The Graphic Language as a Hybridization of Art, Thought, and Technique

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Introduction

Drawing has always stood out as one of the main tools of communication, capable of expressing mental or real images instinctively or through codified systems, by means of lines and marks. Beyond being a document that conveys information about the depicted object, it is also a source of insight into the style, personality of the author, and the time and place in which they operated. Each culture, in fact, adopts its own communicative codes for graphic representation, which reflect their conception of space and the modes of decoding visual language [Ackerman 2003].
For example, in the transmission of medieval knowledge through illustrations, the cultural aspect prevailed over the naturalistic one, to the point of adopting conventional, non imitative codes. What may at first glance appear to be a lack of ability to depict realistically is instead a form of complex communication, carrying multiple levels of meaning –a synthesis of the values and knowledge of an era [Pastoureau 2012]. Realism, understood as visual resemblance between sign and object, is only one of many possible methods of representation and necessarily implies the adoption of a conventional system that enables isomorphism. The semiotic relationships between an object and its depiction are broader, encompassing the cultural codes at play in the identification of the graphic sign [Groupe μ 2007].
Likewise, clear connections exist between the scientific conception of space, representation techniques, and the

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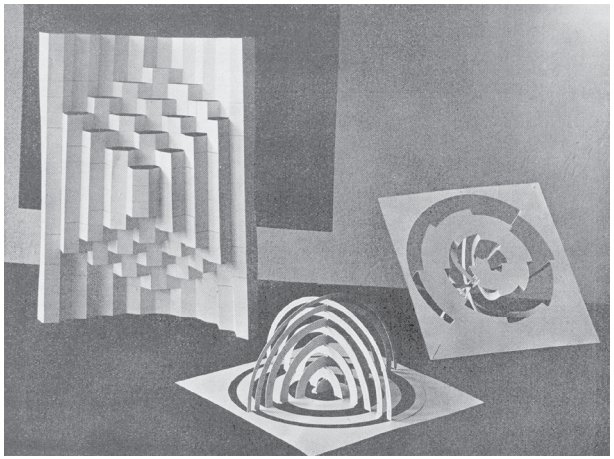


