

bauhaus-archiv
museum für gestaltung

debating the bauhaus
and modernism

taking A STAND ?

an international symposium of the
bauhaus-archiv / museum für gestaltung
on 29 / 30 november 2019

at berlinische galerie
alte jakobstr. 124 - 128
10969 berlin

Fig. 1
Flyer of the symposium «taking a stand?
debating the bauhaus and modernism»
of the Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für
Gestaltung on 29/30 November 2019 at the
Berlinische Galerie, designed by L2M3,
referring to László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhaus-
balkone in Dessau* [Bauhaus Balconies
in Dessau], 1927, Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum
für Gestaltung, Berlin

Introduction

Andrea Bärnreuther

The publication «taking a stand? debating the bauhaus and modernism» is based on a symposium,¹ sponsored by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [Federal Agency for Civic Education], that also incorporated a school project and accompanied the Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für Gestaltung's original bauhaus centenary exhibition at Berlinische Galerie (29th/30th November 2019). The exhibition and the publication were sponsored by the Senate Department for Culture and Europe of the State of Berlin and the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation).

The publication views itself not in the spirit of conference proceedings but instead as a further project development step: On the one hand, almost all the presentations and discussions were revised for the publication and supplemented by seven further papers. On the other hand, this curated publication format, in addition to traditional reading modes, opens up non-linear and multi-perspective approaches via questions and keywords. These summarize or supplement the text passages they reference.

During the preparatory phase before the symposium, two classes from the Nelson Mandela and the Paula Fürst School in Berlin addressed the issue of where we live and how to live when faced with the housing and climate crisis, as well as considering the topics of utopia and taking a stand; they produced short films, screening these for the participating international researchers on 29th November prior to the opening event and discussing the issues with them. In return, the scholars presented questions from the symposium and discussed their personal approach to the research topics. Three articles in the publication offer an introduction to the film project, with teasers intervening in the publication context to showcase the links to the films.

«taking a stand? debating the bauhaus and modernism»

Our symposium's project title alludes to an idea of the Bauhaus as adopting a social attitude, a notion widespread during the Bauhaus anniversary year, and brings questions into play concerning what it means to take a stand. Demands for us to stand up and be counted are omnipresent today. That is because central values and principles of our democratic society are increasingly called into question by

the encroachment of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist positions into the societal mainstream.

Our key image ^{Fig. 1} refers to a 1927 photograph by László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhausbalkone in Dessau* [Bauhaus Balconies in Dessau]. It depicts taking a stand as entailing an unstable equilibrium, teetering on the brink of collapse, requiring constant vigilance and effort to maintain it. We understand «taking a stand» with regard to architecture and design not as a synonym for «style»² but as «an attitude towards the world and one's own being-in-the-world» (Peter Wagner)³ within the complex context of design, social and political concerns and processes, as well as a heuristic method for developing relevant questions.

The question of what we understand by taking a stand regarding the Bauhaus formed the starting point for an expedition that led us to insights into the complexity this entails.

The Bauhaus—as the flagship of Modernism—became recognizable as a complex that encompasses material culture, ideas or ideologies, teachings and practices, as well as politics and geopolitics, while it became apparent how our images of the Bauhaus connect with us—with our questions and perspectives, as well as our values and criteria for determining value, i.e. with our attitude or our decision to take a stand.

Can an institution with so many different facets as the Bauhaus be regarded as embodying a social attitude?

In his opening lecture, Winfried Nerdinger provides insights into the Bauhaus' various and sometimes contradictory programmatic approaches, distinguishing between four phases: the Itten Bauhaus, the Gropius Bauhaus, the Meyer Bauhaus, and the Mies Bauhaus. He also demonstrates how effectively Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius made this diversity and difference disappear, turning the focus instead to the Bauhaus he directed and the image of an ever-topical, universally valid Bauhaus idea.

«Was heißt hier Haltung?» In German the title asks what we understand by adopting an attitude, both in terms of the Bauhaus per se as a discursive object and the ways in which we address it.

In order to be able to answer our initial question, we must therefore first ask ourselves which Bauhaus we mean or want, which entails first of all clarifying what we even mean by Bauhaus—out of the enormous wealth of ideas present in the anniversary year, catapulted into simultaneity from the very different contexts where they originated, only those fundamental for our object of discourse shall be emphasized: Do we mean a historical object, the school of art, design and architecture that existed for 14 years, or the Bauhaus including its history of global reception? Do we understand the Bauhaus

as a vitally alive project that continues uninterrupted or as a living tradition, as reconceptualized by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius? Or is it for us—also envisioned in a transtemporal sense—an artistic, socially emancipatory vision, as the artist Asger Jorn understood the Bauhaus and, drawing on his view, the *bauhaus imaginista* anniversary exhibition? Can we also go along with the line adopted by this exhibition in perceiving the Bauhaus as a transcultural and transnational network of relationships that can once again become a driving force for transnational and transcultural exchange, or do we see it as Germany's most successful cultural export?

