Defining any "era" is a struggle, and viewed from this distance Modernism is no exception. Emerging through the wake of the First World War and Russian Revolution, the movement professed extensive and sometimes contradictory ideas that nonetheless expressed a shared dream for a better future. The Vitra’s spring exhibition "Modernism: Designing a New World" attempts to tell this complicated story. Concentrating on 1914-1934, the exhibition focuses on European architecture and design, but also includes examples of performance, graphics, fashion, film, and sculpture. There is much to see.

Art is spatially represented, but there are many artifacts that display Modernist ideologies of simplicity, economy, and standardization. The once radical designs such as Alvar Aalto’s Savoy Chair, 1935, or former Bauhaus student Marcel Breuer’s distinctive Model B Chair, 1935 (whose early tubular steel frame looks surprisingly slender in comparison to its chunky successors) are now familiar classics, but clothing for the new era such as the Productivist outfit designed by Alexander Rodchenko defies its date of 1929, and still surprises.

Rational practical solutions so typical of the movement are most obvious in the Frankfurt kitchen of 1927—the first kitchen made in quantity with standardised building elements. Designed with in-built labour-saving devices such as storage cupboards, and drop-down ironing boards, it is the embodiment of the pursuit of functionality. Less successful is the section devoted to "Health & Body Culture." Optimistic dreams for a new world can be humbling, although these once powerful celebratory images of group sporting activities seem amusing and a little dark.

Architecture is well covered, but not well presented. Highlights include a breathtaking coloured glass elevation of Corbusier’s 1922 Villa Stéphanie, Berlin, in which the supreme lacquered metal Tatra T-87 saloon car, 1937, looks compact and, this was the first mass-produced streamlined car, but central seat and compelling detail fine to see.

The exhibition has refuelled the complex debate on the success of the movement. The collection itself successfully outlines the experimental nature of early Modernist pioneers, but crammed into the confines of the rooms and the dates 1914-1939, the debate is limited, although the exhibition catalogue provides further analysis. It is interesting to see which ideas have not been overtaken by our 21st-century reality. A commitment to social reform and provision of affordable housing survives, but for the most part Modernist ideology has now settled into a salable style, delivering inspirational design to a wider audience. This audience, in turn, has ensured record attendance to the VitraHaus exhibition, albeit with a rather voyeuristic and nostalgic approach to the unfamiliar pre-war days. Present day speed and volume of new technologies has clearly not jaded enthusiasm for an interest in visionary progress, and despite its drawbacks the exhibition is still a powerful lesson in the potential of optimist rethinking.

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