“All the Struggles of the Present”

Alexander Dorner, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and *Rhode Island Architecture*

by DIETRICH NEUMANN

Fig. 1
“I AM FULL OF RENEWED ENTHUSIASM AND I HOPE YOU ARE TOO,” Henry-Russell Hitchcock wrote to Alexander Dorner on October 21, 1938, announcing his visit later that week to start working together on an exhibition and book on Rhode Island architecture. He had managed to “dispose of” his Friday classes at Wesleyan University and thus could spend three full days in Providence, “as will undoubtedly be necessary.”

The two men had met the previous summer onboard the SS Normandie—the largest and fastest passenger ship of its time—en route from Le Havre to New York. Hitchcock was returning from a research trip to Europe and Dorner and his wife, Lydia, were leaving Germany. The Nazis had forced Dorner to resign from his post as director of the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover, destroying El Lissitzky’s Abstract Cabinet there, which he had commissioned, and confiscating many Modern and Expressionist pieces for their infamous “degenerate art” exhibition in Munich. Dorner had no immediate job prospects beyond a network of acquaintances (such as Erwin Panofsky, a former fellow graduate student in Berlin) and the support of Walter Gropius, architect and former director of the Bauhaus in Germany, who had recently accepted the position as chairman of Harvard’s Graduate School of Design.

The chance encounter of Hitchcock and Dorner—two of the world’s leading exhibition curators—could hardly have been more felicitous. (One imagines them discussing modern art and architecture and Dorner’s hopes and expectations amidst the Art Deco splendor of this famous ship.) Hitchcock [Fig. 1] was impressed with Dorner and ended up recommending him to Alfred Barr Jr. of the Museum of Modern Art when he heard about the position in Rhode Island. Barr, who knew Dorner from a 1935 visit to Hanover, assumed that the job would “naturally go to some American,” but he mentioned Dorner to John Nicholas Brown, the chair of the search committee, anyway. Brown met twice with Dorner and probably related instantly to his ideas, as he himself was deep in conversation with the architect Richard Neutra about his summer home, Windshield, going up on Fishers Island—one of the first modern houses on the East Coast, and certainly the largest. Dorner eventually emerged as the best candidate. Delighted, Barr gave Hitchcock credit, since “it was you who first suggested that I mention Dorner” to Brown.

Alexander and Lydia Dorner found an aptly fitting house for themselves at 10 Cooke Street—one of four townhouses in the middle of a residential neighborhood, just beyond the Brown University campus and about a fifteen-minute walk from his office at the RISD Museum. The building looked rather metropolitan, more at home in London or New York than in Providence, with a flat roof, angular frontal bays with large windows, and simple porch entrances—the so-called Ann and Lucy Draper houses (1878) [Fig. 2]. The Draper houses are among the best examples of nineteenth-century architecture in Providence, with “good proportions but near-absence of ornamental detail,” as a 1971 survey of the surrounding historic district for the National Register put it, and they would have perfectly illustrated Hitchcock’s claim that the seeds for modern architecture lay in the anonymous architecture of the nineteenth century. Lydia and Alexander Dorner would make their home there for ten years.

They lived in uncluttered modern spaces with pastel-colored walls, chrome and glass tables, some family portraits, a Lyonel Feininger painting of skyscrapers on the wall, and a translucent Naum Gabo sculpture. Dorner designed his own modernist furniture and had it manufactured in nearby Warren, Rhode Island. “In the front bay window is a tall rubber plant. In Europe, Mrs. Dorner explains, rubber plants are found only in ultra-modern decorating schemes. It seems to her amusing that Americans consider them as a symbol of Victorianism.” Mrs. Dorner emphasized how much she preferred Providence over Hanover. In Hanover, tradition
hampered progress, "while in Providence you feel the space and mind open in all directions for spiritual and economic progress." Her husband agreed: “Everywhere here, I find culture, good pictures in the ordinary home, people with inquiring minds, people who read modern literature, and Europe is just a little tired, with no enthusiasm left.”

The Dorners must have seemed like a couple of exotic birds who had landed by accident in this industrial New England town still reeling from the Depression. Their new friends and neighbors in Providence could be forgiven if Dorner reminded them of Erich von Stroheim, the Austrian American director and actor (with whom Dorner shared an uncanny resemblance) who had come to personify German officers in World War I movies, most recently in Jean Renoir’s celebrated La Grande Illusion (which played January through March 1939 in Providence). Dorner was tall, his hair slicked back. A straight gaze came from his light blue eyes, and - unforgettable to anyone who ever met him—a three-inch scar extended from his left ear to the corner of his mouth. This was the remnant of a duel in his Königsberg fencing fraternity, borne with pride in German academic circles but retouched in his portrait taken at RISD. Lydia—Dorner’s third wife—also possessed movie-star looks, prompting the Providence Journal on at least two occasions to print large photographs of her.

