
RECEPTION AGAIN, OR AGAINST RECEPTION? ON THE ROLE OF THE CIRCULATION OF IMAGES AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN: ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MONUMENTAL URBAN LANDSCAPES BETWEEN MODERNITY AND RECONSTRUCTION¹

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KEY-WORDS

Architectural drawing, graphic reconstruction, monumental architecture, modern reception, ziqqurrat, modernism, expressionist architecture

PALABRAS CLAVE

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ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that Mesopotamian architectural forms have had a deep impact on the urban development plans for contemporary cities like New York in the 1920s as well as on modern visual and architectural culture in the West. How much of this alleged impact is in reality based on “reconstructed” or “imagined” ancient architectural forms? And how much of these monuments “reconstructed” on paper by archaeologists and architects was in reality influenced by their own knowledge of modern and contemporary architecture and urban development?

This article explores if and how twentieth-century architecture was influenced by the drawings of the pioneers of archaeology and, inversely, how much twentieth-century architecture affected these archaeological drawings and their influence on the academic interpretation of ancient Mesopotamian architecture.

RESUMEN

Frecuentemente se asume que las formas arquitectónicas mesopotámicas han tenido un gran impacto en los planes de desarrollo urbanístico de ciudades como Nueva York en los años veinte o en la arquitectura visual moderna en Occidente. ¿Cuánto de este supuesto impacto se basa en realidad en formas arquitectónicas antiguas “reconstruidas” o “imaginadas”? ¿Y cuánto de estos monumentos “reconstruidos” en papel por arqueólogos y arquitectos fue influenciado en realidad por su propio conocimiento de la arquitectura moderna y contemporánea y el desarrollo urbanístico?

Este artículo explora si y cómo la arquitectura del siglo XX fue influenciada por los dibujos de los pioneros de la arqueología e, inversamente, cuánto afectó la arquitectura del siglo XX a estos dibujos arqueológicos y su influencia en la interpretación académica de la antigua arquitectura mesopotámica.

Ancient Near Eastern studies have been augmented, in the past decades, by an ever increasing interest in the history of the discipline. This reflects a trend, perhaps even a necessity, of the scientific community to reconstruct, in a moment of introspection, the historical roots of the discipline and to clarify past and/or future motivations and purposes, particularly in the light of the political and ideological dimensions of archaeological research in the Near East. The introspective, self-referential nature of this trend within ancient Near Eastern studies is to some extent conditioned by the fact that the majority of the authors contributing to this line of research are scholars whose primary field of study is

¹ The present contribution is partially based on the text published by the Fundació Joan Miró (Barcelona) on the occasion of the exhibition *Sumer and the Modern Paradigm* in November 2017 (<https://www.fmirobcn.org/blog/en/2017/11/30/the-fate-of-mesopotamian-architecture-in-the-spiral-of-image-reproduction/>).

ancient Near Eastern languages, archaeology, art or history.² Even though comprehensible and in line with similar trends in other similar fields of research, this factor has led to a “vicious circle”.

Concerning in particular architecture, art and visual culture, the sources used for the history of their interpretation have been usually confined to the limits of the discipline. As a consequence, the diverse competences and intellectual backgrounds (beyond the ancient Near East) of the authors of modern interpretations of the past is often ignored; similarly, these diverse backgrounds are ignored whenever, in modern and contemporary contexts, anything that seems to recall the ancient Near East is examined in regard to the idea of its modern reception. Thus, it seems that every *lamassu* has been uncritically interpreted as “obviously” a clue for the reception of ancient Assyrian art. This concept has been used too often in the simplistic practice of “associating” forms and images belonging to distant cultures without any historically- and culturally-based explanation of the modern adoption of ancient motives.

