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The Enduring Impact of the Bauhaus Experiment on Interior Design Education A Bauhaus of the Interior

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For an institution whose existence was so brief, the enduring impact of the Bauhaus on architecture and the design disciplines is astonishing. There is no denying the ongoing relevance of the design and pedagogical experimentation undertaken there: from a vision of a new unity of art and architecture to radical ideas propounding the social relevance of design; from the admission of women to courses (albeit mostly confined to the weaving department) to the concerted collaboration with industry; from its radical curriculum, which included hands-on training and production in the workshops, to its inspiring teachers. It is not a singular identity but rather a diversity of approaches that the Bauhaus has left behind as its legacy. In situation and structure, through concepts and ideas, Bauhaus seems to have set itself apart from previous approaches to education, making its experiment something unique and hopeful, right up until the moment that national socialism took hold. One hundred years since the opening of the Bauhaus in 1919, it is worth reflecting on where we are today, amid the rise of populism, the swing toward right-wing politics, and the foreclosure of possibilities that global environmental crises threaten. What the Bauhaus demonstrated was that design is deeply political. To be able to reflect on the Bauhaus' impact, we need to recall the situation and the conditions at the time that gave rise to its emergence.

Founded just after World War I in 1919, the Bauhaus experiment lasted only 13 years until 1933, the same year that Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. During this short period the Bauhaus developed along diverse trajectories, influenced by the remarkable teachers and students who participated in its community. A school does not emerge out of nowhere, however. The Bauhaus manifesto articulated a continuity with earlier developments, such as the Dresdner Werkstätten initiated by Karl Schmidt, and Hans Poelzig's and Peter Behrens' directorships at schools of art in Breslau, now Wrocław, and Düsseldorf,

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respectively. The eventual establishment of the Weimar State Bauhaus with Walter Gropius as its founding director, was in a way built upon Henry van de Velde's arts and crafts school in Weimar, after Van de Velde's forced resignation during World War I in 1915.¹ Gropius, when appointed as the director of what was a quasi-merger between the art academy and the arts and crafts school, propounded similar ideas in his 1919 manifesto as those Bruno Taut had expressed a year earlier. Taut "argued that a new cultural unity could be attained only through a new art of building, wherein each separate discipline would contribute to the final form... there will be no boundaries between the crafts, sculpture and painting: all will be one: Architecture."² Similarly, in the manifesto he wrote as director of the Bauhaus, Gropius proclaimed a unity of art and architecture, creating a "Bau der Zukunft" to unite art, sculpture, and architecture in one "Gestalt."³ As Melissa Trimmingham explains, "The task Walter Gropius set himself, and his team, in 1919 was to rethink the world, especially in terms of technology, manufacturing and aesthetic values."⁴

Following the Renaissance and through a re-discovery of Vitruvius, an understanding had emerged of the architect as artist and not as builder. With the Italian Renaissance there also appeared the first spatial representations,⁵ and one could argue that the concept of the interior was established with these representations. At this point architecture developed its own distinct theory and position, distinguishing itself from the manual crafts. Reflections and discourses on architecture developed, attended by theoretical frameworks dedicated to the discipline of architecture. Prior to the Renaissance, architects had been master builders. Architectural representation was two-dimensional and all aesthetic

¹ Kenneth Frampton, "The Bauhaus: The Evolution of an Idea 1919–32," *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames and Hudson (1980), 123–129.

² Frampton, 123.

³ Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus* (Taschen, 1990, reprint 2019), 33.

⁴ Melissa Trimmingham, "The Affective Bauhaus 1919: 2019," *Theatre and Performance Design* 5:1–2 (2019), 6–21.

⁵ Joachim Krausse, Nikolaus Kuhnert, and Angelika Schnell, "Die Anfänge Moderner Raumkonzeptionen—The Origins of Spatial Conceptions," *Arch+* 137 (1997), 18–22.

construction was based on composition—rules of proportion and symmetry—derived from Euclid’s discovery of geometry and symmetry. Once architecture was established as a discipline, distinct from a trade in which one would take an apprenticeship, it was taught either in Academies of Art, following the Beaux-Arts approach and its emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic qualities of architecture, or else at technical high schools, the Polytechniques, with their more technical-constructive emphasis. Architecture was positioned, if not torn, between technology and art, or as Folke Nyberg calls it in “From *Baukunst* to Bauhaus,” between the art of construction and the construction of art.⁶

The Bauhaus produced a compound, a hybrid of these two directions, creating what might be called an artistic builder. At the Bauhaus, students would bring together positions that were otherwise perceived as contradictory. They studied the arts and crafts and at the same time combined these studies with theories and alternative practices. Bauhaus merged a number of different theories and practices, but, in comparison to other schools before it, aimed toward a greater societal outreach and combined this with the idea of industrial mass production. In the early years it even included a spiritualist orientation and brought this together with a pragmatic crafting of materials and forms. All Bauhaus students commenced their education in the “Vorkurs,” the foundation or introductory courses, which aimed to build an aesthetic foundation for their further education. Only after completing the Vorkurs could one then continue an education in the workshops, which was an education in crafting and making, getting to the heart of the discipline.