The Dorners made great efforts to acquaint themselves with the local community and New England. The social pages of the local paper frequently mention their coffee and dinner invitations. Soon after their arrival, they took trips around New England to visit nearby museums. Walter Gropius and his wife, Ise, who lived an hour away in Lincoln, Massachusetts, stayed with the Dorners in Providence to celebrate the first anniversary of their arrival.
Ten months after Dorner had assumed his position as director of the RISD Museum, he and Hitchcock began working on their joint project. Their ambitions intersected conveniently: Dorner was eager to engage with his new environment and demonstrate his worldliness and connections to the American scholarly scene. He sensed the opportunity to create something truly unusual at the museum, and enjoyed the collaboration with John Nicholas Brown, whose Windshield project would come to occupy a special position in the show. Hitchcock on the other hand was intent on continuing his recent series of architecture exhibitions and his research on the roots of American modern architecture, for which Rhode Island’s industrial heritage offered a particularly convincing case study.

Both Dorner and Hitchcock were polymaths, and frightfully prolific. Dorner’s publications and lectures had embraced sculpture, painting, and architecture from the early Middle Ages to the present. Just before his emigration, he had published books on the Gothic painter Master Bertram, Vincent van Gogh, the popular artist and humorist Wilhelm Busch, and the art and architecture of his hometown of Hanover and in his own museum. Before that, he had examined Romanesque architecture in Germany and edited selected writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The wider scope of the RISD Museum collection presented even more opportunities for an eclectic range of lectures and publications.

Hitchcock, ten years Dorner’s junior, had been a professor at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, for nine years, and had become well known for his 1929 book Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration, which introduced the European modern movement to an American audience. Despite the book’s somewhat mixed reception, three years later Hitchcock was invited to collaborate with Philip Johnson on the Museum of Modern Art’s Modern Architecture: International Exhibition and its accompanying publications, which have long been regarded milestones in twentieth-century American architectural history.

At the time, however, MoMA’s project was not the unequivocal critical success that later scholarship suggests. The ensuing debates in the United States showed that for most architects and critics, the notion of an “International Style” had far less appeal than the search for a genuine American modern architecture. After all, it had been precisely the perceived lack of national identity that had lent a particular urgency to most debates about America’s architecture in previous decades. Over the next several years, the Museum of Modern Art tried rather hard, with a number of exhibitions and publications, to correct the impression apparently left by the 1932 exhibition. As late as 1944, the museum had to assure visitors to its Built in USA, 1932–1944 exhibition that only “hostile and ill-informed critics” were suggesting that the museum had wanted to impose a “foreign style on the United States” with its 1932 show. Quite the contrary, the museum had “been first to show the growth of an authentic modern American style.” In fact, the 1930s were a period of increased introspection in the U.S., driven in part by the Depression and the WPA program’s creation of guide books and architectural surveys as well as by decreased travel opportunities and turmoil abroad. In 1934 and 1939, respectively, Lewis Mumford and Richard Neutra were among the first to suggest the importance of recognizing “Regionalism” in architecture.

As if to will a new genre into existence, between 1933 and 1937 Hitchcock organized eleven architecture exhibitions in quick sequence, responding to his critics and demonstrating his wide-ranging interests. At Wesleyan University, with support from the Carnegie Foundation, he put together the traveling shows Roman Baroque Church Facades, French Houses of the Early Eighteenth Century, Early Museum Architecture 1770–1850, Springfield Architecture 1800–1900,
Romanesque Churches of Apulia, American Cities Before the Civil War, Paris Dans sa Splendeur, and Romanesque Churches of the Rhineland. For American Cities Before the Civil War (subtitled The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties), he secured funds for new photography and toured the East Coast with photographer Berenice Abbott in the summer of 1934, recording the urban vernacular in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Charleston. This, and the exhibition about Springfield, Massachusetts, were the most immediate predecessors to the Rhode Island show. Working with MoMA in between these efforts, Hitchcock conceived the exhibitions Henry Hobson Richardson (1936) and Exposition Architecture and Modern Architecture in England (both 1937), also writing their catalogues.

THE CATALOGUE

Correspondence in preparation of the exhibition seems to have been handled mostly by Hitchcock and Constance M. Place, Dorner’s secretary. In December 1938 Hitchcock had contacted John Nicholas Brown, whom he knew from the advisory board of the Museum of Modern Art. Brown secured a commitment from the Rhode Island Historical Society to loan “anything you desire” to the show. In early February 1939, Hitchcock corresponded with many photographers, architects, and owners of buildings to secure photographs, plans, and permissions. Both catalogue and exhibition were divided chronologically into seven chapters. Of the roughly two hundred photographs in the exhibition, eighty-one made it into the catalogue, in addition to twenty line drawings, surpassing the number of illustrations in Dorner’s first catalogue at the RISD Museum, Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century. Dorner and Hitchcock gratefully acknowledged recent publications about Rhode Island architecture, such as Antoinette Downing’s The Early Homes of Rhode Island and Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State, as they offered a “more complete presentation of the facts of the story.” Dorner cautioned that their approach, in contrast, was “not so much a formal history of architecture in Rhode Island” but rather “a pictorial survey of three hundred years of Rhode Island building” and “a series of connected essays in critical appreciation dealing more with ideas than with facts.” Or, as Dorner explained to a reporter, “The history of art and culture is not a kaleidoscope; it is more than an addition of facts, it is a current loaded with tension radiating into our own life.”

Accordingly, Hitchcock’s text read the past in its value for the present. “Nothing is stupider,” he declared, for example, “than a modern suburban dwelling . . . fully disguised . . . as an early American farmhouse.” Such houses could fully be “relevant to our tastes and our problems today . . . if only we can come to appreciate these houses with intellectual clarity and not merely as the material of an architectural fancy dress.” Eighteenth-century colonial architecture could even be considered a “phase of international style.” In other cases, Hitchcock discovered predecessors of contemporary architecture. The old Bristol Hotel (1824) in Providence’s Market Square, “remarkably different from any other RI structure of the time,” as its “monolithic granite skeleton, filled with larger and more frequent windows than ordinary masonry buildings” was looking forward to the metal skeletons of commercial architecture in the middle of the nineteenth century and ultimately to the Chicago skyscraper.

Hitchcock had little sympathy for the time from 1830 to 1870, where an increasing “eclectic confusion” led to a “turgid flood” of “almost undefinable corruption.” As a result, important Providence buildings such as Arthur Gilman’s Butler Exchange (1873) and Samuel J. F. Thayer’s City Hall (1878) were left out. Hitchcock also had little patience with the Newport mansions, and it did not
help that they were photographed in the winter, all boarded up. There were a few exceptions, such as H. H. Richardson’s William Watts Sherman House (1875) and, most importantly, McKim, Mead, and White’s “vastly superior” Low House in Bristol (1887) [Fig. 5], “the detail reduced almost to zero; the light wooden construction is quite directly and simply expressed; and the warmth and homeliness of the great shingled expanse is especially appropriate by the sea.” The house served as a perfect link from Richardson to Frank Lloyd Wright. Faced with such great architecture, Hitchcock opined, “We can only sigh at the perversity of fifty years of Eastern American taste.”

Years later, prominent architectural historian Vincent Scully saw the Low House in Hitchcock’s book and credited this discovery as inspiration for his publications *The Cottage Style* (1949) and *The Shingle Style* (1955), and, by extension, a major influence on the postmodern movement.

Hitchcock did not take kindly to the majestic Rhode Island State House, completed by McKim, Mead, and White in 1903: it “would be as suitable in South America or the Antipodes as it is here in Rhode Island—as much and no more. It is as international as an epic in Esperanto.” Years later, prominent architectural historian Vincent Scully saw the Low House in Hitchcock’s book and credited this discovery as inspiration for his publications *The Cottage Style* (1949) and *The Shingle Style* (1955), and, by extension, a major influence on the postmodern movement.

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Windshield [Fig. 7], designed for John Nicholas Brown by Richard Neutra, was featured prominently, despite being “not technically” in Rhode Island, but on Fishers Island in New York State, just off the Connecticut coast. Hitchcock praised it as “the largest and most elaborate modern house in America by one of the World’s leading modern architects,” but he also noted its “unnecessary humility in finish and detail” and found that the silvery color of the weathered shingles at the Donnelly House was “more natural and appealing than that of the aluminum paint” of Windshield. Windshield had been partially destroyed by the ferocious hurricane of September 1938, and not yet been rebuilt.
Hitchcock's most important chapter surely was that on anonymous industrial architecture [Fig. 8]. “Rhode Island is unique in America (and possibly in the world) in rich remains of early industrial architecture.” Hitchcock described its mill villages as “among the first, and...certainly among the best in the world.” They might seem an “early American answer” to the European “machine á habiter,” he wrote, but, of course plumbing, running water, heat, and light would have to be introduced before they could serve as something akin to Le Corbusier’s minimal dwellings.

Hitchcock sent the chapter on industrial architecture to his younger friend and colleague John Phillips Coolidge, who was teaching at Vassar while finishing his master’s thesis at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, which would evolve into his 1942 book Mill and Mansion: A Study of Architecture and Society in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820–1865. A co-founder of the Society of Architectural Historians, Coolidge would become a professor at Harvard and the director of the Fogg Museum. He found Hitchcock’s manuscript “a swell job” and saw “almost no mistakes of fact,” but he gently reminded Hitchcock to include “here and there . . . a sentence, suggesting the economic and social background.” Of the eighty-one illustrations in the book, twenty showed industrial structures and mill buildings and villages. Clearly, Hitchcock had found the subject that interested him.
most—and one that no other book on Rhode Island architecture had covered before.

Here, as in the early American farmhouses, he found an unassuming, honest architecture, “not the product of conscious stylistic intention.” Hitchcock was intent on demonstrating that modern architecture’s origins lay in the United States, rather than in Europe, and specifically in its anonymous industrial architecture.

Of course, the notion that American industrial architecture played an important role in shaping European modernism was not Hitchcock’s idea. Rather, Walter Gropius had talked and written about it since 1911, when his commission for a shoe-last factory in Alfeld, Germany, had brought him in close contact with its American investor, United Shoe Machinery, and their enormous concrete-frame building in Beverly, Massachusetts. Hitchcock had adopted Gropius’s argument, and wrote in 1927, “Boldly it may be claimed that in a wide sense all truly modern architecture in Europe is American.”

Alexander Dorner agreed:

[Although America may seem to have been covered by a tidal wave of European art, there exists and has existed for a long time the feeling of an art arising from ordinary life. Although it is only in recent years that there has been great emphasis here on functional design — or design based on the purpose an object is intended to serve, rather than design applied to an object without reference to its purpose — the aesthetic value of functional design was recognized by some Americans long ago. Horatio Greenough, who was born in 1805 and died in 1853, wrote that there was more real art in a well-constructed clipper ship than in all the copies of antique sculpture ever made. Nobody in Europe would have thought of saying such a thing.]

THE EXHIBITION

Rhode Island Architecture was shown from June 18 to December 5, 1939, in a suite of galleries on the museum’s fifth floor, including the central Grand Gallery, into which a few temporary walls were inserted. Governor William H. Vanderbilt III and 300 guests were in attendance at the opening, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock lectured.

It seems likely that the layout and design of the exhibition was handled mostly by Dorner, but we can imagine some input from Hitchcock due to his extensive experience. The continuous horizontal arrangement of large photographs was indeed reminiscent of his recent shows at MoMA. While Dorner had previously
organized only one exhibition with photographs of architecture—on one hundred years of buildings in Hanover, shown in 1931—this survey of three hundred years of Rhode Island architecture became a vehicle for his ideas about experiential spaces in museums and notions of authenticity and originality.

Dorner was about to begin installing his “atmosphere rooms” at the museum later that summer (the first opened in October 1939), in which the collections would be presented as a progression, with newly painted walls and pictorial transparencies in the windows. Five of these rooms were executed, of about eighteen planned; not meant as immersive period environments, they invited the active engagement of the viewer, their color suggesting a general mood and separation from the next section. As Rebecca Uchill points out, Dorner had long used synaesthetic color notations for period styles in his diagrams. Different colors had been applied to period rooms in the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover (dark purple for the Middle Ages, white and gray for the Renaissance, red velvet for the Baroque). At the RISD Museum, the classical room would be painted sky blue; the Early Christian, beige; and the Romanesque, burgundy.

For *Rhode Island Architecture*, Dorner developed a simplified sequence of “atmospheres” by placing the large photographs on broad horizontal bands of colored paper, with a few complementary exhibits in each section. The earliest buildings in Rhode Island (1640–90) [Fig. 9] were shown against a brown and burlap background. Models of the Eleazer Arnold House in Lincoln (1693), the Elder Ballou Meeting House in Cumberland Hill (1749), and the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House in Newport (1697) were included in this section; they had been produced by Brown University students under the guidance of Professor Will S. Taylor for “demonstration in his classes” and showed some structural details.

The section on eighteenth-century colonial architecture (1690–1790) was given a tan band of color. A bureau table from the museum’s collection, probably made by in Newport in about 1780 by James Goddard Jr. or Edmund Townsend, was added to this section, along with an eighteenth-century dressing table [Figs. 10 and 11]. The early republic (1790–1830) was denoted by a light blue; here, one-to-one replicas of three eighteenth-century doorframes marked the transitions to the adjoining spaces, and two side chairs (probably by John Carlile and Sons, ca. 1790–1800) flanked one of the doorways. The Rhode Island Historical Society contributed their model of the Second Unitarian Church on Benefit Street of

