Brokers of Modernity

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I’ve reason to believe that what I find
Is gonna change the face of human kind
And all these years before well I was blind
That’s my conclusion
Cause I’m the architect

(dEUS, The Architect)

In 1925 a rare type of building made its appearance in the literary world: a house entirely constructed of glass, prefabricated yet individualized, light but stable, flat-roofed but with walls which changed colour according to the surrounding landscape. The cavity walls allowed for the movement of water – warm in winter-time and cold in summer-time – which generated a comfortable indoor temperature while the presence of vents ensured the movement of fresh air. The circulating water also guaranteed continuous cleansing of walls and floors. Even the furniture, also made out of glass, underwent this continuous cleansing ritual: These houses of glass “spread like the plague once people found out about it. Who would want to live in a decaying, mouldy wooden sty eaten away by dry rot, or in a hovel that’s a breeding ground for rheumatism, tuberculosis and scarlet fever [...]”?1

This rhetorical question is asked by one of the protagonists in Stefan Żeromski’s 1925 novel Przedwiośnie (The Coming Spring). Żeromski was one of the most influential Polish writers of that era. Although this was his last novel, it was the first novel of significance to use the new Polish state as its central theme. In the first chapter the protagonist’s father tells his son – both returning from civil-war Russia to Poland – the fantastic story of a relative. This cousin allegedly started constructing houses
of glass immediately after the First World War, using sand from coastal dunes and electrical energy generated by the sea in ingenious factories. The glass houses then set off a deep social transformation. Urban standards became the norm in rural areas as a result of the cleanliness of the glass walls and water enforced on the inhabitants who were former farmers. Further still, “the old cities, those fearful banes of the old civilization”, will start to disappear, supplanted by a new kind of garden city along “the tracks of electrified trains”. This vision culminated in workers’ apartment buildings in Warsaw becoming “more comfortable, healthier, cleaner, and more beautiful than the most fanciful palaces of the aristocracy”.

Inspired by the architect Jan Koszczyc-Witkiewicz, the image of the glass house served Żeromski in a twofold way. On the one hand the houses of glass symbolized raising workers and farmers to a higher standard of hygiene, culture and education. On the other hand this ‘invention’ served as an antidote to communist tendencies represented in the novel by the son. Wise reform based on science and technology is contrasted against crude revolt and the power of innovative architecture is presented as the key to building a better society. “Engineer” Baryka, the cousin and master brain behind the comprehensive project, creates a social environment which helps end class differences and facilitates moving on from the ills of the 19th century: social deprivation, illnesses and germ-infested dwellings. Unsurprisingly, his factories, where the houses are produced, are organized as co-operatives and informed by scientific principles.

The glass houses represent a future which made sense in an environment lacking any of the improvements these houses promised. Further, the glass houses speak to the expectations projected on architects turned engineers as builders of far more than a few walls covered by a façade. Three features of Żeromski’s literary picture were to become typical of the role modernist architects came to play in Interwar Europe. First, the notion of a *tabula rasa*, which would allow for the implementation of radically new solutions. Second, the decisive role of architects in reforming society and, finally, the stress placed on technology and science, including enlightened but potentially coercive forms of engaging with workers and tenants.

As Żeromski’s novel and his image of the glass house suggest, and as this study will argue, these features found particular expression in East Central Europe, and Poland specifically. By focusing on developments in this region a sharper picture emerges of the impact of the rise of modernist architects on societies throughout Europe. Żeromski’s vision, presented at the very moment when far-reaching social housing schemes were developed in Poland, strongly influenced the imagination of those involved in the Polish movement for housing reform.
Introduction

glass’ was used in Poland in a manner which referenced discourses on hygiene, planning, and social reform in general. The image of the glass house should, therefore, be understood in a much wider context – as should the changing role of modernist architects. Providing answers to the housing crisis and to the ongoing evolution of cities turned into a central problem for Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, the newly formed states in East Central Europe. This was a question which determined their internal and external legitimacy and thus was a question of the highest social and political order. As Żeromski indirectly establishes, it was also a question which determined successful navigation between Soviet Communism and a West that was too remote to simply emulate.

