

# Dessau means modern architecture. 90 years: the Bauhaus building.

*To celebrate the 90th anniversary of Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation has invited three internationally renowned cultural scholars to Dessau to discuss the world famous school building and reflect on its realities in 1926, 1973 and 1996 et seqq. Bauhaus Matinée, Sunday, 4 December 2016, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.*

Bauhaus Matinée, homage to mark the 90th anniversary of the Bauhaus building

by

*Dr. Regina Bittner*, Head of Academy Department and Deputy Director Foundation Bauhaus Dessau

If the Bauhaus building is now ascribed a particular centrality in the international history of 20th century architecture, this is chiefly due to the systematic identification of the building with modernity. But if the 21st century is in fact distancing itself from the interpretations of modernity and the building has thus lost its relevance as the “morphogenesis of the central ideas of rationality” (Heike Delitz), why then does it still attract thousands of international visitors every year?

As an architectural representation of the curriculum of the school, the Bauhaus building was the first to show the invisible and abstract social dynamics of the modern age and rendered these in a materiality that its modern audience could physically experience. Although the school was active for just a few years, its usage and reception history covers a far greater timespan. In the course of this it surrendered not only its context of use as an avant-garde educational institution, but also this unique moment in time in which it crystallised the present day. While enforced migration may have contributed to the continuation of the Bauhaus idea, its architecture soon became mainstream worldwide.

In this respect, isn't there a discrepancy between the global progress of the idea and the built substance?

The varied usage history of the building in Dessau, which reflects the turbulence of the 20th century, may confirm this. But buildings are more than just manifestations of their social functions and circumstances. They organise actions, intervene in daily life, influence perceptions and experiences and construct meanings. And with a prominent and to a certain extent unwieldy building like the Bauhaus, the conceptual career of which has been so successful, the question of its concrete intervention in the respective contemporary contexts might be of particular interest, involving as it does the updating of those historic moments in which the building emerged as a protagonist – in its material form, its images and representations, in political and cultural debates, experiences and everyday activities. The ways and means of dealing with its material structure, its media presentation, what has been said and written about its meaningfulness and the experiences and perceptions of its users are all part of this.

Three commemorative speeches, three timeframes

Where did the Bauhaus stand in 1926? In which built environment, in which cultural discourses, within which limits of perception and experience, and on which map? What kind of impact did the building, restored for its 50th anniversary in 1976, have on the socialistic industrial city of Dessau and beyond? How did the 'black and white' restoration relate to the heyday of the international criticism of modernity? How did modernity in East Germany, in daily life, culture and architecture and the Bauhaus building interact, and which conflicts, sensitivities and ideas did the Bauhaus building elicit? And finally, what is expected in the 21st century of the Bauhaus building, now with its original colour design restored, and a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1996? How do our contemporaries experience this building, the distinctiveness of which appears to have been cancelled out by the ubiquity of glass buildings and white cubes? To what extent does the repeatedly asserted topicality of the Bauhaus idea correspond with the 90th anniversary of the Bauhaus building as a modern classic?

“1926” commemorative speech by Prof. Dr. Helmut Lethen (A/D)

1,500 guests from Germany and abroad attended the opening of the Bauhaus building on 4 December 1926. The collective astonishment that the building elicited must have been due at least in part to the collision between the Bauhaus and the environment for which it was built. The fascination with which they experienced the Bauhaus may be traced back to the fact that moving through the spaces brought to life in a quasi-physical way what life in the 1920s was beginning to structure. The simultaneity of images and messages, the acceleration of daily life, the intensification of social experiences and spatial relationships: in the building, these symptoms of cultural modernity combined to form a new reality. The film programme for the opening underpinned this experience. Impressions of modern life were shown in a number of educational films on sport, the natural sciences and architecture, among them “Nurmi – Der schnellste Mann der Welt” (Nurmi, the world’s fastest man), a film about the growth of crystals and a documentary about the construction sites of New Architecture.

“1976” commemorative speech by Prof. Dr. Greg Castillo (USA)

In a state ceremony on 4 December 1976, the 50th anniversary of the Bauhaus building, the Bauhaus was reopened as the Wissenschaftlich-Kulturelles Zentrum (Scientific-Cultural Centre) of the German Democratic Republic. The first renovation of the building in line with heritage conservation guidelines owed a great deal to the efforts of the former Bauhausler Konrad Püschel, who taught at the HAB Weimar (College of Architecture and Civil Engineering Weimar). In a climate in which an international criticism of modernity prevailed, which repeatedly equated the Bauhaus with modernity – the failure of which was symbolised by the demolition in 1972 of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, or the ‘building sector functionalism debate’ initiated in 1972 by Heinrich Klotz in the Federal Republic of Germany – the German Democratic Republic reopened the Bauhaus behind the Iron Curtain. Because the journey to East Germany, to the Bauhaus (now located near the Red Army barracks) was difficult, there were few who could testify to the additional value of the Bauhaus building as “another modernity”. The elegant glass building must have also seemed out of keeping with its setting: Dessau, a city of prefabricated reinforced concrete buildings, had an ‘inhospitable’ character common to many of the cities rebuilt in the postwar period in both East and West Germany. The ‘black and white’ restoration of the building complex in the circumstances of a socialistic economy of scarcity aimed perhaps to endorse the internationally circulating images and critical figures.

“1996 onwards” commemorative speech by Prof. Dr. Kathleen James-Chakraborty (IRL)

The major narratives of the modern age that found a central point of reference in the Bauhaus are deemed to be over with the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Likewise, after the reunification of Germany the Bauhaus gains national and international recognition as a cultural beacon and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Two years after the Foundation was set up, creating a new institutional body for the Bauhaus in Dessau, the building is included on the UNESCO World Heritage list. The subsequent renovation in line with heritage conservation guidelines restores the Bauhaus building’s original colour design. The ensemble of Masters’ Houses is completed at the same time. The environs of the Bauhaus buildings are redesigned in accordance with its new role as a tourist attraction for the region. White cubes and flat roofs now also characterise the building style among the local middle classes. The hitherto incongruous relationship between the Bauhaus building and its environment is beginning to dissipate.

