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RECOGNITION OF THE BAUHAUS: ART, DESIGN AND TECHNIQUE, 1919 - 1933

EL RECONOCIMIENTO DE LA BAUHAUS: ARTE, DISEÑO Y TÉCNICA, 1919-1933

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Abstract

This article is based on a historical inquiry into the presence of the Bauhaus school and its influence in post-war Germany. The main objective of this work is to analyse the social and pedagogical dynamics nurtured by the Bauhaus within the broader political context of that time and place. In German history, 1919 is significant not only as the year in which the peace treaty was signed but also as a time of general change in people's ways of living and understanding what the new nation would become. The Bauhaus school was designed to provide options to vindicate what the military project had left after the Great War. As an academic project, it was not only intended to be a place of dynamic new technical innovation but also conceived as an exercise in a new political approach to thinking and making and the designer's responsibility for the environment.

Keywords: Cultural transformation, industrial production, rationalism, nationalism, design, Bauhaus

Resumen

Este artículo corresponde a un resultado de investigación que se sustenta en una indagación histórico – cultural, respaldada en la necesidad de conocer la presencia de la escuela Bauhaus y su influencia en la Alemania de posguerra. El objetivo principal de esta indagación histórica se centra en analizar las dinámicas sociales y pedagógicas que alimentó la escuela dentro de la coyuntura política de la cual hizo parte. El año de 1919, implicó no sólo la fecha en la que se firmó el Tratado de Paz, también motivó un cambio generalizado frente a la forma de vivir y de entender en lo que se

convertiría la nueva nación, la escuela Bauhaus se planeó como una opción para reivindicar lo que el fracaso militar había dejado después de la Gran Guerra, el proyecto académico no es sólo una dinámica técnica, es también un ejercicio de comprensión político que estructuró un nuevo norte en la forma de pensar el hacer y su responsabilidad con el entorno.

Palabras Clave: Transformación cultural, producción industrial, racionalismo, nacionalismo, diseño, Bauhaus

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The beginnings of the novel pedagogical proposal, ending the Great War

It is important to begin with the antecedents that gave rise to the foundation of the Bauhaus, which occurred in the nascent Weimar Republic (1919) amid economic uncertainty and a chaotic atmosphere due to having lost the war. The school evolved ways of conceiving and producing through a combination of architecture, art and design, which served as a training alternative for young Germans who, like the rest of the population, experienced the need to wake up from the nightmare of a defeated, impoverished and destroyed Germany.

The war brought with it a series of cultural modifications: “at first people believed that the twentieth century would bring better options for living. Later, they would realise that this was not the case [...] people found, instead of unity, a proposal for war” (Hochman, 2002, p.40). The various technological applications in production processes of the various industrial contexts, the acceptance of European power beyond religious belief and the military disposition of the powers led to the structuring of economic and political alliances, which would later support the idea of a world war. History would indicate how the war would bring the strengthened Germany to its knees and that the determined “peace” would return as a political illusion.

While war has undoubtedly accompanied human civilisation throughout history, the dynamics that made this confrontation possible were highly specific. The Great War represented a

major break from the history of armed conflict. Gravagnulo (1998) wrote, “in the course of the nineteenth century, the basis of the urban problem is repeatedly put into crisis by the irruption of several imbalance factors that converge in the induction of a notable acceleration in the growth of large cities” (p.37). The factors of the metropolis at the end of the nineteenth century, including industrialisation, the strengthening of urban infrastructure, technological management for both improving citizens’ living conditions and strengthening a nation’s military, as well as nationalist and imperialist perspectives, became consequences of the conflict.

The German context entered the European industrial scene in the 19th century. It was characterised by a strong colonising impulse, and in combination with its imperial aspects, the nation embraced a modern paradigm. In German cities, there was an important socioeconomic transformation; by the end of the 19th century, industrial behaviour was a characteristic of the new capitalist state. Germany “became a relatively modern country” (Richard, 1979, p.15). With this economic dynamic, everything was altered, and Germany began modifying its entire economic structure: “from the foundation of the Reich in 1871, Germany ceased to be an agricultural state to become an industrial nation” (Droste, 2006, p.9). It positioned itself at the top of European production and promoted an ideology of power that was not only militaristic.

