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Bauhaus



Prestel

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The Bauhaus Myth

Context



“The main principle of the Bauhaus is the idea of a new unity; a gathering of art, styles, and appearances that forms an indivisible unit. A unit that is complete within

its self and that generates its meaning only through animated life.”

Walter Gropius, 1925

Modernism's Lines of Development

The Bauhaus was unique, avant-garde, and pursued a path that led purposefully toward Modernism. Its members practiced an anti-academic education, had a concept of utopia and sought the mankind of the future, for whom they wanted to design according to need. Before the Bauhaus there had admittedly already been various reformist approaches to, and ideas on, education and art. But the Bauhaus was unique because it concentrated these aspirations and made them into reality.



This memorial to the workers murdered in the Kapp Putsch of March 1920, built in 1922 to a design by Walter Gropius at the Cemetery of Honor in Weimar, is distinguished by its Expressionist language of forms.

The Expressionist Bauhaus

Many pieces of work by the students, but also by the masters, from the first years of the Bauhaus speak an Expressionist language and continue an artistic direction that came into being before the First World War. These works are often crystalline in form, have strong colors, and spiritual associations. For Gropius, Expressionism was at first the expression of the beginning of a new world view. It was the later preoccupation with Constructivism, the appointment of László

Moholy-Nagy, and Gropius' motto "Art and technology: a new unity" of 1923 that caused the disappearance of Expressionism at the Bauhaus.

Gropius' Creed

In the early days of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius himself referred to artists and groups in whose lines of development he saw the Bauhaus positioned. Here are just a few of the names he mentions:

→ **The English Critic John Ruskin**, who saw the increasing industrialization of the second half of the 19th century as a threat. He supported a return to medieval working methods and favored Gothic ornament.

→ **The Multitalented William Morris**, a follower of Ruskin, for whom the arts—as for Ruskin—are based on the crafts. Morris, a socialist, wanted to create “from the people for the people.” The Arts and Crafts Movement, which he founded, strongly influenced the reforms in the crafts in the Art Nouveau period (known as Jugendstil period in Germany).



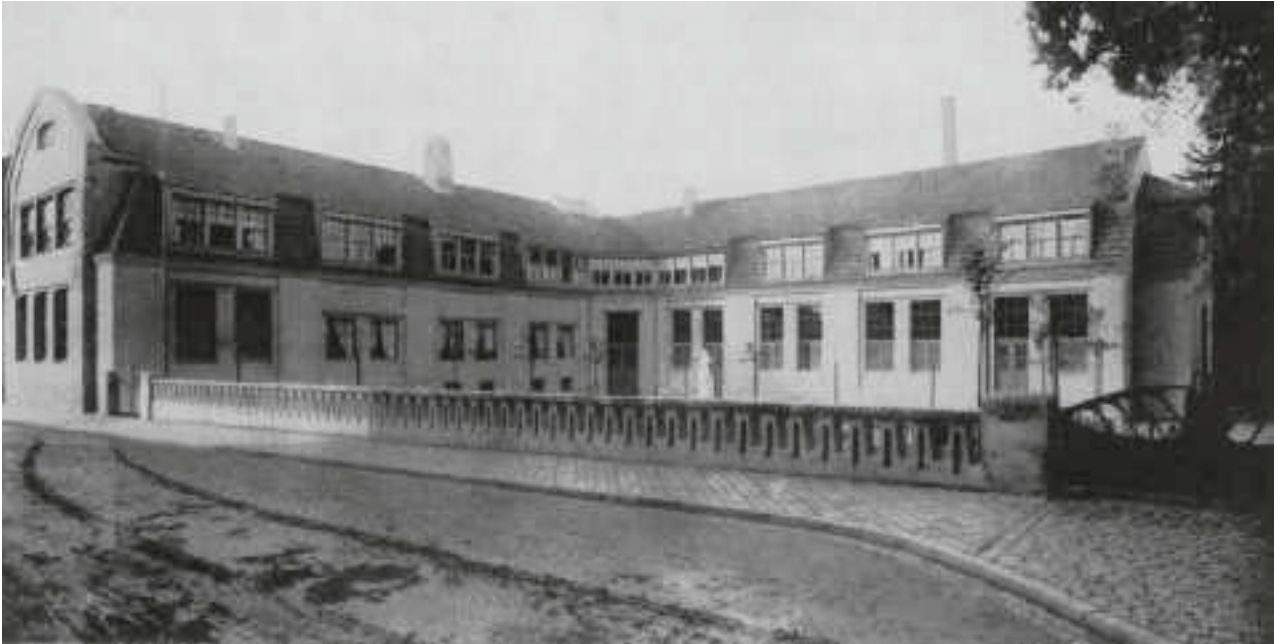
Gothic overtones: “Empty,” designed in 1896 by William Morris for a book illustration.

The Worst Insult at the Bauhaus ...

was “academic”—for this is what its members wished to overcome. The traditional academies not only did not distinguish between high and applied art. They had long before dissolved the link between the fine arts and architecture. At the Bauhaus they were convinced that academic students were brought up in the false belief that they were geniuses. When they had completed their studies than they stood around incompetently in the world and unemployed on the street, because they were not educated comprehensively and in accordance with their times. At the Bauhaus, this would be different.

