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HANS WITTWER: INDEXES IN THE HALLE-SCHKENDITZ AIRPORT Laura Martínez de Guereñu

Introduction
Rafael Moneo

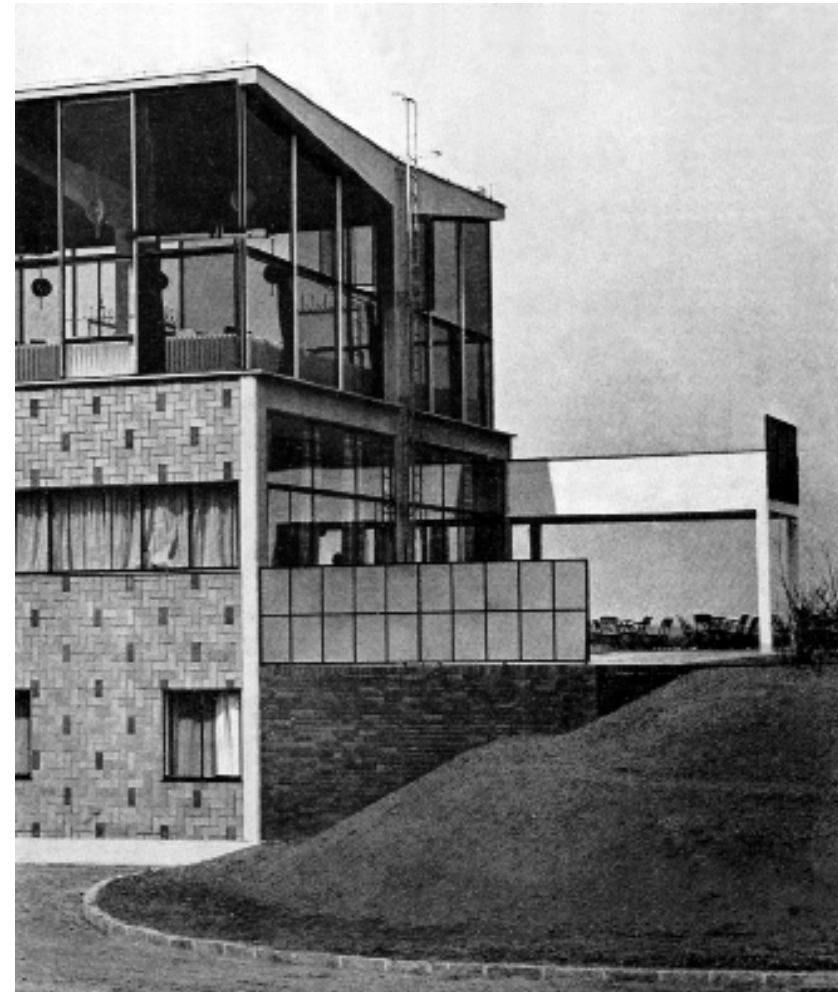
PREFACE

Le Corbusier has become the umbilical cord linking the interests of contemporary architecture with those of the avant-garde between the wars; hence the proliferation of studies on his work by many of those who write about architectural theory and criticism today. Without fear of exaggeration, then, the figure of Le Corbusier can be said to dominate 20th-century architectural history. And I speak of him as a figure because Lecorbusierian studies deal with all aspects of his person: not only his activity as an architect, painter, or publicist, but also his private life, about which some outstanding contributions have been made recently.

This interest in the work and the figure of the Swiss architect has led to the inevitable consequence that many other architects, whose sources are perhaps not as available as those of Le Corbusier, have been ignored or, at least, have not received as much attention as they should have had. Nevertheless, when we look at them, they surprise us with intense, passionate works that undoubtedly deserve to be analyzed and studied both for their intrinsic value and for their meaning to an accurate history of architecture. One such architect is Hans Wittwer, who worked with Hannes Meyer in the well-known competition project of the *Petersschule* in Basel and who single-handedly designed the restaurant for the Halle-Schwendtitz airport.

Laura Martínez de Guereñu rescues this important work from oblivion. Her study begins by reminding us of the connections between Hannes Meyer, Hans Wittwer, and the architects of the Russian Revolution. The ideals of El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko, who aspire to show “no trace of personal expression” in their works, are also those of Meyer and Wittwer. The author of this article sets out to demonstrate how this ethical commitment is present in the airport restaurant. And she manages to do so by making an objective interpretation of the building, which leads her to the logical discovery that it is a work of architecture in which the strategy of design results in the material form, thus allowing the construction elements to become the visual matrix of the building.

Unlike those who associated form with function, Hans Wittwer argued that materialism should have no formal mediation at all, that the form of architecture should reveal its construction process or, as the author points out, its “strategy of creation.” Wittwer’s work, then, shows us the other face of modernism, since a building such as the one studied in this text is stripped of everything that can be regarded as its own: the architect would like to live in a society that did not impose individuals to identify with their own work and



which allowed them instead to solely indulge the process of construction. It is worth remembering that inter-war modernism also included this sort of design proposals, as the present text intends and certainly manages to accomplish.

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KEYWORDS

Hans Wittwer, Halle-Schkenditz airport, design strategy, visual composition.

ABSTRACT

In this essay Laura Martínez de Guereñu rescues from oblivion the work of Hans Wittwer for the Halle-Sckendintz airport, and reminds us the connections between Hannes Meyer, Hans Wittwer and the architects of the Russian Revolution. The article sets out to demonstrate how the ethical commitment is present in the project, and that the strategy of design results in the material form, thus allowing the construction elements to become the visual matrix of the building.

HANS WITTWER: INDEXES IN THE HALLE-SCHKENDITZ AIRPORT



¹ Stedelijk Museum, Russian exhibition, 1923. *Corner Counter-Relief* by Vladimir Tatlin (on wall, second left); *Constructed Torso* (on pedestal, center) and *Constructed Head No. 3* (corner) by Naum Gabo; *two Spatial Constructions* by Alexander Rodchenko, and *Proun 1 A, Bridge I* by El Lissitzky (on wall, last left).

*"Stam is also creating a revolution here, in architecture. Switzerland is very active with her 'Federal art,' the people have to be given some dynamite to swallow. Stam, with some other young architects (Hans Schmidt, Hans Wittwer, Emil Roth) will shortly publish a journal like G. They were very pleased that I have come and asked me to collaborate."*²

In 1924, by the time El Lissitzky arrived to Switzerland for a long period of convalescence in a tuberculosis sanatorium, the radical program of Russian Constructivism had already captured the attention of a number of national modernists. Lissitzky had met Mart Stam in the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin during the opening of the "Erste Russische Kunstausstellung" (First Exhibition of Russian Art, 1922), where he also lectured on the "New Russian Art".³ It was Lissitzky's first opportunity to export Russian Constructivism to the West.⁴

After an international boycott of more than five years, Germany allowed the Russian Constructivists to hold an exhibition in Berlin with works of the two artistic groups of the times. Lissitzky was the main member of UNOVIS (*Utverditely novogo iskusstva*; Affirmers of the New Art), a rationalist group, which isolated art as a purely formal practice. Rodchenko was the main representative of OBMOKhU (*Obschestvo molodykh khudozhnikov*; Society for Young Artists), a constructivist group, who made experiments with modern materials and construction methods, not for aesthetic ends, but rather as a means to design everyday objects for mass production.

