Introduction

There are several ways for a foreigner to meet the problem of America. The simplest way is to deny his own nature and his own past. Every technical novelty, every built-in car radio rouses his enthusiasm, and within a couple of years he is speaking of America as ‘our country’ and declaring that ‘our country comes of age.’ A second way is to criticize anything that crosses one’s path, to measure all things with a European yardstick, to contrast America with a Europe that exists only in one’s dreams. It is often the way of those whose creativeness has weakened, and who in Europe would have lived on their past accomplishments. The result is without fruit of any kind. The third way of meeting America is to face American reality, to seek neither artificial assimilation nor artificial insulation. A man is aroused by the very difference between his own past and the American world. In a land holding such responsibility for the future, he cannot remain detached from its dynamic life as on a remote Greek island. The clash between European scale and American dimensions excites him to new vigor, drawn from a cross-fertilization of viewpoints. The presupposition is only that he shall have kept himself in a state of creativeness, and not have become frozen in his own accomplishments as an artist, scientist or scholar.” — Sigfried Giedion

When Swiss art historian and architecture critic Sigfried Giedion attempted to characterize a European’s relationship to the United States with these words from his 1944 essay on the artist Fernand Léger, he was undoubtedly not only describing his friend’s position but also his own. Frequently called one of the most influential twentieth-century proponents of modern architecture, and recognized for writing one of the first and most widely read histories on the subject, Giedion curiously achieved this reputation far from his homeland—in America. Despite the formative nature of his extended stays in the United States, the effect of that cultural environment on his work and the American reception of his endeavors have received scant attention within the extensive body of scholarship on Giedion’s contributions to modern architecture and the construction of its history.2

From his appointment as Charles Eliot Norton Professor in Poetry at Harvard University in 1938 to his death in 1968, the United States served as an inspiration for the critic’s work. Although his English was poor, Giedion published nearly all of his books written after his initial stay in the United States in English, long before they became available in his native German.3 In the postwar period, teaching opportunities at Harvard and a part-time position at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, or ETH) in Zurich not only nurtured the influence of two different cultural contexts on Giedion’s work but also fostered an exchange of ideas between the architectural cultures on either side...
of the Atlantic. Prolonged periods of time spent in the United States allowed Giedion, a commuting academic rather than an émigré, to assume a remarkable position bridging North America and Europe. This exchange between cultural contexts forms the foundation of the present book. Giedion’s work is explored through the lens of cultural transformation and modernization processes; the mutual influence and interchange between the Swiss art historian and his North American peers is considered to give insight into the ways in which emigration and exile can facilitate the transfer of ideas.

In Between

The deliberate choice of the conjunction and rather than the preposition in for the title of this book underscores my interest in Giedion’s peculiar relationship with America. While the majority of the art historian’s colleagues and friends were forced to leave Europe as a result of the political conditions on the eve of the Second World War, Giedion, a Swiss citizen of Jewish decent, never permanently settled in the United States, and his partial emigration was predominantly motivated by the relocation of his personal network, rather than the immediate threat of the war. While he praised America as a place of innovation, a place that held promise for the future, Giedion always maintained strong ties to Europe. This is evident in “Switzerland or the Forming of an Idea,” his introduction to G. E. Kidder Smith’s Switzerland Builds (1950), which at most hints that its author spent a decisive part of his career in the United States. On the contrary, the text reads like a declaration of love to Switzerland, its particular cultural diversity and political system, and it illuminates why Giedion tirelessly continued to try to establish himself as an academic in Switzerland.

Giedion’s position “in between” could be mistaken for a state of suspension and thereby a position of weakness and hesitation. It is instead my contention that Giedion’s work in between two cultural and academic contexts not only caused ruptures and contradictions in that work but also productively informed it. The four “in between” situations that structure this book reflect the ways in which the art historian strategically shaped his own approach and position precisely because of his operations at the intersection of different entities and forces. Giedion’s transatlantic existence was molded by opportunities that resulted from challenging passages between cultures, currents, and people.

The first chapter, “In Between Languages,” discusses the role of language and translation in the creation of Giedion’s major publications and the reception of the Swiss critic’s ideas over the course of generations and across different cultural contexts. Language barriers forced Giedion to argue visually. In close collaboration with artists, graphic designers, and photographers, he perfected the coordination of illustrations and written arguments and established a universally understandable visual rhetoric.

Giedion’s position within architectural discourse is then contrasted with two leading contemporary American voices—the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and the public intellectual Lewis Mumford. The second chapter, “In Between Approaches,” traces Giedion’s shift from the propagation of modern architecture toward the examination of artifacts of mass culture and the repercussions of industrialization on everyday life as integral parts of modernization.