In Germany, the most developed industry was the construction of railroads and the textile industry. However, from 1890 onwards, the chemical industry, the electrical industry and the construction of machinery developed strongly. This productive sector did not show the sluggish growth from 1873 to 1896 experienced by the world economy, but accelerated development was manifested. (Valenzuela, 2008, p.15)

At the end of the 19th century, Germany increased its exports and consolidated itself as an industrial power, “confirming the primacy of German industrial production. From 1890 to 1914, the development of this country was impetuous, especially in three fields: steel, chemical industry and electrical industries” (Badia, 1964, p.22). This productive advance was the basis for demographic growth and the positioning of the nation’s cities as great metropolises.

The idea of strengthening industrial production with new alternatives was a constant concern. For the Germans, the idea of being left behind in the global context was unthinkable

at the beginning of 1890, the reformist movements of Germany took ideas from England, particularly those of William Morris and John Ruskin who propagated the belief in an effective moral and educational force of artistic creation, which was not oriented backwards –

in retrospect – but was concerned with the improvement of industrial products and forms of production. (Nerdinger, 2015, p.3)

The alternatives for studying English production became evident after the delegation of Hermann Muthesius in 1896 as attaché of the German Embassy in Great Britain. Muthesius conducted a thorough investigation of the production of the Arts and Crafts movement. This experience enabled the foundation of the Deutscher Werkbund (1907) in Germany, a project in which Joseph Maria Olbrich, Peter Behrens, Richard Riemerschmid, Bruno Paul and Friedrich Naumann participated. The school influenced others in the formation of many new institutions including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius who became the first director of the Bauhaus.

The Deutscher Werkbund specifically sought to sensitise production processes through the integration of art and industrial processes from a perspective of cultural and historical vindication that assumed modern technology to be the best input for production. In Munich, “the understanding of the growth of the English Arts and Crafts movement was due to the pressures of industrialisation present in Germany at the beginning of the century. The organisation dedicated itself to improving the quality of design and the commercial value of all German products”¹

Lionel Richard argues that there was a nationalist view that strengthened the national economy, enabling unprecedented strengthening in different production scenarios.

It is clear that the first decade of the 20th century in Germany was a period of considerable economic dynamism, with new rules, new sources of capital, new methods of tax collection, an increase in the use of money and an intensification of work control. (Bonafina, 2001, p. 18)

These characterisations rested on an evident technological and urban advance that projected the empire as a true economic and industrial power in addition to highlighting a policy of expansion that was decisive for expanding its territory. “All or almost all Germans were convinced that the Reich was too narrow a framework for them, that the homeland was too small” (Badia, 1964, p.26) and by right, they would take what by nature belonged to them as a powerful nation. In addition, Germany supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had already declared war on the kingdom

¹ “This outgrowth of the English Arts and Crafts movement’s response to the dislocating pressures of industrialization found ready reception in turn-of-the-century Germany. The organisation was dedicated to improving the design quality and the commercial value of all German products” ([Gutschow, 2005, p. 326](#)).

of Serbia in 1914, a kingdom that had received the support of Russia. The Germans came to the battle convinced that they were the best of the best.

The arrival of the First World War (1914) evidenced particular changes in the nations linked to the conflict: “the managing of the war experienced an unprecedented technification. After four years, the nature of this industrialised war had completely changed” (Wehler, 2009, p. 8), and the dynamics of factors such as production, urban infrastructure, commercial activity and quality of life were processes exponentially affected by the Great War.

The chaos that was reflected in different aspects at the end of the war determined a different vision from the exuberant and refined Germany of the early twentieth century.

When Germany collapsed, in November 1918, those who expected revolutionary changes in their social structure: They were going to be disappointed. The “German revolution” failed, and the socialist leaders who became part of the government ended up in the hands of the military”. (De león, 2005, p. 503)

Although the new political perspective projected a marked inclination to the right, the political debate remained open and critical on both sides.

“After the defeat of the German Empire, the resentful idea of correcting as soon as possible, with a revisionist war that had already supported the state system hundreds of times” (Wehler, 2009, p.) gained momentum based on a nationalist scaffolding to mitigate the pain of defeat as the helpless German spirit was subject to the sanctions of the peace treaty of 1919. Losing the war conditioned the proceeding of the political and social decisions of the nascent Republic to the formation of nationalist visions with a clear visceral course that promised to return what was lost (Patula, 1994). The Nazi movement exalted this type of dynamics and quickly positioned itself in a privileged place of the German political force.

Within Germany, “the end of the war brought a kind of struggle between the right-wing political sectors, representing the most conservative and military side, and of the left, which grouped together socialist and worker groups” (Restrepo, 2015, p. 91). The political discourse showed the disappointment of a people embarrassed by defeat.

