Expressionist Architecture

- **Expressionist architecture** was an architectural movement that developed in Europe during the **first decades of the 20th century** in parallel with the expressionist visual and performing arts.

- The term “Expressionist architecture” initially described the activities of the German, Dutch, Austrian, Czech and Danish avant-garde from 1910 until 1924. Subsequent redefinitions extended the term backwards to 1905 and also widened it to encompass the rest of Europe. **Today the meaning has broadened even further to refer to architecture of any date or location that exhibits some of the qualities of the original movement such as; distortion, fragmentation or the communication of violent or overstressed emotion.**

- The style was characterized by an early-modernist adoption of **novel materials, formal innovation, and very unusual massing, sometimes inspired by natural biomorphic forms, sometimes by the new technical possibilities offered by the mass production of brick, steel and especially glass.** Many expressionist architects fought in World War I and their experiences, combined with the political turmoil and social upheaval that followed the German Revolution of 1919, resulted in a utopian outlook and a romantic socialist agenda. Economic conditions severely limited the number of built commissions between 1914 and the mid 1920s, resulting in **many of the most important expressionist works remaining as projects on paper,** such as Bruno Taut’s *Alpine Architecture* and Hermann Finsterlin’s *Formspiels.* **Ephemeral (geçici) exhibition buildings** were numerous and highly significant during this period. Scenography for *theatre and films* provided another outlet for the expressionist imagination, and provided supplemental incomes for designers attempting to challenge conventions in a harsh economic climate.
CHARACTERISTICS:
Expressionist architecture was individualistic and in many ways eschewed aesthetic dogma, but it is still useful to develop some criteria which defines it. Though containing a great variety and differentiation, many points can be found as recurring in works of Expressionist architecture, and are evident in some degree in each of its works:

• Distortion of form for an emotional effect.
• Subordination of realism to symbolic or stylistic expression of inner experience.
• An underlying effort at achieving the new, original, and visionary.
• Profusion of works on paper, and models, with discovery and representations of concepts more important than pragmatic finished products.
• Often hybrid solutions, irreducible to a single concept.
• Themes of natural romantic phenomena, such as caves, mountains, lightning, crystal and rock formations. As such it is more mineral and elemental than florid and organic which characterized its close contemporary Art Nouveau.
• Utilizes creative potential of artisan craftsmanship.
• Tendency more towards the gothic than the classical. Expressionist architecture also tends more towards the Romanesque and the rococo than the classical.
• Though a movement in Europe, expressionism is as eastern as western. It draws as much from Moorish, Islamic, Egyptian, and Indian art and architecture as from Roman or Greek.
• Conception of architecture as a work of art.

The major permanent extant landmark of Expressionism is Erich Mendelsohn’s Einstein Tower in Potsdam.

Einstein Tower in Potsdam-Berlin by Erich Mendelsohn 1919-22

Erich Mendelsohn's small, but powerfully modeled tower, built to symbolize the greatness of the Einsteinian concepts, was also a quite functional house. It was designed to hold Einstein's own astronomical laboratory... Mendelsohn was after a completely plastic kind of building, moulded rather than built, without angles and with smooth, rounded corners. He needed a malleable (kolyş verilebilir) material like reinforced concrete, which could be made to curve and create its own surface plasticity, but due to post-war shortages, some parts had to be in brick and others in concrete. So the total external effect was obtained by rendering the surface material. Even so, this 'sarcophagus (lahit- taştan tabut) of architectural Expressionism' is one of the most brilliantly original buildings of the twentieth century.”

TWA Building in New York City
by Eero Saarinen 1956-62
RESPONSES TO MECHANIZATION: 
THE DEUTSCHER WERKBUND (German Work Federation)

In Germany, which industrialized later than Britain and France, and experienced some of the opportunities and traumas of the process deeply, there was much debate concerning the ideal relationship between the artist and industry. Broadly speaking there were four main strands of opinion.

- One of these was a direct continuation of Arts and Crafts values in the Kunstgewerbeschulen (Schools of Applied Art), where the belief was maintained that quality goods would be achieved only through a concentration on handicrafts.

- Closely related to this view was a highly individualistic idea of the role of artistic invention which held that authentic forms in architecture could arise only from the imprint of the expressive temperament; this position tended to extend the most subjective aspects of Art Nouveau and led to the “Expressionist” outlook.

- A third position was materialist and down-to-earth by contrast, and tended to hold that the best forms would be those emerging from the logical and direct use of new materials to solve building problems; it was, in other words, functionalist look.

- The fourth position (the one which will principally concern us) tended to regard the functionalist as an uncultivated brute, the Expressionist as an irrelevant remnant of the cult of genius, and the craftsmen as an extinct (türü tükenmiş) entity unless directed to the problems of designing objects for mass production. Thus it became the business of the artist/architect to design the “type forms”—be they objects of industrial design, building elements, or pieces of industrial structure—of a new mechanized and, let it be said, German civilization.

It was an ideology in which the artist had to function as a sort of mediator ( aracı) between formal invention and standardization, between personal style and the appropriate form for the Zeitgeist (or ‘spirit’ of the Time), between a sense of the contemporary world and reliance on age—old artistic principles.