² El Lissitzky, "Letter from Lugano, 13 February 1924," in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, ed., *El Lissitzky: life, letters, texts*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1980, p. 38.

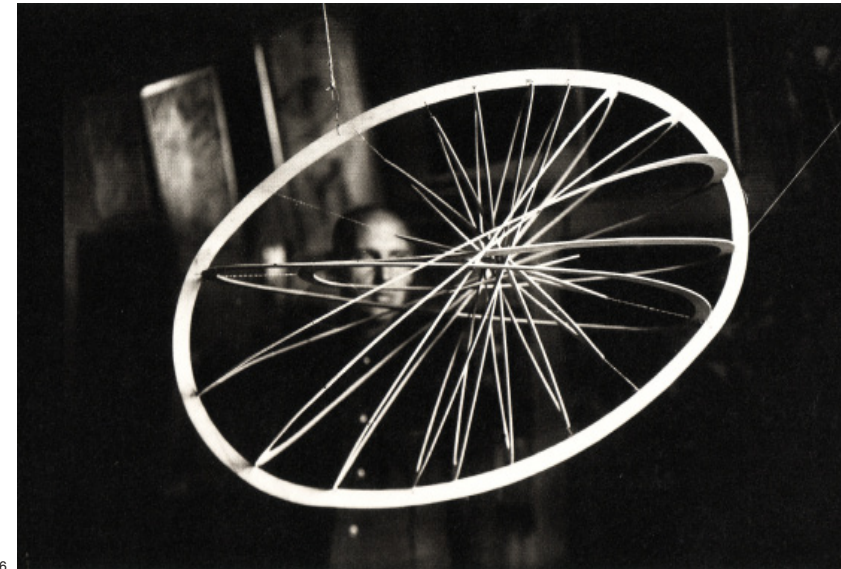
³ El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art: a lecture" (1922), in *El Lissitzky: life, letters, texts*, pp. 334-345. Lissitzky lectured again on the same theme in Amsterdam, where the exhibition was shown during 1923.

⁴ Vladimir Lenin had chosen Lissitzky as the cultural ambassador of the Western countries. Sima Ingberman, "El Lissitzky, the Father of International Constructivism," in *ABC: International constructivist architecture, 1922-1939*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, pp. 3-13.

Although the works of the two groups were quite different, the two sides of Russian Constructivism had indeed a single goal. Both the members of UNOVIS and those of OBMOKhU understood the work of art as a rational construction of real objects, rather than a composition of represented objects. Russian Constructivists abolished the conception of art as an autonomous discipline from life, as an institution with its own separate existence, and fostered instead the creation of a system of universal validity. In order to do so, they developed a series of strategies of design to rationalize their creative decisions. Whether abandoning figuration or introducing non-compositional strategies to rationalize their work, constructivists of the two sides converted the Hegelian idea of “sublation” of art into life in their own political project.⁵

Hanging Spatial Construction, no. 12. Oval in Oval (1920) is one of the two Rodchenko sculptures exhibited in Berlin and the only one that has survived. *Oval in oval*, as most of the works of this series, consisted in a single sheet of plywood coated with aluminum paint, cut-out into concentric rings, which were later rotated in depth in order to create various three-dimensional geometric volumes. Rodchenko operated similarly in all the constructions of this series. He took some material of planimetric nature cut into a specific geometric shape (square, triangle, hexagon, oval, circle) and following his “principle of equal forms” he drew homologous figures from the perimeter towards the center, diminishing their size proportionally. Then, he cut the plane along those lines and unfolded the resulting figures in space. Rodchenko avoided any iconographic element to enter his constructions relating every part organically to the whole.

Proun 1 E, Bridge I (1919) is one of the three *Prouns* that were exhibited and the first abstract work that Lissitzky ever created: a “Project for the Affirmation of the New.” It was by means of the *Prouns* that Lissitzky developed a new visual vocabulary and turned down all the traditional features of the classical order of the western art. Lissitzky relied on axonometric and destroyed the perpendicular vis-à-vis relationship between the viewer and the work of art. He also rejected symmetry, inverted the stable pyramid of composition and left the figures floating in space. By constructing the-



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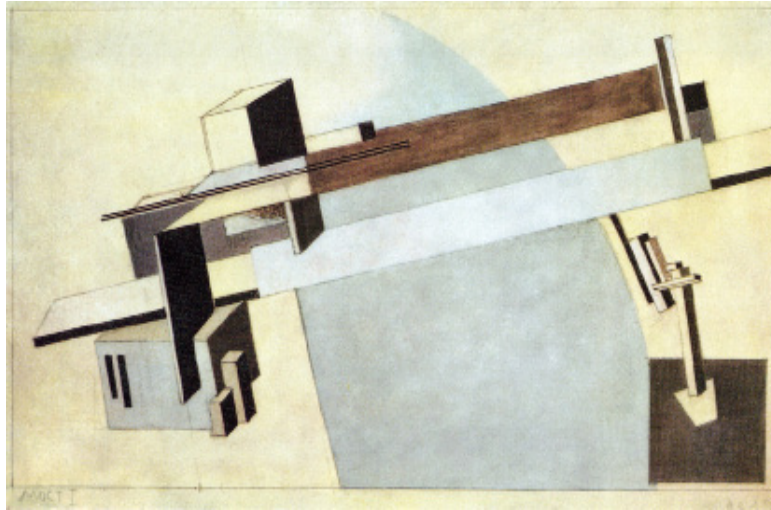
se works, Lissitzky revealed an architectonic sense of pictorial space, in which geometric forms offered immediate recognition with the figures of the physical world. As projective “interchange stations between painting and architecture,” the *Prouns* attempted to capture a new space in which even gravity was vanquished.

Lissitzky’s and Rodchenko’s work reveal how Russian Constructivists wanted to erase every trace of authorship from their work and made art available to the masses. The biggest concern of Russian Constructivists was to make their processes of creation visually traceable and bestow a “Do-It-Yourself” appearance on their works. When looking at constructivist works, the viewers could mentally lay bare the process of creation and could believe themselves capable of creating a construction—a work of art—on their own. This was precisely the attitude of creation that was made explicit in the “Erste Russische Kunstausstellung” in Berlin and that would soon be applied to architectural works.

