

You probably wouldn't expect to find in Hartford, CT, one of the most ambitious introductions of the International Style anywhere in the U.S. But the capital of "The Land of Steady Habits" can claim that distinction, thanks to the vision of A. Everett "Chick" Austin. Austin was director of Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum (the oldest public museum in the country) from 1927 to 1944. Five years into his tenure, Austin became absolutely fascinated

with all things Modern—from painting to sculpture, theater to dance, and especially architecture. He essentially designed the interior of the Wadsworth's Avery Memorial wing, completed in 1934, as one of the first examples of International Style institutional space in the U.S., and helped propel Modernism as the leading style of postwar museum architecture. Even today, the 81-year-old, light-filled Avery Court is astonishing with its cantilevered open galleries that appear supported by nothing but air and a prayer.

INTERNATIONAL STYLE TURN

Hartford's Wadsworth
Atheneum goes bold in 1934

In fact, the central skylighted volume of the Avery wing is ringed by upper-floor galleries securely cantilevered on unseen structural supports. And linear openings between stories admit modulated daylight from the atrium's extensive skylight—presenting a remarkably simple and elegant way to provide the controlled natural light so many museum architects have sought.



Suspended in the three-story skylighted volume of the Atheneum's Avery Court is George Segal's sculpture, *Trapèze*.
Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum

AUSTIN'S AUDACITY

According to Atheneum archivist Eugene Gaddis, whose book *Magician of the Modern* details Austin's life and his role in transforming the arts in America, the director was in the midst of planning an addition to the Atheneum in the early 1930s when he fell under the spell of architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock (who, with Philip Johnson, then design curator at the Museum of Modern Art, named and defined the International Style). Austin quickly became a convert to Modernism and saw the new addition as an opportunity not only to create an avant-garde architectural landmark, but to transform the very idea of the museum building in the U.S.

But not without a fight, which Gaddis describes in rich detail. The funds for the new addition were bequeathed by the late Samuel Avery, who wanted a building in sympathy with the Atheneum's Morgan Memorial wing of 1915 in the Renaissance Revival style, designed by New York architect Benjamin Wistar Morris. Austin started working the building committee, making his case for a path-breaking Modern wing that he conceived with a buoyant, crisp, white, interior of Bauhaus-like audacity. Morris had been tapped to design the Avery wing but deferred to Austin in terms of the building's function as a museum. Austin, with a foot in the door thanks to Morris, kept pushing for Modern until the Beaux-Arts-trained architect diplomatically turned the project over to his junior partner, Robert O'Connor, who was close to Austin in age. Gaddis writes that the younger architect didn't know much about the International Style and latched onto Austin as a teacher. O'Connor recalled his first meeting with Austin on the design: "I would like something like this," said Austin, as he drew a rectangle with a smaller rectangle inside it, denoting an atrium space ascending three stories to an ample skylight.



The sculpture originally installed on the Avery Court's first floor remains there today. The Avery Memorial wing's exterior was treated in stripped-down Classical Revival style. Photos: Wadsworth Atheneum Archives



Gaddis's history is replete with the drama of Austin's tussle with the building committee, the trustees, and the conservative Yankee Hartford culture. He exhausted himself over the details, volleying the architects with endless changes and refinements to the design. On the night of February 6, 1934, the Avery Court was finally unveiled, complete with



Extensive skylights provide both controlled daylight and artificial illumination to the Avery Court and surrounding galleries. Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Archives



Inaugural exhibits on the 1934 galleries' flat white walls included a selection of Pablo Picasso paintings. Photo: Wadsworth Atheneum Archives

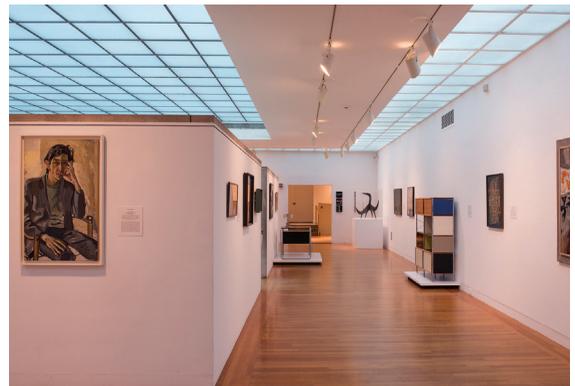
a comprehensive retrospective exhibit of Picasso's work over nearly 40 years—a first in the U.S. Some of the thousand invited guests found the architecture exhilarating, others pronounced it disturbing, but no one could not have been moved in one way or another. Austin's dream had been realized. During the dedication ceremony that evening, Gaddis reports, Austin was quite literally speechless when asked to say a few words. He just cried.

Gaddis also notes that a few days later Philip Johnson called Austin from the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which then occupied a traditional townhouse) and gushed that the Avery made MoMA look "very drab and dull." Johnson didn't get his International Style museum until five years later.

AUSTIN'S MODERN RESTORED

The Wadsworth re-opened in September 2015 after a \$33-million, five-year renovation and restoration focused mainly on the 1910 Morgan Memorial building. The reopened Morgan with its Renaissance-inspired opulence is spectacular indeed—every bit the legacy of its robber-baron patron. Avery Court is equally memorable in its elegant sparseness and visual restraint—the product of its daring, visionary creator, Chick Austin, one of the dedicated few who brought the International Style to America.

—MICHAEL J. CROSBIE



Walling off the rings of upper-floor galleries from the Avery Court are partitions high enough for mounting art yet low enough to admit diffused daylight. Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum

Editors' note: Robert O'Connor, the young project architect for the Avery Memorial, was later the senior partner of O'Connor & Kilham, cited on the facing page for introducing a Modernist sensibility in their work on the Princeton campus. The Benjamin Wistar Morris firm had become Morris & O'Connor, then O'Connor & Kilham.