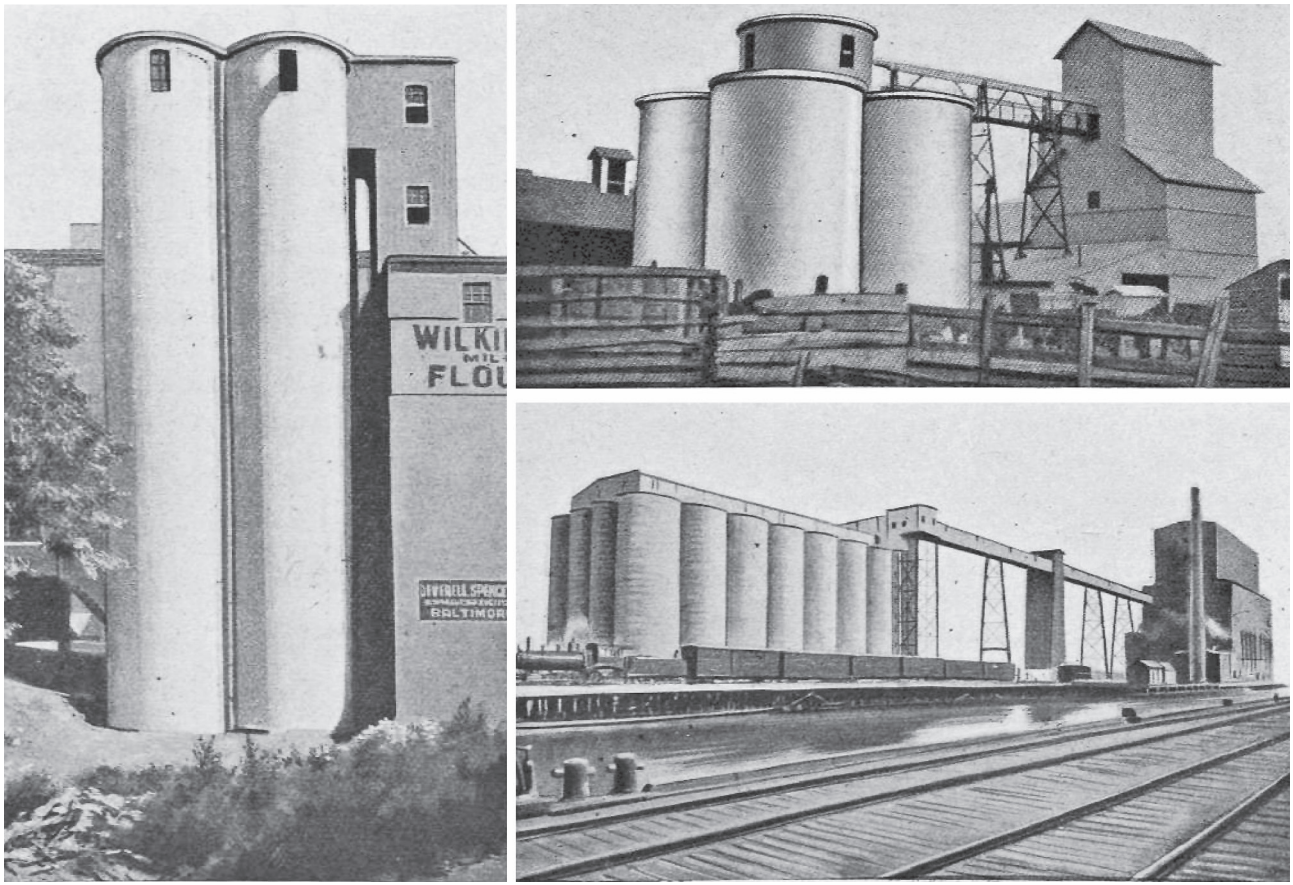
Fig. 1. Exercises in resistance and construction without cutting, made with paper. From Bauhaus, no. 2-3, 1928, p. 5.

material form of architecture across different eras [Francastel 1957]. The most emblematic and well-known examples include the relationship between the Ptolemaic universe, perspective, and humanist architecture; or between Cartesian space, Monge's projective system, and the progressive emergence of an a-perspectival and increasingly abstract and analytical architecture [Panofsky 1961].
Alongside the philosophical framework underpinning spatial culture, the adopted graphic technique plays a crucial role in visual communication, influenced by the tools available. These techniques are themselves shaped by contemporary artistic experimentation, which inevitably permeates the architect's graphic language, even though it pursues different communicative objectives.
The following notes refer to a specific historical moment in which the hybridization of art, thought, and technique takes on particular significance, diverging from traditional modes of representation and laying the foundations of contemporary visual culture.

The innovation of modern graphic language

The period between the 1920s and the 1940s marks a turning point in the field of project representation and communication, seeking tools capable of expressing not only the new forms but above all the new idea of modern architecture. The transformations that led to the birth of modern visual culture were fuelled by the avant-gardes, initially artistic and then architectural, and developed over a relatively short and intense time span [Benevolo 2002].
The ideological ferment of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes encompassed all cultural fields –from literature to art to music– committed to renewing artistic language by breaking with tradition. The fields of art, architecture, design, graphic, and typographic research influenced each other or merged, as in the celebrated Bauhaus school, giving rise to intriguing experiments that fused craft culture with modern industrial technology (fig. 1). The forms produced were not merely works, objects, or spaces, but expressions of a thought system and a new understanding of the artist's role in society. "The architecture of the modern age can be seen as the symbolic representation of ideological and

