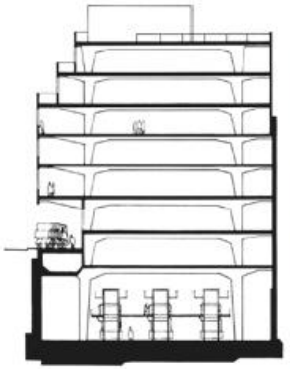
1890–1969

Evan Owen Williams

Born in London in 1890 of Welsh origin, Owen Williams was a self-made man, not only because he obtained his engineering degree as a part time evening student, but also because he became an architect/engineer out of a desire to overcome the traditional division of labor, in which engineers were invariably relegated to calculating the basic structure, but otherwise had little influence on the overall form of the building.

Acquiring his expertise in the emerging field of reinforced concrete construction by working for an American concrete engineering firm in Britain, Williams first rose to prominence as an engineer through his collaboration with the architect Maxwell Ayrton on the 1924 British Empire Exhibition of which the most prominent structure was the 125,000 seat Wembley Stadium. Five years later, in 1929, Owen Williams began his independent practice as an architect/engineer with his design for the Dorchester Hotel, facing onto Hyde Park in the center of London; a work which he was ultimately prevented from executing due to the client's anxiety about harmonizing with the existing urban context. He was obliged to relinquish control over the final form once its reinforced concrete frame had been brought to completion. Although his successor, the architect Curtis Green, modified the stream-lined character of Owen William's original design by super-imposing a quasi-Art Deco syntax onto its form, the fundamental rhythmic organization of the basic structure continued to inform the general character of the building.



1. Daily Express Building, London, 1929–31, cross section

Owen Williams' second work of consequence was the Daily Express Building in Fleet Street, built over the years 1929–1931. Here the inter-professional rivalry was reversed with Williams' transforming a neoclassical design of the architects Ellis and Clarke, by introducing a wide span portal frame capable of accommodating three newspaper press runs within a 58 feet column-free span. The two set-back levels of editorial offices, above the press hall, gave the building its characteristic stepped profile which was unified by the application of black vitrolite throughout; a glistening, black curtain wall of striking originality, given its date. The symmetrical structure of the building comprised 6-foot-wide perimeter beams in concrete which, 12 inches deep, were carried on 6-foot-wide concrete piers. These last supported the outriding, semi-circular, cantilevered corners of the building. Apart from facing the frame and upstands in vitrolite, the fenestration throughout was standard industrial glazing.

2. Daily Express Building, Manchester, 1935–39, view of flush curtain walling with cornice and cleaning cradle track above
<pp. 136–137>

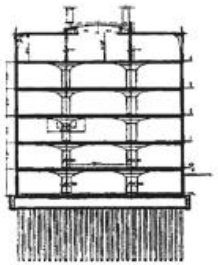
Owen Williams would soon surpass this triumph with his canonical Boots pharmaceutical plant, completed on a 300 acre site at Beeston, near Nottingham, in 1932. This was typical of the commissions he received in the inter-war period, in that it was directly related to the modernization of British society. The Boots pharmaceutical plant was as much a result of fundamental changes in everyday hygiene as the newspaper plants were a direct outcome of mass literacy and the advent of popular journalism.

3. Empire Pool, Wembley, 1933–34, exterior and interior views

The Boots complex would be followed two years later by the largest concrete megastructure of his inter-war career, the 236 foot, three hinged arch over the Empire Pool, completed at Wembley in 1934. Thus, irrespective of whether it was in the service of the newsmedia, pharmaceuticals or the growing popularity of spectator sports, Williams was invariably called on to accommodate large scale, unprecedented programs determined by the emerging needs of societal modernization. It is equally significant in this regard that the initial client for the successive pharmaceutical plants that he built at Beeston should have been an American pharmaceutical company. While both the so called "wet" and the "dry" plants were originally meant to have been housed in one vast structure, the production strategy changed when Boots was reorganized under British ownership.

