

# JUST “A FOLLOWER WITH NO VISIBLE CHARACTERISTICS”? EXAMPLES OF ERNESTS ŠTĀLBERGS’ MODERNISM IN THE CONTEXT OF WESTERN ARCHITECTURE

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## Abstract

The view of modernist architecture as a “unified mass” without regional traits or specific developmental trends has sometimes become symptomatic and is threatening to monuments of this style even today. This article aims to introduce the most significant conclusions obtained from the analysis of the architect Ernests Štālbergs’ creative legacy in the context of Western modernist architecture, identifying the means used to localise the style. Formal and stylistically comparative methods were applied for this purpose. Štālbergs’ modernist works reveal three lines of influences – from the German architect Erich Mendelsohn, the French architect Le Corbusier and the Nordic modernism. This does not mean direct appropriations of composition but rather impulses and inspirations. Štālbergs attempted to adapt modernism to local conditions, as he paid attention to the context of surrounding environment and regional traditions. However, he was more interested not in national but in regional identity, thus fitting in a wider cultural space.

**Keywords:** *Ernests Štālbergs, modernism, Erich Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier, Nordic modernism.*

In his review of the large exhibition organised by the Latvian Architects’ Society in late 1934 – early 1935<sup>1</sup>, architect Jūlijs Lūsis concluded that architects active on

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition took place at Riga City Art Museum (present Latvian National Museum of Art) in honour of the Society’s tenth anniversary. More than 300 works were exhibited.

Latvia's architectural scene could be divided in three loose groups: "original style seekers", "deliberate followers of some (..) trend" and "those (..) working with various stylistic forms" [Lūsis 1935: 5]. Lūsis described the representatives of functionalism Ernests Štālbergs, Kārlis Bikše and Jānis Blaus as "deliberate followers of international modernism with no visible characteristics", adding, however, that their modernism had "a German perspective" [Lūsis 1935: 5]. At that exhibition, Štālbergs showed various works from the 1930s, revealing the diversity of his functionalist period. It included designs and photographs for the Great Hall and cloakroom of the University of Latvia, Riga municipal apartment building, the Freedom Monument, monument to the 6<sup>th</sup> Riga Infantry Regiment, Ķegums Power Plant, houses of the Minister of Justice Hermanis Apsītis and conductor Artūrs Bobkovics as well as furnishing designs and photographs for the veneer factory owner Zālamans Šefers and the architect's own bedroom [Latvijas Arhitektu biedrība 1934: 33–40]. The opinion of Lūsis who was Eižens Laube's student and represented conservative approach is not surprising. However, it is rather superficial and overlooks the existence of regional specificity or distinct lines of influences within modernism, thus endangering the monuments of this style until our days.

Ernests Štālbergs' output reveals the development from academic neo-classicism cultivated in St. Petersburg Academy of Arts in the 1910s and modernised neo-classicism in the first half of the 1920s towards functionalism in the 1930s that he upheld even after the Second World War in spite of Socialist Realism imposed by the occupational power. However, Štālbergs' stylistic evolution was not linear, as he used to look back to his earlier periods at times as well as to seek compromises between the commissioner's aesthetic demands and his creative principles.

Štālbergs gradually began to embrace functionalism in the second half of the 1920s. This was a transitional period of his activity when he moved away from neo-classicism and abandoned decorativeness typical of his short-lived Art Deco episode. Influences of ideas and direct examples from German modernist architecture are evident during these years. Bruno Taut<sup>1</sup> and Erich Mendelsohn were important authors for Štālbergs in both theory and practice. A well-considered synthesis of modern German architectural impulses is seen in the 1929–1930 Riga municipal apartment building at 12 Lomonosova Street. It manifests inspirations from Taut's theoretical works and his Schillerpark housing estate (1924–1930) in Berlin, Ernst May's Bornheimer Hang estate (1926–1930) in Frankfurt am Main as well as from the so-called Frankfurt kitchen furnishings found in "New Frankfurt" apartments [Horsta 2020]. However, designs of this period show Štālbergs' stylistic

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<sup>1</sup> Štālbergs was especially interested in Bruno Taut's classic theoretical work *The New Apartment: Woman as Creator* (*Die neue Wohnung: Die Frau als Schöpferin*, 1924).

experimentation and fluctuating attitude towards modernism. Alongside more modernist examples, he also created markedly retrospective works. During these years, the architect tried to find a balance among the latest phenomena, the classical tradition and the local context.

