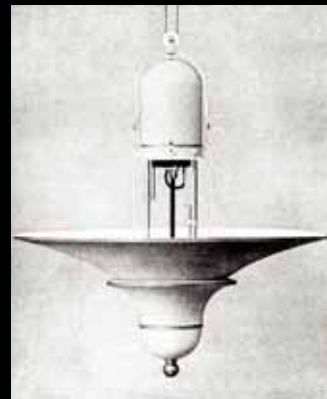


The Genesis Of Modern Design

Ngium finds plenty of evidence linking modern architecture and modern design – in everything from furniture to CD covers, “from our house” to Bauhaus



Throughout most of human history, architecture and the arts were seen in close proximity with one another for the obvious reason that architecture, until lately, was regarded as just one of the arts. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has described architecture as the “greatest and the most distinguished” form of art.

There once were artists who regarded architecture as a privileged extension of their normal artistic vocations. For example, famously, the dome at St. Peter's in Rome, built in 1564, was designed by the sculptor and painter Michelangelo Buonarroti, and in 1667, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, also a sculptor and painter, designed the piazza in front of the cathedral.

The link between architecture and music is also common. American architect Frank Lloyd Wright is known to have regularly played the piano to take his mind off pressures of work, and it isn't hard to notice the musicality of his architectural spaces. Conversely, students Nick Mason, Roger Waters and Rick Wright were studying architecture at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London at the time they formed Pink Floyd in the 1960s. The influence of their architectural background became most evident in *The Wall* but was also reflected in the construction of their elaborate stage structures, which they often worked with architect Mark Fisher. Has anyone noticed how carefully constructed their music is – like a work of architecture – and their equally carefully designed album covers?



Clockwise from far left: Behrens' *The Kiss* (1898); Behrens' AEG lamp; Winslow House, by Wright (1893); Japanese National Pavilion for World Colombian Exposition, Chicago (1892); chaise lounge and chair, Le Corbusier (1927)

The more obvious linkage between architecture and the other arts is in the visual arena, particularly at the genesis of the modern movement at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Rejecting historicism for an organic architecture, Wright (1867-1959) turned to Art Nouveau design for inspiration; he was also influential in evolving curvilinear Art Nouveau into a rectilinear depiction, particularly in the spatial organization. Space became the driving essence of Wright's architecture: to him “organic” meant an overall unity of form within a variety of connected spaces; where “the part is to the whole as the whole is to the part, and which all is devoted to a purpose.” Through organic design, he believed the entity sought “completeness in the execution of ideas which is absolutely true to method, true to purpose, true to character.”