Williams's architecture in the 1930s was characterized not only by his innovative application of reinforced concrete technology, such as the wide-headed mushroom columns in concrete employed in the Boots plant or the unique folded slab concrete walls and the roof of the Dollis Hill synagogue of 1936, but

4. Empire Pool, view of concrete counterweighted trusses



5. Sainsbury Warehouse, London, 1931–33, cross section and view from below showing the track for the window-cleaning cradle
<pp. 138–139>

also by the original programmatic, spatial-cum-structural organizations that were invariably expressed externally, in terms of modular, curtain walling or through the form of an elegant in-situ reinforced concrete superstructure such as we find both in the Peckham Health Center, which, as it happens, was the only civic commission of his career.

Apart from the Boots plant, three works stand out within a six year period that totally consumed and exemplified his talent and energy in the last half of the 30's; these were the Empire Pool, Wembley (1933–34), that at the time was possibly the largest indoor swimming pool in the world; the Peckham Health Center (1933–35), which was as experimental a work as any commission that Owen Williams was to receive; and, lastly, the Daily Express building Manchester, which was unsurpassed in terms of refining a flush fit between glazed revetment and a wide-span concrete frame.

Where the Empire Pool was a monumental sports facility of enormous dimensions, the Peckham Health Center was the subject of a pioneering social experiment that was partially dedicated to improving the health of the working population. As David Cottam has written:

> *The client, the Pioneer Health Center Ltd, was headed by three directors: the doctors Innes H. Pearse and G. Scott Williamson, and their supporter J. G. S. Donaldson. They had two interrelated objectives: first, to make a biological and sociological study of the largely working-class family unit; and second to provide leisure and health-promoting facilities for a specific community, in a search for an understanding of the nature of health. Their intention was to combine these in a recreational and health-educational center to which families would subscribe (at one shilling per family per week) and to which they could come to join in sport activities and receive regular medical check-ups and health education. The researchers intended to operate the center like a laboratory in which they could undertake research, collecting essential sociological and medical data on the health and social development of the family units.*

Entered somewhat unceremoniously from the rear, close to the boundary of the site, this building was basically conceived as a totally glazed container for a complex programme which, in this instance, was gathered around a top-lit, three storey high swimming hall entered at the first floor. The doughnut plan, surrounding all four sides of the pool, consisted of a mixture of research, athletic, social and medical facilities, such as a double height gymnasium on the ground floor, changing rooms and showers on the first floor, with large lounges and study spaces on the second floor combined with consulting rooms for dentistry and general medical practice. The garden side of the cen-

Casa E1027, Roquebrune-Cap Martin, 1926-1929,
veduta del fronte occidentale e della terrazza del soggiorno
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).

Casa E1027

Roquebrune-Cap Martin, Francia (1926–1929)

Copertina del numero speciale
della rivista "L'Architecture Vivante"
dedicato alla E1027 nel 1929.

