

# The Significance of the Educational Philosophies of Walter Gropius for Interior Design Curricula

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## Abstract

*The faculty of the much maligned Bauhaus produced a manifesto filled with timeless, applicable directives for an all-encompassing design curriculum. The powerful principles and objectives were carefully laid out by Walter Gropius during and after his tenure as director of the Bauhaus. His philosophies can be applied directly to interior design curricular development.*

*A separation of Gropius' writings from the design work of Bauhaus associates, an easier task now than in the past, unlocks a realm of deep and thoughtful statements that pertain to and can have a powerful influence on the future of interior design education. The original manifesto of the Bauhaus and twelve of Gropius' more profound edicts are examined for their potential application in course and program methodology in interior design education.*

## Introduction

Walter Gropius, the man most often associated with the Bauhaus, could also be considered a statesman of design education philosophy if only his name was not so synonymous with the Machine Aesthetic of early 20th century design and architecture. A separation of the writings of Gropius from his design work unlocks a realm of deep and thoughtful statements that pertain to and would influence interior design education.

Gropius wrote often and succinctly about general principles to be applied to the goals and objectives of an art, design, or architectural curriculum. He

was the main author of the *Bauhaus Manifesto* of 1919 and was director of the Bauhaus from 1919 to 1928. After leaving the Bauhaus, he continued to write while director of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard.

Although Gropius wrote of an all-embracing education of the built environment, many of his philosophies can be applied specifically to interior design, which has developed significantly as a profession since the inception of the Bauhaus. His writings make remarkable sense today and could be used by institutions formulating or revising an interior design curriculum. The original Bauhaus philosophy and twelve of Gropius' more profound edicts are examined for their potential application in course and program methodology in interior design curricula development.

## Bauhaus Aspiration and Evolution

Paul Heyer (1966) stated that Gropius was the architect of the only comprehensive set of principles between the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and our own educational systems of today. Beaux-Arts principles, which dominated American architectural and design teaching from 1870 until the 1930s, stressed Vitruvian idealism, classical order and harmony, integration of the arts, and a distinct and disciplined method of design.

The primary objective of the Bauhaus, which was formed from the merger of schools of design and fine arts in Weimar, Germany, in 1919, was to "propagate not a style, system, or dogma, but simply to exert a revitalizing influence on design" (Gropius,

1937, p. 8). Teachings were not to be based on any preconceived ideas of form. Unfortunately, the members of the Bauhaus faculty, Gropius included, were not often able to live up to the objective in their design work, hence the quick correlation of Bauhaus to Machine Aesthetic or International Style. The Machine Aesthetic involved emphasis on logic, circulation, mechanical equipment, technology, and structure. In Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), he criticized Gropius for making such common reference to machinery. Banham referred to the widespread perception of the machine being the primary focus of the Bauhaus rather than craftsmanship, creativity, or variety. Banham further stated that the work of the Bauhaus came to be thought of as a recognizable style, though Gropius and others denied it (Banham, p. 285).

The design world was heavily impacted and influenced by the Bauhaus work and products. Banham went so far as to call it a "revolution in aesthetics" (Banham, p. 283). One could assert that had the Bauhaus faculty been dedicated to their manifesto rather than to their own stylistic desires (Banham, p. 283), other design schools could have observed a more comprehensive language of design education and may well have been compelled to incorporate a major concept of Gropius' philosophy — consistent methods of approach to solve design problems. Instead, design schools throughout the world began to push the fashionable International Style with its relatively narrow philosophy of design. However, there may yet be a large-scale influence on present and future interior design programs through analysis and implementation of the well-conceived Bauhaus educational principles.

## **Bauhaus Principles and Objectives**

After laying a philosophical foundation, the Bauhaus set down principles and objectives to follow. Of the principles and objectives developed by Gropius and his peers, twelve are particularly relevant to interior design education. Each of the statements is fol-

lowed, first, by an examination of Gropius' ideas and, second, by an explanation of the relevance and potential application of the statement in interior design education.

