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C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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A BRIEF SURVEY OF
THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
ARCHITECTURAL HOLDINGS

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William Lescaze Reconsidered

BY WILLIAM H. JORDY

Looking back on it from our present perspective, what can one say of Lescaze's career? History has been cruel to it. Although the skyscraper for the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, designed with George Howe (in a design relationship which is still debated) shared in the grand sweep of history, there is not much else now to point to. Of course, to be widely known for a single achievement of such importance in a career may be fame enough. A creativity which is sustained throughout a long professional life and which continuously demands the historian's attention is rare. To have had a Woolworth Building, a Lincoln Memorial, a Schroeder house, a PSFS—just one moment of supreme glory, which even history in the large must acknowledge—is more fame than all but very few will get.

History, however, offers not only the panoramic vista, but also the closer look. It is the closer look which we take of Lescaze here: specifically, his role in "the rise of modern design in America", to cite the theme of this exhibition. But even a careful scrutiny has its disappointing (one might even say for Lescaze personally, its cruel) aspect. The decade that remains important in his professional career comes relatively early, from roughly 1929 to 1939, or from his thirty-third to his forty-third year. The decade of professional life which preceded was desultory and uncertain preparation. The three decades which remained to him from the outbreak of World War II, when he at last began to get commissions of something like the scale of PSFS, are, if thoroughly respectable, dull at best. The magic moment had somehow passed, and, among early modern architects in the United States, not just for Lescaze.

For him, even the restricted look at the single most creative decade of his career can seem disappointing (and harsh) at first sight. It began with the building that rocketed him to fame. The depression saw that no such sizeable opportunities would come his way soon again. Lescaze's other buildings during the thirties were small to medium in scale. PSFS was, so to speak, his Price Tower looming (at the time Wright designed it, at least) over a Bartlesville of smaller buildings. To take a close historical look at Lescaze's career as a modernist demands that we temporarily set PSFS aside, except as a point of comparison—and anyway

I have had my say on this¹—in order to concentrate on the smaller buildings.

What is the configuration of Lescaze's career as a modern architect? It is not, I think, one that requires chronological treatment, because it does not show consistent development: not one, in other words, that indicates the progressive working out of an individual point of view. It is, indeed, a pragmatic career. On the whole, Lescaze accepted a received "look" from European modernism; but he countered this (and here is the real interest in his career) by rising to special occasions which demanded both insight and enthusiasm.²

The received look appears, above all, in the series of houses for suburban or country sites which he designed during the thirties. The special occasions occur in such diverse commissions—some examined by other contributors—as his schemes for the Museum of Modern Art, his housing (especially the Chrystie-Forsyth Street Housing Development), his work as architect and designer for the Columbia Broadcasting System, and in my opinion, above all in his three townhouses in Manhattan. These, together with some of his industrial design and PSFS, comprise his principal legacy to the modern movement. Let us look at them.

How eagerly he received, absorbed, and perpetuated the look of European modernism is demonstrated by his designs for a house for the year 2039, designs which he produced at the time of the New York World's Fair, hoping perhaps, but if so, in vain, that they might win him a job for something similar at the Fair itself (fig. 1). Surely, this House of the Future so-called was all too much his House of the Present. In the airbrushed ethereality of one of its presentation drawings, it seems to be fabricated of aluminum (or some other thin and gleaming material as yet undiscovered) and appears the more fragile for all the extravagance of its plate glass infill. So much is this the case that it is difficult to tell who, among this mob of guests invited to a presumed house-warming (or perhaps visitors to the Fair), is within the house and who without. The pipe-railed decks and stairs appear as his hallmark of the future. The topmost deck has been reinforced to take helicopters, one of which occurs in the drawing as a blob behind the

1. William H. Jordy, "PSFS: Its Development and Its Significance in Modern Architecture", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 21 (May 1962): 47-102.

2. For general background on Lescaze's career, I am indebted to the catalogue sponsored by the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies, Lindsay Stamm Shapiro, ed., *William Lescaze* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1982).

tree. Guests arrive from the sky as well as from the street. Another, less diaphanous drawing reveals this future in more pedestrian clarity (fig. 2). In its design the helicopter has advanced little more than the architecture. (As imaginative projections of what then existed, Frank Lloyd Wright's spinning tops over Broadacres are far more visionary than Lescaze's stodgy vehicle.) Nor have cars apparently advanced much, although the airbrushed version does indicate something dimly Dymaxion. Somehow, the suburban developer's plot, with its hedge and scattered tufts of yews on the front lawn, epitomizes (perhaps all too exactly) the degree of change that is expected to occur. The clearer

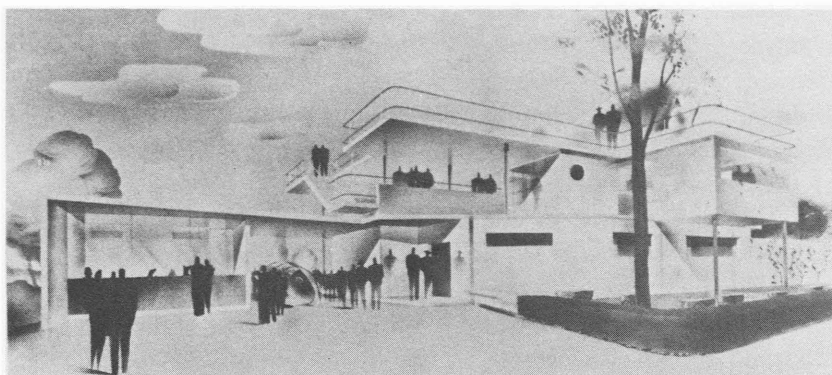


Fig. 1. Project for a House for the Year 2039, 1939, Rendering.
(This and all other illustrations for this article are from the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University.)

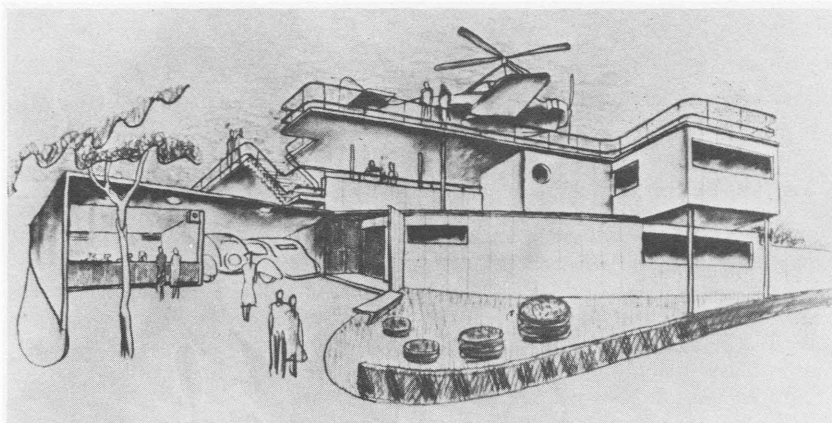


Fig. 2. Project for a House for the Year 2039, 1939, Rendering.

of the two views does at least foretell one aspect of the future. Over the garage door, to one side, there appears to be an electric eye or an alarm of some sort. Nothing, however, redeems the lack of imagination displayed in this project. Given the problem of designing a house projected a hundred years into the future, Lescaze came up with a century of provincial International Style, tarted up with vehicles and gadgetry which could have been extrapolated from the advertising pages of *Collier's* or the *Saturday Evening Post*.

