

100 years since the founding of the Bauhaus art school and movement: “A New Era”

Sybille Fuchs
2 November 2019

Rarely has an anniversary been so extensively celebrated and commented on in Germany as the founding of the Bauhaus School (Staatliches Bauhaus) in Weimar in 1919.

Cities all over the country have opened their cultural institutions, museums, theatres, schools of art and further education to a host of exhibitions, lectures, symposia and performances devoted to the famed art and design school and subsequent movement.

Numerous books and articles have also appeared, along with a series of films and documentaries on television and radio. The celebrations even include the construction of two new museums, in Weimar and Dessau, aimed at preserving the Bauhaus legacy.

The question arises: what is so special about this school, which existed for only 14 years and was forced to change its location three times in Germany due to the hostile reaction of conservative and nationalist forces?

(*Bauhaus* literally means “building house” in German, or “School of Building,” although, ironically, the institution did not have an architecture department to begin with.)

Undoubtedly, the Bauhaus artistic movement has had an enormous influence over the course of the past century. As one art historian comments, “Its assimilation throughout the world can be traced ... in numerous buildings, artworks, objects, designs, concepts, and curricula.” Its founder, architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969), writing in 1923, noted that the movement’s “identifying traits are clear, well-proportioned lines from which all unnecessary ingredients have been removed—the same traits characteristic of the modern engineered products of the machine.”

However, the contemporary significance of the Bauhaus does not lie merely in the forms of modern design it developed and propagated or the simple, functional architecture that was to largely characterise the 20th century—until its replacement by postmodernist conceptions of design. Above all, what makes Bauhaus special is its notion of combining many forms of artistic work and unleashing the creative power made possible by collective work. It appears that as the crisis of capitalism intensifies there is a longing for forms of creativity that no longer strive merely for individual “self-realisation,” but rather address real social needs and problems.

This need coincides with the general goals and perspectives with which the Bauhaus was founded and developed. In its founding manifesto, Gropius placed construction at the center of artistic work by attempting to build on the artisanal and artistic traditions of medieval architecture. The building, its space and everything in it, should be designed to serve the people. This principle should also apply to what appears to be at first glance a backward-looking return to craftsmanship and its foundations. In fact such craftsmanship is deliberately aimed at creating models which can then be produced industrially.

In the April 1919 Bauhaus Manifesto, Gropius wrote: “The ultimate goal of all art is the building! The ornamentation of the building was once the main purpose of the visual arts, and they were considered

indispensable parts of the great building. Today, they exist in complacent isolation, from which they can only be salvaged by the purposeful and cooperative endeavours of all artisans. Architects, painters and sculptors must learn a new way of seeing and understanding the composite character of the building, both as a totality and in terms of its parts. Their work will then re-imbue itself with the spirit of architecture, which it lost in salon art ...

“So let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come.”

It is no accident that the manifesto was adorned by a sketch of a cathedral by Lyonel Feininger, symbolically expressing the common aspiration of artists, master builders and craftsmen.

Even prior to the First World War, the architect Gropius had assimilated the ideas of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen, established in 1907), which called for an economic and cultural “union of artists, architects, entrepreneurs and experts” whose central concern was the search for a new form of architecture centered on “function,” “materials” and “construction.” These concepts were further discussed by architects and artists during the war. They were not limited to Germany or the Bauhaus, but were discussed and developed internationally, with different tendencies influencing one other.

One of the most important representatives of the association of art, architecture and arts and crafts schools in Germany was the architect Bruno Taut, whose exemplary large Berlin housing developments (“Hufeisensiedlung,” “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” etc.) are today part of the UNESCO World Heritage.

In 1918, Taut was one of the founders of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers Council for Art, or Art Soviet), which drew its inspiration from the workers’ and soldiers’ councils founded in Berlin at the same time, as well as from the 1917 October Revolution. Taut set himself the goal of bringing progressive developments and trends in architecture and art to broader layers of the population. He believed that capitalism was a grotesque system and had to perish. Like many artists of the time, members of the “art soviet” were reacting to important impulses from political and artistic developments and discussions in post-revolutionary Russia.

A March 1, 1919 leaflet produced by the *Arbeitsrat*, for example, read: “Priority rests with the guiding principle: art and the people must form a unity. Art should no longer be the plaything of a few, but rather the fortune and life of the masses. The aim is to combine the arts under the wings of a splendid architecture.”

At the end of World War I, Gropius also joined the “soviet” and played a leading role in it.

