

Politics and the Staatliches Bauhaus Function versus the Curve of the Time

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Abstract

This essay intends to show the political situation of Germany during the period of Bauhaus's existence. First, we would like to contextualize the political-ideological situation that outlined society in Germany and the world. In this way, we describe the essential characteristics of the Bauhaus projects and the meaning of the environment of that time in Germany and, in other words, in other countries. Beyond the socio-political aspects during Bauhaus's existence, we address the international repercussion of its representations, analyzing the architecture of Walter Gropius, Oscar Niemeyer, and Le Corbusier. These three architects are references to what we can understand – the Bauhaus legacy. Even if each of them has a style and different works, we consider in our essay the similarities that justify a relationship between the three. So, for the three to have their distinct and innovative achievements, one thing is sure – in the differences and similarities, we can identify the initial influence of the Bauhaus. In general, the direct relationship with the technical details of the architectural project is not addressed, but rather the aesthetic and cultural ones.



Figure 1: Weimar, Bauhaus – Kunstgewerbeschule
Van-de-Velde Bau with Wartburg 353, DDR May 1990¹
ORWO UP15 Slide film. By Sludge Gulper. CC BY-SA CC BY-SA 2.0

Troubled Times

The history of the “Staatliches Bauhaus,”² the Bauhaus school, is so vibrant that it becomes aware of everything that happened with it, whether on the professional plane, with the artistic creation of its members, the social legacy left by it, or even in its political relations with the German state. After reflecting on what we should write, we chose to deal with its political trajectory as we see fit, not less rich than the other two options. We started this work noting that the Bauhaus school was born in a historical and political moment very turbulent (1919) and, more than that, just one year after the end of World War I in 1918.³ Perhaps it was the best time for its creation – that is what we see here. Germany and other European countries were, at that point in history, reorganizing their respective debt-stricken economies after the deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians who had nothing to do with the foolishness of the governors. But the deplorable historical fact is that they found motives for accomplishing that tragedy.

Some countries were devastated by the war, in the case of Germany, but others, a little less. As if this misfortune were not enough, the tragic and sinister ideology of Nazism arose in 1920, officially founded and represented by the National Socialist Party of German Workers (*Deutsche Nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei*). For the Bauhaus school, the political and economic crisis was terrible. For the Nazis, it was a great chance to present themselves to the German people as redeemers of the homeland. This political party took the opportunity from the troubles of the First War and gained great notoriety, not only with German society but also in the political framework of the German state. It is no coincidence that the Bauhaus school closed its doors and ended its professional activities in 1933, just as Adolf Hitler took the country's top position of power. He did not like the ideological principles that guided Bauhaus. Whenever he could, he showed apparent dislike for the avant-garde character of its projects. Yes, the weapons of this school were not guns, rifles, machine guns, or bayonets. They were other instruments: pens and ink, squares and rulers, compasses, paintbrushes, abundant creativity, ideas, and the talent of its members. For these reasons, the Bauhaus school had minimal chances of survival.

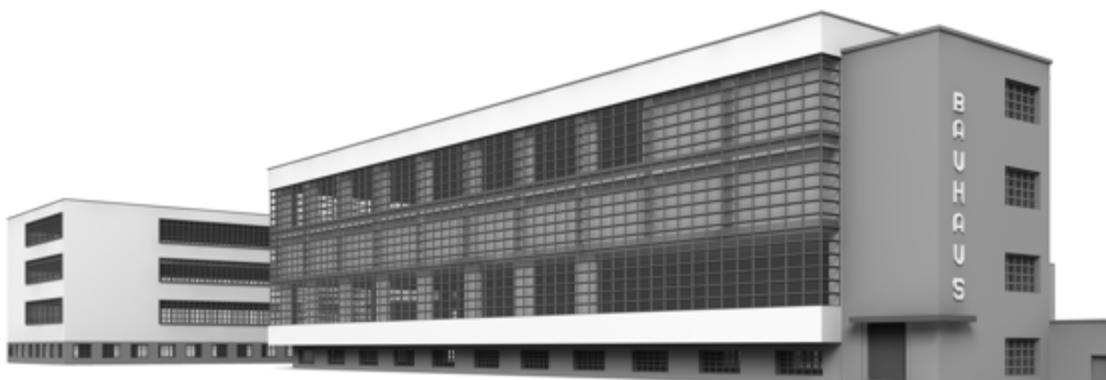


Figure 2: Bauhaus Dessau. Designed by Walter Gropius.
Photo: Design 3D by Peggy und Marco Lachmann-Anke.