The 1930s are typified by Štālbergs' professional maturity when he fully accepted functionalism, rapidly and purposefully exploring the style's possibilities and abandoning the previous cautiousness seen in the early decade. The change of attitude, similarly to other architects in both Latvia and the entire Northern Europe, was fostered by the famous 1930 Stockholm Exhibition [Ashby 2017: 142]. Impulses of this exhibition strengthened Štālbergs' involvement with the Nordic modernist architecture and indirectly introduced Le Corbusier's ideas regarding the arrangement of dwelling houses [Seelow 2016: 132]. Therefore, in the early 1930s Štālbergs learned the language of modernist forms from Le Corbusier's works. The 1930s emerge as a new beginning in Štālbergs' professional career when he radically changed his approach to architecture and attitude towards the environmental context, also becoming much freer in dealing with floor plans and form. Functionalism liberated the architect's creative potential and inspired ambitious projects, thus the period was very productive. During the decade, there was a change of functionalist forms in Štālbergs' individual style, as the early 1930s reveal a "purer" functionalism but later the Nordic stylistic trend with its natural, cosy version of functionalism gained more prominence. This is evidenced by the use of wooden finish in both exterior and interior as well as by the connection with nature and emphasis on the natural relief.

Ernests Štālbergs was an academically trained professional who critically assessed each new architectural development and completely opposed the copying of certain styles or short-lived stylistic trends. Therefore, lines of influences described below do not mean direct appropriations of composition but a synthesis of impressions in line with the architect's understanding of architecture, his individual aesthetic views and creative principles. Štālbergs' approach was that of an individualistic and regional perspective of modernist architecture, commonly defined in opposing terms as a unified, international style.

The first line of influence evident in his designs comes from the German architect Erich Mendelsohn. An excellent example is the competition design for Riga People's House (Figure 1), a surprising, radically modernist third version of the building that followed two neo-classical variants (1926, 1927). This work dated to 1928–1929 is the architect's first consistently modernist design, revealing a rapid adaptation to the formal means of the style. The pronouncedly modernist building with expressive arrangement of volumes and a glass-towered corner shows strong impulses from Mendelsohn's Schocken Department Store (1926–1928) in Stuttgart (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Ernests Štālbergs. People's House in Riga. Third design version (competition design). 1928–1929. Perspective. Latvian State Archive, coll. 95, reg. 1, file 139, p. 19.

Direct influences suggest that he possibly saw the building in person, as during his 1928 research trip to Germany [Štālbergs 1928] the architect prepared for the work on his Riga municipal building project and could visit the exemplary Weissenhof Estate<sup>1</sup> in Stuttgart for this purpose.

<sup>1</sup> It was created after the noted 1927 exhibition in Weissenhof where leading modernist architects of the time, like Le Corbusier, Bruno Taut, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and others, designed permanent dwelling houses.



Figure 2. Erich Mendelsohn. Schocken Department Store in Stuttgart. 1926–1928. Postcard, 1930. From: <http://www.ansichtskarten-markt.com/de/kategorie-1/grossstaedte/stuttgart/ak-foto-stuttgart-partie-eberhardstrasse-kaufhaus-schocken-1930-rar>