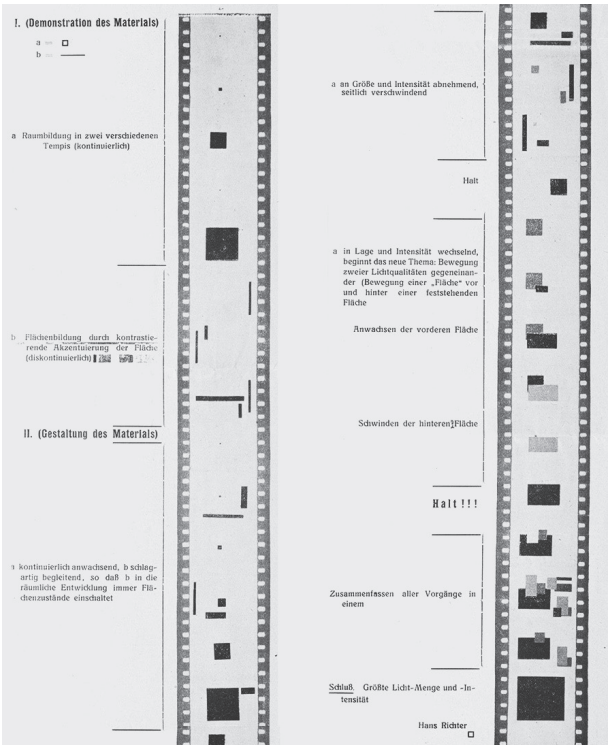
Fig. 2. Photographs of American silos accompanying Le Corbusier's article titled Trois rappels à MM. les Architectes. From L'Esprit Nouveau, no. 1, 1920.



political changes, to a degree hardly found in other periods or cultures. Ideas created buildings; ideas destroyed them" [Frampton 1986, p. X].
Precisely because it is an expression of an ideology, the modern architectural project cannot be observed solely through its material expression; the way it is represented and communicated becomes equally important, both to the small circle involved in the debate and to the broader public to whom it is addressed. From this perspective, numerous innovations emerge, driven also by the availability of new tools and techniques for communication and printing.
First among these is photography, which, although experimented with by architects during the 19th century, assumed an important role in project representation during this period, also as a working tool. Frank Lloyd Wright, for example, rearranged the furniture in his house and studio to photograph different configurations and discuss the images with colleagues.
Le Corbusier, with his *Oeuvre complète*, was the first architect to create a reasoned catalogue of his work using photography with the explicit aim of promoting his projects and ideals [Fanelli 2009]. Furthermore, he used photography as a base for graphic reworking that highlighted specific elements, and as a tool to disseminate his ideas and architecture, even employing retouching to reinforce the demonstrative impact of his arguments.
His unconventional approach to printed pages led him to reuse everyday images in Esprit Nouveau: extracted from industrial catalogues, advertisements, newspapers, art books, and science books. Any image that visually attracted him was decontextualized and reproduced to illustrate his ideas, even without a direct or obvious connection, and without a hierarchical division of illustrative material by genre or style.
The visual language he adopted drew heavily on the emerging mass communication culture and made significant use of recent developments in advertising techniques, where maximum impact was achieved through striking visual material. Just like in advertising, images did not serve to illustrate the text but to create associations of ideas through their juxtaposition, capturing the viewer's attention and lodging in memory.
One of the most famous examples of image reuse is that of the American silos (fig. 2), featured in an article published by Walter Gropius in the *Werkbund Jahrbuch* of 1913 [Fabre 1982]. This operation went beyond

Fig. 3. Mies van der Rohe, photomontage of the glass skyscraper project on Friedrichstraße, 1921. From Bauhaus Archive, Berlin.

Fig. 4. Hans Richter, frames from an abstract film. From G, no. 1, 1923, pp. 2, 3. Original frames arranged in a single column, re-laid out by the author.



the simple circulation of images –common among the avant-garde– of objects that few architects had actually seen firsthand. The silos images were presented entirely isolated from their surrounding context because the interest was solely in illustrating the visual concept discussed in the article: the beauty of pure forms in architecture –cubes, spheres, cylinders, cones, pyramids– as primary shapes revealed in their purity and plasticity by light.

More broadly, it has been observed that the Modern Movement was the first in the history of art to rely on the circulation of photographic images rather than on direct personal experience or surveys [Banham 1986].

