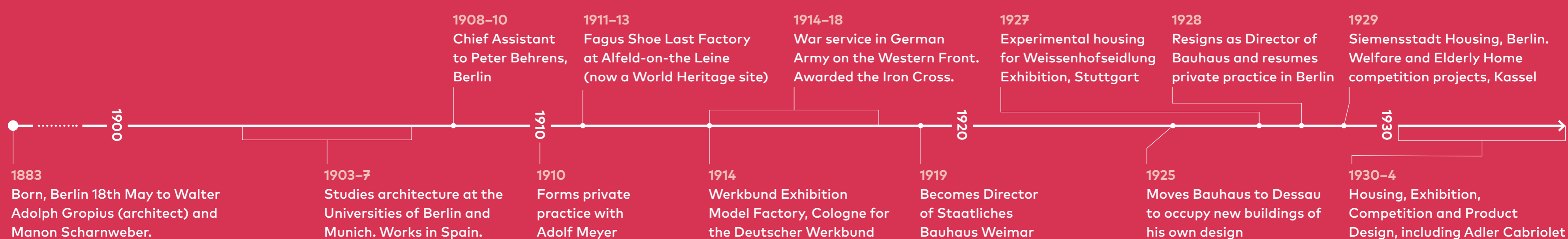


Bauhaus, Dessau, 1925

Gropius in Germany



Early life and training

Walter Gropius (1883–1969) was born in Berlin and embarked on his architectural studies at the universities of Berlin and Munich. In 1908 he became Chief Assistant to the German architect Peter Behrens in Berlin. Behrens was a leading figure of the nascent German modern movement, having helped to found the Deutscher Werkbund in 1910 and achieving several major early projects, most notably the huge Turbine Factory for the industrial firm AEG. Foreshadowing Gropius's own quest to unify art, design and industry, he was also retained to establish its corporate identity and design many of its product lines. Other assistants in Behrens' practice included Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Adolf Meyer, who would later join Gropius in partnership.

First projects

The project that would launch their names as modern architectural pioneers was the Fagus Shoe Last Factory at Alfeld-on-the Leine, Lower Saxony commissioned by Karl Benscheidt. A site plan had already been prepared by the older architect Eduard Werner (1847–1923), but being dissatisfied with his insufficiently progressive building design Benscheidt engaged Gropius and Meyer to develop the architectural scheme. Their new industrial style was further developed in the model factory for the Werkbund Exhibition of 1914, which became an international landmark of modern architecture. Gropius's wide design range is also evident in his innovative Benzene Motor Coach (1913) and later the Adler Cabriolet (1930).

War service and the Bauhaus

Further building work was interrupted by World War I, when Gropius was drafted into the Signal Corps of the German army and served on the Western Front, where he was wounded and nearly died. He was awarded the Iron Cross. The post-war period would lead to Gropius's best known achievement when in 1919 he superseded the Belgian Henry van de Velde as head of the Arts and Crafts School in Weimar, transforming this into the internationally renowned Bauhaus. Described by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'a paramount centre of creative energy in Europe', the school was re-established in Dessau in 1925 in a new building complex to Gropius's own design, attracting a galaxy of distinguished teachers including Kandinsky, Paul Klee, van Doesburg, Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer. This extraordinary concentration of artistic and pedagogical talent inevitably led to the school being in continuous internal turmoil, but ultimately it was the increasing political instability of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism that, after several changes of director, led to its premature closure in 1933.



Werkbund Model Factory, Cologne, 1914



Werkbund Model Factory



Adler Cabriolet, 1930



Gropius's office at the Bauhaus, Weimar, 1923



Fagus Shoe Last Factory, Alfeld-on-the Leine, 1911-13

Leaving Germany

Gropius himself had already resigned as Bauhaus Director in 1928, reverting to private practice and considerable involvement in housing design with extensive schemes in Dessau, Karlsruhe and Berlin. But the collapse of public investment in social architecture following the financial crash, and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 made Gropius's eventual departure from Germany inevitable.

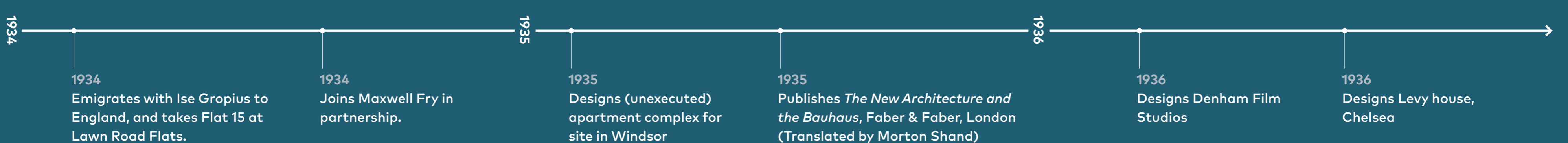
ter pius

mark the 80th anniversary
Gropius's departure from England

«Nothing has impressed me more than the general principle...of sacrificing immediate and minor progress for the sake of a more steady and more comprehensive advance. This has led to a puzzling inefficiency in many details. But it has brought about a human development which is unequalled throughout the world.»

Gropius reflecting on his time in England, 1937

Gropius in England Part 1



Arrival at Lawn Road

Gropius's relocation from Nazi Germany had been assisted by Morton Shand (architectural critic and linguist) and the architect Maxwell Fry, who had befriended Gropius when he visited London earlier that year to attend the opening of an exhibition of his work at the RIBA and give a lecture to the Design & Industries Association. In June Jack Pritchard had written to Gropius offering him rent-free accommodation at Lawn Road (Flat 15) where he arrived on 18th October 1934 with Ise Frank whom he had married in 1923 following his divorce from his first wife Alma Mahler, widow of the composer.

The search for work

Pritchard was already planning a second Isokon apartment project in Manchester, but this failed to materialize and the search for work, a constant issue during Gropius's years in England, resumed. Introductions were arranged to potential patrons, including the Elmhursts of Dartington (to little effect) and Henry Morris of the Cambridgeshire Education Committee through whose offices Gropius and Fry would presently be commissioned to design the Impington Village College.

Meanwhile Pritchard continued to pursue further sequels to the Isokon Flats, and took an option on a fine 33 acre site at St Leonard's Hill, Windsor. Sketches were produced for a substantial scheme of 69 apartments, with a restaurant, lounge and ballroom, but Pritchard was unable to raise sufficient funds to proceed before the option expired.

Other potential apartment projects for sites in London and Birmingham likewise foundered through local objection or lack of funding. In November 1935 Pritchard's appointment of Gropius as Controller of Design for the Isokon Furniture Company did offer the prospect of work, though in the event it was Marcel Breuer whom he in turn delegated as designer and who would largely benefit from the commission with the development of his celebrated Isokon Long Chair (exhibited here in the Gallery).



Apartment scheme at St Leonard's Hill, Windsor, 1935

Gropius builds in England

The first building project to be realised by the Gropius-Fry partnership was the Film Processing Laboratories at Denham for Alexander Korda's London Film Co, opened in 1936. This grew to become one of the most important film production facilities outside Hollywood and the source of such classics as *Brief Encounter*, *The Great Escape*, *Star Wars* and several James Bond films. But although the Gropius-Fry element was listed Grade II in 1985, it was finally closed in 2014 and redeveloped for residential use.

1936 also brought the private house commission from playwright Benn Levy and actress Constance Cummings for their site in Old Church Street, Chelsea. This was planned in coordination with the neighbouring house of Dennis Cohen, designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, both houses being listed in 1970. (The Gropius/Fry house has since been significantly altered.)