Examples of buildings which in any way resembled Żeromski’s houses of glass in Poland were scarce and fewer in number than in the Netherlands or Germany, countries which are well-known as frontrunners of architectural modernism. The many striking manifestations of ‘glass modernism’ in Czechoslovakia, most famously the Villa Tugendhat, nuances the picture for the wider region somewhat. Yet, the important point to be made here is a different one. There are no streets named after *maisons de verre*, glass houses, or *gläserne Häuser* in Germany, the Netherlands, in France, Belgium or Great Britain for that matter. In the vicinity of Warsaw, however, the feminist and socialite Irena Krzywicka had an avant-garde house named *Szklany Dom* (House of Glass), built for herself in 1928 and even today a street in Warsaw is adorned with that name. In fact, the glass house had a life of its own in Poland. In the 1930s the housing co-operative *Warszawska Spółdzielnia Mieszkaniowa* (Warsaw Housing Cooperative, WSM) set up a self-help organization for its tenants under the name of *Szklane Domy* and one of its settlements had its own theatre named after Żeromski.

As these examples suggest, the metaphor and imagery evoked by Żeromski very obviously struck a chord in Poland. Yet, the houses of glass are also a revealing expression of transnational exchange. The image echoed Bruno Taut’s expressionist concepts as presented in his *Glashaus* for the 1914 *Werkbund* exhibition in Germany and his seminal text *Stadtkrone* of 1919, and more generally the *Gläserne Kette* (Glass Chain) association of architects. In 1927 Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet started building the striking *Maison de Verre* in Paris whilst Ludwig Mies van der Rohe began his Barcelona Pavilion in 1929, to name just a few obvious connections. The poet and architectural critic Paul Scheerbart published a fully-fledged vision called *Glasarchitektur* in 1914, a utopian text in which glass houses occupied a central place. Both in its details – the ventilators, the furniture made of glass – as in the scope of social expectations – glass as the remedy to social conflict
and hatred – Scheerbart predated Żeromski and must be seen as the latter’s main inspiration.9

The dynamics of intellectual exchange will have a prominent place in this book. Yet, the interesting point about Żeromski’s vision is not that ideas ‘travelled’ as such. The relevance of Żeromski’s vision for this study lies in how he connects the aspirations of the new Polish state to the promise of rational and visionary ‘social’ architecture. The aesthetics of glass architecture which loom large with Scheerbarth and are central to Taut’s expressionist designs do not bother Żeromski much. His is a concrete utopia connecting the seashore acquired by the new Polish state as part of the ‘corridor’, thus a politically charged territory, with the allure of technology and the idolisation of the genius engineer-architect who will achieve no less than a great leap into the future.10 The desolate, plague-stricken countryside, caught in century-long stasis, will be awakened by a new kind of architecture. The themes of 19th century early urbanist thinking – new street layouts or facades – are no longer so relevant. What is now relevant is the transformative potential of architecture understood as a tool for changing society, modernizing the country, and entering the promised realm of modernity.

This book starts with the transformative picture of the glass house and the way it is connected to a triangle of architects, society and a particular region at a particular historical moment. By so doing this book seeks to provide an answer to the question of why it was obvious for Żeromski to express his political and social vision in architectural terms – and why so many of his contemporaries found this convincing. Part of the answer is the theme of this book – the rise of a group which is rarely researched as such: modernist architects.

The cohort of architects born around 1900, who were trained in the new technologies including glass, developed a new idea of what their profession should be like and what its goals should be. Seeing themselves as modernist architects meant not only building in a modern way, that is using the latest technologies, but also radically extending the reach of what architecture should cover – not just society, but also culture and politics. This was certainly not true for all architects entering the field in the 1920s, and it was also certainly not limited to Żeromski’s Poland. Further, as Żeromski’s glass houses illustrate, the new architectural aspirations could only develop against the backdrop of changing societal expectations.