→ **The Darmstadt Artists' Colony, Mathildenhöhe.** This came into being in 1898/99 with the close cooperation of craftspeople and artists in various disciplines, among whom were Joseph Maria Olbrich and Peter Behrens.

→ **The Deutscher Werkbund (German Work Federation), Founded in 1907.** Its aim was the “ennoblement of craftwork in the collaboration of art, industry, and crafts by means of education, propaganda and a common attitude to relevant questions.” It called for “good form” and “quality work.”



The Grand Ducal Saxon Arts and Crafts School in Weimar built in 1905–06 to the plans of Henry van de Velde. In 1919 the Bauhaus workshops moved in here.



In 1906 Henry van de Velde founded the Grand Ducal Saxon Arts and Crafts School in Weimar, of which he was director up to 1915.

“A ceremony of our own”

The First World War assaulted mankind like a savage monster. Those who did not perish in the war suffered severe physical and psychic damage. In this time of chaos and upheaval, the demand grew for a new and better future. Open minds brought hope and a desire for utopia to a world of uncertainty. One of these visionaries was Walter Gropius.

In Search of a Director

The architect and artist Henry van de Velde was searching, not of his own free will, for a new director for the Grand Ducal Saxon Arts and Crafts School (Großherzoglich Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule) which he himself had founded. Because of the war, it was difficult for foreigners to work in Germany and so the Belgian van de Velde was soon given notice to resign his post and find a successor. In 1915 he suggested the renowned Art Deco artists August Endell and Hermann Obrist, as well as the young architect Walter Gropius. Van de Velde, who was fifty-two, and Gropius, who was twenty years younger, had clearly different attitudes to art, architecture, and education, but also

“... if we simply demand what appears impossible, I am convinced that we will succeed.”

Walter Gropius, 1919

Walter Gropius during a visit to his uncle in Janikow, Pomerania, in 1910, the year in which he opened his own architectural office.



points of contact. Van de Velde's request to put his name forward as a successor reached Lieutenant Gropius on the battlefield. He thought that as a *homo novus* he hardly stood a chance, but replied to Weimar accepting the nomination. But for the time being, the further development of this promising story was prevented by the war.

Gropius' Career

Who was this man, to whom van de Velde was making an offer that was to have such huge and unsuspected consequences?

The young upper-class Berliner had put his architectural studies on hold shortly before they were to have been completed. Instead, in 1908 he applied for a job in the innovative office of the architect Peter Behrens and was accepted. Within a short time Gropius had become a welcome guest in the Behrens' household and was even allowed to instruct Behrens' daughter Petra in tennis. That Gropius could hardly draw did not trouble his employer for a moment. But it did disturb the young, sensi-

tive novice. He wrote despairingly to his mother: "My absolute inability to transfer even the simplest concept to paper spoils many beautiful things for me and often makes me consider my future profession with anxiety. I am not capable to drawing a straight line ... for I immediately get cramp in my hand, break the points off the pencil, and after five minutes I need a rest ... Even in my darkest hours I did not fear that things would be so bleak. What is to become of me?" But the experienced Behrens recognized Gropius' abilities and versatility. He even took him with him on a study trip to England, where they studied factories and industrial plants. In Behrens' Berlin office Gropius not only assisted his employer in the latter's wide-ranging creative activity for AEG, which included designing the firm's logo, its buildings and their furnishing. He also made the acquaintance of another employee of the office, a man who also later became famous—Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

By the spring of 1910 Gropius had already opened his own architectural office in Berlin, and shortly after-



The office building for the pattern factory designed by Walter Gropius and his partner Adolf Meyer, with side stairwells entirely of glass, at the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition in Cologne, 1914.

wards, together with his colleague Adolf Meyer, he designed a new factory building for the Fagus shoe-last factory at Alfeld, near Hanover. Here, turning away from the reiteration of historical styles, Gropius created something truly new, for the glass exterior walls of the factory were largely freed from their load-bearing and supporting function. A revolutionary glass façade of this kind was later to become a significant characteristic of the Bauhaus building in Dessau. Also in 1910, Gropius became a member of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Work Federation, an association of artists, designers, architects, and industrialists) and, as a committed young comrade-in-arms, he worked on its yearbooks. When, at the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914, a scandal broke out—the so-called “Werkbund dispute”—Gropius took sides with the established figure van de Velde. The cause of the dispute was a controversy between van de Velde and the architect Hermann Muthesius that nearly caused the breakup of the Werkbund. While Muthesius spoke out in favor of standardization in architecture and the industrial production of furniture

and other items, van de Velde defended free artistic individuality. In the context of this exhibition, Gropius clearly took up a position in agreement with van de Velde. Gropius was also represented as an architect at this exhibition, in fact with several buildings, all of which he designed especially for the exhibition: a pattern factory and factory office, the so-called Deutz Pavilion, which was designed to be the exhibition hall. This exhibition showed that the architect Gropius was also a versatile designer; not only interiors by him were on display, but also car bodies and a sleeping car.

“Artists, let us knock down the walls”

After more than four years of traumatic experiences at the Front, Gropius returned at a time of disruption and with an uncertain future. Immediately after being discharged from the army, he came back to a Berlin shaken by depression and revolution in order to “take part in the upheavals. There is an atmosphere of high tension here, and at this time we artists too must strike while the iron is hot.” In December 1918, therefore, Gropius