Lissitzky shared with Stam his idea of spreading Constructivism as an international movement beyond the boundaries of post-revolutionary Russia. Stam was a radical architect of Communist convictions who was highly impressed by Lissitzky’s utopian ideas and works. Thus, completely convinced

⁵“Sublation” of art into life was the design attitude that Russian Constructivists adopted in order to transform art into social practice. It is the English approximation of Hegel’s untranslatable term “Aufhebung,” which means simultaneously “negation” and “preservation.” K. Michael Hays, “The Bauhaus and the Radicalization of Building,” in *Modernism and the posthumanist subject: the architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p. 122.

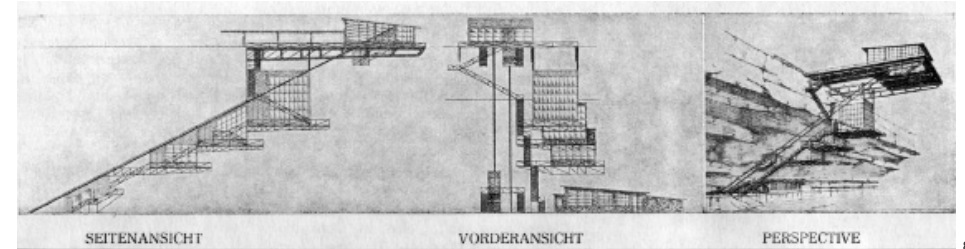
⁶Alexander Rodchenko. *Hanging Spatial Construction no. 12. Oval in Oval*, 1920. Open construction plywood painted aluminum and wire (61 x 84 x 47 cm).



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by Constructivism, Stam returned to his home country, met his modernist colleagues and decided to create a locus of intellectual interchange that would publish radical contemporary trends in architecture. This idea led to the creation of *ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen*, an avant-garde journal that was published from 1924 to 1928.

The ABC group, which originally included Hans Schmidt, Hans Wittwer, Mart Stam, and Emil Roth was engaged in finding and launching a new method of production and in promoting a new approach towards architecture. In the proclaimed program, the journal *ABC*'s mission was twofold: to spread the ideas of Russian Constructivists and to gather the convictions of the European radical architects. It was in this sense that the *ABC* architectural program coincided with the utopianism of Russian Constructivists very much. The contents of the first issues of the journal reflected in fact an intense exchange of views within the two geographical origins of the group. From 1924 to 1926, Lissitzky used the journal as his personal springboard to bring the projects of Asnova—the most abstract and theoretically inclined constructivist group of the times—to the attention of the West. This would be Lissitzky's second opportunity to promote Russian Constructivism in Western Europe.



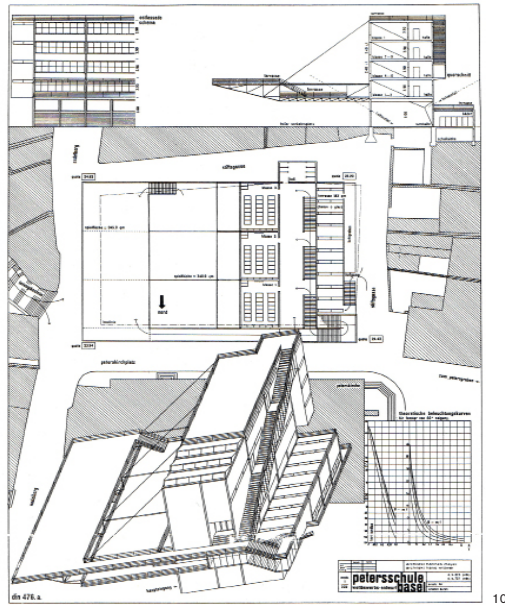
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It was through this publication that the strategies of design that were first employed by the Russian Constructivists were later transmitted to the European architects and artists. Among other examples, the publication of a project developed at the VKHUTEMAS School by a student of Ladovsky, "Restaurant on a Cliff over a Lake: Exercise in the Representation of Formal Qualities of Mass and Equilibrium" (1923), had a great impact on the imagination of European architects, for it radically challenged the design approaches pursued by them. It was a project that clearly emphasized architecture's perceptual potential, paying attention to the manner in which elementary forms and structural parts were combined with each other. As opposed to the architecture that was being constructed in Europe at that time, function gained no importance; organic relationships were brought to the fore instead. Only the manner in which the building had been created from the parts to the whole mattered.

This theoretical project had a clear influence on the work of one of the best known teams of architects working in the environment of journal *ABC*: the tandem integrated by Hans Wittwer and Hannes Meyer. Through this project, Wittwer and Meyer could understand how Russian Constructivists had reduced the traditional distance between art and life by operating on the external determinants of architecture, as functional requirements, building techniques, site conditions, or cultural conventions. And following this ambition, Wittwer and Meyer formalized the competition entry of the *Petersschule* in Basel (1926) in a non-traditional way. The body of the building—a simple five story vertical block composed by a series of three classrooms on each floor—was formally differentiated from the gymnastics-hall, the vertical

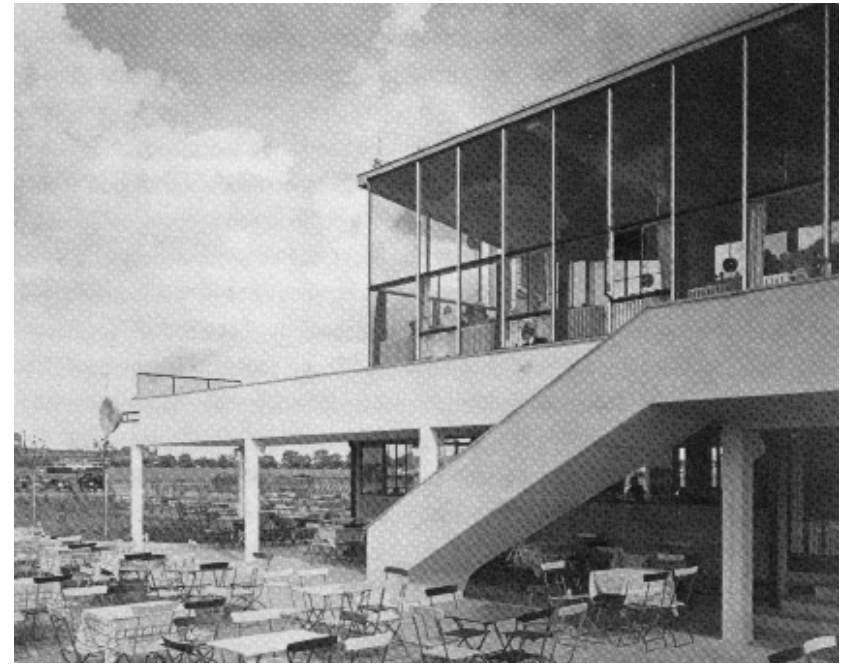
⁷El Lissitzky, Proun 1 A, Bridge I, 1919. Oil and sand on plywood (47 x 63.5 cm). "Proun" is the Russian acronym that Lissitzky used to nominate a series of abstract geometric paintings which he began to produce in 1919.

