

Essay

New World remakes, Cold-War politics,
and the legacy of the Bauhaus

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By Isabel Wünsche

In 2019, numerous events, exhibitions, and publications in Germany and other countries around the world marked the centennial of the Bauhaus, the now famous German reform art school that first opened its doors in Weimar in 1919, thus cementing once more its brand status as *kultureller Exportschlager*.¹ Despite a postmodern backlash in the 1980s and some critical revision,² the Bauhaus myth is alive and well, having recently acquired a more global dimension in its reception and transformation.

Looking at the historical Bauhaus, we see an art school that was a continuous work in progress—an institution that faced numerous challenges and almost constant crisis throughout its existence in Weimar (1919–25), Dessau (1925–32), and Berlin (1932–33). How then to explain the eventual success, in the public eye, at least, of this seemingly insignificant art school in provincial Germany? The Bauhaus legacy was shaped not in Weimar Germany but rather in the era of cold-war politics in the United States and postwar Europe. In this essay, I will explore some aspects of the construction of its legacy in the 1930s and the extent to which it is still defined up to this day by cold-war politics.

The historic Bauhaus

The Bauhaus was anything but a coherent and unified artistic, educational, and aesthetic concept. Its founding was a part of the cultural reconstruction of Germany after the First World War and the November Revolution, with its earliest instantiation being dominated by new educational approaches to arts and crafts education developed under the leadership of Walter Gropius.³ Students were taught the fundamentals in a preliminary course, followed by specialized craft training in a variety of specialized workshops led jointly by a master of work (craftsman) and a master of form (artist). A finishing course was reserved for the most talented students. As Gropius's visionary manifesto suggested, the end result was to bring together skilled artists and artisans in the service of an ambitious architectural agenda. Organizational difficulties, financial obstacles, and a lack of suitable training facilities, however, greatly restricted the scope of this grand experiment.

In Weimar, it was above all Johannes Itten who dominated early Bauhaus education as a person, an artist, and with his educational and metaphysical concepts. An adherent of the religious-philosophical teachings of Mazdaznan, Itten was a charismatic figure and surrounded himself with a group of like-minded disciples. He stressed self-discovery, the fusion of experience and expression,

1) The centennial was heavily promoted by the Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute, the Institute for Foreign Relations (ifa), and the cultural ministries of the federal states, see, for example: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sponsored/18-cant-miss-bauhaus-100-anniversary-centenary-celebration-event-exhibit-germany-2019-180971894/> (accessed July 18, 2022).

2) See, for example, Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981); Anja Baumhoff, Magdalena Droste (eds.), *Mythos Bauhaus. Zwischen Selbsterfindung und Enthistorisierung* (Berlin: Reimer, 2009); Philipp Oswalt (ed.), *Bauhaus Streit. 1919-2009: Kontroversen und Kontrahenten* (Ostfildern Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

3) Rainer Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 34–38; Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin Chicago* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 29–61.

and an association between spiritual and physical exercise.⁴ In the preliminary course he designed, students were encouraged to develop their own feel for the materials they were working with, to discover their essential properties and, at the same time, free themselves from the prejudices imposed by traditional uses.⁵

In 1923, responding to pressure from the Thuringian government, their primary sponsor, the Bauhaus agreed to present a public exhibition of its work, highlighting the various products of the workshop. In his opening address, “Art and Technology – a New Unity,” Gropius outlined the school’s new orientation. To facilitate the new emphasis, he appointed the Hungarian constructivist László Moholy-Nagy as master of form in the metal workshop. Two themes were central to Moholy-Nagy’s teaching at the Bauhaus: first the idea that design is a social process; secondly, the understanding that intuition plays a major role in the design process.⁶ He thus promoted a socially motivated unity of art and technology that was aimed at “an organic system of production, whose focal point is man, not profit.”⁷ Although strongly opposed to the esotericism of Itten’s approach, Moholy-Nagy adopted much of Itten’s teaching method in the preliminary course, but rather than emphasizing individual development, he pursued a more systematic introduction to the technical foundations of statics, dynamics and equilibrium, and placed greater emphasis on an understanding of space.⁸

In conjunction with Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers, an advanced Bauhaus student in the glass-painting workshop took over part of the preliminary course to prepare first-semester students for the later craft studies in the various workshops. Albers stripped away the more esoteric and expressionist aspects of Itten’s original program, including meditative and metaphysical components, and focused more directly on the use of materials at hand.⁹ Thus, in the mid-1920s, Bauhaus education was largely in the hands of Albers and Moholy-Nagy, who taught the mandatory preliminary course, and Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, who taught *Formlehre*—the studies of color and form—that complemented the preliminary course.

