

communiqué /press release**For immediate release****THE FILTER OF REASON : WORK OF PAUL NELSON**

An Exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture

Montréal, 26 March 1991 - The exhibition **THE FILTER OF REASON** presented at the CCA from 27 March until 26 May 1991 represents the first comprehensive exploration of the work of Paul Nelson (1895-1979), the American architect, film set designer, painter, critic and educator who taught and practised architecture in the United States and France for over 50 years. Nelson was a central figure in the development in the 1930's and 1940's of functionalism, which rejected the Beaux-Arts language in favour of technological and functional expression. "New needs require new forms" was Nelson's oft-stated credo.

THE FILTER OF REASON explores the extent to which Paul Nelson contributed to the exchange of architectural ideas between Europe and North America. Like his Canadian contemporary, Ernest Cormier, Nelson acted as a conduit for the passage of new architectural and artistic ideas, playing a role in the growing internationalization of art and architectural theory and practice that began in the early twentieth century. Nelson was particularly influenced by the modernist aesthetic which he experienced through his circle of friends (including the painters Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró and the sculptor Alberto Giacometti); the theories and work of Le Corbusier; and the rationalism of Auguste Perret. In turn Nelson went back to France from the United States imbued with the technological vision of his friend R. Buckminster Fuller; a fascination with metal and tensile structures; and an entirely new concept of institutional especially hospital – design.

Through his friendship with the American actress Gloria Swanson he was asked to design the sets for her 1929 film "What a Widow!" Nelson's sets, which included curvilinear walls, Cubist art, and tubular-steel and built-in furniture helped to popularize a view of the modernist aesthetic to a broad segment of the North American population.

The Palace of Discovery (1938), a projected museum and exhibition hall for science and technology, allowed Nelson, and his collaborators Oscar Nitzchke and Frantz Jourdain, to design a building which expressed its purpose through a functionalist plan, dramatic sculptural forms and a technically bold suspended structure.

Perhaps Nelson's most innovative project was his experimental Suspended House of 1936-38 which owed as much to the technocratic theories of Buckminster Fuller as to Nelson's own interest in cinematographic space, surrealism and functionalism. Nelson's model of the house features scale models of artworks contributed by Alexander Calder and Fernand Léger. The Suspended House features a continuous structure of tubular stainless-steel frames supporting the roof and a meshlike curtain wall, which leaves the interior space free of columns and partitions. The curtain wall was designed to be infilled with opaque, translucent or transparent panels. Within the open space of the interior, prefabricated rooms and elements are suspended from the steel frames and connected by an open ramp. A concrete and glass-block volume that houses service functions penetrates the metal screen midway through the house. It acts as a mezzanine on the interior and a terrace on the exterior.

After the war, Nelson became a recognized authority on the subject of hospital design and construction as a result of his exhaustive programmatic analyses of the subject. Four themes appear in the three hospitals that he designed at Saint Lô (1946-56), Dinan (1963-68) and Arles (1965-74). These are a flexible structural system that can accommodate changes in hospital technology; compact and efficient plans with direct relationships between care units and medical services; zoning and detailing to facilitate maintenance of an antiseptic environment; and consideration of aspects of the patient environment, such as light, privacy, colour and furnishings.

More than 150 objects, including architectural drawings, models of built and unbuilt works, photographs, paintings and drawings have been assembled for **THE FILTER OF REASON**. Also included are autographed letters representing more than forty years of correspondence between Nelson and Le Corbusier, André Malraux, Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, Buckminster Fuller and others. The exhibition was produced by the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation and curated by Joseph Abram, Kenneth Frampton and Terence Riley. The CCA curator for the project is Howard Shubert.

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