The Bauhaus that we encountered during the 100th anniversary year oscillates between its roles as an object of the past, a resource for the present and a screen for projections in which we find ourselves reflected.

Anniversaries pursue a politics of remembrance. They exist within the field of tension between scholarship and politics, which cannot be resolved in favour of either. The two poles that define this field are historical research and re-construction of what this anniversary is celebrating to make it a catalyst and means of mobilisation for the present and the future.

Looking back now, with nine months' hindsight, it seems fair to say that the Bauhaus anniversary has borne fruit. Its most spectacular manifestation is EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political proclamation of a new European Green Bauhaus in her 16th September 2020 State of the Union Address «Building the world we want to live in: A Union of vitality in a world of fragility».⁴

The Bauhaus has thus entered the arena of the sustainability debate in a present defined by the climate crisis: as the cultural dimension of the European Green Deal and a wave of European renewal with the EU spearheading a circular economy.

The Bauhaus as a symbol of radical renewal and change in our lifestyles, as a paradigm of new forms of collaborative design and interdisciplinary knowledge-generation, as well as new visions of building as a field of experimentation, as a process-oriented method that strives to attain distant goals, delves into new possibilities, and much more.

The Bauhaus as the flagship of European renewal characterized by sustainable development in the guise of a political statement—that is an idea that was not yet explicitly present in the Bauhaus anniversary year. However, many ideas that can be regarded as a driving force were already present: the idea of the Bauhaus as a workshop for the future and a worldwide think tank, and all the desiderata associated with that—the courage to experiment, confidence that we can change many people's lives for the better, a force that transcends the boundaries of political interventions and generates new approaches to thinking and design, which are so urgently needed in the light of globalisation and digitalisation, climate change and migration—while, last but not least, the question of what politics can do today

also emerged. That's not all: Through his interest and participation in our opening event, German Vice-Chancellor Olaf Scholz, now in the running for the post of chancellor, set the ball rolling on this topic as a political contribution to the Bauhaus anniversary year.

The opening lecture by architectural historian and Bauhaus expert Winfried Nerdinger and Olaf Scholz's keynote speech render palpable the tensions that generally characterize anniversaries: on the one hand, critical historical analysis and, on the other, the political intent to shape the world, which seeks to understand the Bauhaus as a resource for the present and a call for action, outlining political prerequisites and sketching out the course to be steered by socially committed architecture, especially for housing and urban planning in the 21st century.

The complexity of taking a stand

The symposium encompasses three interconnecting and overlapping thematic complexes in which the complexity of taking a stand is investigated and discussed in detail: ranging from the attitudes of *Bauhäusler* (former Bauhaus teachers and students), as well as the architects of *Neues Bauen* [the New Building Movement], and how these were reflected in activities and works through to the attitudes that shaped or continue to shape Bauhaus historiography and its politics of remembrance, including our own attitude as Bauhaus researchers or historians, which underpins the construction of our (research) object.

The publication comprises 20 papers and 5 highly fascinating discussions. Here however I shall simply briefly introduce the individual papers in order to outline the overall conceptual structure.

The papers in Section I deal with questions concerning the fate of the visions developed by the *Bauhäusler* as well as by *Neues Bauen* architects, after the Bauhaus' closure, concerning planning and building a «new world» in the unfamiliar new contexts of emigration or exile, and ask what taking a stand means in this context.

They show the architects in various political and economic contexts, which often made it difficult to adopt a resolute stance, as well how they handled conflict situations and areas of tension. In this context, learning processes are also examined and attempts to reimagine modern architecture.

Taking Hannes Meyer in exile in Mexico as his point of departure, Ryan Fred Long examines the contrast between European and Latin American self-images and ideas of identity, the contrast between the ideology of progress and «being contemporary with the world», the homeland and post-colonial homelessness. He sees Hannes Meyer's approach to the localisation and contextualization of architecture and his handling of the tension between regionalism and universalism in the context of Kenneth Frampton's «critical

regionalism» as a response to homelessness. Long draws on Kenneth Frampton's analytic terms, viewing Meyer's «trajectory of displacement» as a «marginal counter-history», whose potential lies in its eccentricity, i.e. in the simultaneity of connection and separation, «the joint and the disjoint».