With the outcome of the state elections in Thuringia in 1924, it became clear that the Bauhaus would have no future in Weimar and no longer be underwritten by the state. Following its closure in 1925, the school re-opened in Dessau, where it was initially welcomed with open arms and enjoyed its greatest success. Dessau commissioned Gropius to erect a new building for the school, a group of studios for the students, and several villas for the masters. Subsequently, the town placed a number of important orders with the various workshops and a commercial company was set up under the name Bauhaus GmbH to sell the designs developed in the workshops; thus, a growing number of connections were initiated between the Bauhaus and local industry.¹⁰

The move to Dessau brought some changes in organization and curriculum. The workshops for pottery, stone sculpture and glass painting were discontinued, and the Bauhaus stage, under

4) Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, 92-130.

5) Johannes Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 9; Winger, *The Bauhaus*, 280–89; Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, 67.

6) Gillian Naylor, *The Bauhaus Reassessed: Sources and Design Theory* (London: Herbert Press, 1985), 145.

7) *Ibid.*

8) Wick, Rainer, *Bauhaus: Kunst und Pädagogik* (Art and Pedagogy) (Oberhausen: Athena, 2009), 260.

9) Frederick A. Horowitz, “Albers as a Teacher,” in *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes. The Bauhaus, Black Mountain College and Yale* (New York, London: Phaidon, 2006), 20.

10) Sebastian Neuratuer, *Das Bauhaus und die Verwertungsrechte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

the leadership of Oskar Schlemmer, was further expanded. Importantly, the practice of dual appointments of two masters within each workshop was abolished; six former Bauhaus students were appointed junior masters and took over responsibility for individual workshops.¹¹ Albers and Moholy-Nagy continued to teach the preliminary course, which was extended to two semesters, with Albers teaching material studies in the first semester and Moholy-Nagy directing form experiments in the second.

Things took a major turn in 1928, when Gropius, as founding director, resigned from the school, taking with him Bayer, Breuer, and Moholy-Nagy. Hannes Meyer, an architect who had been appointed master of the newly founded architectural department in 1927, became the new director. Meyer criticized formalist tendencies at the Bauhaus and emphasized instead scientific principles, functional design, social responsibility, and economic sustainability: “Our activity is to serve the people... We do not see a Bauhaus style or a Bauhaus fashion... Thus, the ultimate goal of all work at the Bauhaus is to gather together all the forces that contribute to life in a harmonious design of our society.”¹²

While the structure of the school was left more or less intact, fundamental changes were made in the curriculum and work methods. Meyer emphasized the importance of science in the training of the designer and introduced new courses covering a number of scientific and technical fields, including sociology and *Gestaltpsychologie*; he also hired renowned international experts as guest lecturers.¹³ Albers, Kandinsky, and Klee along with Joost Schmidt continued to teach the foundation courses. The focus of the workshops shifted from the preparation of imaginary projects to executing actual commissions; students no longer engaged in individual tasks but participated in collective work. This reorganization of activities made it possible to form “vertical brigades” in which students at all levels were brought together to work in teams. The considerable scale of commercial work performed by the workshops generated a significant income for the Bauhaus, the profits from which were distributed to the students, thus making the school financially accessible to a wider range of students. Once again, however, political developments soon overshadowed work at the Bauhaus. Despite Meyer’s successful efforts to collaborate with industry and strengthen the school’s financial and administrative autonomy, he was attacked by the conservative and increasingly right-wing government in Dessau for admitting communist students and allowing political activities in the school and dismissed in July 1930.