It is the latter aspect, as this book will argue, which turns modernist architects into a key group of the seminal changes of the first half of the 20th century in Europe. The promise of redemption encapsulated in glass houses was not convincing to everyone. Yet, the notion that a new holistic approach to building, based on techno-
logical progress and new scientific insights, could bring about vast improvement and cure the ills of the 19th century was widely shared. This belief points to the rise of technocratic ideas and the technocratic movement, which modernist architects were a part of, after the First World War. This said, Żeromski’s houses of glass with their enforced transparency and deep interference in individuals’ lives also epitomize the darker side of technocracy and, in a wider sense, the modern project. Extreme rationalization, as was famously argued by Zygmunt Bauman, was also one of the paths which led to the Nazi death camps and, as Marius Turda has contended, was closely tied to eugenics. Further, the issue of prefabricated mass housing as envisioned in the 1920s (not only by Żeromski) also calls into question its long-term legacies in communist housing projects.

The question of how to build and of how building was connected to societal change was one of the crucial themes of the first half of the 20th century in Europe. Yet, Żeromski’s image of the glass house is more complex. The image renders the architect as more than just simply caught between the advantages and disadvantages of hyper-rational modernization. Here the engineer-architect features as an executor of deep, transformative change, proving himself by rising to the challenge of nation-building. In this, very obviously, the engineer-architect was also subject to the transformative project of modernity and the ruptures which accompanied the politics of modernization.

After the First World War this experience was probably more dynamic and this promise more convincing in the region roughly defined as East Central Europe than in any other part of Europe. Here, with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, new states saw the light of the day or, as in the case of Hungary, a state was radically reshaped. All three states were successors to the empires which had crumbled during the war. Given the situation of extreme economic challenges and political turmoil, these states almost by definition had to take on the challenge of modernization and attempt to harvest the fruits which modernization promised.

It was the scope of the East Central European crisis that allowed modernist architects to achieve cultural, political and social relevance. What could be described as the modernist architects’ rise to new relevance was, however, much more than a simple equation of demand and supply, of societal needs and answers as provided by architects. Modernist architects, in the form of new professionals and socially-charged figures, only emerged during the very process in question, when they both shouldered expectations of change and shaped them at the same time. Modernist architects must thus be understood as a complex product of projections...
trussed in a profession which was attaining new weight. The figure of the modernist architect must be understood as a dynamic configuration.

In his book *ABC* the Polish writer and Nobel Prize laureate Czesław Miłosz introduces ‘centre-periphery’ as a central category. Here, Miłosz, while confirming the relevance of the geographical divide spelled out earlier, also reflects on his own existence as an artist in a predefined asymmetry. This asymmetry is important on various levels to this study, starting with where it positions itself in historiography and existing scholarship. The history of modernist architecture has mostly – with the exception of the Soviet Union – been written with a western focus. Modernism in the East was only ‘discovered’, with some important exceptions, after the fall of the Berlin wall – filling a blank spot on the map of modernism and supplementing important aspects to the history of art of modernism.

The broad scope of this book means that it relies on various strands of literature, some of which have been very dynamic in recent years and cannot be outlined here. This literature ranges from history in the narrower sense to the history of art and architecture, urban history, and the history of technology and experts, but also includes cultural output such as novels and films. Due to its diverse nature this literature will be introduced in the individual chapters. However, some key aspects and trends in the literature and some crucial works must be mentioned here, the more so as the way modernist architecture features in research today is part of the very story being told here. This is also true for the asymmetries in assigning architectural relevance which developed in the 1920s and 1930. An important case in point is the extreme focus placed, until recently, on the short-lived *Bauhaus* in Weimar Germany. This attention can also be explained by the fact that leading *Bauhäusler* left for the US before the Second World War and thus entered American academia. The latter, after the war, became the central arena wherein architectural importance was defined and assigned. This tendency was already emerging in the 1920s and was somewhat deliberately brought about, for example, in Sigfried Giedion’s attempts to streamline and ‘purify’ the modernist movement by confining it to an elite of the “seven lamps of architecture”. The tendency was furthered by the influential works of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Nicolas Pevsner of 1932 and 1936 respectively.