To be more modern than “modern”, at a time when modern had just been established as (in Mies’ phrase) the style of the epoch, was, at least, consistent. But in examining *en bloc* the suburban and country houses of Lescaze’s creative decade, can more be said for them? Consider his Frederick Vanderbilt Field house in New Hartford, Connecticut, which was built in 1930-31 (fig. 3). It has been called the “first country house built in the United States in the International Style of architecture”,³ following three slightly earlier residential designs, none of which were realized. As grandson of Marshall Field and great-grandson of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, his client could well afford the isolated mountain site of nearly eight acres with a spectacular view. But Field, then in his twenties, was something of a renegade millionaire—a writer with liberal socialist views who specialized in modern China.⁴ Sun Terrace (as this house was called) was intended as a summer hideaway. According to Field’s own instructions to his architect, it was to be “intelligent about service, sun and air, and with space for 2,000 reference books”.⁵ So, it was to be a combined locus for reclusive relaxation and study. Only the year before Lescaze began his design, in the perpetual summer of Los Angeles Richard Neutra had completed the first (and greatest) American house in the so-called International Style for Philip Lovell (1927-29).⁶ (Although surrounded mostly by desert hills at the time it was built, it was located in a city; hence the need to specify the Field House as the “first” American

3. According to information on the house in the National Register of Historic Places, United States Department of Interior.

4. Field’s many publications on modern China, especially on economic issues in the Far East, were for the most part issued by the Institute of Pacific Relations. He also published *Thoughts on the Meaning and Use of Pre-Hispanic Sellos* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), as a product of his long-time residence in Mexico.

5. Information in National Register of Historic Places.

6. The best account appears in Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75-91.

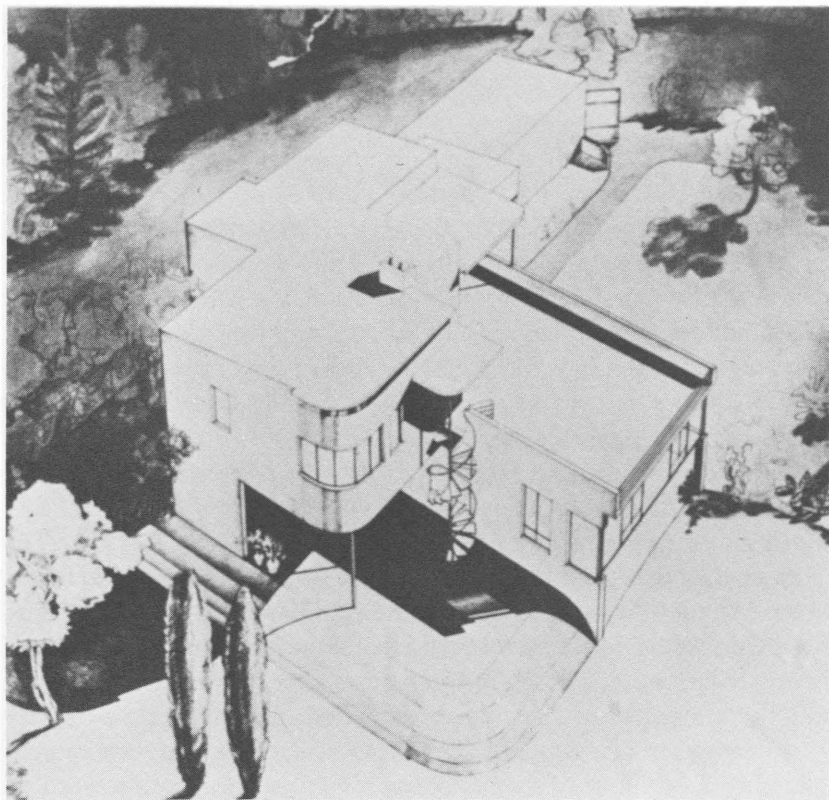


Fig. 3. Frederick Vanderbilt Field House, New Hartford, Connecticut, 1930-31, Howe & Lescaze, Rendering.

country house in the International Style, if it was to have any premier designation.) Lovell was an advocate for advanced ideas on diet, exercise, and health, which he publicized (along with his Health House) in his regular "Care of the Body" column in the *Los Angeles Times*. Lovell, like Field, typified the progressive-minded client who, together with independent-minded, small, but prosperous businessmen, were the principal clients for early modern houses.

The Field House is obviously an example of the International Style which would, at the very time of its completion, be christened as such in the pioneer exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. There are, to be sure, personal palettes within the Style. What a difference there is, in fact, between the Lovell and Field houses! Neutra consistently evolved his house from the frame, with walls hung mostly as horizon-

tal ribbons from it. Lescaze was obviously eclectic, mixing purist and constructivist strains of modernism and for the principal elevation setting the curved container for the master bedroom in a collusive and diagonal manner against the box for the living space. In the isometric drawing we see other typical Lescaze emphases. The house appears as a compact cluster of interlocked boxes, piled up toward the core of an eccentric pinwheel, which the isometric drawing accentuates. The crisply edged building is thrust in several directions toward the ghosted landscape by a draftsman who (as the cliché has it) had “trouble with trees” and covered his deficiency by spotty additive bits of frumpy scribble and wash. But it is the precise isometric that counts, with its extension into some terracing of adjacent lawns, before the geometry is lost to the American wild.

