

Bauhaus

In 2019 it's 100 years since the Bauhaus opened in Weimar. Germany is celebrating in style, with no less than three new Bauhaus museums opening – or on the way. But honoring a movement that turned more or less everything upside-down has proven challenging.

Words Carl Undéhn Translation Martin Mirko

Party



PHOTO CARL UNDEHN

**Bauhaus in
Dessau.**

**Peter Keler's
cradle from 1922
is a concentrated
illustration of
Bauhaus' ideas.**



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PLENTY OF REVOLUTIONARY ideas have emerged over the centuries, but the Bauhaus is one of the few that didn't only turn a lot of things upside-down, but also withstood the test of time.

All over Germany, the centenary is being celebrated – with everything from exhibitions, books, discussions and architecture guides to productions of Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet, avant-garde to this day, with its geometric choreography. And the centenary will place special focus on the women of the Bauhaus. Officially the school was open to both sexes, but apart from Marianne Brandt's metalwork and Margarete Heymann's porcelain objects, the female students were expected to stick mainly to weaving.

In the summer of 2019 you can travel through Germany on the "Grand Tour of Modernism", experiencing the Bauhaus buildings in real life. The centenary will also be recognized in Israel, Argentina and the United States.

If you head out to experience the original Bauhaus buildings today, you're entering 90-year-old structures. These are creations from a completely different era. At the same time they still seem so modern, and in some cases innovative. So is the Bauhaus still relevant in our

time? Or is that just how we perceive it, because so much of what we associate with "modern" is based on ideas formed in Weimar, Dessau and finally Berlin?

"It was about much more than just design. They dreamed of a new type of person, and wanted to create a new society", says Winfried Speitkamp, president of Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

Weimar – a town of 37,000 inhabitants in 1919. An unlikely place for the Bauhaus to be founded?

"For centuries Weimar has been a cultural and intellectual centre. Nietzsche, Goethe and Schiller were all active there, and in 1906 Henry van de Velde started a school of art and design in the town", says Winfried Speitkamp.

This school evolved into the "Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar". But although it's the school's birthplace, Weimar has ended up in the shadow of the Bauhaus' time in Dessau and Berlin.

To remedy this, a new Bauhaus museum will open there this April. It's a minimalist concrete block, designed by Heike Hanada. Twenty-four frosted glass panels wrap around the building, easing the weight of the façade. The scarcity of windows is to protect the collection from daylight.

The interior, which varies from two to five levels, will provide 2,000 square metres of exhibition space for some 13,000 objects from the school's early years.

"Primarily the museum will show how the Bauhaus was born in Weimar and spread through Germany and the world. This is its cradle – literally", says Wolfgang Holler from Klassik Stiftung Weimar, referring to Peter Keler's iconic cradle from 1922.

Painted in the primary colours of blue, red and yellow in accordance with Wassily Kandinsky's colour theory, and designed using the basic shapes of the circle, square and triangle, the cradle is a concentrated illustration of the Bauhaus' principles.

By rejecting decoration and ornament, the students were to learn how to really work with the materials, letting form follow function. Today no one raises an eyebrow at this, but at the time it represented a radical break with basically everything.

Moreover, 1919 was the right time to attempt a complete restart. World War One had just ended, the old world order had come crashing down and the Germany kaiser and Russian tsar had been ousted. So the Zeitgeist was certainly revolutionary. ►►



Neues Bauen am
Horn in Weimar.

PHOTO CARL UNDEHN

”The programme included weaving, painting, sculpture and other crafts. Architecture was not added until several years later, and the aim was to create a Gesamtkunstwerk.”

It was the school’s first head, a young Walter Gropius, who recruited equally young and innovative artists to teach at the Bauhaus. These included Paul Klee, Johannes Itten and the aforementioned Wassily Kandinsky. The students, only slightly younger, came from 30 different countries.

The programme included weaving, painting, sculpture and other crafts. Architecture was not added until several years later, and the aim was to create a Gesamtkunstwerk – a work comprising all the art forms.

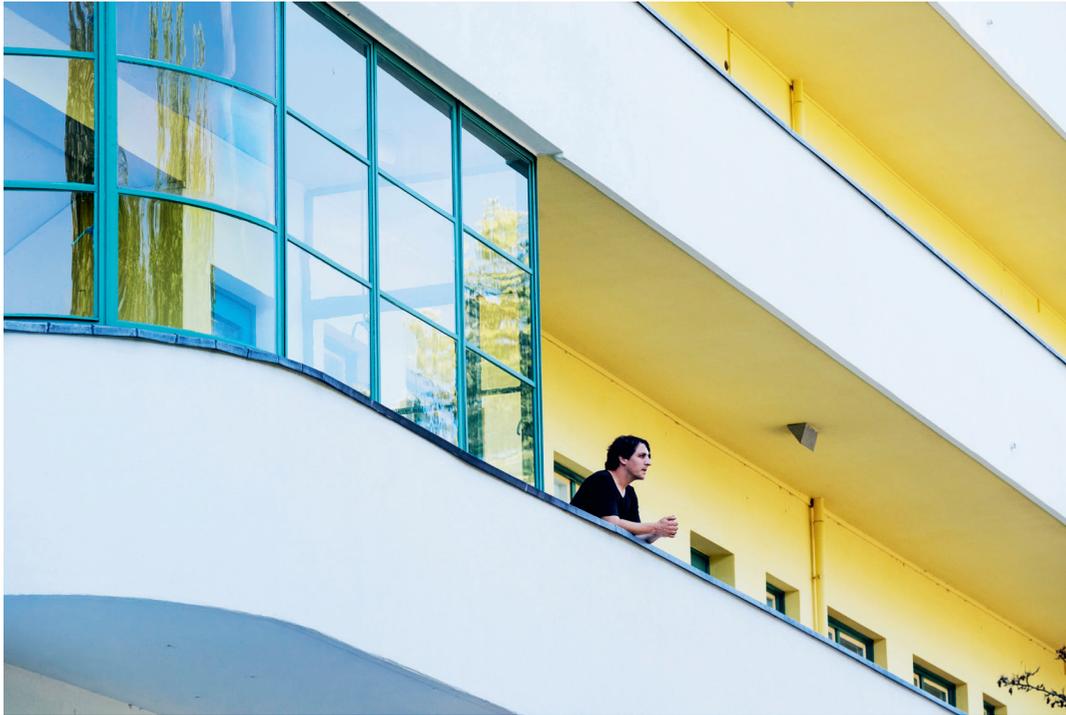
In his “Bauhausmanifest”, Gropius argued that it is not possible to teach art; one can only teach crafts. Therefore, instruction was dominated by material studies, color theory and, in Johannes Itten’s preparatory course, certain esoteric elements such as group breathing exercises.

Traditional instruction focused on copying historic masters, but Bauhaus students were encouraged to create their own pieces, based on their own ideas.

Outside school hours, bizarre parties were staged, where students wore costumes crafted in the workshops. The students were an exotic spice in bourgeois Weimar.

For an exhibition there in 1923, the “Haus am Horn” (House on the Corner) was built. Designed by the painter Georg Muche, it was the first house to be constructed according to Bauhaus principles. All furnishings came from the school and it was completed in just four months. It was to be home to the modern citizen, with Gropius’ democratic floor plan, where every part of the house was accessed from a large central room – a concept that also made cleaning easier for the women.

The idea was to develop the entire block this way, but only Muche’s villa was built – solitary, square and white, with large windows. Not until the early 2000s was the plan realized to a degree, with the block being developed in Bauhaus-inspired style, in the block called “Neues Bauen am Horn” (New Building on the Corner). ►



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Weisse Stadt in Berlin.



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DR STEPAHN CONSEMÜLLER

Woman wears mask by Oskar Schlemmer and sits on Marcel Breuer's chair, ca 1926.

**"Meisterhäuser"
in Dessau.**



STIFTUNG BAUHAUS DESSAU, FOTO YVONNE TENSCHERT

The first years in Weimar were characterized by conflict and experiment. The Bauhaus we know today had not yet found its form; rather, a variety of beliefs and philosophies were in opposition.

It wasn't until the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925 that the school's principles became concrete, and truly flourished. For instance, Marcel Breuer produced what became possibly the school's most iconic piece of furniture – an armchair of tubular steel.

Architecture became more dominant, and consequently a large number of original buildings from the 1920s can be found in and around Dessau. The most famous of these is the trend-setting teacher's housing, "Meisterhäuser", plus of course the school building itself.

Designed by Gropius, it was both a chance to turn the Bauhaus ideas into reality, and to experiment with solutions and materials.

The pendant lamps by Marianne Brandt consisted simply of tubular steel with long light bulbs and were reduced to their function alone. The walls of the workshop building were made almost completely of glass, giving a light and floating feeling that was enhanced by the base on which the building sits. The ceiling was painted in different colours, which continue into the stairwell, conveniently guiding visitors to various parts of the building.

However, the ideas that technology should be an important part of the architecture sometimes led to less successful results. At several points, enormous radiators were hung high up on walls, a sort of technical decoration that hardly helped heat the spaces. And the experiments with different flooring materials, such as triolin in Gropius' office, would soon prove unsafe. To this day it emits a strange smell.

Experimentation was an important part of realizing Bauhaus' and Gropius' ideas. In the 1920s, urbanization was rapid and housing in great demand. The new materials and methods would enable the mass-production of buildings, furniture and everyday objects, an idea that gained real momentum when Hannes Meyer took over the job of school head in 1928.

Even more radical than Gropius, Meyer saw architecture as a tool for social change. With the motto "The needs of the people instead of the need for luxury", he intensified the drive towards mass production and industrialization.

The school's largest project in Dessau that is still standing is the Törten block – 314 terrace houses for workers. Inexpensive and largely mass-produced dwellings with plenty of daylight and air were the Bauhaus's solution to the housing problem. They also experimented with a house

made of steel, which could be built in just a two weeks. When the rooms in the terrace houses proved too small because the new residents moved in with their traditional, heavy furniture, the students developed small, practical storage units.

"We're happy that we have all these buildings in Dessau. But we also have loads of objects that we cannot exhibit in any of the buildings because it is not possible to monitor the temperature and humidity", says Claudia Perren, director and CEO of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation.

So of course, in September a new Bauhaus museum will open in Dessau as well. Of more than 800 proposals, the winner was addenda architects from Spain, whose design is a black box of raw concrete that appears to hover, surrounded by glass.

"The proposal is interesting, with strong references to the Bauhaus architectural language. It's also a very open design that gives us a stage at ground level, reminiscent of the one used for teaching at the school in the 1920s", says Claudia Perren.

The exhibition space will be in the black box, with 1,500 square metres of floor area, suspended above the ground. It has been likened to a time capsule containing the school's history. Contrasting this, the rest of the building is glazed, and completely open. ►►

"It wasn't until the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925 that the school's principles became concrete, and truly flourished."



Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, after drawings of Walter Gropius.

The Bauhaus didn't emerge from nothing; it was a continuation of the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement and Viennese modernism. But as revolutionary as it was, it could not escape its time. The burgeoning Nazism saw the school, especially the teachers, as examples of the "modernity" and "cosmopolitan garbage" that it despised. Hannes Meyer's radical ideas meant he had to resign as school head in 1930, and his replacement Ludwig Mies van der Rohe tried to lead the school despite an increasingly hostile climate. In 1932 he moved the Bauhaus to Berlin, in a final attempt to continue as a private school, but the following year the Nazis closed it.

"Many students and teachers had to flee Germany when the Nazis came to power. Of course this was a disgrace, but it also meant that the school's ideas were spread all over the world", says Winfried Speitkamp from Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

But at the same time as the ideas of the Bauhaus were stamped into the brown dirt of its homeland, they began to find strong support in other parts of the world. The decisive breakthrough came after a 1932 exhibition at

New York's Museum of Modern Art. When the United States embraced the Bauhaus, and incorporated its philosophy into the "international style", the Bauhaus became exactly that – international.

Also in Israel the Bauhaus theories became reality, as a large number of students left Germany for Palestine after 1933. In Tel Aviv's White City district alone, there are 4,000 Bauhaus-style buildings.

"It's all founded on the Bauhaus' ideas, and adapted to our warm climate. But 20 years ago there were calls to demolish many of them. Today we're working hard to teach people the skills so the buildings can be conserved and maintained properly", says Sharon Golan, architect at Tel Aviv's White City Center.

Ahead of the anniversary, efforts increased to renovate the buildings which in many cases had been neglected.

In Berlin, where the largest collection of objects is located, a new museum is also being built – right next to the now dilapidated Bauhaus Archiv, built in 1979 to Gropius' own drawings. It won't open until 2022, but will be worth waiting for. The five-

storey tower designed by Volker Staab is borne up by exterior walls consisting of thin metal bars.

The main function of the tower is to serve as a meeting place and a beacon, leading the visitors to the archive that is now almost hidden. The actual exhibitions will be located underground, where the tower and the old building are tied together by way of an open atrium.

Common to all three new museums is that they don't want to be museums, but places for dialogue and interaction, where the Bauhaus history will form a backdrop for new ideas.

This is not an original idea for museums today. But in the case of the Bauhaus it's actually a realistic aim. In 1930 Gropius wrote that "the goal of the Bauhaus is not a style, system, dogma, canon, recipe or fashion!".

Therefore, the Bauhaus is much more an idea than the objects it produced, and which we still associate with the school. The principle of connecting form and function, which is so simple and simultaneously so great, is also a sort of attitude that can be adhered to without glancing at Bauhaus' creations. Without a doubt it's an idea that is very much alive today. ■

IMAGE STAAB ARCHITECTEN, BERLIN



A new museum, designed by Staab Architekten, is planned adjacent to the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin.



IMAGE STIFTUNG BAHAUS DESSAU/ADDENDA ARCHITECTS

The Bauhaus
Museum in
Dessau.