In recent years there have been numerous attempts to ‘even out’ this picture, by assigning East Central Europe a place in the history of modernism. These publications, often based on exhibitions, succeeded in showing the relevance, originality, and scope of avant-garde movements in East Central Europe which far exceeded just copying or adopting western trends. To a degree, this is also true for modernist architecture, an important part of these avant-garde movements.
however, three important limitations to the respective literature. There are next to no historically informed studies on modernist architects as groups or networks for the region. Moreover, biographies of those architects central to this study are extremely scarce and there is very little research on the social impact and interaction with society and politics of these architects.

With a view to the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), the last two decades have seen impressive new research, without which this book could not have been written. The works by Eric Mumford and Kees Somer on the CIAM as an organisation deserve particular mention. Moreover, in 2014 the Atlas of the Functional City, an extremely rich collection delivering far more than a mere account of the most well-known CIAM congress of 1933, considerably expanded and deepened our understanding of that organisation.

Many of the sources used for this study have so far received little attention. This book relies heavily on the correspondence of those architects from East Central Europe who were active in the CIAM and the written documentation of their engagement with this organisation. This includes, in part, correspondence directly relating to CIAM matters and, particularly from the mid-1930s onwards, correspondence stemming from the friendships and close relationships which had evolved between members of the CIAM, confirming the shared cause of modernism. For reasons explained in detail in chapters 1 and 3 the Polish case will be given particular attention, as the Polish group was by far the most active of the Eastern CIAM groups. As a result of the extreme suffering endured by both the city of Warsaw as well as most Polish CIAM members during the German occupation of the Second World War and the ensuing destruction of archives, source material on the Polish group is, however, scattered and uneven for the different architects involved.

The perceived peripheral status of the region of East Central Europe – continuously reflected by politicians as well as by modernist architects – formed the framework which allowed both to enter into an informal modernizing alliance. For the architects in question, however, their identification with modernism entailed more comprehensive goals, including those of personal emancipation, than for, say, a Dutch modernist architect. This book regards this point as vital to a better understanding of the implications of the modernist project. If we shift the attention from matters of style and aesthetics to the social impact and social dependencies of modernist architects, the regions where these impacts and dependences were particularly pronounced, where modernization was particularly invasive, almost logically move centre stage. The relevance of the questions this book seeks to answer is not confined to East Central Europe, and these questions do not even initially point
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to this region, though. By choosing the case of East Central Europe this book primarily seeks to gain a closer understanding of the rise of modernist architects and its associated implications. This also includes the relevant question famously ridiculed by Tom Wolfe as “From Bauhaus to our House”, namely under which communicative conditions were modernist architects believed?30

This book does not embrace the assumption of a western model of modernization to which then, almost logically, the East had to adapt.31 Yet, this book acknowledges that such assumptions existed and as such had an impact. The whole idea of modernization was always charged with an East-West asymmetry, which in East Central Europe was intensified by an idea of modernity more or less loosely linked with the notion of Europe and civilization and thus also intensely reflected.32 This reflection, in turn, should be seen as part and parcel of modernity.

Why Modernist Architects?

Architects are influenced by the fluid nature of their skill which shifted between the arts and technology. Although matters of style and built manifestations of architectural designs cannot and will not be ignored, of course, they are not central considerations here. The focus rests on modernist architects as part of a group. In this, this book distinguishes itself in two important ways from the majority of the existing literature in the field.33

First, historians of art and architecture are mostly interested in matters of style where aesthetic merits and innovative potential are the most important categories. It might be said, without doing justice to all those studies, that those architects who either did not fit into the category of outstanding artist – such as, for example, Mies van der Rohe – or into a category dealing with general innovation, such as Constructivism, tended to be ignored, though there are noteworthy exceptions even for the region under scrutiny here.34

Second, when architects are academically treated as individuals this tends to be in a biographical perspective, featuring those architects who shaped the cannon. To be sure, relevant works have long moved beyond ‘hero-worshiping’ and have made very significant attempts to understand architects, and modernist architects specifically, as much more than ‘mere’ builders. The self-fashioning of these architects in a mediated modern world has recently found increasing attention, particularly as regards the seminal figure of Le Corbusier.35

Focusing on modernist architects as a group allows us to better understand these architects’ motivations in pursuing the course of modernism beyond the limitations
of one biography. More importantly, it allows us to make sense of the personal dimension of what can be understood as the rise of architects to new social, cultural and political relevance. We can study the effect of social and political change, and in particular political ruptures, on the lives of modernist architects, whose work was so closely linked with social modernity and the modernizing state and who were symbolically charged as epitomes of modernity and modernization. The biographical level thus brings into the picture the massive ruptures that were decisive for Europe’s history in the first half of the 20th century, including changing citizenships, exile, forced migration, and genocide.

