

Bauhaus-Méditerranée. The Art of Dwelling Differently in the World

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- [I] What can we learn from the history of the Bauhaus and Modernism when facing current issues? And how can this enable us to gain new insights into the past?
- [N] How do our own cultural, social, and political beliefs and stances affect our understanding of the Bauhaus, Modernism, and modernity?

«The highest form of hope is
despair overcome». ¹
Georges Bernanos, *La liberté,
pour quoi faire?*

bauhaus centenary

What does the Bauhaus still have to say and pass on to us? A century after its foundation, after so many events, exhibitions, publications, a television series on Arte, the inauguration of the new museums in Weimar and Dessau, or *bauhaus imaginista*, presented at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin for the centenary in 2019, it seems that the subject has been well and truly addressed. Why not move on rather than dwelling on history?

bauhaus legacies

bauhaus as a source
of inspiration

The time for celebration has passed; another era is dawning, more uncertain, more improbable: an era of metamorphosis. How can this Bauhaus legacy still continue changing our viewpoint and inspiring new forms?

learning to dwell differently
in the world

new everyday environment

- [I] It is not about «heading back upstream» to inflate the importance of this history from a century ago, but rather about a «salvo for the future», seeking to give another countenance to the world to come. How can we establish a basis, lay the foundations and open up new prospects in order to learn to dwell differently in the world? There are genuine lessons to be learned from the Bauhaus experience. Attempting to duplicate or even transplant it would be futile. What remains is an experience, a spirit, a collective creative adventure, linked to the invention of everyday life, which can serve as an extremely fertile inspiration for us today.

climate change

need for lifestyle changes

Given the state of the world, with continuing climate disruption, we now realize deep down that we need to change how we live. Yet nothing really changes, transitions are still tentative, and adaptations remain uncertain, due to a lack of desire or imagination that would urge us to profoundly transform our lifestyles.

- [N] How should we live? In the Bauhaus spirit, artists have something to tell us and to teach us as we attempt to answer this question. Not uprooted and out of context, but as an ensemble in a specific situation, anchored perhaps in the Mediterranean world, this world made of in-between worlds. A setting where a world-class contemporary art scene on a grand scale is asserting its presence. The Mediterranean is no longer part of the past but has become a creative force again.

bauhaus as a creative force

This is where a possible intersection with the Bauhaus legacy emerges, heralding a potential metamorphosis, for inventing new ways of living tomorrow, based on new forms. A new art of

- [O] What is the significance and relevance of the Bauhaus and Modernism today—a historical phenomenon or a resource for the present? And what, if anything, constitutes their current relevance?

bauhaus as a concrete utopia

dwelling in the world is taking shape here, for which the Mediterranean world can perhaps serve as a source and an inspiration. Is it a concrete utopia, a hope-driven principle? It is at least the promise not to give up, not to consent to the looming collapse, in this world that has become so fragile.

Lessons from the Bauhaus

lessons from the bauhaus

- [O] Why does the Bauhaus still mean something to us today? Over and above specialist scholarship, or indeed the need for excellent preservation of the archival material and works produced by the school's masters and students, the Bauhaus makes its mark. It opens an unprecedented trajectory that we can pursue. «What is good is form as movement, as action. [...] What is bad is form as immobility, as an end. [...] Form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is life.»² That was how Paul Klee addressed his Bauhaus students. A place that creates forms that are not isolated like so many individual machines. They are in motion and alive, never fixed in place. This cross-over of forms, in multiple workshops, is much more than a simple interdisciplinary approach. It is about opening an original creative space that builds bridges between architecture, photography, drawing, dance, design, weaving and glasswork, painting, and graphics. As never before has such a conjunction of approaches occurred, in one single place, in this new type of school.

interdisciplinary approach
collaborative forms of
knowledge production

«Inventions from the unknown demand new forms», Rimbaud wrote in one of his famous «Letters of the Seer».³ It is this invention from the unknown, this visionary impulse that once gave birth to the Bauhaus, between Weimar, Dessau and Berlin.