The most conspicuous mannerism in Lescaze’s residential design is the curved volume, so overwhelmingly present at the base of PSFS, born in a drawing by Lescaze done on Christmas day in 1928.⁷ This curved volume is often in Lescaze’s houses, as here, ponderously floated over a shadowed void, as though the geometry of the house resisted to the utmost the eroding force of the surrounding openness. Ground living balances deck living in this house. One or more inset columns lift the curved form over the void. These pipe stem props appear elsewhere in the Field house. Two serve as flanking supports to mark the outermost limits of the living room volume thrust out toward the major view. The pipe columns here seem squeezed at the top and bottom, the more so because the flanking walls above and below project slightly beyond the enclosed box of space like the jaws of a vise. Above, an equally quirky notching occurs where the roof terrace projects as a ledge or mini-cantilevering. As an early publication of the house informs us,⁸ this projection is intended to throw water drained from the terrace out from the wall below—a practical detail designed to cope with the freezing which would occur if the roof drained through an interior pipe in a house mostly closed for the winter. However, the fact that it looks and acts like a conventionally projected eaves is enough to disturb the abstract “purity” of the geometry. Yet another pipe support props a corner of the slab which protects a nook at the opposite end of the roof terrace. Most conspicuously of all, one more pipe rises

7. Jordy, “PSFS: Its Development”, 63.

8. *Architectural Record* 72 (November 1932): 329.

from the ground a full two stories, supporting the wind of the circular stairs before terminating as the prop of another sheltering roof slab over a bit of the roof terrace.⁹ Surely nothing about this lackadaisical scatter of pipe supports and their varied uses suggests the European philosophical dialectic for Modern Architecture, in which the field of regularly placed, widely spaced point supports in skeletal framing visually opposes the open volumes of interior space made possible by this skeletal structural system. Lescaze uses his columns as casual functional props with the pragmatic attitude of one who had absorbed the look of modernism more than its message.

Indeed, a glance at the very practical plan (fig. 4) of this summer hideaway makes clear that, a certain openness notwithstanding, the

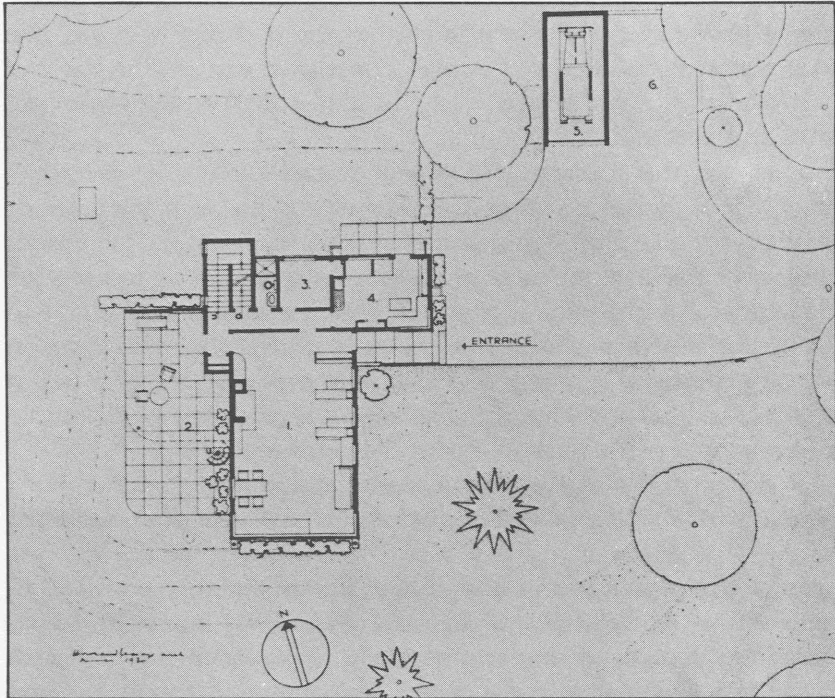


Fig. 4. Frederick Vanderbilt Field House, New Hartford, Connecticut, 1930-31, Howe & Lescaze, Plan.

9. This occurs only in the isometric. As executed, the pipe for the circular stair is stabilized by right-angled supports into the wall of the house and the overhead slab receives its own pipe support from the roof parapet.

spaces are conceived in the traditional manner as a series of boxes making their impress on the exterior massing: a box for the big living space; a box behind for the service area making an “L” of the first floor; a box for the stair; two boxes for the bedrooms above, with a box for the bath between, making a stepped diagonal of the upstairs massing where it opens onto the rooftop terrace. Inside, all is walls—no columns at all—thus confirming the conservative use of the pipe supports on the exterior as bits plucked from the rhetorical and philosophical ensemble for what Modern Architecture should be. These bits do not serve to demonstrate the logic which called forth this kind of Modern Architecture in the first place, but appear as scattered emblems of the “modernism” the house was meant to invoke. In short, measured against the highest plane of the European rationale for modernism, the Field house is provincial. A few years ago that is where the verdict might have rested. And so it might rest today. Now, however, one is almost tempted to view Lescaze’s pilfering of parts in the terms of postmodernist wit and irony, using the modernist flotsam as commentary and parody.

But surely this is a superficial view of Lescaze’s design, however productive it might be for a postmodernist revival of his work. For a devout modernist of the thirties like Lescaze, modernism was far too serious and too immediate for such levity. It is more rewarding to view the Field house afresh, without condescension, for what it was and is and to inquire whether it might have virtues worth more consideration than the nostalgic cuteness of so much current design which pretends to profound historical insight. The virtues it proclaims might indeed be construed as an admonition to the present.

The first of these virtues is its austerity and simplicity, in tune with a vision which then existed of modern life and which the asperities of the depression reinforced. (Think what would be the likely consequence of such largesse in Long Island’s Southampton today!) Consider again the directness of the plan of the Field house, its decent restraint. Observe the importance of the living room and its hearth downstairs, opening to the sheltered terrace on the ground; the easy connection between ground and roof terrace; the straightforward convenience of the staggered bedrooms with the centered bath. Or, looking again at the photograph of the house with Field himself on the deck with a friend (fig. 5), consider the implications of the bluntness with which the windowed boxiness is set against the looming bulk of

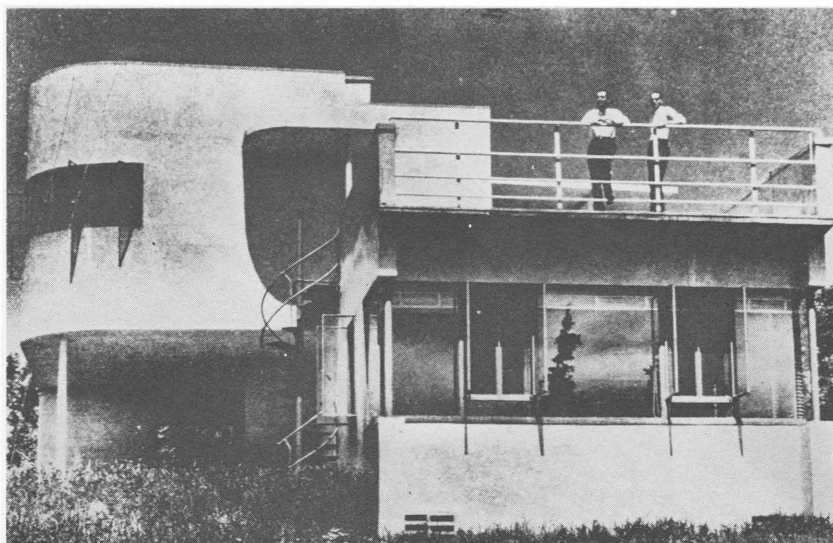


Fig. 5. Frederick Vanderbilt Field House, New Hartford, Connecticut, 1930-31, Howe & Lescaze, Exterior view.

the master bedroom with its curve of casement windows commanding the view, like the cabin of the ship this partly means to be. It is an awkward conjunction—comparable, in the collision of curved volume to rectangular volume, to Lescaze's earlier scheme for the Oak Lane Country Day School, constructed in 1929 (fig. 6), only one classroom and the centerpiece of which was built. But what is admirable is precisely this directness to the expression of what is most essential to the program.