Thus, this book is able to provide a broader picture of and assess in greater depth how the identification with modernist architecture was expressed, and lived, and the price that came with it. Moving beyond the level of one biography is more than a matter of enlarging the sample. Belonging to a group – which, of course, was always an imaginary group – confirmed the relevance of their new cause to its members. This book will show how the formation of a movement beyond borders helped to strengthen modernist architects’ relevance and standing at home in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Focusing on a group allows also for, as phrased convincingly by Madeleine Herren, the challenging of narratives which are too closely linked to a simplified notion of political change: “They [networks] do not tie in closely either with the evolution of institutions or with relations between persons; they neither are the product of an evolutionary process of modernization nor can they be assigned to a pragmatic conception of politics.”

Evident as the need to study architects as a group is, undertaking a group study is not easy. It is nearly impossible to apportion equal attention to dozens of architects, not least due to the often scarce sources. The need to limit the group of architects under study in a practical way is one, though not the most important, reason why this book concentrates on those architects who were members of the CIAM. The CIAM, as will be explained in chapter 3, was a unique way of organizing architects around a shared cause – modernism – and stressing the added value of internationalism.

Not much attention has been paid to the fact that the CIAM was particularly successful in East Central Europe. This book will investigate why this was no coincidence while not losing sight of the ongoing asymmetries between East and West, which the CIAM only partially overcame. In this way this study will also contribute to a better understanding of the relevance of the CIAM as such. Using the CIAM as a framework naturally explains why architects from the Soviet Union, who of course played a key part in the rise of modernist architecture, are not part
of the study. Although, as will also be discussed here, the Soviet Union played an important role for CIAM architects as a projection screen of new urbanist opportunities and as a concrete space of action, Soviet architects were barely involved in the organisation – mostly for political reasons.

With this in mind, the book will concentrate on those modernist architects from East Central Europe who were most committed to the CIAM. The book will frequently refer to Szymon and Helena Syrkus. Szymon Syrkus was arguably one of the leading pre-Second World War modernist architects in Europe and the fact that today he is hardly acknowledged as such speaks to the aforementioned asymmetries in the historiography of modernism. A number of other relevant members of the CIAM came from the Polish group Praesens. Architects such as Bohdan Lachert, Józef Szanajca, Barbara and Stanislaw Brukalski, and Roman Piotrowski will also feature throughout this book. As will be discussed in chapter 3 the link between the Czechoslovak architects and the CIAM – despite the enormous role modernist architecture played in this country – was problematic. Apart from the likes of František Kalivoda, therefore, Czech architects remain largely out of the picture, although the country itself does not. In Hungary Farkas Molnár and Fred Forbát fit the selection criteria. Forbát, who left a rich estate of papers and was a highly sensitive observer, will be referred to frequently. This selection implies that the results of this study more strongly reflect the Polish development than the development in Hungary or Czechoslovakia. Yet, this study’s purpose is not to give an all-encompassing account of architects in the region, but to use the mentioned examples in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what drove the rise of modernist architects generally, even beyond the region in question.

Talking about modernist architects as a group raises the question of whether they belonged to the same generation. Most of the architects mentioned were born around the turn of the century – Forbát in 1897, Piotrowski in 1895, Lachert in 1900, Szanajca in 1902, Barbara Brukalska in 1899 and Helena Syrkus in 1900. Stanisław Brukalski and Szymon Syrkus, both born in 1894, were slightly older while František Kalivoda, who was active in the CIAM in the second half of the 1930s, was born in 1913, making him much younger. The strong representation of the cohort born around 1900 separates this group from Walter Gropius (1883) and Le Corbusier (1887), who had been the leading figures in the CIAM before the Second World War. The architects born after 1900 belonged to a generation which was strongly influenced by the new technologies they encountered in their training, as well as by the idea of planning.
Introduction