Influences from Mendelsohn remained persuasive later too. Reconstruction design of Hotel de Rome in Riga was worked out in summer 1930. Štālbergs here proposed a bold solution, breaking the uniform rhythm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-renaissance façade with a remarkably modernist element – a narrow, vertical, fully glassed semicircular bay window (Figure 3). A similar principle was used for the reconstruction of the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt* administrative building in Berlin by Erich Mendelsohn and his assistant Richard Neutra in 1921–1923. They put a new, contrasting modernist structure on the historicist Art Nouveau building, creating a streamlined corner [Krohn, Stavagna 2022: 58]. Štālbergs turned the 19<sup>th</sup> century historicist building into a shell for the modern content and lifestyle, manifested by the sharply contrasting glass split on the façade. The architect's clear shift towards modernism is seen in the concept of reconstruction, aimed at a deliberate contrast between the new structure and the historical architecture. The striking difference between the old and the new emerges as a surprisingly progressive idea in Latvia's architectural milieu of the time.

One has to agree with the Estonian historian of architecture Mart Kalm that inter-war Latvian architects were much attracted to Mendelsohn's typical style with its rounded façade forms [Kalm 2019: 16]. Therefore, Štālbergs blended in a local functionalist trend.



Figure 3. Ernests Štālbergs. Hotel de Rome reconstruction design. 1930. Perspectival view from Aspazijas Boulevard. Latvian State Archive, coll. 95, reg. 1, file 233, p. 35.

In the early 1930s, the line of influence from Le Corbusier became stronger in Štālbergs' output, especially evident in his dwelling house designs, including architectural volumes as well as floor plans and interiors. Štālbergs examined and interpreted Le Corbusier's works to master the formal language of modernism. For example, in a sketch of an unknown mansion, Štālbergs tried the French architect's five principles of modernist architecture – the building had a flat roof, band-type windows on the façade but the ground floor was envisaged with a covered, post-supported gallery with large, shop-like windows, creating a visual impression of a volume resting on posts above the ground [Štālbergs ca. 1930–1931]. The sketch reveals influences from Le Corbusier's most typical works of the second half of the 1920s – semi-detached house at Weissenhof Estate (1926–1927) in Stuttgart and Villa Savoye (1928–1931) in Poissy. Štālbergs returned to this typical modernist façade composition in his 1934 competition design of Liepāja Latvian Society House – the main façade facing Rožu Square (Figure 4) is compositionally close to Le Corbusier's classic Villa Savoye. Direct impulses from Le Corbusier are also evident in the engineer Aleksandrs Siksnā's house with its two-level, multi-functional

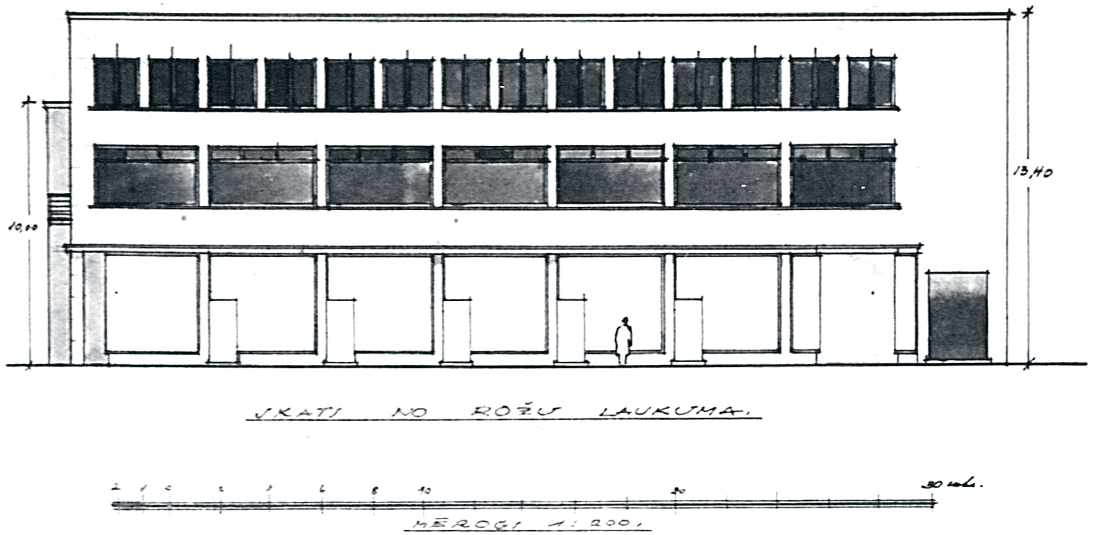


Figure 4. Ernests Štālbergs. Liepāja Latvian Society house design. 1934.  
Main façade. Latvian State Archive, coll. 95, reg. 1, file 238, p. 4.

