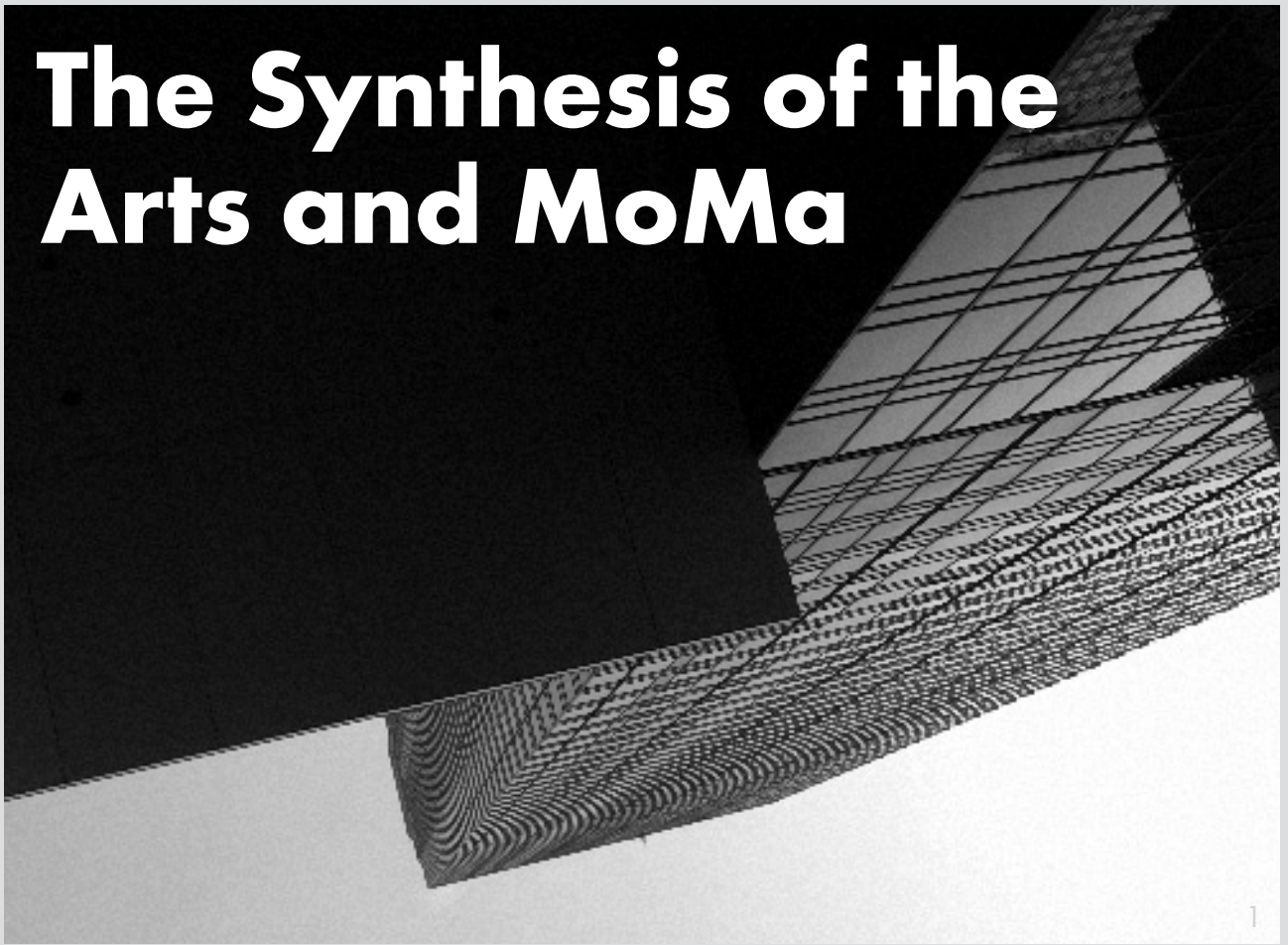


# The Synthesis of the Arts and MoMa



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1948–49 were key years for the reaction of the Museum of Modern Art's newly amalgamated Department of Architecture and Design to respond to the rising discourse on the "Synthesis of the Arts." The response was indirect and took the form of MoMA assessing the progress of modern architecture that it had been describing and forecasting for fifteen years. The exhibition "From Le Corbusier to Niemeyer, 1929–1949" was part of a larger assessment of the fate of the international style and of the interaction between abstraction in painting and sculpture and in architectural design, a theme laid out by Alfred Barr and Hitchcock in the 1948 book *Painting Toward Architecture*. Niemeyer's unbuilt Treamine House, designed with Roberto Burle Marx, was upheld as a synthesis not only of the arts but of the movements coalescing towards a postwar abstract consensus.

By Barry Bergdoll

THE concept of "synthesis of the arts," launched most succinctly in the United States by the seminal appeal in 1943 of Sigfried Giedion, Josep Lluís Sert, and Fernand Léger for a "new monumentality" as the basis of the renewal of civic life had only indirect echoes in the exhibition programs of the Museum of Modern Art. The museum participated fully in the spirit of the years 1943–1945, when many sought to engage design talents towards building a new world even as the destruction was accelerating in the multiple arenas of a nearly global conflict. In 1944 alone MoMA sponsored a symposium and lecture series on problems of "Postwar Planning" and a circulating exhibition on community planning. But the theme of the synthesis of the arts, *per se*, was not taken up directly. No doubt, this can be attributed to the fact that for MoMA the interaction of all forms of modern visual expression had been part of its mission and agenda from its first framing by the young art historian Alfred Barr, and for architecture by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. A synthesis of the arts, in the terms of these historian/critic/curators would be not simply collaboration on a single building project but the fulfillment of a historical understanding of the dialectical development of the avant-garde. In his twin monumental surveys presented in 1936 "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" Barr juxtaposed works of architecture and furniture design with paintings and sculptures to suggest that the two dominant strains of modern visual practice resonated in all media. In the famed flow chart of artistic movements on the cover of *Cubism and Abstract*