In the postwar period, Giedion proposed establishing “bridgeheads” on both sides of the Atlantic to foster intellectual exchange between the United States and Europe. “In Between Academies,” the third chapter, follows Giedion’s concurrent teaching assignments at Harvard University and the ETH in Zurich. While Giedion struggled against an unwelcoming intellectual climate at the ETH, his presence there set the stage for broad transformations of the curriculum in later years, and at Harvard he succeeded in reintroducing architectural history into modernist design education. This transition, from early Bauhaus pedagogy to a postwar academic professionalism, had a lasting impact and can still be traced in architecture schools today.

After the Second World War, cross-disciplinary work gained wider acceptance among public and private interests. The concluding chapter, “In Between Disciplines,” focuses on Giedion’s ambition to create awareness of cross-disciplinary scholarship and teaching to overcome the increasing tendency toward specialization, and to cultivate a universal language with which to describe the modern condition. Although the direct success of his efforts was limited, the exchange across disciplines that Giedion relentlessly pursued led to fertile intellectual encounters throughout his career and offered a set of methodological tools that inspired academics in both North America and Europe.

Giedion’s role as a mediator between different architectural cultures played a seminal role in the intellectual production and development of modern architecture on the European and North American continents. By framing Giedion as a figure fundamentally “in between,” I propose the emergence of a new type of art historian, one whose work greatly profited from crossing boundaries between cultural, disciplinary, and academic contexts, and through whom there developed a new model for art and cultural history geared toward architects.

As a historian and critic, a commentator on and witness to modernity, a true architectural impresario like Giedion cannot be regarded in an isolated manner or measured only by his own achievements and writings. As secretary-general of the Congrès Internationaux d’Archi-
tecture Moderne (CIAM) from its founding in 1928 to its dissolution in 1959, and through his affiliations with academic institutions in the United States and Europe, Giedion was in close contact with many leading architects and intellectuals of his time. As such, he was a figure well suited to transmit something of the cultural climate of a time shaped by a devastating war, major technological progress, rapidly increasing mobility, and marked advances in communication. A closer look at the wealth of archival sources—some of which have surfaced recently—and literature related to Giedion extends our understanding of several key protagonists of the modern movement. Conversely, their exchanges also offer us important perspectives on Giedion's own work and persona and raise the issue of the extent to which the art historian's position is a consequence of his personal contacts and network. By focusing on Giedion's engagement in a dialogue across cultures and disciplines, and reflecting on its impact on the postwar generation of architects, architectural historians, and other intellectuals, this book offers a reevaluation of the work that Giedion accomplished, with particular attention to the intellectual and cultural environment of his time.

Cultural Transfer

The aspiration of modern architects to disseminate their ideas and ideals across the globe can be grasped in a world map published in L'Esprit Nouveau that locates subscribers to Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant's journal in 1922.5 Two decades later, in Can Our Cities Survive? (1942), Josep Lluís Sert pinpointed in a graphic how, as a result of ocean liners, the distance between Europe and the United States was shrinking, and that it was now possible to cross the Atlantic in five days. Air travel, which increased exponentially in the postwar era, would eventually cut the same journey to less than a day.6 Giedion's position as a bidirectional transatlantic messenger, and his key role in disseminating the principles of modern architecture across the European and American continents, would have been unthinkable without this increased mobility as well as the rapid development of advanced means of communication.

This new connectivity so evident in Giedion's career is an essential factor in considering the effect of the art historian's teaching activities and his extended stays in the United States, the reception of his writings published in multiple languages, and the less well-understood and primarily interdisciplinary facets of his career. The present book therefore does not frame Giedion exclusively as a historian, but attempts to understand him equally as a contemporary witness in whose works historical analysis is coupled with personal experience. Precisely fifty years after Giedion's death, and three decades since the last comprehensive investigations of his work, this book reconsiders significant aspects of the life and work of one of the most seminal figures in the history of modern architecture, and it critically assesses his contributions to the cultural discourse. While foundational studies by Dorothee Huber, Sokratis Georgiadis, and Werner Oechslin facilitated the positioning of Giedion as a champion of modern architecture and as the movement's public voice, the impact of his extended stays in the United States on the direction of his work and the reception of his writings have so far only been selectively investigated.7 Among these investigations, the essays on Giedion and Mumford and the afterword to the German edition of Mechanization Takes Command by Stanislaus von Moos, as well as Scenes of the World to Come by Jean-Louis Cohen, have been particularly instrumental to the present study.8 This book has also profited from a number of thematic studies and conferences that have addressed cross-cultural relations and mutual exchange between different cultural contexts in the work of individual architects or the history of institutions.9