One of the most vocal proponents of the fourth position was Hermann Muthesius (author of Das englische Haus), who founded the Deutscher Werkbund in 1907. This organization was set up precisely to forge closer links between German industry and artists, and thereby upgrade the quality of national product design in emulation of what Muthesius had seen in England. From the start this was seen as far more than a commercial matter; rather it was one involving deep probings into the nature of ‘the German spirit’, the role form in history and the psychic life of the nation. Muthesius wrote:

Far higher than the material is the spiritual; far higher than function, material and technique, stands Form. These three aspects might be impeccably (perfectly) handled but —if Form were not— we would still be living in a merely brutish world. So there remains before us an aim, a much greater and more important task—to awaken once more an understanding of Form.

... the re-establishment of an architectonic culture is a basic condition of all the arts... It is a question of bringing back into our way of life that order and discipline of which good Form is the outward manifestation.

Muthesius inherited some concerns of English Arts&Crafts tradition:
- The moral power of design to influence people’s lives
- A sense of integrity in the expression of nature of materials
- A feeling for the dignified (serious) embodiment of function, and
- An obsession with the ‘dishonesty’ of false revivalism.

When the Deutscher Werkbund’s ideal to
- “DESIGN FOR MACHINE,” and
- German Idealist tradition (Hegel)
was added to those concerns, the debates was condensed on the following central notion:

It was the destiny of Germany to realize some higher idea in the historical scheme of things, and a related notion that a sort of ‘will-to-form’ with a strong national taint would realize the form of genuine style. Such a style would not then be seen as a merely personal, conventional or wilful matter, but as an inevitable force of destiny: a universal necessity.
As an organization, the German Werkbund was clearly indebted to the principles and priorities of the Arts and Crafts movement, but with a decidedly modern twist. Members of the Werkbund were focused on improving the overall level of taste in Germany by improving the design of everyday objects and products. This very practical aspect made it an extremely influential organization among industrialists, public policy experts, designers, investors, critics and academics.

German architect, designer and painter, Peter Behrens's work, for AEG was the first large-scale demonstration of the viability and vitality of the Werkbund's initiatives and objectives. In 1907, AEG (Allgemeine Elektrizität-Gesellschaft) retained Behrens as artistic consultant. He designed the entire corporate identity (logotype, product design, publicity, etc.) in which he reconciled the Prussian Classicist tradition with the demands of industrial fabrication and for that, he is considered the first industrial designer in history. Peter Behrens was never an employee for AEG, but worked in the capacity of artistic consultant. In 1910, Behrens designed the AEG Turbine Factory.

From 1907 to 1912, he had students and assistants, and among them were Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Adolf Meyer, Jean Kramer and Walter Gropius (later to become the first director of the Bauhaus.)

AEG Turbine Factory, Peter Behrens, Berlin, 1908-9

One of the earliest designs was for the celebrated turbine factory (1909) in Moabit, Berlin, which used an exposed hinged steel frame—designed with Karl Bernhard (b. 1859)—and undecorated masonry cladding on the gable end to create one of the canonical statements of 20th-century architecture, in which transparency and the rhythms of the industrial process were combined with classical monumentality.

The AEG Turbine Factory of 1908-9 had the character of a temple dedicated to some industrial cult. The colossal tribunes had to be lifted and moved from one end of the hall to the other while work was done on them, a process requiring an uninterrupted central aisle and an overhead moving gantry (makas köprüsü). Behrens’s solution was to make the whole building a series of elegant, parallel two sided cranes meeting at the peak of the roof. There was a grand even ennobling character to the whole, and effects of visual lightness and massiveness were cleverly orchestrated to emphasize the overall lines. Had Behrens been a mere functionalist he might simply have optimized the functions and clothed the resulting structure in cheap materials without concern for proportion let alone the impact of forms on the spirit; had he been an ‘Expressionist’ he might have sought to dramatize the process of movement with a highly sculptural formal arrangement. But Behrens steered a way between these approaches in a search for a ‘sober’ and, indeed, ‘typical’ form in the ‘classical / German spirit’.

The supports and profile were adjusted to give a dignified rhythm and impression of repose. The repeated exposed steel supports along the side elevation were given the character of a travée of classical supports. The gantry shape was blended ingeniously with the image of classical pediment. The vast areas of glass in the main facade were laid flush with the pediment plane, so as to give the sense of a thin screen hovering in front of the massive corner quoins in concrete, which provided a suitable sense of structural stability to eye.

BUT the usual expectations of load and support were reversed, since these steel stanchions were tapered, being thinner at the bottom than at the top.
Fan (model GB1) c. 1908.
Peter Behrens (German, 1868-1940)
Painted cast iron and brass, (pirinç) (28.6 x 27.3 x 15.3 cm).
Manufactured by Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft (A.E.G.).

A.E.G.- Metallfadenlampe
(A.E.G. - Metal Filament lamps)
Printer: Hollerbaum & Schmidt, Berlin, 1907.
Peter Behrens (German, 1868-1940)
Lithograph, (69.2 x 52.7 cm).
Arthur Drexler Fund.

Electric Kettle 1909.
Peter Behrens (German, 1868-1940)
Nickel-plated brass and rattan, (22.9 x 22.2 x 15.9 cm). Manufactured by Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft (A.E.G.).
Bruno Taut’s Glass Pavilion

The Werkbund Exhibition of 1914 was held in Cologne, Germany. Bruno Taut’s best-known building, the prismatic dome of the Glass Pavilion familiar from black and white reproduction, was a brightly colored landmark. Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer designed a model factory for the exhibition. Henri van de Velde designed a model theatre. However, a debate was sparked in which Muthesius argued for industrialized design while van de Velde spoke up for the creative artist and craftsman. After the 1914–18 war the Werkbund moved away from anything redolent (anımsatıcı) of an Arts-and-Crafts position towards the Modern Movement.