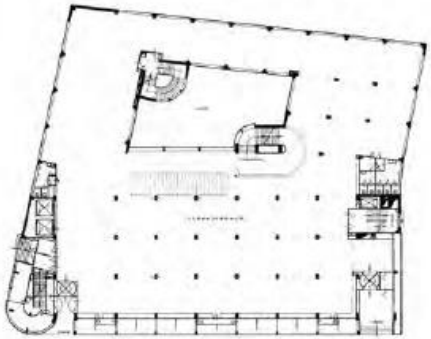
A dispetto del lussuoso tetto-terrazzo che fiancheggia il volume principale destinato al soggiorno della casa di Castellar, il capolavoro di Eileen Gray resta la E1027, disegnata in collaborazione con Jean Badovici, soprattutto per l'organizzazione dei suoi micro-spazi e per la raffinata integrazione spaziale tra gli arredi fissi e quelli mobili. Lontana dall'essere l'ennesima casa alla maniera convenzionalmente accettata dell'International Style, la E1027 è un manifesto che, strano a dirsi, è paradossalmente sia a favore sia contro la presunta oggettività del Movimento Moderno. Influenzata dalla sintassi purista di Le Corbusier, la Gray persegue una sintesi tra spazi a disposizione libera e componenti planimetriche astratte. Nello stesso tempo la Gray è antiteticamente contraria a ogni tipo di funzionalismo riduttivo: la sua sensibilità è basata fondamentalmente sul modo in cui il dimensionamento e l'arredamento dello spazio riescono ad accogliere il corpo umano, sia alla media sia alla piccola scala. La sua preoccupazione per la natura specifica dello spazio corporeo non è intesa in senso esclusivamente ergonomico, ma piuttosto in quello del piacere che le persone possono trarre dal posizionare se stessi in relazione agli oggetti e agli altri esseri umani. Si potrebbe suggerire che la E1027 tenti di fare propria, a ogni scala possibile, l'essenza del verso di Baudelaire: «luxe, calme et volupté». La sostanziale mediazione che la Gray opera nei confronti dell'ideologia del Movimento Moderno comunemente intesa sta proprio in questa raffinata voluttà. La sua opera manifesta un profondo interesse per la poetica della cadenza del corpo nello spazio; un tratto che ha in comune con Rudolph Schindler e Richard Neutra, l'avanguardia architettonica californiana a lei contemporanea.

La conferma che questa fosse una presa di posizione consapevole viene dal manifesto *De l'édetisme au doute* che accompagna l'articolo sulla E1027 pubblicato nel numero speciale de "L'Architecture Vivante" del 1929 con il titolo *Maison en bord de mer*. Il manife-

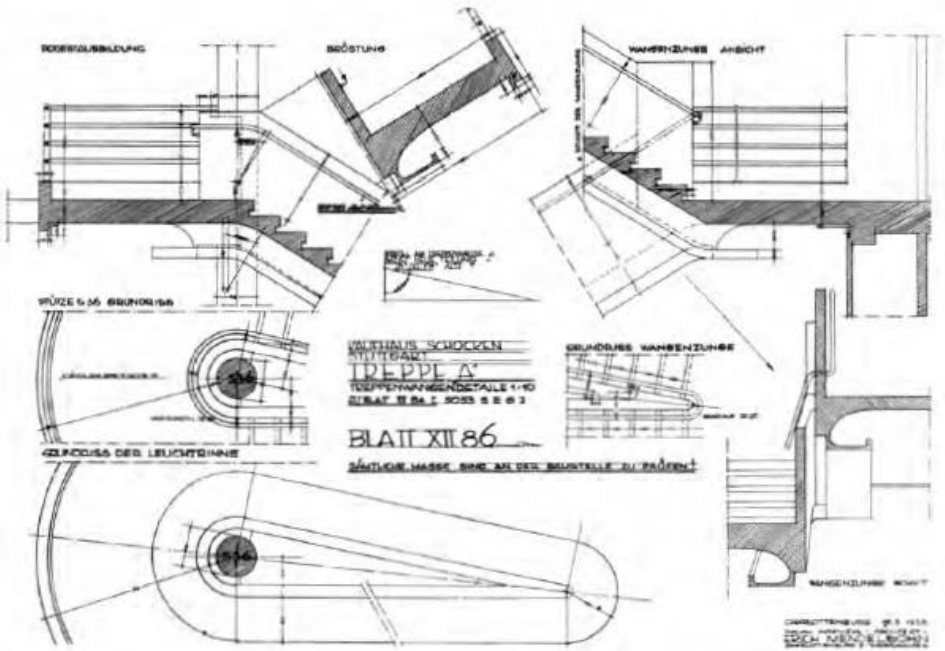
Vista dal mare, la villa appare come una nave
ancorata alla riva; il carattere marittimo
è sottolineato dalle pareti bianche,
dalle ringhiere e dal salvagente appeso
(RIBA Library Photographs Collection).

<

Grandi magazzini Schocken,
Stoccarda, 1926-1928,
veduta notturna del fronte verso Eberhardstrasse.



