

Marcel Breuer

1902-1981

Marcel Lajos Breuer was born in Pécs, Hungary, on 21 May 21 1902, and died in New York City on 1 July 1981. As an architect and furniture designer, he was an influential Hungarian-born modernist of Jewish descent. One of the fathers of Modernism, Breuer showed a great interest in modular construction and simple forms.



Known as Lajkó, Breuer studied and taught at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, stressing the combination of art and technology, and eventually became the head of the school's cabinet-making shop. He later practised in Berlin, designing houses and commercial spaces, as well as a number of tubular metal furniture pieces, replicas of which are still in production today.

Perhaps the most widely-recognized of Breuer's early designs was the first bent tubular steel chair, later known as the Wassily Chair, designed in 1925 and inspired, in part, by the curved tubular steel handlebars on Breuer's Adler bicycle. Despite the widespread popular belief that the chair was designed for painter Wassily Kandinsky, Breuer's colleague on the Bauhaus faculty, it was not; Kandinsky admired Breuer's finished chair design, and only then did Breuer make an additional copy for Kandinsky's use in his home. When the chair was re-released in the 1960s, it was designated "Wassily" by its Italian manufacturer, who had learned that Kandinsky had been the recipient of one of the earliest post-prototype units.

In the 1930s, due to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, Breuer relocated to London. There he was employed by Jack Pritchard at the Isokon company, one of the earliest introducers of modern design to the United Kingdom. Breuer designed his Long Chair as well as experimenting with bent and formed plywood. Breuer eventually ended up in the United States. He taught at Harvard's architecture school, working with students such as Philip Johnson and Paul Rudolph who later became well-known U.S. architects. At the same time, Breuer worked with old friend and Bauhaus colleague Walter Gropius, also at Harvard, on the design of several houses in the Boston area.

Breuer dissolved his partnership with Gropius in May 1941 and established his own firm in New York. The *Geller House I* of 1945 is the first to employ Breuer's concept of the 'binuclear' house, with separate wings for the bedrooms and for the living / dining / kitchen areas, separated by an entry hall, and with the distinctive 'butterfly' roof (two opposing roof surfaces sloping towards the middle, centrally drained) that became part of the popular modernist style vocabulary. A demonstration house set up in the MOMA garden in 1949 caused a new flurry of interest in the architect's work, and an appreciation written by Peter Blake.

The 1953 commission for UNESCO headquarters in Paris was a turning point for Breuer: a return to Europe, a return to larger projects after years of only residential commissions, and the beginning of Breuer's adoption of concrete as his primary medium. He became known as one of the leading practitioners of Brutalism, with an increasingly curvy, sculptural, personal idiom. Windows were often set in soft, pillowy depressions rather than sharp, angular recesses.

Breuer is sometimes incorrectly credited, or blamed, for the former Pan Am Building (now the MetLife Building), a high-rise in New York City considered to be unpopular. The Pan Am was actually credited to Walter Gropius. In 1969 Breuer developed a 30-story proposed skyscraper over Grand Central Terminal, called "Grand Central Tower", which Ada Louise Huxtable called 'a gargantuan tower of aggressive vulgarity', and became a cause celebre. Breuer's reputation was damaged, but the legal fallout improved the climate for landmark building preservation in New York City and across the United States.

