

Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain. Leyla Daybelge and Magnus Englund, Batsford, 2019. 240 pp., illus., cloth, £25.00. 9781849944915.

Moholy-Nagy in Britain, 1935–1937. Valeria Carullo, Lund Humphries, 2019. 96 pp., 80 col. illus., paper, £29.95. 13 digit ISBN: 9781848223769.

Few design historians will have failed to gather that 2019 was the centenary of the founding of the Bauhaus School in Weimar. From Berlin to Tel Aviv to New York, an abundance of books, talks, concerts, performances and exhibitions celebrated and reevaluated the School a century on.¹ This was not, of course, the first time its significance has been rethought; from its very inception in 1919 the School's founders made declamatory statements about its value and values, its contribution regularly appraised ever since. Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* published in 1936, only three years after the Nazis forced the School's closure, established Gropius's status as design pioneer. Just two years later the Museum of Modern Art in New York's major retrospective, 'Bauhaus: 1919–1928' opened, showing nearly 700 examples of the school's output from textiles to glass, wood, canvas, metal, and paper, accompanied by a catalogue written and edited by Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius and Herbert Bayer. For design historians working in an English-language context, Gillian Naylor's books *The Bauhaus* (1968) and more extensive *The Bauhaus Reassessed: Sources and Design Theory* (1985) provoked further rethinking of the School's contribution to design's histories, as did the ninetieth anniversary in 2009, marked by major exhibitions at Martin Gropius Bau Berlin and MOMA New York.² But the School has remained a dominant focus in

Eurocentric design history narratives, something academics working to decolonise and decentre have been trying hard to move beyond, with initiatives like Decolonising Design making a series of important interventions over the last few years.³ However, two significant things were achieved through the Bauhaus centenary: firstly, through public events and exhibitions, histories of design reached beyond the academic cognoscenti to a wider, design-interested audience. Secondly, the Bauhaus focus moved beyond design heroes, iconic buildings and objects to an interest in design's diasporic qualities—its potential for movement, exchange and dispersal. Online journal *Bauhaus Imaginista* has been exemplary in this respect, offering re-readings of the cosmopolitan conditions of the Bauhaus from a transnational perspective, both through text and through exhibitions that have travelled to Rabat, Hangzhou, Lagos, São Paulo and beyond as a means through which to rethink previous centre–periphery assumptions.⁴ Thirdly, recent work has foregrounded gender and queerness including, for example, Elizabeth Otto's *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics*, which excavates the lives and works of lesser-known faculty-members, often women, and explores queer traces in Bauhaus work and sociability.⁵

A number of new books published in the centenary—including the two reviewed here—revived a popular, if well-worn theme: the Bauhaus in, from and to Britain.⁶ They were produced to appeal to a wider, design-engaged audience. *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* is co-authored by journalist Leyla Daybelge and Magnus Englund, founder of Scandinavian interior design shop Skandium. Until recently Englund lived in the Lawn Road penthouse completed in 1934, for the book's central characters, Jack and Molly Pritchard. Englund also championed the

restoration of 'the Isokon' building from 2001–5. In keeping with these interests, the book is a biography of the Pritchards and a love letter to the building that Englund saw brought back to life and become home. The authors paint an enjoyably vivid picture of the sociability, interactions and networks enabled by the Lawn Road mise-en-scène, with the Pritchards centre-stage, affectionately referred to as 'Jack and Molly'. The flats and their Isobar dining and social club become the setting for lively, at times salacious interactions between the chattering classes of north London: from novelist Agatha Christie, to painter Adrian Stokes, and economist Philip Sargant Florence. The flats also act as a protagonist in their own right, which, as Englund and Daybelge show, is in keeping with the anthropomorphic attitude with which they were regarded at the time. Early inhabitants enthusiastically marked the flats' birthdays with generous gatherings on the roof terrace and some referred to them in affectionate tones that are now toe-curlingly off-key: architect Marcel Breuer called the flats a 'wench' and a 'hospitable', 'pretty girl', for example (p. 195). *Isokon* draws on a plethora of important primary sources, from the Pritchard archive at University of East Anglia, to contemporary periodicals and biographies. There is also a great deal of detail about Isokon furniture retailing, models and alterations, reflecting Englund's interests as a furniture manufacturer.

For all its enjoyable elucidation of life in Lawn Road, the book has limitations for historians already familiar with the Bauhaus literatures. The central protagonists of the Modern Movement—Walter Gropius in particular—had a notorious propensity for self-mythologisation, which the authors of *Isokon* have a tendency to reinforce. In the book's narrative, for example, Lawn Road is the direct result of Pritchard's journey with Serge Chermayeff and Wells Coates to see the

abandoned Bauhaus in Dessau in 1931. Fiona MacCarthy, in her book also published for the centenary, *Walter Gropius: Visionary Founder of the Bauhaus*, gives a much more detailed account of the political environment surrounding this visit.⁷ There is very little discussion of how events played out at Lawn Road intersected with other manifestations of modernism in Britain beyond Hampstead, so the iconicity and exceptionalism of the Lawn Road flats is reinforced, the block behaving like an ocean liner untethered from local architecture or conditions, passing through, echoing the myth-making of the time. Nor does the book broaden out debates to consider Modernism as a set of diffuse processes and practices located just as much in advertising and writing, for example, as in ply furniture and concrete buildings. The authors trace the building's rise and fall through the decades, documenting its deterioration and degradation until the 1990s when its value was recognised in an English Heritage listing and by an enlightened local councillor, who campaigned for restoration. In coming up to date *Isokon* makes an important point about the intersection between international histories and specific local conditions and arrangements, which the very existence of such totemic buildings depend on.