Grandi magazzini Schocken,
Stoccarda, 1926-1928,
pianta del piano tipo e disegni di dettaglio
della scala circolare nella torre vetrata
del 19 maggio 1928
(E. Mendelsohn, *Das Gesamtschaffen des Architekten. Skizzen, Entwürfe, Bauten*, Berlin 1930).



<

Vasca dei pinguini, Zoo di Londra, 1933-1934, dettaglio delle rampe elicoidali intrecciate (M.von Sternberg).

1901–1990

Berthold Lubetkin

Nato nel 1901 a Tbilisi, in Georgia, in una famiglia di imprenditori ebrei impegnata nel commercio di strumenti scientifici, Lubetkin studia a San Pietroburgo e a Mosca. Da ragazzo accompagna la famiglia nei viaggi a Londra e a Parigi, dando il via così alla propria formazione cosmopolita. Durante la guerra civile che segue la Rivoluzione russa dell'ottobre del 1917, Lubetkin si arruola per un anno come riservista nell'Armata rossa (1919-1920), studiando prima nello Svomas (Liberi laboratori) di San Pietroburgo, dove entra in contatto con Vladimir Tatlin e Aleksandr Rodčenko, e poi, dopo il 1920, al Vchutemas (Studi superiori artistici e tecnici) con Aleksandr Vesnin.

Nel 1922 lascia la Russia alla volta di Berlino in occasione della famosa mostra di arte sovietica allestita nella capitale tedesca alla Galleria van Diemen, e attraverso il curatore dell'esposizione, David Šterenberg, fa conoscenza con El Lissitzky e Il'ja Erenburg, membri dell'avanguardia russa. Lubetkin decide di rimanere a Berlino per frequentare sia l'Accademia d'arte tessile, dove studia storia del tappeto con Wilhelm Worringer, sia la Scuola professionale di edilizia di Charlottenburg, seguendo le lezioni sulle costruzioni in cemento armato tenute dal professor Kirsten, eminente ingegnere.

Nei due anni seguenti (1923-1925) prosegue gli studi al Politecnico di Varsavia e nel 1925 si trasferisce a Parigi, dove lavora come disegnatore, seppure in veste non ufficiale, al progetto del Padiglione sovietico che Konstantin Mel'nikov edifica quello stesso anno in occasione dell'Exposition des Arts Décoratifs. Frequenta alternativamente sia l'atelier di Auguste Perret sia l'École Spéciale d'Architecture, quando nel 1926, insieme a due suoi compagni di studio, Claude Manuel da Costa e Luis Iturralde, partecipa, con un progetto molto sofisticato, al concorso per un Politecnico da realizzare negli Urali, a Sverdlovsk, dando prova di una grande padronanza del Costruttivismo russo. Come osserva John Allan, il progetto mostra già, nel dinamismo dei quattro blocchi di laboratori che si elevano diagonalmente in un complesso organizzato in modo simmetrico, la sintesi delle due opposte tendenze che caratterizzano il resto della carriera dell'architetto russo.

Nel 1928 Lubetkin apre uno studio a Parigi con Jean Ginsberg, compagno di studi al Politecnico di Varsavia. Il loro primo incarico è un edificio per appartamenti di nove piani in avenue de Versailles terminato nel 1931, anno in cui Lubetkin parte per l'Inghilterra. L'edificio, estremamente elegante, comprende, per ciascun piano, un appartamento con due camere da letto e uno studio. Non è l'unico lavoro realizzato da Lubetkin nella capitale francese alla fine degli anni Venti, ma è sicuramente il più significativo per quanto concerne la sua carriera futura. Di spirito più costruttivista è invece il padiglione smontabile che progetta e realizza, tra il 1928 e il 1931, per la delegazione commerciale sovietica. Costruito per la prima volta a Bordeaux, l'edificio è influenzato dal Padiglione sovietico di Mel'nikov, del quale riprende il motivo della copertura