While Long thus links the beginning and the end of the symposium and inspires the discussion of Section III, Raquel Franklin analyses Hannes Meyer's attitude in terms of two construction projects that required him to compromise: In the Soviet Union he had to accept Socialist Realism, despite realizing that he could not contribute to it, and in Mexico he had to accept working in the capitalist world. For Franklin, Meyer's scientific, social and functional approach, along with his idea of the «fate of landscape» as a determinant of design, constitute the common denominator and are indicative of his attitude.

Can architectural modernity simply be translated into other parts of the world, such as the Near or Middle East, without altering its identity? What kind of experiences did German architects have in Turkish society? Paola Ardizzola explores these questions and, drawing on the example of Bruno Taut's transposition of *Neues Bauen* into his exile in Turkey, reveals a successful attempt to mediate between the matrix of Modernism and the matrix of a reinterpretation of specific traditional architectural traits, thus creating a different Modernism beyond Historicism and the International Style—in a dialogue between tradition and modernity.

There are good reasons to consider Modernism's willing engagement with learning processes and its self-criticism as a form of attitude too.

Ulrich Hartung and Eduard Kögel demonstrate the complexities of taking a stand through the example of Richard Paulick. Hartung accompanies the architect as he travels «from the Bauhaus to the Stalinallee and back». Kögel accompanies Paulick in exile in Shanghai «in search of a more humane architecture».

Hartung traces out how Paulick moved from the Bauhaus to the diametrically opposed approach manifested in the Stalinallee, where Paulick adhered to Socialist Realism and the National Tradition doctrine, yet subsequently returned to his initial practice in the urban planning designs for Hoyerswerda, Schwedt and Halle-Neustadt, where he again embraced modernity in terms of industrial processes and construction.

Hartung views the prevailing economic and ideological conditions as permeating Paulick's design mindset and thus constitutive for his architectural and urban planning designs. What he perceives as a reconciliation of Socialist Realism with industrialized construction processes as the Bauhaus legacy looks from Kögel's perspective questionable yet also worthy of further interrogation. Kögel provides insight into Paulick's great ambition, shaped in exile in Shanghai in the 1940s: to work on a revolutionary new architecture by integrating architecture into nature and strengthening its socio-political impact.

Section II focuses on transfer, translation and transformation processes of Bauhaus and Bauhaus pedagogy, drawing on the example of Sweden, Latin America and China in the political arena, i.e. in an engagement with asymmetrical power relations and geopolitics.

Contrary to the idea of the Bauhaus as the most successful German cultural export, activated very effectively by various political stakeholders in a funding and marketing perspective in the context of the anniversary year and then adopted without criticism by many others, the very different forms of Bauhaus reception, as a function of time, space, political orientation and geopolitical significance, economic approach and social reach, turn the focus more onto the diverse forms of translation and transformation.

Facets of taking a stand are encountered here on various levels: on the one hand, in the understanding of the Bauhaus that underlies our project, namely as a transnational and transcultural network of relationships, or in the historiographical perspective of «entangled history».

The question of whether Bauhaus reception should be presented as a one-way process or as bi-directional needs to be examined in each individual case, particularly as it can only be answered with the appropriate research and sources. And in order to start pursuing research along these lines, an appropriate historiographical perspective or attitude is needed.

On the other hand, attitudes become visible in the sender's projection or the recipient's expectation and how these interact in transfer and translation processes.

What conceptions do *Bauhäusler* or *Neues Bauen* architects in exile have about their remit, their host country, and its inhabitants? What problems does reception of Bauhaus ideas seek to solve and what social and political significance does this reception assume for the local populace?

And thirdly, differing perspectives on the same subject matter—as a social project to be renewed in the present or as an object of intellectual imagination—can also be brought together with different attitudes, although here professional differences and experiential, and certainly also social, contexts may have a stronger impact than cultural or national factors.

Atli Magnus Seelow focuses on the transposition of continental European Modernism into the Nordic context and the Functionalism that emerged from this, which had a uniquely enduring effect as an aesthetic-political programme that shaped the Swedish welfare state's architecture, urban planning and design. He also refers to the differences in reception of the Bauhaus, which in Germany, as a tangible utopia, became a screen for projections, and Functionalism, which was subjected to a reality test and finally abandoned.