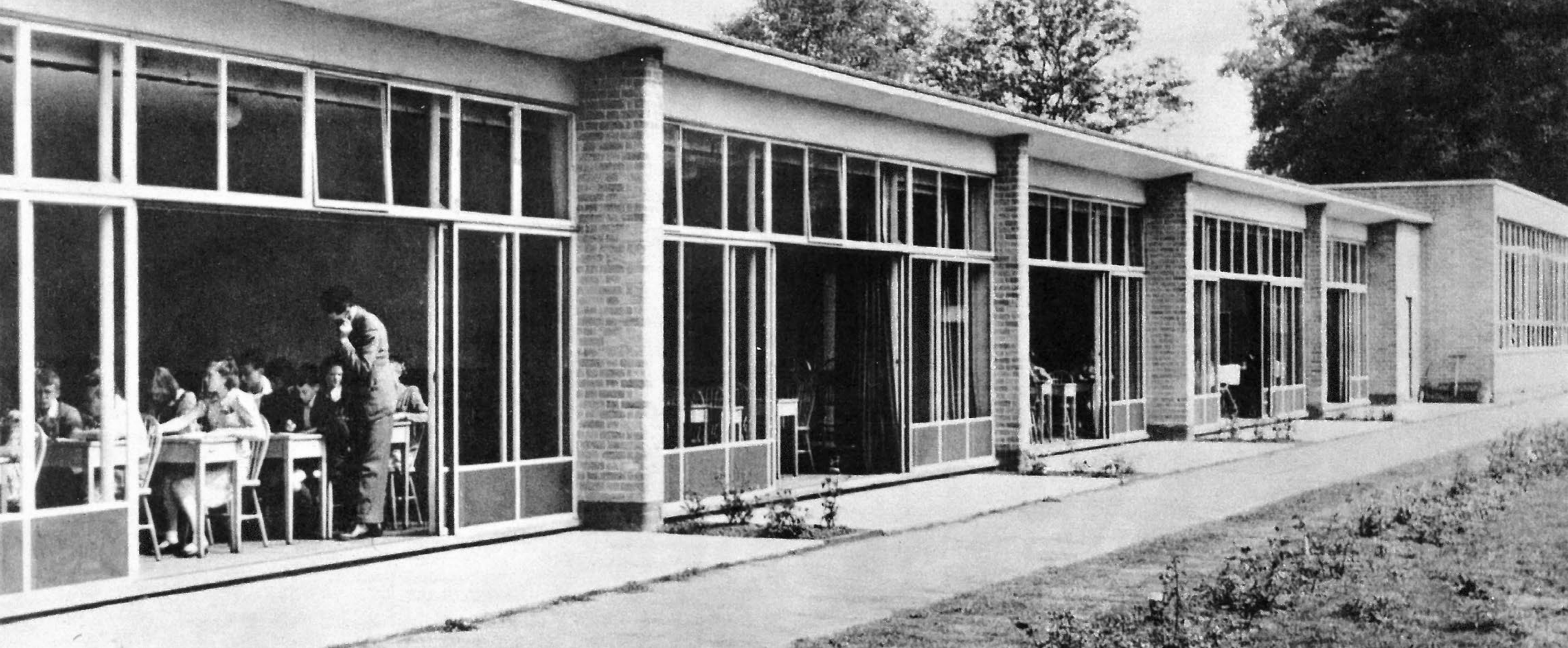
Film Laboratories, Denham, 1936



Levy House, Chelsea, 1936



Levy House, Chelsea, 1936



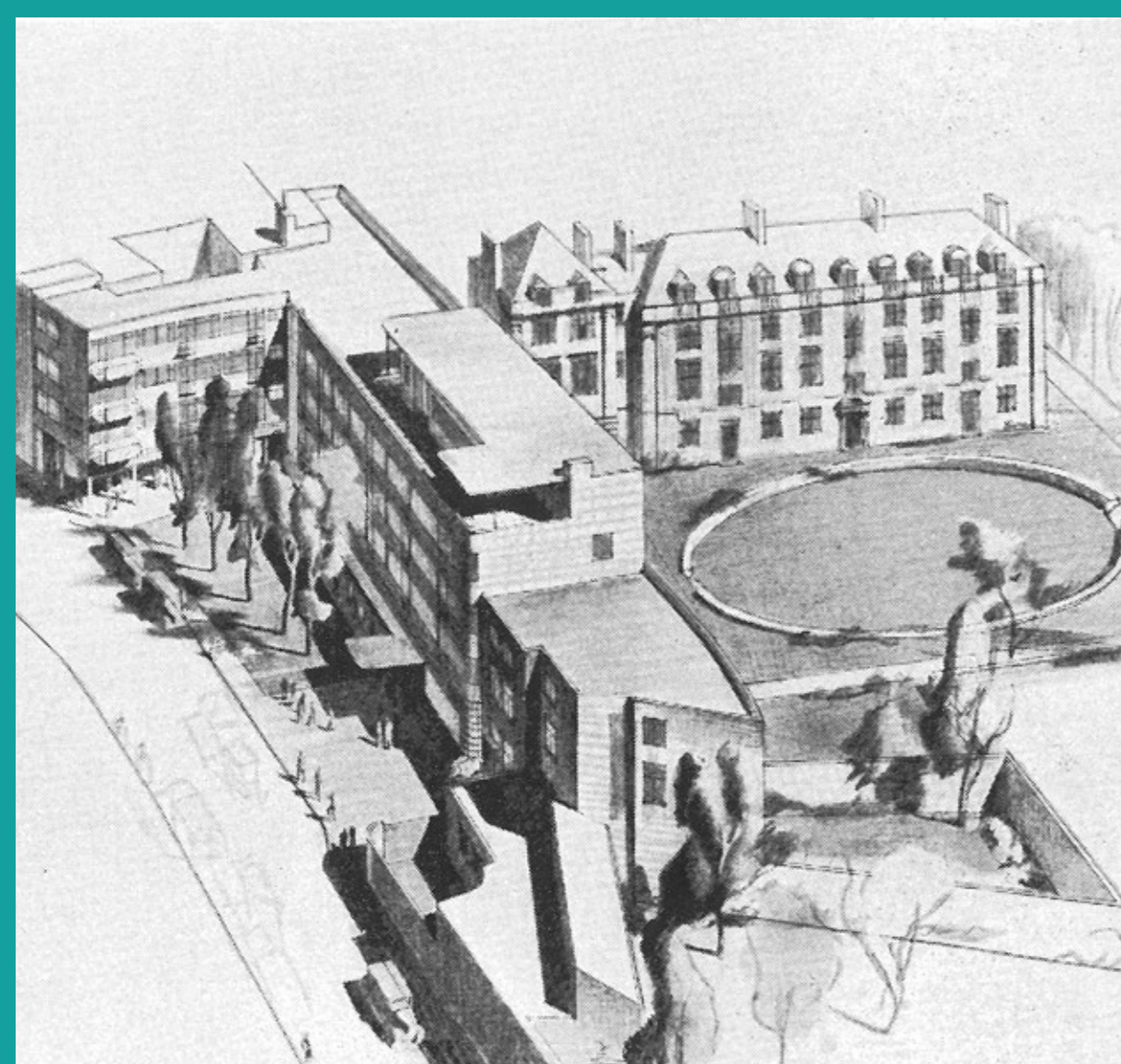
Impington Village College, 1936–9

Gropius in England Part 2



Opportunity in Cambridge

The most high profile commission to come Gropius's way during his period in England was the project for Christ's College, Cambridge. Promoted by the eminent geneticist and Fellow of Christ's C.H. Waddington, this was to provide a new student dormitory building linked to the existing college with related landscaped gardens. The surviving drawings suggest Gropius's design was developed in considerable detail, but its radical architectural *parti* proved too controversial. A rival scheme by the Traditionalist architect Oswald Milne was favoured in a Fellows' vote but in the event the whole project was abandoned, and the lost opportunity of having a Gropius building (followed a year later by Fry's similar experience at All Soul's, Oxford) became an historic testament to Oxbridge's pre-war unreadiness for modern architecture.

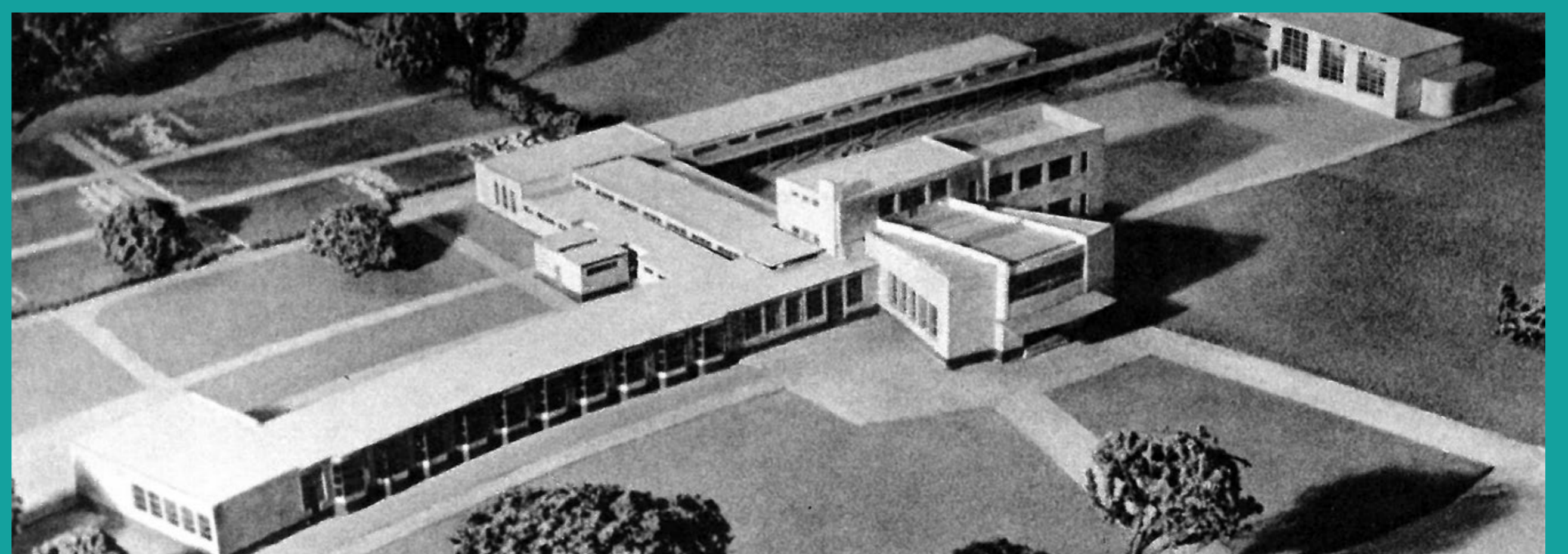


Scheme for Christ's College, Cambridge, 1936

Impington Village College

Various pieces of Gropius's correspondence from this time indicate his increasing frustration at the difficulty of finding work and the repeating pattern of abortive commissions, but it would be in Cambridgeshire that he eventually achieved the project for which his brief residency in England is best remembered – the Village College at Impington. The programme of village colleges around the county had been developed by Henry Morris with the support of Jack Pritchard, who recruited a range of luminaries including Charles Holden, J.M. Keynes and

Charles Reilly to back the appointment of Gropius and Fry for the Impington project. An initially sceptical Education Committee was eventually persuaded and the scheme, though effectively designed by Gropius, was finally completed under Fry's supervision in 1939 two years after his departure. Even this project was not without its financial problems, the outturn cost significantly exceeding the original budget and a substantial portion of the architects' fees having to be recouped through public subscription.