Figure 3: Bauhaus Dessau. Designed by Walter Gropius.
Photo by Christiane Wagner

From 1919 to 1933, the lifetime of the Weimar Republic, the German state lived through intense and constant conflicts in the face of the consequences of the First World War. The economy since that time, which had always been a source of pride for the German people, was torn by war and political events and did not resist; it collapsed, and unemployment in Germany reached 44% of the population. It was a tragedy. It should be noted that Germany was only one of the strong-economy countries degrading at the time. It was a worldwide phenomenon – it could not be otherwise – which became known as the “1929 Crisis” or the “Great Depression.”⁴ Economic liberalism to serve the interests of rich countries, overproduction, and financial speculation led international capitalism in the 1920s to a severe economic recession — the largest ever on the world stage.⁵ With the socio-political and economic situation in a state of desolation, one would expect that not only the Bauhaus school, but other segments of German art, culture, and economy would disappear or suffer irreparable losses.



Figure 4: Bauhaus Dessau. Designed by Walter Gropius.
Photo by Christiane Wagner

As we saw earlier, the aims of Walter Gropius, founder of this school and his colleagues, were not in line with the ideology of the *Deutsche Nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei*. Well, the Staatliches Bauhaus, as this school was called, was founded at a historically improper time – just after the First World War. In this sense, of course, everything would make the work of Walter Gropius and his colleagues even more difficult. The socialist ideal of multipliable architecture, at that time, was in danger of collapsing as a project of democratization of constructions accessible to the more modest segments of German society. The Bauhaus was initially subsidized by the Weimar Republic, formed by the "Weimar coalition," which included the Social Democrats, Centre, and Democrats. Meanwhile, the Depression in German was reflected by the dramatic rise of the Communist and, more especially, Nazi vote. One alternative for the Bauhaus was to move to Dessau as early as 1925, with support from the city's politicians, most of whom identified with the center-left political ideology.



Figure 5: The Masters' Houses, Dessau.
Designed by Walter Gropius in 1925 to house the Bauhaus professors.

However, once again, political-ideological issues would force the Bauhaus leaders to look for another location to settle. Elections to the Reichstag were held (July 31, 1932) and resulted in a Nazi triumph, giving them 230 seats in the Reichstag. On January 30, 1933, the coalition assumed office, and Hitler became the chancellor of Germany. The activities of the Bauhaus in Dessau were closed, and the school tried to reinstall in Berlin. But with the changes from one city to another, nothing resolved. The political persecution against the vanguard ideas from many members of the Bauhaus prevented resolution. In 1933, it was no longer possible for the Bauhaus to continue its activities.



Figure 6: The Masters' Houses, Dessau.
Designed by Walter Gropius in 1925 to house the Bauhaus professors.

Experts have recognized this German school as the first in the world to create design studies. It is worth noting that the repressive truculence of the Nazi government at that time was not confined to the Bauhaus alone. No one – no one at all, citizens or institutions – could oppose that political regime. Otherwise, they would be killed. These historical facts are recorded, and today, they are already in the public domain. There is no way to question them. The political orientation of the government to its people was to support Nazism. Those who did not do it would be considered an enemy of the state and subject to face trial for treason. There was no alternative. The history of the German people at that time, unfortunately, is full of records of brute force from the Nazi government to its citizens. At this point in the German socio-political context, the Bauhaus would not have had the slightest chance of surviving.

Their gypsy wanderings as if they were nomadic did nothing to advance their school and would not do any good. In a brief time, from 1933, the entire German state would be controlled by the Nazi. Like all institutions interested in rights and justice, the Bauhaus school wanted the citizen as an integral element of the State, his/her full well-being in society, and his/her important civil rights. But that was not what was seen. A feeling of insecurity, of uneasiness, and an extremely unpleasant presence of not knowing what could happen the next day prevailed.

The presence of artists, architects, and students from Russia in a way further aggravated the repression of the Bauhaus. The crude, misleading, and untruthful German government understood that the presence of these Russian citizens meant a political-ideological option for communism by Walter Gropius and his colleagues. Now, time has shown that there was no political ideology behind what that school was doing. It was in itself a socialist proposal based precisely on the concept of social housing in the 1920s, and with the just purpose of social justice. The German writer Wilhelm Frick, appointed by Adolf Hitler to occupy the Ministry of Interior portfolio, was one of the most radical opponents to the modernist tendencies developed by the Bauhaus artists. He never gave up working behind the scenes of Nazi politics to end the its project.



Figure 7: Bauhaus Architecture. Cologne Nowadays. Germany.
Photo Klaus Hausmann.

Bauhaus–International Style

However, all the political-ideological actions that led to the closing of this school in 1933 failed to prevent the export of the ideas of its professionals. Western Europe, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and Israel – to name a few – were influenced by these German professionals, especially in architecture, but not only. In Israel, for example, in the city of Tel Aviv, the most significant number of buildings that have received the “Bauhaus–International Style” seal is concentrated. In 2003, UNESCO declared the “White City,” a region of Tel Aviv, a world heritage site. It is in this part of the city that the vast majority of the buildings constructed in the “Bauhaus–International Style” are located.



