

The Bauhaus and Its Legacy

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Professor Jefferies began his lecture by describing some of the events taking place this year, to mark the centenary of the Bauhaus. These include TV programmes and newspaper articles, a Bauhaus touring bus, a Bauhaus Google doodle, a grand tour of modernism by the German Tourist Board, an App, an exhibition at Tate Modern, as well as the establishment of 3 new museums in Weimar, Dessau and Berlin.

The centenary has led to critical assessment of the significance of the Bauhaus and analysis of its genesis and long-term impact. Several books were mentioned, including Gillian Naylor's book which analysed the past airbrushing of women's' role; others questioned the extent to which the Bauhaus deserves its reputation as the founding ideology of modernism, suggesting it has been wrongly mythologised over time. In 2005, a revisionary approach challenged the prevailing view that the Bauhaus had been opposed to Nazism. In fact, Bauhaus principles were applied in many areas promoted by Nazism, including aviation, autobahns, and public buildings. Two Bauhaus students were responsible for the designs of the gas chambers and the decorative gates at Buchenwald concentration camp.

Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), a Belgian artist/designer was a founder member of the Werkbund in Weimar, formed to bring together different art forms, a precursor of the Bauhaus movement. Before leaving Weimar as an enemy alien, he recommended 3 people as possible successors. The 3rd name was Walter Gropius (1883-1969), an architect who had seen action in the German Army on the western front. In 1916, he put forward a proposal should he be offered the post of establishing a new school based on Werkbund principles. Post war political upheavals in Germany led to the sweeping away of various monarchies, the Grand Duke was deposed and Weimar became a republic, thus creating a new open political climate, making possible the foundation of the Bauhaus.

The Bauhaus was founded in Weimar in 1919 by Walter Gropius and his proposals were accepted. Although he faced some opposition from the Academy of Art, he had a vision of bridging the gap between art and industry by combining crafts and fine art, previously located separately in the Academy for Applied Art and the Academy of Art. He argued that 'the new times demand their own expression'. The movement was characterised by a simplicity of design focussing on mass production. For Gropius, breaking down the old artistic hierarchies was not just a cultural act, but a social one too, aimed at a fundamental reordering of society for the modern age. To this end, the school encouraged teachers and students to work together in design studios and workshops, breaking down old class distinctions.

Bauhaus designs were applied to industrial projects, architecture, graphics, typography where the clean lines, simplicity and lack of ornamentation were a reaction to the heavily decorative designs of the early 1900s. Some of the influential teachers included Gerhard Marks (pottery); Johannes Itten; Oskar Schlemmer (stage design); Paul Klee (painting); Wassily Kandinsky (painting). Students were admitted after one interview and new workshops were introduced once new staff were appointed. An early attempt at equal salaries for all teachers was abandoned later. In 1923, a formal curriculum covering theory and practical design was introduced. Some resentment and opposition continued from conservative nationalist politicians, craft associations and guilds and traditionalists in Weimar who feared the presence of many new radical free-thinking students. In 1923, Johannes Itten was made a scapegoat for the trouble and was sacked. He was replaced by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a Hungarian photographer with an interest in industrial projects, who became very influential in the school.

The Weimar Exhibition on Art and Technology in 1923, a large public event, aimed to demonstrate and justify the use of taxpayers' money. The main exhibit was a pre-fabricated house built along Bauhaus principles of clean lines, glass and light. The exhibition, however, was a financial disaster. So, following the election in 1924, right-wing parties took control in Weimar and threatened to cut the Bauhaus budget. In 1925/6, the Bauhaus moved to Dessau which, though much smaller than Weimar, had a more liberal mayor who was keen to support the Bauhaus financially. They moved to a new building, designed by Gropius with intersectional horizontal and vertical lines and planes, using modern materials of steel, glass and concrete. Whilst this provided a more

conducive environment in which to work, the mayor also hoped it would raise the image of Dessau itself and also help resolve the housing crisis in the town by the introduction of modular housing, ie the Torten Estate, an experimental municipal housing estate, an example of economical and functional construction.

Walter Gropius resigned as Director of the Bauhaus in 1928 and returned to his own practice. He wished to be free from constantly defending the school, its aims and principles and the use of public funds. His replacement, Hannes Meyer, was seen as a bad appointment professionally, though he secured funds from industry, setting the school on a more secure basis. He also faced increased attacks on the Bauhaus in a climate already deeply suspicious of anything not deemed authentically German. Problems with staff and the changing political climate forced him out, to be replaced by Mies van der Rohe, a German-American modernist architect (1886/1969), now regarded as one of the pioneers of 'modern' architecture. He became the third and final Director of the Bauhaus. Despite his eminent reputation he was regarded as authoritarian, banning student political activities. Finally, he closed the school in Dessau, locating it in a disused factory in Berlin, where he oversaw the school's final years until it closed in 1933. The school was overtaken by financial problems, the influence of the craft guilds and the difficulty of pursuing the liberal ideals of the school within the increasingly authoritarian political climate in Germany in the early 1930s. After the closure, many of the leading exponents of Bauhaus ideals, emigrated to the USA and elsewhere, where they continued to promote the principles of the Bauhaus.

Whilst the life of the Bauhaus was short, its impact and influence can be seen around the world, eg Tel Aviv in Israel is considered to be a Bauhaus city. The forces of nationalism, conservatism and cultural retrenchment which forced its closure, leading eventually to death and destruction unprecedented in human history, are increasingly present in our modern world. The ideals of the Bauhaus and its fundamental optimism about the future are needed now more than ever.

Lecture Report by Deborah Beetham