living room, having a large window and a vertical multi-level division, the upper floor intended for the engineer's office [Štālbergs ca. 1931]. The effect is enhanced by the stairs shifted to the side of the room. In line with Le Corbusier's idea of "an architectural promenade", different views of the expressive room are revealed while climbing the stairs [Cohen 2006: 24].

The line of Nordic modernism is also present in Štālbergs' creative work throughout the 1930s, becoming more prominent in the second half of the decade. Štālbergs got more direct impulses from the Stockholm Exhibition that became a turning point in his output, shaped his understanding of modernism and outlined the future years of activity. Štālbergs chose Sweden as the main reference point in the implementation of modernist architecture and visited the country on a regular basis, paying particular attention to new buildings and establishing of professional contacts. For example, he joined the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design (*Svenska Slöjdföreningen*) [Štālbergs 1942]. Besides, Štālbergs was attracted also by the modernist architecture of other Nordic countries, especially by the active Finnish architects' achievements.

Impressions of the Stockholm Exhibition, especially of its main restaurant's (architect Gunnar Asplund) spatial image with a rounded glass structure, are clear in the restaurant hall for the previously mentioned Hotel de Rome [Štālbergs 1930] with a striking semicircular form and a curved, fully glassed outer wall. This design also shows relationship to nature important for the Nordic modernism, as Štālbergs

planned the glassed outer wall as a winter garden that would compensate for the lack of greenery and cover the view of the hotel's unattractive inner household yard.

A similar connection with nature is demonstrated in children's sanatorium *Gaujaslīči* whose architectural expression is based on the relief as well as on natural and modest finish materials (Figure 5). The building's façades are clad with vertical boards that create an aesthetic effect based on rhythmical lights and darks, also giving a modernist interpretation of the surrounding wooden cottages. However, one can widen the scope of analogies and influences, as such exterior finish was very common in exemplary houses at the Stockholm Exhibition, modernising the archetype of traditional Swedish farmstead. The sanatorium was possibly a synthesis of impulses from several such houses, evidenced not just by the vertical board cladding but also by the use of the single-pitched roof, close window proportions and rhythm. Similar examples were house no. 49 designed by Sven Markelius and house no. 47 by Sigurd Lewerentz. Štālbergs also took photos of simple, similarly boarded one-family houses during his visit to Sweden in 1934 [Štālbergs 1934]. The sanatorium complex was created, purposefully using the natural light, relief and pine forest conditions. The building conformed to the right-angle aesthetics but it was more adapted to human needs and emphasised naturalness, directly revealing the regional specificity of Northern European functionalism.



Figure 5. Ernests Štālbergs. Sanatorium *Gaujaslīči*. 1936–1939. View from the north. Photo: Ernests Štālbergs, 1939. Latvian State Archive, coll. 95, reg. 1, file 127, p. 8.