When the school re-opened in the fall of 1930, it was under the directorship of the star architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who immediately banned political activities of any sort and strictly emphasized the training of architects.¹⁴ The curriculum, adjusted to reflect the new emphasis, relinquished its commitment to social awareness; the workshops were reformed and commercial activities largely discontinued. Despite these measures, intended to appease local authorities, once the National-Socialists came to power in Dessau, in 1932, the school stood no chance and was closed on October 1. Together with Albers, Kandinsky, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Walter Peterhans, and Hinnerk Scheper, Mies van der Rohe carried on offering instruction as a private school in Berlin

11) Herbert Bayer – typography, Marcel Breuer – furniture, Hinnerk Scheper – wall painting, Joost Schmidt – plastic arts, and Gunta Stözl – weaving.

12) Meyer, Hannes, “bauhaus und gesellschaft,” *bauhaus*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1929, 2. English translation: Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, 47.

13) Naylor, *The Bauhaus Reassessed*, 165–72; Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, 177–80.

14) Wick, *Teaching at the Bauhaus*, 71–72.

for another year before he and most of the others, too, left Germany for France, Great Britain, and the United States.

Gropius's Bauhaus and the art of the narrative

The Bauhaus narrative that we know today was above all the work of its founder, Walter Gropius, a master of situational diplomacy, who as necessary shaped the school's objectives and its story line to fit the location, political and cultural climate, and socio-economic conditions at hand. In the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto, he readily took up the post-revolutionary spirit of the time:

Let us create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist. Together let us conceive and create the new building of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.¹⁵

Four years later, the medieval ideal of a guild of craftsmen-artists gave way to an embrace of “art and technology.” In the 1926 publication “Bauhaus Dessau – Principles of Bauhaus Production,” he emphasized a standardized approach to the manufacture of “all practical commodities of everyday use,” noting that: “the Bauhaus workshops are essentially laboratories in which prototypes of products suitable for mass production and typical of our time are carefully developed and constantly improved.”¹⁶

In architectural terms, the Bauhaus, within a very short period of time, had renounced the world of the Gothic cathedral, in 1919, for the idealized single-family home of Haus am Horn, in 1923, which was followed by the move into their very own modernist “Bauhaus School” building in Dessau, in 1926. The reasons for the shape shifting and re-invention were clear. Walter Dexel, writing in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* about Gropius's resignation from the Bauhaus in 1928, minces no words:

Gropius is leaving – and there is talk about a crisis in the Dessau Bauhaus. That is both correct and false. [...] If a Bauhaus crisis exists at all, then it is a permanent one – it has been struggling ever since it came into being. It is one of the most hated institutions of the “new Germany.” It has become a first-class target in the election campaigns.¹⁷

During his years at the Bauhaus, Gropius necessarily spent a great deal of time defending the institution and fending off the almost continual attacks. Though admired by his colleagues and the students for his perseverance, charismatic leadership, and negotiation skills, he was criticized by many for yielding too easily in negotiations with the authorities.¹⁸ After leaving the Bauhaus, he kept in close contact with colleagues and former students, even employing some of them in his Berlin office (1928–34) and collaborating with others during his time in London (1934–36).

15) Walter Gropius, “Program of the State Bauhaus in Weimar (1919),” in Winger, *The Bauhaus*, 31–33.

16) Walter Gropius, “Bauhaus Dessau – Principles of Bauhaus Production,” in *ibid.*, 109–10.

17) Walter Dexel, “Why is Gropius Leaving? (On the Bauhaus Situation),” in *ibid.*, 136–37.

18) Ise Gropius, “Gropius Proclaims his Intention to Resign to the Students,” diary notes of February 4, 1928, in *ibid.*, 136.