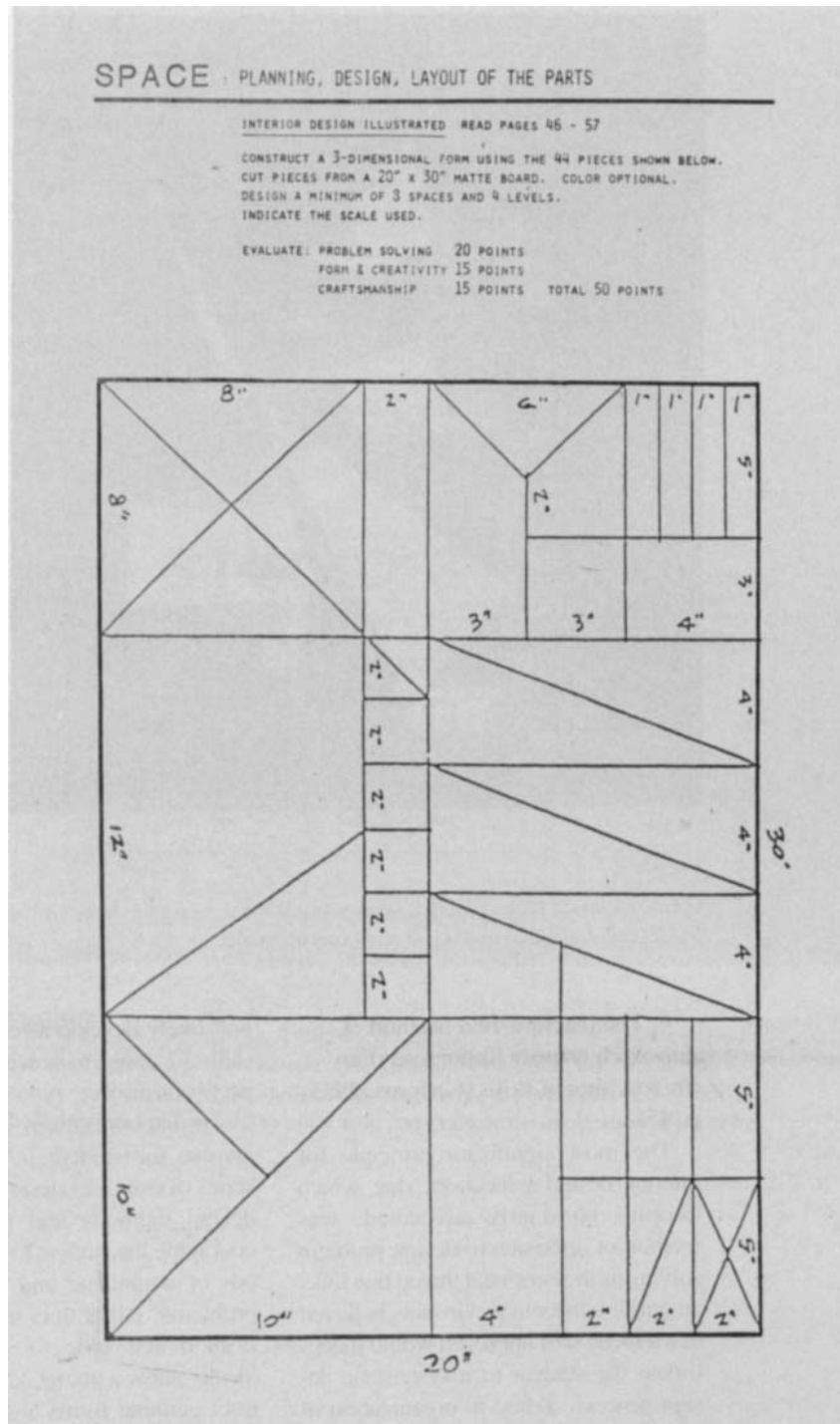
### **1. Begin with and maintain a vision**

Gropius believed that a consistent vision offers a solid foundation for fellow colleagues to push toward a "higher embodiment of creative unity" (Gropius, 1935, p. 79). The Bauhaus vision was well documented in the manifesto. The guiding vision of the Bauhaus was that "artistic design is neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life" (Gropius, 1935, p. 89). One could conclude from the study of Gropius' writings that he used 'vision' as a truncation of philosophy and goals.

Formulating and adhering to philosophies and goals, a difficult yet necessary exercise, assures that administrators, faculty, and students understand what the program entails, what it emphasizes, what the goals and objectives are, and what the expectations are. The overall vision of the program and curriculum should be communicated to the student at the outset of his/her studies. Ensuing course outlines should contain ties to the overall goals, thus allowing for cognition of the individual course objectives while still considering the comprehensive curriculum goals. Maintaining and sustaining the vision is essential for a strong and consistent program and curriculum.