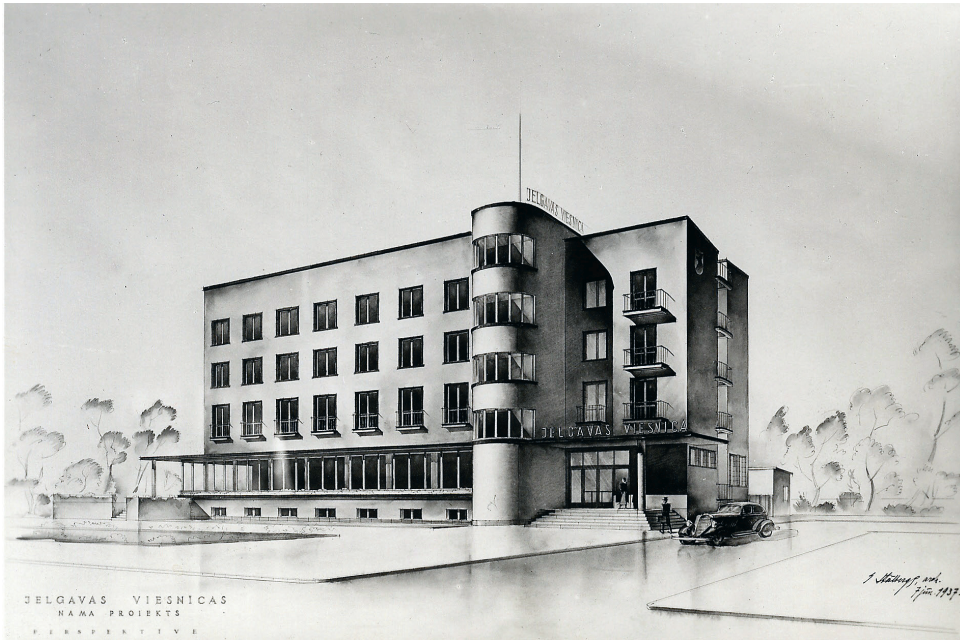


Figure 6. Ernests Štālbergs. Jelgava hotel design. 1937. Perspective. Photocopy. Latvian State Archive, coll. 95, reg. 1, file 153, p. 12.

Conversely, influences of Finnish functionalism are visible in Štālbergs' later work – the Jelgava hotel design created in 1937 (Figure 6). The building's accent is a narrow semicircular avant-corps that marks the entrance and the main staircase of the hotel. In the initial design version, the semicircular avant-corps emerges as a self-sufficient plastic form with one glassed side only. Such a solution is close to Hotel *Aulanko* (architects Märta Blomstedt, Matti Lampén, 1936–1939) in Hämeenlinna (Figure 7). However, the design also features the other line of influences as such semicircular avant-corps were commonly used by Mendelsohn's followers too. Impulses of Finnish architecture are also identifiable in the spatial solution of the Jelgava hotel restaurant hall, reminding of Restaurant *Lasipalatsi* (architects Niilo Kokko, Heimo Riihimäki and Viljo Revell, 1935) in Helsinki that has a similar floor plan and interior. Especially similar are the rhythm of posts and the glassed outer wall. It is known that Štālbergs visited Finland in 1935 [Štālbergs 1935]. The Jelgava hotel design shows how the tendency of representation and Nordic comfort entered Štālbergs' functionalist buildings in the second half of the 1930s. Modernist column shafts imitated marble but the stair railings were crafted of wood – more pleasant to touch and warmer than metal tubes [Štālbergs 1937]; wood was especially popularised by Alvar Aalto [McCarter 2014: 94].



Figure 7. Märta Blomstedt, Matti Lampén. Hotel *Aulanko* in Hämeenlinna. 1936–1939.

From: <https://en.docomomo.fi/projects/hotel-aulanko/> Photo: Pietinen / MFA.

The aforementioned examples demonstrate that consistent modernism and creative ambitions are better revealed in Štālbergs' unrealised designs or the so-called paper architecture. During construction the architect had to reckon with the commissioner's wishes as well as financial and technical resources, therefore modesty and compromises prevailed with dominant traditional architectural forms and greatly reduced functionalist details. While learning the functionalist language of forms, Štālbergs retained some critical attitude and tended to localise the style, creating an individual version. For example, he did not abandon sloping roofs or brick façades and also did not use the typical modernist white façades, choosing painted plastering or natural finish materials, like ceramic or wood cladding, instead. These aspects link his output to the architectural principles of Nordic countries. Štālbergs cared about the surrounding environmental context and regional traditions but differed from his Latvian colleagues, aiming to emphasise not national but regional traits, i. e., the Nordic identity, thus joining a broader cultural space.

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