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ESSAYS PRESENTED TO
D. KENNETH SARGENT

THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

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BASIC DESIGN: PERSPECTIVES

SIEGFRIED SNYDER

Siegfried Snyder has been developing the introductory course in Design at the Syracuse School of Architecture over several years and has traveled widely in investigating similar programs elsewhere. He also has become well known for his participation in the affairs of university governance as well as for his paintings, assemblages, and constructions.

The new territory opened up by the impetuous advance of a few geniuses, acting as a spearhead, is subsequently occupied by the solid phalanxes of mediocrity; and soon the revolution turns into a new orthodoxy, with its unavoidable symptoms of one-sidedness, over-specialization, loss of contact with other provinces of knowledge, and ultimately, estrangement from reality.

Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*¹

Since the year of 1919 when Johannes Itten taught his first course of *Grundlehre* at the Bauhaus, his ideas of basic design have been used, modified, and elaborated on in a great number of books, articles, and essays. Many such courses have been taught at schools of art and architecture all over the world, and many a syllabus has been written and mimeographed. Basic Design is now, over 50 years after its inception, an established teaching tool and more—it has become the province of specialists. It is an undeniable fact that this system of conveying to the student a basic visual vocabulary has had a considerable influence on the direction which the development of product design and architecture has taken, how ever this visual language may have been understood and interpreted by its proponents. It may speak well for Basic Design that the ideas which we see connected with it still appear fresh and dynamic and that although its stylistic elements can be traced back to the early days of the 20th century they are still considered *modern*, and as such are still questioned and treated with suspicion by those who like to consider themselves “traditionalists.” But at the same time, an attitude of unquestioning acceptance is not without pitfalls.

It is now a widely accepted proposition that it is in the nature of “good” art, architecture, and design to be modern, new, ahead of its time and therefore inaccessible to the understanding of the majority of people. This inaccessibility has, as a matter of fact, become a standard by which to judge what is of quality and importance. This notion, I believe, may be largely based on a popularized version of ideas expressed by Kandinsky in his essay of 1910, *concerning the Spiritual in Art*.² His verbal illustration of the upward moving triangle at whose apex stands the true and misunderstood innovator is quite striking and convincing. And so is the idea of the larger and lower segments of this shape where one finds the followers and the opportunists. But if his essay is to be taken seriously at all, the word *modern* itself seems to call for a new definition when seen in context with the history of time which has not stood still since the first decade of the century. And even upon cursory examination of the development of the visual arts since the time of Kandinsky’s essay, it comes to light that the Bauhaus, which was founded nine years later and at which Kandinsky became a teacher, can be analyzed in terms of rapidly hardening positions of dogma as early as 1923 and certainly towards the end of that same decade when it was actively opposed by the “traditional” right as well

as by the "progressive" left. Could it be that even then the apex of the rising triangle had left many of those behind who were thinking of themselves as the *Avant Garde*?

A brief historical analysis seems in place. There is no need to belabor the point that the Bauhaus and its gospel of a new visual order found opposition from the very beginning from those who saw a connection between these ideas and those being developed simultaneously in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia. Mutual interests and exchange of ideas continued until 1933.³ And indeed, in the end it was this importation and propagation of "Culture Bolshevism" which led to the closing of the Bauhaus by the National Socialists. But this labeling by the Nazis had an unfortunate side effect: it seems to have led historians to negate and even ignore, reverse witch-hunt fashion, the ideological dimensions of the visual expressions of the Bauhaus. This, plus the clean, functional, clinical appearance of much of its *stijl-istic* design may have helped to precipitate the myth of "pure," i.e. content-less form.

Any attempt to analyze a closed ideological system which lays claim to some fundamental truth invites defensive posturing and counterattacks by those who feel an obligation toward it, according to the slogan that everyone who is not for them must be against them and must thus be either destroyed or converted. In the case of the Bauhaus any criticism of it was subject to be interpreted as showing hopeless conservatism, i.e. stupidity, or worse yet it was taken as a show of sympathy for the Nazi cause which, of course, was inherently evil. And thus it became anathema to explore the content of the symbolism of the straight lines, the pure colors, the pure expression. It was declared to be devoid of any ideological and political connotations while at the same time the claim to universality was emphasized. But that any such universalism, be this in language, philosophy, religion, or visual symbolism, has worldwide cultural, semantic, semiotic, and therefore in the end social or political implications was roundly ignored. That Hitler was aware of the power of perceptual symbolism and that he acted on this awareness by outlawing *modern* art and declaring it degenerate is seen as proof of madness, ignorance, or of the manifestation of an evil mind. Thus, curiously, the charge against the Nazis was at least by implication, that they took art too seriously.

