

When did modern architecture actually begin?

IN-DEPTH STUDY

▶ When Did Modern Architecture Actually Begin? *posted by* ARTiculations

Videoscript.

I remember in school, we were taught that Modern Architecture began around the early 1920s, with the rise of prominent architects such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier.

And in a way, the image of their building styles is probably what most people associate with Modern Architecture, sleek geometric boxes of mostly glass and steel.

So, for many years I took this as fact. However, the more I thought about it, the more this seemed questionable.

Ongoing developments in technological innovation, changing attitudes of society, and the shifting of architectural theories were gradual processes that didn't always coincide with each other.

So, when did Modern Architecture actually begin? Modernity is a complicated term to define, of course, whether in Architecture, Art, Literature, or Philosophy. However, in Architecture, many attribute the earliest beginnings of "modernization" to the Industrial Revolution, which first took place in Britain from the mid-1700s to mid-1800s. The development of large-scale iron production resulted in a large amount of iron making their way into building by the late 1700s, which resulted in more efficient structural elements, wider beam spans, better lateral stability as well as less fire-hazardous structures due to metal being non-combustible.

But of course, while buildings during this time used technologically advanced materials for practical reasons, they still "looked" like traditional buildings, such as being clad in traditional masonry and adhering to classical proportions and visual styles.

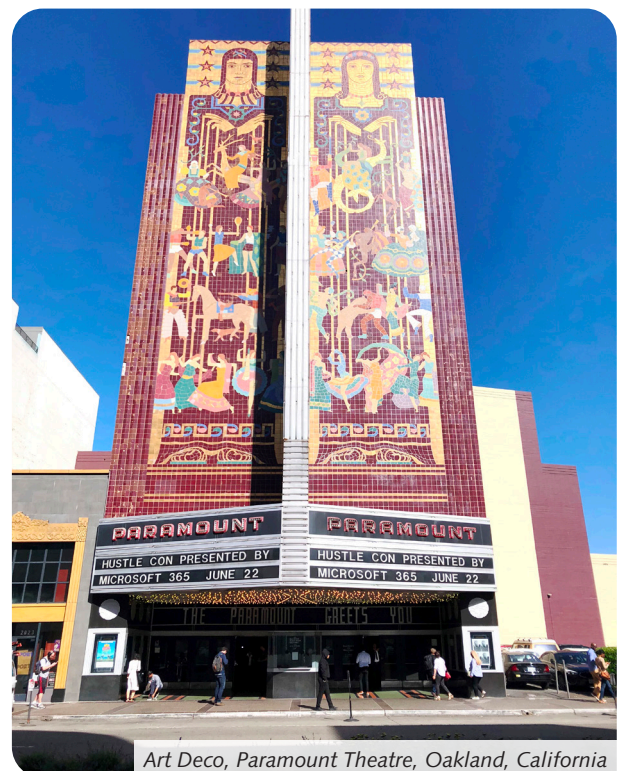
The building that is commonly accepted by many to be the first example of "modern architecture" is the "The Crystal Palace", which was a 990,000 sq ft building that hosted London's legendary Great Exhibition of 1851.

It was almost entirely made of slender cast iron frames that sustained large sheets of plate glass. By the 1830s, technologies of the Industrial Revolution made it possible for windows to be made significantly larger than ever before. However, what made the Crystal Palace revolutionary was not only that it was tall, light and open, but it also seemed to defy conventional structural expectations.

Prior to this, all buildings were expected to have a solid and sturdy base, with architectural elements getting progressively lighter as it went up the building. This was not only true physically, but also aesthetically. Classical architectural principals emphasized this hierarchy of visual elements.

To design a building that "looked" top heavy not only seem to defy the laws of physics but also defied long-held aesthetic principals of western architecture.

The Home Insurance Building in Chicago, completed in 1885, is often credited as the world's first "Skyscraper." Many construction projects in Chicago during this time opted to



Art Deco, Paramount Theatre, Oakland, California

use metal framing as opposed to timber due to the fact that most of Chicago was destroyed during the Great Chicago fire of 1871. The Home Insurance Building became the first tall building to be entirely supported by a structural steel frame. Steel is even stronger and more lightweight than iron, which not only meant buildings could be much taller, but window openings could also be much larger, which is especially important at the ground level where retail shop fronts are typically located. These early skyscrapers paved the way for modern office towers and retail buildings.

So why are we generally taught that Modern Architecture didn't begin until the early 20th century? Well, it comes down to philosophy and theory. Even though new, revolutionary materials and technologies were used in construction throughout the 1800s and buildings were starting to divert away from classical aesthetics, most of these design decisions were made for practical and economic reasons. It took until the turn of the 20th century for the elements of modern architecture to be rationalized and standardized into a set of formal principles.

In 1886, American architect Louis Sullivan published an essay titled *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered*. This is the essay where he coined the phrase '*form follows function*', which would go on to influence generations of architects and designers.

In 1919, Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus School in Weimar, Germany. Bauhaus teachings asserted that architectural form should be simplified to the bare essentials of function, and that a building should not bear any ornamentation that does not follow the structure or purpose of the building.

In 1920, Swiss architect Le Corbusier co-founded a journal called '*L'Esprit Nouveau*' which advocated the idea that architectural design should be divorced from historical references and associations. He also introduced

urban planning theories arguing that residential and commercial amenities should be zoned entirely separate from one another.

As you've probably noticed, these concepts were pretty radical and while there were significant groups of architects and designers championing these ideas around the world as early as the 1920s and 30s, most of the world was not ready to get on board.

Thus, there are some who argue that Modern Architecture didn't really begin until the 1950s. In the aftermath of WW2, massive reconstruction projects took place all over the world, and due to the unprecedented scale of devastation that occurred, there was a demand for economic construction processes and efficient urban planning methods like never before.

Thus, many public housing projects across the world implemented modernist construction and planning strategies, but Modern concepts of sleek minimalism and purity of form were also embraced by capitalists and wealthy elites, especially in America. Shiny, glass towers would pop up left, right and centre across cities' skylines throughout most of the 1950s and '60s. Thus, from the perspective of the masses, the 1950s was really when Modern Architecture began to shape the lives of everyday people.

Of course, the theories proposed by Modernists would go on to be heavily criticized and in some cases entirely rejected by other architectural designers, as well as the masses. Many sub-movements and diverging architectural styles would later emerge as a response. But, those are topics for another time.

So, when did Modern Architecture actually begin? Well, what do you think? Do you think it starts with the departure from classical conventions? The first published paper theorizing modern practice? The founding of a school? Or the spread of its ideas to the masses? Let me know in the comments.

Hey friends, thanks so much for watching. This video is obviously a very brief overview of

modern architecture so I've put lots of links to sources and further reading in the description below. If you're interested in watching more videos like this, then here are a couple of my suggestions.

Ok, bye for now!



L.M. Van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, Chicago

1 Watch the video and complete the sentences.

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