Bauhaus—A New Era is the title of a six-part series that recently featured on German television to coincide with the Bauhaus anniversary. The title is entirely apposite. It refers to the social approach of the Bauhaus school, which remains so relevant today. The school emerged from its predecessors, the Grand-Ducal Saxon Art School and the School of Applied Arts founded by Henry van de Velde in Weimar in 1907, in whose buildings it initiated its work.

The television series is limited to the Weimar years of the Bauhaus. It depicts the spirit of optimism and enthusiasm that made possible highly progressive solutions despite the severe material shortages. Under these conditions, Bauhaus students developed new and creative methods of producing materials, often based on recycling existing sources.

Weimar was traditionally associated with German artistic giants Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, and reactionary forces in the city were quite prepared to distort the heritage of these two radical thinkers and artists to justify their own backward nationalism against everything Bauhaus stood for. They deplored the school's internationalism, its opening up of opportunities for women and efforts to overcome boundaries between various arts and crafts to develop a comprehensive socially based concept.

Gropius (August Diehl) had already applied for the post of heading the Weimar school from the trenches of the First World War. The opening credits of the first part of the series feature this scene against the backdrop of images from the war. Both pupils and teachers (known as masters) returned from the horrors of war to what they hoped would be a fresh start for society, a new society which they were prepared to fight for with all their might.

Bauhaus—A New Era stands in contrast to the television film *Bauhaus* (original German title, *Lotte am Bauhaus*, 2019, directed by Gregor Schnitzler) recently broadcast on the ARD television channel, which is dominated by a love story and concentrates on the theme of the supposed oppression and discrimination of women at the Bauhaus.

The six-part series directed by Lars Kraume (*The People vs. Fritz Bauer*, 2015) has a number of strengths, even if the basic story and the choice of Dörte Helm (also present in the Schnitzler-directed film) as main protagonist initially suggest a similar approach. Kraume and his team have carried out extensive research to provide a realistic insight into the spirit of elation and enthusiasm with which the students, male and female, and masters, took up their work.

The series opens with an interview with an 80-year-old Walter Gropius in New York City carried out by the feminist journalist Stine Branderup (Trine Dyrholm), who accuses the architect of oppressing female students at the Bauhaus.

Branderup brings up Helm (Anna Maria Mühle) as an example of such alleged repression. Helm is able to develop herself and play a leading role among the students. The series explores the different factors determining why the talented young woman is not able to rise to the position of master-professor.

Kraume also deals with issue of the failure of the school to fully implement equality between the sexes, although the Bauhaus makes clear it favours equality for women. Instead of simply laying blame, the series presents a number of plausible explanations based on Gropius' manoeuvres aimed at preserving the school.

Gropius has the support of the Social Democratic education minister Max Greil (Sebastian Blomberg), who, however, repeatedly makes concessions to the members of Weimar's conservative-nationalist "fine society" and other reactionary circles. These included previous masters of the former art school and its pupils who despise Gropius for allowing Jews, women and Bolsheviks to participate in the Bauhaus. The prejudices

of some of the teachers brought to the school by Gropius also play a significant role.

The establishment of a "women's-only class" and the banning of female students from all the activities apart from work in the weaving department was undoubtedly a concession to the hostility and prejudices Gropius confronted. But as the film shows, the weavers were not oppressed. Rather, the textile workshop at Bauhaus headed by Gunta Stölzl (Valerie Pachter) developed into a highly creative center for textile art and technology and became one of the school's most economically successful workshops.

Regarding the conflict about equal rights for women, Kraume explains: "Of all of the biographies, hers [Dörte Helm's] was best suited to our story. She came from a middle-class home and yet was the most rebellious amongst her fellow students. She was denied matriculation but then resumed her studies, and had an unexplained relationship with Gropius on the basis of which she was able to join the painting class of Oskar Schlemmer, although women were only supposed to participate in weaving. Finally, after many conflicts, she moved back to her patriarchal father in Rostock. We asked ourselves the question, why."

The role played by Gropius' alleged affair with Helm remains unclear, but it clearly provides for dramatic film material. The court assembled to clarify whether Gropius did have a relationship with his student really existed and concluded there was no basis for the accusation.

Was the Bauhaus "political"?

Although the alleged affair occupies a central role, the series includes powerful scenes, performed by a cast of outstanding actors, which throw light on the history of the Bauhaus and why the school continues to fascinate up until today.