Art, Barr already proposed the emergence of a unified "modern architecture" around 1925 out of the artistic influences of three movements: Parisian purism, Dutch *De Stijl*, and the German Bauhaus (figure 4).

In the late 1940s, with the political conflict resolved and an exhibition already staged entitled "A Home for the United Nations: Must We Repeat the Geneva Fiasco?" (1946), MoMA returned to forging a new unity against any fragmentation of architecture in both its internal dialogues and its interaction with the other arts. 1948–1949 were the key years. Johnson, and along side him Hitchcock, returned to an active role in shaping the museum's agenda, the Departments of Architecture and Industrial Arts were consolidated into the Department of Architecture and Design, and in a seminal gathering of international architects MoMA posed a question it planned to answer: "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?" A first response was sketched that year in a book published by Hitchcock with a preface by Barr: *Painting Toward Architecture*, and followed up quickly in an exhibition: "From Le Corbusier to Niemeyer: 1929–1949."

In the book Hitchcock's task was to present the works of a singular collection of abstract art by a manufacturer of modern architectural lighting, the Miller Company of Connecticut. Theirs was an early example of the corporate collections which became frequent in the postwar years, this one "assembled to illustrate with original examples abstract painting of the twentieth century which has influenced the development of modern architecture" and "contemporary painting and sculpture of potential value to contemporary architects."<sup>1</sup> In the MoMA exhibition the focus and denouement would be a single work of architecture, a house commissioned by the company's president Burton Tremaine and his wife Emily Hall Tremaine, curator of the corporate collection. Ultimately to remain a project and today largely forgotten, the house was to be a second home for the couple at Santa Barbara on the California coast, and was undertaken, sig-

Figure 1 View from the MoMA garden.

Figure 2 Installation view of the exhibition "From Le Corbusier to Niemeyer: 1929–1949." February 15, 1949 through April 17, 1949. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photo by Soichi Sunami

nificantly, as a collaboration between Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx, in a direct invitation to import to North America the synthesis of the arts that had famously emerged in Brazil a decade earlier.

