

his mind. In this sense everything produced by man has style." We must expect designers to work in the ambient or vernacular language of their eras. Answering a question about the distinctive period look of the 1984 Summer Olympics graphics system, Deborah Sussman once told me, "Many of the great things that we love in the environment, from monuments to public buildings, from cathedrals to temples, are of *their* time. Most art is."

And so we ought to turn to the designs of Bernhard, Cassandre, Garretto not for imitation but inspiration. Although they aren't cathedrals or temples, they are monuments of a sort. They vividly represent the broader style of their era. True, by today's measure, these styles are now locked in time. But their makers were not prisoners of time.

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MORALITY AND MYTH: THE BAUHAUS REASSESSED

by

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Designers have been nourished by the Bauhaus' teachings and wearied by its doctrines. Since its close in 1933, the Bauhaus legend has exerted profound impact on late Modern graphic design. The author believes that in recent years these repeated myths have obscured many truths about the Bauhaus' failure to cope with real world issues. In spite of its utopian promises, the Bauhaus never really succeeded at working for the public good.

The exalted status that the Bauhaus has assumed in the history of the design profession, a status fostered and enhanced by publications and exhibitions, some sponsored even by governments of East and West Germany, has had the unique luxury not to be scrutinized or held accountable for its behavior and ideology. Little has been published on its moral and ethical positions, and most assumptions rest on the closing of the Bauhaus by the authoritarian fascist government as an indicator of the school's moral positions. Indeed, prevailing assumptions portray an educational institution of integrity and high moral fiber: open-minded, anti-fascistic, cross-culturally responsive, and universally astute. But are those assumptions correct, in part or at all? Or is the super-heroic mystique only a shadow of human traits which, besides great accomplishments, include some severe shortcomings?

Why worry about it now? Maybe for the reason that the professional design field has matured and is looking at its information base to establish guidance for future endeavors? Maybe because design mirrors its attitudes in either selfish opportunism or ethical responsibility? Maybe because it's important to clear the whole house to be able to examine present behavior in the design community?

What is most surprising is the set of very naive attitudes that the Bauhaus represented. It did not hold deep or discriminating opinions about the social content of

its ideas or about the purpose and impact of its design philosophy on artifacts and, through these, on the lives of consumers and audiences. Its ideology was gleaned mostly from the cultural and social concerns of Ruskin and Morris, whose benign British socialism was to alter the social conditions of the largely working-class population. This romantic socialism envisioned beautiful but practical and functioning images and objects borne out of socially responsible design philosophies. The time was right for the integration of the social concerns, and German socialists, Marxists, and internationalists tried to find support for unions and working-class needs, while the Bauhaus took advantage of existing credos but did little in refining or redirecting the missions.

As an emerging school, with an interest in being quickly recognized, the Bauhaus took an opposing stance to nearly anything resembling a previous order. It condemned the intellectual components of academic education in the arts, and indirectly barred intellectual discourse of social, political, and philosophical nature, allowing only intellectual activities that concerned themselves with the development of the language of form, color and image, and object construction. The Bauhaus staff and students were surprisingly ill-informed on the politics of their epoch, and critically ignorant and behind the times in their knowledge of the then-current movements in literature, philosophy, and behavioral and social sciences. Contemporary events like Hitler's putsch of 1923 or the central fascistic uprising made little impression on staff and students, borne of a social-ethical attitude that had nothing to do with politics. Writings of Kafka, Brecht, Benn, and Buber were unknown to most, and their warnings and premonitions were left unheeded. The narrow studio concentration of the Bauhaus made it possible to avoid intellectual and ethical confrontation.

While surrounded by the ideologists of the new Republic, whose national assembly was housed in Weimar, the Bauhaus found it more important to isolate itself from even the new and positive influences on the German political horizon. On one hand, the Bauhaus responded with great enthusiasm to the vast and energetic American life, especially the vitality of the larger cities and the corresponding skyscraper architecture, which it revered. But it found little in American ideology to transfer to the German social condition. Instead it steadfastly adhered to the traditional German class consciousness, making clear separations between working classes and those strata of the educated and financially affluent. Although the rhetoric proclaimed better goods or living conditions, the intended consumers, the public, had little chance to influence or shape Bauhaus ideology. The public became a misunderstood and mostly unwilling participant, blamed for its lack of worldly perspective and aesthetic-value discrimination.