Such a cross-over of forms establishes a foundational force whose effects we continue to feel today. It is a source of possibilities and a masterful lesson that never ceases to inspire us to invent the world of tomorrow.

dismantling arts'
hierarchical order

new unity of art and
technology

Another lesson to be learned comes from the link between the fine arts and the «arts of doing» for reinventing the everyday environment. «Art and technology, a new unity» was the motto that Walter Gropius proclaimed in 1922. This attachment to everyday life, this attention to the objects and gestures that make up our daily lives transforms our gaze. Art is no longer a celestial or sacred domain that concerns only princes or great patrons and

bauhaus school acting
as a precedent

new forms
of collective practice

heterogeneity of
the bauhaus

different bauhaus versions

new building of the future

bauhaus' power of
resistance

bauhaus as nazi germany's
antithesis

collectors; it is a form of life. It is a way of giving life a style, in the aftermath of the First World War.

Another lesson from the Bauhaus is the art of creating a school and acting as a precedent throughout the world, knowing how to build a collective project, giving birth to a «movement that shifts boundaries». This sense of a collective adventure is exemplary, even if we should not underestimate the divisions, oppositions and conflicts that have characterized the Bauhaus throughout its history. Nevertheless, it remains a school that has invented a new art of transmitting, teaching and shared creation. What was born there has «pollinated» the whole world, enabling it to make honey from this legacy. Being together, of course, but not simply to meet one another and teach what already existed. The Bauhaus had a quite different aspiration: It was about «building the future», creating and constructing the world differently. This «new building of the future» that Gropius advocated from the inception of the Bauhaus is a foundational principle. It is not a mere declaration of intent or an inconsequential theoretical manifesto. It is a way of challenging the future that has had an impact, has made its mark on the history of design, has profoundly shaped its era, in particular by drawing together, around the Bauhaus, figures such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy, Anni and Josef Albers, Marcel Breuer, Marianne Brandt and so many others. The aspiration to challenge the future bore fruit. This is the yardstick against which we must measure ourselves, seeking to take this everyday imperative as a foundation stone and use it as an example. This is a fine legacy for tomorrow, a way of confronting the dark times. A beacon that shows us the way and urges us never give up, for nothing is lost.

The Bauhaus was born amidst adversity. The Bauhaus managed to resist, in the face of myriad forms of conservatism, an established order that dictated the rules to be followed and repeated. However, it encountered considerable difficulty in handling the upsurge of identitarian, nationalist and populist *völkisch* movements, which reject everything that is different, in particular a school that attracted, in their view, far too many «Jews, foreigners or Communists». Identitarian zeal would lead Germany to its downfall in the 1930s, while the Bauhaus embodies its exact opposite: a desire to be open to the world and in particular to welcome people who come from elsewhere. This self-proclaimed taste for openness, for what «comes from across the seas», is not a weakness or a flaw in the Bauhaus. It is what gives the Bauhaus

- [1] What can we learn from the history of the Bauhaus and Modernism when facing current issues? And how can this enable us to gain new insights into the past?

its lifeblood, its *raison d'être* and, in a way, is the basis for its universality. The National Socialists were vehemently opposed to such openness and under their pressure the school was closed down.

- [1] These few lessons, drawn from the Bauhaus' experience, trace out lines of meaning, what architects like to call «regulating lines», which can be taken as a basis for re-building. They do not constitute all the Bauhaus legacy and are by no means exhaustive. But they exist and persist. Time has not stood still; on the contrary, we have entered the «Great Acceleration» over the past 50 years, to an even greater extent since the advent of economic and financial globalization. What is happening before our very eyes invites us to move on to another chapter, to invent other ways of living.

Changing Our Lifestyles—An Imperative of Our Age

need for lifestyle changes

The American way of life or the Chinese way of life are simply not viable on a global scale. Every day, we become a little more aware of the devastating effects of global warming, omnipresent pollution, unbreathable air, the extinction of half of all living species, vanishing glaciers and the inexorable rise in water levels, as exemplified in *acqua alta*, which threatens gems like Venice.