The Bauhaus reception in Chile is the subject of three papers, each with a different perspective: David Maulén de los Reyes discusses how the Hannes Meyer Bauhaus, as embodied in Tibor Weiner, influenced socially engaged architectural training and practice, which he understands from the perspective of the cybernetic system model as a systemic approach critically directed against technocratic modernity and that should be further developed. In his view, the prerequisite for this is the 1920s «Active School» movement—a synthesis of educational approaches from Europe and Latin America that recognized the cultural variables of each context in the construction of knowledge.

Susanne Neubauer and Marcelo Mari present an early example of post-colonial critique of the Bauhaus: the contribution that German design theorist Gui Bonsiepe, a student of Tomás Maldonado from Argentina at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, made during his time in Chile; in his role as project manager for the central economic administration, he fostered value-based, anti-capitalist, sustainable design rooted in local design and craft production within the cultural-political context of Salvador Allende's Chile. Bonsiepe criticized the concept of «good design» advocated by the Ulm School of Design as an expression of cultural imperialism.

Whereas David Maulén de los Reyes views socially committed architectural practice in the tradition of the Meyer Bauhaus as a resource for the present, Fernando Pérez-Oyarzun sees the Bauhaus School in Chile, regardless of which particular tradition one considers, as a component of the intellectual conceptual universe of art historians and students. He demonstrates how it is intertwined with the artistic and intellectual milieu in Chile and how it has left its mark and reinvigorated art, architecture and design teaching, especially in the second half of the 20th century, while remaining utopian in terms of its socially transformative impetus.

Chin-Wei Chang examines the historical advent of modernity in the arts, design and architecture in mainland China. He understands the Bauhaus as a collection of attitudes to design problems in the industrial age that is still relevant today. At the same time, he relativizes the Bauhaus' significance in relation to other modern traditions, calling for the Bauhaus to be decentralized and attention to be directed to translation and transformation processes, as well as to the social significance for the local populace.

In contrast, Zoe Zhang considers the Bauhaus to be very important for China. She sees the Bauhaus as a complex comprising material culture, ideas and politics. In her view, the Bauhaus' capacity to survive lies in the superposition of anonymous reception in the form of material culture and reception of ideologically distinct versions of the Bauhaus, i.e. in its great breadth and flexibility. The Bauhaus in China transcends popular and high culture, the roles of a colonial power and a colonised people and unites adversaries from the Second Japanese-Chinese War. Having been submerged in the anonymity of material culture, it survived the Cultural Revolution, re-appearing in various versions in the 1980s and sparking controversy.

Section III relates the question of attitude to Bauhaus historiography and its culture of remembrance, thus linking up to the Bauhaus anniversary year and our present.

Using architect Mart Stam to illustrate her argument, Simone Hain depicts Modernism as an attitude that can only conceive its own position outside of contemporary art history, in the process also rendering visible the blind spots and cognitive weaknesses of an image-driven and work-based art historiography. Hain shows Stam as a leading figure in the Constructivist movement, his interest in participating in a great historical-cultural development on an unprecedented scale, his affiliation to a community of values in which cultural progress and an alternative form of economic management, cooperation and consumption are inextricably linked and there is no room for authorship.

Philipp Oswalt tackles the Bauhaus brand from a twofold perspective: Hannes Meyer's critique of the Bauhaus style and the «White City», Tel Aviv, which as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, views itself as the world capital of Bauhaus. He articulates the argument that the branding that has kept the Bauhaus alive to this day and been highly successful in the Bauhaus anniversary year makes productive examination of its heritage more difficult: due to the branding's focus on objects and the «Bauhaus style», which was already highly controversial in the historical Bauhaus. Oswalt calls for a more in-depth engagement with Hannes Meyer's Bauhaus—not only in the spirit of a corrective to Bauhaus historiography but also to heighten awareness of a fundamental conflict in modern consumer design between its iconic-symbolic status and its social utility value.

Taking Tel Aviv's «White City», as an example, he shows how myth-formation around the Bauhaus brand creates new, constructed affiliations to the Bauhaus and links it to values that cannot necessarily be connected to an actual affiliation with the Bauhaus. Oswalt examines the objectives along with the both positive and negative intended or functional impact—identity formation, exclusion and repression processes.

