

Europe Meets America

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*William Lescaze,
Architect of Modern Housing*

By

Gaia Caramellino

Translated by Marella Feltrin-Morris

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Shall I then hope that sweet history sometimes will straighten out the record? Who else had done that time modern skyscraper? Where were Mies, Gropius, even Le Corbu, F. L. Wright, Neutra and the others then? Remember the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center have been designed about the same time of my PSFS. It is strange for when you look back and you see how much you have been ignored, how much silence has been built around you, how much the MoMA which owes me a debt, managed to hurt me, to ignore me. One wonders? When did it begin? I can't really say. It is difficult to put a finger on it and say: this is it. It's so silent, like fog. And it's been going now for years and years. Yes I still hope that sweet history will show that I created more than they acknowledge and that I did influence the current of modern architecture more than they are admitting today.

—William Lescaze, *Notes*, November 30, 1960. WLP.

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FOREWORD

BY JEAN-LOUIS COHEN

The deleterious effects of the New York Museum of Modern Art's ideological *modus operandi* have not ceased to be felt in the eighty-four years since the museum's opening in 1929. While carrying out its legitimate role in disseminating the visions of modern architects, the museum has also kept sending ambivalent messages, the truth of which has remained unquestioned thanks to the museum's reputation. This is what occurred to many historians and to those who visited the 15th exhibition, which the museum dedicated to modern architecture in 1932. The concomitant publication of *The International Style* quite distorted the message of the exhibition, pushing both the young architects who were then active in the United States, and the section dedicated by Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer to public housing, into the background.¹

This skewed portrait has already been revised for some time, first of all by the research groups associated to the museum on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the 1932 exhibition. Thanks to the museum's archives, Terence Riley was able to shed light on the various aspects surrounding the preparation for that exhibition, in a three-voice dialogue between the MoMA director, Alfred H. Barr, and the two organizers, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson.² A new generation of scholars, among whom Marc Dessauce, who came to an untimely death in 2002, later revealed the importance of the contributions that had been overlooked in the official narratives, primarily those of Richard Buckminster Fuller and his magazine *Shelter*, Knud Lonberg Holm, Albert Frey, and William Lescaze himself.³

¹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1932. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *Modern Architecture, International Exhibition*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932.

² Terence Riley, ed., *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Rizzoli, 1992.

³ Marc Dessauce, "Contro lo Stile Internazionale: *Shelter* e la stampa architettonica americana," in *Casabella* 604 (Sept. 1993): 46-53.

Gaia Caramellino's research gives a crucial contribution to the ongoing studies aimed at defining the many paths that brought about the modernization of American architecture, focusing on the exploration of the professional itinerary followed by Lescaze, a Swiss architect who studied at the École Polytechnique Fédérale of Zurich with two innovators such as the architect Karl Moser and the planner Hans Bernoulli. Caramellino's study shows that, despite its pioneering role, MoMA was not the only institution that sought to draw an American interpretation of the new architecture, and even of those elements that, during the Weimar Republic, would be identified with the *Neues Bauen*⁴.

There is now a better grasp of the variety and complexity of the European contribution, which can no longer be reduced to an echo of the works by the four main figures of the 1932 exhibition – Le Corbusier, Gropius, Oud, and Mies van der Rohe – who, on that occasion, were featured alongside Frank Lloyd Wright, Erich Mendelsohn, and André Lucrat. The reprinting of the articles published by George Nelson in 1935 has revealed that the North-American audience had a much wider knowledge of modern European architects.⁵

Indeed, Lescaze's milieu was teeming with professionals from the Old World – even before the German immigration, which marked a significant turn: Rudolf Maria Schindler and Richard Neutra in Los Angeles, Alfred Kastner and Oscar Stonorov in Philadelphia, and the French Jacques Carlu and Jean Labatut, who taught at MIT and Princeton, respectively, were anything but conservative.