What about awkwardnesses in detail? Awkwardness is admittedly evident. For example, there is the placement of the curved window dead center in the surface of its wall where Le Corbusier, for instance, would characteristically have increased the visual tension and assertiveness of the volume by forcing it a little down as he did in his Savoye house. There are those unintended lapses between traditional and modern expression, like the aforementioned eaves—or, elsewhere, the occasional appearance of a piece of projecting cornice ledge to contrast with the sheer edges of modernist *prisms purs*; and, of course, there is the boxiness of the spaces inside. Are we to read the area above the living room window band as part of the volume or as a spanning beam between supports? The confusion is dismaying. But to return to those pipe supports: in their scatter, their varied heights, their

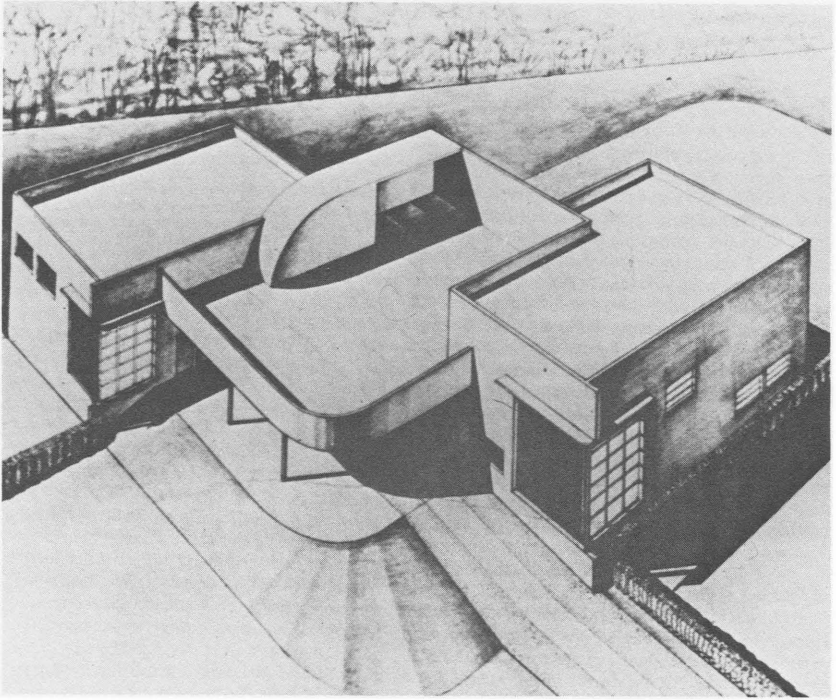


Fig. 6. Oak Lane Country Day School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1929, Howe & Lescaze, Rendering.

toothpick lack of presence, their prosaic and localized functions, don't they revert to the vernacular and appear as the lally columns they really are? But it is just this ambivalent hold on what is commonplace, while reaching for what is cosmopolitan, which (in a more consciously intended design) might give the Field house special interest today.

Among Lescaze's other houses there are finer, more consistent designs, like the William Curry house (High Cross as it was called), which served the headmaster at the Dartington Hall School in Devon, England, and which was built in 1930-32 (fig. 7). It was another progressive school, like Oak Lane and the Hessian Hill School in Croton-on-Hudson, New York (1931-32), which Lescaze also designed at this time. The liberal forces for progressive education, so pervasive and persuasive during the thirties, called forth such schools in the United States as images for the "experimentation" and "modernity" promised in the curriculum. Curry, who had been headmaster of the Oak Lane venture in nursery education, was called to Dartington Hall to head an

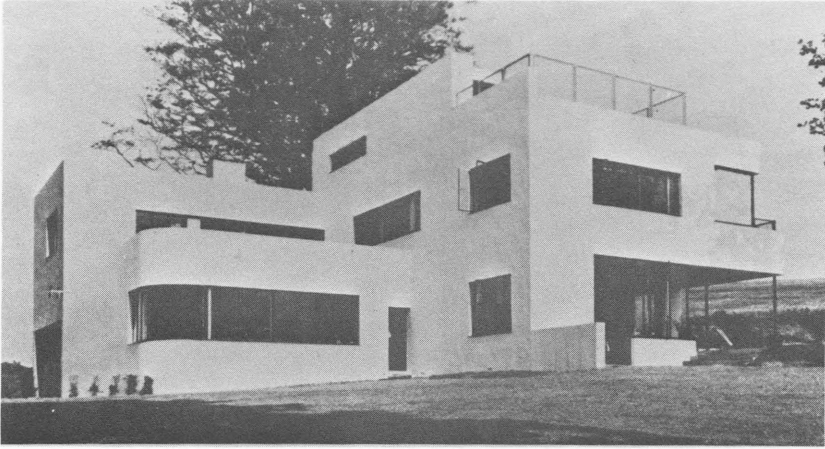


Fig. 7. William Curry House (High Cross), Dartington Hall, Devon, England, 1930-32, Howe & Lescaze, Exterior view.

even more radical school at the junior high school level.¹⁰ In the Curry house the eroded void, with its lally column supports and complicated play of planes, crumbles the corner of the *prism pur* into a kind of preordained ruin which nature penetrates (dimly anticipating perhaps the sort of effect which Richard Meier and others will eke from the International Style by the late 1960s). On the same site we see how Lescaze could give the relative blandness of wall plan and consistently shaped openings in the Curry house more variety, with greater tensions among them. One can note this, for example, in one of the Dartington Hall staff cottages, which was built in 1934-35 for Kurt Jooss (fig. 8), where the shape of the tall slot and its adjacent blip are tensely set against cornered rectangular windows in the manner, say, of Gropius' faculty houses at the Bauhaus or some of the De Stijl houses in the Netherlands. We see yet another Lescaze design approach in an all-glass alternative for a rather grand project for the Maurice Wertheim house which was to have been built in Cos Cob, Connecticut (1931), and which would have accommodated a collection of modern

10. William B. Curry's ideas on education appear in his influential *Education in a Changing World* (New York: W. W. Norton, c.1935), variably appearing as *Education for Sanity* (London: W. Heinemann, 1947). He also published *The Case for Federal Union* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1939). His own account of Dartington Hall is incorporated in Victor Bonham-Carter, *Dartington Hall: The History of an Experiment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958).