We know that we can no longer continue living like this, in the Anthropocene age. Our lives can no longer be governed by productivism and consumerism, which became central points of reference in the 19th century, initially in Europe, later in the United States and now in large parts of the world. Admonitions from the Club of Rome as early as the 1970s concerning the «limits to growth» were not heeded. On the contrary: Productivism and consumerism boomed globally after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). «*L'Empire du Milieu*» [i.e. The Middle Kingdom, China] has been replaced by «*l'Empire des Choses*», the realm of things. Consumer society has risen to dominance as the pace of economic globalization has accelerated.

As the writer Georges Perec so aptly observed already in the 1960s: «It was almost a regulation always to wish for more than you could have. It was not they who had decreed it, it was a social law». ⁴ This purported social law lies at the heart of the value system in our consumerist and productivist world. Such a law persists today, even though some cracks are beginning to appear. The time has come to ask: What do we really need?

need for a different
architecture of values

need for a different
economy of desire

need for lifestyle changes

imaginaries and change

new everyday environment

new living—a new lifestyle

bauhaus spirit

«There is no excess in true needs», Jean Jacques Rousseau observed. It is a question of rediscovering a sense of limits in our lifestyles. This stems from a different philosophy of existence, a different architecture of values, a completely different economy of desire, where having no longer takes precedence over being, where «always more» is no longer considered a «social law». In our open, plural and democratic societies, a «social law» is not altered by decree, from above, in an authoritarian or dictatorial manner. Only emergency public health and lockdown measures, such as those adopted in the face of the COVID-19 disaster, can be imposed on us from above, for a very brief period.

Changing our lifestyles happens from the grassroots up, through a horizontal or lateral approach, right at the heart of our societies. This awakening springs from another imaginary vision, a new «imaginary institution of society», as Cornelius Castoriadis once advocated.⁵ Artists, thinkers and writers are the great purveyors of imaginary realms. They are the ones who dream of tomorrow's world and escape the empire of established, repeated, outdated standards and rules. They sketch out in advance what may happen in future and capture the ineffable. As Victor Hugo rightly observes in «Le Promontoire du songe»: «A low sky to a low soul. As one makes one's dream, one makes one's life. Our conscience is the architect of our dream. The great dream is called duty. It is also the great truth», adding: «The visionaries of life are mocked by the visionaries of negation»,⁷ those artisans of the void for whom nothing is ever possible, nothing must change, for everything must follow its course, its pre-established order. But remember that «the dreadful sense of groping one's way in a dream is intermingled with the beginning of all things».⁸ That held true for the founders of the Bauhaus, who tamed their dream and gave new form to the world. It was not a hollow dream, but a vision embodied, from a school with many faces that sought out and gave a new architecture to the order of things. A school that created a different aesthetic of the everyday.

Art does indeed make it possible to give life a style, as the Bauhaus creators most certainly did. A «style», this «mark of the human being on everything», as Paul Valéry so aptly defines it.⁹ It is an expression of its time and the spirit of that time, of a singular moment in history. This time is unique, it cannot be reproduced or imitated. It may perhaps be extended, as was attempted in Chicago with «The New Bauhaus» (1937) founded by László Moholy-Nagy, later IIT Institute of Design (ID), or at Black Mountain College,

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North Carolina. But it is more than a school—it is a spirit that we must bring to life, a foundational experience for an adventure of engaging with forms that we can draw inspiration from today to create a different aesthetic of the everyday.

need for lifestyle changes
bauhaus as a creative force

- [1] Changing our lifestyles, this imperative of our times, can find a vibrant wellspring in the Bauhaus legacy, a rare experience and creative energy that shows us that something of this order is possible. It has happened at least once in history, despite all the obstacles. This is what I see as the significance of this link between the Bauhaus and the Mediterranean.

It is not in any way about the Bauhaus in the Mediterranean, the way these architectural or other forms have been disseminated, transplanted to Istanbul, Tel Aviv or Casablanca. That is not the issue being raised here. The link between the Bauhaus and the Mediterranean operates in a different register and bears witness to a completely different perspective. It is an invitation to change the way we live, by giving it style, taking as our point of departure the contemporary Mediterranean world. A context where new forms are being invented, moving beyond the disasters currently unfolding, beyond violence and war, forced migrations and essential exile, murderous theocracies and military dictatorships, while also moving beyond all the forms of immobility approved by the Western powers in the name of security and stability, a true European and Western obsession that prevents us from seeing what drives the younger generations, who can no longer stand this straitjacket. There is another face of the contemporary Mediterranean world and it is high time we stopped concealing it and learned instead to look it in the eye—the world of the creative Mediterranean.