This systemic flaw, by which some misleading interpretations still affect the methodological approaches to the reconstruction of the ancient Near Eastern architecture, has been already highlighted especially in relation to an alleged Orientalism in European, and especially, Italian art and architecture (Micale 2010). According to the same methodological approach, however, a sort of “countercurrent” Orientalism seems to have arrived in the modern Middle East as an effect of the circulation of images and models first designed in Europe for very different purposes (Micale 2013 and 2018). Whereas these studies have already recognized the role of the circulation of archaeological drawings and reconstructions of the ancient Near Eastern architecture in the creation of modern “Oriental” architectural motives and shapes in Europe beyond “reception”, conversely the role of modern and contemporary architecture in the reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern architecture remains still under-investigated and, as a consequence, underestimated especially in the light of the power of these reconstructions to determine the fate of subsequent scientific interpretations and reconstructions.

Before the archaeological exploration of the ancient Near East at the beginning of the 19th century under the direction of the pioneers of Near Eastern archaeology on behalf of European museums and institutions, no significant architectural remains from ancient Assyria and Babylonia were known. Their history was in fact only partially known and that knowledge came *via* the mediation of biblical and classical textual sources (i.e. Herodotus), where famous descriptions often served as the foundation for the fantastic

² Within the vast literature concerning, on the one hand, the historical and political backgrounds of archaeological expeditions to countries located around the Mediterranean and in the Near East and, on the other hand, the impact in return on several aspects of Western culture, one might single out the studies of S. Marchand (1996, 2009). These publications are certainly among the richest contributions by a non-archaeologist to the history of archaeology. On German studies of the Orient, see also Haerke 1991; Trigger (1989) touched only briefly the modern study of the ancient Orient. A perspective restricted to French and English protagonists of the first archaeological discoveries of ancient Assyria, largely embedded within the context of European diplomacy in the Middle East, is expressed in the work of M.T. Larsen (1996). For a comprehensive account on Nationalism and archaeological research, see Diaz-Andreu 2007. A fundamental instrument of comprehension edited and written mostly by archaeologists is Pollock and Bernbeck 2005. Concerning visual culture, and mostly in the wake of Said’s Orientalism, are the works of F. Bohrer (1998 and 2003), which still represents one of the most exhaustive treatments of the images of the Orient as vehicle of multi-layered cultural meanings. For a synthesis of these approaches in light of archaeological research on Assyrian architecture, including political and economic implications, see Micale (2005 and 2008a). For a first attempt to discuss the cultural and historical bases of the use of “oriental” and more specific “Mesopotamian” architectural features, see Micale 2010, 2013 and 2018. A major collection of contributions on different aspects of the relationship between Near Eastern studies, Bible and Orientalism is edited by S. Holloway (2006). For an overarching perspective, see also the recent three volumes by McGeough 2015.

images of famous Mesopotamian lost cities created by European artists well before any actual discovery.

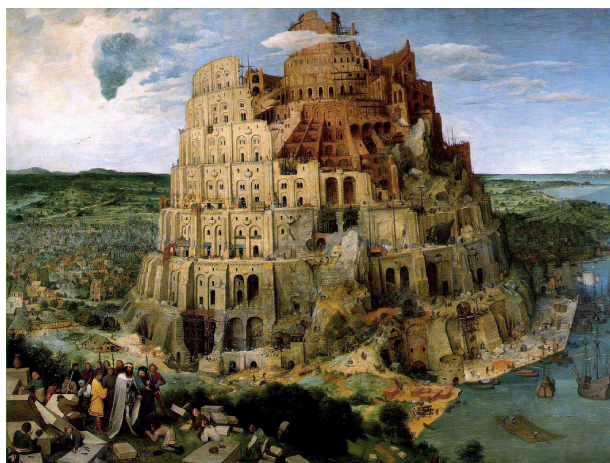


Fig. 1. Pieter Brueghel the Elder, The Tower of Babel, 1563 (Wikimedia Commons <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Brueghel-tower-of-babel.jpg>)

In theory, the material discovery of ancient Mesopotamia should have bridged the gap between imagination and reality, at least concerning their architectural culture. However, a closer examination of the question reveals that this logical expectation has not been fulfilled, and that the reconstructed image of ancient Near Eastern architecture was not reconstructed on the basis of archaeological research even in some allegedly scientific publications (for more on this see Micale 2005 and 2008a).