*Painting Toward Architecture* accompanied a circulating exhibition of the Miller Company's collection and included photographs of the planned house, which the Tremaines viewed both as a private commission and a contribution to the future direction of American architecture. Barr explained, in his preface, with remarkably willful oversight of the early Renaissance, that "it is only in the twentieth century that painting, and to some extent sculpture have influenced architecture," a sentiment echoed by Hitchcock who claims the artists and architects "were often focused in the 1920s and even later toward the establishment of such a synthesis. They were consciously seeking a twentieth century style that should embrace all the visual arts in one single frame of reference."<sup>2</sup> Both viewed the moment as ripe to effect a needed synthesis between what he saw as the separate traditions of the Bauhaus, whose clear position of the theoretic relationship between painting and architecture is "now very influential as this country tends toward a systematic study of design in all fields,"<sup>3</sup> and the less clearly stated, but more lyrical position of Le Corbusier. When it comes to effecting a relationship between functionalist geometric abstraction and what he calls "abstract surrealism," which "played a not unimportant part in loosening the mechanical rigidity of modern architecture in the 1930s"<sup>4</sup> next to the work of Alvar Aalto one must look to the Brazilians for guidance. Philip Goodwin had laid the groundwork for MoMA's celebration of Brazilian modernism as a school for a new unity of the arts in his influential "Brazil Builds" exhibition of 1943. Five years later Hitchcock celebrates in particular Niemeyer and Burle Marx with making a spatial art out of the exploration of Arp in sculpture and Miró in painting. He fêtes the line of integration opened with the Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro, Léger's church façade at Assy in France, and most the just completed Terrace-Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Skidmore, Owings & Merrill joined forces with Miró and Calder. The influence here will be mutual Hitchcock concludes, admiring especially Calder's mobiles since, "Perhaps it is the borderline fields between sculpture and painting, in which American abstract artists have of late been particularly active and inventive, that offer the most rewarding possibilities for collaboration between architects and artists."<sup>5</sup> In order for modern architecture to develop, without falling into the dangers of a new academicism, Hitchcock concludes that the catalytic role played by artist's exploration of abstraction must remain a stimulus.

Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s MoMA had

regularly staged exhibitions on a single work thought to mark a historical road mark in the progress of modern architecture. Hitchcock's hero Frank Lloyd Wright for instance was celebrated with exhibitions on Fallingwater (1938) and on Taliesin West (1947). In 1949 the honor shifted to the Brazilian masters just commissioned by the Tremaines. Johnson, recently returned to head the department at MoMA, charged his newly hired curator of architecture Peter Blake with conceiving a show that would visualize Barr and Hitchcock's hypotheses in *Painting Toward Architecture* and celebrate the ambitions of the Tremaines' future house in Santa Barbara, which was also to be celebrated in an article in the influential Los Angeles magazine *Art + Architecture*. "This house," the show wall text explained "represents today's final synthesis of two important stylistic trends: the strict mechanical formalism of Le Corbusier and the cubist-constructivist movement, and the organic shapes and free-form fantasy of the tradition of Miró and Arp" (figures 2, 3). The juxtaposition of Le Corbusier's 1920 still life with the Villa Savoye model that had been at the museum since the seminal 1932 show promoting the international style had been made over and over again in MoMA's galleries. But, the juxtaposition of Miró and Arp with Niemeyer and Burle Marx was intended to represent a whole new state in the dialogue among the arts and the threshold of a new synthesis, as explained in the press release: "The Tremaine House . . . represents today's final architectural synthesis of three two important twentieth century stylistic trends: the formalistic geometry of Le Corbusier, and the free-form anthropomorphic shapes of Arp."<sup>6</sup>

At MoMA the synthesis of the arts went beyond a new collaborative paradigm to the threshold in the epoch development of modern architecture as the project of the age.