Ronny Schüler homes in on the dark side of Tel Aviv's mythicization and investigates the repression of Bauhaus history through the prism of two less well-known Bauhaus students in the shadow of Arie Sharon. For Munio Weinraub Gitai and Shmuel Mestechkin, the Bauhaus was a testing ground for socialism and Zionism. In this context, Schüler also addresses the contradiction between the Bauhaus' founding ideals and its popularisation in the spirit of neo-liberal interests in its exploitation, which paid scant attention to the social-utopian ambitions of the Bauhaus and *Neues Bauen*, and, on the contrary, fostered social displacement processes under the «Bauhaus» label.

Hila Cohen-Schneiderman examines processes of repression relating to the historical intertwining with National Socialist Germany materially inscribed in the «White City», depriving it of its «whiteness» and purity. She also highlights scope for new discoveries and

perhaps even processes of change in an artistically inspired culture of remembrance. Taking the language of material culture as the starting point, specifically tiles made in Germany, the artistic research and exhibition project to mark the inauguration of the Max Liebling Haus, restored with German funding, as the White City Center (with the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation as a partner) was sparked off by the Transfer Agreement (1933), of all things. That encompassed an economic agreement between Nazi Germany and the Zionist Federation, as a result of which assets were transferred from Germany to the «White City» in the form of building materials.

Lessons from the Bauhaus

There are many reasons to believe that we can only learn something from the Bauhaus about our own challenges and about ways to resolve our current problems if we understand it as a complex made up of material culture, ideas/ideologies, teachings and practices as well as politics and geopolitics, and if we engage with the social, political and design processes underlying the objects and buildings, as well as with their effects.

The Bauhaus is embedded in the nexus of an ambivalent European modernity and its universal aspirations, interwoven with colonialism and European hegemonic claims or practices. The Bauhaus as a discursive object transcends the boundaries of disciplines, moves into areas that elude traditional architectural or art historical analysis while also escaping a national or Eurocentric perspective; it calls for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, as well as questions and methods of «entangled history», along with the corresponding transnational and transcultural exchanges—and, last but not least, it demands a readiness to constantly and self-critically question one's own criteria for determining value.

At the same time, in order to avoid over-simplifying, we should also always be aware of what separates us from the historical Bauhaus: first and foremost a concept of sustainability and the need for sustainable development, awareness of the scarcity of resources, scepticism about an unqualified faith in progress and towards utopias that leapfrog the existing world and believe they can manage without transformational efforts.

The last two papers in the epilogue explore the current significance of the Bauhaus. Elke Krasny asks if, particularly in view of COVID-19, we should be devising an architecture that tackles the challenge of repairing the future and finding a new critical and sustainable approach to the existing and the traditional, rather than clinging to the modern promise of building a better future. She views care ethics as a topic for research and teaching, as well as for architectural practice—a framework for re-examining the Bauhaus legacy—and draws up a blueprint for a new architecture curriculum that considers the interrelationships between economic, ecological and social issues.

Thierry Fabre understands the Bauhaus as a source of inspiration for the present day, as a model for «the art of dwelling differently in the world», for the invention of the unknown and the reinvention of everyday environments and a new lifestyle that will enable us to make the requisite changes to our ways of life. He sees the creative art scene in the Mediterranean region as an embodiment of the Bauhaus spirit in the present.

The question of taking a stand, adopting a particular attitude enables us to build bridges between our own attitudes and those of the *Bauhäusler*, Modernist architects and Bauhaus recipients in translation processes, historiography and politics of memory.

In this context, excellent opportunities emerge to open up forms of cultural education to encompass social and political issues and processes, as well as to the educational goals of social science subjects, such as a critical spirit, multi-perspectivity, dealing with diversity and heterogeneity. There are many reasons to believe that great, as yet untapped potential lies in new forms of combining knowledge about the arts and hands-on learning, on the one hand, and cognitive learning or knowledge about social and political sciences and history on the other.

In new configurations of cultural and political education in the analogue and digital realm, interdisciplinary synergy effects could be generated, tapping into the field of tension between art and science; at the same time, networked thinking could be promoted and practised, along with a broad spectrum of creative, digital, discursive, collaborative, social and democratic skills among students, young people and adults. These are vital prerequisites for the social transformation processes needed today. In this context, examining the Bauhaus and its heterogeneity or rather the contradictions that permeate its teachings and practices, which to this day continue to be multiplied in worldwide reception and constant (re)production of highly diverse Bauhaus images, offers an excellent springboard for engaging with diversity and difference, with history as construction, with processes of memory, marginalisation and repression, with colonialist thinking and hegemonic practices, with a new understanding of cultural heritage as a transnational and transcultural network of relationships and with areas of tension that cannot be resolved and must be endured.

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