MARS group (act. 1933–1957) was a collection of architects and architectural critics brought together by their shared enthusiasm for the modern movement in architecture. Formally called the Modern Architecture Research Group, they were self-consciously élitist and progressive and were not displeased, as the MARS group member John Summerson observed, ‘to find that the initials of their enterprise ... nicely combined a sense of militancy with a vision of planetary exploration’ (Summerson, ‘Mars group’, 305). The group was chiefly significant for four areas of work. In the first place, as its name suggested, it undertook architectural research. Second, it engaged in propaganda, seeking to sell modernism to intellectuals and opinion formers. Third, it acted as the link between British modernists and their continental counterparts, serving as the local branch of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Finally, and above all else, MARS was a meeting point for people who wanted to establish what it was to be modern. According to Susan Digby Firth, who acted as secretary to the group in the mid-1930s, its members ‘were almost brought together to find themselves; to try and define what they should be doing and how they should move forward’ (Gold, 113).

MARS was not the first group to seek such a solution. Wells Coates, its foremost founder, had also been a member of the Twentieth Century Group established in 1930, and of Unit One, which operated between 1933 and 1934. In the former he had been joined by the future MARS group members Serge Chernayeff and Raymond McGrath (1903–1977). In Unit One—which included the sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth and the artists Ben Nicholson and Paul Nash—architects were represented by Coates and Colin Lucas, who also joined the MARS group. What made MARS different was its exclusive architectural focus, its longevity, and its international connections.
The impetus to found the group came from the Swiss architectural writer Sigfried Giedion (1883–1968). Giedion was secretary to CIAM, arguably the most important series of conventions the architectural world had ever seen, with contributors coming from across the world to discuss the modern movement in architecture. The absence of British architects from CIAM’s meetings was noticeable and Giedion wanted to establish a British branch. On the advice of the architectural writer Philip Morton Shand (1888–1960) Giedion wrote to Wells Coates and asked him to form just such a group. Thus, on 28 February 1933, Coates, his architectural partner David Pleydell-Bouverie, Morton Shand, and Maxwell Fry met to discuss this suggestion. MARS was founded on 25 April of the same year, and its existence proclaimed in a letter to The Listener a few months later, on 12 July.

Three categories of member were envisaged from the first: professional architects and engineers, interested laymen, and what were known as “snob” names, that is, people who would add social cachet to the group (Gold, 111). It was an avowedly exclusive club: members had to be nominated, seconded, and approved by the executive committee, and those not considered modern enough were ruthlessly excluded. None the less, the group soon grew in number, coming to encompass many of the most avant-garde architectural thinkers of the period. The architects Ernő Goldfinger, William Tatton Brown (1910–1997), Francis Yorke, Amyas Connell, and his practice partner Basil Ward (1902–1976), were joined by the architectural writers John Betjeman, Geoffrey Boumphrey (1894–1969), and James Maude Richards, among others.

Within three years membership had reached fifty-eight and included such major names as Ove Arup, Elizabeth Denby, Frederick Gibberd, William Holford, Berthold Lubetkin, and the writers Anthony Bertram (1897–1978) and John Gloag (1896–1981). All were middle class; almost all lived in London; and most were left wing, though with differing degrees of radicalism. None the less, as the group grew larger divisions began to occur and in 1936 MARS was convulsed by quarrels. Lubetkin and Connell sparred over the latter’s neo-classical entry in the Newport civic buildings competition. George Grey Wornum’s work at Birmingham was similarly assaulted. At the same time, more radical members found the group too conformist; in response Lubetkin, Chermayeff, and others founded the Architects’ and Technicians’ Organization
as a sort of socialist MARS group.

However, such arguments did not halt MARS's growth, and the group reached seventy-two members by 1938. These included some surprising names such as the older architect C. R. Ashbee, as well as more mainstream modernists like Hugh Casson, Walter Gropius (1883–1969), Laszlo Maholy-Nagy (1895–1946), Thomas Sharp, and Ralph Tubbs. Jane Drew, an advocate of modernism and the future wife of Maxwell Fry, became a member in 1939. Nor did arguments stop the group from working. Every few years there was the CIAM meeting to prepare for and, from the first, MARS members played a central role in this. There was also research to be undertaken. Although many of the sub-groups established proved to be stillborn—with the executive committee having to admit in July 1936 that the press committee ‘possessed only one surviving member’ (RIBA, ArO/1/5/40/ii)—some interesting work was achieved, first on slum clearance and then on town planning more generally. The group's role in providing propaganda for the modern movement was also never forgotten. In 1934 it contributed a stand advocating the development of London's Bethnal Green to the Building Trades Exhibition at Olympia, and showed the stand again in 1936. Richard S. Lambert (1894–1981), editor of BBC's The Listener magazine, was a member of MARS, and the executive committee emphasized the need to ‘keep in touch with the BBC’ (RIBA, ArO/1/2/21/iii). The group's role as propagandist and a think-tank for the modern movement found its apotheosis in the New Architecture Exhibition of 1938 and the 1942 MARS ‘Plan for London’.