⁸W. Simbirchev. Restaurant on a Cliff over a Lake: Exercise in the Representation of Formal Qualities of Mass and Equilibrium, 1923. Published in *ABC*, series 1, no. 3/4, 1925.



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circulation, the restrooms, and the playgrounds. The vertical elements of circulation were not integrated in the volumes, but were explicitly exposed and treated as programmatic parts of equivalent significance. Relation to the site did not happen traditionally either. A cantilever of enormous proportions challenged the order of traditional structural systems and theatrically elevated the playgrounds from the ground of the old city. Instead of creating a classical courtyard on the ground floor, two cable-mounted terraces supporting the playgrounds were suspended from the main building on the opposite side of the gymnastics-hall. Calculated with dramatic structural virtuosity and technological precision, the self-weight of the main building was used as the counterbalance of the pillar-less iron construction of the exterior playground, which was suspended from its top. As the graphic documents evidence, the project for the Petersschule competition in Basel was charged with an exuberant utopianism very much influenced by the projects of Russian Constructivist architects. This was the same kind of utopianism that Wittwer kept alive in the only work that he built after the split of his partnership with Meyer: the restaurant for the Halle-Schkenditz airport.⁹ Bombed and destroyed in the beginning of World War II, the architectural literature of the 20th century has not devoted much attention to the restaurant for the Halle-Schkenditz airport. However, it is a key work to unders-



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tand the way in which many modern architects rejected composition-based architecture's means of signification, or in other words, negated the existence of a second level of meaning beyond the traces of the processes of construction. When the European *neue sachlichkeit* was still an operative modern architectural program—but had already begun to produce some very severe and restrained works of architecture—Wittwer offered his restaurant building as a token of the social role that modern architecture was called to accomplish.

Wittwer demystified the design process derived from the “intuition” of its creator in order to explain it as a rational and objective process. As Lissitzky and Rodchenko may have done before, Wittwer did not leave any trace of his personal expression in this work and instead, foregrounded the intellectual ability of the modern inhabitants. Wittwer clearly explained the utopia of Russian Constructivists through the construction of this restaurant-building,

⁹After designing one of the winning entries for the Société des Nations competition in Genève (1927) and the project for the General German Trade Unions Federation in Bernau (1928), Wittwer and Meyer dissolved their partnership. Wittwer did not leave behind any significant written evidence of his architectural thinking, although he taught at the Bauhaus. He believed himself a constructor, someone who could solve practical problems without needing theoretical postulates. This might be one of the reasons that lead him

refuse to go to the first CIAM in La Sarraz in 1928. See Julius Posener, *Hans Wittwer/ Eingeführt und Zusammengestellt*, Gta, Zürich, 1985, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰ Hans Wittwer and Hannes Meyer. Board of the competition for the Petersschule in Basel, 1926.

¹¹ Hans Wittwer. Restaurant in the Halle-Schkenditz airport. Side view, 1931. Destroyed in 1940.



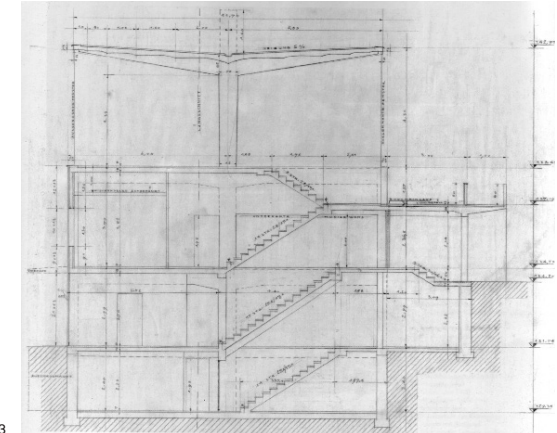
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eliminating every trace of authorship from the architectural work and inviting the visitors to interpret instead. This explicit removal of authorship from the architectural work operated as a visualizing strategy for the masses, who following the logic that had generated the project, could understand each of the phases that were registered during the construction process.

AN IRREFUTABLE INDEX

Wittwer began his design approach by carefully looking at both the contextual and the programmatic conditions. The site was situated in the Western limit of a vast wind-swept plain of the airport. The landing strip of the planes extended through its north side, while the arrival from the city occurred from the south. These conditions were quite determining, because a height difference of an entire story separated the landing strip from the road arriving from the city. The program was simple, a cafe-restaurant, bar, dining room, kitchen, warehouse, restrooms, and apartments for pilots. As seen, the difference of level that separated the two sides was a much stronger determinant factor than the program. For this reason, Wittwer did not find

¹² Southeast aerial view.



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the architectural solution in the plans, but in the cross-section. In fact, Wittwer realized that a unique cross-section could do both: link the functions between each other and fully connect the building from the ground up.

Wittwer concentrated all the vertical communications in one single bay and, by means of a two-flight staircase running across the four stories, linked three entrances and anchored the building to the site. For the ground floor and the two basements, Wittwer created a concrete portal of two bays, which spanned six meters. In the upper floor, Wittwer symmetrically cantilevered two beams which rested in a single central column, leaving the facades totally open to the views. Once the system of portals have been created and situated in the center of the building, Wittwer generated the structural bay of the restaurant by giving depth to the cross section. Then, Wittwer produced a centrifugal distribution of the functions in the plans and added two more modules symmetrically to each of the sides. Wittwer did not introduce any other system of vertical circulation, apart from the one designed in the original module, which communicated the different floors. Wittwer made each module of the restaurant dependent on the central one, in which all the functional and site conditionings had been first abstracted and resolved in a single cross-section.

¹³ Cross section.