### **2. Synthesis of the mastery of form, space, and skill of hand (Heyer, 1978, p. 202)**

Gropius believed that the relationship of the most significant design elements, form and space, should be emphasized early in the curriculum and further elaborated in subsequent courses. The student would then display his or her level of comprehension with proper development of presentation and communication skills. Gropius further hoped that the student would come to perceive the harmonious relationship of different rhythms of forms and spaces, and that through actual material depiction and handcrafting of materials, the student would develop an increased sensitivity for materials.



**Figure 1**  
Form and Space Project handout for Introduction to Interior Design course at Colorado State University. Project originator: W. Otie Kilmer.

An interior design curriculum should involve such a synthesis and stress the comprehension of space and forms in space. Projects which require three-dimensional development, such as models or perspectives, coupled with course work to develop a sense of the relationships of form and space, can greatly enhance design students' ability to synthesize.

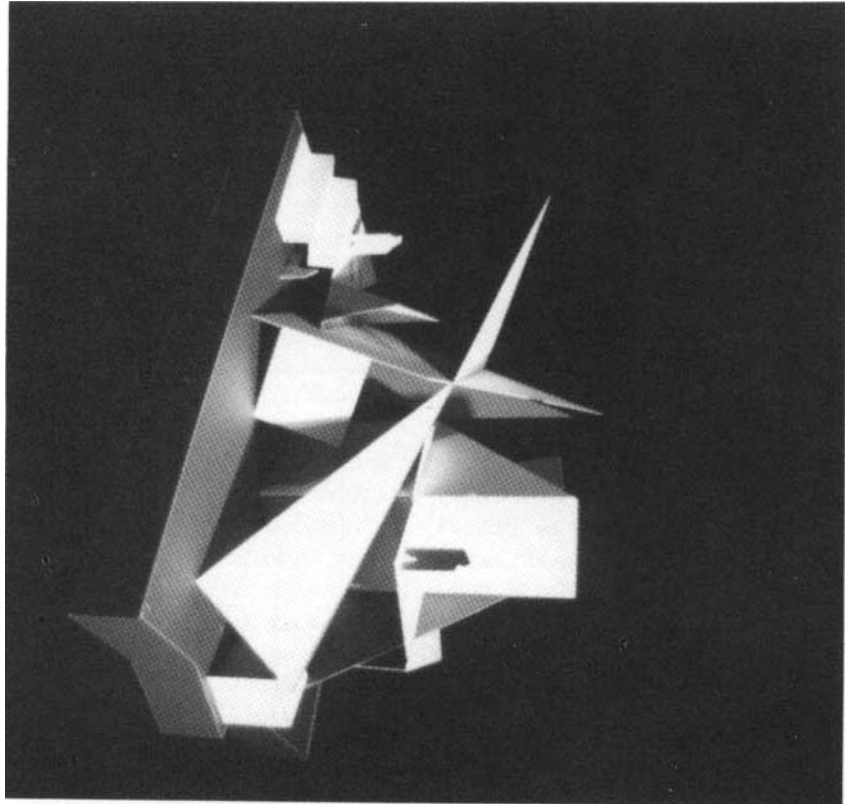
A project that has been successfully employed in some interior design programs engages the student in building a model out of miscellaneous abstract pieces of neutral-colored board. (See Figure 1.)

The student rather easily visualizes various spaces resulting from the placement of the pieces (forms). If most of the other design elements, such as color, scale, texture, and light are deemphasized, form and space can be isolated in a critique setting. (See Figure 2.)

### 3. Design education should be a visual education

Gropius believed that the duty of design is to activate the spiritual and aesthetic values to intensify the development of everyone's imaginative faculties. He felt that a designer must have a grammar of the visual components of design such as composition, space, scale, form, color, and light which, "expressed through the senses, links human to human even closer than do words" (Gropius, 1947, p. 300). A common language of visual communication, Gropius believed, will give designers a foundation of solidarity for spontaneous expression in art.

To heighten the visual education of an interior designer would involve stressing the importance of graphic communication techniques as well as instructing the student with pictorial media (slides, photographs, video tapes). The objective would be that the student appreciates the magnitude of visual aspects of design. An interior design program should have a large and select library of visual media for research and course use, as well as adequate studio and computer facilities to assist a student in properly understanding and communicating the many visual components of a design.