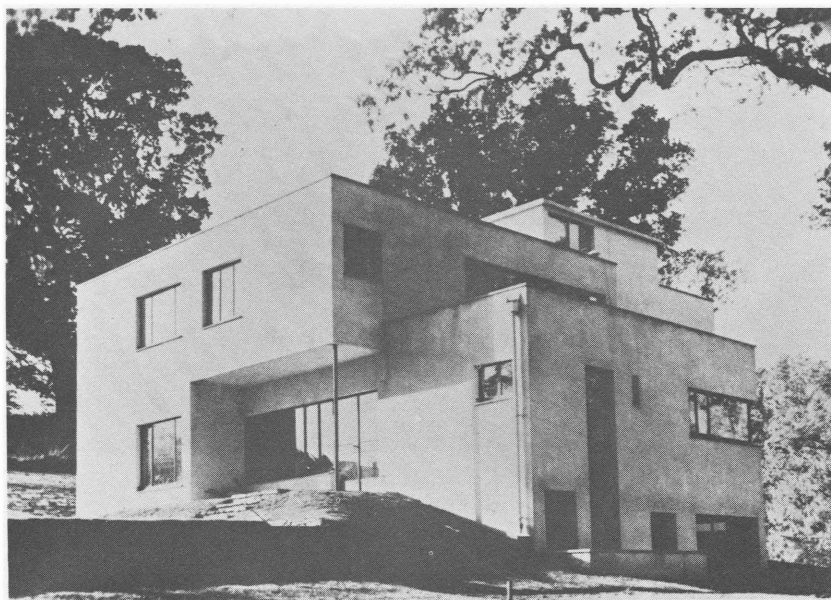


Fig. 8. Kurt Jooss House, Dartington Hall, Devon, England, 1934-35, William Lescaze, Exterior view.

art¹¹ (fig. 9). Lescaze never again employed such an extravagant run of plate glass windows in his residential work. Such extensive glazing, while congenial to the openness of American space for suburban houses, is rare for the tighter sites of their European equivalents. Here, the glazed ribbon at the ground is again cornered by another of those cumbersome, curved volumes on lally columns, this time climaxed by the master bedroom as pilot house on top. More interesting, especially to the retrospective viewer aware of comparable concerns in the 1970s, is the way in which stilted International Style volumes are simply butted into one another as they step down the hillside for the Roy Spreter studio and garage in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, which was built in 1933-34 (fig. 10). The masonry garage ploughs into the stucco box with the compositional nicety of an automobile accident. One feels that Lescaze is not quite aware of the full potential that these collisions might have for design, beyond the playfulness they permit between functionalism

11. On the Wertheim Collection, see Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, *Modern French Art, Monet to Picasso, the Maurice Wertheim Collection*, an exhibition held June 17-Sept. 4, 1960.

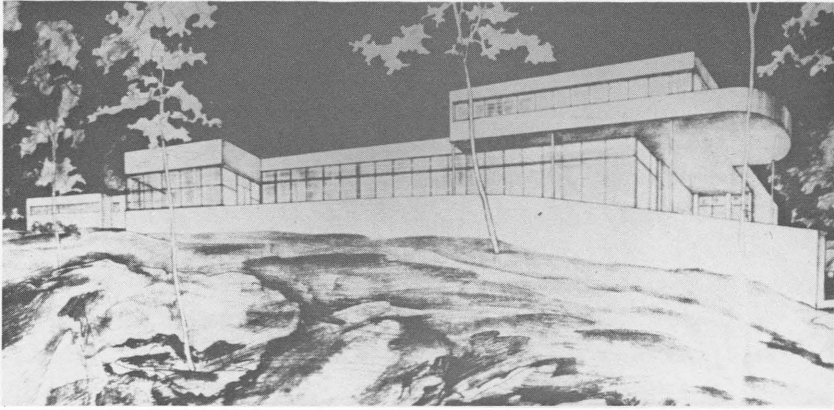


Fig. 9. Project for Maurice Wertheim House, Cos Cob, Connecticut, 1931, Howe & Lescaze, Rendering.

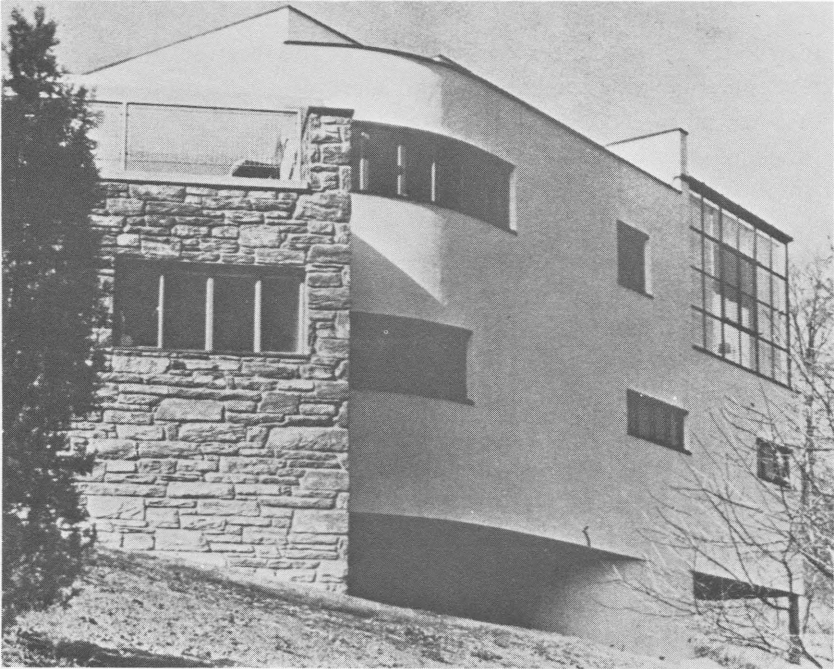


Fig. 10. Roy Spreter Studio and Garage, Ardmore, Pennsylvania, 1933-34, William Lescaze, Exterior view.

and picturesque massing. He did not develop this approach. (But one feels that today Gehry or Graves, as two examples, would understand such a potential.) Finally, to conclude this sweep of Lescaze's residential design during the thirties, I would mention that naturalistic texture and two-tone horizontality in massing become prevalent in work done toward the end of the thirties. Like other American modernists, as the decade advanced Lescaze bowed somewhat to the growing reputation of Frank Lloyd Wright.