It is moreover strangely ironic that these same Nazis must also receive credit for bringing *modern* art to the public at large, even if their intent was purely negative. The exhibit *Degenerate Art*, which in one form or another circulated in Germany under Government sponsorship between the middle 30's and the early 40's, drew over two million viewers in Munich alone between July and November of 1937.⁴ It may be inferred that people saw some significance in this art, and that furthermore this significance was clearly of an ideological nature.

Foregoing a detailed historical assessment of the various ideological trends represented in Bauhaus history, it may be stated that they followed two basic directions, both of a utopian nature. On one hand there was the influence of De Stijl and Mondrian's concepts of Pure Plastic Reality interwoven with Theosophy. Although dissimilar in some of their visual expressions, Kandinsky's ideas likewise portrayed spiritual-intellectual concerns with a bent toward the super-natural. On the other hand there were the influences of Karl Marx's socialism as interpreted by William Morris. It cannot be considered a controversial statement that the masters of the Bauhaus were not simply involved with the development of better teaching techniques and with "pure" visual awareness. The concept of a "pure" art is just as absurd as that of "pure" lan-

guage. Both are symbol systems. It is as paradoxical to claim absolute pureness as it is to raise the word *meaningless* to the status of an absolute. This is not to say that this cannot be done. It is to say, however, that the concept *meaningless* either has meaning after all, or that it is used as a reference and a means for the denial of other symbol systems outside of what is considered absolute truth. The concept of "pure" art similarly tends to isolate itself from other visual expressions by belittling and negating their right to existence and declaring its own all-encompassing, universal, mystical law of order. Such a view of truth which ultimately requires conversion or subjugation of the deviant, the dissident, and the unenlightened was precisely the position which Hitler assumed in his own "cultural" politics. The deadly competition between the Nazi and some of the propagators of *modern* art seem proof of the force and of the uncompromising nature of their respective dogmas.

Extremists in either camp saw themselves called to bring order into a world torn by the clash of conflicting values. Both sought the answers in closed symbol systems promising unification at the sacrifice of cultural diversity and therefore individually. "Soulless International Fabrications"⁵ of modern art and architecture were replaced by Hitler's ethnic mythology expressed in grandiose architectural schemes which served as stages for multi-media controlled mass meetings. Both systems under scrutiny here had something in common: each declared itself to have exclusive answers to basic and universal human needs. And, strangely, each of them have left us visual mementos which out of their original and intended contexts have become parts of the visual vocabulary of the Free World without creating much conflict in their diversity. They are Hitler's Kraft Durch Freude (strength through joy) automobile and the familiar straight lines of the International Style of architecture. The functioning of such a juxtaposition is perhaps a hopeful sign.⁶

It is said that art is a mirror of its time. But a mirror reflects everything visible in clear focus. It is the eye which selects what it wishes to see. Perhaps in view of our newly discovered ecological awareness we ought to state that visual environment rather than art is the mirror of our time. Everything could so be brought into perspective for scrutiny. Such a vision might help us to see that the simple frame house and the Woolworth-type art reproduction are equally, if not more significant in our quest for self-evaluation than paintings by Mondrian or Kandinsky which have found their way into the permanent collection of a museum. A common and self-evident truth begins to reveal itself in either case: overexposure can lead to banality.⁷

But it is easy to get from the frying pan into the fire here. There is a form of banality which masquerades under the guise of innovation, of novelty. It has in common with the other kind that it shows a lack of meaning or content. Its purpose is production for the sake of turnover, profit, and the amortization of tools. This production of an ever greater variety of cheap and shoddy articles devaluated life and labour as Morris saw it in the 19th century. But while his answer was the return to individual craftsmanship, the Bauhaus, reacting to the same problem, saw as its goal the more sensitive use of the machine. And, existing in a spiritual environment of clashing philosophies, it found it necessary to deal with questions of ideology too.

For those who believe that history repeats itself, it might be interesting to study in detail the economic developments in Germany after WW II. The widespread destruction of the war caused an enormous demand for consumer goods which quickly began to lead to a proliferation of visual banality. Designers, aware of this trend, but also realizing the positive potentials of this

rising from the ashes, this new beginning, decided to open the "New Bauhaus," the Hochschule fuer Gestaltung at Ulm. But unlike its predecessor, this school was supported by private enterprise rather than by the State. And Germany after the Second World War was different from the Germany of political unrest, of inflation and depression which set the stage for the first Bauhaus. These differences were soon discovered to have an effect. Christian Norberg-Schulz, once a visiting professor at the school writes:

. . . it soon became evident that the Bauhaus methods no longer led to the desired results. The spokesman of the school, Tomás Maldonado, points to the contradiction that the products of the Bauhaus have become museum pieces, while we still believe in the didactical principles from which they stem. Maldonado especially attacks the idea of "freeing" the individual's faculty of spontaneous expression through a *Vorkurs*. He emphasizes that the *Vorkurs* is the backbone of the Bauhaus tradition. But the *Vorkurs* has generally shown itself unable to adapt the individual to the real object world of our society, and may rather lead to a new formalism.⁸