Impington Village College, 1936–9



The Wood House, Shipbourne, Kent, 1937

Gropius's only other significant English commission was the Wood House, Shipbourne (1937) in Kent for Jack Donaldson which, like Impington, registers the progress of English modernism from the declamatory 'white concrete' phase to a more assimilated aesthetic employing wider varieties of traditional materials.

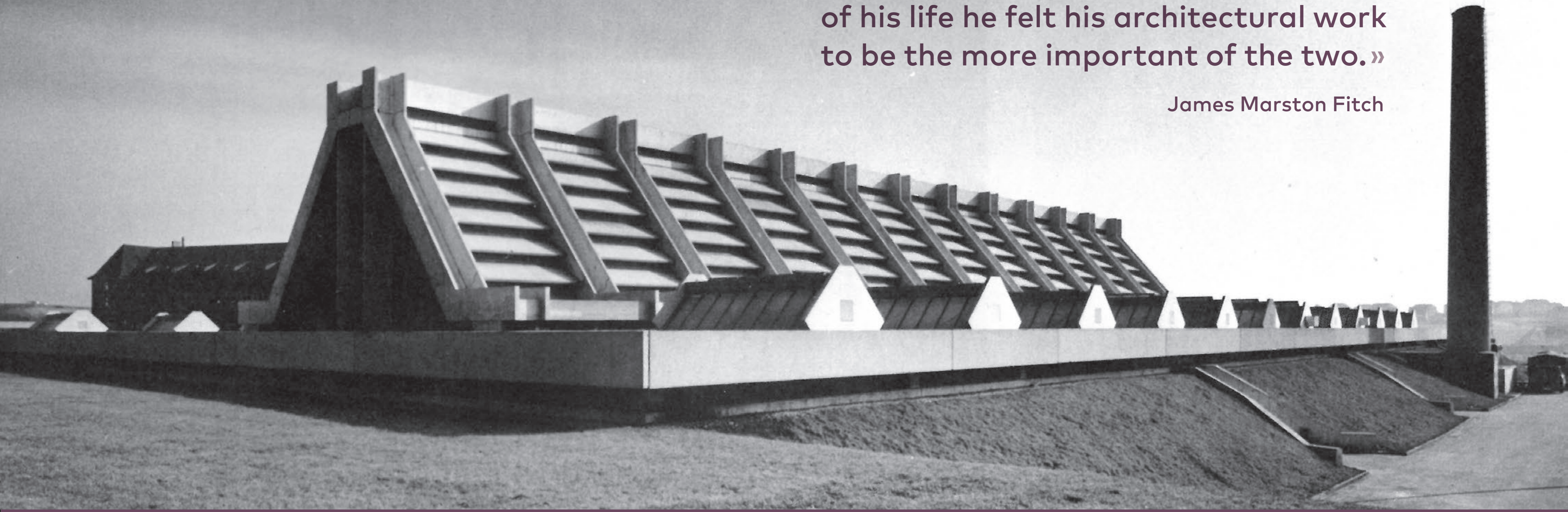
Moving on

Although Gropius had applied in July 1936 for permission to settle in England, he was offered a Professorship at Harvard only three months later, and in weighing such an opportunity against the difficulties he experienced here his decision to move on is hardly surprising. At a Farewell Dinner, hosted by Julian Huxley at the Trocadero Restaurant, Piccadilly on 9th March 1937 and attended by numerous friends

and admirers, Gropius would remark of his English experience, «*Nothing has impressed me more than the general principle...of sacrificing immediate and minor progress for the sake of a more steady and more comprehensive advance. This has led to a puzzling inefficiency in many details. But it has brought about a human development which is unequalled throughout the world*».