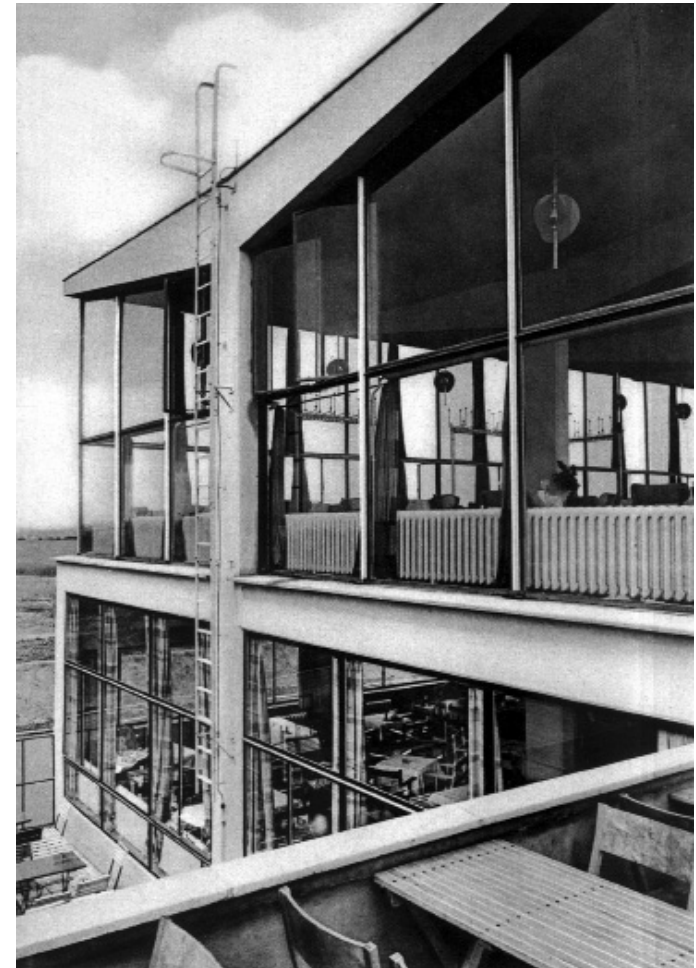
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When Wittwer added symmetrically two more modules to each of the sides of the building, he left the edges without any structural element, implying—as it seemed—that the building could have been extended infinitely. Due to the double cantilever that rested in a single spine, Wittwer was able to eliminate the structure from the vertical limits as well as the perception of a material edge in each of the sides of the building. The last structural bay was just similar to the generative one.

Wittwer created material continuity through the edge when he situated the glass of the enclosure in the interior side of the structural portico. By this means, the edge could be clearly seen close-up, but completely disappeared from a medium distance. In order to negate the vertical limits of the building as linguistic elements, Wittwer bestowed the horizontal ribboning of the glass the responsibility of constructing a visual limit. In fact, the horizontal ribbon was the only constructive element that fully enclosed the restaurant and linked together the four elevations together without any interruption. This visual limit represented the horizon line, the locus of vanishing points in the inside. However, this line of horizon could never be inhabited, for it was situated at a much higher level than the sight lines of the visitors. Thus, by making the line of horizon inapprehensible, by making explicit the infinite space, Wittwer evidenced his unconditional support to iteration of industrial processes of construction.¹⁵

¹⁴ Interior view.

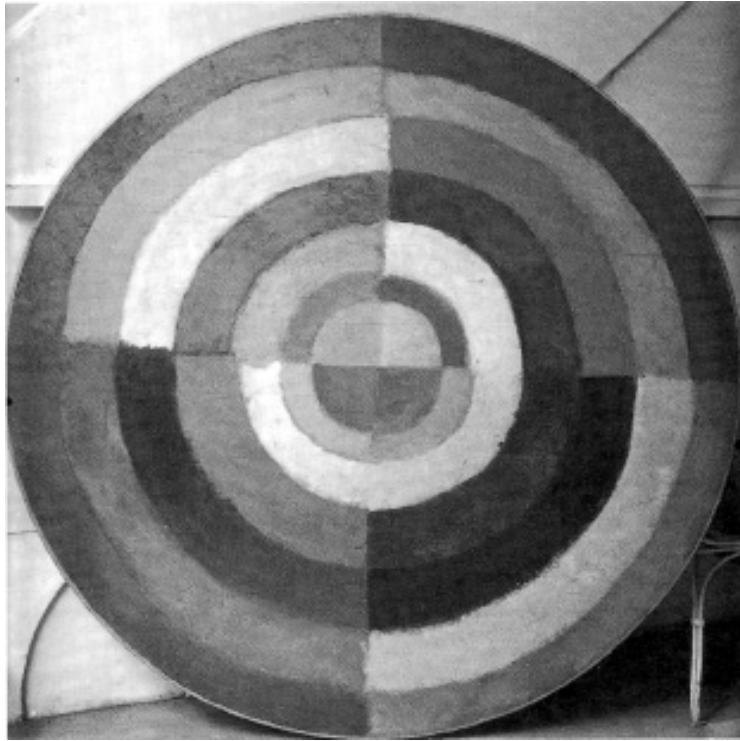
¹⁵ In 1926, Wittwer wrote "Industrielle Massenproduktion von Wohnhäusern" (Industrial building production), an article for ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen in which he described in detail the new industrial products and the construction techniques.



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The structure was clearly seen in the side elevation. In fact, Wittwer flattened the frames of the structural portal into the skin of the two side elevations and bestowed on them the ability to narrate the way in which the bays behind had been organized. Wittwer converted these structural frames into indexical representations of the building's process of construction. As a footprint in the sand, these structural concrete portals—two oversized cantilevered beams that rest on a central column in the upper floor and a regular beam that rests on three columns in the lower ones—flattened with the glass, represented the spatial module that had generated the building. It was the

¹⁶ Flattening of the cross section.



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planar means of representation in which the full solution of the project had been abstracted. One may say that these side elevations were grids, indexes of the design process of the building construction that prevented the restaurant from being recognized formally.¹⁷

Looking at the first pictorial grid of the history of modern art can help us understand Wittwer's operation in the side elevations of the restaurant. This circular shape painting is particularly revealing because the sign and its referent are co-present. Robert Delaunay's *Premier Disqué Simultané* (1912) consists of seven concentric bands of solid colors divided into quarters in which the image and the field—the disk and the ground—coexist physically. The creation of this painting masked a significant pictorial achievement in the beginning of the twentieth century, for the figure-ground relationship of traditional painting was surpassed when both the sign and its referent collapsed on the canvas. As Delaunay did in his painting, contesting the givens of pictorial aesthetic tradition, Wittwer surpassed the traditional relationship between form and space organization, and rendered together the skin and

¹⁷ "Index" is one of the three categories in which the American linguist Charles Sanders Peirce classified meaning; the one which is based on cause and effect relationships. According to Hays, when a work of architecture points to the reproductive processes of its making, when it is a trace or direct registration of those materials and procedures of reproduction from which it is constructed, one can say that it has the condition of "factual indexicality." See "reproduction and negation: the cognitive project of neue

the structure of the restaurant in the side facades. In this sense, the side fronts of the restaurant did not refer to any figurative element but, mirroring the structural bay by means of which space was generated, represented nothing but the construction process itself.

Wittwer added a structurally independent, but powerfully charged symmetrical white portal in the side of the landing strip in order to allow the longitudinal elevation to reflect the process of design. Situated at the level of separation between the upper glazed crystalline dining room and the lower opaque parts of the restaurant cafe, the portal played an important functional role. At the top, it provided an exterior space to view through; at the bottom, a covered space protected from the sun. However, the most particular feature of this portico did not have to do with function, but with symmetry, for it had the ability to rhetorically signify the beginning of the design process.