With Kandinsky and Klee, who both taught in the foundation year, a course called “Gestaltlehre,” which included a theory of gestalt, was offered. The Gestalt concept is difficult to translate into English. Conventionally, it might be translated as form or shape, but I would argue that it also incorporates aspects of psychology and a holistic awareness about designed artifacts. This holistic idea covers features of composition and form such

⁶ Folke Nyberg, “From *Baukunst* to Bauhaus,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 45:3 (1992), 130–137, DOI: 10.1080/10464883.1992.10734501.

as appearance and perception. Today, Gestalt extends into aspects of cultural connotation and personal experience. One could argue that Kandinsky taught a theory of Gestalt, an attempt of translation could be a theory of artistic design, which, once translated into spaces rather than objects, informs a protean theory of interiors.

Magdalena Droste's book *Bauhaus* reminds us that the Bauhaus was a heterogeneous school. There was no one dogma or philosophy that all teachers agreed upon—it hosted an ongoing struggle and back and forth among teachers and influences that generated a complex set of relationships. The constant flux of concepts and ideas impacted the focus of the education. Droste writes that the arts and crafts idea together with an expressionistic focus formed the early years of the Bauhaus. Another orientation that came into play was the idea of the integration of art and technology, demonstrated through the relationship between the workshops and industrial production. The weaving department, predominantly populated by women, was especially successful at combining experimentation in the workshop with the industrial production of woven products.⁷ The opportunity to develop expertise in the production of textiles, furniture, and graphic illustration allowed students to undertake distinct specializations across the design disciplines. Once Hannes Meyer took over from Gropius as the director of the school, he argued for the idea of social justice and affordability. Finally, during Mies van der Rohe's brief tenure before the school's closure, a distinct approach was taken, one that foregrounded architecture.

A new spirit for the new times was expressed in the term "Neues Bauen." This view was prominent in the Bauhaus' systematic and methodological curriculum, from artistic and aesthetic education to a craft-based year in the workshops, a curriculum that helped to create a spirit of innovation and experimentation. An important ingredient added to this innovative mix would have been the radical contemporary shifts in pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, from the Italian Montessori school to the pedagogical ideas of Rudolf Steiner, who placed the student at the center of the

⁷ Droste, 158–170.

educational matrix. Still relevant today is an idea of how artistic practice could be undertaken as an investigation, which brings it into the purview of what we now call design research, or research through design. A critical ability to question everything, to set one's own rules, to both understand and challenge conventional precedents, to learn through doing and making in the workshops, to learn through trial and error and accidental discoveries. It was the first time that architectural education shifted from a rule- to a process-based orientation, the process of making in the workshops being a fundamental part of this concept. Such an approach supports students in developing the confidence to venture independent ideas and to reflect on their own progress and process.

At the same time the Bauhaus developed its formal language, recognizable to this day, including a designed typeface that removed all uppercase letters, doubtless devised as a challenge to convention (uppercase letters, it should be noted, are very common in German, removing them is a radical formal decision with cultural implications). Still, it is the central role of undertaking design explorations while maintaining critical reflection and an open-ended process of investigation that set the Bauhaus apart from other schools. Through making in the workshops, new forms were realized and tested. By teaching concepts of Gestalt, one opened up the possibilities of form, thus giving way to a free play of elements that could be composed based on abstract concepts. Together with the appointment of "Master" teachers well known in their respective fields, a spirit of innovation was encouraged, the radical intention being to overthrow conventions, to provoke and to be different, to imagine new societal formations. While the Bauhaus and Modernism did not operate in a vacuum, it is its trademark attitude of curiosity and investigation that remains relevant in architecture, interior design, and design education today.

BIOGRAPHY

Rochus Urban Hinkel is an interior designer and architect, academic and curator. He holds a Ph.D. in architecture focusing on creative practice from the University of Melbourne, Australia. He has been a practicing architect and designer since 1996, with projects published and exhibited in Europe, Australia, and Asia. Dr. Hinkel has been curator of the

Weißenhof Architecture Gallery in Stuttgart. He has taught architecture and interior design, furniture and product design and has held positions at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart, RMIT University Melbourne, TU Berlin, and has been appointed to Professor at Konstfack University of Arts, Craft and Design in Stockholm, and OTH Regensburg. Dr. Hinkel has presented lectures and seminars at various other schools, including ETH Zürich, Rietveld Academie Amsterdam, Parsons School of Art and Design in New York, TU Eindhoven, and ETSA Barcelona. He was recently appointed to Associate Professor of Architecture and Design at the University of Melbourne, in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. Dr. Hinkel is the editor of *Urban Interior—Informal Explorations, Interventions and Occupations* (Spurbuchverlag, 2011) and *The Society of Interiors* (AADR, 2016).