

# Bauhaus Houses and the Design Canon: 1923-2019

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## Introduction

The focus of this paper is issues central to the reconstruction and display of iconic Modernist houses and how such issues complexify our understanding of the canonical reputation of the Bauhaus. Like the De Stijl movement, the Bauhaus can expect to receive much renewed media and scholarly attention as its centenary year of 2019 approaches. And like De Stijl, it holds pre-eminence in design history as a point when new theories and roles for design were realised by a remarkable set of actors. For its relatively short life of 14 years as a school in Germany, followed by the Chicago years, the Bauhaus has sustained what might be considered to be a disproportionate amount of attention. Indeed, arguably, its short life adds neatness to applying a narrative that suits re-telling and mythification.

By applying the term 'canon' to design, we can assume this involves a select set of figures, objects and movements that claim official status, receiving scholarly attention and entering museums and galleries. To do so, they conform to and meet certain criteria. As we know, critical theory, feminism, race theory and post-Marxism have all offered means of critique of the canon, questioning the basis on which it privileges certain histories – at worst, 'dead white men' or in the case of the Bauhaus, a site of high conservative modernism. Accordingly, in recent years, revisions in Bauhaus scholarship have also taken place, whether through questioning gender relations and roles at the school, challenging fundamental principles such as functionalism and universalism, or considering its diaspora of influence in a post-colonial context.<sup>1</sup>

Before turning to the houses of my focus today, it is perhaps worth teasing out the structures that have been central for the construction of the Bauhaus within the design historical canon:

1 Examples include Philipp Ostwalt (ed.), *Bauhaus Conflicts, 1919-2009: Controversies and Counterparts*, Ostfildern (Hatje Cantz) 2009 and *Bauhaus. Die Zeitschrift der Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau/ The Bauhaus Dessau Foundation's Magazine*, Leipzig (Spector Books) June 2013, no.5 *Tropen/Tropics* Philipp Ostwalt (ed.).



fig. 1 The Bauhaus building, Dessau, Walter Gropius, 1926, author's photograph, 2014.

1) The Name – It begins with the word itself. When in 1919 Gropius chose to bring together the Grand Ducal Saxon Academy for Fine Arts and Grand Ducal Saxon School of Applied Arts State under the title (Staatliches) Bauhaus, his choice of word functioned on several levels. Beyond its literal meaning of ‘Build’ ‘House’ and its reference to Medieval guilds, it functioned richly as a sign, symbol, design, and what we today call ‘brand’. This proved effective in its lifetime and beyond, as testified by its borrowing by the now defunct UK post-punk band and the contemporary major German DIY Bauhaus chain store.

2) Then there are the Actors (principally male) who are the individual protagonists identified in the familiar narratives we encounter, engaging in the debates about art and technology, applied art or industrial design, and individual patronage or major complex architectural schemes;

3) The Manifestos – offering graphic immediacy and future soundbites;

4) The Exhibitions – promoting the school’s aesthetic philosophy;

5) Publications – self-publication as promotion, notably the Bauhausbücher written by staff and fellow travellers through which ideas travelled abroad;

6) The Journal – available for just an affordable 2 Reichsmark;

7) The Products themselves – however paradoxical they are or how much they qualify the claims made for them;

8) The subsequent curation in later years, essential for the longevity of the brand through archives and collections. Among the important steps of these was the exhibition organised by Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius and Herbert Bayer at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1938 – possibly the ultimate canonisation.<sup>2</sup>

9) The establishment of the Bauhaus Archiv, originally in Darmstadt in 1960 and Hans Maria Wingler's magnum opus, *Bauhaus*, designed by Muriel Cooper at MIT Press; and subsequent developments in Berlin, Dessau and Weimar in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>3</sup>

10) Then there was the growing global interest in Bauhaus and Ulm legacies, as in the People's Republic of China, shown in the exhibitions at Tsinghua University in 2010.

We might end with the plans for the new Bauhaus Design Museum in Weimar, along with the extension at the Bauhaus Archiv, both scheduled for 2019.

## **Haus am Horn**

Turning now to my two case studies: the Haus am Horn in Weimar (1923) and the Bauhaus Meister houses in Dessau (1925-1926) have complex exhibition histories. In brief, my aim is to argue that prioritising 'authenticity' in their historical reconstruction has been key to promoting the canonical reputation of the Bauhaus. Located in former East Germany between 1948 and 89, their recuperation and entry into the Modernist canon was affected by political and geographical factors, far from smooth or straightforward. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German re-unification, the Bauhaus received considerably more attention. Symptomatic of this was recognition of its buildings in the award as UNESCO world heritage sites in 1996.<sup>4</sup>

The Haus am Horn in Weimar was originally built to coincide with the first major exhibition of the school, held in 1923 to justify to the city authorities that the school warranted continued financial support from the local government.

