

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS



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OCTOBER 7, 1966

MR. GEORGE B. PETTENGILL, HON. AIA  
LIBRARIAN  
THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS  
THE OCTAGON  
1735 NEW YORK AVENUE, N.W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20006

DEAR MR. PETTENGILL:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR LETTER OF OCTOBER 5TH IN WHICH YOU STATED  
THAT THE AIA LIBRARY WOULD PREPARE SHORT BIOGRAPHIES ON THE  
VARIOUS NOMINEES FOR GOLD MEDAL. I WOULD VERY MUCH APPRECIATE  
YOUR DOING THIS FOR ME FOR MARCEL BREUER.

SINCERELY YOURS,

  
JAMES N. HUNTER, F.A.I.A.  
ARCHITECT

JMH/NON

BREUER, Marcel

October 25, 1966

Mr. James M. Hunter, FAIA  
1126 Spruce Street  
Boulder, Colorado

Dear Mr. Hunter;

We have prepared a short biography of Marcel Breuer, which we are sending you herewith. This is intended to be factual, rather than critical or interpretative. As his nominator, you will know those points which you feel should be stressed in your presentation to the Board. If you need more material along this line, several of the books and articles would be helpful.

We are sending you also a short bibliography of some writings about Breuer. I presume that you will wish us to have some of this illustrative material available for the Board meeting in December, and we will plan accordingly.

Sincerely yours,

George E. Pettengill, Hon. AIA  
Librarian

GEP:mec

Breuer, Marcel Lajos, born in Pecs, Hungary, 1902, to Jacques and Franciska (Kan) Breuer. In 1920 he was graduated from the Magyar. Kir. Koreáliskola, in Pecs. Intending to become a painter and sculptor he went to Vienna in 1920 and studied for a short time at the Art Academy. Late in 1920 he went to Weimar, Germany, to the Bauhaus, becoming one of the youngest members of the first generation of Bauhaus students. He received his master's degree there in 1924, and was made a full-fledged master of the Bauhaus, in charge of the carpentry section. By the time he was 23 he had invented the first tubular-steel chair. His pre-occupation with modular unit furniture led him to interior design and modular unit housing, and then to architecture. During the 1920's his most notable contributions in the field of design were in the area of furniture. In 1928 he invented the S shaped cantilever chair, "which remains the most commonly used modern commercial chair in the world today." When the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1925, Breuer was commissioned to design all the furniture for the new buildings. In later years Breuer influenced the field of furniture design by developing the first bent and moulded plywood chairs and by designing some of the first chairs using aluminum as a supporting frame.

In 1928 Breuer left the Bauhaus to begin his practice as an architect and interior designer in Berlin. He entered a number of competitions and prepared many theoretical projects for cities, theatres, factories, etc. From 1931 to 1935 with the advent of Hitler, Breuer was forced into a period of idleness. He used the time to travel extensively visiting architectural structures in Spain, Morocco, Switzerland, Hungary, Greece and England. Twice during this time he returned to execute commissions, once to design the Dolderthal Apartments (1934) in Zurich with Alfred and Emil Roth, and then to draw plans for his first modern house for the Harnischmacher family in Wiesbaden. In 1933 he realized he could not practice in Germany with Hitler in power, and he began to make his plans to leave Germany permanently. In 1935 he became associated with F. R. S. Yorke in London. Among his important

works at this time were an exhibition pavilion in Bristol and a design for the British Cement Concrete Association for a model project, the "Civic Center of the Future."

In 1937 when Gropius became associated with Harvard University, he asked Breuer to join him as a member of the Harvard faculty and as a partner in an architectural firm in Cambridge. Important among the commissions of this partnership were the Kensington, Pa. housing project for aluminum workers; planning projects for Wheaton College and for Black Mountain College; and various residential projects. In 1942 Breuer designed two prefabricated buildings : the "Yankee Portables" and the "Plas-2-Point" house, both dismountable and for the assembly line.

In 1946 Breuer moved to New York, and he has practiced architecture there ever since. For the first number of years his practice was largely devoted to houses and smaller, institutional buildings. The houses he has designed are too numerous to list, but critics agree that he has profoundly influenced domestic architecture in this country. In 1950 he designed a dormitory for Vassar College, and in 1952 an arts center for Sarah Lawrence College. In 1952 he was selected as one of the three architects to design the headquarters for UNESCO in Paris. This had a tremendous effect upon Breuer's practice. While working on UNESCO, he made nearly sixty Atlantic crossings, and after an absence of twenty years from Europe he received many commissions from Europeans, among them the Van Leer Office Building in Amstelveen, Holland, and the Bijenkorf Department Store, Rotterdam.

Since 1952 Breuer has designed many buildings in the United States as well as large urban complexes in South America<sup>1</sup> and in Asia. His American work has

been diverse and includes St. John's Benedictine Abbey, Collegeville, Minn.; the Railroad Station, New Canaan, Conn.; Members' Housing, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; the United States Embassy, The Hague; Litchfield Schools, Litchfield, Conn.; Torrington Manufacturing Co., Los Angeles and Oakville, Ontario; Temple B'Nai Jeshurun, Short Hills, New Jersey; New York University's University Heights campus; and his most recent work to receive architectural acclaim is the Whitney Museum in New York City.

Breuer is a Fellow of The American Institute of Architects. He was the recipient of the Medal of Honor, New York Chapter, AIA, in 1965. He is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He is author of Sun and Shadow; the Philosophy of An Architect (New York, 1955) and Buildings and Projects, 1921-1961 (New York, 1963). He has contributed a number of articles to various architectural journals. He has traveled extensively in Japan, Pakistan, South America, and Europe.

Home: 628 West Road, New Canaan, Conn.

Office: 635 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022.

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# NEWS

The American Institute of Architects  
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## MARCEL BREUER TO RECEIVE GOLD MEDAL

Do Not Release Before: February 11

WASHINGTON, D.C., February 11, 1968--Internationally-known Architect Marcel Breuer, FAIA, has been selected by The American Institute of Architects to receive the 1968 Gold Medal, highest honor accorded by the national professional society of architects.

Mr. Breuer, of New York City, whose noted works include the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., the UNESCO World Headquarters Buildings in Paris, the IBM Research Center in La Gaude, France, and several college and university buildings, is the 34th recipient of the award, which was established in 1907. The Gold Medal is given by the AIA Board of Directors for most distinguished service to the profession of architecture or to The Institute." It will be presented at the national AIA convention in Portland, Oregon, June 23-26.

Breuer, 66, is a native of Hungary, and was a student under Walter Gropius, FAIA, 1959 Gold Medalist, at the Weimar Bauhaus from 1920-24 when he attained the rank of Master. He then taught at the Bauhaus in Dessau from 1924-28, where he invented tubular furniture, and in Berlin and London. He came to the United States when Gropius invited him to join the faculty of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University in 1937 and form an architectural partner-

(more)

medalists - Breuer  
page two

ship, which lasted until 1941, in Cambridge. Among his students at Harvard were Philip Johnson, FAIA, John A. Johansen, AIA, Edward L. Barnes, FAIA, Landis A. Gores, AIA, Eliot F. Noyes, FAIA, Henry Hill, AIA, Nelson W. Aldrich, FAIA, Victor Lundy, AIA, and Willo von Moltke, AIA.

In 1946, Breuer moved to New York where he continues to practice with Herbert Beckhard, AIA, Robert F. Gatje, AIA, and Hamilton P. Smith, AIA, in the firm of Marcel Breuer and Associates, Architects. He also maintains a branch office in Paris.

Breuer is a member of the College of Fellows of The American Institute of Architects and The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, vice president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the only U.S. practicing member of the Ordre des Architectes, France, and an honorary member of several foreign professional associations.

Among his awards are two first prizes in International Aluminum Competition (for aluminum furniture), citations from architectural magazines, silver medal in the Spaeth-Lercaro Competition for St. John's Abbey Church, the New York Chapter, AIA, 1965 Medal of Honor, and several other national and international honors.

This year, Mr. Breuer has been named to receive, in addition to the AIA Gold Medal, the 1968 Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal from the University of Virginia.