What this series of residential design reveals, then, is a traverse of the visual effects of the International Style which is perhaps to be expected of one, like Lescaze, who receives a cosmopolitan style second-hand. The varied visual modes of the style are spread out to view in the provincial, if informed, situation where their constant adaptation to the national building habits, comforts, and to that mixture of relaxed, earnest, frank, open (and on occasion even pretentious) liberalism becomes apparent. It is precisely the kind of cultural situation which calls forth not sophisticated expression and certainly not sophisticated commentary, so much as ingenious experimentation. And that is precisely what we find in other works by Lescaze during the thirties. It is when he is roused in some way out of the received quality of the style that his work jerks us up into alertness.

Above all, of course, this energy appears in PSFS, which I have elsewhere shown to be exceptional in so many ways. Here, however, I shall only pause to observe the astonishing revelation of function evident in its massing, especially for a skyscraper office building. This characteristic is something that persists in Lescaze's work. The store on the street is boldly distinguished from the banking hall, which is in turn innovatively elevated to the second floor, as the *piano nobile* of the building, in order to preserve the commercial life of the street. This polished granite volume at the base provides a platform for the office tower, its narrow, slab-like character and off-center placement insuring perpetual light for the interior, whatever building occurs on adjacent properties. Elevators, stairs, and vertical utility shafts tend to be concentrated in the spine at the back of the building, forming a "T" with the tiers of offices. On top, a cluster of enclosures contains the executive board room and other executive amenities, as well as mechanical equipment, which is partially wrapped in a wedge-shaped enclosure with one side angled so as to present the best view of the neon letters PSFS to incoming commuters. (The original observation

platform at rooftop was subsequently rented out to a local radio and television station.)

We have already seen evidence of a similar visible packaging of functions in the Field house and in the Oak Lane School. If Oak Lane shows the school as a jointed series of individual classrooms, each discreetly revealed as a sunlit studio, Lescaze's Hessian Hills School, which included more advanced grades, arranged classrooms in a ribbon slab with factory or laboratory look, fronted by an arcade. For Dartington Hall he enlarged the Hessian Hills scheme to a loose campus arrangement of classroom blocks (which were executed in a much reduced manner). These were to have been depended from a corridor spine extending from the administration and refectory blocks at one end of the complex to the library, topped by an observatory turret, at the other. Hence, within the space of a couple of years, from 1929 through mid-1931, Lescaze explored practically all the paradigms by which progressive approaches toward school design would disintegrate the monumental school building into more informal arrangements. It is impressive evidence of Lescaze's receptivity to new ideas in such a short span of time and at such an early date.

The most exceptional demonstration of the kind of packaging of function which makes PSFS so extraordinary among skyscrapers even to this day and the progressive school projects so prophetic of future developments is the series of *tour de force* schemes which Lescaze did (while with Howe) for the Museum of Modern Art. The Museum was, in 1930-31, looking to move from the townhouse in which it had its origin to a more institutional setting. The proposed site on West Fifty-third Street, narrow and deep (sixty by one hundred feet), was to have been on axis with a proposed extension of the private street which crosses Rockefeller Center in front of the RCA and Associated Press Buildings.¹² Cut through one more block, between Fifty-first and Fifty-third Streets, the projected Museum of Modern Art (which also enjoyed strong Rockefeller backing) would have been directly linked with the Center; but John D. Rockefeller, Jr. thwarted himself in this endeavor because his own purchases of real estate drove up prices in the area to levels of expectation which made their owners unwilling

12. On the Rockefeller effort to link the Museum of Modern Art directly with Rockefeller Center, see William H. Jordy, *American Architects and Their Buildings: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 22 ff.

to sell. Hence, nothing came of the schemes. When, in the mid-thirties, the Museum of Modern Art did build, Lescaze missed out on the job.

All variations for the proposed Museum building show the galleries clearly stacked one above the other in an effort to bring natural light deep into the narrow gallery spaces. The first version¹³ seems to take off from Joseph Urban's suave New School for Social Research, which had just been completed in 1929, but with a lattice-like, glazed (or tiled) stair tower expanding against the penthouse offices at the top. The second scheme seems to have moved toward an all-glass wall in an elegant warehouse design in which the transom-like bank close to the ceiling of each floor nevertheless tended to suggest a stack of independent galleries. The perspective emphasizes the structure, pulling it out into the open, into the slotted garden between party walls at the roof. The apparent third scheme offered a stepped variant of this same glassy scheme with rooftop lighting at each stage. As this elevation with its southern exposure rose out of the shadow of the buildings across the street, roof slabs projected to shade the surface. The next stage is apparently suggesting a checkerboard of wall and glass bricks. In any case, it led to the boldest suggestion of all in two more variants dependent upon the cross stacking of top-lighted galleries, which Lescaze preferred as the definitive conclusion to the series of designs. One of these schemes shows boxed galleries partially supported by the abutting exposed columns (as Mies would later do, but as Howe and Lescaze had already done at PSFS). The other depended solely on radical cantilevering. The stacked blocks pile up to a circular restaurant on the roof. Glass blocks in a transom arrangement now extended over all exposed roof surfaces. Above each gallery, dropped interior glass ceilings made a light-diffusing box with a complicated series of baffles and louvers which were operated electrically to regulate luminosity. A complete model at one-quarter scale was built for testing.

There is about these projects for the Museum of Modern Art a decorative quality in the repetitive revelation of suave patterning, which, as clearly as any projects I know of, suggests what a thoughtful combination of waning twenties Art Deco with rising thirties Euro-

13. From a statement (located in the Lescaze Papers) made by Lescaze to the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, it appears that the order of the schemes is as here indicated, and not in the order in which they are illustrated (without comment) in the IAUS catalogue, above cited. Schemes 5 and 6 (as indicated here) were definitely regarded as the "final", preferred version by Lescaze.

pean modernism of an expressionist persuasion might have looked like.

Laid on the ground in a more arbitrary pattern, the design strategy of the Museum of Modern Art reappears in the *parti* of Lescaze's proposed Chrystie-Forsyth Street Housing Development, which was built in 1931-32 (fig. 11). At the time, this project, making such a clean sweep (or perhaps swipe) of the old with the new, was highly regarded. In the photo-cum-aerial perspective, the dilapidation of the existing Lower



Fig. 11. Project for Chrystie-Forsyth Street Housing Development, New York, New York, 1931-33, Howe & Lescaze, Photomontage of project on the site.