Most of the architects at the core of this book started their training during and right after the First World War and began their – rapidly advancing – professional careers in the first decade after the war. This was a time of state building, the rise of radical avant-garde cultures and intense debates on the place of experts vis-à-vis state and society. The use of the term ‘brokers’ in the book’s title stresses these links. The idea of brokers is intended to evoke a group at the interface of state and society, a group which negotiated modernity from a central position as a new reality and a desirable goal. Modernist architects succeeded in positioning themselves as brokers of what modernity should mean between their profession and society, between the local environment – the city, but also the nation state – in which they worked and an overarching international scene of modernist architects. The term broker also stresses the communicative aspect as well as the active role architects played in what chapter 2 will describe as a process of self-empowerment.

This study acts on the assumption of a rise of modernist architects to new positions of influence and relevance and is set to analyse and demonstrate this rise. Tzvetan Todorov has remarked that during Europe’s Interwar period architecture attained the role of “the total art that could transform everyone’s life”.[38] In focusing on this process the specificities of the profession of architects must not be forgotten. The associations related to the term ‘rise’ do certainly not fully capture the experience of this profession in the 20th century. Two tensions which were characteristic of the profession deserve particular attention:

The first tension is captured in the novel The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand – along with an awkward ideological programme. This tension refers to the conditions of precariat and demiurge as possible forms of existence in one architect, as expressed in the literary figure of Howard Roark. Given that architects were dependent on sponsors in order to realize their designs – and this was particularly true for the long controversial modernists, such as Roark – they ran a greater risk of being condemned to inactivity than most other professionals. However, the literary figure of Roark can also serve as an example of the architect as demiurge. The demiurgic character inherent in the architectural profession was particularly pronounced in modernist architects when they made claims of being able to transform society.[39]

The second tension is connected to the first. Not only dependent on sponsors for any kind of work at all and in particular for pushing through designs which exceeded the scope of the single building, architects were also much more dependent on politics than most other professions. In somewhat of an overstatement of the point one could compare this with Albert Speer’s career between Hitler’s Reichskanzlei and the Spandau prison, or the many Soviet architects who were at the
height of their careers around 1930 and eventually ended up perishing in Stalin’s purges a few years later. Architects, probably more so than other professionals, clung to the illusion that they could steer their engagement with politics in the direction they wanted – an example of overestimating one’s own capabilities, as well-captured in the lines of dEUS at the start of this introduction.

It is beyond the scope of this book to determine what role personal vanity played in all this. The relevant point is rather – as is particularly true for modernist architects – that architects were almost sought out by society as epitomes of modernity. Modernist architects responded to this need in a double avant-garde way – with the striking avant-garde solutions connected to modernist realisations in architecture, but also to new, avant-garde forms of organizing themselves and communicating. These categories will thus have a central place in this book.

Before turning to the book’s layout, a key term which has already been used several times requires clarification. The group focused on here is referred to by the term modernist architects thus introducing the element of modernism as an aesthetic identifier and as a distinct process.

**Modernist Architects and Modernity**

The terms modernity and modernism share both a long history and the fact that they are highly controversial. This is due to their comparative vagueness and because they are heavily normatively charged. Often, rather than being seen as an open-ended process which did not necessarily end positively, modernity has been linked to democratic and emancipatory effects. Despite these concerns the most important reason why this study still employs the term modernist architects is that it offers not only an analytical category, but is an essential part of the very story this book intends to tell. Although this is certainly not a sufficiently clear distinction it is telling and relevant that the architects themselves used the terms modern or modernist to describe the particular group they belonged to and to characterize the novelty of their approach. The CIAM carried the designation “modern” in its name as did several respective national groups, such as the Polish journal *Praesens: kwartalnik modernistów*. This signalled much more than just the simple need to denominate oneself. By using the term ‘modern’ architects were linking themselves to the wider concept of modernity as an international phenomenon and the dynamics of modernization. In so doing they reflected their own position geographically and temporally much more intensely than had been the case for other, older strands of architects – who were in any case typified by a less pronounced and less messianic group identity.
Modernist architects embraced the idea that something radically new had begun of which they were part and which could no longer be integrated into older narratives. Reflexivity has often been described as a hallmark of modernity, and not only by those sociologists diagnosing a “reflexive modernity” in post-Second World War Europe. With a clear notion of what progress would look like and how it should be brought about, modernist architects reflected what modernity could and should be. As will be described in chapter 2, these architects not only contributed to clarifying the idea of modernity, but also put their own movement on the map in a self-reflected way.

