

The Bauhaus—its artistic and social significance

Former Bauhaus student speaks in Liverpool and Sheffield

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Wilfred Franks, who studied at the Bauhaus between 1929 and 1931, delivered two successful lectures at the Liverpool Art School and Sheffield Hallam University last week. Over 300 students, staff members and others listened attentively as Franks recounted how he came to study at this influential school of art and design, and his experiences there.

Speaking for over one and half hours, Franks' lecture provided a vivid and moving account of his time at the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany. Architect and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, the Constructivist Laslo Moholy-Nagy, painters Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Oskar Schlemmer were just a few of the artists and teachers that Franks encountered during his stay. Although the events and personalities he described were from some 70 years ago, as Franks spoke they came alive again and the audience entered the world of the Bauhaus, through the eyes of the 21-year-old English student who had journeyed there.

Franks explained that before he founded the Bauhaus, Gropius was part of the *Novembergruppe*, so-called because “November was the month in which the German revolution had started in 1918, and they were sympathetic to it. They were going to create the architecture and the designs for mass production; to make the life of the New World, which they thought had started in 1917 in Russia. The New World should have beautiful things to use.”

Even though he had given up formal directorship of the Bauhaus when Franks arrived, Gropius's conceptions still powerfully influenced the atmosphere there. Skilled craftsmen instructed the students in the use of tools and techniques in manipulating various materials, teaching alongside gifted artists who

provided insights into concepts of form and design.

When he was introduced to the former director, Franks told Gropius that he did not know anything about architecture, or about politics. Gropius said he should listen to what the students said and observe them; they would educate him in both, as it was their generation that would build the “New World”.

Franks, who said that he had “been a nobody” before he went to Dessau since he was poor, said he “became somebody at the Bauhaus” because of the way those who taught and studied there imbued him with their artistic and socialist vision. He said Gropius taught that the social dimensions of design were such that in designing buildings you were “designing the life of the people”. Gropius told them that architecture would develop far beyond what it was today, and would “be so wide and so profound that it would be as immense as life itself.”

“It took me a long time to discover that this was a social process, in which everybody joined in and helped everybody else. This was not an ‘ideal’ that was imposed. Somehow, through Gropius and Moholy-Nagy and the others, they got this to happen by their own relationship to each individual student. They created this social body.”

The close association of many Bauhaus teachers and students with socialist ideas made the school the object of attack by right-wingers and the fascists. Forced out of Dessau in September 1932, the school existed briefly in Berlin until the Nazis closed it in April 1933.

Franks concluded his lecture by talking about a number of slides showing the work of various Bauhaus teachers, depicting buildings, paintings, typography, artifacts, textiles, theatre productions and furniture. He

related the images to the methods of teaching and ideas about design and form that were practiced at the school, providing a concrete and living link to the world of the Bauhaus.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will be presenting a more detailed account of Wilf Franks' lecture next week.



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