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Brauer ①



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# THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

awards

## THE GOLD MEDAL OF HONOR

to

**MARCEL BREUER, FAIA**

Architect, Designer, Teacher, Planner

who, through the pursuit of excellence in a broad spectrum of activities, has succeeded in uniting within his person the many disciplines that form our environment:

As an architect, he has pioneered in diverse fields such as the design of private houses, the design of religious and educational buildings, and the design of public buildings such as the Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris and departmental buildings of the United States Government in Washington; as a designer, especially of furniture, during the past half century he has been a most influential innovator in this country and Europe;

as a teacher, he has inspired entire generations of architects who came under his influence at the Bauhaus in the 1920's and at Harvard in the 1930's and 1940's;

as a planner, he has made outstanding contributions to the development of new communities in the United States during World War II, and in Europe and Latin America in more recent years.

In honoring a man of such broad and varied abilities and endeavors, The American Institute of Architects brings honor to itself.

Robert L. Durham  
President

*[Signature]*  
Secretary

June 26, 1968







to experience. To you might thus be revealed something of the process and circumstance of leadership, of its joys and of its frustrations and of its rewards.

You would understand that no leader begins from the beginning; that each is a brief part of a long continuum; that there is no beginning, there is no end, and finally, that each who rises tall in vision stands upon the shoulders of his predecessors, many of whom I see sitting before me tonight.

It is in this spirit, Mr. President, that I proudly accept this Citation of honor, and thank you, dear friends.

(Applause)

PRESIDENT DURHAM: Sixty-one years ago, The American Institute of Architects awarded its first Gold Medal of Honor. Since that time, only thirty-three men have been so honored. I believe that this is an indication of the Institute's high regard for the Gold Medal. No other Institute honor means as much as this one.

Tonight, we are to present the Gold Medal of Honor to an architect whose career is an embodiment of the very best of our profession.

Marcel Breuer, FAIA, is a world-renowned architect, designer, teacher, and planner. In all of these fields, he has

distinguished himself.

A native of Hungary, Marcel Breuer studied under Walter Gropius, our 1959 Gold Medalist, at the Weimar Bauhaus in the early 1920's, and he there attained the rank of Master. He later taught at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where he invented tubular furniture, and in Berlin and London. Mr. Breuer came to the United States in 1937 at the invitation of Walter Gropius and joined the Architecture faculty at Harvard University. He also formed a partnership in Cambridge.

Among Marcel Breuer's students at Harvard were some of the brightest lights of American architecture --Philip Johnson, FAIA; John A. Johansen, AIA; Edward L. Barnes, FAIA; Eliot F. Noyes, FAIA; and many others.

In 1946, Mr. Breuer moved to New York and began a practice with several other architects in the firm of Marcel Breuer and Associates, Architects.

Our 1968 Gold Medal winner is a member of the College of Fellows of AIA and The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is vice president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and is the only U. S. practicing member of the Ordre des Architectes, France.

Among Mr. Breuer's outstanding works are the

Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the UNESCO World Headquarters building in Paris, the IBM Research Center in La Gaude, France, and St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. For these and other projects he has won many awards, national and international.

I will read the citation which accompanies the Gold Medal:

"The American Institute of Architects awards The Gold Medal of Honor to Marcel Breuer, FAIA, architect, designer, teacher, planner, who, through the pursuit of excellence in a broad spectrum of activities, has succeeded in uniting within his person the many disciplines that form our environment:

As an architect, he has pioneered in diverse fields such as the design of private houses, the design of religious and educational buildings, and the design of public buildings such as the Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris and departmental buildings of the United States Government in Washington;

As a designer, especially of furniture, during the past half century he has been a most influential innovator in this country and Europe;

As a teacher, he has inspired entire generations of architects who came under his influence at the Bauhaus in



the 1920's and at Harvard in the 1930's and 1940's;

As a planner, he has made outstanding contributions to the development of new communities in the United States during World War II, and in Europe and Latin America in more recent years.

In honoring a man of such broad and varied abilities and endeavors, The American Institute of Architects brings honor to itself."

MR. MARCEL BREUER, FAIA: Mr. President, fellow architects, ladies and gentlemen:

I am grateful for the honor. It came as a complete surprise and it calls for some self-accounting, for some looking into the mirror, for some tangible contours of thought and work. There are questions to answer.

