A brief history of Wells Coates
1895 to 1958
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Portrait of Wells Coates for 'Unit One'
S. Cantacuzino
To understand Wells Coates as a designer and more specifically his design ethos, one must first understand his upbringing. Unlike any designer at that time he originated from Japan, this is the original catalyst that provoked the insight into design and architecture that made him so well known in his later years. Cohn, L.

The reason being, the Japanese attitude towards living is very much portrayed through their architecture. Simplistic, open and functional spaces that would often switch between living room, bedroom and dining room, while this meant that originally many designers rejected his ideals, in time they would come to understand through the actualization of Wells’s designs, the beauty of an aesthetic yet incredibly functional living space. Cohn, L.

“Let us take a tour… and let us take as guide one who is a stranger to the West, one born and brought up according to the inflexible customs of an ancient civilization to the East”

Wells Coates in (Cohn, 1999)
This can be clearly seen in his studio flat, page 7, where what was known as the sitting down area (bottom left) is no doubt Wells’s take on the Japanese tatami mats, additionally the window encasing the plants in form are very similar to the sliding screen doors that are often seen in Japanese homes. Cohn, L.

Moreover, these doors were also a main part of the architecture in a design he did for Charles Laughton & Elsa Lanchester that can be seen on page 6. Cohn, L.
Obviously Wells Coates did soak up the design thinking of the West to perfect his own ethos.

The most important group of like-minded designer that worked with and influenced him were a group called ‘MARS’ composed of highly sought after architects. The leading figures included Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Alvar Aalto, this group of modernists all agreed with the following set of principles, to formulate contemporary architectural problems and to represent the modern architectural idea, to cause this idea to penetrate technical, economic and social circles, to work towards the solution of the contemporary problems of architecture. Montes Serrano, C.

The group of elitists worked on many projects together projecting their thoughts about progression, space, simplicity and freedom through their work and exhibitions with much success. Skandium.
After joining this group and refining his thought process through experience and his own social and political exploration, Wells Coates held a talk directed towards students at the Architectural Association in 1938. The talk conveyed his beliefs that architecture must respond to and more specifically exploit the birth of new materials and manufacturing techniques in order to create a more efficient living space at a cheaper cost to the masses, essentially a set of rules for semi mass produced homes. Cohn, L.

The way he explains this is by relating the home to the car; he says: “a car was produced in small quantities at a cost of, say, £600… and you could choose extra accessories from a long expensive list… today it is produced in vast quantities at cost of about £60. It is less noisy than you, it is reliable… it is more comfortable in its seating…and there are no accessories to buy as extras” here Wells speaks of the car to represent the home and the accessories the furnishing. Wells Coates in (Cohn, 1999)

“...steel affects all aspects of architecture… apertures are not so much cut out of the walls as left out of them”

Wells Coates in (Cohn, 1999)
His first major solo project was the 'Cresta' shops, which included the design of the shop front and lettering, the lights, cupboard, shelves, benches, table, stools and more.

Three shops were put in place within London; one on Baker Street, Brompton Road and Bond Street. The very elegant yet abstract design that can be seen became very popular; sadly they were destroyed once their ownership was passed on to Eric Crabtree due to illness in the 1990s.
Next came his biggest interior design project, a request to convert 1 Kensington Place Gardens from a typical Victorian home into a modern living space.

By observing the before and after pictures it’s obvious that Wells used his ethos and personal experience to turn this traditional home into a clean-cut, open living space. Every item in the home has been carefully designed to convey the same aesthetic theme and unification.

Wells Coates’s personality is reflected through his designs of the furniture, mirrors and Japanese sliding doors. Hafa Elgohary F.
He was also asked to design the studios at the new Broadcasting house in Portland Place. Darling, E.

The outcome incorporated a sleek modern feel as well as functionality shown by the microphone that, instead of taking up floor space, hung down from the ceiling using a well thought out counterweight system. Darling, E.
Another design, this time unrelated to architecture, was the ‘AD65’ for ECKO.

This was a wireless circular radio made out of Bakelite, the design at this time was revolutionary compared to the other rectangular radios on the market. The best selling product is still regarded as a collector’s item from the 1930s and is still now being held at the Design Museum in Butlers Wharf. Wells Coates Exhibition Committee Staff and Staff Museum of Modern Art.
One of his larger achievements would be ‘The Studio Flats’ an iconic piece of architecture on 18 Yeoman’s Row. Cohn, L.

As mentioned earlier, this living space embodies everything that he believed in in terms of ethos and aesthetics, in fact so much so that he lived there until 1955 after its completion in 1935. Cohn, L.

The space has been put together with space, comfort and functionality in mind all encompassed within a uniform setting of structure and furnishing. Cohn, L.
What many would consider his biggest achievement are the 'Lawn Road Flats' or 'Isokon' in Hampstead, London.

Built with the methodology of leaving behind cluttered Victorian homes, Wells Coates created a living space that contained everything the user would need without the presence of useless items, all encompassed within a rigid but well thought out structure. Cantacuzino S.
Another invention of his was a new wingsail, the design took inspiration from a bird’s wing in order to go closer to the wind and stiffen at will. This sail was attached to a catamaran hull of his own design, which was almost completely unknown at the time.

Cantacuzino, S.

After a lot of prototyping and testing the design was exhibited at ‘Britain can make it’ and received a lot of publicity as a new form of ‘high speed sailing’.

Cantacuzino, S.
After his many accomplishments, commissions started to dwindle and due to this, financial troubles and partly his own loneliness, Wells Coates became depressive and in time died on the 17th of June 1958. Cohn, L.

Although this is a sad truth, this in no way alters the fact that Wells Coates had an incredibly modern ideology. He tasked himself in bringing architecture to its full potential through the use of the new manufacturing methods, materials and most of all; functional yet beautifully aesthetic space management solutions. He has exhibited all this throughout his many years of work and although unknown to most, helped pave the way for many architects after him.
This report is an exploration of Wells Coates's life and accomplishments, however this is not only conveyed in writing but also layout.

The ‘Peignot demi’ font used for the headings is typical of the 1930s and is there to convey his upbringing in Japan, while the body font ‘Gill sans’ represents the modern influence of the West. The colours used to separate each chapter are also typical of the 1930s, Wells Coates’s golden age so to speak.

You the reader must also understand that although grids, spacing and eye diversion techniques are used in the background, the lack of clutter between text and images is a reflection of Wells’s ideals towards architecture.

Bibliography


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