With this interest in exchange, I hope to unite transatlantic history with recent endeavors in architectural history. A key focus of this book is to trace lines of research in transatlantic history and to transfer them to a common and comparative perspective. Advances in architectural history have been paralleled by an enduring interest in transatlantic reciprocities and related assessments of intellectual migration and cultural transformation in the field of history.10 The framing of Giedion as a protagonist in an architectural dialogue across the Atlantic therefore represents both a shift of attention to intermediate spaces that resist easy categorization, and the objective of considering the achievements of different individuals in relation to wider networks. To evaluate the effect of a migratory process on the body of work of an individual, it is inevitable to speculate about what might have happened without this cultural transition. For this reason, the present study is not devoted only to the biographical question of how Giedion succeeded in continuing his work in America; rather, it also considers how this new cultural environment affected his teaching, thinking, and writing, and finally how his own work and ideas were adopted and adapted in America. In some traditional models of cultural reception, influences that originate in a particular environment are shown to balance deficits in the receiving cultural context. Instead, this book examines Giedion's complex experiences and explores a reciprocal cultural exchange in an area in which architecture, art history, media, and the academic sphere overlap.

The present examination of a particular period of Giedion's career (1938–1968) and its evaluation and integration within a larger context of art, architectural, and cultural history is based on a myriad of primary archival sources—many of which have not been considered
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Repositioning
the History of
Modern Architecture

Giedion’s move across the Atlantic also marks the beginning of a more decisive effort to engage with architectural education, or what might be described as an emigration from the historian’s own discipline of art history into the field of architecture. During the postwar period, the teaching engagements at Harvard that Giedion secured, which followed his initial visiting position at the school, as well as his eventual part-time engagement at the ETH in Zurich, not only nurtured the influence of two different cultural contexts on his work but also fostered an exchange of ideas between the architectural cultures on either side of the Atlantic. At fifty years of age, arriving in the promising cultural and technological climate of the United States, Giedion was exposed to opportunities he never would have had in Switzerland.

More than a decade after his initial contacts with Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, Giedion finally had the chance to formulate a theory of modern architecture in an academic context. This occurred at an important moment of transition within the history of modern architecture. Giedion, like many other émigrés, was motivated to reassess the values that had been established in Europe over the course of the first decades of the twentieth century, when the core group of modern architects entered a (forced) phase of transformation upon gaining ground in the United States during the Second World War. The avant-garde, as Giedion himself already declared in the early 1930s, was over. An emerging generation of modern architects set out to continue the uncompromising work of the founders, but now under changed conditions, in a new cultural environment, and with diverging motivations.

Once again, it becomes clear that Giedion took on more varied roles than solely that of doyen of the modern movement, which is how he typically has been portrayed. His experiences in the American academic context led to a revised approach to teaching history as a dynamic discipline with the potential to breach the boundaries between different faculties and fields. The role of history in architectural education became a dominant theme in Giedion’s writings after the war. Many of these texts and unpublished conference papers are directly associated with the changing role of history at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. Appointed by Dean Josep Lluís Sert, Giedion had the opportunity to reinstate history courses for architecture students—they had been banned under Walter Gropius’s tenure to counter established Beaux-Arts pedagogy—and eventually also to create a new urban design program to revive the legacy of CIAM.

To an emerging generation of architecture students, the name Sigfried Giedion at best resonates vaguely. The days when Space, Time and Architecture, his magnum opus, served as mandatory reading for students and registered architects alike are long past. And yet, through his personal and intellectual persistence, a recurring theme in this story, Giedion reminds us that the role of architectural history and theory—despite its ever-changing manifestation and reception—is as critical and timely a subject in architectural education as it ever was. Giedion’s academic advances in the postwar years suggest a desire to close the widening gap between architectural history and practice in America, a condition that would intensify further as theoretical speculation increased toward the end of the 1960s. With a changing of the guard about to take place, Giedion, along with the other protagonists of this book, began to reassess modernity by crossing the boundaries of architecture as a historian who engages with disciplines, including cultural history, industrial archaeology, and media studies. Through his unrealized project for an “Institute for Contemporary History,” and the related disciplinary translations of methodological approaches in conjunction with a number of collective research endeavors, Giedion prepared the ground for a repositioning of architectural history, and simultaneously for a renewed conception of what it means to be an architectural historian.
A Note on the Type
This book is set in GT America, a contemporary typeface family positioned in between the modernist typographic traditions on either side of the Atlantic. Designed by Swiss typographer Noël Leu and released by Grilli Type in 2016, GT America amalgamates the characteristics of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Grotesque typefaces (for example, Ferdinand Theinhardt’s Royal Grotesk) defined by open apertures and simple, static letterforms, with those of American Gothic typefaces (including Morris Fuller Benton’s News Gothic or Franklin Gothic) that tend to be more upright in stance and less curvaceous than their European counterparts.