From its foundation MARS had always intended to mount a public exhibition, but this was repeatedly deferred; the New Architecture Exhibition was eventually staged at the New Burlington Galleries, London, between 11 and 29 January 1938. The organizing committee was made up of many founder members as well as H. T. (Jim) Cadbury-Brown, J. Earley, Clive Entwistle, F. Digby Firth, Walter Goodesmith, Valentine Harding (1904/5–1940), Christopher Nicholson (1904–1948), Godfrey Samuel (1904–1982), and Cyril Sweett (1903–1931). Among the 'snob' names that the group considered so important were Edward Stanley, seventeenth earl of Derby, Charles Wakefield, first Viscount Wakefield, Thomas Horder, first Baron Horder, and Sir Michael Sadler, who all acted as patrons. George Bernard Shaw, perhaps recalling his youth in the Art-Workers' Guild, provided an introduction to the exhibition.
catalogue. The displays were designed by non-members of the group, including Misha Black and Peter Moro, but the concept of the exhibition was, as Shaw put it, wholly ‘Martian’ (*New Architecture*, 3), and the accompanying text was written by Summerson. It sought to show that modern problems cried out for modernist solutions, and in a series of stands illustrated the ways in which scientific research would discern the architectural requirements of contemporary life. True enough, it virtually bankrupted the group, and it was criticized by those who thought that it did not go far enough. But it was also, as Le Corbusier himself put it, ‘a brilliant success’ and a ‘charming display of youth’ (*Architectural Review*, 83, 1938, 109), attracting 7000 visitors and a number of appreciative reviews.

The MARS ‘Plan for London’ (1942) similarly represented the culmination of years of work. An interest in urban design was a characteristic of many early members, and a town planning committee was set up in December 1937, comprising Maxwell Fry, Godfrey Samuel, Tatton Brown, Arthur Ling (1913–1995), and Christopher Tunnard (1910–1979), with Arthur Korn in the chair, and Felix Samuely running a sub-committee on transport and economics. The result of their researches, finally published in 1942, was a radical rethinking of London, later described by Lionel Brett (1913–2004)—although himself a MARS member—as ‘a futurist fantasy, which virtually destroyed the conurbation and started again’ (Brett, 95). The MARS plan reimagined London as a series of linear zones stretching out into the home counties, rationally redesigned, with an integrated transport system. This utopian ideal was ultimately overshadowed by the county of London plan published by Patrick Abercrombie in 1944, but was nevertheless an important milestone in urban planning. More than that, it can also be seen as ‘nearly the last will and testament’ of the MARS group ‘before the war dispersed its members’ (Fry in *Perspecta*, 13, 1971, 165).

After the war the group grew still larger. There were 96 members in 1945, and 142 in 1956. These were a much more variegated lot than their pre-war predecessors, including provincial planners like George Checkley (1893–1960) and a new, more radical generation of young architects including Denys Lasdun, Leslie Martin, and Alison Smithson [see under Smithson, Peter Denham] and Peter Smithson. In the post-war period individual MARS members became increasingly influential both at home and abroad. They were
on the staff of the Architectural Association and sat on the council of the Royal Institute of British Architects. As J. M. Richards wrote at the time, they also occupied ‘key positions in many Government Departments’ (Mumford, 169). The centre of gravity within CIAM also tilted towards MARS, with the group hosting the 1947 and 1951 meetings, and playing an ever-increasing role in shaping its agenda. By the mid-1950s MARS was larger and more influential than it had ever been before.

At midnight on 28 January 1957, however, the MARS group voted itself out of existence. The collapse of CIAM, the advancing age of its founder members, and growing divisions within the modern movement all contributed to this decision. Perhaps above all, though, MARS was a victim of its own success. Its message was now widely accepted. Its impact was now widely felt. As John Summerson put it, ‘It had done its job and declined to grow old. A very proper attitude: very “functional”, very “modern”’ (Summerson, ‘MARS group’, 309).

**WILLIAM WHYTE**


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