Membership of the group of modernist architects could be defined as adherence to Le Corbusier’s famous five points of architecture but this would hardly reflect the dynamics of the new movement. In a less rigid manner one could characterize the new approach of modernism as assigning a central place to the principles of “unity, order, purity”. These went hand in hand with a new concept of space which was now, unlike previously, regarded as mouldable. Yet, this would ignore the much wider and more important engagement of modernist architects with the many strands of modernity – and the contradictions inherent in it. Modernist architecture was always also an intellectual endeavour, neatly summarized by one of its main advocates, Sigfried Giedion, as “the invention of a new tradition”. Complete departure from tradition was what Marcel Breuer established as the common denominator of the modern movement.

It was typical of modernist architects to engage in the process of social and economic change and the rise of new technologies – in response to the challenges arising from this change or bringing about change themselves. The modernist movement was much more characterized by both social engagement and the notion of being able to shape societies and generating improvement than mere matters of style. Further, in reflecting modernity, taking part in its production and thus also ‘inventing’ themselves as a group, modernist architects can again be described as brokers of modernity. This meant that modernist architects were part of the very dynamic of modernity, captured in Karl Marx’s famous line “All that is solid melts into air” from the Communist Manifesto, later used as the title of Marshall Berman’s classic study on the experience of modernity.

The term modernization captures this dynamic, and links society’s expectations of architects and the profession’s own aspirations with the state. This link, as chapter 1 will show, was particularly expressed in East Central Europe. Key ingredients of modernization such as science, technology, rationalisation and efficiency were all central terms of what modernist architecture promised to achieve. This promise, it
will be argued here, held a strong potential in a region which partly was, and partly perceived itself as, backward vis-à-vis an often highly idealised West and where the past had a largely negative connotation.52

The question of just how universal modernity and modernism actually are was controversially debated in recent years.53 In this book the relevance of the East Central European case in a wider historiography of modernist architects is not believed to particularly lie in a specific pathway to modernity as expressed in Shmuel Eisenstadt’s concept of “Multiple Maternities”.54 What is instead striking, as far as this region is concerned, is the enormously intense and reflected engagement of modernist architects with examples from abroad.55 This in particular did not mean a critical renunciation of a modernism perceived as western.

In line with the main strand of the relevant literature this study assumes that “high modernity” set in during the late 19th century, an era of unprecedented upheaval lasting roughly from the 1880s to the 1960s.56 The technical and scientific modernization of urban space became an essential part of high modernity and was increasingly reflected as such.57 This time frame of high modernity should be understood as an “open process of transformative dynamism”.58 The period was strongly impacted by political disruptions, which also derived from attempts to find political answers to problems posed by modernity thus politicising these answers. Modernist architecture also formed one of these answers, albeit a highly disputed one.

**Thematic and Temporal Structures**

If we assume that modernist architects rose to meet new opportunities of social influence we must then also assume that a decline followed the inevitable peak. Indeed, this process could also be described as a parabola which began just before the First World War, ascended during the two decades after the war, and then faded out in the two decades after the Second World War. This parabola thus, certainly not coincidentally, more or less follows the age described as high modernity, that is, the period of the 1890s to 1960s. This book chronologically begins at a slightly later point and ends about a decade earlier. The narrative starts with the First World War, and ends in the year 1948. These caesura follow two seminal political developments or events, impacting the question under scrutiny here. In 1918 the new East Central European states emerged – all of which, of course, had an important and very distinct pre-history. In 1948 the consolidation of communist regimes and the introduction of the doctrine of Socialist Realism largely marked the end of the international exchange, which was part and parcel of interwar modernism.59
chapters organizing the argument and narrative of this book follow, *grosso modo*, a chronological structure and integrate this structure with thematic approaches. Each chapter, while focusing on East Central Europe, tackles questions extending far beyond the region in question.