The Philadelphia Savings and Loan Society building, designed by Lescaze and his then partner, George Howe, has long found its rightful place in architectural history, and is regarded as the first truly modern skyscraper. However, the core of Lescaze's works has by now come to bear particular relevance: a geographical relevance, with the inclusion of the projects for the Churston Estate and Dartington Hall in the UK. These projects, which Caramellino examines in her book, constitute a true discovery, since they begin to question the trite notion that England was always quite dismissive of modern architecture.⁶ And a typological relevance, with the many individual houses – albeit not examined in this

⁴ Up to that point, the only interpretation – hagiographical – had been by Lorraine Welling Lanmon, *William Lescaze, Architect* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, – London: Associated University Press, 1987).

⁵ George Nelson, *Building a New Europe: Portraits of Modern Architects. Essays by George Nelson, 1935-1936*, Foreword by Kurt W. Forster. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁶ Alan Powers, *Britain*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

book – and with Lescaze's theoretical works and projects in the field of public housing.

Lescaze was truly instrumental in what can be considered the shift from potential to action of the Housing Study Guild. This association had been lobbying since the 1920s for a public housing policy in New York, thanks to the efforts of Lewis Mumford, Henry Wright, Catherine Bauer, and Albert Mayer. At last some light is shed on Mayer's role, which was not limited to his participation in drafting Chandigarh's project in the 1940s.⁷

Actively involved in the political arena, Lescaze also played a fundamental role when the municipality of New York instituted the New York City Housing Authority, for which he designed the Williamsburg Housing Development. As Caramellino argues, Lescaze was fully involved in this project, which, inspired by the research conducted by Le Corbusier and the Frankfurt architects, attempted to find specific solutions to the problem of housing in New York City.⁸

Although Lescaze's private life is not the object of Caramellino's research, readers can still gain an insight into the main aspects of his personality: lucid and well aware of the social impact of his profession, Lescaze was nevertheless unable to hide his frustration at the public homage paid to his colleagues, who were more skilled than him at courting the media. In short, Lescaze represents a complex and fascinating figure worth rediscovering and reinstating in the narrative of the transatlantic elaboration of modern architecture, shedding light on many yet-unexplored aspects.

⁷ Thomai Serdari, *Albert Mayer, Architect and Town Planner: The Case for a Total Professional*, Ph.D. Dissertation. (New York: New York University, 2005).

⁸ For an overview of this topic, see Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHC	Citizens Housing Council
CHD	Churston Housing Development
DHTA	Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Dartington Hall, Totnes, England.
FHA	Federal Housing Authority
GHC	George Howe Collection, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Drawings and Archives Department, Columbia University, New York.
HSG	Housing Study Guild
HSGR	Housing Study Guild Records, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, C. Koch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
<i>MAIE</i>	<i>Modern Architecture International Exhibition</i> , exhibition and catalogue, Museum of Modern Art of New York, 1932
MoMAA	Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York
NYCHA	New York City Housing Authority
TNYCHAC	The New York City Housing Authority Collection, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, Fiorello H. La Guardia Community College, Long Island, New York.
<i>OBA</i>	<i>On Being An Architect</i> , W. Lescaze, Putnam and Sons, New York, 1942.
PWA	Public Works Administration
RAC	Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.
USHA	United States Housing Authority
WLP	William Lescaze Papers, Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Libraries.

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM LESCAZE AND THE HOUSING DISCOURSE

On February 27, 1932, the *New Yorker* published a rather scathing review of the famous and disputed *Modern Architecture. International Exhibition* inaugurated just a few days earlier at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It was penned by Lewis Mumford, who wrote: “Even here, the model for a series of low-rental apartment houses by Howe & Lescaze is much more convincing as pure architecture than their Philadelphia skyscraper.”¹ On the one hand, these words reveal Mumford’s harsh assessment of the misleading concept that animated the entire exhibition. On the other, they praise the only large-scale housing development included in a section entirely dedicated to architecture. The model of the project was featured along with others by the Swiss-American firm as examples of a controversial international modernity – mostly from Europe – presented in New York for the first time.

Only a few days earlier, on February 19, a symposium organized for the exhibition opening by MoMA director Alfred H. Barr initiated a dialogue among several renowned American professionals from diverse disciplines and intellectual backgrounds. The contributions by Lewis Mumford, Henry Wright, Raymond Hood, Harvey Wiley Corbett and George Howe, published in *Shelter* in the same year,² reflect the uniqueness of the New York professional climate in the early 1930s. Starting in 1929, the emerging debate on public housing paved the way for architects, social reformers, planners, administrative bodies, federal agencies and private institutions to engage in a broader discussion on the architects’ social responsibility and on the new architecture and its autonomy, precisely at a time – during the Depression Era – when

¹ Lewis Mumford, “Organic Architecture” (February 27, 1932), in Robert Wojtowicz, *Lewis Mumford. Sidewalk Critic* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000): 71.