There were other criticisms responding to Bauhaus-connected ideas in general. In England, Maurice deSausmarez bluntly states that Basic Design is in danger of creating for itself a frighteningly consistent and entirely self-sufficient art form.⁹ Surprisingly, Georgi Borisowski¹⁰ of Moscow's Lomonosov University raises similar questions in regard to architecture which, in spite of an interlude of "Stalin Gothic" had continued in the spirit of the International Style and which Borisowski considers de-humanizing. Research being conducted under Alexander Mitscherlich at the Sigmund-Freud-Institute at Frankfurt leads to negative criticism of Functionalism¹¹ from a sociological basis. And during the late 60's, in the wake of student uprisings which led to the reform of the whole university system in terms of form as well as of content, a total re-evaluation of the teaching of architecture and primarily its foundation courses was begun. This had a profound effect on attitudes, goals, and curricula of design schools in other European countries as well.

To illuminate briefly some of the new trends, I shall use the development of a course in architectural fundamentals under Professor Lederbogen at the Fridericiana University at Karlsruhe, Germany. The emphasis here is placed on the human being as a reference system to which the world of objects must be related. It is, of course, necessary to relate man and his creations to conditions of change inherent to nature in such a way as to improve and order environment rather than to create chaotic conditions and intentional or unintentional destruction. The interdependence of systems is analyzed in terms of their fluctuating figure-ground relationships.

The basic idea of this approach is almost too simple and furthermore it presents no scheme which claims perfection and can thus be published and "taught." This is its strength and will be considered its weakness by those who believe that the invention of universally beautiful form is the task of the designer. This approach is not designed to produce "beautiful" uniformity. It seeks to answer questions posed in a pluralistic society in which tastes and attitudes vary, and where the individual independent from any aristocracy is free to choose or to reject a particular life style which is limited only by his respect for equal freedom of others within his society. This is admittedly a utopian goal, and lacking a unifying, tangible symbol system an uncertain one. It may have derived from negative experiences of the past and although its considerations are sociological or rather in its widest sense, ecological, it is emphatically a-political. This view of education in design is shifting from the traditional one of the training of an elite, to a quest for the understanding of complex processes of interaction of man, society, and environment.

Dr. Reinhard Gieselmann, architect and professor at the School of Architecture at the Technische Hochschule of Vienna, Austria, stated in his inaugural lecture:

We will have to become accustomed to it that divergent ideas do not only co-exist but are also valid in so far as they exist as the intersecting knots of a space grid. There may be no universally valid direction in our time and perhaps not in the future; there may be no style in the art-historical sense. But this does not exclude a fruitful interaction between opposing tendencies. It may even be possible to derive from this an educational principle: To keep open to the students a full range of possibilities, not to inoculate them with (subjective) rules, not to force students' ideas into the principles of a "school," but to encourage their development. It should be possible even for the teacher who is committed to a direction of his own to be tolerant towards the perhaps opposing ideas of his students, yes, even to support them in this. To hand them the means to define a goal, to help them to advance toward a *Gestalt* which is subjective and objective at the same time and thus becomes an expression of artistic identity, this appears to me the task of the teacher.¹³

Footnotes

1. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964, p. 225.
2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. New York: Wittenborn Inc., 1947.
3. El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*. Trans. Eric Dluhosh. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970.
4. Joseph Wulf, *Die Bildenden Kuenste im Dritten Reich*. Guetersloh, Germany: Sigbert Monn, 1963, p. 363.
5. Wulf, p. 253.
6. This is not meant to be an endorsement of either art form; it is simply an observation.
7. Jacques Barzun, "The Arts, The Snob, and the Democrat," *Aesthetics Today*, ed. by Morris Philipson. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1961, p. 21.
8. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture*. Cambridge. The MIT Press, 1965, p. 220.
9. Maurice de Sausmarez, *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form*. New York: Reinhold, 1964, p. 11.
10. Georgi Borisowski, *Form und Uniform*. Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1967.
11. Heide Berndt, Alfred Lorenzer, Klaus Horn, *Architektur als Ideologie*. Frankfurt/M, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1968.
12. Rolf Lederbogen, "Grundlagen fuer Architektur," *Fridericiana, Zeitschrift der Universitaet Karlsruhe* Karlsruhe, Germany, 1970.
13. Arch.Dipl.-Ing.Dr.-Ing. Reinhard Gieselmann, "Die Identifikation von Raeumen," *Antrittsvorlesungen der Technischen Hochschule in Wien*, Vienna, Austria: Verlag der Technischen Hochschule Wien, 1969, pp. 17-18.

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