Scholars in recent years have opened a discussion on concepts such as artistic reception and cultural memory. However, the power of architectural images to embody different cultural meanings through similar formal features is still under-evaluated, thus creating, as already anticipated, a misinterpretation of the visual sources at the base of architectural forms and as a consequence of their possible meanings.

It is important to emphasize, in fact, that the connection between Mesopotamian architecture and modernity was mediated by the drawings diffused within the first publications of Assyrian and Babylonian discoveries.



Fig. 2. Victor Place - Félix Thomas, “Palais. Ensemble de la porte Z. du harem”, Ninive et l’Assyrie, 1867-1870 (General Research Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f682-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>)

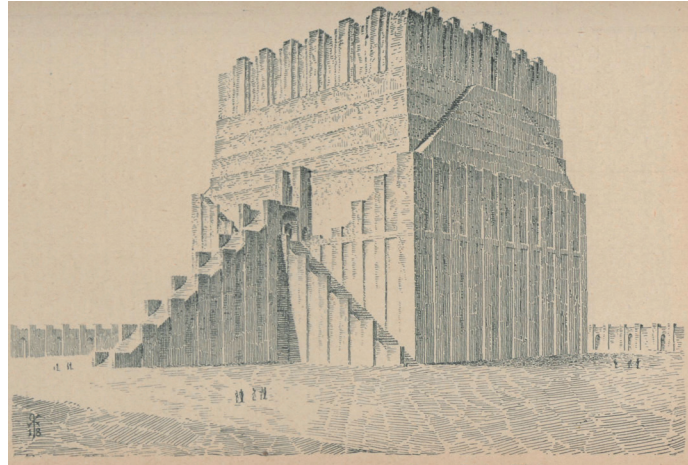


Fig. 3. Robert Koldewey, Etemenanki, Babylon, 1918 (Koldewey 1918: 33, Abb. 8).

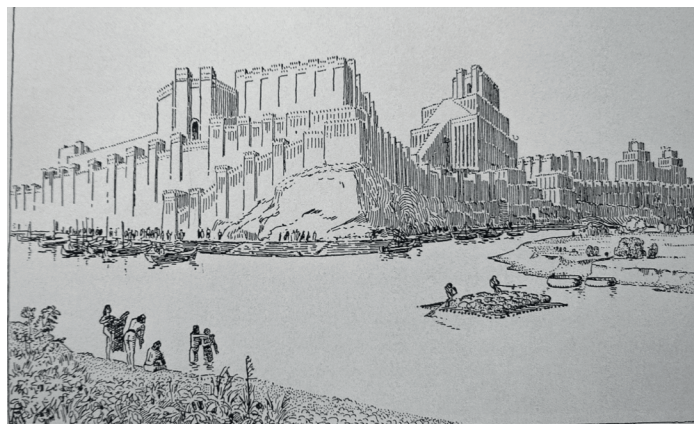


Fig. 4. Walter Andrae, view of Assur from north-east, 1937 (Andrae 1977: 54, Abb. 37)

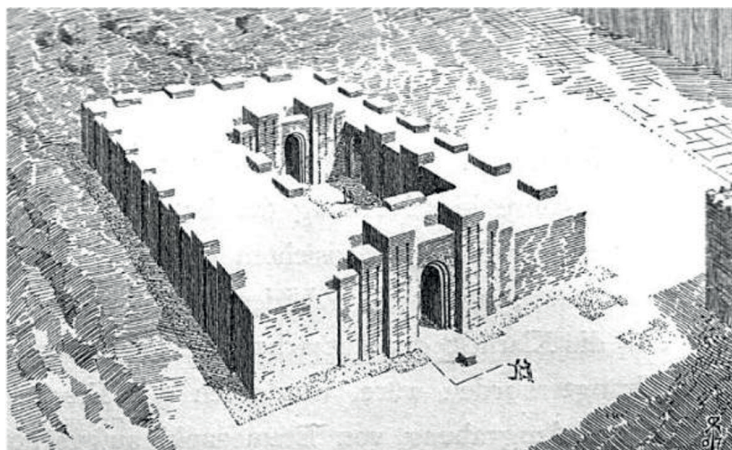


Fig. 5 Robert Koldewey, Emakh, 1907 (Koldewey 1911: 4, Abb. 1)

These architectural (re-)constructions, designed as integral part of the archaeological publications, had an impact not only on the history of the scientific interpretation of ancient architecture, but also on the construction of modern architectural designs and occasionally in the reconstruction of real or alleged traditions.