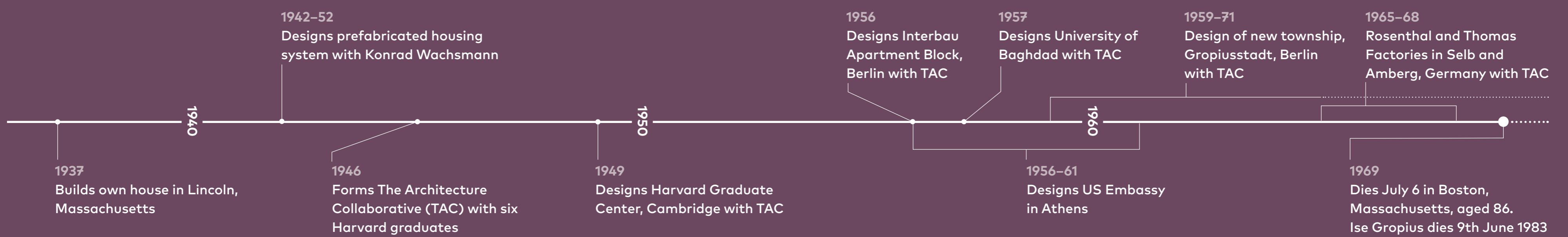
«He aspired to be a practitioner more than a teacher... In his own perspective of his life he felt his architectural work to be the more important of the two.»