2 Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius and Ise Gropius, *Bauhaus 1919-28*, exh. cat., New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938.

3 Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus, Weimar Dessau Berlin Chicago* (1962) Cambridge, Mass. and London (MIT Press) 1976.

4 Thomas Würzel (ed.) and Bernd Rudolf, *Das Haus ‚Am Horn‘ Denkmalpflegerische Sanierung und Zukunft der UNESCO in Weimar*, Sparkassen-Kulturstiftung Hessen-Thüringen, 1999 and Rudolf Bernd, (ed.), *Haus am Horn. Rekonstruktion einer Utopie*, Weimar (Bauhaus-Universität) 2000.

This was when Gropius re-oriented the school from an emphasis on individualistic arts and crafts thinking to more programmatic design.

After its exhibition in 1923, the house became widely known through publication, as subject of the third in the series of the Bauhaus books.

The house was called an 'Experiment' or 'Versuch'

Haus. Designed by Georg Muche, it was a single building intended for a married couple with a child and a daily, not live-in maid, and intended as a prototype for a settlement of new dwelling types. These were never realised, owing to continuing financial difficulties facing the school and the local authority, and neighbouring residents' resistance to what was considered an alien building style. As Muche was not a trained architect, Gropius's office took over the full preparation of the plans although a later record shows his attempts to disown this involvement.<sup>5</sup> Its comfortable, leafy, *bürgerlich* setting, overlooking Park an der Ilm, forms a strong contrast to the usual image of Haus am Horn as an icon of technical modernity in representation: bare, austere and functional. The house was built using mortar and concrete blocks, under the patent name of *Jurkosteine*, then rendered white. Muche favoured standard industrialised materials that could be bought off the shelf by any builder. In the future, this would create significant challenges for curators and conservators involved in the house's restoration.

The house was planned as a ribbon of rooms around a central room, leading from the hall to a guest room, the man's bedroom, bathroom, lady's room, child's bedroom and playroom, dining room, and kitchen with walk-in cupboards. The central reception and living room and study, four meters in height, crucially functioned well as an exhibition space at many stages of its life. In tune with other modernist architects, Muche provided the equipment and environment for modern everyday life. The child's room was provided with wooden units in primary colours to encourage constructive play. Particular attention was given to new technologies for the home. Lighting throughout was by innovative inset panels with rear reflectors, intended to avoid unnecessary free-standing or



fig. 2 Haus am Horn, 1923, author's photograph 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Adolf Meyer (ed.), *Ein Versuchshaus des Bauhauses in Weimar*, (facsimile of 1923 edition) Weimar (Bauhaus-Universität) 2009.

pendant fittings.

Following the 1923 exhibition, the house was sold to a judge and became the family home for which it had been intended. This family extended it in what was considered a sympathetic way, adding a winter garden and terrace on the southern side. This was the last visually well-documented stage of the house before the period of National Socialism and World War II intervened.<sup>6</sup> In 1951, with the stabilising political situation, the house became property of the GDR State and was used for much-needed emergency housing allocation. By the 1960s, art, design and architectural historical interest in the Bauhaus had grown in both East and West Germany. By 1971, active participants in this movement, Bernd and Marlis Grönwald became tenants of the Haus am Horn, Bernd being one of the GDR's most prominent architectural theoreticians.

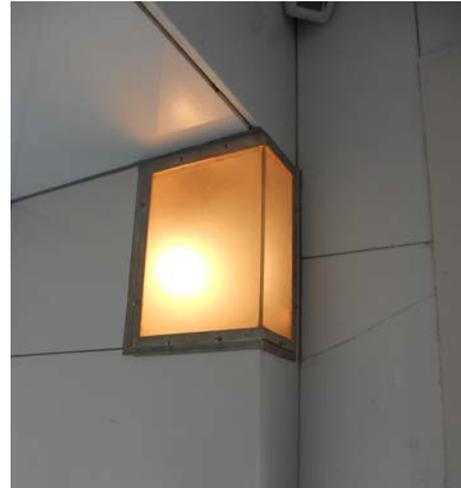


fig. 3 Encased light fitting in Haus am Horn central room, author's photograph, 2014.