bauhaus as
a call for change

new living—a new lifestyle

The Creative Mediterranean

need for a different
architecture of values

need for a different
economy of desire

Changing the way that we live is only possible with a different economy of desire. These changes, while certainly globalized, can only be effective if they happen locally. Our ways of life respond to symbolic territories, anthropological anchors, value systems, forms of belonging, gestures and practices that make sense within the history and genealogy of the place in which we live.

That also holds true too for the Mediterranean world, this world composed of in-between worlds where many alloys between cultures and ways of life have been forged, moving

beyond divisions and oppositions, reflecting profound interactions throughout history. What some are beginning to call «bio-regions» took shape in the Mediterranean world. It is a natural ecosystem that has come into being in this form over the lengthy course of history but it is also a type of cultural ecosystem that has emerged, particularly over the last thirty years. I call it «the creative Mediterranean».

La Méditerranée créatrice is the title of the first book I edited and published in 1994.¹⁰ I argued then for an artistic and cultural «renaissance of the Mediterranean». Far from being fixated on the past, celebrating wreckage and ruins, being obsessed with cultural heritage, I put forward the idea back then that «we are entering a new process of cultural creation in the Mediterranean». A Mediterranean modernity was beginning to emerge, a contemporary art scene, once paralyzed, imprisoned by dominant Western forms, was asserting itself. How would it find its place? Through creation, specifically by inventing its own forms in the world. Despite all the burdens, archaisms and immobility of dictatorial powers, conjoined with religious obscurantism, this élan has managed to burst through this immense stratum of inertia, this perpetual reproduction of the same thing. The flipside of the disaster is exactly there, in this bubbling up of artistic and cultural lifeblood, driven on particularly by a whole new generation of artists who craft an imaginary for the 21st century.

How can this scattered, fragmented whole, which to this day is not yet clearly perceived, be made easier to see and understand? Perhaps we should start by drawing one or more constellations that allow us to connect various figures, stars that light up the sky of our imagination. That could be the storyline for a major exhibition that has not yet been realized ... «Constellation: group of stars forming a figure, a group of shining objects, remarkable individuals». The dictionary definition points us in the right direction.

Constellations-Méditerranée: Therein lies a vision of what a 21st-century Bauhaus could be, not as a school, nor even as a movement, but as a vibrant fount of creation. Where «inventions from the unknown demand new forms». Where a new «imaginary museum» is being built.

Constellations-Méditerranée: Like the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar, a sort of opening scene presenting the school's various productions, showcasing new art, an emerging style and the creative fertility of a place where forms are invented, today it

- [B] What do we understand by taking a stand regarding architecture and design, and particularly of the Bauhaus and Modernism?

is possible to connect contemporary artists, steeped in the Mediterranean world, in an innovative constellation or in several such constellations.

Constellations-Méditerranée: There are numerous potential configurations to link together remarkable figures and to join up dots that come together as an armful of stars. Unique artists, with no desire to be part of a movement, carve out their own pathway but they are not separate from their context, nor can they escape the pace of the world. They are nurtured and inspired by the Mediterranean world, its fragments and its heritage, its colours and its shapes, its repertoires and its rhythms, its faces and its gestures, its flavours and its images as well as its narratives.

Joining together artists and works, those stars that shine in the heavens of contemporary creation, is one way to start imagining a Bauhaus-Méditerranée of the 21st century. A major exhibition that would showcase the interactions and myriad connections between these different *Constellations-Méditerranée* could offer one possible meeting place. A form of concrete utopia, of metamorphosis of the Bauhaus spirit into action could thus perhaps emerge. Remaining faithful to this link between contemporary artistic forms and everyday objects for attempting to transform our lifestyles, it is now a matter of inventing the forms of the future. Or how can we dwell differently in the world?

bauhaus as
a concrete utopia

bauhaus signifying
art's power to
transform society

Dwelling Differently in the World

learning to dwell differently
in the world

- [B] The question we face today, as Bruno Latour suggests, is: «*Où atterrir?*»—to cite the original title of his book *Down To Earth*—, which translates literally as «Where to land?»¹¹ He proposes that we should come down to earth at the conjunction between a terrain and the world. It is not just about one particular terrain in isolation, for that would hint at identitarian self-absorption and would be a dangerous dead-end, nor is it just about the world seen in isolation, for that would be a sign that something had been lost in the vast empire of globalization. It is the conjunction of the two that we must create, building our dwelling for learning to live differently in the world. Far from the ever-faster pace, pillaging and devastation of our planet.