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![Fig. 9 Installation view, “Earliest Buildings in Rhode Island 1640–1690,” Rhode Island Architecture, RISD Museum, 1939. The structural models were made by Brown University students. (Courtesy of Bennington College)](image)
1794–95. The RISD Museum had recently acquired a “garden statue by an unknown American craftsman,” which Dorner placed on an axis in the second room of this section, where it was joined by a watercolor of Waterman Street, an oil painting of Lonsdale Wharf, and an old engraving of Brown University’s college building [Figs. 12 and 13]. Early industrial architecture (1790–1830) had a “neutral” background, while the mid-nineteenth century (1830–70) stood out in “Victorian red” [Fig. 14]. Mansions of the late nineteenth century (1870–1900) referenced the proverbial Golden Age with “a wide band of gold paper” as background and two large transparencies in the windows replacing the outside view with appropriate motives. In the last section, photographs of twentieth-century architecture (1900–40) looked “well against the black background” [Figs. 15 and 16]. Here, exhibition panels
Figs. 12 (previous spread) and 13 (top)
Installation views, “The Early Republic 1790–1830,” Rhode Island Architecture, RISD Museum, 1939. (Courtesy of Bennington College and RISD Archives)

Fig. 14
Installation view, “The Mid-Nineteenth Century,” Rhode Island Architecture. (Courtesy of Bennington College)

Fig. 15
At right, the Industrial Trust and Hospital Trust buildings. On the left through the doorway is the grandstand at Narragansett Park (1935) in Pawtucket. Beyond that, obscured by a fir branch, is the model and photograph of Windshield, with the Mary Ellis House in East Greenwich in the distance.
blocked the windows to the Radeke Garden to avoid distractions. John Nicholas Brown’s house, Windshield, was given special attention with “a model, photographs, working sketches and large transparencies.”

Among the sixty-three exhibitions shown at the RISD Museum under Dorner’s watch, *Rhode Island Architecture* was the only one that contained almost no authentic artwork. Perhaps Dorner wanted to emphasize the lack of intrinsic value in the photographic reproductions through his somewhat slapdash installation. The colored paper on the walls buckled, showing its own materiality. The large photographs were printed on cardboard (resulting in a slight warp) and pinned to the wall unframed, their captions unceremoniously glued into the lower right corner. There were no text panels, as the catalogue was considered an essential part of the exhibition. Because it combined the work of a number of different photographers, the show did not have as consistent a vision as, for example, Berenice Abbott’s fifty photographs in Hitchcock’s earlier exhibition on vernacular architecture in American cities. Dorner explained that these photos were “not pictures but more or less accidental segments of nature”—some showed mere sections of facades [Fig. 15]. Accordingly, Dorner insisted that the photos in the catalogue bleed to the edge, making it “more attractive and modern.” The models were not placed in the center of the room but protruded from the walls, next to photographs of the buildings they represented. Their support systems were as lightweight and unobtrusive as possible, either suspension cables or oblique supporting poles in the center.

The fact that Dorner commissioned color lantern slides (which survived among his teaching materials at Bennington) suggests how much the color treatments and installation of this exhibition meant to him. The installation photographs omitted sections where oil paintings and prints appeared on the walls. A number of planters with flowers and small pots of gangly evergreen branches are visible, but their changing locations suggest that the photographer merely placed them to enliven the images [Figs. 9, 14, 15]. In some pictures, an unwieldy rubber plant leans over the model and photograph of Richard Neutra’s Windshield House—perhaps a nod to the appreciation that rubber plants enjoyed among European modernists [Fig. 16].

In 1936, philosopher and historian Walter Benjamin famously celebrated how reproductions liberated art from its “aura” of authenticity, from its subservience to ritual, its confinement to museums, and from outmoded (and ultimately Fascist) concepts “such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery.” But several years earlier, in the late 1920s, it was Dorner who had first questioned the cult of the original artwork in a number of essays and installations. He coolly advocated for the inclusion of facsimiles in museum installations for pedagogical purposes, to the great consternation of his art-historian colleagues. Instead of shows on “individual artists” and the “blossoms” of their masterpieces, “exhibitions should help to explain our present position in the course of historical growth.” By offering “surveys” and “road signs,” they could provide “liberating incentives and productive energies for our public life.” This is exactly what *Rhode Island Architecture* endeavored to accomplish. It opened the eyes of its viewers to regional building traditions and demonstrated the American roots of modern architecture. Critics recognized its contemporary relevance also in the fact that historic architecture was being lost at an alarming rate. They mentioned the “needless destruction of buildings whose styles offer important records of their periods.” Specifically, they noted that buildings near the First Baptist Meeting House had been “torn down to make room for parking spaces.”