Together, the couple took on the major task of renovating the house. So, for example, in the bathroom red and white plastic curtains by Malimo, a 'Pop' GDR design available in the 1980s. They combined examples of Bauhaus provenance furniture with their own self-build. Here, rattan furniture designed by Erich Dieckmann and Hirschfeld-Macke in the spirit of the house. In 1976, the Grönwalds took the important step of establishing the series of Bauhaus colloquia, drawing international visitors, largely architects, architectural historians and curators to the house. The guest-book is a roll-call of leading figures in world architecture.<sup>7</sup>

With re-unification, the status of the members of the GDR architectural establishment came under significant criticism, so much so that in early 1991 Bernd Grönwald committed suicide in the house.<sup>8</sup> Marlis remained the house's custodian and curator, continuing to live there until more ambitious reconstruction plans took effect. The Haus am Horn was substantially restored in 1998-9 with the aim of returning its structure to its 1923 state. It is currently overseen by the Friends of the Bauhaus University of Weimar. Through this, a strong connection is established between house and school. The house is currently visited as part of an architectural walk, the *Bauhaus Spaziergang*.

The material legacy of the house between late 1920s and 1998 now has been

6 Stefan Matz, *(Un) Geliebtes Muster. Neue Einsichten zum Haus am Horn*, Weimar (VDG) 2001.

7 Marlis Grönwald in interview with author, Weimar, 8 April 2014.

8 *Der Spiegel*, 21/1994, pp 58-65. I am grateful to Jessica Jenkins for this reference.

eradicated. As the guidebook says, ‘The model house was continually reshaped by its inhabitants. [...] Today, all modifications and accretions have been eliminated, all traces of well-intended improvements scrupulously erased, and no inhabitants are in sight.’<sup>9</sup> A question of the future curation of the house remains and it could be hoped that with non-invasive exhibition technologies, parts of the social history of the house might be told in future displays, along with the material fabric so important for its status as architectural monument.

### **The Dessau Meisterhäuser**

The second group of houses, known collectively as the *Meisterhäuser* or Master Houses were built according to the designs of Walter Gropius in 1926 to accommodate the staff who had moved with him from Weimar to Dessau. With only three years separating the two schemes, the latter houses appear much more resolved as buildings. The detached house was intended for Gropius as director. The others, three double units, were for teachers László Moholy-Nagy and Lyonel Feininger; Georg Muche and Oskar Schlemmer; and Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee – an illustrious group. Although the period of residency by Bauhäusler was only up to 1932, when the Bauhaus was forced to close and move to Berlin, these houses hold such an important place in the construction of the history of the school it is these first years that form the benchmark for their interpretive reconstruction. In contrast to the Haus am Horn, the context for the Bauhaus master houses is other contemporary modernist buildings in the district, seen as the fulfillment of the ideal visionary complex, largely realised by Gropius and his office.

Even during their construction the houses were filmed and the houses became acclaimed through their extensive publication. In particular, Lucia Moholy’s images presented the houses in Modernist rhetoric of the New Photography with strong contrasts, heavy shadows and experimental points of view. From these largely black and white photographs, the buildings are coded as white abstract forms broken by asymmetrical fenestration, with acute angles of cantilevered balconies. Extending the concept of the house as *Wohnmaschine* or machine for living, their praxis was recorded in a film made by architect Richard Paulick, *Wie wohnen wir gesund und wirtschaftlich* (How we live in a healthy and economic way) in 1926. This often humorous performance of the house by fashionably-dressed Ise Gropius and her friend, shows her enthusiastically demonstrating its features, while the maid is depicted using the rationalised kitchen. The mythical status of these houses was therefore immediately established. Yet, we are also told that the masters hung curtains on the three-storey vertical staircase windows for the sake of privacy. They subdivided the larger rooms and built partitions, while Gropius’s

9 Philipp Ostwalt et al., *Bauhaus Travel Book*, Cologne (Du Mont Verlag) 2012, p.49.

cellar was full of his other belongings to allow the upstairs to conform to the modernist ideal. Architectural historian Robin Schuldenfrei has described how photographs were re-touched to stress their austere modernity in ways that stressed their apparent functionalism.<sup>10</sup> In one case, the marble sinks in the Gropius house were painted out to appear like standard fittings, more in tune with the machine aesthetic.