² “Symposium: The International Architecture Exhibition” *Shelter* 2 (April 1932): 3-9.

hierarchies and institutional roles were being challenged.³ As part of the “housing fever” that marked the initial phase of Roosevelt’s New Deal programs in New York, in 1933 *The New Republic* published the article “New Deal Architecture,” one of the most influential writings by Swiss-American architect William Lescaze. Initially entitled “Modern Architecture for a Modern Nation,”⁴ this article illustrated the institutional viewpoints and the “official culture” of the New Deal on architecture – a field initially excluded from the government’s vision. It also examined the critical situation of a European professional who had inherited the rhetoric of the avant-garde and who was grappling with the new federal policies and with a local housing culture still dominated by the perspective of real estate promoters. These apparently unrelated events revealed instead the development of a broader professional scenario heavily characterized by a shift of public interest towards the rising debate on the “house for all,” as well as by a gradual – albeit slow – assimilation of European ideals by American professionals who were still unwilling to apply the values of the European modernity of the 1920s to the first federal public housing projects. Indeed, American professionals were still strongly tied to the tradition of the housing reform movement which had seen the light of day in New York City in the previous century, and continued to trust the outcomes of the debate inaugurated in the 1920s by local institutions such as the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) and the Russell Sage Foundation.⁵ In the course of fifteen years between the early 1930s and the end of World War II – considering Roosevelt’s death as marking the end of the New Deal –, New York became an ideal spot for the debate on low-cost housing, which developed through publications, exhibitions, symposia and competitions. This entire period is worth exploring in depth, even though the initial, more theoretical and experimental phase of the debate (1932-1934) is especially relevant. It is during these years that conflicting intellectual and institutional perspectives began to take shape: on the one hand, the new hierarchy of values and the cultural, “Europeanizing”

³ Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, “The Architect and the Depression,” *The Nation* (August 9, 1933): 152-154. See also Catherine Wurster Bauer, “The Social Front of Modern Architecture in the 1930s,” *JSAH* 24.1 (March 1965): 49.

⁴ William Lescaze, “New Deal Architecture,” *The New Republic* (July 26, 1933): 278-280. WLP.

⁵ On the situation in New York City during the 1920s, see Francesco Dal Co, “From Parks to the Region: Progressive Ideology and the Reform of the American City,” in Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri Elia, Manfredo Tafuri, *The American City. From the Civil War to the New Deal* (London: Granda Publishing, 1980): 231-260.

rhetoric promoted by the MoMA in New York; on the other, the diffident approach of the federal government, initially aligned with the American tradition of the “garden perimeter apartments plan” championed by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration. In the complex and ambiguous process of defining a local modernity, strongly diverging positions separated technocratic American professionals,⁶ “International Style” architects, and social reformers, who sought to delineate the features of the programs that the Federal Housing Authority would begin to sponsor in New York in 1934. Nevertheless, a new dialogue was being initiated among the representatives of the professional, academic and institutional world, based on the general theme of public housing and focused on delicate issues such as slum clearance, high-rise construction, model housing and receptiveness to a markedly European message.

The resulting scenario is as contradictory as it is surprising. In it, the separation between the various branches of technical culture and of professional roles becomes blurred, and the figure of the architect occasionally takes on the characteristics of an institutional technician, inaugurating a dialogue between professional categories and the bureaucratic apparatus, and revealing a new connection between architecture, politics and society that would last from the Depression through World War II.⁷ This scenario is effectively delineated by Henry Russell Hitchcock in his influential essay, “The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius,” published in *The Architectural Review* in 1947. Here, Hitchcock attempts to delineate the ambiguous relationship between two quite distant and undefined fields of expertise, which would find a new structure only after the end of the New Deal, with the radical turn brought about by the United States’ new economic, political and social role in the international scene.⁸

⁶ These figures revolved around “Structural Study Associates,” an organization founded by Richard Buckminster Fuller and Knud Lonberg-Holm, and *Shelter*, a magazine that started publications in 1930. See Marc Dessauce, “Contro lo Stile Internazionale: *Shelter* e la stampa architettonica americana,” *Casabella* 604 (September 1993): 46-53.