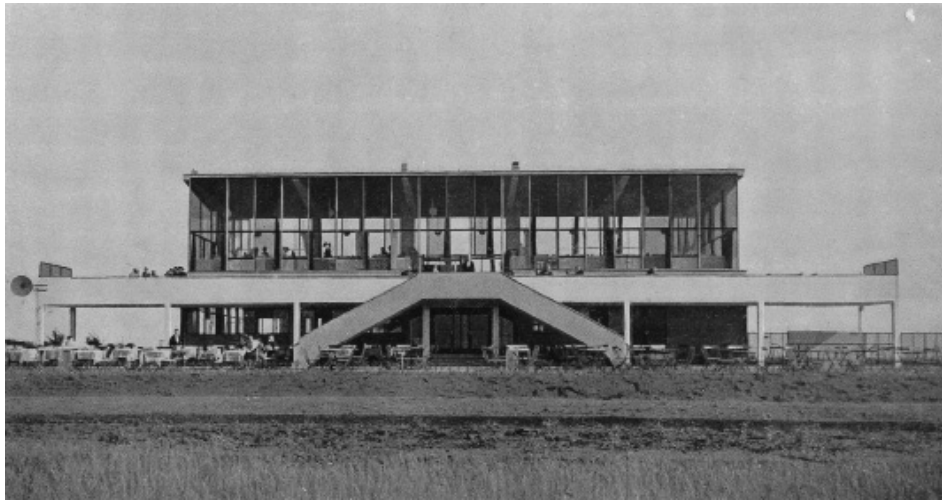
These two elements—the side elevations in which the structure and the skin were flattened and the symmetrical portico that run along the longitudinal elevation—were indexes that rendered explicit Wittwer's "intention" as an author. Because it was only by the reconstruction of the process of creation, upon the discovery of the building's internal structure, that the modern inhabitants—the new collective audiences—could fully understand the building.¹⁹ Both the side elevation and the symmetrical portico demonstrate that the development of the project, the construction process, depended already on the first module in which the entire design had been solved.

The lack of an edge, the flattened skin and frame and the structurally independent symmetrical white portal evidence that Wittwer did not simply add a series of structural bays; he did not merely juxtapose a series of modules to generate the building. Wittwer "structurally deduced" the entire development of the restaurant from an original module in which all the functional and site conditionings had been first abstracted. Wittwer indeed configured a building system "structurally deducing" it from an internal module created

sachlichkeit," in Hays, *Modernism and the posthumanist subject: the architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Robert Delaunay, *Premier Disqué Simultané*, 1913. Diameter, 134 cm. Oil on canvas.

¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss has precisely defined indexicality as a "model of consciousness," which allows "a public model of meaning," for everybody to understand the intention of the author. Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility. Reflections on Post '60s sculpture," in *Artforum* 3 1973, pp. 43-53.



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in the cross-section. The fact that Wittwer used “structural deduction” as his primary design strategy to repeat longitudinally the generative module of the restaurant should not come as a surprise, for it was one of the most important strategies of space organization that Russian Constructivists had used in their politically engaged artistic practice of the early 1920s. As evidenced in his *Spatial Constructions*, Rodchenko consistently used this creative strategy of space organization in order to negate traditional means of representation, and transfer the creative ability from the author to the subject, who had to engage in order to understand the work.

“Structural deduction” was first theorized in minimalism, as a way to describe pictorial organization. It was Michael Fried who coined this term in order to explain how Frank Stella’s minimalist paintings had meaning. As Fried explained, Stella structured *Die Fahne Hoch!*—one of his best known early black paintings—deductively, deriving all the internal differentiations of the surface from the literal aspects of the canvas edge.²¹ Stella began this creation crossing the middle point of the canvas with a vertical and a horizontal line parallel to the shape of the canvas. Then, he expanded a repetitive sequence of homothetic stripes in a double set of symmetries from the middle point towards the four edges of the canvas. In this way, Stella demonstrated what a painting was through its making. The painting was a deductive structure for the viewer, who could understand how the painting had been created.

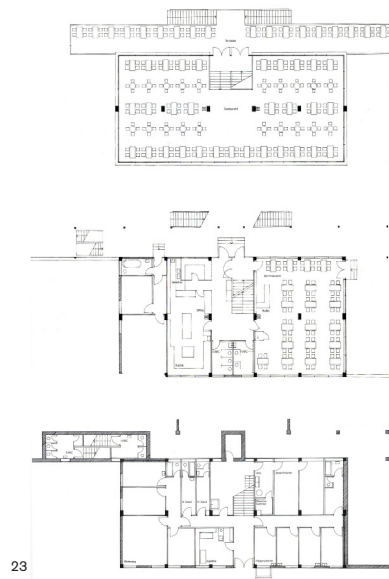
²⁰Front view of the restaurant of the Halle-Schkenditz airport, 1931.



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After this historical moment or art criticism, “deductive structure” has been consistently used to describe those paintings in which a shape or a structure—for example a square on a square canvas—is “deduced” from its support, from the boundaries of the picture frame. When the organization of the space of the entire painting is derived from the boundaries of the picture frame, when the division of a surface is predicated by the material properties of that very surface (shape, proportion, dimension), it is said that the painting has a deductive structure. Yve-Alain Bois has in fact redefined structural deduction as one of the “non-compositional strategies” that modern artists

²¹Frank Stella. *Die Fahne Hoch!*, 1959. Black enamel on canvas, 308.6 x 185.4 cm. See Michael Fried, *Three American painters*, The Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass., 1965.



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relied on, in order to rationalize their creative decisions, to erase every trace of subjectivity, any sign that pointed to the authorial identity of the work of art.²² Wittwer is one of these modern artists that advocated for revealing architectural matter without any formal mediation and for limiting the scope of his work by means of a design strategy. By means of structural deduction Wittwer could completely erase the trace of his authorship in the restaurant, only making its process of construction explicit.