The Bauhaus arrives in the United States

The conceptual ideas that fueled the Bauhaus were carried to countries around the world, including Palestine, Nigeria, China, and Australia,¹⁹ but its main post-European narrative was shaped by the masters who eventually emigrated to the United States in the 1930s, among them Anni and Josef Albers, who were the first to arrive; followed by Gropius; Mies van der Rohe; Moholy-Nagy; Breuer; Bayer; and others. Albers and his wife joined the faculty of Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1933, where he set up a visual arts curriculum and taught courses on drawing, design, and color theory and she headed the weaving workshop. In 1950, Albers was appointed chair of the Department of Design at Yale University, where he reorganized the curriculum, integrating painting, sculpture, graphic arts, and architecture all under the banner of design.²⁰

After a brief period in London, where he unsuccessfully tried to set up a British Bauhaus, Gropius emigrated to the United States in 1936, accepting an appointment as head of the Department of Architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, in 1937. Marcel Breuer, his close associate, who had followed him to London in 1935, also joined him at Harvard in 1937. At Gropius's recommendation, the recently arrived Moholy-Nagy was appointed to oversee the opening of what was to be called the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937, being assisted by György Kepes and Bauhaus alumni Hin Bredendieck and Xanti Schawinsky. When funding of this initiative was terminated after a year, the school continued as a private institution, the School of Design, which, in 1949, became part of the Illinois Institute of Technology.²¹

In 1938, Mies van der Rohe, who had arrived in the United States the same year as Gropius, was appointed head of the Department of Architecture at the Armour Institute of Technology (later the Illinois Institute of Technology), where he worked closely with former Bauhäuslers Hilberseimer and Peterhans. American-born Lyonel Feininger returned for a summer at Mills College in Oakland, California, in 1936 and permanently resettled in New York in 1937. Herbert Bayer settled in the United States permanently in 1938. In the process of establishing their careers in the United States, the former Bauhaus masters and students kept in close contact.²²

Depression-era America showed little interest in the Bauhaus or its artists; Regionalism was at its zenith. The abstraction of the newly arrived Europeans was perceived as foreign and too international in orientation. There was, however, a small circle of promoters of European modernism, including Katherine S. Dreier who had co-founded the Société Anonyme, Inc., in 1920; Galka E. Scheyer, who had been promoting the Blue Four on the west coast since 1925; Hilla Rebay, who was instrumental in setting up the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, in 1937; and most importantly Alfred H. Barr, who became the first director of the Museum of Modern (MoMA) art when it opened its doors in 1929. Dreier, Rebay, and Scheyer were in close contact

19) See for example, Wiebke Dursthoff, *Kibbutz und Bauhaus: Arie Shanon und die Moderne in Palestina* (Berlin: Edition Critic, 2016); Philip Goad, Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, Harriet Equist, Isabel Wünsche (eds.), *Bauhaus Diaspora and Beyond: Transforming Education through Art, Design and Architecture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing; Sydney: Power Publications, 2019); "Moving Away," in *Bauhaus Imaginista*, <https://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/editions/5/moving-away> (accessed July 18, 2022).

20) Frederick A. Horowitz, Brenda Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: to open eyes: the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and Yale* (London, New York: Phaidon, 2006).

21) "The New Bauhaus," in Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, 191–217, 577–613.

22) Gabriele Diana Grawe, *Call for Action: Mitglieder des Bauhauses in Nordamerika* (Weimar: VDG, 2002).

with abstract painters and the Bauhaus masters Kandinsky and Klee.²³ Barr had visited the Bauhaus in 1927 on his year-long trip to Europe and been impressed by Gropius's new building and the school's creative atmosphere.²⁴ He kept in touch with the Bauhaus director, and the 1932 MoMA show *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* featured the work of Gropius along with that of Mies van der Rohe, and other modernist architects; on view was also a model of the Dessau Bauhaus.²⁵ Discussions over the acquisition of this architectural model led, in 1937, to a meeting of MoMA representative John McAndrew with Gropius, his wife Ise, Bayer, Breuer, Moholy-Nagy, and Schawinsky and a plan to organize a Bauhaus exhibition at the museum in 1938.²⁶

This first major American survey, *The Bauhaus 1919–1928*, opened at MoMA in December 1938.²⁷ Despite the efforts of Bayer, who had returned to Germany in 1937 to secure works from former Bauhaus members, the number of loans from Germany was limited. Many of the artists had already emigrated; those remaining feared further repression or had adjusted to life and work in the new system. The majority of the works and items on display accordingly came from Gropius and the circle of those involved in the preparations (in addition to works from Schlemmer and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack); photographs were used to fill in the gaps.²⁸

The exhibition consisted of two parts: Weimar 1919–1925 and Dessau 1925–1928, the material being arranged in thematic sections such as Preliminary Course, Painting, Workshops, Typography, Architecture. An important aspect of the presentation was the innovative exhibition design by Bayer, who was able to employ his experience in advertising at the Dorland agency in Germany in the 1930s.²⁹ Interestingly enough, there was no mention of the political situation in either the exhibition or an associated publication. In typical fashion, Gropius pursued a thoroughly apolitical stance, and the Bauhaus narrative that was presented began and ended with his tenure. Mies van der Rohe had responded indifferently to their inquiries, but Meyer, who was at the time living in Switzerland, had not even been contacted by Gropius and Bayer. In the end, the Bauhaus under Meyer and Mies van der Rohe was addressed in one sentence in the preface by Barr:

During these five years [1928–1933] much excellent work was done and the international reputation of the Bauhaus increased rapidly, but fortunately for the purposes of this

23) Isabel Wünsche, "In Pursuit of a Spiritual Calling: Katherine S. Dreier, Galka E. Scheyer, and Hilla von Rebay," in *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Amy K. Levin (London, New York: Routledge, 2010), 213–28.

24) Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 155–61.

25) *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, Museum of Modern Art, New York February 10 to March 23, 1932, see <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2044> (accessed July 18, 2022).

26) Anke Blüm, "The Exhibition Bauhaus 1919–1928 at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938: A Project of the Bauhaus Emigres around Gropius," in *Bauhaus In and Out: Perspectives from Spain*, ed. Laura Martínez de Guereñu (Madrid: ILE, 2019), 422–424; --, "Etappen einer Legendenbildung: Die Bauhaus-Ausstellungen in New York (1938) und Stuttgart (1968)," in *Entwürfe der Moderne: Bauhausausstellungen 1923–2019* (Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2019), 199.

27) Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius (eds.) *Bauhaus 1919–1928* (New York: MoMA, 1938), https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2735_300190238.pdf (accessed July 18, 2022).

28) Blüm, "Etappen einer Legendenbildung," 201–02.

29) Patrick Rössler (ed.), *Herbert Bayer. Die Berliner Jahre – Werbegrafik 1928–1938* (Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag, 2013).

book, the fundamental character of the Bauhaus had already been established under Gropius's leadership.³⁰

Barr went on to emphasize that the Bauhaus really only came into itself after its relocation to Dessau.³¹ Thus, the exhibition firmly established the narrative of Gropius's Bauhaus—which may also explain Gropius and his team's inattention to ownership and intellectual property rights, most specifically in the case of Lucia Moholy, from whom the exhibition and its catalog appropriated roughly fifty Bauhaus photographs without attribution.³²

The reviews of the MoMA show were mixed, with some criticizing a conceptual weakness on the part of the organizers and the low quality of the works on view,³³ and the central question as to the relevance of the Bauhaus for contemporary American society remained unanswered. But the exhibition gained mainstream acceptance as it travelled across the United States in the following two years. Its most lasting impact, however, was achieved by the book publication; with its 550 illustrations, it became a standard reference work on the Bauhaus in the decades that followed (reprints in 1952, 1955, 1972, 1986), casting in stone the scope and image of the Bauhaus and the names of its main protagonists, and laying the foundation for the later reception of the Bauhaus and its founder in the English-speaking world—this being reflected most clearly in the first Bauhaus exhibition in Australia in 1961 and Robin Boyd's statement at the opening:

It is often said that the Bauhaus succeeded because it had a great idea. This is only half the truth. The other half is that it had also a man: one man who held the great idea perhaps more surely in his grasp than anyone else, and who also was a born leader. I mean, of course, the strong, grave and humble man, Walter Gropius, who had the capacity for drawing selfless devotion to this great idea from his confreres.³⁴

This “great man” Bauhaus saga—well tended to by Gropius himself, among others—was likewise well received and further perpetuated by an international network of fellow architects.

The MoMA show provided Gropius with the opportunity to update and reshape the Bauhaus idea for an American cultural environment. Using his talent for effective propaganda, Gropius, writing from his desk at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, in Cambridge, put forth the narrative that the aspirations of the Bauhaus had only reached fulfillment in the democratic environment of the United States.³⁵ Gropius advanced a form of international modernism that

30) Bayer/Gropius/Gropius, *Bauhaus 1919–1928*, 8–9.

31) *Ibid.*

32) Robin Schuldenfrei, “Images in Exile: Lucia Moholy's Bauhaus Negatives and the Construction of the Bauhaus Legacy,” *History of Photography*, vol. 37, no. 2 (May 2013): 182–203.

33) Blüm, “Etappen einer Legendenbildung,” 204–06.

34) Robin Boyd, Opening Speech, Bauhaus Exhibition, Gallery A, Melbourne, July 20, 1961, Walsh Street Collection, Robin Boyd Foundation. See also Isabel Wünsche, “Terra incognita? Die erste Bauhaus-Ausstellung 1962 in Australien,” in *Entwürfe der Moderne: Bauhausausstellungen 1923–2019* (Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2019), 219–38.

35) Kathleen James-Chakraborty, “From Isolationism to Internationalism: American Acceptance of the Bauhaus,” in *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War*, ed. Kathleen James-Chakraborty (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006), 154.

fused Bauhaus design with distinctly American developments such as individual car ownership, suburban settlement development, and domestic consumer culture.³⁶

In the 1940s and 1950s, the Bauhaus idea and aesthetics were, in fact, gradually incorporated into American modernist design and consumer culture, a transition that was aided by the political situation and cultural politics of the ensuing Cold War. The establishment of a New (World) Bauhaus fit well with America's image as a land of freedom and opportunity—and now, perhaps, the rightful heir and guardian of international modernism.³⁷ The presence and efforts of the German Bauhaus exiles at major US institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and the Illinois Institute of Technology enabled the Americans to articulate a new cultural identity as an emerging superpower. As Paul Betts has noted, the marriage of European culture and American civic society became the basis of the American cold-war cultural identity and reflected a “shift of cultural preeminence from Europe to the United States.”³⁸

The Bauhaus returns to Germany

The establishment of the Bauhaus as modernist mecca was strongly shaped by the narrative Gropius and his network cultivated in the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s and then brought back to Germany after 1945, namely the rise of the National Socialists abruptly silencing the successful modernist art school and driving into exile its most talented representatives.³⁹ This narrative became important in the reconstruction of Germany after the collapse of the Third Reich and the end of the Second World War and in the postwar efforts of the Allied Forces to eliminate any trace of National Socialist ideology through a strategy of denazification, reeducation, and social restructuring.⁴⁰ What it tends to obscure is that the “crisis of the Bauhaus” had been present almost from its inception in 1919, long before the school's demise in Dessau. It also ignores the fact that Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Moholy-Nagy, Bayer, and other members of the school had successful careers in Germany between 1928 and 1934 and even later, with Gropius and Mies van der Rohe participating in a competition to design the new Reichsbank in Berlin in 1933, collaborating with Nazi organizations as members of the Deutsche Werkbund, and being actively involved in the design of the 1934 exhibition *Deutsches Volk: Deutsche Arbeit* (German People: German Work).⁴¹ Furthermore, this narrative glances over the fact that in July 1933, Mies van der Rohe received a letter from the Berlin office of the State Secret Police (Gestapo), outlining a conditional approval to re-open the Bauhaus in Berlin, provided that Hilberseimer and Kandinsky were dismissed, the

36) Greg Castillo, “The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany,” in *ibid.*, 181.

37) Paul Betts, “The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend: West German Modernism Revisited,” *German Politics and Society*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 83.

38) *Ibid.*

39) Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, 4th ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 148.

40) Ulrich Wilmes, “Postwar: Denazification and Reeducation,” in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-1965*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, Ulrich Wilmes (Munich: Haus der Kunst, Prestel, 2016), 59.

41) Pamela M. Potter, *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 194-195. See also Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung* (Munich: Prestel, 1993); Jonathan Petropoulos, *Artists Under Hitler: Collaboration and Survival in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

curriculum modified, and faculty members completed an obligatory questionnaire.⁴² From Mies van der Rohe's final letter to the students announcing the school's dissolution on August 10, 1933 we know that the school's leadership was willing to accept these conditions, but felt that the economic conditions would not support a continuation.⁴³ Thus, the canonical telling of the school's demise in the face of National Socialism, the persecution of its members, and their forced exile is only part of the story.

Gropius's Bauhaus narrative became a cornerstone in the cultural reconstruction of postwar West Germany because it provided what was seen as an untainted link to the German historical past of the Weimar Republic, with the exiled Gropius serving as a main representative of its liberal cultural politics. Having adjusted his Bauhaus concept to incorporate American values, Gropius was the ideal figure to lead the efforts for cultural renewal and the creation of a new, democratic Germany as imagined by the western Allied Forces. With his consent, any historical remnants of radical leftist activities at the historical Bauhaus were attributed to the "communist" director Meyer, who had sabotaged his Bauhaus mission, and thus easily served as a "convenient scapegoat" for all those ideological traits that did not fit into the Western cold-war image of the school.⁴⁴

Gropius, who had provided the British Armed Forces with information on German construction technology to aid the effectiveness of their air raids on German cities⁴⁵ and consulted with the Harvard Committee on Military Government and International Administration on plans for a postwar Europe in 1942,⁴⁶ was appointed architectural advisor to General Lucius D. Clay in 1947 and frequently travelled to Germany in the immediate postwar period to assist in the Allied reconstruction program, promoting American-style modernization. The former Bauhaus director, with his "good" German past and a powerful standing in America was granted special cultural authority. By cultivating the narrative of an apolitical liberal Bauhaus that had been destroyed by the Nazis, Gropius became the ideal representative on the pathway from the Weimar Republic to a new, democratic West Germany.

Gropius used his standing to support the establishment of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (School of Design) as a "new Bauhaus" in Ulm in 1953, a joint effort by the American High Command of Germany and the West German government. Founded on the initiative of Inge Aicher, sister of Sophie and Hans Scholl, members of the White Rose resistance group who had been murdered by the Nazis, the Bauhaus heritage was now connected to efforts at cultural regeneration, providing democratic re-education on the basis of antifascism, anticommunism, international modernism.⁴⁷ The school, set up as a private institution and funded with one million marks from the US fund for the democratic re-education of the Germans, as well as additional private funds, was to promote humanistic education and foster creative activity in the cultural reconstruction of Germany. The opening ceremony, attended by Ludwig Erhard, Theodor Heuss, Albert Einstein, and Walter Gropius, demonstrated that "the Bauhaus idea [had] come home" and was serving as

42) Office of the State Secrete Police, Berlin, letter of July 21, 1933 to Mies van de Rohe, in Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, 189.

43) Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Announcement to the Students of the Dissolution of the Bauhaus," August 10, 1933, in *ibid.*, 189.

44) Betts, "The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend," 80. See also --, "Das Bauhaus als Waffe im Kalten Krieg: Ein Amerikanisch-Deutsches Joint Venture," in *Bauhaus Streit*, 196–213.

45) Richard Overy, *The Bombing War, Europe 1939–45* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 328.

46) Castillo, "The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany," 181.

47) Betts, "The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend," 78.

the basis for an enlightened West German culture.⁴⁸ Thus, the Bauhaus legacy became a centerpiece of American-West German cultural relations, helping the Germans to come “to terms with the past with American assistance.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, in the period of the economic miracle, Bauhaus modernism was elevated to standard bearer of West Germany’s official architectural and design aesthetics, shaping postwar middle-class consumer culture.⁵⁰

Throughout the postwar period, Gropius was not only involved in architectural competitions for the reconstruction of German cities (e.g., the 1957 *Interbau*) but also instrumental in institutionalizing the historic Bauhaus legacy in West Germany, working closely with Hans M. Wingler on the establishment of the Bauhaus-Archiv in Darmstadt. This comprehensive collecting and archiving effort was necessary to make up for those sites and collections that were no longer accessible due to their location in what was now the Soviet zone and East Germany (GDR). The comprehensive volume of documentary material published in German in 1962 and in an English edition in 1978 is still in use today.⁵¹ Gropius also obtained the commission to design the museum intended to house this new, permanent collection, the Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für Gestaltung, which eventually opened its doors in Berlin in 1979.

