

Peter behrens, aeg turbine factory, berlin, 1908-09 essay samples

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The Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft AEG Turbine Factory was built between 1908 and 1909 by the early modernist artist, innovator, architect, and painter Peter Behrens. Behrens was born in Hamburg in 1868, and he died in Berlin in 1940. Behrens first studied as a painter and a woodcutter, but by the turn of the century had abandoned it in favor of the applied arts. Behrens became involved in the German labor movement, and he was influenced by nationalist ideas to fortify the middle class at the time, and was influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and the early ideals that formed European cultural aesthetics leading up to the First World War. Behrens work for AEG began in 1907, and he was in charge of not only executing architectural design, but also oversaw product design, branding, marketing, as well as the buildings and also the tools in the factories, from “ tiny switches to massive turbines.” AEG at the time was Berlin’s number one electricity provider. Behrens’ work on the turbine factory is one of the earliest examples of his work with AEG, situated in Moabit, Berlin. AEG symbolizes the transition Germany was facing at the time, and the company needed to expand its brand and to promote its dominance in the market. The factory sits on the corner of Hutten Street in the now tree-lined urbanized suburb of Berlin.

AEG wanted its buildings to not only be working factories, but also illustrate the company’s presence and to work like an advertisement. In this way, the architecture of Behrens work for AEG shows constraint in overdoing the design elements, but it also emphasizes the monumentality of the industrial workplace. The turbine hall is simple with only the words “ Turbinenfabrik” inscribed on the front, written below the company logo. The hall where the

turbines are assembled has a support system of “ three-hinged arches” with beam ties at height of twenty-five meters. The gable front has two pylons with as they go toward the top narrow a bit, and in the top façade in a polygonal gable zone is the company logo that is next to a window. The building looks heavy, but the façade is made of thin concrete skin held together by a steel lattice. According to Anderson, the building’s façade represents “ spatial conclusions, not load bearing elements.” According to Kultermann, Behrens achieved a plastic effect and a dynamic form of construction of the trusses, “ which were pulled towards the outside,” as well as “ through the tapering iron trusses and the glass areas which were drawn towards the inside.” The corner pylons were not necessary, but add to the monumental shape of the structure, “ which could not be considered a necessity for construction, and which were built with a thin ferroconcrete shell, caused criticism among younger architects.”

The building was constructed with an “ exposed hinged steel frame” which he designed with Karl Bernhard. Behrens’ architectural is set within the context of the early modern movement in art and design that reached its high point between 1925 and 1933, but in reality, as we can see in the modernist elements of the turbine factory, modernism began even earlier, and its reach has extended way beyond the Second World War art and architecture both in Europe and in the United States. The turbine hall is certainly one of these early modernist works, created by the founding member of Germany’s Werkbund movement that sought to transform industrial architecture “ across the spectrum.”

Behrens’s work first dabbled in an unadorned style that was a marked

departure from the imperial pomp and gestures to classical antiquity that characterized architecture in Europe before World War I. According to Anderson, Behrens reconciled the Prussian Classicist tradition with the demands of industrial fabrication. The building is undecorated and its shows strength in its masonry, to create what some have called a “ canonical statement” on twentieth century architecture, in which the structure of the building is transparent, and the building itself reifies the waves and rhythms of the worker in relationship to the building he works, combined with a monumentality that still holds onto classical roots. At the time of its construction, the building was revolutionary and different because it signaled the aim of the German werkbund movement, to transform the industrial landscape of Germany to help the suffering middle class in the country transition from an agrarian economic system to an industrialized nation. Modern architecture is often portrayed as a response to industrialization and to industrialized culture. The A. E. G. Turbine Factory by Peter Behrens has become the monument that supposedly proclaimed the new direction. Nikolaus Pevsner, in arguing that this architecture was " pioneering," implied that its modernity was still nascent and glorified the civilizational struggle of the early modernists. Here for the first time, Pevsner claimed, " the imaginative possibilities of industrial architecture were visualized." What historians have noted about the AEG turbine factory is that it is such an early work of modernist practice that often gets overlooked by other notable architects like Frank Lloyd Wright in later decades of the century who would nail it with the Larkin Building in Buffalo. Historians point out the façade of the factory as the most notable point of interest, its fully exposed glazed

windows, and the achievement of creating a functional design with the levity of simple aesthetics, making Behrens' accomplishment a manifesto of the young industrial architecture of the time.

As Kultermann observes, the building represents the combined efforts of many different converging influences. It is interesting that the building has come to represent both the ideals of early modernity, but also the ideals of the workers, and the effort to place in the building a symbol of respect that is due to the worker. Critics are impressed by the large glass and iron pairing that becomes paired with an industrial aesthetic that both gives the building grace and strength -- the span is enormous. Showing the work on the outside gives the building a plastic and dynamic effect.

Hilberseimer notes that the building reflects a turn away from imperial power that was the central economic and power grip of Europe over its colonies, and the restraining effect and the doing away with classical themes reflects this turn away from hegemony and imperialism. The classical influences are there, but the insertion of the façade gives the building a different version of power on otherwise terse, powerful structure. Mendelsohn has criticism for the building, which he thinks Behrens copies the tension which the hall creation with a rigidity of a temple, but Le Corbusier thought the structure was "charged" like a magnificent machine, both solemn like a church and the embodiment of modern cleanliness. If the church is to classicism what the factory is to early modernism, then Behrens' project certainly fits into this category. Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, Behrens' work shows the dawning of the modernist period in architectural history of the twentieth century. In his work we see the early

markings of what is to come. First, Behrens represents a movement in art to erase the pompous forms of neo-classicism and start afresh. Second, his work introduced the concept of the building as the brand. Behrens tires to marry life into art, mixing solemnity with practical problems of how to introduce Europe to a new industrial world. The horrors of both world wars has not yet come to past when Behrens work is completed, so it is a modern work without the stain of war, so it can stand as an impressive structure both wedded to the past, and looking forward to the future. Behrens obviously did not solve the problems Germany was having at the time solely through architecture, but his genius of bringing life into art certainly shows how he was able to integrate form into function. It's like how Apple uses the architecture of its brick and mortar stores to both serve a functional purpose to sell products, but the building is the brand. Third, Behrens work presages the work of the Bauhaus and even postmodern art that even more sought to strip function down to its simplest formal properties.

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