The step from using photography for architectural representation to its hybridization with drawing was short. The first 'photo-perspective' –the superimposition of a perspective drawing onto a photograph of the context following "a procedure that draws from photography every valid suggestion to make the image compatible with visual perception" [Stockel 2007, p. 228]– dates to 1910. That year, the competition announcement for the Bismarck Monument on Elisenhöhe hill explicitly required competitors to present perspective drawings inserted onto photographs provided by the committee.

In the artistic field, the technique of *collage* –composing fragments of images into a communicative synthesis where the individual elements acquire new meanings through their recombination– emerged shortly afterward. The first example is Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), a *collage* combining oil paint, oilcloth, paper, and rope on canvas, where various elements from everyday life are recombined into a visual synthesis that grants new meaning to the pictorial space [Poggi 1992]. The difference between photomontage (in all its variants) and *collage* lies in the formal coherence and plausibility of the final product [Waldman 1992].

In 1921, Mies van der Rohe entered a competition with his project for a glass skyscraper on Friedrichstraße in Berlin (fig. 3). His intention was to interpret glass as a reflective surface that would vary under the effects of light. Since the building was to be constructed on a triangular plot, Mies opted for a prismatic shape with a slight angling of the front surfaces to accentuate the play of reflections. His design considerations were expressed through the drawings created to present the project, at

Fig. 5. Bauhaus-film dedicated to Marcel Breuer's chair. From Bauhaus, no. 1, 1926.