Official narrative now offered in the interpretations by the Bauhaus Foundation shows a marked bias, even hostility towards history of the GDR. Here, historian Winfried Brenne, 'The GDR violently damaged this architecture, depriving it of any possibility of articulating itself outwardly. Within, these buildings were simply papered over, their historic context erased. The occupants recognized only their utilitarian value, and were insensible to their historical status.'<sup>11</sup>

Colour has played an important role through its relative absence or presence during their reconstruction. After the briefest original flirtation with Agfa colour in the 1920s, ironically, the master houses entered the world of colour photography only to emphasise their neglect during the GDR years. Then, in the 1990s, colour became the defining feature of the houses. Newly re-discovered and restored, their colour was used to differentiate them from each other and dispelled modernist interpretation of the 'international style' as a black and white affair, as so often suggested by earlier publications in the aftermath of Postmodern critique.<sup>12</sup> Conservation scientists, for example, discovered that the Feininger house held traces of 40 different paint colours, while the Kandinsky/Klee houses included as many as 200 between them. With the choice of seven houses to display, complementary curatorial strategies could be adopted for each. No house had an extant collection of furniture – it was therefore impossible to consider a period room approach. As a self-reflexive gesture, the renovation is now displayed in the stripped down basement of the main Bauhaus building in a gallery entitled 'archaeology of the modern'. In certain instances, the material history of the houses was retained, as here, remnants of paint and flooring surfaces reveal the layering of changing taste.

In the early 2000s attention turned to the remaining unresolved sites: the Gropius director's house and Moholy-Nagy's house; both had been severely damaged in the final stages of the war. During the GDR years the Moholy house had been restored almost beyond recognition, while the ground plan of the Gropius house

10 Robin Schuldenfrei, 'The Irreproducibility of the Bauhaus Object' in Jeffrey Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei (eds.), *Bauhaus Construct. Fashioning Identity, Discourse and Modernity*, Abingdon (Routledge) 2009.

11 In Matthias Hollwich and Rainer Weisbach, *(Um)Bauhaus. Aktualisierung der Moderne/Updating Modernism*, Berlin (Jovis Verlag) 2004, p.138.

12 Renate Scheper (ed.), *Farbenfroh! Die Werkstatt für Wandmalerei am Bauhaus*, exh. cat. Berlin: Bauhaus Archiv, 2005.



fig. 4 Archaeology of the Modern gallery in the Bauhaus building, Dessau, author's photograph, 2014.



fig. 5 Kitchen in the Klee-Kandinsky houses showing wallpaper remnants, author's photograph, 2014.

had been retained by the Emmer family, who commissioned local architect Alfred Müller to add a traditional gable, windows and wall surfaces that conformed to standard GDR housing types. In discussions about their reconstruction, the choice was to **conserve** what remained; to **reconstruct** to an original notion of authenticity, or more controversially, to make something new, for which the phrase 'Updating' – Aktualisierung – the Modern was used.<sup>13</sup>

The winners of the competition were the Berlin-based office of Bruno Fioretti Marquez, whose concept they called – 'precise uncertainty' – 'präzisen Unschärfe'. The houses opened in May 2014 to much fanfare. Reconstructed spatially on the original footprint to define the same physical form as the previous buildings, they are composed of grey on white surfaces with blank windows. Interpretation is limited to text and image panels, largely placed horizontally on the half-height dividing walls to avoid intruding on the architectural space – or by means of an audio-guide. The buildings' monochrome surfaces create a sense of hovering that changes according to the natural and artificial light conditions. Their interiors reveal the three-storey structure and plain undecorated surfaces of polished concrete that act to provide imaginary space. In many respects, they work as palimpsests, with referents that are not materially present. As reconstructions, re-presenting sites of monument and memory, I think they can be placed in the sculptural tradition of an artist such as Rachel Whiteread.

13 'Jenseits von Rekonstruieren und Konservieren/Beyond Reconstruction and Conservation' in *(Um)Bauhaus*, op. cit., pp. 44-51.

14 Ibid., pp. 62-64.



fig. 6 Side elevation of Moholy-Nagy house, author's photograph, 2014.



fig. 7 Interior of Gropius house, author's photograph, 2014.

## Conclusion

The preservation of Modernist heritage such as the Bauhaus houses raises important political and economic questions. In the case of Dessau, Dr. Regina Bittner of the Bauhaus Foundation warned, 'The reconstruction of the Masters' Houses would [therefore] immortalise Dessau as a Bauhaus city, albeit with a form of architecture that would extinguish a variety of local identities in the name of an international style, and for which a small, crisis-riddled city in Saxony-Anhalt would pay the price.'<sup>14</sup> One could suggest Bittner's comment highlights the hazard for such houses entering the design canon. The Bauhaus houses, highly significant documents of architectural Modernism, continue to inform current practice, serving a global professional and academic community, while also operating as sites of cultural tourism. Current strategies for their display and interpretation do not reflect the recent material culture turn or fascination for everyday life which inform many other historic house museums. Instead, the case of the Bauhaus houses reveals how attention to the authenticity of material evidence and respect for their conception as innovative architectural monuments have been priorities for their care, conservation and display, in turn, reinforcing their canonical status.

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