

Chatten House

2336 Oak Street - International Style - 1937-38 - Charles Beherensmeyer, architect

The International Style came into being in Europe in the 1920's. The countries in which it achieved its early successes were Germany, with Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as its leading practitioners, Holland, with J. J. P. Oud, and France, with Le Corbusier. It may be said to have come of age in 1927 when the above and several other architects working in the style were represented in the housing exhibition at Stuttgart known as the "Weissenhofsiedlung" which was organized by Mies van der Rohe.

The style made its debut in the United States in 1928 when work began on the Lovell House in Los Angeles, designed by Richard Neutra. Neutra had arrived in America from Vienna in 1923, going first to Chicago and then moving to California. In the East the first completed buildings in this new style were also houses...for example, those on Long Island by A. Lawrence Kocher and Albert Frey. But they were soon overshadowed by Raymond Hood's McGraw-Hill Building in New York, completed in 1931, and by the much finer Philadelphia Saving Fund Society in Philadelphia, which went up in 1931-1932. The architects for the latter building were George Howe and William E. Lescaze.

In the 1930's, the growing acceptance of the International Style was evident in almost every country except Stalinist Russia, first, and then in Nazi Germany. It was the modern architecture of the decade. Many of the architects who had previously worked in Europe settled in the United States and their presence here had a great reinforcing effect on this side of the Atlantic.

The International Style is characterized by complete absence of ornament and by forms in which effects of mass and weight are minimized for the sake of an effect of pure volume. Flat roofs, smooth and uniform wall surfaces, windows with minimal exterior reveals, and windows that turn the corner of the building are among the means by which the effect of volume is obtained. Skeleton construction of steel or reinforced concrete is typical. Much use is made of the cantilever principle, both for carrying upper floors outside the supporting columns and for balconies and other projecting features. Wall surfaces of any material but wood are normally plastered and painted white; concrete is almost never exposed. Horizontality...most marked in the ribbon window...and rectilinearity predominate, through circular windows, curved surfaces, and cylindrical forms sometimes appear as elements of contrast.

The Chatten house embodies almost all of the elements of the International Style and is one of only two buildings in Quincy of its kind. Designed by the well-known Quincy architect Charles Beherensmeyer, the house was begun in 1937 and completed in 1938. It was considered extremely contemporary and stylistically advanced for its day. In keeping with the usual method of construction, the house is completely of steel and concrete and the floors are of reinforced concrete. The house, as did many of the style, employs dramatic use of glass block. While today, these only remain in window areas, the stone fireplace was originally built of glass block. It is said that the fire caused a most dazzling effect as it sparkled through the glass. Other features which attracted much public attention were the circular wall which enclosed a portion of the dining area and the flat roof which some people mistakenly assumed was meant to support a swimming pool!

The Chattens lived in the house from 1938 until 1966 when the property changed hands. Since then and at the present time it has been used as the headquarters of the Boy Scouts of America. Several interior changes have been made through the years. In addition to the removal of the glass block fireplace, several partitions have been removed to make the building more suitable for its present use. However, the exterior has remained the same...along with the extensive plantings which help to make the building so commanding.

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