Figure 8: White City Tel Aviv. Photo Uwe Weihe. January 31, 2016. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

In Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer is considered the architect closest to his colleagues at the Bauhaus. Proximity does seem to be an adequate word to register the professional relationships of the Brazilian architect Niemeyer with Bauhaus. However, we have not adequately identified it. Also, the differences in concepts between both architects Oscar Niemeyer and Walter Gropius, and by extension to the Bauhaus ideal, came when they met at congresses or any event of architects to talk about their profession. In these meetings, they were not always friendly with each other and held different ideals regarding the architecture's aim. Viviane Vilela (2018), in her essay for the Magazin Humboldt entitled *Oscar Niemeyer and the Bauhaus - more similarities than disagreements*, (*Oscar Niemeyer und das Bauhaus: mehr Ähnlichkeiten als Unterschiede*) highlights a hard dialog already well known by scholars of this subject between Niemeyer and Walter Gropius, on the occasion of a meeting between them in Rio de Janeiro. The quote was slightly long but very illuminating in understanding the convergences and divergences between both architects and, by extension, between the modernist architecture of Niemeyer and the works of Gropius at the Bauhaus. The author shares the following:

"Niemeyer invited Gropius to visit his house Casa das Canoas (House of Canoes) in São Conrado, Rio de Janeiro. This house is considered one of the most significant examples of modern Brazilian architecture; the work was designed by Niemeyer in 1951 to serve as his residence. Its construction in curves adapts to the unevenness of the terrain and makes the vegetation practically penetrate its rooms. However, after the visit, Gropius would have commented with the host, saying 'your house is wonderful, but it is not multiplying.' It was enough to provoke Niemeyer's anger: 'the house was made respecting the forms and the nature of the land, which in principle would prevent it from being multiplied,' he replied."⁶



Figure 9: Niemeyer's House - Casa das Canoas. Photo by René García. CC BY-NC 2.

The author mentioned something interesting, even though it has alleviated the differences between the proposed "multipliable construction" of Walter Gropius and the modernist architecture of Oscar Niemeyer. Indeed, the differences are a bit more pronounced. Some motifs are perceptible, even visually, when we compare these two proposals. In his work, Walter Gropius explores the objectivity of the straight line, allied to the rationality of the geometric forms. All these elements present an aesthetically pleasing work to see, and it meets its initial proposal, namely the "multipliable construction" of cubiform aspect.

For the time when the Bauhaus school existed, it is undeniable that there was a transformative advance, especially about its architectural form. From that moment on, the impression we have is that all previous architecture has aged more rapidly than had already occurred within a normal process of aesthetic transformation of the building. By this time, the concept of multipliable constructions was the starting point of the transformation engendered by Walter Gropius in architecture.

And here it should be noted that teachers and masters of the Bauhaus School had regular contact with the Soviet school Wchutemas. It was founded on the initiative of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1920) and later transformed into a university. They exchanged opinions, information, and knowledge acquired from research. This exchange was undoubtedly of great value to both schools, but it would be short-lived with the rise of Nazism. The goal, as desired by its founder, was preparing artists with the highest qualifications for the industry and builders and managers for professional technical education. The German school even shared its pedagogical origins with this institution. In other words, the Bauhaus received essential contributions from the Russian school Wchutemas, and vice versa.



Figure 10: Bauhaus Architecture. Cologne Nowadays. Germany. Photo Klaus Hausmann.

On the other hand, the work of Oscar Niemeyer has no opposing views, but it was quite different from those designed by Walter Gropius. As noted above, the Bauhaus school worked largely with the pragmatism of geometric and cubic lines, which is quite different from the Brazilian architect's style. In Oscar Niemeyer, as Professor Rodrigo Queiroz stated, "the abstraction is lyrical: the domes of the National Congress, the Cathedral of Brasília, as opposed to the constructive abstraction of the Bauhaus." A structural difference already stands out. Under these conditions, to have at its base vastly different architectural designs and also several goals, understand that we should not compare the work of these two architects, at least as they are presented visually.



Figure 11: National Congress of Brazil, by Oscar Niemeyer, 1958.
Photo: Eduardo Aigner.

We must always celebrate the legacy they have left us. Their works are examples that architecture can be functional and pragmatic – Gropius – but can also harmonize straight lines with elegant curves – Niemeyer – as if accompanied by the rhythm of musical composition and lightness. Today, the work of both is an essential reference in the history of architecture. As well as Gropius, Oscar Niemeyer, if we think about his work, became an architect from all over the world, not just Brazil. To illustrate, here are some of his works frequently visited and performed at different times in his professional career.