This social separation, isolation from the public, and lack of understanding of its daily events and cultural experiences, gave impetus to the design of products that were equally remote from the public's perception and contributed to a continuously growing lack of interest and an abundance of critical, and mostly wrong, responses. The truth lies in the fact that the disparate cultural experiences of Bauhaus members and the small-town public, coupled with the absence of an adjudicating language, allowed the Bauhaus to emerge as an alarming irritant to the cultural traditions of the various class systems. Since all public opinion finds its way into local and regional politics, it is the Bauhaus and its political naïveté that is surprising.

The greatest paradox lies in the discrepancy between the education received by the Bauhaus staff and the education it provided for its students. Gropius and several of his

staff were educated in the most aristocratic and classical manner in a system open mostly to the privileged or the unusually gifted and intelligent. While they received the classical liberal and high-quality education with emphasis on literateness in the humanities, they nevertheless imposed an anti-intellectual bias on the studio education, thereby handicapping and restricting design education for the future. Because of the adoption of their methods in most design schools even today, the narrow vision of the Bauhaus takes its toll.

The Bauhaus faculty assumed themselves capable of furnishing all necessary information. However, much of what was shaped into Bauhaus publications depended heavily on loose and unpublished bits of information from other sources. Much of it was spawned at the other schools or originated in Constructivist, Suprematist, Futurist, De Stijl, and Dada ideologies as well as in the early definitions of visual languages or the principles of form, color, and construction. There was little acknowledgment of the contributions by others. By assembling the publications, the Bauhaus received credibility and as holder of these new truths was easily identified, but wrongly so, as the originator.

The Bauhaus open-mindedness was in reality only skin deep. To protect its interests, it resisted any challenge or interference from other evolving or competing dogmas. A wonderful experiment when it started, it coagulated only after a short time span into dogmatic rigidity. The period of unhampered experimentation changed into a posture of public relations, whereby exhibition-quality work interfered with the process of searching. The famous Bauhaus exhibitions were in true contradiction to all of its previous pedagogical statements. The public relations efforts accelerated to such an extent that when Hannes Meyer replaced Gropius as director of the school, his critical assessment was that its reputation outstripped manifold the quality of the work produced. He attributed this to the unparalleled public relations effort.

Although the Bauhaus is considered an important originator of product design, it must be understood that the functionalist label applied only to the primarily technological area. Functionalism at the Bauhaus assumed standardized cultural experiences. It did not concern itself with the value systems of people and the cultural obstacles that bar an object or image from cultural integration. It also made little effort to respond to traditions, languages, and customs. Its typography shows a deep ignorance, not only of the evolution of letterforms, but also of the mechanics of reading, legibility, and perception. The belief that one approach could satisfy many problems is a lapse between the reality and a wish to have all segments of culture function in the same mode and within the same value system.

This lack of cultural perception and the restricted model of design, although it never really blossomed, was imported by the U.S. The impediments which restricted its integration into the German public were the same for the American.

The Bauhaus faculty that settled in the U.S. held misperceptions about the American culture. They came with distinct prejudices and, like Thomas Mann, thought of Americans as uneducated and boorish. They had a hard time understanding that the U.S. Constitution offers not just a single but multiple and utopian futures, unlimited by social or economic position and not guided by class restrictions. In the periods of cultural shifts from agrarian to industrial society and to world power, the dreams of true success or leisure pursuit were fostered by the film and print media and allowed each American, unlike the German, to have realistic expectations that his dreams could become reality.

The failure of the Bauhaus model has helped designers recognize the need for cultural data. Unlike the parameters of the sciences, the boundaries of the sociological

information base, which is helpful for sound design decisions, are transient and dynamic. The field of import shifts according to interpretation of the philosophies and world views and the corresponding social processes of evaluation. Individual and social behaviors do not respond in predictable, repeatable or consistent cycles. Although the Bauhaus was searching for sets of binding principles of high dependability, it succeeded in finding those in areas of visual perception, but even there, only within the framework of very restricted visual languages. The fact is that no matter how scientifically or empirically sound bits of information may be, people will align with them or defer from them for reasons other than empirical truth. Any culture's behavior is based on perceptions of the environment. They are not proof of a reality of truth, but interpretations which responded to all social dynamics, including territorializing status, the development of symbols, and the making of meaningful, but subjective reality.