Fig. 6. Chaldean Church, Aleppo, Syria, 2007 (Photo: Author)

However, the importance of these drawings reconstructing ancient Mesopotamian architecture lies also in the fact that they clearly functioned as vehicles for ancient architecture to enter into modern design, thus creating a powerful spiral of images (but not necessarily of cultural meanings) through time.

A number of more or less contemporary (and more or less famous) projects show how diffused the Mesopotamian temple-tower/ziggurat or “Mesopotamian-style” cubic volumes were in European modern building design, regardless of the artistic movement to which their authors belonged.



Fig. 7. Hans Peolzig, Firma Gebr. Mayer, Hannover-Vinnhorst. Lagerschuppen, 1923-1924 (Architekturmuseum Technische Universität Berlin, Inv. Num. 3004, <https://architekturmuseum.tu-berlin.de/P/118737.php>)

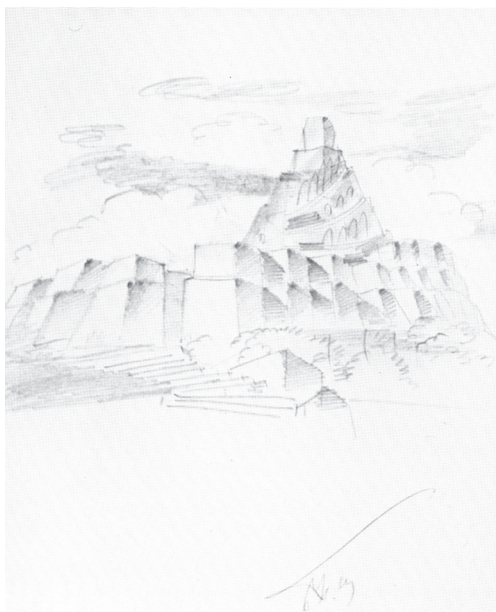


Fig. 8. Sigismund Vladislavovich Dombrovski, Meeting Place of the Peoples, 1919 (Courtesy: Wolfgang Pehnt).

It is difficult to detect the assumption of the single choices of these formal volumetric expressions, but certainly it has often nothing to do with a deliberate and culturally motivated reception of Mesopotamian motives. Hugh Ferriss explains concerning the American urban regulation of those years: “The building rises vertically on its lot lines only so far as is allowed by law [...]. Above this it slopes inward at specified angles [...]. A tower rises, as is permitted, to unlimited height, being in area not over the fourth the area of the property [...]. The mass thus delineated is not an architect’s design: it is simply a form which results from legal specifications.” And further: “The ancient Assyrian ziqqurrat is an excellent embodiment of the modern New York legal restriction: may we not for a moment imagine an array of modern *ziggurrats*, providing restaurants and theaters on their ascending levels?” (Ferriss 1929: 74, 98)



Fig. 9. Hugh Ferriss (?), *Modern Ziqqurat* (Ferris 1929: 99)

An explicit correspondence between the ancient religious function of a *ziqurrat* and modern monumental buildings evoking an ancient tower, for example, is missing. The project of a Soldiers’ Memorial Church by Boehm in Goettingen 1923 seems to be an exception if considered in the panorama of a religious architecture generally dominated by classical or Gothic models,



Fig. 10. Dominikus Böhm, Soldiers' Memorial Church, Goettingen 1923 (Courtesy: Wolfgang Pehnt)

but it is not alone in the panorama of the German expressionist architecture of those years, when towers, projecting facades, and cubic volumes apparently recall or are inspired by the image of Mesopotamian architecture diffused in Germany in those decades. The drawing of the stepped tower by Wenzel Hablik (1914/1921)