**Figure 2**

Form and Space Project Model, sophomore student, Colorado State University.  
Model constructed of mat board at no specific scale.

**4. The teaching of a method of approach is more important than the teaching of skills (Gropius, 1955, p. 45)**

The most significant principle for interior design education, one which Gropius constantly advocated, was method of approach to design problem solving as the continual thread that links an entire curriculum. Gropius believed that a method of approach would indoctrinate the student to a systematic design process, aiding in organization of the complex problem solving inherent in many design problems. Gropius maintained that the method should be a crescendo of added depth and complexity.

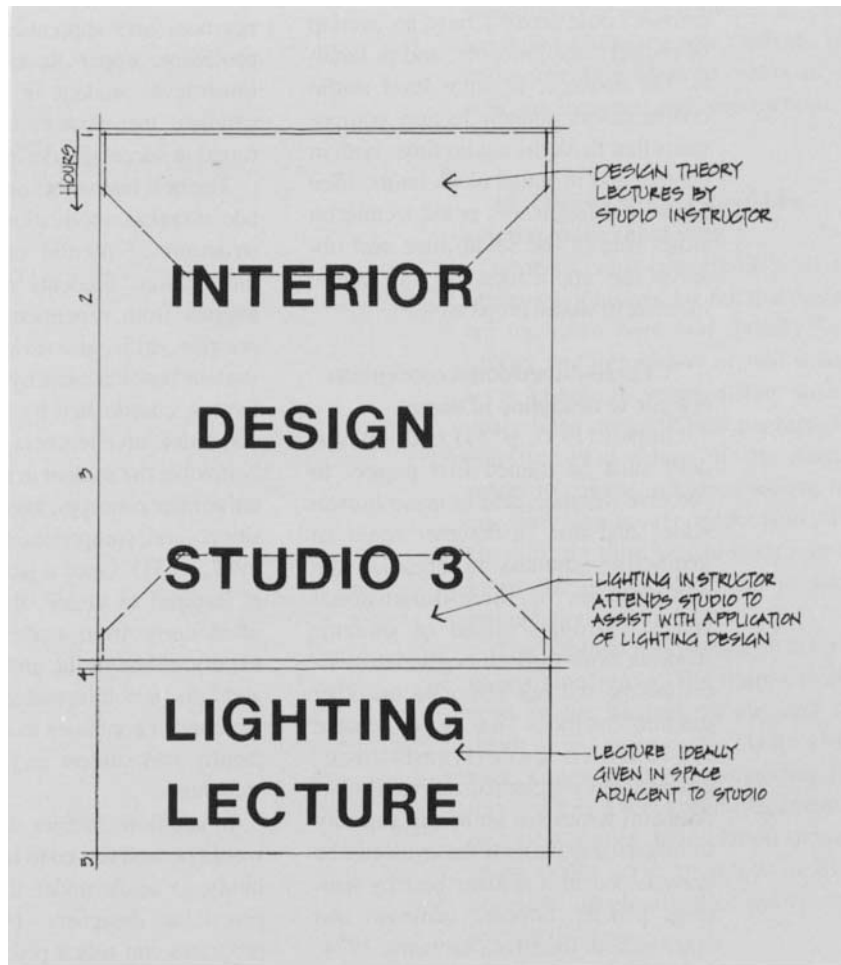
An interior designer must possess many skills to effectively design and communicate. The student of interior design should acquire these skills in conjunction with learning proper methods of skill application. If the design faculty concentrates on teaching consistent methods of approach to design problems as a framework for the teaching of the necessary skills, the student

will likely develop a feeling for which skills to apply to solve individual aspects of a project.

An interior design program could involve the student in a project or a series of exercises designed to focus on design methods and processes. Encouraging the student to focus on methods of organizing and solving design problems, rather than merely adapting fashion and style to spaces, should ideally allow a young designer to create true, genuine forms and spaces based on the present technical and socio-economic conditions. Once the designer becomes confident with a method of approach, this confidence should allow the designer to react positively to change throughout his or her career.

**5. In the age of specialization, method is more important than information (Gropius, 1955, p. 54)**

Gropius emphatically believed that too much emphasis on information and book education does not promote the proper state of mind for creative conception. Gropius (1955, p. 39) stated in



**Figure 3**

The chart depicts a partial class day. The first hour of a studio may begin with a lecture or discussion by the studio instructor. During the latter part of the studio, the lighting instructor visits to assist with and evaluate the application of his or her lecture material.