The first chapter, *Modernity in Eastern Europe – East European Modernism?*, sets the scene by detailing the specific connection between modernism and modernization in East Central Europe during and after the First World War. The region is described as a projection screen of radical socio-political change and the enormous possibilities which accompanied planning and modernization. The chapter discusses the basis for such fantasies against the background of the economic crisis and recovery of the region and the emergence of new states after 1918. For these states modernization was imperative and the project of modernism in many respects provided an answer to their complex problems and was key to gaining political legitimacy. In this framework modernist architects could successfully claim to hold a new status.

Chapter 2 introduces *Architects as Experts of the Social*. Largely dealing with the period of 1916 to 1925, the chapter analyses how architects both laid claim to new tasks and became a focal point of societal expectations, how this turned modernist architects into experts of far more than ‘mere’ building and how this translated into new forms of educating architects. These architects represent a new phenotype, mixing modernism in one’s own personal life with a new conception of one’s professional identity and the self-empowerment as ‘social planners’. The second part of the chapter highlights the main themes of change, namely the rise of scientific urbanism, the allure of the machine and the triangle of rationalization, planning and technocracy as ‘background’ ideologies which modernist architects embraced and contributed to.

Chapter 3, *Organizing new Architectural Goals*, has its focal point in the second half of the 1920s and discusses new post-First World War forms of architects’ organizations with particular reference to the CIAM. The chapter treats the CIAM as a new type of organization, concerned with establishing architects as key players in a yet to be defined relationship between experts and politics. The implications of this change are spelt out by using the example of the Polish CIAM group. Shifting attention to the rarely studied CIAM-Ost the chapter assesses the relevance of these findings in a wider framework covering East Central Europe and beyond.

Chapter 4, *Communicating Social Change through Architecture*, will study how architects changed their method of communicating with the wider world by producing new types of architecture books, journals and exhibitions, ranging roughly
from 1925 to 1935. Modernist architects’ strategic use of various forms of media, including the role of visual shorthand to phrase social problems, is investigated here. This chapter serves to grasp the tension between internationalist convictions and national aspirations which characterized both the professional and private lives of the architects in question. Coalescing the national and international levels reveals the enormous tensions these architect-experts experienced, a theme central to the next chapter.

Chapter 5, *Materializing the International Agenda: Warszawa Funkcjonalna*, takes up the main problems of the earlier chapters in the concrete example of the Polish capital Warsaw in the early 1930s. The chapter shows how the various modernizing agendas of Poland’s central government, the city council of Warsaw, and the CIAM programme all merged for a brief period. Discussing the example of *Warszawa Funkcjonalna*, the only concrete plan for a so-called functional city developed within the framework of the CIAM, the chapter links seemingly lofty internationalism and very concrete problems on the ground. *Warszawa Funkcjonalna*, which had a considerable impact both on planning in Warsaw and on the international debate, serves as a case in point to demonstrate how architects managed to position themselves in the driver’s seat at a time when the urban crisis became a national issue. As this chapter shows, the planning benefited both the CIAM (in urgent need of concrete application cases) and the Polish architects on the spot, who could exploit the organization’s international clout in their dealing with politics at home.

Chapter 6, *Under Pressure: Modernist Architects and the Rise of Political Extremes*, addresses covert planning in Warsaw during the Second World War and the reconstruction in the wake of the establishment of communist regimes for the period 1936 to 1948. The chapter focuses on how architectural expertise increasingly became part of politics, forcing architects to take a position *vis-à-vis* the ideological struggles permeating East Central Europe before, during and after the Second World War. The chapter addresses the leeway architects had through their command of critical expertise, and the pressures exerted on these architects for the very same reason by using the example of Szymon Syrkus, who spent three years in Auschwitz. The final question posed is how architects employed the catastrophe of the war to push through radical plans during the short window of opportunity which opened in 1945 and closed in 1948.

To answer this question and the questions of the previous chapter, this book will first turn to the concrete space of analysis and the question of why it was here that modernist architects found such fertile ground.