Reviews in national magazines concentrated on Hitchcock’s catalogue. Columbia University architectural historian Everard M. Upjohn mildly chided Hitchcock for overstating the case for mill buildings and mill villages and for being
overly harsh on the Beaux-Art architecture of Newport.\textsuperscript{58} In great contrast and
not surprisingly, Marxist poet and architect John Brooks Wheelwright welcomed
Hitchcock’s emphasis on industrial architecture and mill villages, but missed the
greater social context (“Rhode Island slums do much to make Americans the worst
housed of all civilized people”). He also suggested the inclusion of military engi-
neering, as well as the crediting of eighteenth-century builders rather than treating
them as anonymous.\textsuperscript{59} Art historian H. W. Janson, another recent immigrant from
Germany, called the catalogue “a model of its kind” by “the foremost authority on
American architecture.” He complimented the RISD Museum for including “local
architecture among its responsibilities” and expressed hope that this precedent
would find “wide imitation.”\textsuperscript{60} Parts of the exhibition were loaned to a number of
university museums in the following years, among them Wesleyan University (where
Henry-Russell Hitchcock taught), Pembroke College, Smith, Oberlin, and Iowa
State.\textsuperscript{61}

\section*{DORNER, GROPIUS, AND GIEDION}

Walter Gropius remained a steady friend and advisor, and an occasional visitor
at 10 Cooke Street, throughout Dorner’s time in Providence. After Dorner lost his
position at the RISD Museum in 1941, Gropius consoled him:

\begin{quote}
from what I see in the papers and Brown’s report you have got such strong
reports that everybody soon will see where the trouble was. This is another
example of dictatordom which must always be destructive but still I think
your fame about what you have done in your three years work there is gone
around enough so that I hope you will soon find another position with your
talents…. I think that Brown did a marvelous job and he has behaved like
a man which is not easy in his home town where he has to keep relations
with everybody.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

The board’s decision put Dorner and his wife in a particularly dire situation.
As enemy aliens without employment, they would have to return to a Germany in
the grip of Nazi dictatorship and wartime suffering. Alexander and Lydia Dorner
tried desperately to gain American citizenship. After interventions by John Nicholas
Brown and Rhode Island senator Theodore Francis Green, the Dorners finally
received approval in April 1943 and became citizens in December that year.\textsuperscript{63} In the
meantime, Brown, who had resigned from the RISD board in response to Dorner’s
dismissal, arranged a teaching contract for Dorner at Brown University. This gave
Dorner the opportunity to write his book on Herbert Bayer, the former Bauhaus stu-
dent, teacher, and designer, who had moved to the U.S. in 1938. The Way Beyond
‘Art’ became Dorner’s most critically acclaimed work. In scope and ambition it
was comparable to Swiss art historian Sigfried Giedion’s book Space, Time and
Architecture (1941), which had quickly become a standard textbook in architecture
schools. Giedion’s book was based on a series of lectures he gave at Harvard after
Gropius had invited him there in 1938 and 1939.

Dorner and Giedion had an extremely acrimonious relationship, fueled by
Dorner’s sense that Giedion had appropriated his ideas about a new relationship of
space and time in modern art and architecture without crediting him. Joan Ockman
has made a very convincing case that Giedion had indeed embraced ideas that
Dorner had presented both in a 1931 article in Cahiers d’Art and in a published
lecture given at the 1930 Congress for Aesthetics in Hamburg. Dorner’s name,
indeed, is nowhere to be found in Giedion’s book.\textsuperscript{64} According to Ockman, Giedion
was not the only one plagiarizing Dorner—James Johnson Sweeney, curator from
1935 to 1946 at the Museum of Modern Art and later the second director at the Guggenheim Museum, had used a translation of Dorner’s *Cahiers d’Art* text several times without crediting him.

Dorner was also convinced that Giedion had been complicit in his dismissal from the RISD Museum. In fact, he claimed in a letter to Gropius that Giedion himself admitted to him “to have participated in Mrs. D’s witch hunt against me as a Nazi spy.” We get a glimpse of Dorner’s infamous temper as he continues: “His kind of Fascism is just as bad as Nazi Fascism and he deserves every word I said to him and more. I rather die than shrink away whenever I meet with so much meanness and wrotten [sic] human qualities.”

Andrew Martinez and Daniel Harkett have shown elsewhere in this volume that the president and vice-president of the RISD Corporation, Helen M. Danforth and Royal Bailey Farnum, had plenty of other grievances, beyond an irrational fear of Dorner’s political leanings (and perhaps of his clichéd movie-villain looks).

Gropius stayed out of the conflict between Dorner and Giedion and helped to spread the word about *The Way Beyond ‘Art.* Explaining where he fundamentally differed from Giedion helped Dorner to clarify his own position regarding the “new type of art museum”: it was the difference between “stylistic investigation” and “a new tradition” (Giedion) and a place that was flexible, colorful, alive, and embraced dynamic “open growth,” and “all the struggles of the present” (Dorner). Dorner and Gropius organized a traveling show (also named *The Way Beyond ‘Art*’) about Herbert Bayer’s work in 1947. Its open arrangement, dynamic spatial sequence, and emphasis on reproductions rather than original works of art illustrated his book’s theses and crowned Dorner’s time in Providence. It was shown first at Brown University’s Faunce House Gallery to great critical acclaim (see page 58) and then moved on to at Harvard, the Institute of Design in Chicago, and an art center in Colorado Springs.

