

# ISOKON symposium

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART | APRIL 20 + 21, 2023

THURSDAY  
APRIL 20 1–2 pm

## Keynote Conversation

**LEYLA DAYBELGE** ISOKON GALLERY TRUST  
**MAGNUS ENGLUND** ISOKON GALLERY TRUST  
**JULIET KINCHIN** INDEPENDENT DESIGN HISTORIAN

FRIDAY  
APRIL 21 8:30–9:25 am

## Introduction

An Isokon Exhibition at the YCBA

**RACHEL STRATTON** YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

Researching Isokon — Past, Present, Future

**CHRISTOPHER WILK** VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

9:25–10:30 am

## Panel 1 | The Lawn Road Flats: Before and After

**CHAIR: ALEXANDRA LANGE** CRITIC

Introduction

Isokon in the Antipodes: Best Overend and the “Cairo” Flats

**PHILIP GOAD** UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Before Lawn Road

**ELIZABETH DARLING** OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Roundtable discussion

10:30–10:40 am

## Break

10:40 – 11:45 am

## Panel 2 | The Making and Marketing of Isokon Furniture

**CHAIR: EEVA-LIISA PELKONEN** YALE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

Isokon: Prototypes for Cooperation

**JYRI KERMIK** ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS

Isokon and the *Architectural Review*:

Advertising Modernism to the British Middle Class

**JESSICA KELLY** LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

Roundtable discussion

11:45 am – 12:15 pm

## Break

12:15 – 1:45 pm

## Panel 3 | The Social Life of Isokon

**CHAIR: CRAIG BUCKLEY** YALE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
+ HISTORY OF ART DEPARTMENT

Introduction

The Isobar Club and Avant-Gardes in London in the 1930s

**CATERINA CAPUTO** UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DELL'AQUILA

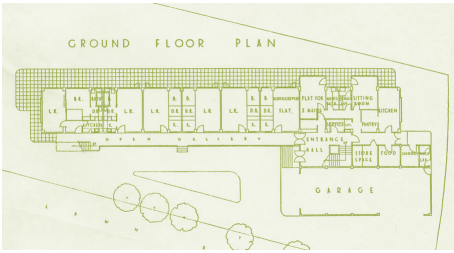
Dwellings of the World Unite! A Comparison of the Lawn Road Flats and Narkomfin, the Convergent Evolution of “Communal Living” in the Interwar Period

**CALVIN PO** DARK MATTER LABS

Dwelling Minimally: Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and László Moholy-Nagy at Isokon in England

**ROBIN SCHULDENFREI** COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

Roundtable discussion



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### CATERINA CAPUTO

Caterina Caputo is an adjunct professor of the history of contemporary art at the University of L'Aquila and in the international program of the University of Pisa. She received her PhD in the history of art from the University of Florence, where she researched British surrealism and the London Gallery. She has been a post-doctoral fellow at the Frick Art Reference Library and at the Center for Italian Modern Art in New York. Her research interests and publications lie at the intersection of collecting, the art market, transnational exchanges, and cultural and visual dissemination related to avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes. Her current research on Herbert Read is supported by a grant from the Henry Moore Foundation. Caputo is the author of *Collezionismo e mercato. La London Gallery e la diffusione dell'arte surrealista, 1938–1950* (2018) and “Automatism and Psychoanalysis in the Pages of the *London Bulletin* (1938–40): From Herbert Read to Humphrey Jennings” in the journal *Dada/Surrealism* (2023).

### The Isobar Club and Avant-Gardes in London in the 1930s

Designed by Marcel Breuer in the 1930s, the Isobar Club was located in the former service quarters (restaurant, kitchen, staff room, cook's room, and boiler room) of the Lawn Road Flats. The club immediately became one of the most interesting cultural venues for art events in London. In addition to hosting debates and lectures on both cultural and political topics for left-wing intellectuals and artists, the Isobar Club periodically organized exhibitions of modernist and avant-gardist art. In 1939, for instance, the Belgian artist E. L. T. Mesens (a director, with Roland Penrose, of the surrealist London Gallery in Cork Street) organized a show at the Isobar Club with a selection of surrealist paintings and objects by Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, Penrose, and others.

This paper aims to shed new light on the Isobar Club as a venue that combined political debates with an avant-gardist aesthetic and ideology. Specifically, it analyzes the role that surrealism played in embedding Isokon in avant-garde discourse, and how the cultural exchanges that took place at the Isobar strongly contributed to a peculiar concept of abstraction in the London avant-gardist art milieu of the 1930s.