⁷ Alessandro De Magistris, “Burocrazie, strategie e apparati. Un'introduzione,” in Patrizia Bonifazio, Sergio Pace, Michela Rosso and Paolo Scrivano, eds., *Tra guerra e pace. Società, cultura e architettura nel secondo dopoguerra* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998): 183-190.

⁸ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius,” *The Architectural Review* 601 (January 1947): 3-6.

This complex picture includes some yet-unexplored figures who participated in the European debate of the 1920s,⁹ the protagonists of a phase in the history of intellectual and professional migrations that is lesser known than the later season of the undisputed “masters” of the Modern Movement, but one that surely deserves to be re-examined by architectural historiography. This first generation of *émigrés* to the United States played a crucial role in establishing a dialogue with the institutions in the field of social housing, following a different pattern from those of the 1930s, who would occupy prominent positions in American Universities. One representative of this first generation was Swiss architect William Lescaze (1896-1969), who emigrated to New York in 1923, and who provides invaluable insight into the intricate mechanisms of definition of housing policies and the socio-economical factors that influenced them, shedding light on the introduction and gradual assimilation of European modernity in New York. Though hailed on both sides of the ocean by architecture critics of his time for his work, in collaboration with George Howe, in designing the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (PSFS) building,¹⁰ which soon became a world-renowned symbol of modernity, in more recent years Lescaze has been grossly trivialized by American historiography.

Indeed, his influence has been reduced to that of introducing the East Coast to the International Style, a term that, after 1932, when private initiative gave in to government control in the United States, lost the social and political connotations that had characterized the European experience.¹¹ This simplification appears even less convincing if one considers how Lescaze had distanced himself from the “International Style” label, which he often questioned along with Le Corbusier’s machinist ideals.

A wealth of unpublished writings, notes and articles, letters and projects yields precious information on a multi-faceted professional and on an individual deeply committed to social issues. In particular, his interest in low-cost housing finds its roots in his formative period in Switzerland

⁹ A few examples are Albert Frey, Alfred Kastner, Oscar Stonorov, Alfred Claus, Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler.

¹⁰ See Raffaello Giolli, “William Lescaze,” *Casabella* 10 (January 1937): 10-21. Alberto Sartoris chose an image of the PSFS building as the cover of the third edition of his *Introduzione all'architettura moderna* (Milan: Hoepli, 1949).

¹¹ Jean-Louis Cohen and Hubert Damisch, eds., *Américanisme et modernité. L'idéal américain dans l'architecture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992). See also Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come. European Architecture and the Americanization Challenge 1893-1960* (Montréal: Flammarion, 1995).

and cannot be overlooked if one is to provide an accurate portrayal of his contribution as a European architect in America.

The analysis of Lescaze's early years in Switzerland goes well beyond biographical considerations, as its goal is not so much to trace his career as an architect and an intellectual as it is to highlight the European nature of his approach to architecture and planning, isolating exclusively some crucial aspects that can prove useful for an understanding of his later work in the United States. Indeed, Lescaze's European training between Zurich and New York in the course of a twenty-year period left an indelible mark on his formative progress on both sides of the Atlantic and on the intellectual background that accompanied his entire career in the United States until his death in New York in 1969.

If on the one hand his first experiences in Europe were fundamental for his development before his move to America, his perspective on Europe as seen from New York in the 1920s – a period during which Lescaze remained strongly tied to the European avant-garde – represents a transition to his new phase, a phase that officially began in 1929 with the establishment of his partnership with George Howe, his naturalization, and the construction of his first American project according to the canons of international modernity.