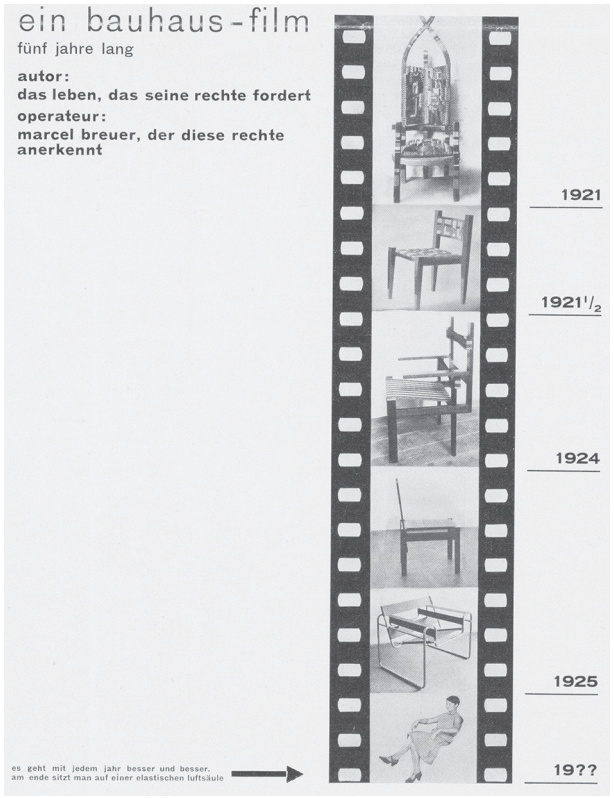
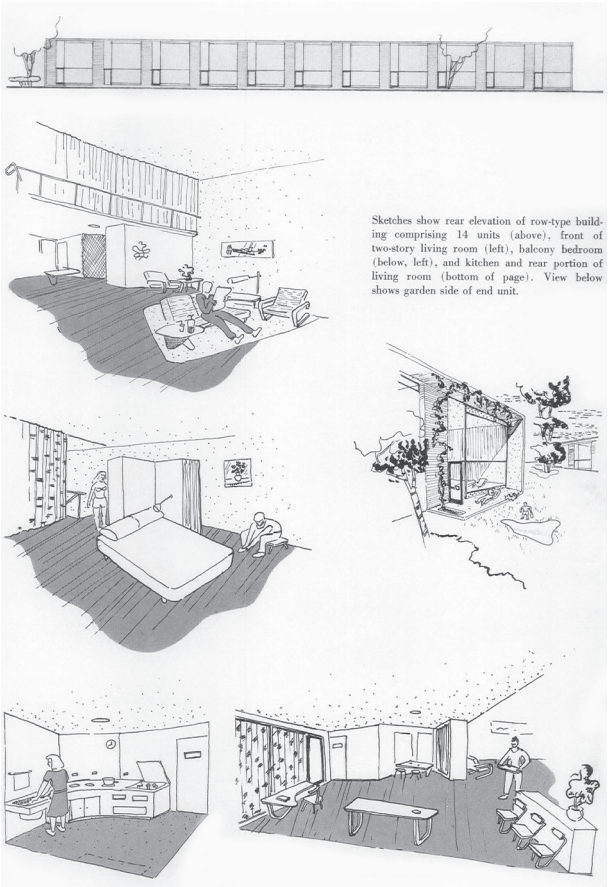
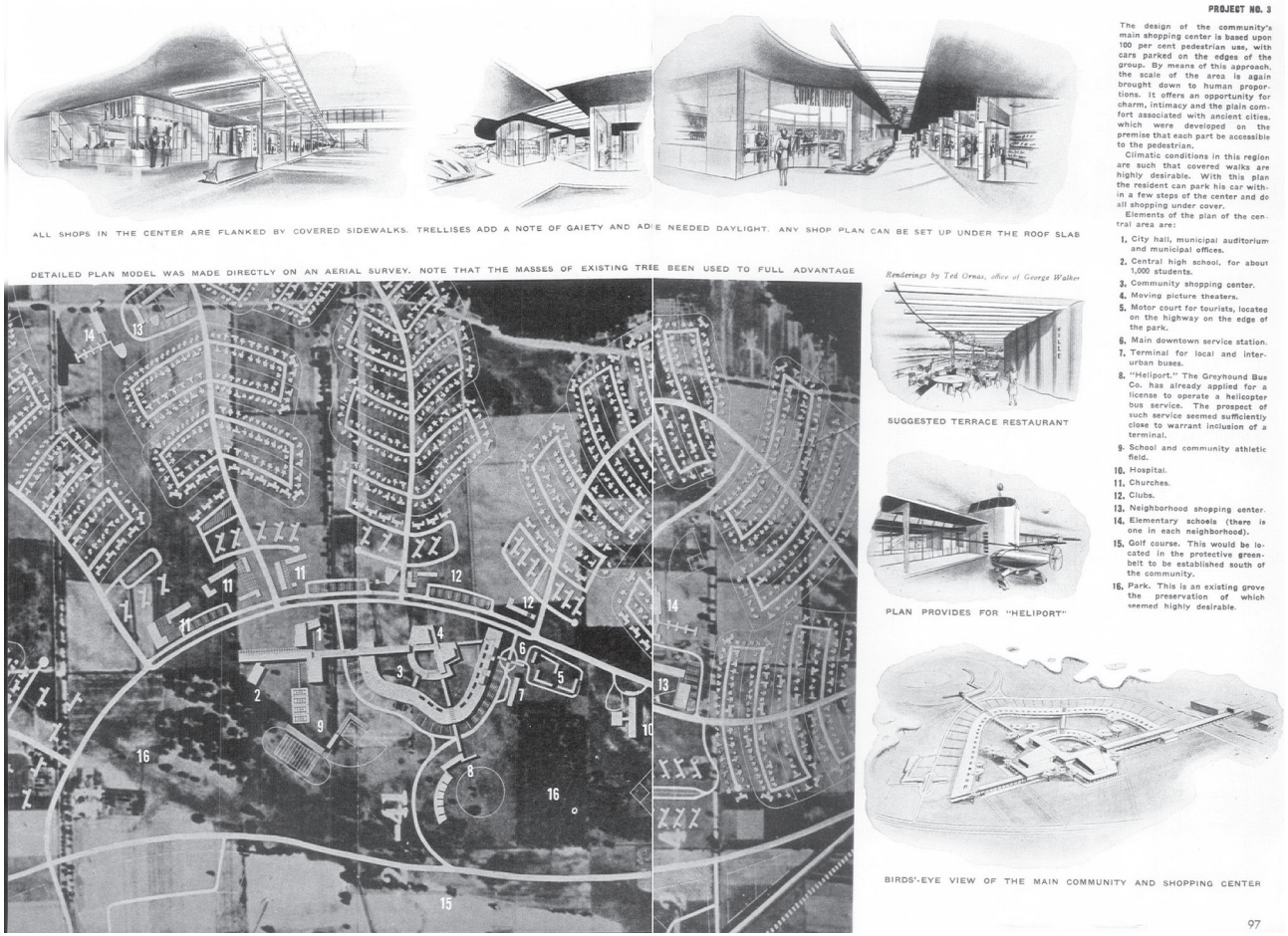


