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## Bauhaus and Heritage



*Bauhaus Building, south-west view, 2006*

Every generation faces the issue of choosing which of the preceding generations' material goods and spiritual values, that is which parts of their cultural heritage it keeps and conserves.

In my view, the most important legacy of civilised society is the city. Although the city per se has harboured contradictions from its inception, it is also one of civilisation's greatest works of art. Nowhere else are human diversity and variety found at such close quarters. Bursting with contradictions the city is a repository of human desires, hopes and passions that cannot be reduced to one *Weltanschauung* or one way of life. Because the city is in a position to endure, or engage with, these contradictions and the conflicts they entail, it is passed on and refined as a lifeform from one generation to the next. The city is a repository for memories – an open book that is still being written.

While the city is capable of continuous regeneration and rejuvenation, and since it is a place of retrospection and a site of historical and cultural remembrance, it always runs the risk of losing its identity, that is, the built structures that relate its history.

In 1993, the architect, architectural historian and former mayor of Belgrade, Bogdan Bogdanovic, published a collection of essays entitled "The City and Death". Among other things, he points to the fact that cities have been the

targets of aggression throughout history, and cites threats motivated by religious beliefs to "reduce the cities of the world to ruins".

Cities incite religious passions; they are wayward in character, and can never be "tamed". Religious and ideological fundamentalisms are in no position to cope with the density and contradictoriness of the urban environment. The complexity, the wealth of discrepancies and differences, are so extreme that fundamentalists see the city only as a source of chaos, lunacy or even sin. Ideologists and dogmatists have their sights set on cities, suspecting the presence of their strongest adversaries, that is, of wilfulness, self-assertion, ingenuousness and intellectual curiosity. Religious and ideological dogma require simple structures and conditions: for the dogmatist, therefore, the city is an affront, and is to be feared. Bogdan Bogdanovic puts this in the context of an "archetypal fear" that sees the urban environment only in a scandalous light.

In wars, past and present, cities have been the focus of attack – the deliberate intention being to damage or destroy the objects that commemorate a society. On the civil war in former Yugoslavia, Bogdan Bogdanovic stated in 1993: "Western society's horror is understandable. For hundreds of years, the terms 'city' and 'civilisation' have barely been separated, even in etymological terms. The



*Architecture class in front of the Bauhaus, 1931*



*Bauhaus members on the refectory terrace, 1931*



*Bauhaus Building, south-west view, 1956*

senseless destruction of cities can only be understood as a manifest, violent resistance against the highest values of civilisation". He cites the example of Dubrovnik "The strike on Dubrovnik – which I dread to mention, but must – was fully intended as an attack on an exceptional, almost mythical, beauty. The instigators remind us of a maniac who throws acid in a woman's face while promising her a new, more beautiful countenance!"<sup>1</sup>

It is almost a miracle that, despite recurring hate-fuelled attacks, the city is still provocatively lasting – that cities such as Jerusalem, Istanbul or Rome, which have been or still are fiercely contested, have outlasted changing rulers and regimes.

Modernism in its current guise of technological revolution and relentless globalisation also entails, along with war and dogmatic hate, a new quality – a new radicalism – of destruction. Speculation and ruthless orientation on profit making mean investors worldwide no longer stop short of destroying valued historical heritage. When historical remains are obliterated, when even last minute excavations are avoided through criminal activities of investors, then the first buildings to fall victim to this greed for profit are those yet to be acknowledged as common cultural assets.

The Bauhaus provides us with the definitive symbol of this dual face – the progress and destruction – of modern civilisation. As the first institute of modern design, the Bauhaus was a central point of reference for the modern movement and the international avant-garde. Artists, teachers and students from at least 29 nations worked together at the Bauhaus. Its famous masters, such as Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger and László Moholy-Nagy gave the Bauhaus an intensely international and artistic flavour. As a school of design, it went on to become a benchmark and a crystallisation point for the modern movement.

The intention of the Bauhaus was to make rational use of the technical resources of Modernism, the negative aspects of which had been all too evident since the outset of the 20th century. The Bauhaus sought to find new, contemporary solutions in design, art, and architecture, and in doing so struck out in unconventional and radical directions.

The Bauhaus's artistic foundation opened up an inner dialectic, which not only allowed, but also actively encouraged, the cultivation of opposites. At the Bauhaus, therefore, it was possible to combine e.g. existential philosophies and mysticism with scientific standpoints, or at least to productively extrapolate the differences between the two. Ultimately, this resulted in the emergence of those circumstances that today still defy explicit valuation, and which make it possible to continuously review and reinterpret the Bauhaus from different standpoints. As such, the Bauhaus is not merely a memorial, but a monument that symbolises modernity in all its complexity.

