
WINDOWS – C. '65

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I rediscovered windows! How hard it is now to remember how taboo it was then to do windows – that is, when I started out when architecture was Modern with a vengeance.

In the early days of the International Style you did find some windows as holes in the wall, as in Mies van der Rohe's great Afrikaner Strasse Housing in Berlin or Le Corbusier's great Villa Savoye, but they were disguised in their combinations as strip windows that articulated the walls as essentially long vertical planes and that did not "violate the integrity" – the formal and structural image – of the wall as a simple and abstract element.

Windows as stripes more than as openings could be not only horizontal but also vertical in the less industrial-referenced Modernism of American skyscrapers – as in Rockefeller Center complex where the spandrel dividing the real but unacknowledged windows occurred below and above them rather than beside them.

And then there was the *brise-soleil* of Le Corbusier, which dominated the facade by its geometric force and thereby disguised the windows behind it and hid them as well by means of shadows – in the end less to keep the sun out of the inside and more to block the window out from the outside.

The concept of window as absence of wall had become almost universal, as "flowing space" that eschewed enclosure in architecture and encouraged ambiguity between the inside and the outside came to predominate. The unobtrusive glass walls connecting disconnected planar walls of Mies's Barcelona Pavilion came to exemplify the window as pariah – although we must remember the window disguised as shadow below the hovering horizontal planes as roof overhangs that dominated Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style houses some decades before.

I describe the concept of architecture sans window in terms of formal perception, but it applies as vividly within a symbolic dimension involving association. The actual elements in this kind of architecture that consisted of frames and glass to keep out the cold and the rain and to look through these elements were designed not to look familiar, not to have qualities or imagery that resembled or even reminded you of windows as you knew them from past association – from, heaven forbid, history, therefore modern sliding windows were *in*. The previous invention of plate glass allowing big sheets helped here, of course.

But as important as were these aesthetic bases – structural, spatial, and symbolic – for denying the window in the wall was a philosophical basis: Modern architecture was progressive, if not revolutionary; its forms had to look different, if not new, in their often pure and minimalist abstractions – and thereby entirely free of historical precedent. And it helped if the architecture looked outrageous, which increased its chance of being avant-gardely correct. I have written elsewhere of the International Style's implicit reference to an industrial vernacular architecture, which Le Corbusier acknowledges in his references to American grain elevators in *Vers une architecture*. (For Gropius, thank God, his seminal Fagus Shoe Works happened to really be a factory!).

Louis Kahn's late work contains eloquent holes in walls but they are significantly abstract and made more so by their circular and triangular shapes that reinforce their quality as holes and diminish their reference to windows.

So it turned out by the early and mid-sixties that I was revolutionary in not being revolutionary; in employing reference and association, if not symbolism; in eschewing abstract, progressive, by-then-old-fashioned Modernism; and in making the little houses and fire stations I could get as commissions not outrageous but familiar and conventional. Being outrageous by not being outrageous sounds not outrageous now, but it was outrageous. And one of the ways was to make a house look like a house and a fire station look like a fire station – to make them represent what they were via association rather than to functionalize them, so to speak.

And that's how I came to make a generic window – a window that looked like a window, that was symbolically a window as well as formally a window in my second building, my mother's house. (My first building, the North Penn Visiting Nurses center in Ambler, Pennsylvania, had an entrance that looked like an entrance by sporting in the facade a frankly decorative decorative-arch.)

Yes, it took courage in the early sixties – construction was completed in the spring of '64 – to make that hole in the wall on the left side of the front facade of my mother's house – and then as well to insert a window in it by persuading, with some difficulty, the Arcadia Sliding Glass Door Company to insert a horizontal muntin! This window was followed by double-hung windows with a central vertical muntin in the Guild House facades – an even more literal representation of a conventional window of the United States – and then in the Trubek-Wislocki Houses and others, sometimes in the form of casements, and then on and on until this classic window became the universal trademark of some other architects. And then there is the literal universal trademark of now – Windows '95!

In the end, architects might have to adore windows as elements that create and modulate light inside and are perhaps the single most important architectural element signifying historically the quality of a building and the character of a style.