

International Style

by Andreas Angelidakis

Corporate Architecture, as we think of it today, was invented by Mies van der Rohe in the 1920s in a series of charcoal drawings that depicted steel and glass skyscrapers (Friedrichstrasse, Berlin). He became identified as the progenitor of the "International Style", which was a modernist style of building simple steel and glass structures for both homes and public buildings. They were considered to be perfect structures, because they could accommodate any climate or setting. The houses produced during that period formed the historical basis in the International style, but it was office buildings that proliferated, filling the downtowns of every city in the world. The glass and steel box became the style that dressed up the corporate images of the world.

As the market of this style of corporate architecture expanded, during the 1970s and 1980s so did the architecture firms that produced them, becoming themselves corporations. Working a bit like a production line, teams of architects designed together. One team might be assigned to make just the plumbing diagrams for a single megastructure. But even though these corporate products, each one is designed for a client's specific purpose and for a specific site, but only the design process can qualify as corporate. The building itself is, most of the time, required to serve as a corporate face, and for the bigger corporations a kind of landmark often based around its vertical mass.

In the outskirts and suburbs of all major cities corporate architecture has taken a slightly more modest turn. The mirrored box still exists, but it lives a significantly less glamorous life; neither a landmark, nor any one to impress, it just has to be cheap and fast to build. Then, of course, there is the "dumb" box, a building with one door and no windows, often housing corporate shops like Ikea or K-Mart. Their only distinction is their logos. On a slightly smaller scale are gas stations, which are nearly perfect examples of corporate architecture. Stripped down versions of Mies's Barcelona pavilion, without the marble and the chic furniture; made in the shape of a plane or mushroom on thin columns, with a roof to stop under to fill up your tank. If it's Shell it will be yellow and gray; if it's Mobil, red, white and blue. And there is always a minibuilding next to it where you can pay and buy cigarettes and relieve yourself. A little further down the street, whether in Los Angeles or Budapest, the most complete manifestation of corporate architecture is opening its doors, not to calculate your stock or trade insider information, but to serve pizza. A small, one-story white building with a plastic red roof and the name Pizza Hut. You know what that means! An even if you haven't seen the product, you know what it looks like.