<sup>1</sup> Bogdan Bogdanovic, *Die Stadt und der Tod: Essays, Klagenfurt/Salzburg 1993*, cited in: Christian Thomas, *Schwert und Flugzeug. Die Stadt als Ziel des Hasses und Raum der Erinnerung*, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 26.9.2001.

The inclusion of the Bauhaus on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1996 therefore not only serves to protect the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau and Weimar, but also the ideas and concepts of the Bauhaus. One of the main tasks of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, founded in 1994, is therefore the cultivation, conservation, investigation and reflection of this heritage. A further emphasis is placed on contemporary urban issues, and the contradictions and cultural strengths of cities in the face of the tensions created by population growth, globalisation and the technological revolution.

All this fully acknowledges that Modernism, in its ambivalence, was not entirely free of totalitarian tendencies, particularly when it inclined to an uncompromising opposition of the old urban structure in favour of the new, up-and-coming modern city. By today's standards, therefore, many of the buildings developed by modern architects and designers appear ruthless and excessive.

The reconstruction of cities after World War II in particular, which reduced Modernism to a predominantly technical programme of rebuilding, has contributed, with its rigorous geometry and economic functionalism, to the inhospitality and facelessness of many urban districts. A considerable portion of the widespread rejection of the Bauhaus may be traced back to this "post-war Modernism", which is, ultimately, only a reduced form of Modernism.

Today, if we – in the age of global urbanisation – reflect on a reorganisation of cities and discuss new parameters for the reclamation of emotional, symbolic and identity-forming urban qualities, the Modernist buildings passed down to us often seem alien and perturbing.

In my opinion, we now bear a special responsibility toward this legacy. The danger is that we repeat the radical process of destroying and rebuilding cities anew, thereby effectively exposing ourselves to the kind of criticism generally levelled against Modernism. We will only succeed in conserving the legacies of Modernism as valuable historical evidence when we understand and accept these in their historical, conceptual context. How problematic this can be, and the extent to which this often depends on the prevailing Zeitgeist and ideologies, becomes clear when one looks at the history of the Bauhaus and the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau.

When the architectural historian Leonardo Benevolo visited Dessau in the early 1970s, he found the Bauhaus in what he perceived as a desolate state. He saw a building long deserted by the spirit and function of the Bauhaus. He wrote: "Now that the former life has disappeared and the building is no more than a woebegone ruin, the Bauhaus, strictly speaking, exists no more ... it resembles an empty chrysalis from which the butterfly has hatched".<sup>2</sup>

Like many other Modernist buildings, the Bauhaus Building has aged badly, and not only because of the nature of its construction. It also embodies a form of architecture that declined to be restricted to the formal expression of modern society's endeavours, preferring instead to con-



*Stone/wood composite floor after repair, bridge, 2nd floor, 2006*

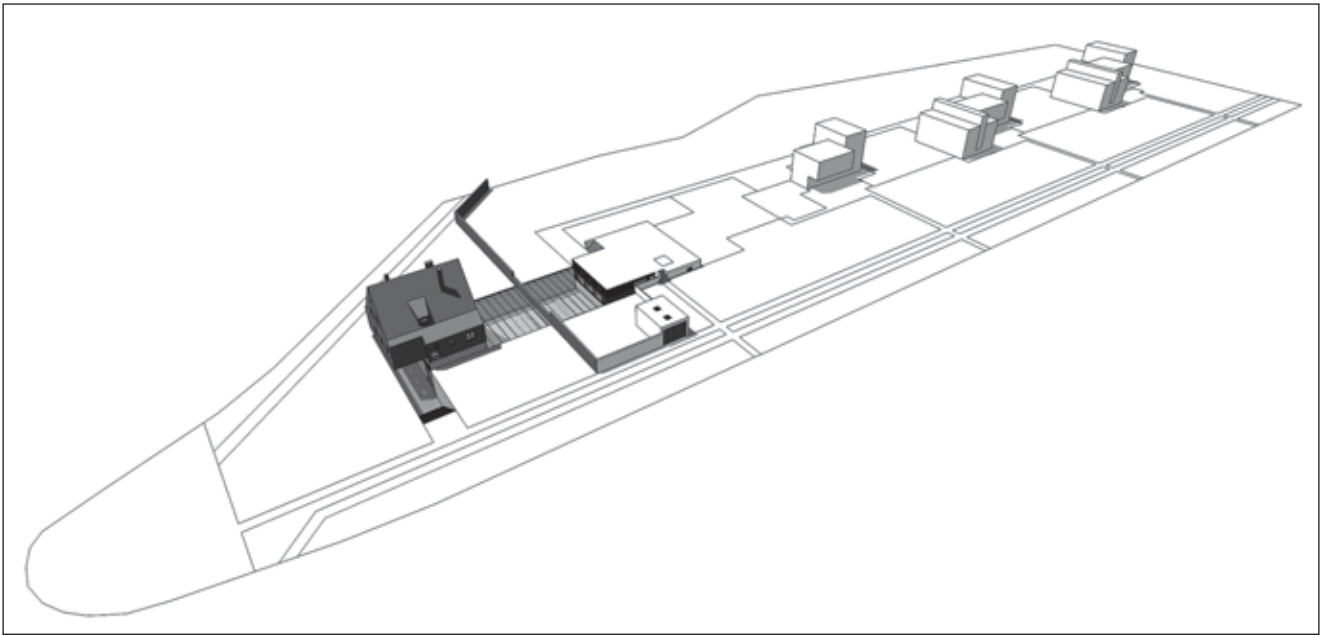
tribute to the realisation of those endeavours. The inherent value of such a modern building is therefore relative, and strongly dependent on the life taking place within it.

The Bauhaus in Dessau can only preserve its architectural value if it is subject to provisions that protect it from deterioration – provisions that were not in place until long after its closure in 1932. The Nazis misused the building for their propaganda wars against modern architecture and art; fortunately, the building was not demolished, but used by the Nazis for training purposes.

After suffering heavy war damage and undergoing a short-lived resuscitation attempt, the Bauhaus and the Bauhaus Building were once more rejected, and treated with contempt, by the East German government. While the 20<sup>th</sup>-century legacy of the Bauhaus was stylised in West Germany as the symbol of a new, 'good' Germany open to tradition, in the GDR the Bauhaus was perceived as an abominable, 'cosmopolitan' institute, since it contradicted the Soviet artistic doctrine.

Kurt Liebknecht, associate of Mies van der Rohe and president of the East German Bauakademie stated in the early 1950s: "The 'products' of Bauhaus architecture still

<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Benevolo, *Geschichte der Architektur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, München 1978, Vol. 2, p. 58.



4th International Bauhaus Award 2006, 1st prize: Stephan Weber/Michèl Flaßkamp “EMMER moves out – general view”

disfigure our cities today – as our Bauhaus Building in Dessau once did (...) These buildings have no connection with their surroundings; they are crude, primitive boxes that try to turn even humans into machines.”<sup>3</sup>

At the time, Walter Ulbricht, secretary general of the United Socialist Party of East Germany published the following statement: “As we study national tradition as the basis of the evolution of our architecture, we must also clearly recognise the Bauhaus style as a phenomenon that is hostile to the people.”<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, the Bauhaus idea was officially renounced and the GDR, in its dealings with the Bauhaus Building, pursued a similar line to the Nazis well into the 1970s. The building substance of the Bauhaus Building was subjected to provisional repairs, and it was used for a variety of training and schooling purposes. Only after Stalin’s death in 1956 did it gradually become possible to speak of the Bauhaus heritage in positive terms. Nevertheless, a genuinely open debate on the ideas and work of the Bauhaus never existed in the GDR. Those active in the cultivation of the Bauhaus legacy were invariably compelled to make considerable ideological compromises. All the same, the Bauhaus Building was eventually recognised as a monument, and renovation work was carried out, which focused largely on the condition of the building in 1926.

Even many years after reunification, which ended the political manipulation of the Bauhaus legacy, the repercussions resulting from the stylisation of the Bauhaus as an equally loved and hated icon of Modernism were still considerable.

In Dessau, for instance, this meant that the Bauhaus buildings were gradually rediscovered, and became the subject of debate. Consequently, renovation and reconstruction work on the Bauhaus Building began as a

number of individual projects carried out without a coherent overall concept. This concept was first drawn up when the Bauhaus was included on the World Heritage List. It focuses on the cultivation and conservation of the original substance of the building while ensuring that the traces of history are both conserved and shown.

In this context, in 2002, the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation initiated a debate on approaches to the former Gropius Director’s house, which is part of the Dessau ensemble of Masters’ Houses. Built in 1926, the house was almost entirely destroyed in 1945 – only the basement level remained intact. In the 1950s, a traditional gable roof house, the so-called Emmer House, was built on the site. A number of people in Dessau wish to see the Director’s House reconstructed, mainly in order to serve the tourist industry’s marketing interests in seeing the ensemble completed. Others prefer the idea of a challenging new building that updates Modernism through a reinterpretation of the spatial and historical setting.

The issue of approaches to the site of the former Director’s House was also the subject of the fourth International Bauhaus Award. The first prize was awarded to two architecture students from Münster, Stephan Weber und

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Liebkecht, *Fragen der deutschen Architektur*, cited in: Andreas Schätzke, *Zwischen Bauhaus und Stalin-alley, Architekturdiskussion im östlichen Deutschland, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1991*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Ulbricht, *Rede vor der Volkskammer, 31 October 1951*, cited in: Andreas Schätzke, *Zwischen Bauhaus und Stalinallee, Architekturdiskussion im östlichen Deutschland, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1991*, p. 145.