One of the most persistent questions to others and to myself concerns the line beyond which building and planning become more than just rational, and the roof over our head takes on the significance of architecture. This question concerns the demand that the building, the street, the square, the city, and road over the land -- indeed, the whole man-made world -- including low cost housing -- speak of a mental surplus, of an emotional plus, of a conceptional generosity; of a stance

which is optimistic and as creative as a growing child's attention.

In this demand for a plus-surrounding (though by no means a plush surrounding), the inanimate object gains an organic quality. That world of stone behind stone, of vistas, of weight and material, of large and small cubes, of long and short spans, of sunny and shady voids, of the whole horizon of buildings and cities: all that inanimate world is alive. It is as close to our affection as good friends, the family -- right there in the center of emotional faith. It is important that we should not be disappointed in them, in our buildings and cities.

They are alive, like people. They have also their cycles of vigor, strength, beauty and perfection. They have also their struggle with age, with decline, with circulation troubles, with sagging muscles, with wrinkles. There is one difference though: they can be beautiful even in old age, even in ruins.

Here is where the eye may fool us. Let me say a few words about our visual perception. The eye is the most comprehensive of our senses: an image is received with the speed of light, with absolute speed. It is a most influential something, the eye. It may register notions before we can think. Of all our senses, it is closest to our consciousness. In

primitive languages, songs and proverbs, "eyesight" is the most precious possession of man. The split second of eye reception is, it seems, automatically linked with an appraisal of the object: not only whether it is big or small, black or white, curved or straight, but whether it is threatening or friendly, whether it is pleasant or not, whether it is beautiful or not. The eye is a powerful informer, it forms an aesthetic judgment at a glance and, while buildings should be useful, well constructed, and in harmony with our human-social world, the first impact, the eye impact, is perhaps a preconditioning of our sympathies.

Now, we also know, on the other hand, that our aesthetics are preconditioned by custom, by precedence, by preconceived opinion, by varied experiences of varying individuals.

I would like to think that, if I have deserved this medal at all; it is at least half due to my efforts to check up on my eye. In a sense, I see the aesthetic quality as a most abstract one, the most inner quality, although it is often adorned with glamour, with rules of tradition, with excesses of wealth, with fashionable slogans, with moralizing, with pomposity, sometimes even with drabness. However, aesthetics should be too good to be camouflaged.

Buildings should be not moody, but reflect a general, durable quality. Architecture should be anchored in usefulness; its attitude should be more direct, more directly responsible, more directly social, more technic-bound, more independent; whether symmetrical or non-symmetrical. The builder should feel free to be similar, and equally free to turn his back on precedence. He should be free to be scientific, free to be human, free to be non-traditional. The rapid aesthetic of the eye should be in balance with the other aspects of architecture, with its living and material aspects, whether this balance is 50-50 or 10 to 90.

And there are buildings in the midst of an unfamiliar surrounding, serving foreign conditions. Also, there are buildings of a past historic period. They communicate to us to a greater and greater degree through the eye, less and less by rational and other qualities. Functions, usefulness, the details long-past human demands cannot be reconstructed and fade into the unknown, whereas the eye is still active, Aesthetics become independent of everything else. The photograph of a miserable slum may be so beautiful that, unconsciously, we roget slum conditions. The slow-motion film of an atomic explosion is one of the greatest aestnetic and visual impacts.

It may make us forget what we actually face. The eye is playing tricks with us.

Mesa Verde's cubistic cave towns are great sculptural compositions; they have been also the most inhuman fortifications ever conceived by man.

The aesthetic quality of architecture is of the first order - but not sufficient for a total justification.

Perhaps these few words have explained to some degree why the limitless domination of the eye should be balanced, -- why living architecture should have its usefulness, its structure, its social aspect -- and its undiminished architectural eye-quality; its dimensions, its proportions, its materials and surfaces, its structural composition and its textures, its spaces and proportions, its logic and justification. Only this combination of polar qualities can assure an architecture which is alive and of our time.

Thank you again, and thank you!

(The audience arose and applauded)

PRESIDENT DURHAM: It is with some hesitation that I follow such a rich statement. But the following words by an old-time AIA friend and father-confessor led me to the most challenging year of my life. "I would rather be president of