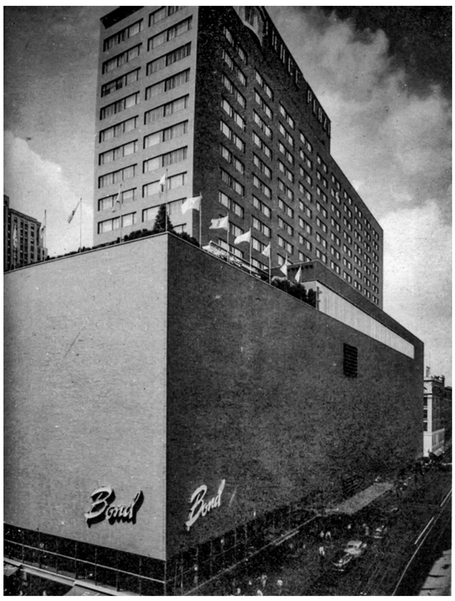
One-Minute Modernist: Recladding Modernism's skin-disease

Modern Architecture is developing a "skin disease" of unfortunate re-claddings. Many Modernist buildings are being stripped of their original exteriors and are "reskinned". Several local buildings face that unpleasant fate. Notable among them is Proctor Hall at the University of Cincinnati, an innovative building by architect Woodie Garber of 1968 for the College of Nursing. Proctor Hall's "skin" includes vertical metal louvres for shade, alternating with crushed milk-glass panels that reflect heat and sparkle delightfully. This cladding kept the building cool in summer and saved energy decades before "sustainability". Without this unique skin, Proctor Hall will lose much of its character and probably require more air-conditioning.

The Kroger Headquarters, Cincinnati's first curtain-wall skyscraper (1952, by architect Wyatt Hedrick) is an early recladding; done in 1980, it now appears completely different building than the original. Another Modernist building with an endangered skin is the Terrace Plaza Hotel (1948, by New York architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill). Department stores originally occupied the first seven stories are a nearly windowless box, clad in thin brick veneer. Adaptive-use schemes have proposed entirely stripping the brick-box and glazing it, or cutting multiple windows in it. While increasing the usefulness of the lower floors, either scheme would alter the building beyond recognition.



Terrace Plaza Hotel, 15 W. 6th Street , Cincinnati, OH, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1939.
Photograph from the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The first step in diagnosing Modernism's skin disease is to understand it. Before the advent of skeletal metal framing, most commercial and institutional buildings had masonry walls of brick or stone, which meant that the skin and structure were one. Modernism was the first period in history to separate the building's skin from its structure. Le Corbusier celebrated this divorce in the 1920s as one of his famous "5 Points for a New Architecture" by spending the non-structural skins of his buildings from their steel skeleton frames, thus creating "free facades" or curtain walls. This separation of skin from structure in Modernist buildings, combined with their experimental, now often deteriorated, cladding materials, makes them tempting and easy re-clads.

We should acknowledge Modernism's skin problem and address it. Repair and preservation of the original cladding is desirable when possible; an alternative is re-cladding which replicates or carefully references the original skin. Aesthetically responsible solutions that balance technical and economic factors by using new energy saving materials and systems are necessary. Otherwise, many of our finest Modernist buildings will be unrecognizable.

An "SOS" is needed to save our skins, or some approximation of them.

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