By the summer of 1919, the new Germany acquired its new form: the Treaty of Versailles had been ratified, the Constitution approved, eliminating the threat of the communist

revolution, abandoning the idea of a directed economy and the alliance of the old ruling classes with the new government became evident. (Mendieta, 2007, p. 3)

The path was clear towards building a new vision for the country; however, the distressing disappointment of failure was evident in all Germans, and a safe path was not visible.

“Once the war ended, the preparation of the first German republican experiment began in Germany; the way in which it was carried out was through a provisional assembly composed mainly of Social Democrats who would carry out the project” (Valenzuela, 2008, p.30). Post-war Germany was unified in the Weimar Republic (1918), and through “the Weimar Constitution, it was proposed to reconstruct the fundamental principles on which the new state would be based” (Álvarez, 2011, p.448), a democratic perspective and with it the recovery of national sovereignty from a proposal for state integration, a vision that led the political success of nationalism with an idea of German unity.

Within this new political framework, the Bauhaus was developed. Several problems were raised. Among them were the way in which art and crafts were taught, the nature of the design of objects, the effects that buildings have on the people who inhabited them, and some ideologies. (Palmerino, 2004, p.4)

The Bauhaus contemplated the critical German reality and sought to adjust to the requirements of society to improve the nation’s living conditions. Without a doubt, it was an arduous task: “[...] the intention of the German government with the School was, basically, to help the reconstruction of the country” (Pinilla, 2012, p.42), enabling the structuring of a formative dynamic adjusted to the particular interests of the new state. “The objective of creation was not objects but functional systems that responded to human movements in space and to different daily needs” (Echavarría, 2001, p.44), a legacy that structured a practical and contextualised vision. “The beginning of the Bauhaus renewed the hopes of a united people. In 1918-1919, they returned to craftsmanship” (Haus, 2006, p.20) and to the motivation of the social conscience. Building on the basis of the Deutscher Werkbund, Walter Gropius set out to build a new school.

The Bauhaus school was founded in 1919, one year after the end of the war, and its new pedagogical approach was based on apprentices’ (students’) explorations (students) in artisans’ workshops. The need to develop a new alternative of production, one that was consistent with and

budgeted under the German reality, became evident. “At the end of 1919, the Bauhaus Manifesto was published in Germany” (Hochman, 2002, p. 122). This literary component would support the pedagogical and productive process of the new school.

In his inauguration manifesto, Gropius calls on artisans and artists to create together the new structure of the future in which everything would constitute a single set comprising architecture, art and painting and that one day would rise to the sky from the hands of millions of architects as a crystalline symbol of a new faith. The author of that manifesto was singularly committed to the novelty of the future. (Arranz, 2018, p.89)

The Bauhaus was committed to the integration of art, design and technique in accordance with the aims of the Republic to cultivate the German education system. “Regarding educational reform, Germany had two fundamental demands. First, all arts education should be based on artisan training. Second, since students were prohibited from specialising, art schools should cover as many activities as possible” (Palmerino, 2004, p. 5). The participation of students was required immediately after graduation in the different production systems, guaranteeing their presence in all aspects of the process.

“The Bauhaus was not a monolithic institution; like any school, it was a changing and often divided coalition of students, teachers and administrators in interaction with the outside community, which was often hostile” (Lupton and Miller, 2004, p. 2) partly because, in addition to its state subsidy, the school was seen as introducing unfair competition for the local workshops.

The workshop became the educational tool of the school, that is, it was vital in the development of the materialisation of creative exercises and educational experiments. From every perspective, the school considered questions of pedagogical historicism and privileged awareness of process. “In many respects, the Bauhaus, despite the multiple changes it experienced between 1919 and 1933, continued to be the engine and exemplary model of the reform of anti-academic artistic training in the Weimar Republic” (Droste, 2006, p. 15).

The post-war context allowed for the identification of particular production alternatives that emerged over time. “The post-war subsistence economy reinforced artisanal production, which before the conflict seemed to suffer the strong threat of industry” (Haus, 2006, p. 20). Proximity to craft was introduced as an alternative to rediscover the traditional foundations that characterised the productive discord at the end of the 19th century in Europe, aspects of which had already been identified in Germany by Muthesius. “Ruskin observed industrialisation as a commercial danger:

the supply of articles of lower quality and in bad taste led to the buyer's lack of interest in well-made products" (Wick, 1988, p. 21). The Arts and Crafts movement clashed head-on with Victorian interests and opened the door to a new understanding of doing based on the vindication of artisan products, even suggesting the idea of exclusivity that seduced the English elite and that the Deutscher Werkbund considered in its pedagogical approach.