Michél Flaßkamp, for their entry “EMMER moves out”. In their design, the two architects succeeded in recreating the unity of the Masters’ House ensemble without reconstructing the Gropius Director’s House or negating the traces of history – in this case, the Emmer House. The design also provides an opportunity to bring the ensemble to life, thereby contributing to the progress of Modernism.

The design favours the following: A new wall, in part following the outline of the original wall which bordered the ensemble of Masters’ Houses, will enclose the ensemble once more. The Emmer House is separated from the original foundation of the Gropius House and “pushed out” of the ensemble. The extricated foundation of the Director’s House remains. At its new site, the Emmer House “floats” at the original height of the foundation. The missing floor slab of the Emmer House provides visitors with an unobstructed view of the interior of the building and illustrates the contrast between it and the Bauhaus. A subterranean interspace is created between the underground level of the former Director’s House and the Emmer House in its new position. This interspace creates an initially invisible link between the estate and the Emmer House. It will serve as a visitors information centre, and as an activity area. A variable partition system, hidden underground, provides space for, among other things, exhibitions and conferences. The original basement of the Director’s House will be converted into a lounge, and the foundations will serve as a stage.

In my view, such an open and creative approach to architectural heritage demonstrates the necessity for an understanding of the city that avoids reaching hasty decisions on what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ architecture (Gropius House = good, Emmer House = bad). It is a matter of taking the existing built substance seriously and respecting it as an accomplishment of civilised society, rather than merely reacting to the spirit of the time. This is, of course, a particular challenge when that, which exists, does not initially correspond to the current idea of what is acceptable, or when the spirit of the time is disposed to ignore, deny or – motivated by the most profane economic reasons – even destroy certain historical traces. Now, in particular, it becomes necessary to take a closer look – even when the subject of scrutiny is not necessarily valid evidence of cultural history.

When, with regard to the conservation of certain buildings, investors and urban developers enter into dispute with those responsible for monument preservation, it is often a matter of balancing the building’s identity-forming impact against the assumed terms of future development. This is often an ideological conflict. However, as I have attempted to illustrate ideologies and dogma lend themselves far more readily as instruments for those subversive and uncivilised members of society.

What our cities need are open minds, which not only accommodate different forms of expression, but also recognise a city’s greatest potentials. To continue to remodel our cities with every new generation according to the

image conjured up by each new *Zeitgeist* would be fatal. A reduced view of the city based only on its outer form also disguises its most significant potential for civilised society, i.e. its potential as a site for human diversity. This is why it is crucial that the conservation of our buildings is free of ideological, nationalist or religious rigour, and that it is defined by a sober look at what we actually have. In practice, it is important that we identify both successful and unsuccessful qualities.

As we know the buildings of Modernism in particular were often conceived in a tremendous and provocative, spirit of idealism. Nowadays, they challenge our critical faculties specifically because of the ambivalence manifested in their socially orientated belief in progress, and their simultaneous negation of traditions. Critical reflection, however, dictates that we should integrate these buildings in our cities by taking possession of them in a new way and therefore, above all, first preserve them.

It is important that we remember the hopes and desires embodied by these buildings. We must learn to understand them in order to grasp exactly what was released by the desires, passions and visions they articulated.

In the history of the city, buildings such as the avant-garde Modernists’ wilful, thoroughly visionary and intractable examples of architecture are rare. Their designers were also seldom focused on the advancement of a particular city. The utopian ideal was as international and global as the modern movement. Ultimately, this is also why these buildings are a part of the cultural heritage of humankind. A conscious decision was made not to bring one particular building to the fore, but to focus on the entire architectural oeuvre and its intellectual aspects. Modernist buildings are found all over the world, but mainly in Europe, where Modernism has its roots, i. e., in Dessau, and in Tel Aviv, Moscow, etc.

In this context, the architecture and projects of the Russian Constructivists of the 1920s are a part of this heritage, since they were also a part of the international avantgarde network. Naturally, every city and society is obliged to approach its legacy in an independent and creative manner. All the same, the essentially international character of this shared intellectual legacy of civilised society must be acknowledged. As I have already mentioned, the legacies of Modernism are a wayward and difficult inheritance, often in the most practical terms. Primarily, however, their differences present a challenge to a city’s capacity to integrate and assimilate.

The approach to these often-disturbing buildings becomes a kind of “acid test” of a city’s tolerance. It shows the extent to which this legacy, beyond any cyclical attention and periodical fashions, is accepted by cities as a recognisable legacy, that is, as a dynamic interweaving of civilised society’s knowledge. Its rejection would cause harm to the city, and with that to a highly valued asset of civilised society. Its protection is a transnational task.