## ELIZABETH DARLING

Elizabeth Darling is a reader in architectural history at Oxford Brookes University, UK. She has been at the forefront of revisionist approaches to the history of modernism in Britain, starting with her book *Re-Forming Britain: Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction* (2006) and including her monograph *Wells Coates* (2012). Her research is particularly concerned with recognizing women's contributions to twentieth-century architectural culture. Her publications include *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1950* (2007, coedited with Lesley Whitworth) and *AA Women in Architecture, 1917–2017* (2017, coedited with Lynne Walker). The latter was part of the AA XX 100 project, which commemorated the centenary of women's entry to the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. More recently she coauthored (with Alistair Fair) a two-part article titled "'The core': The Centre as a Concept in Twentieth-Century British Planning and Architecture," which was published in *Planning Perspectives* (2022). Darling is currently writing a history of BBC Broadcasting House, for which Wells Coates designed several studios.

## Before Lawn Road

The opening of the Lawn Road Flats in July 1934 is often seen as the beginning of architectural modernism in Britain. This paper takes a different stance. It focuses on Wells Coates, who worked closely with clients Rosemary and Jack Pritchard on the design of the flats, and traces his emergence as a designer in 1920s London. It discusses a series of his early projects, including shops for Crysede and Cresta, in which he worked out a formal language that he brought to a peak of refinement at Lawn Road, and the theoretical approach to his practice that he developed in the same period. The paper also explores the associational and media networks that brought him and the Pritchards together, and the intellectual and social milieus that shaped their approach to modern life and the spatial environments best suited to accommodate them. Through this focus, it places the founding of Isokon, and the commissioning of what became the Lawn Road Flats, within a wider modernist culture that was already well established. It argues that the Isokon project can be understood as both a product of this culture and, in keeping with Coates's self-positioning as the leader of modernist architects in Britain, a resounding statement of the future direction that culture should take.

## PHILIP GOAD

Philip Goad is chair of architecture and Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor at the University of Melbourne, where he is also codirector of the Australian Centre for Architectural History, Urban and Cultural Heritage (ACAHUCH). An authority on modernism and Australian architecture, he is coeditor of *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia* (2008), *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* (2012), *Australia Modern: Architecture, Design, and Landscape, 1925–1975* (2019), and *Bauhaus Diaspora and Beyond: Transforming Education Through Art, Architecture, and Design* (2019). Recent coauthored books include *An Unfinished Experiment in Living: Australian Houses, 1950–1965* (2017)

and *Architecture of the Modern Hospital: Nosokomeion to Hygeia* (2019). In 2016, he was Patrick Geddes Visiting Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, and in 2019–20, he was Gough Whitlam Malcolm Fraser Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University. He is a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

### **Isokon in the Antipodes: Best Overend and the “Cairo” Flats**

In March 1933, the young Melbourne architect Best Overend (1909–1977) returned to Australia after working in London, first for Australian émigré Raymond McGrath, then for eighteen months in the office of Canadian émigré Wells Coates, where he rose to the position of chief draftsman. Back in Australia, Overend immediately began to champion European modernism in architecture and design, writing for newspapers, art journals, and popular home magazines. In September 1933 in *Australian Home Beautiful*, for example, his article “A Minimum Flat with Maximum Comfort” described the contemporary demand in London for the so-called minimum flat and illustrated Overend’s ideas for an *Existenzminimum* apartment, complete with folding bed, VitaGlass window, and built-in cocktail cabinet. In layout and interior design, the inspiration was the Coates-designed Isokon flats in Lawn Road, Hampstead (1929–34), particularly the office-developed scheme of November 1932. Two years later, in 1935, Overend designed “Cairo,” a U-shaped block of twenty-eight flats planned around a private garden in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy and completed in December 1936. It was Overend’s answer to the Lawn Road flats, his antipodean Isokon. It was similar but different in so many ways: internally and externally, in detail and in construction, and in its subsequent history of occupation. This paper examines the phenomenon of modernism in translation: as part of a broader culture of design practitioners of Commonwealth origins engaged in the development of modernism in Britain and, critically, as part of the complexity of knowledge and technology transfer in modernism’s global trajectory.

### **JESSICA KELLY**

Jessica Kelly is a reader in architectural and design history at the University for the Creative Arts, UK, and senior lecturer at London Metropolitan University. Her research explores architectural history beyond buildings, paying particular attention to media and criticism in the mid-twentieth century. Her book, *No More Giants: J. M. Richards, Modernism and the “Architectural Review”* (2022), examines the work of the architectural critic and magazine editor J. M. Richards. She is the coeditor (with Neal Shasore) of *Reconstruction: Architecture, Society, and the Aftermath of the First World War* (2023). Jessica produces and cohosts the podcast *Architecture and . . .* for the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain.