Figure 12: Museum Oscar Niemeyer. Rio de Janeiro. Designed by Oscar Niemeyer.
Photo 1 by Jessica Fonseca Matos. Photo 2 by Cristina Tamar.

Final Considerations

Moreover, what is even concrete is that the differences between the Bauhaus School of Walter Gropius, with his conception of "multipliable construction," and the modernist architecture of Oscar Niemeyer. They crossed time, and today, they have mandatory attendance in the history of architecture and university curricula. Gropius's remark when visiting Niemeyer's House of Canoes (Casa das Canoas) and annoying him (his house is wonderful, but it is not multiplying), as much as the hard response of his fellow host, should be credited only to the carelessness of both at that moment. So much so that there were no consequences of this event and over time has become irrelevant.

But even more emphatic was Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, whose pseudonym was no less than Le Corbusier. He had significant importance and positive influence on the concepts that Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa acquired concerning modern architecture. To even do justice to the Swiss-born Swiss architect, naturalized French, the foundations of the modernist movement in architecture are in his book entitled *Towards a new architecture* (1931).⁷ Even before the incident between Walter Gropius and Niemeyer, Le Corbusier had already demonstrated no sympathy for the work of German architects from the Bauhaus school.

For him, the concept of "multiplying construction" was a kind of *déjà-vu* in architecture, and, as such, it represented nothing, much less novelty. After learning about the episode between Niemeyer and Gropius about Casa das Canoas architecture, he did not restrain himself and decided to express himself with these words: "it is active mediocrity, they do not know anything, they want to create rules. Then everyone has to follow. I am the only one to sculpt the Bauhaus, and they are afraid to say that it is a bullshit." The resonance of Le Corbusier's harsh words among the members of the Bauhaus school was rather discreet – almost null. Probably in respect to the figure of a great architect who was already at that time and, by extension, the magnitude of his work.

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Figure 13: The United Nations Secretariat Building. New York, 1947.
Designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Photo by Jörg Peter.

Notes

1. "The art school building was designed by Henry van de Velde and built 1905-1906. It has just been restored over two years to its original state in the University (since 1996) and has been reopened on 5th Feb 2010. In April 2010 it became the faculty of Gestaltung. In 1919-1925 after Van de Velde left Weimar the Bauhaus (an amalgamation of both Van de Velde's schools) Werkstattgebäude was situated here. In DDR times, it became the Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar - HAB - until 1994."

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Weimar,_Bauhaus_-_Kunstgewerbeschule_Van-de-Velde_Bau_with_Wartburg_353,_DDR_May_1990_ORWO_UP15_Slide_film_\(4606651925\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Weimar,_Bauhaus_-_Kunstgewerbeschule_Van-de-Velde_Bau_with_Wartburg_353,_DDR_May_1990_ORWO_UP15_Slide_film_(4606651925).jpg)

2. "The Bauhaus was only active for 14 years: as the "State Bauhaus" (*Staatliches Bauhaus*) in Weimar, as a "school of design" (*Hochschule für Gestaltung*) in Dessau and as a private education institute in Berlin. It evolved out of the arts and crafts movement and art school reforms. Its ideas had an impact well beyond the school itself, its locations and its time." In: The Bauhaus in all its facets (May 3, 2019). <https://www.bauhaus100.com/the-bauhaus/>

3. After Germany was defeated in World War I, the German Empire was replaced by the Weimar Republic—the democratic regime of Germany from 1919 to the assumption of power by Adolf Hitler in 1933. Weimar Republic, the government of Germany from 1919 to 1933, so called because the assembly that adopted its constitution met at Weimar from February 6 to August 11, 1919.

4. "A significant economic collapse characterized by mass unemployment and limited business activity that lasted from 1929 to 1940 in the US and a similar period in many other countries."

In: The U.S. Political System | Boundless Sociology (May 4, 2019).

<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-sociology/chapter/the-u-s-political-system/>

5. "With the crash on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression, German unemployment figures shot up. Foreign trade was drastically curtailed, wages fell, and the number of bankruptcies increased daily. The Depression had immediate political repercussions, undermining the foundations of the republic and producing a notable increase in support for the extremist parties both on the left and on the right. Within two years the Nazis shot up to the first and the Communists to the third place among the German parties. In 1933 Hitler told a Munich audience, "We are the result of the distress for which the others are responsible." The Depression was the indispensable condition for the Nazis' rise to power." In: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Weimar Republic" Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (March 05, 2019) <https://www.britannica.com/place/Weimar-Republic>

6. Viviane Vilela. Oscar Niemeyer und das Bauhaus: mehr Ähnlichkeiten als Unterschiede. Magazin Humboldt (October 20, 2018) <https://www.goethe.de/ins/br/de/kul/fok/bau/21385377.html>

7. Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture* (London: J. Rodker, 1931).