Moholy-Nagy in Britain, 1935–1937 is written by Valeria Carullo, the RIBA's Photography Curator. Its publication was linked to a centenary display Carullo curated at London's Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) about the brief, but productive, period László Moholy-Nagy spent in Britain after fleeing the Nazi threat and before moving permanently to the USA. As might be expected, the book is filled with high-quality photographs from the RIBA's collection, including images of Moholy and his collaborators' lesser-known commercial interiors work in London. Electrical showrooms on Cannon Street and Regents Street are

illustrated with close-ups of photomontages, friezes, lighting and staircases. Detailed images from his three British photographic commissions: *The Street Markets of London* (1936), *An Eton Portrait* (1937) and *An Oxford University Chest* (1938) and his various films including *Lobsters* (1936) give an insight into Moholy's eclectic preoccupations while in Britain. They also highlight the precarious and piecemeal existence of a jobbing designer trying to make ends meet on the eve of World War Two. The text provides an interesting commentary on whom Moholy-Nagy worked with and who commissioned him but further interpretation and analysis would have been welcome, including discussion of the rich array of letters and pull-quotes, which float as illustrations but are not always incorporated into the narrative. Comparisons with the work of other émigré photographers or designers who faced similar predicaments on arriving in Britain would also have helped bring this moment to life as would have further discussion of the role of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, who features as wife—sending dinner invitations to Ursula and Ernő Goldfinger—and as commentator on her husband's actions and motivations as recorded in her postwar account *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* of 1950. Previous accounts of Moholy-Nagy's time in Britain have focused on his dismal experience, his being overlooked and rejected for jobs by Frank Pick and other leading members of the design establishment.⁸ Carullo, meanwhile, remains upbeat; she describes Moholy's choice to settle in Britain as, according to Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, being informed by his reading of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques sur les anglais*, 'which confirmed his opinion of the country as a refuge from repression and intolerance' (p. 19). She describes Moholy's engagement with a tight-knit and rich creative community in Britain, suggesting he moved to Chicago only because he could not afford to turn the job down. Given the recent resurgence in nationalism and xenophobia in contemporary Britain,

these observations are both poignant and also valuable elements in the wider historical reassertion of émigré contributions to British culture throughout the twentieth century.

Both *Isokon* and *Moholy-Nagy* are published by presses with proud histories of making Modernist art and photography books. *Isokon* is published by Batsford, whose books of the 1930s and 1940s carried high-quality photographs and illustrations commissioned from leading artists. This new book fits with this legacy: it is an object of desire, lavishly produced with bronze on spine and cover and illustrated throughout in colour and black-and-white images, many not seen before. *Moholy-Nagy* is published by Lund Humphries, who have a history of producing British Modernist art and design books dating back to 1939.⁹ It is beautifully designed and produced: it uses colours, fonts and devices that allude to design of the time; Moholy's trademark shop-window displays are playfully referenced with a dotted peephole page, for example.

For an academic reader, neither book contains enough references, there is a useful index in *Isokon* but no bibliography, while there is no index in *Moholy-Nagy*, and only a select bibliography. But this sort of quibble is to miss the point of these two books, whose power is in telling engaging stories that will be heard beyond the lecture theatre.

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- ¹ As the informative centenary website of the Office of the Bauhaus 2019 shows: <https://www.bauhaus100.com/the-centenary/>
- ² N. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Penguin, 1936); information about MOMA's 'Bauhaus 1919–1928', including the catalogue, can be accessed here: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2735>; G. Naylor, *The Bauhaus* (Worthing: Littlehampton, 1968); G. Naylor, *The Bauhaus Reassessed: Sources and Design Theory* (London: Herbert Press, 1985). Bauhaus ninetieth anniversary events were reviewed by Jeremy Aynsley in *Journal of Design History*, Volume 23, Issue 3, September 2010, Pages 307–315.
- ³ Further information is at <https://www.decolonisingdesign.com>.
- ⁴ D J Huppertz review of *Bauhaus Diaspora and Beyond: Transforming Education through Art, Design and Architecture* in *Journal of Design History*, epz054, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epz054>. *Bauhaus Imaginista* is at <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org>.
- ⁵ *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics; Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective and Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism's Legendary Art School* reviewed by Barbara McCloskey for *Journal of Design History*, epz055, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epz055>
- ⁶ Another centenary publication with this focus was A. Powers, *The Bauhaus Goes West: Modern Art and Design in Britain and America* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019).
- ⁷ Fiona MacCarthy, *Walter Gropius: Visionary Founder of the Bauhaus* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).
- ⁸ For example T. A. Senter in 'László Moholy-Nagy: The Transitional Years' for *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: from the Bauhaus to the New World*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (Yale University Press, 2006).
- ⁹ <https://www.pavilionbooks.com/2018/01/05/celebrating-175-years-batsford/>; <https://www.lundhumphries.com/pages/history>. Valerie Holman's short history of Lund Humphries is online: https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0996/9954/files/LH_History_booklet_final_for_website.pdf?7931564720529927002.