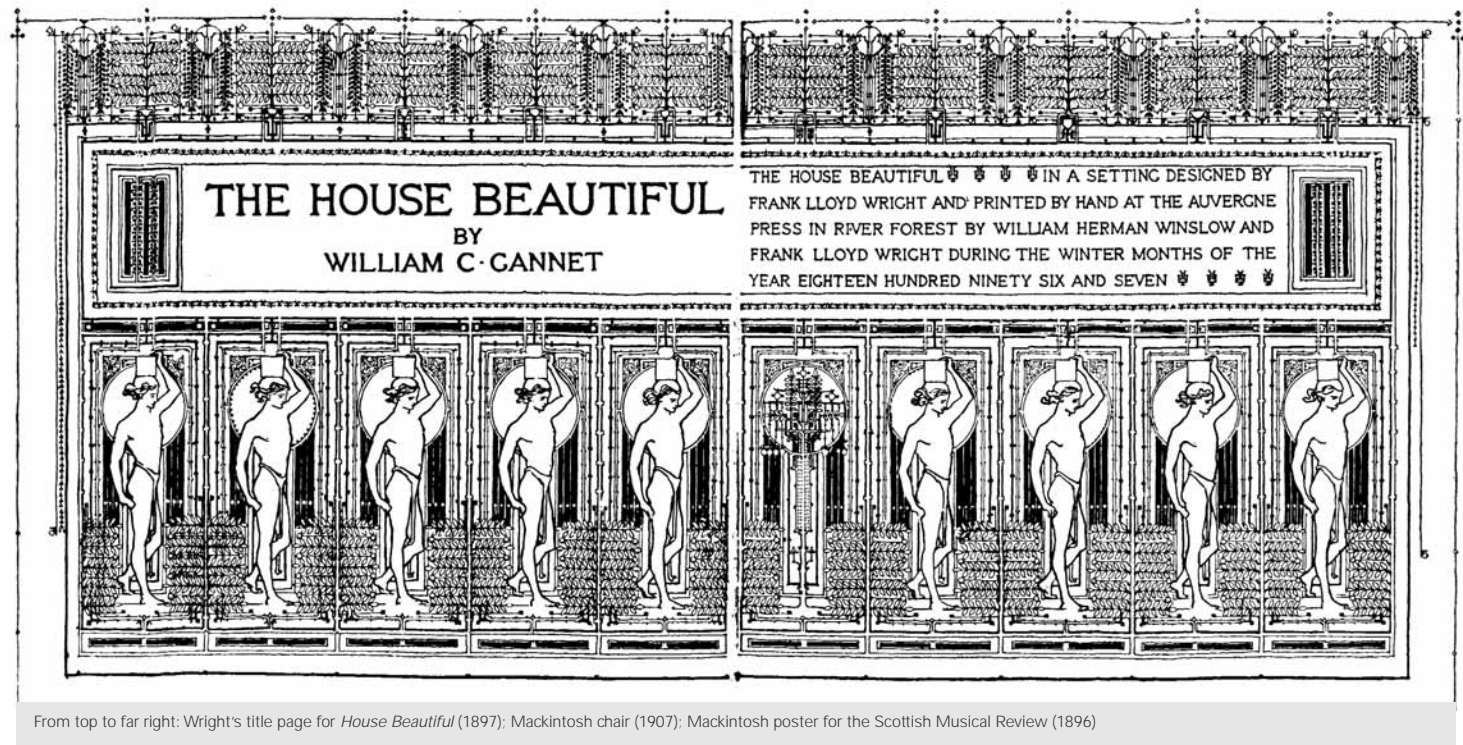
Wright was an avid collector of Japanese prints, which were popular at the time, but he also saw Japanese architecture as a model of harmonious proportion and visual poetry. Indeed, in the Japanese measurement of spaces based on the tatami mat, there seemed to be a mathematical repetition in the creation of spaces. Equally, Wright used repetition to create asymmetry in spatial organization. Moreover, he extended and expanded his architectural vision and aesthetic into other artistic realms that included furniture, graphics, fabrics, wallpapers, and stained-glass windows.

Before becoming an established architect, he operated a basement printing press with a friend. It is postulated that the discipline of printing taught him to appreciate white or blank spaces as an integral component of his architecture, and to combine various materials to form a single spatial and formal entity.



Throughout his career as an architect he was to periodically turn his hand to graphic design. He built his first house for his friend, William H. Winslow; but before that, he had collaborated with Winslow to produce a beautifully handcrafted book, *The House Beautiful*. In the end only 90 copies were printed, using a handpress method on handmade paper. Wright's border designs were executed in a delicate freehand line, which inscribed a lacy pattern of stylized plant form. The lines had a clear English Art Nouveau influence, particularly that of Aubrey Beardsley's graphic work.





From top to far right: Wright's title page for *House Beautiful* (1897); Mackintosh chair (1907); Mackintosh poster for the Scottish Musical Review (1896)

Another renowned architect who was influenced by Beardsley and the English Art Nouveau was Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928). Mackintosh was part of a group of Scottish collaborators known in artistic circles as "The Four", which also comprised J. Herbert McNair, and sisters Margaret and Frances Macdonald. The Four were first known for their print illustrations, which were distinguished by their stylized and symbolic imagery derived from bold, simple lines on flat planes of colors. The spiritual nuances of their works were probably influenced by the Macdonald sisters, who combined strong religious beliefs with mystical ideas. The effeminate, melancholic and disquieting visual nuances are fairly overt. The influence of their style on Wright and the Vienna Secession (a breakaway group of young Turks from the established guild) in Austria is apparent although they seemed to have little influence in Britain itself.

