics.”

The Turbine factory represents the direction in which Behrens was to develop during these years. “For the first time the imaginative possibilities of industrial architecture were visualized.”

OBSERVATION

The image of the Turbine factory is showing the imposing front façade with its ‘mass-creating’ brickwork, but also the steel framework filled with glass panes. The fact that on the pages 157, 158 and 159 images are displayed of Behrens’s work, indicates Behrens’s importance to Pevsner.
Chapter: The Modern Movement Before Nineteen-fourteen

1911, Walter Gropius, Fagus Factory, Alfeld-on-the-Leine, Germany

N. PEVSNER / PIONEERS OF MODERN DESIGN

Above / Gropius and Meyer: Fagus Factory, Alfeld-on-the-Leine, 1911
WALTER GROPIUS / FAGUS FACTORY

ARGUMENT

The Fagus Factory is taken as an example because it contains some 'pioneering' elements. "For the first time a complete façade is conceived in glass. The supporting piers are reduced to narrow mullions of brick. The corners are left without any support, a treatment which has since been imitated over and over again."

These examples from the building itself show the new characteristics of the 'new style'.

Pevsner also uses the terms: pure cube, annihilation of the usual hard separation of exterior and interior, conquest of space.

OBSERVATION

The image of the Fagus Factory (in colour) is shown next to a smaller black-white image of the Model Factory in Cologne from 1914. The images are on the second last page of the book and the projects are the last ones to be displayed in the book.

MEANING

In Behrens's continuance, Gropius - in 1911 - took over the leading role in the Modern Movement.

For Pevsner, the Fagus Factory represents a big step in this movement towards a universally accepted new style. The new style in the form Gropius gave it with the Fagus Factory, uses some of the most characteristic features of the developing modern movement, derived from the Arts and Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau and engineering architecture, exceeding his master Behrens.
Chapter: The Modern Movement Before Nineteen-fourteen

1914, Walter Gropius, Model factory, Cologne, Germany

Above right / Gropius: Model factory, Werkbund Exhibition, Cologne, 1914, North Side.
ARGUMENT

Pevsner’s first argument on the Model factory directly suggests that Gropius surpassed Behrens in his architecture: “The north side is his comment on his master’s turbine factory of five years before.”

Thereby he states that “this new style of the twentieth century [...], because it is a genuine style as opposed to a passing fashion, is universal.”

Further on Pevsner praises the factories’ characteristics and Gropius’s talent: “thin metallic lines”; “without mystery”; “the superb contrast between the decidedly Wrightian brick centre and the completely glazed corners”; “effortless mastery of material and weight.”

Indicating its importance on the cover of the book, Pevsner also concludes with the Model factory - as well in image as in text - in the last pages of the book, where he proves its importance.

MEANING

In Pevsner’s eyes the Model factory stands for perfection in style - thus reached in 1914 - as well in aesthetics as in social aspects.

“It is the creative energy of this world in which we live and work and which we want to master, a world of science and technology, of speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security, that is glorified in Gropius’s architecture, and as long as this is the world and these are its ambitions and problems, the style of Gropius and the other pioneers will be valid.”

OBSERVATION

The image displays the North façade of the factory, resembling the façade of Behrens’ earlier Turbine factory in order to compare the two.

As for the Fagus Factory, the two images are on the second last page of the book and the projects are the last ones to be displayed in the book. For the Model factory you can say this means a lineage, beginning on the cover (indicating its importance) and concluding on the last page (proving its importance).