Wittwer made the symmetrical portico of the open terrace work accordingly with the structural bays originally derived from the cross section and put special effort into physically connecting the frontal and the side elevations. To do so, he rendered the two indexical elements—the additional white portal and the flattened sections—as a visual unit, and constructed both of them in white concrete. This coincidence of materials provoked an apparent ambiguity between the different architectural elements, which many times forced the spectators for a continuous interpretation. As it happened in Lissitzky's *Prouns*, the visitors needed to enjoy different points of view at the same time in order to achieve an overall view of the project. This need to experience the



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building from different sides endowed the restaurant with an axonometric nature, which allowed the infinite not just “to be seen,” but “to be thought.” With this idea of the infinite extension in mind, Wittwer conceived the building abstractly, as an all-embracing addition of a series of cross sections in a longitudinal track. By means of two mass-produced materials, Wittwer created a vertical differentiation between an earthy lower opaque part—which housed all the services—and an upper transparent airy part—which accommodated the main dining room. In the upper part, Wittwer alternated the material quality of the glass, creating a vibrant lantern, both when the natural light entered during the day and when the artificial light was projected towards the outside during the night. In this way, Wittwer created a dynamic field of transparent and colored vertical glass panels.²⁵ In the lower part, Wittwer created a neutral field of industrially produced ceramic tiles, introducing red pieces among the dominating yellowish ones. In order to balance the horizontal and the vertical dimensions, Wittwer assembled the cladding diagonally, and produced a state of visual equilibrium of two colors. Wittwer alternated horizontal and vertical pieces, creating a soft diagonal lattice in

²²Yve-Alain Bois, “The Difficult Task of Erasing Oneself: Non-Composition in Twentieth-Century Art,” lecture at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, March 7, 2007.

²³Basement, ground, and first floor plan.

²⁴View of the restaurant from the city.

²⁵Sigfried Giedion admired the restaurant for he considered it as a clear rejection of any type of ma-

chine romanticism, which allowed organic and human forces to become more effective. See Giedion, “L’aéroport,” originally published in *Cahiers d’Art*, no. 7-8, 1931, pp. 359-368. Republished as “Nachwuchs in Deutschland,” in *Bauwelt* 33, 1931, pp. 17-27. An excerpt of this article was translated into Spanish as “Restaurante del aeródromo de Schkenditz, línea Halle-Leipzig (Alemania), 1931,” 2C. *Construcción de la Ciudad* special issue of “La línea dura,” April 1985, p. 34.

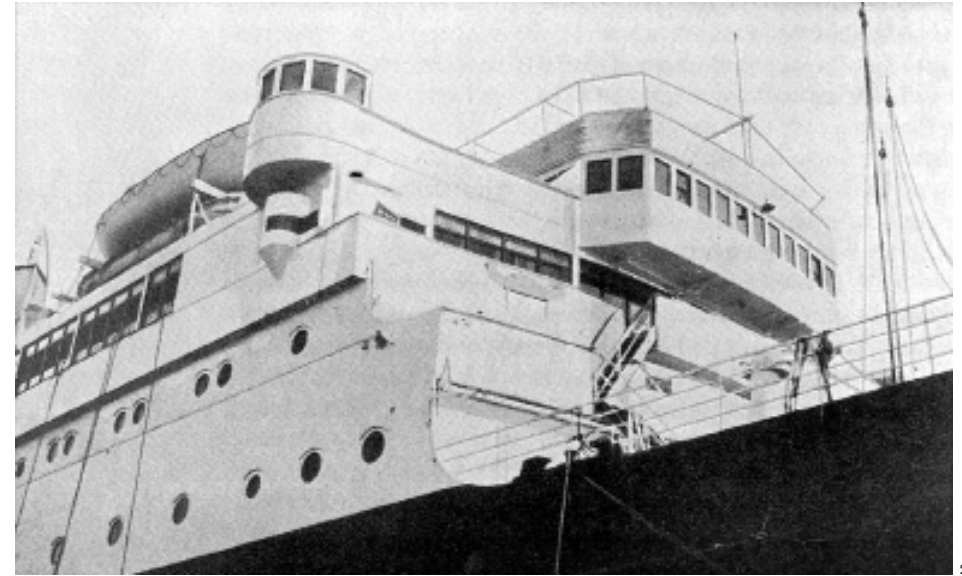
which windows of different sizes could be opened according to the different functions in the inside.

The order of the building looked like that of the assembly line of modern systems of production and to some extent, the planes aligned in the landing strip of the airport waiting to take-off. Similarly to what Lissitzky and Rodchenko had done during the same decade, Wittwer constructed an oversized structure covered by tense skins, an irrefutable index, which did not have an impact because of its function, but because of the relationships of the parts to the whole.

A NON-ICONOGRAPHIC CONTAINER

The strategies that Wittwer used in the restaurant of the Halle-Schkenditz Airport avoided transferring any external reference into the project, as opposed to what Wittwer's contemporary architects were doing in projects of similar functional nature. When Wittwer constructed the restaurant, the attitude of referring iconographically to engineering artifacts was common among modern architects who felt completely free to mimic the forms of planes and ocean-liners when designing airports, yacht-clubs, or any other kind of leisure buildings. In a completely different fashion, Wittwer anticipated the architecture of containers, those buildings whose form is indifferent to its function.

At that time, airplanes were the most acclaimed artifacts that modern technology had created. As ocean-liners did, airplanes represented the paradigm of the modern functional *dictum*, as their shapes had been derived from a profound understanding of their functions. Modern architects shared a great fascination for these engineering artifacts, and often used them as iconographic references for their buildings. Bruno Taut compared a photograph of the *SS Australia* to a modern building in his book, *Modern Architecture*, and Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock also selected examples of this kind for the catalog of the *International Style*²⁶ Exhibition. Joseph Emberton and the tandem of Jose Manuel Aizpurúa and Joaquín Labayen



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created explicit references to the shipping trade in their English and Basque yacht-clubs respectively.²⁷ In 1931, Emberton constructed a building, which unquestionably referred to the nautical world relying on the repertoire of canonical modern elements. The series of horizontal elements, such as the open balconies protected with steel hand-rails or the ribbon windows along each floor, configured a building which seemed to have just arrived to the sea shore. In 1929, Aizpurúa and Labayen also constructed a realistic and elongated building which formally resembled an ocean-liner in Donostia-San Sebastián. Most of the roof surface was protected with steel handrails and treated as a deck. Resembling the elevations of any transatlantic-ship, several portholes and horizontal windows were arrayed along its white walls.

²⁶ *SS Australia*. In Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture*, The Studio, London, 1929.

²⁷ Joaquín Labayen and José Manuel Aizpurúa. Clubhouse in Donostia-San Sebastián, 1929. Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock selected these two buildings for their catalog on *International Style*. See Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, Nor-



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Wittwer did not mimic the airplane imagery when designing the Halle-Schkenditz restaurant, but constructed the very opposite case: a building that clearly showed its different layers. From the concrete portal that flattened into the side facades, up to the cross section that solved the difference of level between the two sides; from the white portico that was added to the longitudinal façade, up to the way in which each of the modular structural bays were repeated. Where other architects used modern movement's linguistic principles, Wittwer invented a new strategy to communicate, a new way of space organization that prevented the parts of the building from being recognized independently. Following the principles that Russian Constructivists had previously developed, Wittwer structurally derived the form of the restaurant from a cross-section original module. He did not allow any iconographic element—any strange reference—to enter the logic of his construction, and did not mimetically rely on any referent. Instead, he related all the pieces of the restaurant from the parts to the whole and put the stress of the project in its syntax.