East Side progressively vanishes in the remorseless advance, block by block, of the open zig-zag, like a Greek key pattern, of sharp-edged, tiered horizontals, in a manner comparable to the way in which a crisp pattern resulted from the rise of the stairs, story by story, inside PSFS. At the time of its design, several aspects of the project were both enlightened and, in combination, original: such as the way in which the pattern of the L-shaped slabs creates interior courts while the stiling of these slabs maintains continuous openness for the site; the cross ventilation of all apartments; and the open-air walkways (giving access to the individual apartments) that will much later be aggrandized as “streets in the sky”. Experience with such good intentions makes us less sanguine about the project today. For its time, however, it was laudable and provided early evidence of Lescaze’s continuous concern with New York’s housing. Later, in the relatively low-rise Ten Eyck Houses in Brooklyn, built in 1935-38 (fig. 12), when the excessive zeal for modern expression had somewhat quieted, Lescaze participated with others to create a housing type which, in its human-scaled decency, has become belatedly acknowledged as one of the finer contributions



Fig. 12. Ten Eyck Houses, Brooklyn, New York, 1935-38, William Lescaze and Associated Architects, Perspective (or exterior view).

toward housing of the period. Characteristically, the more polemical statement is momentarily arresting, whereas the greater modesty of the more vernacular approach makes the more permanent appeal.

At the opposite range of urban housing, the three townhouses Lescaze did in New York between 1933 and 1941 are outstanding. To me, after PSFS, they are his most memorable designs. Especially remarkable is the first, his own house, built in 1933-34 (figs. 13 and 14). It is, at first sight, as heedless of context as the International Style mostly was. But

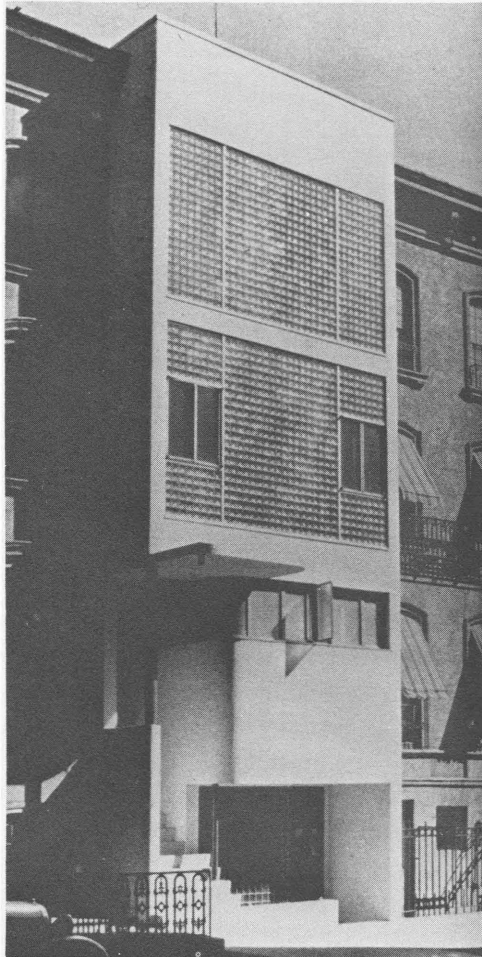


Fig. 13. William Lescaze Townhouse, New York, New York, 1933-34,
William Lescaze, Facade.

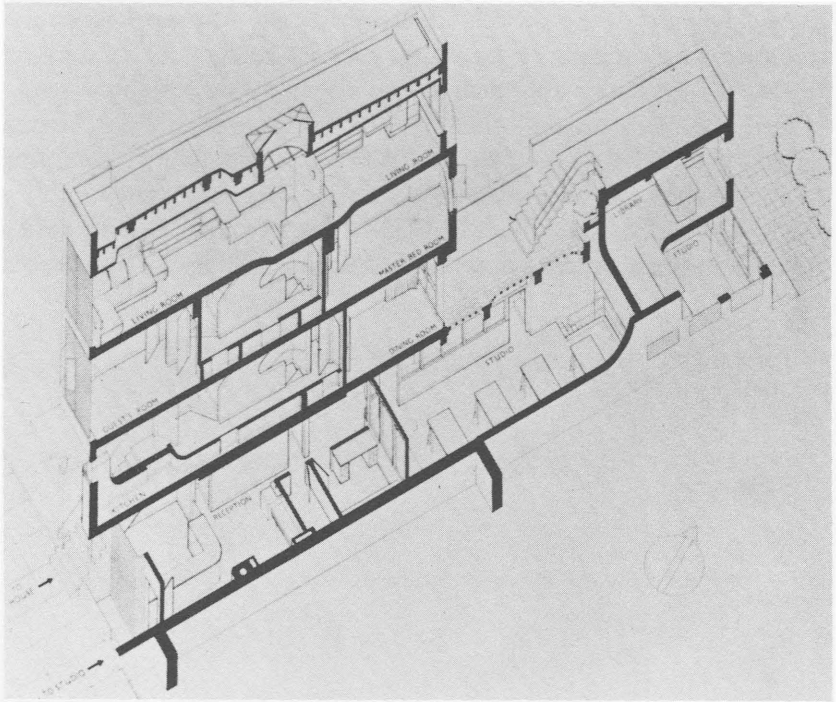


Fig. 14. William Lescaze Townhouse, New York, New York, 1933-34,
William Lescaze, Axonometric-section.

after all, for such modernism at the time, the context into which it was designed to fit was part of the future that was meant to come, when *all* would be modern. Only momentarily (as it may have seemed to Lescaze) would his house impatiently burst forward of the common wall plane for the row of musty Victorian housing it interrupted. Pushing his facade out to the legal limit of sunken courts for basement service, Lescaze boldly asserted the modern *prism pur*, all luminously white (originally, but eventually gray to better cope with New York grime). It flashed with the crystalline quality of the dominating glass brick panels, at a time just before these were widely adopted in this country from Europe. But what is also part of its drama is the inset entrance to his office, back to the plane of the elevations of the Victorian neighbors. Dramatic, too, are the steps to his own living quarters above, which rise with all the steep, ceremonial stiffness of the adjacent rowhouse stairs. From their spill onto the sidewalk, up into the tall entrance slot, they rise to the residential entrance. Overhead, the

canonical Lescaze cantilevered slab with one curved corner intensifies the slot and works against the curve of the window bank sliding beneath it. Both slab and band converge from opposing directions to suck us into the entrance space. If the projecting slab heralds the entrance, it also, along with the gratuitously exposed stubby lally columns to either side of the stair, celebrates the style. Of course, the niche in which the corner column exists could have been filled as a wall. How telling that it was not! The lally column decisively stakes out the corner of the building and becomes as symbolic of modernity here as a classical column is to a Renaissance-style facade. The glass panels above accord to the height of the slightly arched windows in the Victorian elevations to either side. The stretch of wall at the top provides an equivalent to the beetling visual weight of the Victorian cornicing. So, despite the breathtaking thrust of the new here, Lescaze does acknowledge the old and saves the intrusion from becoming rambunctious.