James Marston Fitch



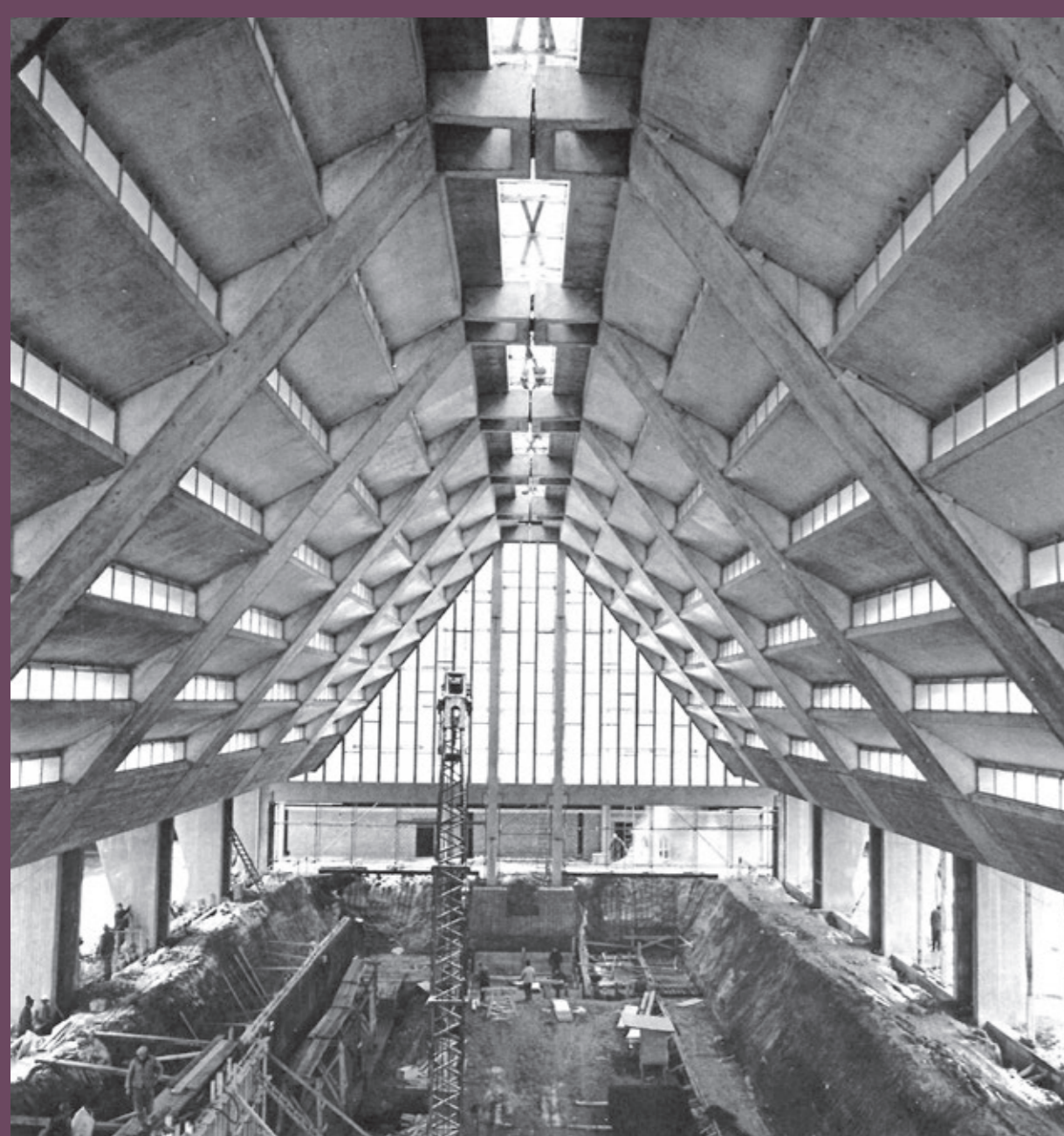
Thomas Glass Factory, Amberg, 1968

Gropius in America

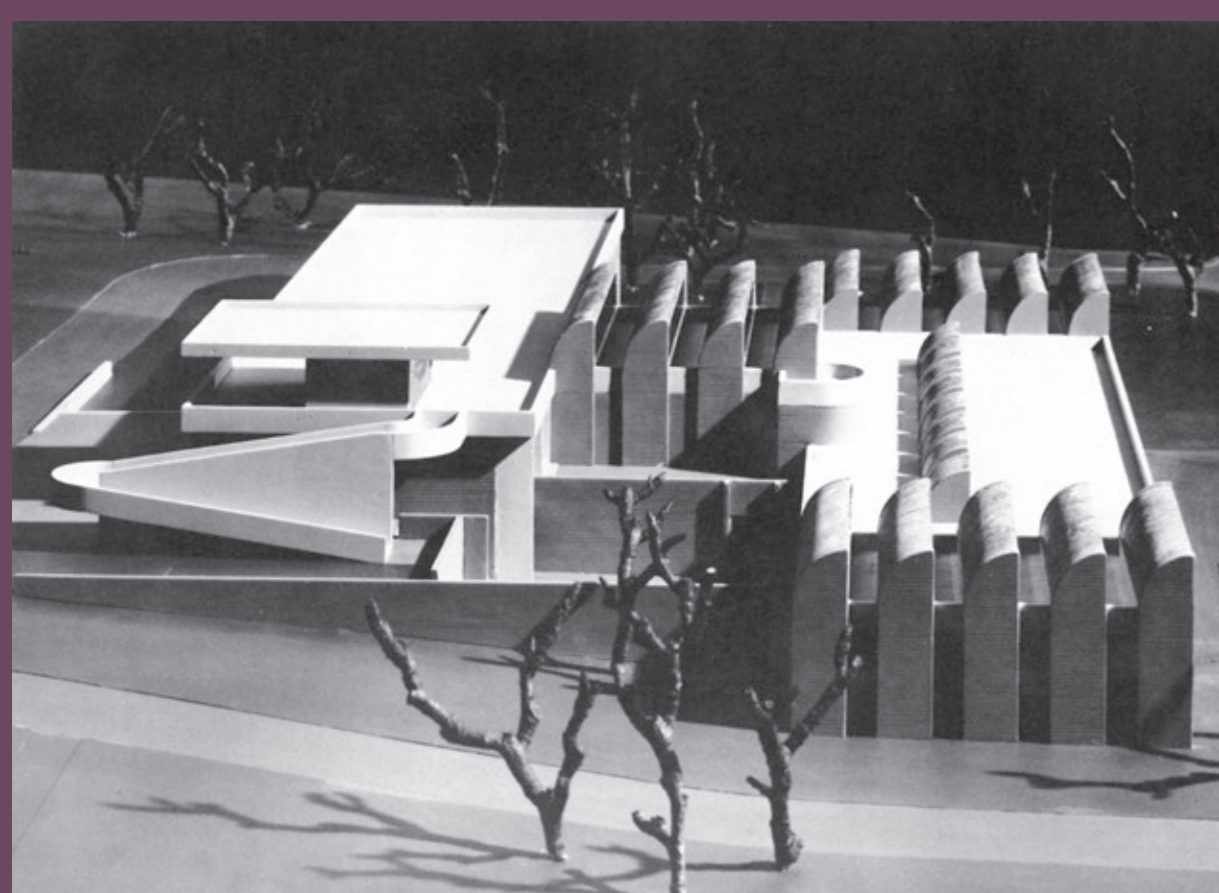


Settling in the States

In 1937 Walter Gropius took up his post as Professor of Architecture at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, where he was rejoined by his former Bauhaus colleague and Isokon neighbour, Marcel Breuer. The same year he designed his own house in Lincoln, Mass. on a site and with funds provided by the Boston philanthropist Helen Storrow. Breuer would build his own house on a nearby plot. In 1944 Gropius became a naturalized US citizen. Whilst the Harvard appointment consolidated his reputation as one of modern architecture's foremost teachers, he would soon resume his preferred métier as a practitioner.



Thomas Glass Factory, Amberg, 1968



Bauhaus Archive, Berlin, 1964

Architectural practice

Characteristically, this took the form of group practice, The Architects Collaborative (TAC) founded in 1946 with six of his former Harvard pupils. TAC became a highly regarded US practice and achieved many notable projects locally and abroad, including the Harvard Graduate Center (1949), the US Embassy in Athens (1956-61), the University of Baghdad (1957) and a project for the German Ambassadorial Residence, Buenos Aires (1968). Ironically perhaps, much of TAC's work was in Gropius's native Germany – the Interbau Apartment Block in Berlin (1956), the new township named Gropiusstadt, Berlin (1959-71), the Bauhaus Archive (1964) and the China Factory, Selb (1966) and Thomas Glass Factory, Amberg (1968) both for Rosenthal.