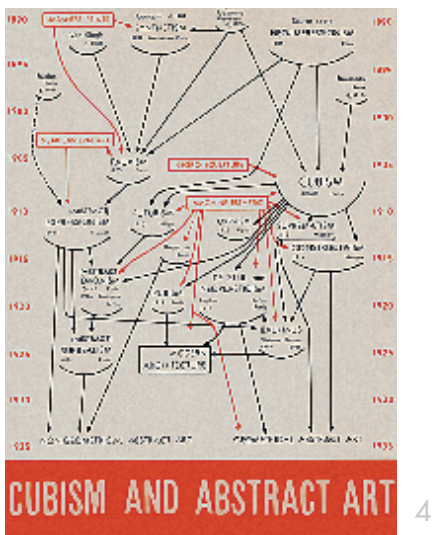
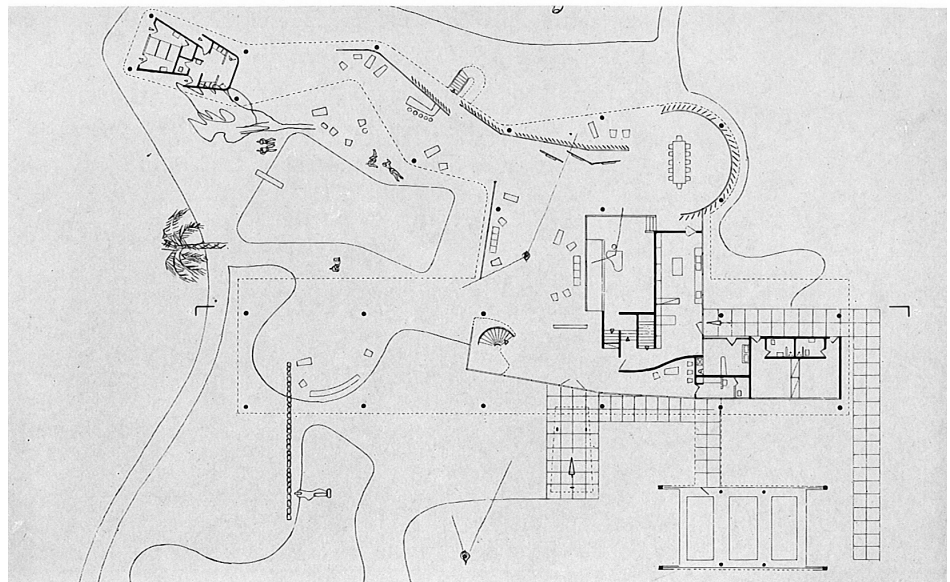
#### Notes

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Painting Toward Architecture* (New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce, 1948), 5 (title page). 2 Ibid, 9, 36-38. 3 Ibid, 38. 4 Ibid, 40. 5 Ibid, 52. 6 Ada Louise Huxtable, draft of press release (February 8, 1949, MoMA Archives, Exhibition 400).
2. Ibid, 9, 36-38.
3. Ibid, 38.
4. Ibid, 40.
5. Ibid, 52.
6. Ada Louise Huxtable, draft of press release (February 8, 1949, MoMA Archives, Exhibition 400).





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Figure 3 **Oscar Niemeyer** and **Roberto Burle-Marx** project for House and Garden, Montecito, California 1948.

Figure 4 Cover of *Cubism and Abstract Art* by **Alfred Barr**, showing artistic movements of the Modernism, 1936.

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Is the Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art and professor of modern architectural history at Columbia University.

He is author or editor of numerous publications including, *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity* (winner of the 2010 Award for Outstanding Exhibition Catalogue, Association of Art Museum Curators); *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling* (2008); *Mies in Berlin* (2001); *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: An Architecture for Prussia* (1994); *Léon Vaudoyer: Historicism in the Age of Industry* (1994); and *European Architecture 1750-1890*, in the Oxford History of Art series (2001). He served as President of the Society of Architectural Historians from 2006 to 2008. Among the recent exhibitions he has organized are "Rising Currents: Projects for New York's Waterfront" at MoMA (through October 11, 2010); "Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity" at MoMA (2009-10); "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling" at MoMA (2008); "Mies in Berlin" at MoMA (2001), with Terence Riley.