
The Packaged House: A Wartime Proposal

The French Legacy of Konrad Wachsmann

When Konrad Wachsmann arrived at the Gropius house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, in September 1941, a destitute refugee, among his few possessions were two precious rolls of drawings, which he believed would one day make his fortune. One of these was the design of a tubular steel structural system.¹ This system, later to become widely known as the Mobilar hangar, was one of Wachsmann's major contributions to the art and science of building technology; its details fall beyond the scope of this study, but its development overlaps with our present concern and in some respects impinges seriously on it.

The second roll of drawings contained ten² small sheets, unannotated, unsigned, and undated, which delineated with exquisite precision a modular universal building system, consisting of load-bearing panels, weatherboarded externally, flush-paneled internally, thermally insulated, and combining freely (as indicated by the plans, sections, elevations, and details) to generate a house plan adhering to a rectilinear three-dimensional modular grid. The edges of the wall panels were beveled at 45 degrees, and were secured to each other by elaborate Y-shaped metal connectors. This proposal for a universal housing system lies at the heart of our subject.