### **Isokon and the *Architectural Review*: Advertising Modernism to the British Middle Class**

In December 1939, an image of the Isokon Penguin Donkey bookcase was published in the design supplement of the *Architectural Review*. Crammed together in the magazine rack section of the bookcase, above the Penguin paperbacks,

were copies of the *Architectural Review*, the *Times*, the *New Statesman and Nation*, and what appears to be the BBC's magazine, the *Listener*. This image captured the web of joint publicity between Isokon and various media organizations, including, of course, Penguin Books, but also the BBC and the *Architectural Review*.

This paper will explore how the editors of the *Architectural Review* developed the magazine into a vehicle for publicizing and promoting modern architecture to a specific facet of the middle-class public that was educated, interested, and deemed capable of thoughtful appreciation of architecture. J. M. Richards, one of the magazine's editors, described this audience as "the new patrons of architecture." They were also the consumer market for Penguin paperbacks, Isokon furniture, and the BBC. This paper traces the network of editors, critics, and marketing managers who sought to cultivate a market for modernism.

### **JYRI KERMIK**

Jyri Kermik is an academic and designer with research interests in design history and materials innovation. His doctoral research at the Royal College of Art focused on the history of plywood in furniture design. He is the author of the award-winning monograph *A. M. Luther, 1877–1940: The Innovation of Form Arising from the Material* (2002) and continues to exhibit and lecture internationally. Kermik is currently professor of interior architecture at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

### **Isokon: Prototypes for Cooperation**

The advancement of bending technologies during the 1930s brought plywood to the fore as a structural material in its own right. Its novelty value and machine-made aesthetics attracted the interest of progressive designers who wished to experiment with its largely unexploited technical possibilities in furniture production.

The emergence of furniture companies such as Isokon and Artek during the 1930s was part of this phenomenon. The availability of new materials and industrial production techniques had paved the way for a new type of small-scale company after the First World War. In contrast to the small workshops of the nineteenth century, whose existence came under threat with industrialization, these so-called design-led companies took advantage of the possibilities offered by the modern manufacturing sector. Through industrial contacts, designers became aware of the complexity of contemporary manufacturing practice and the potential of their own role in one of its central aspects – the process of product development. Design and standardization were not only concerned with the end product; they also allowed the production process itself to be separated into units, enabling specialist sub-construction to take place.

This paper focuses on the development of Isokon projects by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, who strove to engage with opportunities offered by the plywood industry. The cooperation between Isokon, Venesta, and Luterma in developing such projects serves as a model of the new types of relationships within the manufacturing sector and their role in the modern movement of the 1930s.

## CALVIN PO

Calvin Po is a designer, writer, and researcher. He studied at University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture, where he graduated top of class and received the Royal Institute of British Architects Donaldson Medal and the Bartlett School of Architecture Medal. He was also a scholar at the Architectural Association, where his thesis won the Dennis Sharp Prize, and a finalist for the Royal Institute of British Architects President's Awards for Research.

Po is a strategic designer at Dark Matter Labs, where he explores how policy, law, regulation, finance, and other institutional infrastructures are a site of design for shaping the built environment. He is currently working with multiple municipalities on community approaches for housing decarbonization, and with the Scottish Land Commission on experimental land reform proposals. Po is also a writer and architectural journalist whose work has been published in the *Architectural Review*, the *Architects' Journal*, and *e-flux Architecture*.

### **Dwellings of the World Unite! A Comparison of the Lawn Road Flats and Narkomfin, the Convergent Evolution of “Communal Living” in the Interwar Period**

Two examples of “communal living” emerged in the interwar period: Lawn Road Flats (later renamed Isokon) by Wells Coates in London and the Narkomfin building by Moisei Ginzburg in Moscow. This paper compares and contrasts the two buildings and argues that, despite converging in their similar architectural typology and expression of “communal living,” they did so while attempting to realize profoundly distinct political agendas.

This paper explores this first through an architectural comparison of the buildings, including the rational optimization of the individual unit and programming of communal functions. This paper elucidates overlaps in the political contexts that shaped their design, namely the emerging consensus on economic planning (and its role for architecture), in both Keynesian and Soviet senses. The paper also explores potential historical moments for cross-pollination between Ginzburg and Coates, namely the (non-overlapping) participation of both architects in the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) and associated discourses and publications.