But Dorner grew restless. His teaching contract at Brown was running out and he was “not very happy here,” as he told Gropius. Gropius helped with numerous leads and letters of support and, finally, in 1948, Dorner accepted a position as a professor of art history at Bennington College. One year later, Hitchcock returned to the RISD Museum with a traveling exhibition he had curated, called *Painting Towards Architecture.* It showed the Miller Company collection of abstract art, with many of the avant-garde artists whom Dorner had featured at his Hanover museum, among them Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, Picasso, Schwitters, and Van Doesburg, with American contemporaries such as Calder, Tobey, Marin, and O’Keeffe. It was the kind of exhibition Dorner would have loved to stage at RISD himself.

**EPILOGUE**

Hitchcock and the Dorners stayed in touch and many years later, in 1953, Lydia wrote to say that she still fondly remembered their first meeting on the SS *Normandie*, on their passage from Europe. She also wanted Hitchcock to do her a favor: Bennington College was preparing a special issue of their quarterly alumni journal dedicated to Alexander Dorner. Would he write a statement about their collaboration in Providence sixteen years ago? After some delays, Hitchcock sent in a brief essay mentioning the influence Dorner’s work in Providence had had on other institutions, such as the Smith College Museum of Art, whose director he had become. “American scholarly life in the field of Art History was much influenced by the arrival in the 1930s of so many Gelehrte from central Europe, most of whom have become permanent ornaments of the teaching staff of our colleges and universities.” He praised Alexander Dorner for his work as both museum director.
and educator. “[T]he work he did in Providence immediately upon his arrival in this country is a significant part of the accomplishment of our American museums in the 20th Century.”

If this sounds a bit uninspired on Hitchcock’s part, it probably was. In his most recent publication, a MoMA exhibition catalogue on postwar architecture, he had mentioned the many immigrants from Europe and wondered if their work here was “as fine as that on which (their) earlier reputation was based.” Few passed the test in his eyes, among them Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer, but not Gropius (who had built little of note since he came) or Erich Mendelsohn. In all likelihood, Hitchcock would have placed Dorner with Gropius, in the lesser category. And, indeed: none of Dorner’s work in the U.S. achieved the radicalism and freshness he had shown in Hanover, even if some installations and in particular the *Rhode Island Architecture* show continued important ideas. Instead of the clichéd “unlimited possibilities” that Germany’s *Amerikanismus* had promised immigrants to the United States, Dorner encountered systemic challenges. A museum director in Hanover had considerably more freedom—unless curtailed by the Nazis, that is—than one in the U.S. In Germany, cultural institutions were tax funded, and a director reported only to the state’s minister of culture, whereas here a museum board wielded considerable influence over day-to-day decisions. Dorner’s ideas of a museum’s relevance for the present, however, as well as his broad inclusivity regarding exhibits and his strong emphasis on the museum’s educational mission, have lived on at RISD, and beyond.
1 Alexander Dorner to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, October 21, 1938, Henry-Russell Hitchcock Papers, Correspondence, Ri Exh., Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Reference to this source is hereafter abbreviated as HRH Papers, AoAA).


4 Alfred H. Barr Jr. to Hitchcock, December 30, 1937, Series 2: Alphabetical Files, Correspondence A-Z, 1937, HRH Papers, AoAA.


6 Ibid.


8 La Grande Illusion first played at the Albee Theater on Westminster Street, then at the Avon on Thayer Street. “Movie Clock,” Providence Journal, January 13, 1939.


13 Alexander Dorner, Die romanische Baukunst in Sachsen und Westfalen (Leipzig; Seemann, 1923); Alexander Dorner, J. H. Winckelmanns Werke in einer Auswahl herausgegeben (Hanover: Adolf Sponholz Verlag, 1924).


15 It was not an unqualified success. Writing in The Saturday Review of Literature, architect Frederick James Woodbridge rightly suggested that Hitchcock’s broad overview of modern architecture had selected only those cases that conveniently fit his theory, and thus left out many important others. Hitchcock also invented categories and often mentioned little-known buildings without illustration. As a result, the book was “of little or no real use either to the architect or layman.” Similarly, art historian Donald Drew Egbert found its “value as architectural history” greatly diminished by “dogmatism,” “dilettantism,” and “partisanship.” Frederick J. Woodbridge, “The City of the Future: Modern Architecture by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr.,” Saturday Review of Literature, February 22, 1930. Donald Drew Egbert, “Book Review of Henry-Russell Hitchcock’s Modern Architecture,” Art Bulletin 12, no. 1 (March 1930): 98–99.


20 John Nicholas Brown to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, December 23, 1938, RI Exh, HRH Papers, AoAA.