During the cold-war period, the Bauhaus advanced to a cultural-political symbol of the transatlantic alliance.⁵² Wingler, director of the newly established Bauhaus-Archiv from 1961 to 1984, summed up the Bauhaus legacy in 1958 as the forging of a new cultural partnership between the United States and West Germany and a major step in the re-integration of Germany into the West:

The Bauhaus counts as Germany’s most substantial gift of modern culture to America [...] it now belongs to the entire world – but what concerns us especially is this: it is for Americans and Germans the shining symbol of our great spiritual solidarity.⁵³

This approach to the Bauhaus in the Western zones of postwar Germany and the early Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) also brought a quick end to the efforts of former Bauhaus members active in the Soviet zone and early GDR, including Hubert Hoffmann in Dessau and Mart Stam in Dresden (1945–49) and Berlin Weissensee (1950–51). The verdict came at the Fifth Congress of the SED in 1951:

Today, where are the architects who represent the Bauhaus, such as Gropius, Mies van der Rohe... and others? They are in America, they appear to like it there, and from this we can infer that they have decided in favor of American imperialism.⁵⁴

48) Eva von Seckendorff, *Die Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm* (Marburg: Jonas, 1989), 89-90. English in *ibid.*, 81.

49) Christian Borngräber, *Stil Novo: Design in den Fünfziger Jahren* (Berlin: Dieter Fricke, 1978), 23. English in *ibid.*, 82.

50) *Ibid.*, 79; Castillo, “The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany,” 185–86.

51) Hans M. Wingler, *Das Bauhaus 1919–1933 Weimar, Dessau, Berlin und die Nachfolge in Chicago seit 1937* (Bramsche: Gebr. Rasch & Co., 1962). English edition: Wingler, *The Bauhaus*.

52) Göckede, *Mythos Bauhaus*, S. 284.

53) Hans M. Wingler, “Was hält Amerika von deutscher Kunst,” *Die Welt*, May 12, 1958, cited in Betts, “The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend,” 88.

54) Report by Hans Lauder, cited in Castillo, “The Bauhaus in Cold War Germany,” 180.

In the wake of functionalism and the formalism of the so-called Bauhaus style, which—particularly in West Germany, as introduced by the Americans—have led architecture to a dead end, it is necessary to base the architecture of a new Germany on the classical legacy and... above all, Soviet architecture.⁵⁵

While the 1970s and 1980s saw some efforts to rehabilitate the Bauhaus in the East and to critically re-assess its postwar legacy as narrated by Gropius and his circle in the West, this came to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which seemed to confirm the superiority of the Gropius narrative that had shaped West German identity and consumer culture now for four decades. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Eastern bloc in 1990 have made available a wealth of new material and details on the school itself and the greater Bauhaus community, finally bringing to light the significant contributions of the Bauhaus women, as well as lesser known figures, and other regional offshoots, particularly in the East.⁵⁶ The reunification offered, however, no incentive to deconstruct and reconsider the overall narrative of the successful historical winners. Rather, it cemented the projected superiority of the “New World” role of Gropius in America and West Germany: Itten’s influence on the early Bauhaus remains an expressionist side note, Meyer’s tenure is seen as a “socialist aberration,” and Mies van der Rohe’s directorship as a brief afterword. The institutionalized, state-funded, and ideological tainted cold-war narrative lives on, having now taken on a greater global dimension fueled by the past centennial.

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55) Walter Ulbricht, *Das nationale Aufbauwerk und die Aufgaben der deutschen Architektur* (Berlin 1952), cited in *ibid.*

56) See for example, Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* (London: Herbert Press, 2019); Eva Bajkay, *Die Ungarn am Bauhaus* (Pecs: Janus Pannonius Muzeum, 2010); *Bauhaus: Networking Ideas and Practice* (Zagreb: MSU, 2015).