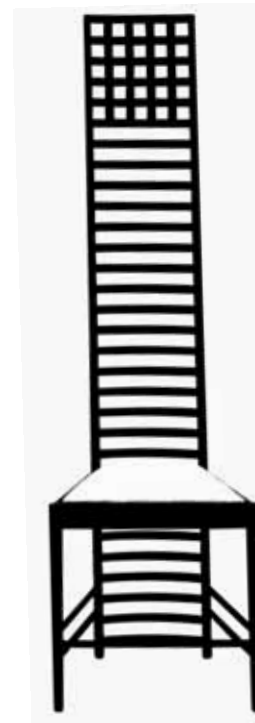
Mackintosh was to bring the style into his architectural designs and extend them into other associated areas such as decorative objects, chairs and interiors. Like Wright, Mackintosh applied the style to the total environment. In contrast to the usually busy interiors at the time, Mackintosh had the interior walls white and bathed in light and, uncluttered except for a few carefully placed ornaments. He used rising vertical lines as the unifying theme, the rising lines often had subtle curves at the end, tempered with

horizontal lines at the junctions. He also often included tall slivers of rectangles coupled with ovals, circles and arcs as counterpoint. These seemed to be the visual signature of his work. Like Wright, his furniture and interiors are detailed to be compatible with the whole. The rising lines of the "Mackintosh chair" exemplify this aesthetic.

The movement that most scholars know about today, which extols the unity of the arts is the "Bauhaus." This German "school" of architecture started in Weimar in 1919 through the merger of two previous schools; its full name is Das Staatliches Bauhaus (the State Home for Building). The first director of the Bauhaus was Walter Gropius (1883-1969), already a renowned pioneer of modern architecture when he was appointed. Significantly, his mentor was Peter Behrens (1868-1940) a German contemporary of Wright and Mackintosh. Like them, Behrens was an architect who was also proficient in the printed arts. Behrens started his career as a painter of gloomy industrial landscapes and equally depressing scenes of the underclass. He was to later embrace the Jugendstil movement – the German equivalent of Art Nouveau. One of Jugendstil's iconic images is Behrens' *The Kiss*, a six-color woodcut, controversial for its androgynous imagery.

Behrens was to switch back and forth between graphic arts, product design and architecture. He pioneered new typographic forms for the new industrial era and, thinking like an architect, was among the first to use a grid system to structure space in his graphic designs. He also designed such products as streetlamps and teapots using an industrial-like aesthetics, considered as innovative at the time. His work for the German company AEG is considered the first comprehensive visual identification program, commonly known today as "branding." Behrens' rigor carried into his architecture, where he pioneered non-load-bearing glass curtain walls spanning the spaces between structural supports. The association of this method of construction with modern architecture still continues today – not a lot has changed since the first decade of the 20th century.

Well before the emergence of the Bauhaus, Behrens pioneered an art course in Düsseldorf in 1903, which combined architecture, graphic and interior design together as a preparatory course of study to precede specific studies. His intention was to raise perceptive skills through artistic and spontaneous form, rather than through mechanical studies. Significantly, the preparatory courses were precursors for the Bauhaus' own preparatory course, and even more significantly, two of Behrens' apprentices, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe served as directors of the Bauhaus and were themselves icons of the Modern movement.



However, Behrens later became involved with the German version of the Arts and Crafts movement known as the Werkbund, which unlike the English version, tried to reconcile with the industrialized culture of the machine age. With this involvement, his work became less spontaneous and more objective, later descending into a form of neo-classicism, moving away from both Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts to draw inspiration from the aesthetics of ancient Greece and Rome. It was thought that the muscular, objective Greek and Roman geometry could make ornament universal and impersonal, satisfying the nature of mass production. In pioneering the attitude of modern product design, he sought neutrality and standardization for the machine to manufacture. His forms were simple, devoid of decoration, with all the connotations of social class association stripped away. His work pointed to a new aesthetic sensibility, which was to mature in the 1920s into the Modern movement. Behrens pointed to a rational approach to the arts deemed appropriate for the new industrial age, where form was to follow function.

In the background, while all of this was happening, loomed the silent figure of Le Corbusier (1887-1965), who was an apprentice to Behrens, together with Gropius, Mies and Adolf Meyer (1881-1929). All became icons in the modern movement in architecture. Le Corbusier and Mies also left a legacy of timeless furniture design. Today, Le Corbusier's sofa, chair and chaise lounge continue to be sought after to complete modern interiors. Even more iconic are Mies' Marcel Breuer chair and Barcelona series of furniture. 