21 See correspondence with photographers Joseph McCarthy, Harvey Weber, and Berenice Abbott; architects Norman Hershoff, Sylvia and William Wilde, Alexander Knox, Richard Neutra, George Howe, and Robert Montgomery; and professors Will S. Taylor (Brown), Philip Creer (RISD), and Everard M. Upjohn (Columbia, an architectural historian and great-grandson of the architect Richard Upjohn, who had designed both St. Steven’s Church and Grace Church in Providence); Fiske Kimball at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Talbot Hamlin at the Avery Library; Samuel Green, the state director of the Federal Art Project; and historians King Covell and John Hutchins Cady. Occasionally the correspondence did not yield results and an important building was not shown, such as George Howe and Robert Montgomery Brown’s Donnelly House on Cottrill Road in Saunderstown (1938), because the architects lacked photographs and presentation drawings. Robert Montgomery Brown to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, March 6, 1939, RI Architecture, HRH Papers, AoAA.


24 Alexander Dorner, Rhode Island Architecture, 5.

25 Ibid.
27 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, 13.
28 Ibid., 15.
29 Ibid., 16.
30 Ibid., 35.
31 Ibid., 52.
32 Ibid., 60.
34 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, 63.
35 The correspondence with Hitchcock reveals that it was a collaboration between Howe and Robert Montgomery Brown.
36 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, caption for plate 73, also page 66.
37 John Nicholas Brown had happily agreed to have the house be a centerpiece in Dorner’s show. After the costly repairs of its hurricane damage—and largely due to Neutra’s miscalculations—which happened during the show’s run, Brown lost interest in further publicity. See Neumann, Richard Neutra’s Windshield House, 53–56.
38 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, 36.
40 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, 13.
41 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, American Architecture in Europe (manuscript, ca. 1927): 6, in Modern Architecture, outline and introduction, several drafts, HRH Papers, AoAA.
44 The show, installed at the domed hall of the Hanover museum, consisted of photographs on a burlap background. This was information kindly provided by Dr. Ines Katenhusen, who is finishing a book manuscript, ca. 1927): 6, in Modern Architecture, outline and introduction, several drafts, HRH Papers, AoAA.
46 See Rebecca Uchill’s discussion in this volume.
47 A checklist in the Hitchcock papers suggests that there were 208 photographs in the show. Folder Rhode Island Architecture, HRH Papers, AoAA.
48 Will Samuel Taylor (1882–1968) was a professor of art and curator of the art collection at Brown University from 1926–53, chairing the Art Department 1946–49. The models were constructed between 1934 and 1936. Will S. Taylor to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, February 18, 1939, RI Exh, HRH Papers, AoAA.
51 Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, 5.
52 Alexander Dorner to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, February 10, 1939, and February 27, 1939, Correspondence, RI Exhibition, HRH Papers, AoAA.
57 Daly, “History of State’s Architecture on Exhibition,” June 18, 1939.
60 H. W. Janson, “Review: Rhode Island Architecture by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Parnassus 12, no. 6 (October 1940): 32. Architectural Forum announced the show with many photographs but refrained from a critical review.
61 Information kindly provided by the RISD archivist, Andrew Martinez.
62 Walter Gropius to Alexander Dorner, September 24, 1941, BHA Gropius Papers.
64 Alexander Dorner to Walter Gropius, April 8, 1943, BHA Gropius Papers. See also Ockman, “The Road Not Taken: Alexander Dorner’s Way Beyond ‘Art’,” 82–120.
65 Alexander Dorner to Walter Gropius, February 5, 1947, BHA Gropius Papers. Dorner is referring here to Helen M. Danforth, president of the RISD Corporation and chair of the Executive Committee. According to Daniel Harkett’s essay in this volume, however, it was Royal Bailey Farnum, RISD’s executive vice-president, who had suspicions about Dorner’s political orientation and held a general antipathy against him.
66 The fact that the opening of the Rhode Island Architecture exhibition was moved twice, from March 1939 to May 1 and finally to June 18, confirms reports about Dorner’s erratic working methods. Dorner’s difficulties at RISD were also systemic.
69 Alexander Dorner to Walter Gropius, April 18, 1947, BHA Gropius Papers.
73 Ibid., 60.
74 Ibid., 16.
75 Ibid., 35.
76 Ibid., 52.
77 Ibid., 66.
78 Ibid., 60.
79 Ibid., 16.
80 Ibid., 35.
81 Ibid., 52.
82 Ibid., 66.
83 Ibid., 60.
84 Ibid., 16.
85 Ibid., 35.
86 Ibid., 52.
87 Ibid., 66.
88 Ibid., 60.

71 Lydia Dorner to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, July 6, 1953, Correspondence D–E, HRH Papers, AoAA.

72 Untitled manuscript, Correspondence D–E, HRH Papers, AoAA.