The glass brick panels stretch a screen of light from party wall to party wall as a beacon of modernity, crystalline by day, luminous by night. Where glass brick is too often boringly blind, here windows open out as eyes, making a face of the elevation. Their verticality and that of the teeth (so to speak) of the window mouth below are stretched through the fields of glass brick, linking the levels, giving a top-batted height to the elevation and providing a center against which a sense of the interior can break through at the sides. It is a remarkably subtle elevation for such apparent simplicity and directness of means. In the elevations of his subsequent townhouses Lescaze never quite repeated its quality. The facades of both the Raymond Kramer townhouse (1934-35) and the Edward A. Norman townhouse (1940-41) are handsome, but became progressively bland.

Lescaze's own house is also remarkable within. The ground floor contains the office; the second floor, the kitchen and maid's quarters to the front, a dining room behind. This opens in the back through glazed doors to a low terrace, with skylights down to the drafting room below, and behind this sunken section, to a raised library with stairs up to a small rooftop deck. The third floor contains the master bedroom on the back, with the wall bowing out in an S-curve on this north-facing wall to capture the sun. At the top the living space extends from front to back. Characteristic of much modern American work of the period, there is restraint, but nothing spartan, about the interiors. No

Thonet chairs here. One thinks rather of the comfort of the club, or the plush spareness of the railroad observation cars of the period. Clumps of low, deep, upholstered furniture are fitted to equally low cabinets and shelving, which in turn are often ingeniously fitted into jogs made by the protrusions of structural columns into the space. The lowness of the furniture and the unbroken expanse of wall-to-wall carpeting emphasize the plane of the floor against the painted plaster expanse of the walls and ceiling. As a result of the restraint, one senses with special intensity, even in a photograph, the resonant play of materials: wood, fabrics, metal, plastic, glass, plaster, and paint, as well as plants, bouquets of flowers, and their shadows on the wall (fig. 15). The Lescaze living room was in beige, dark brown, daffodil yellow and creamy white—club colors combined with pastels into something more ethereal. On the cool side Lescaze selected sky blue (PSFS blue, one might say) and oyster with maroon and chartreuse accents, which were interior colors also favored at the time. His inclusion of a fireplace in this room reminds us that, however subdued and often dismantled, fireplaces generally remained prominent in modern American interiors. Concealed lighting (hidden in coves, ledges, and “indirect” lighting fixtures) came into its own, often positioned so as to conceal the invasion of spanning beams into the space, as furniture was fitted to columns. In the Norman house, just such concealed lighting, occurring behind a wall within a wall, lights a shelf for paintings and photographs—Stieglitz photographs, in fact, since Dorothy Norman was a devotee of Stieglitz and the American Place and wrote essays and a book on the photographer.¹⁴ In the foreground of the Lescaze living room, the long metal plate with its line of buttons testifies to the theatrical effects possible from the washes of concealed light and their sometime (apparently not here) rheostat control; this was at a time when theater and store display lighting was being revolutionized.

Lescaze’s townhouse typifies a Modern Architecture which thrusts in many directions. The free-wheeling use of the gamut of modern stylisms; the complication and explosion of the *prism pur* into massing

14. An intimate of Stieglitz, Dorothy Norman published an essay on him in Waldo Frank, et al., *America and Alfred Stieglitz* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1934) and a more definitive study *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Random House, 1973). Her writings also include, in addition to other items on Stieglitz and privately printed volumes, two books: *Nehru, the First Sixty Years* (New York: John Day, 1965) and *The Hero: Myth, Image, Symbol* (New York: World Publishing, 1969).

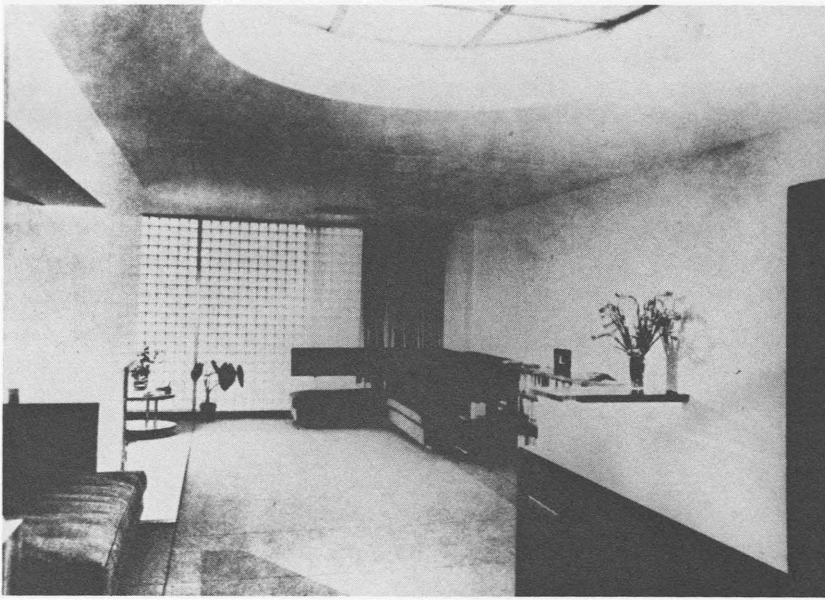


Fig. 15. William Lescaze Townhouse, New York, New York, 1933-34,
William Lescaze, Living room.

which is variously functional, picturesque, and ornamental; the rub of the vernacular against sophistication; the creation of architectural images for the American liberal sensibility coming to grips with “modernity”: these are aspects of Lescaze’s personal involvement with the modern European style and the restless, inventive, empirical manner in which he attempted to inflect it to his own expression in the context of American culture. Sometimes he was successful, sometimes less so; but there is about this work of the thirties a spirit of discovery and adventure which seems to have dwindled as the style became more familiar, the solutions more *pro forma*, and (quite as important, it would seem) the progressive spirit and marked individuality of Lescaze’s early clients inevitably gave way to more conventional and more commercial patronage. After all, the excitement of the discovery of Modern Architecture in the thirties was the client’s as well as the architect’s. The architecture which resulted reveals their shared enthusiasm.

The portrait photograph [see page 15] which serves as the poster image to this exhibition was taken in the Lescaze living room. Nattily attired, Lescaze leans on the cantilevered projection of the back of the sofa, against the crystalline geometry of the glass brick. Silhouetted plant leaves

poke in from the left. Light, geometry, the cantilever, an emblem of the “organic”—all signs of the “modern”. Lescaze sucks on the pipe of professional meditation—the final *objet type* in *Vers une architecture*, laid across the page as an image of finality. He reads a current architectural journal. A sharper print of the photograph will reveal that the open page shows a plan (not apparently of one of his own buildings, as one might suspect). One would like to think at least that the journal contains the latest from Europe. And Lescaze may be wondering how he can appropriate it and bend it to new use on another continent.

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