It was very true that the imposition of a mass production model reduced costs, and it was practically impossible for an artisanal object to compete with those manufactured by industry, although the idea of *a fake object*, as William Morris described industrial objects, determined the beginning of an ideological battle.

Faced with this situation, there were many who raised the need to radically stop all industrial production, with a view to returning to times in which things seemed to develop in a more harmonious way, when objects of great beauty were produced and, above all, when the human being was the final objective of production, and not only the subject, since objects were manufactured by man for man. (Rodríguez, 1995, p. 127)

The post-war economic crisis once again led to an interest in artisanal production, which was adapted to the Bauhaus ideology; however, that ideology did not reject industrial parameters, favouring interaction in the face of alternative modes of making. "Gropius formulated a project that aspired to renewal. He believed that through the reintegration of all the arts, an expressive stylistic expression of the modern German nation would be reached" (Campi, 2015, p. 140) and considered artisan culture to be the only option to consolidate such reintegration.

Gropius's envisioned reintegration was therefore based on artistic unity: "the Bauhaus upheld the values of functionality and the integration of disciplines. He wanted to find a unitary expression. [...] although the war left a need for artisanal work as an important aspect in achieving industrial progress" (Echavarría, 2001, p. 44). The pedagogical guidelines of the school proposed a mode of thinking in which art should be more critical, generating political awareness in the working classes and social commitment in artists. "The Bauhaus, united with the Jugendstil, the Deutscher Werkbund and the Novembergruppe. Expressionism was the only institution that carried out these ideals" (Amigo, 1992, p. 229), ideals that implied political persecution by the nationalist visions that also arose strongly in German society. This perspective was based on the control of power that grew out of the political crisis, as evidenced in the emergence of the National Socialist Party and the decline of democracy. This anti-democratic process focused on the different expressions that the National Socialist Party considered to be linked to the guidelines of the Republic, among which was

the financing of the Bauhaus. The disadvantages for the Bauhaus school were not only of an economic nature but also based in the fact that the opponents of the Bauhaus “were united by a radical anti-Bolshevism, a nationalist mentality, sometimes latent and open anti-Semitism, as well as aesthetic traditionalism (attitudes that, without exception, did not want to give any opportunity to the Republic or to modern art experiments)” (Ulbricht, 2006, p. 32).

The transformations of society were reflected in this cultural milieu: theatre, poetry, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture and education were observed with care and adjusted to the political and social ideals rooted in the German perspective before the paradigms of modernity, “although before the seizure of power, the National Socialist Party never had any official position on design and architecture [let alone on its teaching], some party members, such as Wilhelm Frick or Alfred Rosenberg, had already charged the Bauhaus for their “modern” degenerations and their supposed anti-Germanism” (Vega, 2008, p. 2), signs that were filtered through anti-Bauhaus perspectives that defended the traditional guidelines that came before the new aesthetic and cultural explorations.

“The belief that culture could transform society was not new, as mentioned by German expressionists since 1911” (Hochman, 2002, p. 123), three years before the war. At that time, German artists had already begun to display new aesthetic thinking, as reflected in their new forms. “The Bauhaus worked for man; their habitability and their psychological or family needs were taken into account” (Amigo, 1992, p. 248). A good example of this approach is illustrated in architecture: “in the *Haus am Horn* model house, 1923, the Bauhaus motivated the transformation of daily life through art” (Droste, 2006, p. 55). The new pedagogical vision identified a new modes of production: “the central theme was *art and technology*, a new model” (Lupfer, G. and Sigel, P., 2006, p. 11) that “[...] sought to include scientific-theoretical principles along with art in its teaching methodologies” (Oleas, 2018, p. 41), which implied the development of processes supported not only by technical refinement but also in the understanding of doing from artistic, social, technological and political perspectives.

