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Modern Architecture: A Direct Expression of Trauma of WWI Trench

by Ann Sussman, RA

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Co-editor, *Urban Experience and Design, Contemporary Perspectives on Improving the Public Realm* (Routledge, 2021)

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Description:

This poster was first presented at the 30th Annual International Trauma Conference in Boston, MA in 2019, organized by Dr. Wendy D'Andrea of The New School for Social Research. It combines new understanding of how trauma changes the brain, altering perception, with new understandings of how normal or neuro-typical perception works, unconsciously prioritizing the viewer to take in faces and areas of complexity and contrast. It seeks to answer an abiding question, why does modern architecture, post-WWI, look and feel so differently than traditional? Why is it so often blank and detail free?

Certainly, an urge to bury the past, after WWI (1914-1918) with the horrors of industrialized warfare and loss of 20 million people, encouraged a new design approach, as did technologies enabling the expansive use of glass, steel, and concrete, and accompanying economic incentives.

But the *missing link* in the story we tell of how modern architecture came to be, is *how trauma changes the brain*, distorts a survivor's perception of 'reality', and can manifest itself in every design move a survivor makes decades later without their awareness or conscious control. We can now explain a key reason why 'modern' architecture looked so different from that of the past – *it represents a direct expression of the horror of the trench warfare that preceded it.*

An effective way of 'seeing' this is by looking at the house built by a 'founding father' of modern architecture, none other than Walter Gropius, (1883-1969), the founder of the Bauhaus, himself. On a rural road, twenty miles west of Boston in Lincoln, MA, the iconic 'modern' building looks little like the traditional New England houses in the area with their pitched roofs and shutters. Built in 1938, Gropius' home has a flat roof, slit windows and hidden front door. Undeniably, it was unique for its time, but reviewing its design today, psychologists describe it as actually firmly rooted in the past - Gropius' own horrific one as a German soldier on the Western Front. We learn here how the neuroscience of trauma and how it changes the brain also reframes the history of modern architecture and helps us better understand what humans need to see to be at their best.

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Brief Bio:

Ann Sussman, RA, is an architect, author and researcher passionate about understanding how buildings influence people emotionally. Her book, *Cognitive Architecture, Designing for How We respond to the Built Environment* (2015) co-authored with Justin B. Hollander, won the 2016 Place Research Award from the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA). Her new book, *Urban Experience and Design, Contemporary Perspectives on Improving the Public Realm* (Routledge, 2021), co-edited with Hollander and due out this October, reveals the role PTSD, post-WWI, had in shaping Modern Architecture. A frequent speaker, Ann has given more than 80 lectures at regional conferences and universities, including internationally at Greenbuild/Berlin in 2018 and Greenbuild/Amsterdam in 2019. She co-founded the non-profit, The Human Architecture + Planning Institute, Inc., (theHapi.org) in 2020. Currently, she teaches an introductory course on human perception, Architecture & Cognition, to undergraduate and grad students at the Boston Architectural College (BAC). More info: annsussman.com and the blog: geneticsofdesign.com.