Fig. 11. Wenzel Hablik, Cyklus Ausstellung-Bauten. "Würfel", Variante 3, A 11, 1914/1921 (Prange 2000: 100, Abb. 108)

is a clear example of what, in reality, was, in the intention of expressionist architects, the intellectual and artistic relation between architectural form, function and meaning: i.e. the reproduction of the crystalline mountain peak and the visualization of architecture as "second nature" (Prange 2000: 98). The conceptual and formal association between architecture and natural forms (mountains) was already forcefully expressed in 1919 by architect Bruno Taut in his famous map "alpine Architektur" (Adam 1995) and mirrored –though without Taut's explicit reference to a Nietzschean ideal connection between

art, architecture and nature – in the formal association of volumetric spaces made by Hugh Ferriss in the frontispiece drawing “Building like Mountains” of his *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (Ferriss 1929).³ Further, the design submitted by Hans Poelzig for a competition for the German-Turkish House of Friendship in Istanbul (1916)



Fig. 12. Hans Poelzig, *Haus der Freundschaft, Istanbul, 1916* (Architekturmuseum Technische Universität Berlin, Inv. Num. 2727, <https://architekturmuseum.ub.tu-berlin.de/P/97683.php>)

has been interpreted by an anonymous author of *The Architectural Review* (2015) as an “orientalising ziggurat”, even though there is no reason to assume that Poelzig in 1916 used any form of Mesopotamian monuments. Many of the prominent early modernist architects in Germany participated in this competition, but none of them won the competition. A few of the same German architects would later come back to build important public buildings in republican Turkey (Bozdoğan 2001: 47).

It is precisely in some of Bruno Taut’s buildings dating some decades later, in a completely different intellectual and cultural environment in both Europe and the Middle East, where, on the contrary, a clear reference to Mesopotamian culture can be assumed. In the period between the two World Wars Walter Andrae, the excavator of Ashur and director of what is today the *Vorderasiatisches Museum* in Berlin, was struggling to give a proper location to the findings and the architectural remains from Ashur and Babylon brought to light decades before (meaning that the “promotion” of Mesopotamian antiquities was

³ Fantastic drawings and archaeological reconstructions of ancient Mesopotamian and especially Babylonian monuments, including ziqurrats and temple-towers, were already known thanks to scientific and popular publications as well as to the use of Assyrian motives in public events, such as the construction of the Assyrian Court designed for the Crystal Palace in 1854. However, not every use of Mesopotamian images and motives can be labeled as “reception”, as the early 20th century design of city monumental towers demonstrates. Nevertheless a central role in the diffusion of Mesopotamian alleged architectural motives in European art must be assigned to the Crystal Palace. For the direct involvement of Layard and Fergusson in this temporary though influential building, see Micale 2007: fn. 17 and Micale 2018: fn. 7. On the drawings and the first hypothesis of integration of the ruins of the ziqurrats see Micale 2008b. It is also worth noticing the personal contribution of Walter Andrae to the diffusion of the exotic image of ancient Assyria; Andrae was assistant architect/draftsman of Robert Koldewey in Babylon first (for the story of the employment of Andrae in the Babylon expedition, see Micale in press, fn. 22), and then director of the excavations of Assur. Andrae’s work was basically sustained by Wilhelm II and his *Orientpolitik* (Micale 2005: 149; 2008a: 196–197); of particular relevance is the fact that he designed the scenography of the historical pantomime Sardanapal performed in 1908 (for the historical and cultural background of this event see Micale 2005: 150; Micale 2008a: 197; also Bohrer 2003: 300). For the primary source for original Andrae’s drawings see Andrae and Boehmer (1992: 21, 125). On the “reception” of Babylon, see the exhaustive Marzahn and Schauerte (eds) 2008. An extensive research based on the hypothesis of an extensive reception of architectural Mesopotamian motives has been conducted by B. Pedde; within her vast literature on the argument, see especially Pedde 2010, 2013, 2015, 2018.

not concluded yet). During this period another image of Mesopotamia was also making his way into the public's eye, *via* both art and architecture: Sumer. Some monumental projects of modern Turkey designed by Bruno Taut during his period in the country dated to the 1930s (and comparable to other similar projects by Turkish architects in 1940s)⁴, for example, could not be interpreted only as a conformation to modernism.



Fig. 13. Bruno Taut, the 1938 Izmir International Fair. The Ministry of Education's "Culture Pavilion" (Orel and Çeçen 1939: 202)

Even though no Mesopotamian tradition could be claimed in Turkey, the reference to the *ziqqurrat* may have been connected to the idea of a racial/linguistic relation between Turks and ancient Sumerians diffused starting from the 1920s among some intellectuals. It is clear how, in these examples, architecture enters the public space and creates visual links that aim at a public recognition of formal features and meanings from Mesopotamia – whether these links are based on substantial cultural ties or not.⁵

Was the fragmentary materiality of Mesopotamian architecture brought to light by archaeology the source of the tower-shaped projects in both Europe and Turkey? Or were perhaps the archaeological drawings, diffused in the scientific publications in order to explain and support the diverse hypothesis of reconstruction, the inspiration for these buildings? In either case, the image is perceived and used as if it was the reality, while the architectural forms that this image conveys have the power to embody different meanings in different contexts.

But most important, how much of modern and contemporary architecture draws on these archaeological drawings? And how much within these drawings actually derives from the individual visual culture or educational background of the archaeologists and architects reconstructing ancient architecture? The majority of Robert Koldewey's drawings seems to suggest his tacit conformation to the principles of the Rational School, while Walter Andrae, as student of Cornelius Gurlitt at the University of Dresden, seems to be influenced by some principles of the German *Jugendstil* and the compositional perspectives in vogue with the Gothic Revival in the 20s (Micale 2005 and in press) as well as by the expressionist architecture that was certainly very well known by Andrae in 1920's and 1930's, when he was designing the majority of his drawings reconstructing the ancient Mesopotamian capital cities of Ashur and Babylon.⁶ Architectural reconstructions of ancient Near Eastern architecture and urban contexts (not exclusively made by German archaeologists/architects) were heavily influenced by projects that were supposedly well known at the time when those reconstructions were made. Examples include the perspective reconstruction of the Citadel of Khorsabad (1938 ca.), which recalls both the *National Mall and memorial Parks* of Washington of the McMillan Commission (1901) and the *Plan for a City of Three Million People* by Le Corbusier (1922) (Micale 2018: 431, figs.

⁴ For all these projects, see Bozdoğan 2001: 144, fig. 3.22; 283, fig. 6.23; 288, fig. 6.28; 289, fig. 6.29. See also Bozkurt 2012.

⁵ For some references to these academic and intellectual currents of thought, see Pancarolu 2007: 74; Can Bilsel 2007: 225.

⁶ It should be mentioned here that Walter Andrae started teaching the History of Architecture and Architectural Drawing at the *Technische Hochschule* Charlottenburg (after 1946: *Technische Universität* Berlin) in 1922 (1922-1951), just one year before Hans Poelzig also started teaching at the same university as Professor for Structural Engineering (1923-1935).

3-5). A much more recent archaeological reconstruction inspired by a modern building may also be the perspective drawing of the Temple of Salomon by Theodor Busink (1970)

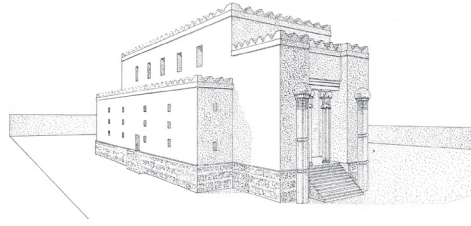


Fig. 14. Theodor A. Busink, the Temple of Salomon, 1970 ca. (Busink 1970, Tf. VII)

whose model may have been the famous Larkin Administration building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright (1906).



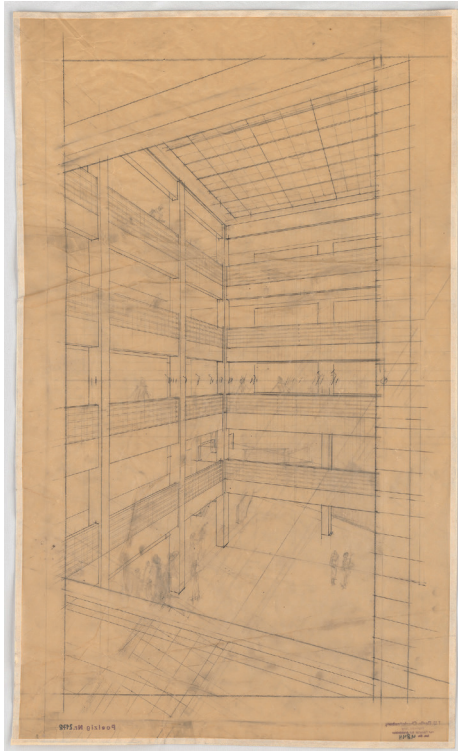
Fig. 15. Frank Lloyd Wright, Larkin Administration Building, Buffalo N.Y. 1906 (https://en.wikiarquitectura.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Edificio_Larkin_1-1024x796.jpg).

Interestingly the interiors of Wright's building



Fig. 16. Frank Lloyd Wright, Larkin Administration Building, interiors (https://en.wikiarquitectura.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Edificio_Larkin_2-569x1024.jpg).

seem to have also inspired the foyer of the Haus des Rundfunks of Berlin designed by Hans Peolzig (1928-30)



*Fig. 17. Hans Poelzig, Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1928-1930
(Architekturmuseum Technische Universität Berlin, Inv. Num. 4844, <https://architekturmuseum.ub.tu-berlin.de/P/117613.php>)*



*Fig. 18. Hans Poelzig, Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1928-1930
(Architekturmuseum Technische Universität Berlin, Inv. Num. 4921, <https://architekturmuseum.ub.tu-berlin.de/P/117690.php>)*

and the Synagogue of Plauen designed by Fritz Landauer, destroyed during the *Kristallnacht* (9th-10th November 1938);

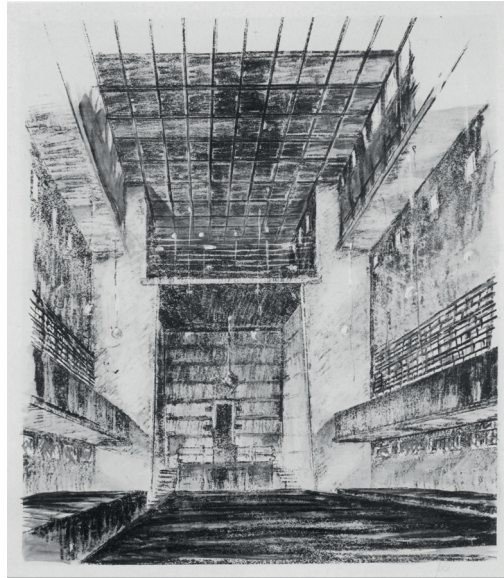


Fig. 19. Fritz Landauer, *Synagogue, Plauen, Germany*. 1928 ca. (Bingham 2012: 90).

these parallels, however, may only suggest that Wright's famous building may have served as a model for a wide range of modern designs as well as modern reconstructions of ancient buildings, albeit as a shape disconnected from meaning and function.

At the end of this short panorama one can say that contrary to figurative art, which establishes a direct relationship between the ancient and modern artists, ancient Mesopotamian architecture arrives to the modern world only *via* the mediation of its fragments' recomposition and interpretation by archaeologists and architects – a mediation which, however, is bi-directional since modern concepts of space and volumes deeply impact the archaeologist's way of interpreting and communicating ancient architecture. It is this binary relationship between ancient and modern that is the real key to understanding the creation of a repertoire of *prêt-à-porter* images of ancient Near Eastern architecture – images more and more divorced from the artistic, cultural and archaeological contexts – that, to the need, have the power to “orientalize” architecture in both East and West.

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