The school led theoretical-practical courses through workshop in which a new way of making and seeing art was offered. At this time, Gropius’s pedagogy offered his apprentices ways to think about the object from the perspective of form, colour and function instead of simply manufacturing an industrial object: “knowledge of the psychology of form is included in their classes” (Düchting, 2007, P. 66). The *vorkurs* or basic course was intended to be an introduction of the apprentice to the artistic field. “The basic course developed an abstract and abstracting visual language to provide a

theoretical and practical basis for any artistic endeavour (Abbou, Lupton y Lupton, 2004, p. 5), always seeking to awaken a critical spirit in the social, cultural, productive, pedagogical, historical and political dynamics, among others. It was crucial to understand that from the idea of unity proclaimed in the Bauhaus ideals, the perspective of transformation that occurs after the formation is recognised.

Behind Walter Gropius's idea of rediscovering a unitary aesthetic expression through the unity of artistic and artisanal training, not only was dissatisfaction with the artistic and architectural training of the time hidden but also the hope of social renewal through of the reintegration of all the arts into a typical stylistic expression of the nation. (Ulbricht, 2006, p. 27)

The transformative project that was built in Weimar, Dessau and Berlin radiated theoretical, practical and pedagogical elements towards different international contexts. "The influence of the Bauhaus and its design are reflected in building constructions designed throughout the world and, in turn, the works of Mies Van de Rohe and Le Cobusier as well as the furniture and products of daily use that embody the Bauhaus tendency towards functionality and continue to exist to this day" (Palmerino, 2004, p. 63). The Bauhaus proposition radiated throughout the world despite its contradictors. "Today, Bauhaus furniture is now classic and individual decorative pieces can be found in current domestic landscapes. This shows that, in fact, our conception has returned to the ideology of "good form" after the unitary visions of the Bauhaus" (Haus, 2006, p. 21).

Conclusions

It is very important to understand under what pedagogical, political, productive or socio-cultural dynamics the Bauhaus school was structured in the post-war period as well as the transformations and determinations that made it possible to recognise the core of modern design: "It was in the Bauhaus that the foundations of what we now know as graphic design were laid" (Pinilla, 2012, p. 40). The legacy of the school spread throughout the West despite the budgetary adjustments for its operation in Germany and the political tensions that overflowed with the persecution of teachers and students, which generated extracurricular accusations that implied changes in headquarters, imprisonment and exile. These international migrations determined the irradiation of Bauhaus thought: "it was also this correlation between art and design, and that crossing of borders between disciplines, which marked the Bauhaus heritage. Each discipline had to contribute to the final form that was intended to be achieved" (Echavarria, 2001, p. 44).

The school managed to transcend German borders by influencing the development of the conception of 20th century design: “as is known, from 1933, many of its teachers and students had to leave Germany, which contributed to the expansion of ideas and principles of the Bauhaus in Europe and the United States in the following decades” (Vega, 2009, p. 3). This last context became one of the best options in America for the professors and students of the Bauhaus. In 1937, László Moholy-Nagy founded the New Bauhaus in Chicago, adjusted to the traditions and visions of the German school: “Of the new incarnations of the school, this would be the one that would most faithfully respect the original curriculum” (Vega, 2009, p. 3).

[...] the educational methods of the Bauhaus were also transferred to Black Mountain College, where the former member of the Joseph Albers school taught (from 1933 to 1949). Later (in the period 1950-59), Albers would be director of the Department of Design at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Like him, many others such as Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Hilberseimer and Moholy-Nagy transmitted and spread their teachings in different centres throughout the US” (Prieto, 2005, p. 330)

leaving a deep mark on great artists of the 20th century – many of them Americans, including painters and sculptors, graphic designers, fashion designers and architects.

The modern proposal was also observed in the Colombian territory. That rationalist bias was initially evident in Colombia in the 1930s, when the *Campus* projected by the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (National University of Colombia) gave way to the *Ciudad Blanca* (White City): “The hypothesis on which this document is based is that the German architects who designed the white city had in their minds the image of European rationalist architecture that served as a model for the project of the Universidad Nacional de Bogotá (National University of Bogotá). With this, the German designers staged a foreign urban and architectural project in Bogotá and completely set aside the possible objective of designing an architecture that would adapt to the Colombian tropics” (Álvarez de la Roche, 2006, p. 8).

“During the second half of the 20th century, the Bauhaus reached a higher level of recognition worldwide, becoming a model of curriculum and methodological construction for many schools” (Ángel, 2015, p. 77). Undoubtedly, the commitment to modify the craftsman’s work, through the theory of Gestalt, together with the communicative and sensory perspectives, which at the time revolutionised the Bauhaus learning methodology, became necessary tools for the professional vision of today’s designer: visual perception, colour theory and visual expression are subjects present in the curricular meshes of academic design programmes in different institutions.

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