While fully committed to local modernity, Lescaze never lost sight of the transformations taking place in Europe and kept in contact with the European scene – worth mentioning was his ambiguous relationship with Le Corbusier, which earned him a reputation as “Le Corbusier of America.”¹² His web of relations emerges in a series of unpublished writings and unfinished editorial projects, a recurring motif of which is the difficult transition from an already distant European condition to the new one in the United States. These elements become central for a reflection on the channels, times, places and modes of dissemination of models and ideals, making Lescaze a vehicle for the transatlantic exchange among young avant-garde architects.

Lescaze's years in the United States, marked by his difficult status as an immigrant, overlap with various phases of the federal housing policies in New York. Little by little, the local culture and bureaucracy came to embrace established models and images developed in Europe in the 1920s and codified at CIAM at the end of the decade. This hierarchy of values was assimilated and re-elaborated in the new set of standards and codes adopted by the first federal projects sponsored by the government in New

¹² Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America. Travel in the Land of the Timids* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001).

York. This process coincided with Lescaze's rising reputation as "housing expert," a role confirmed by his involvement, from 1934 until 1960, with the New York City Housing Authority. From his initial condition as an "outsider," Lescaze went on to engage in a dialogue with the social reformers who emerged from the cultural climate of the 1920s, and collaborated with them within recently-formed local institutions such as the Housing Study Guild (HSG). Throughout these phases and up to his controversial appointment at the NYCHA Architectural Board, Lescaze's career reveals the new direction followed by federal programs in the mid-1930s: a cautious opening towards the ideas of an international modernity that gradually became part of a shared aesthetic revived after World War II, which would characterize social housing interventions in New York until the late 1950s. Between 1930 and 1934, Lescaze's radical proposals for the Lower East Side represent an attempt to "awake the institutions and stimulate the planners' fantasy" during the most visionary and experimental phase of the New Deal programs and provide an explicit answer to the skepticism expressed by housing developers. Such skepticism was directed against slum clearance interventions, new materials and methods of construction, and a new approach to the problems of hygiene, traffic and vertical development, despite the fact that the economic benefits of the cross-shaped residential tower had been acknowledged in the United States since 1934, making it one of the most popular solutions at a local level, as well.¹³ If Lescaze's unsuccessful attempts during these years can be regarded as the first "victims" of New York public housing – where the almost literal application of European models to the American city would produce upset the continuity of the Manhattan orthogonal grid in the name of a continuous park –, it was precisely these failed experiments that formed the basis for one of the most accomplished projects of New Deal housing, one that still reveals the innovative potential of the previous years. The Williamsburg Houses project (1934-1938), directly assigned to Lescaze by NYCHA and defined by Roosevelt as "the best demonstration of intelligent and successful modern low-cost housing in America," was meant to highlight a historical moment and serve as a demonstration program of the New Deal policies and plans. Regarded by the PWA as "the most valuable contribution to social progress that the New Deal has made," it would inaugurate a "housing community experiment," and its results

¹³ Housing Study Guild, "Higher Housing for Lower Rents," *Architectural Forum* 61 (December 1934): 421.

would determine people's response to the new housing policies in New York.¹⁴

The war years, too, provide a valuable perspective on the changes that influenced Lescaze's personal and professional growth, as well as on the new status of architecture and of the entire professional culture during a period in which the situation invited serious reflection on post-war planning. Thus, the housing debate resumed, and the themes that Lescaze had already explored in the 1930s, together with the pre-war experiences of social housing, now benefited from a re-examination unfettered by issues of scale and from Lescaze's well-established position in the bureaucratic system.

Diverse and complex issues crisscross the narrative, albeit tangentially. Among them, further consideration is due to the inane dispute (which began in the early 1960s and which remains currently unresolved) on the attribution of the actual roles played by the two partners of the Howe & Lescaze firm. In 1932, Hitchcock first drew attention to the fact that this partnership – one of the most common forms of collaboration in the United States – was in fact quite unusual. Hitchcock emphasized, using M. Breuer's words, how Lescaze's German and Swiss "systematic nature" complemented Howe's American "efficiency,"¹⁵ in a cooperation that stemmed from their different perspectives on the technical developments and architectural research in the two continents. The two partners belonged neither to the category of "nationalists" nor to that of "importers," and while they respected functionalist concepts, they were not slaves to them, either.¹⁶ Nevertheless, their individual roles must be reconsidered in light of new reflections that go well beyond the practice of architecture. What needs to be investigated more thoroughly is the encounter between an architect with a more progressive European background and a representative of a political, cultural and social elite that epitomizes the condition of American professionals between the wars, one

¹⁴ Frederick Ackerman's letter to Langdon Post (August 21, 1935), "Williamsburg: A Comment. Preliminary Submissions of Elevations." NYCHA.

¹⁵ See William Jordy, *Symbolic Essence and Other Writings on Modern Architecture and American Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005): 191.

¹⁶ "When Howe and Lescaze joined forces in 1929, modern architecture of a type hitherto hardly known in America was brought into the field of regular American practice. Lescaze representing originality and imagination, Howe representing the restraining force of cool intelligent criticism and long practical familiarity with American conditions." See Hitchcock, "Howe & Lescaze," *Modern Architecture International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932): 145.

who had inherited the *Beaux-Arts* tradition and prevailing academism and who sought a “modern” renewal. Quite relevant to this portrayal is also the skepticism of American culture during the Depression against professionals, values and knowledge coming from the outside. The interpretation of Howe and Lescaze’s partnership offered by Robert Stern and William Jordy from the 1960s on has underscored its American aspects and the role played by Howe, and has strongly contributed to constructing an image still shared among European historiographers, which associates Lescaze exclusively with the PSFS building, the popularity of European-style skyscrapers in the United States, and the encounter with Howe’s eclectic personality.¹⁷ Stern’s and Jordy’s perspective has also led to the merely visual interpretation of Lescaze’s work attempted in the 1970s – and partially interrupted only by Banham’s¹⁸ –, and to the undeserved oblivion to which his legacy has fallen since his death.¹⁹ A clarification is therefore sorely needed, and the time is ripe for rehabilitating an international figure that suffered, even during his lifetime, from a long series of discriminations caused by his status as a European – the rejection of his proposal for the new MoMA in New York in the early 1930s, his PSFS building project, and his controversial involvement with NYCHA are just some glaring examples –, discriminations to which the interpretation disseminated by American historiography after Lescaze’s death constitutes only an epilogue. It seems therefore befitting to restore a fair balance by acknowledging Lescaze’s contribution to the partnership, as well as the projects he developed during this collaboration, in an attempt to legitimize a role that he claimed in vain until his death. According to this new interpretation, Howe’s role is limited to that of introducing young Lescaze to American work standards.

Finally, the account of the first federal housing programs in New York intersects a biography still largely unexplored, calling into play a variety

¹⁷ The PSFS building was the object of the symposium, “When Modern Was Modern,” organized in October 2004 at the exhibition, “PSFS: Nothing More Modern” (October 30, 2004-May 5, 2005), organized by Thomas Mellins and Donald Albrecht and held at the Yale School of Architecture. See in particular the contributions by Jean-Louis Cohen, “Modernism and Modernization: European Eyes on the American City,” by Dietrich Neumann on Lescaze’s critical appraisal, and by Robert Stern on George Howe. Regarding PSFS’s popularity in the United States, see also Alberto Muffato, *William Lescaze. Il grattacielo PSFS a Philadelphia e il modernismo americano* (Milan: Electa, 2012).

¹⁸ P. Reyner Banham, *The Well-Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969).

¹⁹ William Lescaze, *Notes* (1960). WLP.

of sources and fields of knowledge that constitute an explicit answer to the need to venture outside of the discipline in order to provide an accurate portrayal of the complex and uncharted connections between architecture, politics and social housing. To this end, and also to overcome the limits of “architects’ archives,” it proved essential to carry out a “cross-reading” of the inventory of Lescaze’s papers held at Syracuse University. This analysis has made it possible to discover Lescaze’s work as critic and an unsuspected wealth of theoretical material – and of technical and institutional records on housing policies and programs drawn from broad disciplinary fields seldom considered by architecture historians, which includes an array of archival sources such as the Housing Study Guild Collection and the Henry Wright Records at Cornell University, the New York City Housing Authority Records at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archive in New York, as well as other documents contained at the Dartington Hall Trust Archive in Devon, UK. These are fundamental sources to trace the various phases of Lescaze’s encounter with an eclectic American culture strongly rooted in local tradition – from the supporters of American conservatism to the more progressive social reformers and to the public officials of federal authorities –, which has made it possible to reassess relationships, collaborations, balances, friendships and alliances, revealing Lescaze’s unique ability to carry on simultaneous dialogues with such diverse professional worlds and intellectual positions. Thus, Lescaze’s biography has provided an opportunity to connect two fields – housing and architecture – which have been historically separate in an American milieu of critical and historiographical studies that have consistently regarded social housing as playing a secondary role in the history of architecture – an interpretation still widespread in the United States.²⁰ This misunderstanding dates back once again to the famous MoMA exhibition of 1932, which marks the official induction of Lescaze and other European architects into the American professional elite. Hitchcock and Johnson’s decision to relegate social housing projects to a separate, marginal section of the exhibition was deemed unacceptable by an architect trained in Europe like Lescaze, who had inherited the avant-garde rhetoric of the 1920s which regarded social housing as the most distinct manifestation of the new architecture.

²⁰ On this topic, and specifically on the cases of New York, Cleveland and Philadelphia, see the accurate analysis provided by Richard Pommer in the late 1970s. See Pommer, “The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States during the Early 1930s,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 37 (December 1979): 235-264.

However, a closer look cannot ignore the double significance that the transatlantic discourse on housing design was taking on in the early 1930s and the multiple angles from which the two-way circulation of models and concepts can be viewed. Lescaze's generation – the first wave of young European architects who emigrated to the United States – aimed at translating the highest expressions of the European modernity of the 1920s to the North-American institutional context. During those same years, another set of values stemming from the technical field and from the politics and experiences gathered in Europe in the field of economic housing was being introduced to the United States thanks to the European journeys of American architects and social reformers such as Catherine Bauer, Lewis Mumford, Henry Wright and Edith Elmer Wood, which shed light on another aspect of European modernity in the field of collective housing.²¹ Essentially, Lescaze's constitutes only one of the many possible itineraries, many of which are still partly unfathomed.²²

This book does not claim to provide an exhaustive analysis of Lescaze's multifaceted personality. Rather, its goal is to highlight, through the sequence of chapters, various steps in his research on collective housing: his education in Switzerland; the early theoretical phase characterized by the encounter between European models and the New York culture of the New Deal; and the pivotal moment: the construction of Lescaze's first government-sponsored project, a landmark of his professional and institutional success on the American scene. And in order to emphasize the continuity of his involvement, the war years are also taken into consideration, serving as further proof of Lescaze's ever-increasing attention to the issue of minimum dwelling, and revealing some yet-unknown aspects of his career.

The ambiguous relationship between housing and architecture; the role played by a still-unexplored early generation of European architects in the American professional world and bureaucratic system during the Depression; and the gradual assimilation and re-elaboration of modern rhetoric by federal institutions in defining new public housing programs –

²¹ Carol Aronovici, Catherine Bauer, Edith Elmer Wood, Henry Wright and Lewis Mumford traveled to Europe between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Their experiences are related in Aronovici, *American Can't Have Housing* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934); Bauer, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1934); Elmer Wood, *Recent Trends in American Housing* (New York: Macmillan, 1931); and Wright, *Rehousing Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

²² William Jordy, "William Lescaze Reconsidered," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 19 (1984), published in Jordy, *Symbolic Essence*, cit., 171-186.

all of these themes emerge from an inquiry that seeks to distance itself from the perspective on Lescaze that has been codified since the 1970s²³. This European viewpoint offers a privileged insight into the times and modes that contributed to the construction of a local modernity in the New York housing debate which, for at least the next twenty years, would continue to draw inspiration from across the ocean²⁴.

²³ On the topic see also Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America. Policies Struggles in the New Deal Era*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁴ This book is the result of a research project begun in 2004 as part of a Ph.D. in History of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Polytechnic University of Turin and published in Italy by Franco Angeli Publishing in 2010.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LESSON OF EUROPE: BETWEEN ZURICH AND NEW YORK

Lescaze's Formative Years in Switzerland

Despite the paucity of research on Lescaze's work, even critics with the most disparate perspectives acknowledge the crucial role that the Swiss architect played in the dialogue that engaged professionals in the old and in the new continent during the 1920s. Critics also unanimously recognize that the period Lescaze spent in Europe before moving to the United States in 1920 was fundamental for his professional and intellectual growth.¹

Lescaze's American writings call forth a number of echoes from his formative period at the Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule in Zurich and from his relationship with the European avant-garde. Such influences are fundamental to understanding Lescaze's work in the United States and his growing social awareness, which finds its roots in the debate on modernity that was taking place in Switzerland, and in the mentor figure of Karl Moser.²

Even before Moser, however, the individual who left the most significant mark on Lescaze's development was his own father, a graduate of the University of Heidelberg who taught German philology and

¹ See Robert Coates, "Profiles," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1936: 44; Raffaello Giolli, cit.: 10-21; Gilles Barbey, "William Lescaze (1896-1969). Sa carrière et son oeuvre de 1915 à 1939," *Werk* LVII, August 1971: 559-563. See also James Marston Fitch, "William Lescaze," *Architecture Formes et Fonctions* 6 (1959): 96-103; Lorraine Welling Lanmon, cit., and Robert Stern, *George Howe: Toward a Modern American Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).

² The role played by Karl Moser will emerge in later writings, as well. In 1942, Lescaze describes him as "the teacher who meant the most to me personally.... He challenged you, made things happen in your mind, opened your eyes, helped you to become yourself," and refers to his teaching as "the most inspiring introduction to architecture." Lescaze, *On Being an Architect* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942): 153.

literature at the *Collège de Genève*. Lescaze was strongly influenced by his father's studies and by an enduring fascination with German culture.³ Born on March 27, 1896, in Onex, a small village in the French-speaking region of Switzerland, the son of Alexandre Lescaze and Marthe Caux (both of them educators), young William, the second-born of two boys (his brother Adrien died in 1914), attended the same university as his father, first as a student in the *Académie* from 1904 to 1907, and then in the *section technique* of the Collège from 1910 to 1914.⁴ During his adolescent years in Geneva he was enticed by the art scene and developed a passion for painting that accompanied him throughout his career. A momentous event occurred in 1912, when sixteen-year-old Lescaze decided to set out on the arduous path of architecture.⁵ His resolution stemmed from his patent dissatisfaction with the early twentieth-century Swiss architectural culture and with the conservative professional environment of Geneva.⁶ Determined to escape the *Beaux-Arts* tradition that dominated the *Écoles* both in Paris and in Geneva (a trend which Lescaze defined as "the art of designing turrets"),⁷ he was nevertheless forced to enroll in the Swiss *collège*, even though he was clearly attracted to the cultural and artistic atmosphere of Paris. Between 1914 and 1915 he halfheartedly attended the composition courses in Geneva, but devoted much of his time to artistic experimentation, stimulated by the cultural fervor and the manifold initiatives that were taking shape in Switzerland at the time.⁸

³ "William E. Lescaze. Biographical Sketch," typescript (December 1934). WLP.

⁴ His father's family name was of Spanish origins, meaning "las casas." Lescaze changed his original name, Williame, into William when he became a naturalized American citizen in 1929. Lescaze, *OBA*, cit.: 67-68. Lescaze, "Biographical Sketches: William Lescaze, Architect," typescript (November 27, 1936).

⁵ Lescaze, "Biographical Notes," 1931. WLP.

⁶ "In 1910 in Switzerland public and private buildings were given from one to five round turrets, depending on the degree of importance which it was desired to bestow on them." Lescaze, *On Architecture* I (May 3, 1937), 1. WLP. This article is the first of two pieces Lescaze was invited to write by Josef Albers for *PM Magazine*, to become part of a collection of essays entitled "The Influence of Bauhaus in America," which sought to trace the history of Bauhaus from its origins to Gropius's arrival in the United States. See Joseph Albers's letter to Lescaze (March 19, 1937). WLP.

⁷ Lescaze commented: "Fortunately I escaped such a fate," *On Architecture* II (1937): 2.

⁸ The tragic, untimely death of his brother Adrien, the outbreak of World War II, and Switzerland's mandatory military service convinced Lescaze to choose Geneva instead of Paris. See Lescaze, *OBA*, cit.: 154.