Kraume and his team have inserted key dramatic events drawn from the social struggles that took place between 1919 and 1923. The scenes commence with original film material from the battlefields of World War I. Later scenes, shot partly in black-and-white, feature battles between workers and police and in particular the events surrounding the general strike carried out by German workers to oppose the counterrevolutionary Kapp Putsch in March 1920. The militant resistance by workers was supported by many Bauhaus students.

Gropius sought to protect his school against reactionary forces by declaring it to be "unpolitical," but there could be no escape from the political strife and antagonisms that dominated the early years of the Weimar Republic.

Time and again, *A New Era* reveals the precarious conditions under which members of the Bauhaus fought to further their aims of freedom of art, emancipation and internationalism against a host of right-wing forces. Based on their artistic work, the Bauhaus students were determined to overcome social differences and contribute to a better understanding between different nationalities.

Achievements, contradictions and conflict in the Bauhaus

The Bauhaus school is often associated with "reduced colours, clean lines and functionality," but that is only partially true and applies above all to the work of Bauhaus in Dessau. During its period in Weimar the school's approach was much broader and more colourful. The series shows this clearly.

This was precisely the approach adopted by those masters employed by Gropius in the school's early days, including Johannes Itten (Sven Schelker), Lyonel Feininger (Ernst Stötzner), Oskar Schlemmer (Tilo Werner), Marcel Breuer (Ludwig Trepke), Wassily Kandinsky (Pjotr Olev), Paul Klee (Marek Harloff) and later Lazslo Moholy-Nagy (Alexandru Cirneala). Some of these artists had already made a name for themselves as Expressionists before the war.

The inclusion of dance and theatre in the school's education program was also revolutionary. The series depicts Bauhaus evenings which included performances by well-known artists, such as Else Lasker-Schüler (Marie-Lou Sellem), as well as the famous Bauhaus festivals with their imaginative costumes and lanterns, expressing the hunger for life on the part of young people following the horrors of the World War.

Fierce polemics about the artistic orientation of Bauhaus' educational program are also addressed in *A New Era*. In the course of the Weimar years, these conflicts developed mainly around the teachings of Itten and his followers, who in their endeavour to place the perfection of man at the center of their artistic activity turned to extreme forms of lifestyle. The conflict with Itten eventually led to his departure from the school. Nevertheless, albeit with some changes, the compulsory preliminary course developed by Itten, requiring all students to acquire basic skills in dealing with color, materials and techniques, was retained.

At the same time, great weight was placed on clear, constructivist forms based on the principle of "form follows function," as well as a concentration on primary colours, represented by Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg from the De Stijl ("The Style") movement who was invited to the school as a guest speaker. De Stijl had many followers at the Bauhaus, although Doesburg was never appointed as lecturer.

The sixth and last part of the series is devoted to the highly successful Bauhaus exhibition of 1923 which, for the first time, combined all of the various arts and crafts in the form of a new building—the Haus am Horn. The intention was to build an affordable house with all the features necessary for a family. The Haus am Horn predates the conceptions developed later in Dessau, i.e., construction with cheap and in part prefabricated but solid materials, together with simple but functional and appealing interior accessories.

However, the end of Weimar was not far away. In 1924, funding for the school was withdrawn following the election of a right-wing, German-nationalist administration in the state of Thuringia. The Bauhaus was forced to find a new location in the industrial city of Dessau.

The approach to the training of artists and architects encouraged by Gropius and his co-workers continues to be fruitful in many respects. Even if they could not solve many problems due to the constraints of capitalist society and the devastation of culture by the National Socialists and war, a study of the school's ideas and aesthetic conceptions remains rewarding.

The issues and contradictions surrounding art, design and building, posed in Weimar in 1919, are again very relevant at a time when ultra-right forces are once again seeking to influence cultural affairs. A whole layer of intellectuals is embracing reactionary politics.

In Germany the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is threatening to withdraw funding to artists and projects that seek to defend the rights of refugees and immigrants, should the party come to power. It is already agitating against art which does not conform to the party's own thoroughly nationalist and backward provincial outlook.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Ines Weizman, a professor at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, was asked: "Do the Bauhaus institutions—in the light of this history—have a socio-political responsibility today?"

She replied: "Yes, that is very important! Then as now we must make a stand against right-wing tendencies and their attacks against cultural institutions and recognise the international network of scientists, teaching

institutions, cultural institutions, collections and involved public celebrated in 2019, to be a strong, unifying force against the right wing."

Weizman went on to criticise the decision by the Bauhaus in Dessau to cancel a concert in 2018 by the left-wing punk band Feine Sahne Fischfilet following threats of counter-demonstrations by the far right.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact