

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

---

### **Before and After 1933: The International Legacy of the Bauhaus**

Organizer: Laura Beiles

Chairs: Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman

---

Museum of Modern Art, New York

22 January 2010

The Bauhaus (1919-1933) was easily the most important school in the history of modern architecture and design and arguably the most multi-faceted, mutable, and, certainly, controversial. Perhaps for these reasons it was slow to receive scholarly treatment commensurate with its historical role. While New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) held an important exhibition on the Bauhaus in 1938, that show was substantially shaped—some would say, distorted—by Walter Gropius. A quarter of a century would pass before Hans Maria Wingler's *Das Bauhaus* appeared, published in German in 1962 and in English in 1969, to document the scope of the Bauhaus experiment. Wingler, treating an “East German” institution in a West German publication, and published just after the Berlin Wall went up, was careful to justify his study. Soon after, in 1968, Barbara Miller Lane addressed the political contexts of the Bauhaus directly, in her seminal *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945*. Since then, and particularly as new archival sources have come to light, the Bauhaus has become a magnet for scholars for its combination of aesthetic ambition and political tragedy.

*Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, the MoMA exhibition which ran from 8 November 2009 through 25 January 2010, was intended partly to correct the 1938 show, as well as to mark the Bauhaus's ninetieth anniversary. But it also remained true to the Museum's predilections with its sharp formal and historical focus. The political controversies that beset the Bauhaus were not on view. Politics were the point, however, at “Before and After 1933: The International Legacy of the Bauhaus,” a one-day symposium MoMA held on 22 January 2010 to complement the exhibition.

Juliet Koss (Scripps College, Claremont, California) presenting her lecture “The Bauhaus and the Soviet Union” on 22 January 2010 at MoMA. Photograph: Paula Court, 2010, for The Museum of Modern Art.



The symposium traced the spread of Bauhaus ideas largely along national boundaries. Morning papers were organized under the title “Diaspora to the East,” and the afternoon session was labeled “The Americas.” National borders, like decades, are a convenient way to narrate history. But in this case they seemed at odds with the internationalist ambitions of the Bauhaus as well as its synthetic aim to bring together fine and applied arts and to fuse studio with commercial production. Looked at another way, nearly all the talks might have been gathered under the rubric of “Politics and Pedagogy” since nearly all were concerned with schools founded by or strongly influenced by Bauhäusler, or with the ways in which innovations in form, as well as pedagogy, were themselves given political charge.

In this frame, the morning session focused on political uses of the Bauhaus. Paul Jaskot, in his talk, “The Nazi Party’s Strategic Use of the Bauhaus,” noting that much Bauhaus scholarship is presented from the school’s viewpoint, instead described the Nazi Party’s changing characterizations of the Bauhaus. In service to its own agenda, the Nazis were alternately uninterested in the school, positive regarding its housing and industrial projects, and harshly critical of it. As Jaskot showed, however, Gropius was castigated for his communist affiliations, which included his work for Le Corbusier’s *Esprit Nouveau*, rather than for

overstepping formal conventions. “The Bauhaus in Divided Germany,” the paper delivered by Greg Castillo, looked at the postwar aftermath of the Bauhaus. West German architects, Castillo argued, were induced to accept modernism as an essentially American phenomenon, to distance themselves from the recent Nazi regime, as well as the current communism of East Germany, and in keeping with various Marshall Plan promotions that made modernism a symbol of the democratic future. Hemmed in by history, contemporary architects, such as Egon Eiermann, could not be seen looking back in time, even if only to their own work. In her presentation, “The Pale Red Bauhaus and the USSR,” Juliet Koss dismissed the notion of influence for its suggestion of an unidirectional flow of ideas and figures, noting the fundamental internationalism of the Bauhaus and the many mutual exchanges between the European avant-gardes at the time. Koss situated a detailed examination of Bauhaus exhibitions and of Hannes Meyer’s years in the Soviet Union against the broader context of Bauhaus sympathy for Soviet political ambitions and Bauhaus admiration for the Soviet state’s support of aesthetic innovation, and suggested that ambivalence regarding modern design in later decades complicated the legacy of the Bauhaus in the Soviet Union. To these renditions of the Bauhaus as fascist, democratic, and communist, Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, in her talk, “Zionism + Bauhaus,” described how the Bauhaus was used in service to the foundation of a Jewish state in mandate Palestine in the 1930s. As Nitzan-Shiftan told it, the building of a “White City” in Tel Aviv, ultimately some 4,000 buildings and now a UNESCO World Heritage site, was seen by Zionists as evidence of Jewish enterprise and industry and then, after 1948, part of Israel’s national heritage.

The afternoon session focused more on the pedagogical legacy of the Bauhaus, beginning with Dietrich Neumann’s discussion of “Gropius, Mies, Moholy-Nagy: Traces of the Bauhaus in Cambridge and Chicago.” By following the establishment or recasting of three design schools, Neumann revealed a number of fascinating incongruities, including the degree to which personal relations colored institutional histories and, in turn, how a rhetorical environment, such as the American dogma of having no dogma, as Edward R. Murrow put it in 1963, would lead to various sorts of self- and institutional censorship. A subsequent talk, given by Paul Makovsky, brought to light another important school inspired by the Bauhaus, The Design Laboratory, operating in New York City from 1935-1940.

Peopled by numerous Bauhaus alumni and attended by students who would become leading figures in postwar American design, the Design Laboratory was, as Makovsky put it, “The Forgotten Bauhaus.” “Black Mountain College: An American Bauhaus?” was the question asked by Brenda Danilowitz in her review of the formative effect of Josef and Anni Albers on many hundreds of students who, in turn, went on to productive careers in the arts and education across the United States and around the world. Black Mountain’s collective, almost utopian lifestyle, was in some ways a fulfillment of core Bauhaus principles although, as Danilowitz related, development efforts were careful during the 1940s not to mention the school’s Bauhaus—and thus, German—pedigree. Two final talks on individuals further compounded the Bauhaus legacy. Monica Amor explained how the sculptor Gego brought Bauhaus principles to Venezuela without actually having studied at the Bauhaus, while Raquel Franklin recounted the struggles of Hannes Meyer in Mexico. As Franklin told it, Meyer described his ten-year struggle to plan and build in a developing capitalist country and, at the same time, remain true to his own social ideals as the most challenging period of his career.

Although not in every case presenting an entirely new point of view, all of the day’s talks were grounded in substantial archival research and filled out what might seem familiar points with satisfying detail. Taken as a whole, the day offered a meticulous and complex portrait of the politics and pedagogy of what was, ultimately, a school, a style, and a symbol.

Sandy Isenstadt  
University of Delaware

Related media:

Symposium Website: <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/events/7647>