Before a building can be interpreted as historically significant it has to first be recognized as a constructed expression, something that is recognizably different from the world around it. A frame is a very obvious way to give unity to an aesthetic expression. The frame of a painting creates a literal boundary that encourages us to look upon everything inside it as meaningful, and everything outside of it as unimportant. But putting a frame around a three dimensional building is not really possible. How then to achieve a recognizable unity in architectural expression? For centuries, architects achieved aesthetic unity by constraining their expressions to a particular style, such as the Classical or Gothic styles; conventional sets of guiding rules for relating the parts of the building to each other such they appear integrated within a whole. But in the early twentieth century architects argued that buildings built with modern construction methods such as concrete and steel, could not be honestly designed according to the historical styles that had been developed for masonry construction. Polemically, they articulated their break with historic styles as a break with the very idea of style as the unifying principle of architectural expression. Modernism is not a style became an often-repeated mantra. If not style, then what was to give integrity to the work of architecture? On what basis would one distinguish modern architecture from mere building? As an architect, curator and historian, John Summerson (1904-1992) provided an answer in the form of a critique in this influential essay. Summerson pointed out that that while in theory modern architects could say they had broken entirely with the past by freeing themselves from style, in practice they had been unable to achieve the aesthetic unity required of meaningful architectural expressions without making recourse, in some way, to style, to a visual language that could be recognized, understood, and interpreted as significant. Summerson thus questioned the premise that modernism had truly broken with the past. He pointed out continuities in architectural practice that, in his view, were being wittingly or unwittingly ignored by modern architectural theorists who kept insisting, despite evidence to the contrary, that it was possible to ignore historical architecture. Summerson’s writings encouraged postwar modern architects to engage historic architecture as a source of knowledge and inspiration. His thinking also helped architects conceptualize new ways to integrate new designs into historic contexts without having to slavishly copy the historic style, for instance by visually articulating new additions according to the same proportional systems used in the historic building. His book The Classical Language of Architecture (1963) became a popular reference for preservation architects working on additions and extensions to classical and beaux-arts buildings. Summerson worked in a number of London architectural firms during the late 1920s, then became an editor at Architect and Building News, and started writing his first book, John Nash, Architect to George V (1935). He served as deputy director of the National Buildings Record from 1941 to 1945, when he became curator of Sir John Soane’s Museum in London. He remained in that post for nearly 40 years, while also teaching at numerous major British universities and publishing major works of architectural history including Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830 (1953). He was knighted in 1958.

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