Configuring the restaurant as a system of elements, Wittwer surpassed formal representation in the traditional sense. Wittwer created the restaurant



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as a flexible system in which modern techniques of production had been applied. By means of structural deduction and being faithful to his political ambition, Wittwer synthesized a part of the abstract reality of his architectural practice. Just like the architects who opposed the *neue sachlichkeit*, Wittwer incorporated the way in which the restaurant had been created—the technical means of its “facture”—in the form of the restaurant. As the work only talked about its strategy of design, as the work only pointed to the reproductive processes of its making, it generated its own representation without any authorial mediation, as if it was the result of an industrial process. Making the strategy of creation explicit, Wittwer constructed an intelligible reproductive system.

While most of his modern colleagues associated form and function, Wittwer only unfolded the process of construction and produced a very generic form, completely flexible, and indifferent to its function. By constructing a container, Wittwer surpassed the one to one relationship between form and meaning that was spread in modernism and in some sense anticipated the crisis of architecture as function. Horizontally repeating the original differential module to the two sides, Wittwer followed one of the non-compositional

ton & Co., New York, 1932, pp. 142, 143, and 174. The caption of the photograph of the Clubhouse in San Sebastian is particularly relevant. “The marine character of the design is justified by site and purpose. The projection of the terrace roof adds an unnecessary complication. Compare Emberton’s simpler treatment of the same problem.”

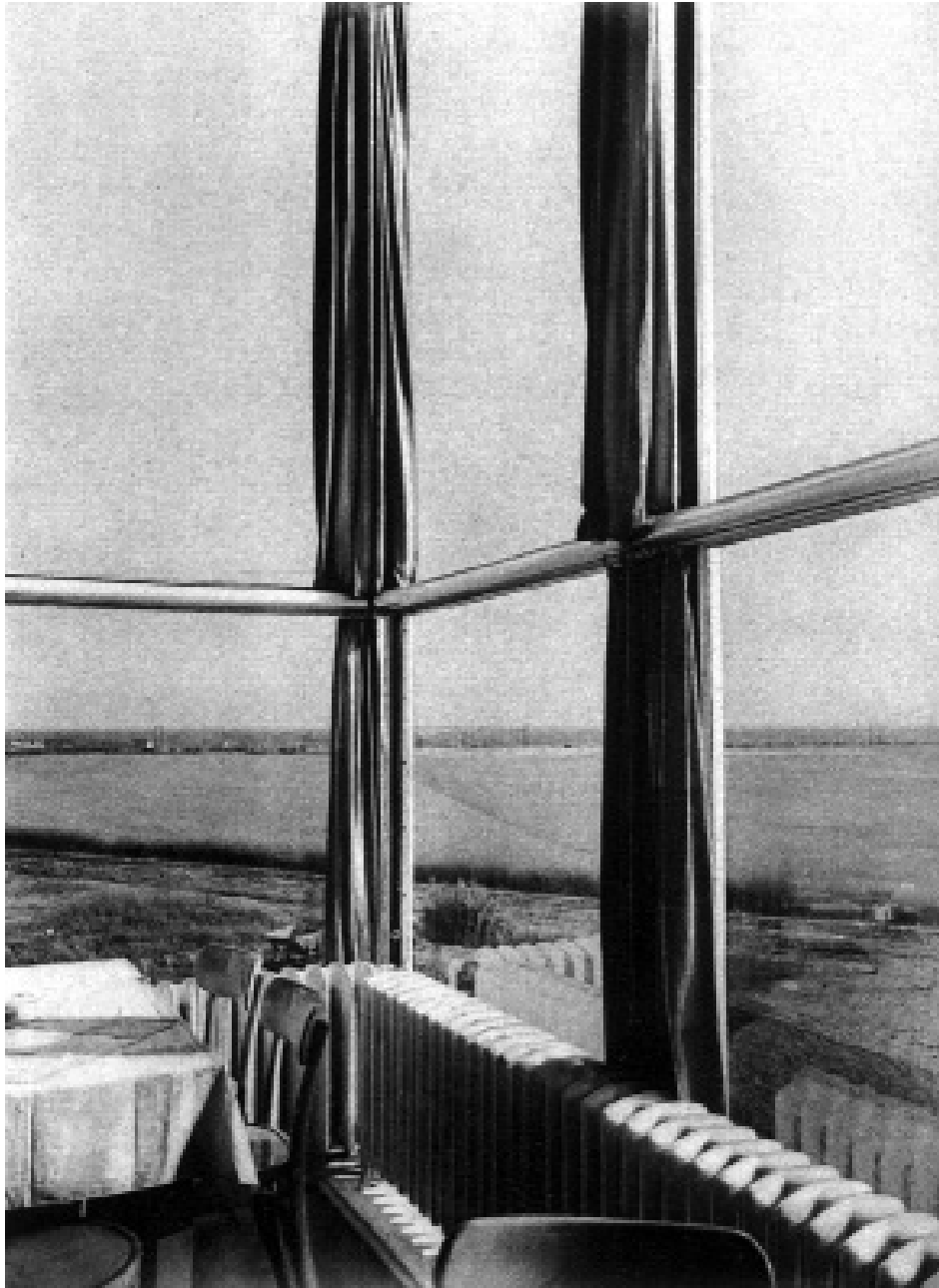
²⁸Hans Wittwer. Side view of the restaurant in the Halle-Schkenditz airport.

strategies of design that Russian Constructivists artists had created in order to fight against composition and limit the arbitrariness of their creative decisions. Wittwer substituted functionalism, the architecture whose form reveal the function behind, with “indexicality,” the architecture whose form reveal the strategies of design behind. In this sense, one would argue that deductive structure, the strategy of design at work in the restaurant of the Halle-Schkenditz airport anticipates the end of the *neue sachlichkeit* architectural program.

Wittwer offered intelligibility by means of indexical elements and rendered the restaurant as a mass-produced system. In doing so, Wittwer constructed a restaurant as a socially accessible system for structural deduction. In the same way that it was only possible to understand Lissitzky's *Prouns* and Rodchenko's *Spatial Constructions* through the reconstruction of their process of creation, the only way to comprehend the internal order of the restaurant was by looking at its process of construction. By means of a series of indexes, Wittwer constructed a non-iconographic container that did not acquire meaning because of its function, but because of the relationships that emerged among its different parts.

Wittwer incorporated the way in which he had created the restaurant—the technical means of its facture—to its architectural form. As the work explicitly expressed its design strategy, as it pointed to its processes of reproduction, it generated its own representation without any authorial mediation. It was in this way that Wittwer was able to eliminate every trace of creative subjectivity and to generate a public model of meaning, easily accessible for the new active subjects of modernism.

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HANS WITTWER: INDEXES IN THE HALLE-SCHKENDITZ AIRPORT

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