The paper identifies fundamental political differences that shaped the two buildings' briefs through a critical analysis of the architects' writings. While Ginzburg explicitly attempted to realize the Soviet state's Marxist-Leninist ideas of proletarian egalitarianism, including the abolition of the family through collectivized domesticity, Coates aimed to create an architecture for a liberal, individualistic lifestyle for bourgeois intellectual elites, entrenching a class hierarchy in the building's program. The paper also explores the political journeys of Coates's clients Rosemary and Jack Pritchard, and reconciles them with the capitalist, rentier business model that underpinned Isokon's development.

Ultimately, this paper serves as a wider reflection on the complex inter-relationships between architectural form and political content.

### **ROBIN SCHULDENFREI**

Robin Schuldenfrei is the Tangen Reader in Twentieth-Century Modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. She specializes in modern architectural history with a focus on the object, the domestic landscape, and materiality. Schuldenfrei has written widely on modernism as it intersects with theories of the object, architecture, and interiors. Her publications include *Luxury and Modernism: Architecture and the Object in Germany, 1900–1933* (2018) as well as numerous articles, essays, and edited volumes, including *Iteration: Episodes in the Mediation of Art and Architecture* (2020), *Atomic Dwelling: Anxiety, Domesticity, and Postwar Architecture* (2012), and *Bauhaus Construct: Fashioning Identity, Discourse, and Modernism* (2009, coedited with Jeffrey Saletnik). Her upcoming book, *Objects in Exile: Modernism across Borders, 1930–1960*, is forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

### **Dwelling Minimally: Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and László Moholy-Nagy at Isokon in England**

This paper focuses on the design work of Bauhaus members living at Lawn Road Flats in the 1930s in terms of the preceding and concurrent debates surrounding “minimal existence” in architecture. It uses the changed circumstances and status of the émigrés themselves – focusing on three leaders of the modern movement in Germany who arrived nearly penniless and lived in greatly reduced quarters – to contextualize ideas of the minimum dwelling anew. Its aim is not to look at the objects that designers brought with them into exile, but to examine how conditions and contingencies of exile itself informed the design of objects produced as part of the Isokon project. It asks how furniture designs, and the spaces for which they were intended – whether in the context of the existing furnished Lawn Road Flats, in Isokon’s graphic design, in translation, or in the dwellings Gropius proposed under the auspices of Isokon for Windsor, Birmingham, and Manchester – can be better understood as “objects of exile.” This paper looks to the experience of exile and the financial crisis of émigrés like Gropius to contextualize how the émigrés failed to come to terms with the economic and social realities of their new surroundings in England. Finally, it examines the ways in which the notion of the total environment implicit in turn-of-the-century theories of the architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk* persisted into the minimalist modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, even as architects reconsidered the relationship of luxuries and necessities, individual artistic output and machine production, art and politics.

### **CHRISTOPHER WILK**

Christopher Wilk is the keeper of Performance, Furniture, Textiles and Fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). He created the V&A’s Frank Lloyd Wright Gallery (now closed), was chief curator of the British Galleries 1500–1900, and conceived the V&A’s Furniture Gallery. His V&A exhibitions have included *Fornasetti: Designer of Dreams*; *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914–1939*; and, more recently, *Plywood: A Material Story*.



Before joining the V&A, he worked at the Brooklyn Museum, where he was project coordinator for *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941*, and at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where he curated the exhibition *Marcel Breuer: Furniture and Interiors*.

In addition to exhibition-related books on Marcel Breuer, modernism, and plywood, Wilk authored *Thonet: 150 Years of Furniture* (1980) and *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Kaufmann Office* (1993). He also edited and contributed to *Western Furniture: 1350 to the Present Day* (2001) and *Creating the British Galleries at the V&A: A Study in Museology* (2004, coedited with Nick Humphrey).

### **Researching Isokon — Past, Present, Future**

In the context of developing an exhibition devoted to Isokon, it is timely to review past, very recent, and possible future approaches to interpreting the varied activities, interests, and outputs that fall under that name. The core of Isokon is often, and understandably, seen as one significant, realized building; a number of unbuilt architectural projects; and the products made by or for the Isokon Furniture Company. These, retrospectively, led some to erroneously characterize Isokon as having somehow invented modernism in Britain. Isokon, with its communitarian ethos and its Isobar, also served as a geographical and intellectual locus for both casual and more serious social, artistic, culinary, and political interactions, including espionage directed by government agencies. Above all, Isokon was a direct reflection of the personal outlooks and agendas of its main protagonists and founders, Jack and Rosemary (Molly) Pritchard and, in its earliest years, Wells Coates.

This talk will consider the factors that fed into the subsequent creation of Isokon's reputation, among them the legacy of the presence and brief involvement of Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and László Moholy-Nagy; the embedding of Isokon furniture into an especially influential canon of modern furniture, one created in the United States as early as 1941 and reinforced in exhibitions and publications over the following decade; the contrast between this canonization and the lack of international recognition of Lawn Road Flats until the very recent past; and the outsize influence of Jack Pritchard's autobiography, published in 1984, on interpretations of Isokon. It will conclude with some thoughts on future avenues for investigation, some of which may be interrogated by subsequent speakers.

### **CRAIG BUCKLEY**

Craig Buckley is an associate professor of modern and contemporary architecture in the department of the history of art at Yale University. He is the author, most recently, of *Graphic Assembly: Montage, Media, and Experimental Architecture in the 1960s* (2019). His essays have appeared in the journals *Grey Room*, *Log*, *October*, *Perspecta*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, among others. He is the editor of numerous books, most recently *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium* (2019, coedited with Francesco Casetti and Rüdiger Campe). He is currently at work on a new book with the working title *The Street and the Screen*, which pursues a media archaeology of the architectures of the moving image in the twentieth century.

### **LEYLA DAYBELGE**

Author and broadcaster Leyla Daybelge is a trustee of the Isokon Gallery Trust. She is the coauthor of *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* (2019) and *Walter Gropius: An Illustrated Biography* (2022), both with Magnus Englund. She and Englund have lectured internationally on Isokon and Gropius at institutions including the Alvar Aalto Museum, Finland; the Design Museum, London; Fondation Corbusier, Paris and Marseille; and most recently the Palm Springs Art Museum, California. Leyla previously worked as a news anchor for Independent Television News and Sky News, and as head of press for design and contemporary art at Sotheby's London.

### **MAGNUS ENGLUND**

Magnus Englund is the director and a trustee of the Isokon Gallery Trust, the museum established in 2014 to tell the story of Isokon and the Lawn Road Flats. He is also a trustee of the Robin and Lucienne Day Foundation, safeguarding the legacy of Britain's most famous twentieth-century design couple. Englund has written or cowritten six books about design and architecture, including *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* (2019) and *Walter Gropius: An Illustrated Biography* (2022), both with Leyla Daybelge. Between 1999 and 2016, Englund was the managing director of Skandium, a chain of interior design stores in London. He is originally from Stockholm, Sweden.

### **JULIET KINCHIN**

Juliet Kinchin is an independent design historian and former curator of modern design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Her publications and exhibitions have focused on twentieth-century design and material culture. Kinchin has held faculty positions at the University of Glasgow, as the founding director of graduate studies in decorative arts and design history; the Glasgow School of Art; and Bard Graduate Center, New York. She has held curatorial positions at the V&A, London, and at Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries. Exhibitions organized during her MoMA tenure include *Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen* (2010); *Plywood: Material, Process, Form* (2011–13); *Century of the Child: Growing by Design* (2012); *Designing Modern Women* (2013);

*How Should We Live? Propositions for the Modern Interior* (2016); *The Value of Good Design* (2019); *Taking a Thread for a Walk* (2020); and *Automania* (2021).

#### **ALEXANDRA LANGE**

Alexandra Lange is a critic, journalist, and historian who has been widely published in design and general interest publications. Her most recent book is *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* (2022).

#### **EEVA-LIISA PELKONEN**

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen is assistant dean and professor at Yale School of Architecture, where she teaches both architectural design and history-theory subjects. She received an MArch from Tampere University of Technology, Finland; a master's degree in environmental design from Yale University; and a PhD from Columbia University. Her scholarly interests cover twentieth-century European and American art and architecture; art and aesthetic theory; and the history of ideas. She has authored and edited several prizewinning books, including *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics* (2009), which won the Alice Davis Hitchcock Book Award, given annually by the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) for the best work of scholarship in the field by a North American writer. Her book *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* (2006) won the Philip Johnson Award, given annually by the SAH for the best exhibition catalogue, and the Banister Fletcher Award, given annually by the Authors' Club in London for the best book on art or architecture. Her next book, titled *Untimely Moderns: How Twentieth-Century Architecture Reimagined the Past*, will be published by Yale University Press in July 2023. Her scholarly and curatorial work has been supported by the Getty Foundation, the Graham Foundation, the Finnish Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research.