The bright light of the Bauhaus might dim even further through a look at its political morality. It is true that times were difficult and positions against the political mainstream dangerous. However, although the school held a place in the forefront of world opinion, it took a very neutral and a political stance. It had become accustomed to play by the rules of the legislators. It had gotten its monies first from the post-World War I remnant, imperial government; then from officials of the Weimar Republic; and finally from the representatives of the Hitler regime. Like all members of state-run institutions, they were in touch with the legislators who forged the conditions of the time. But Gropius and van der Rohe had used their organizations (*November Gruppe*, *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*) to influence the government. They could not have been so naive as not to see the conflicts between their educational rhetoric and the rhetoric and propaganda of their government. There is a strong suspicion that Hannes Meyer was sacrificed to appease the right wing's demand for censorship of his Swiss socialism. Granted that conditions were perilous, the last statement by van der Rohe—that he closed the school for fiscal reasons only—and his willingness to sacrifice both Hilberseimer and Kandinsky are very disturbing. "We would have agreed to these conditions, but the economic conditions do not allow for a continuation of the Institute." The conditions were: Ludwig Hilberseimer and Wassily Kandinsky are no longer permitted to teach; the curriculum has to satisfy the requirements of the civil service examination.

The Bauhaus history is an important tool for gauging the progress of the design profession. Has the field taken the same stance of political aloofness in terms of the moral issues of present times? What is the design morality or the design responsibility of the professional? Is it still possible to have no discriminatory opinions about the contents, purpose, and impact of communication messages on users and consumers? Can the designer be allowed to be politically neutral and not take a position on human rights, world politics, questions of ecology and natural resource survival, consumption of resources? Is it possible to be so uninvolved as to design a political campaign for a conservative movement one year, a moderate the next, and a left-liberal the following year without stretching integrity and credibility?

Designers must determine if information in itself is neutral and supportable by a design effort. Not all design missions pursued are desirable from a cultural perspective. A number of them are neither honorable, responsible, nor of benefit.

Can the field of practitioners continue to ignore large segments of society and, through the choice of abstract and culturally foreign iconography, bar them from access

to information or services and participation in the governing process of this very complex ecosystem of multicultures and races?

The design practice must reassess the statements on which it founded its success. The slogan of good design as cost-efficient or selling surely deserves scrutiny. Is it reflected in the design of a six-color poster, with flat and glossy varnishes, for which expenditures for design and printing far outdistance the return of the box office (the rental of the hall, the hiring of the performers, and their conductor)? Does it not matter that the recruitment brochure suggests an idyllic campus located at a lakeside, which in reality is barely within driving distance? Is there not something wrong when publications show minorities as if in active control when in reality that is not true? Is not Yves St. Laurent's designer cigarette a moral blow to the whole essence of the design function? Can we sit by and not aggressively reject his contribution to the increase of cancer in women?

Unfortunately, designers are mimicking architects who have been spending time designing uncomfortable furniture and pretentious dinnerware, and who are proudly presenting their utopian or non-implementable ideas in drawing or model forms in galleries and museums. Designers develop posters for which there is no practical purpose. There is no designated space in which they might function and therefore they become an interior decorator's opportunity to solve a home-environmental beautification problem. Designers have discovered that being closer to corporate management is being closer to power and that this power provides status in the design community. Bigger is better, larger budgets more desirable and more opportune for posturing. Design is seen as an end, not a means to an end of facilitating access to information and opportunities. For example, the government proudly recognizes the prestigious sign and mapping projects for the leisure-oriented needs of the Park Service, but it seldom focuses attention on the quality of communication design in more complex areas like the social services. It is here where the affluent value systems of designers clash with those of the illiterate, the unprivileged, and alienated.

It is right to celebrate the Bauhaus' successes, but it is also prudent to use its failures as warnings. Designers have become accustomed to dogmatic credos, mottos, and manifestos: ornament is crime; less is more; form follows function. It is not acceptable to embrace these statements without responding to the relevant causal circumstances. The substantiation must include responsibility to the social environment and honest appraisals of the real worth of the design efforts.

If the anti-intellectualism of design schools could be changed, we might expect that our information base, and its interaction with the rest of the national intelligentsia, would result in a better system of critique of professional behavior and lead to the responsibility that the public deserves.

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