Fig. 6. Joseph Amisano, Row Type Apartments, project presentation sketches. From The Architectural Forum, September 1942.



a time when he did not yet have the appropriate technologies to produce these effects in built form.
Through photomontage, he created a complex image, alternating light and shadow, as if the luminous crystal building were illuminating the darkness of the metropolis [Mertins 2010]. In the photograph, the street appears dark and almost deserted, save for a few silhouetted figures enveloped in shadow. In the background to the right, the skyscraper is shown as a luminous and soaring form, perfectly integrated into the perspective construction, yet completely decontextualized from the surrounding buildings –as if to emphasize the distance between past and modern architecture. The realistic execution of the perspective representation allowed him to use photomontage to insert the work into the context, giving the illusion that it had been actually built. The skyscraper's position in the background made the lack of fine detail believable. The vertical volumes are clearly defined in their size and spatial arrangement, subdivided into horizontal bands, and the presence of glass is suggested by the transparency effect.
During this period, many buildings were conceived only to be experienced on paper, and perhaps precisely because of the expressive freedom this allowed, they were perceived as the new paradigm of Modern architecture. The circulation of ideas was made possible through an intense relationship with the media: magazines, exhibitions, competitions, expos, all conceived as moments of image dissemination. "The history of the avant-garde in art, in architecture, in literature can't be separated from the history of its engagement with the media. And it is not just because the avant-garde used media to publicize their work. The work simply didn't exist before its publication" [Colomina 2012, p. 199].
This was not just a functional use for promotional purposes. For the first time, each medium contributed to defining a new language through which to enrich communication. One example is the first experiences with film, used by avant-garde figures to help define the new visual code of modern architecture. The research of German painter and filmmaker Hans Richter on the development of an abstract film (fig. 4) was directly related to Theo van Doesburg's architectural compositions in his program to search for elemental form. Film, as an art form based on time and movement, was conceived as a paradigm for other art and creative forms [Bury 2009].
The Bauhaus also showed interest in the nascent technique of cinema, through its namesake magazine, as a communication tool capable of conveying a message across time and space. The *Bauhaus-film* (fig. 5) was authored by life itself: through a sequence of frames, it narrates the transformation of the chair by Marcel Breuer, showing examples from 1921 to the famous Wassily Chair designed in 1925, with the innovative use of steel tubing. The final frame of the sequence points toward future developments with a model of an invisible chair to take shape in an indefinite future date: "19??" [Breuer 1926, p. 3].
The early 1940s marked a transitional phase from architectural culture to planning culture. Many ideas from the Modern Architectural Movement were transferred into the context of urban planning, through which architects began to envision the postwar city. For many avant-garde designers, the projects took on a visionary character, and the modes of representation shifted once again, adopting a style closer to image-based storytelling. "Where a traditional painting represents through visual means, and architecture through visual and spatial means, planning represents its object, the city, through a complex omnibus of images, maps, charts, texts and publicity (which may itself represent the plan, becoming a representation of a representation of an intended object, the city, or of a process)" [Shanken 2009, p. 17].
At the architectural scale, graphic language evolved from descriptive to narrative, with drawings reminiscent of comic book style, developing a story through multiple images in sequence, often accompanied by handwritten notes. These were small axonometric, or perspective views populated by characters who took visual precedence over the environment, almost to emphasize the importance of spatial experience in shaping architectural form (fig. 6). The drawings were simplified, using only a few essential lines to convey spatial ideas. Photographs and drawings interacted in a tightly reciprocal relationship, each image adding a layer of meaning to the overall narrative.
At the urban scale, drawing and photography hybridized and complemented each other through photomontage techniques, showing aerial views of city portions where new building designs were inserted (fig. 7). These works were no longer presented in isolation; instead, various visual languages contributed to the transmission of

Fig. 7. Project for a satellite city in the Detroit area. FromThe Architectural Forum, October 1943.