The consistency and sobriety of Gropius's architectural work reveals the same rationalistic principles that had underpinned his earliest designs from the Bauhaus years. It displays little of the rhetorical qualities of his contemporary, Le Corbusier, so that it tends to be eclipsed by his enduring reputation as a teacher. Yet, as the distinguished architect and critic James Marston Fitch was to write in the catalogue that accompanied his lifework retrospective:

«He aspired to be a practitioner more than a teacher... In his own perspective of his life he felt his architectural work to be the more important of the two, and his two terms as a teacher, first at Dessau and later at Cambridge, he regarded as being, in a certain sense, interruptions of his task».

James Marston Fitch, *Walter Gropius – Buildings, Plans, Projects 1906-1969*, International Exhibitions Foundation, 1972.

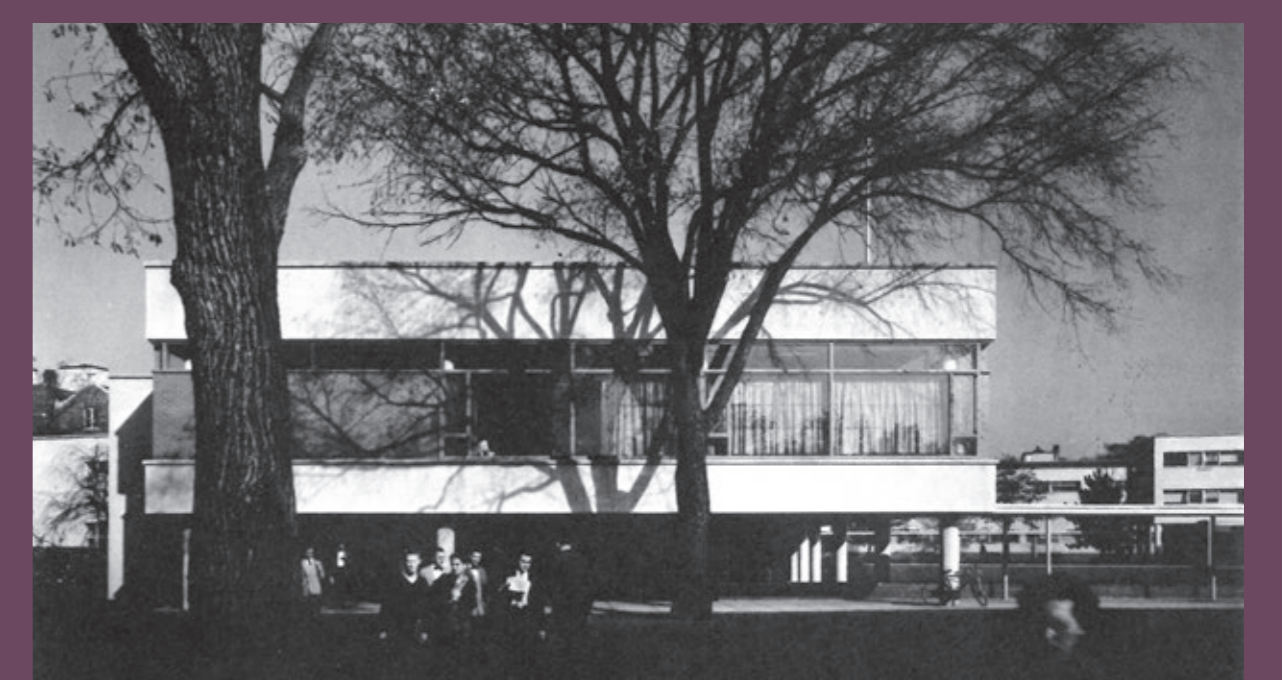
Maintaining the English connection

Gropius returned to England on several occasions after his departure, attending the CIAM congress in 1947 and to receive the RSA Albert Medal in 1961. He continued to keep in touch with his former comrades, Maxwell Fry and Jack Pritchard, who was to play a key part in bringing his exhibition to the UK in 1974 where it was shown in London, Manchester, Glasgow and Impington College.



Gropius House, Lincoln, Mass. 1937-8

After his death in 1969 Ise Gropius donated their house in Lincoln to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) though remained in tenancy till her death in 1983. It is now open to the public as a museum. Of the Isokon's numerous notable residents (see Gallery chart), Gropius was arguably the most outstanding – a 20th century figure of world stature.



Harvard Graduate Center, 1949