Dwelling differently in the world is not a simple transition, illusory or cosmetic, an adaptation to global warming or an ephemeral or temporary accommodation. It is a much broader

need for lifestyle changes

perspective that we are talking about here, a form of inner revolution that invites us to genuinely change our lifestyles.

Inspiration may come from certain aspects of Martin Heidegger's important text «Building Dwelling Thinking».¹² One is ill-advised nowadays, certainly, to quote Martin Heidegger, given his proven complicity with the National Socialist regime. Many of his texts, statements, diaries and deeds bear witness to this. Nonetheless Martin Heidegger's philosophy and thought, as demonstrated by Georges Steiner, Hannah Arendt or his exchanges with René Char, cannot be reduced to this dimension alone.

«Building Dwelling Thinking» leads us to reflect, particularly when he observes that «the real meaning of the verb *bauen*, to dwell, has been lost to us. [...] To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.»¹³ He invites us to reconsider the meaning of limits in the art of dwelling in the world and it is in this sense that his ideas may be fruitful today: «A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.»¹⁴

learning to dwell differently
in the world

That from which something begins its presencing ... could indeed be a *21st-century Bauhaus-Méditerranée*. A way of inventing a new art of dwelling in the world, based on limits, on a sense of proportion, in the face of the disproportionate excess of our contemporary world. This ardent desire to draw limits, to «keep a sense of proportion and respect limits», according to an age-old saying of ancient philosophy, this philosophizing as a way of life is what Albert Camus called «*la pensée de midi*» (thought at the meridian), and not «*du midi*», that is, not a way of thinking from the south of France, because it is in no way a question of regionalism, but of a new form of universalism.

imaginaries and change

Thinking that addresses limits for building in the 21st century, learning to live and dwell differently in the world. There is a compass here that can guide our steps, a horizon that opens up, a remarkable imaginary that takes shape in the artists' gaze. As visionaries, they help to unravel reality, such as it is, to metamorphose our heritages and our visions of the world, to inspire «*ce qui commence à être*»—«what begins its presencing»—, the opening scene of another art of dwelling in the world, coming from the Mediterranean world. Where it is possible to invent a world after the disaster.

Notes

- 1 Georges Bernanos, *La Liberté, pour quoi faire?*, Paris, 1953 [English: «France Before the World of Tomorrow», in: *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*, transl. Joan and Barry Ulanov, Chicago 1955, pp. 4–5.
- 2 Quoted in Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, New Haven, CT 2009, p. 162.
- 3 Quoted in English in: *I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud*, (ed.) Wyatt Mason, New York 2004, p. 37.
- 4 Georges Perec, *Les Choses* (1965), Paris: Gallimard, 2017, p. 28. [English: Georges Perec, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, transl. David Bellos, Andrew Leak, Boston 1990, p. 49].
- 5 Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris 1975. [English: Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, transl. Kathleen Blamey, Cambridge MA 1987].
- 6 Victor Hugo, *Le promontoire du songe* (1864), Paris: Gallimard, 2012, p. 95.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 9 Quoted by Marielle Macé, in: *Styles*, Paris 2016, p. 253.
- 10 *La Méditerranée créatrice*, (ed.) Thierry Fabre, Paris 1994.
- 11 Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir?—Comment s'orienter en politique*, Paris 2017. [Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, transl. Catherine Porter, Cambridge 2018].
- 12 Martin Heidegger, «Bauen Wohnen Denken», in: id., *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen, 1954. [English: Martin Heidegger, «Building Dwelling Thinking», in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. Albert Hofstadter, New York 1971, pp. 141–160].
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 152.