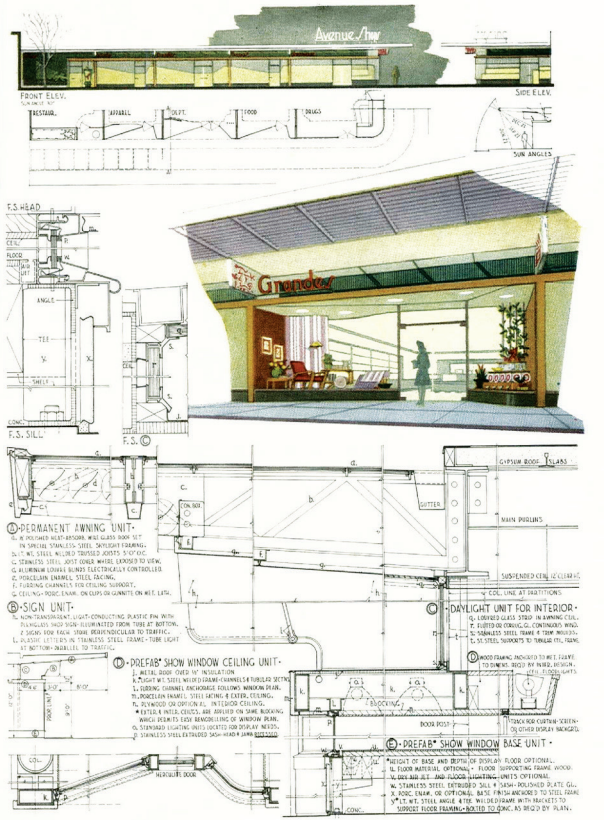


information: fragments of photographs, drawings, charts, textual notes. Communication became richer and more dynamic, suited to different levels of reading by people interested in diverse aspects of design, and understandable even to those without specific training in drawing interpretation. The result seemed intended to engage not only professionals, but a broader public with visually appealing and accessible graphics [Piscitelli 2024]. By the early 1940s, all the elements of the new visual language of modern architectural avant-gardes –experimented with since the 1920s– were fully integrated into the international graphic language (fig. 8). In particular, the shift had occurred from simple project representation to its narration through the integrated use of all expressive means available.

Conclusion

The visual language of the early twentieth century renewed previous modes of representation through the hybridization of various graphic techniques, incorporating technical, design, and compositional data that underpinned it. The representation of the architectural project progressively evolved toward greater clarity in the presentation of graphic materials –often accompanied by written notes– through the visual synthesis of multiple communicative elements (text, drawing, photography), assuming the freer, more dynamic, and engaging traits of image-based storytelling.
World War II stripped Europe of the leading role it had held during the avant-garde period in fostering new forms of expression in art and architecture. The United States, by contrast, drew new vitality from the wartime period to envision the postwar city. The centre of research and renewal thus shifted from Paris to New York, and America assumed the central role that a socially and culturally exhausted Europe could no longer fulfill. Nevertheless, postwar design continued to draw upon the circulation of ideas developed in Europe in earlier decades. The post-World War II era opened the way for new graphic experimentation, which in the 1960s led to a second phase of strong innovation in visual language. However, the experiments of the Modern Movement remain a fundamental point of reference in the development of representational culture.

Fig. 8. William H. Scheick, project for the Store Fronts of Tomorrow design competition, awarded honourable mention. From The New Pencil Points, February 1943.



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