*Scope of Total Architecture.* "A student of art and design emerges from college filled to the brim with knowledge but has not been given any clue toward contemporary problems and contemporary tasks." The overemphasis on "fact-knowledge" and intellectual reasoning, Gropius believed, runs the risk of causing students to mistrust their own instincts and deny everything that cannot be reasoned conclusively. He felt that it was more important to stimulate students to come forth with their own ideas and solutions than to focus on facts and ready-made formulas.

A student of interior design, upon comprehension of a method of approach to design, should acquire the skills to assimilate the satisfactory product, material, and other technical information to fit a method of approach. If, on the other hand, a student is supplied with information and has little regard for procedures of application, the information would likely become trivialized and mishandled. In addition, information that often becomes dated and replaced would be of little concern to the designer trained in methods of search and research of products, techniques, codes, and standards.

**6. At each stage the scope (of instruction) should be all embracing rather than sectional (Gropius, 1955, p. 55)**

A student must initially understand the whole of design in simple terms and subsequently grow concentrically with a deeper comprehension of the complexities, according to Gropius. He felt that "the student will easily absorb all details and place them where they belong if he (she) progresses from the whole to the details and not vice-versa" (Gropius, 1955, p. 46).

A sectional approach to education, the most common method of instruction in the United States (Dr. M. C. Wittrock, personal communication, Nov. 7, 1988), does not foster comprehension of the interdependencies of subjects. Interior design educational curricula, course work, and pedagogy could reflect the many interrelationships that designers must consider during the development of a project. The curriculum could be designed to require the student to take corresponding and related courses each semester and those

courses could actually have an overlap of projects, assignments, and/or faculty. For instance, a junior level studio course could contain lecture components that flank the studio time, both in content and in actual clock hours. (See Figure 3.) Instructors could lecture on either side of the studio time and observe the application of the lecture material in studio projects.

### **7. Three-dimensional conception is basic to discipline in design**

Gropius (1955, p. 54) said, "A student must be trained first to see, to perceive distance, and to grasp human scale" and that "a designer needs an instinctive sureness to organize the complexities of three-dimensional space." Gropius talked of students working with three-dimensional models but he did not elaborate on other teaching methods that would enable students to understand three-dimensional conceptualization. Rudolf Arnheim wrote that an inborn capacity to understand through the eyes can be reawakened in a student best by handling pencils, brushes, cameras, and other tools of the artist (Arnheim, 1974, p. 1).

An interior designer will often communicate the proposed design in two dimensions yet must be capable of conceptualizing and visualizing in three dimensions, as the finished design is almost certain to be a three-dimensional space or form. Training in oblique, axonometric, and perspective drawing and sketching coupled with exercises involving the design elements, especially space and form, in three dimensions will enable the student to become familiar with three-dimensional conception.

### **8. Capacity for growth is derived from stimulation and curiosity**

Gropius contended that the student needs contact with creative and enthusiastic individuals who are actively and passionately involved in their own work. Gropius called for "constant contact with public life and the people by means of exhibitions and other events" (Dearstyne, 1986, p. 41). He also believed nothing is so contagious as "friendly intercourse between master and students outside of the work" (Heyer, 1978, p. 201). Gropius also instituted terms such as masters, jour-

neymen, and apprentices in place of professor, upper-level student, and lower-level student in an attempt to simulate the close-knit working unit found in successful design firms.

The best instructors are able to facilitate attention, motivation, and the construction of mental elaborations of information. Students do not sustain interest from repetition or reinforced practice, drills, and reviews. Instead, a student benefits most by classroom activities, coordinated by supportive and communicative teachers, which actively involve the student in construction of unfamiliar concepts, knowledge acquisition, and comprehension (Wittrock, 1987, p. 31). Once a group of students is inspired to create, the energy will often carry from student to student. Ideally, although the enthusiasm peaks and falls, it will be sustained as long as the contact continues to occur between faculty and student and also between students.

In addition, interior design students would be well served to have the opportunity to study under the tutelage of practicing designers. Interior design programs can solicit practicing designers in the form of student project critics, lecturers, internship mentors, or as visiting or adjunct design professors.

### **9. Students should be versed in working in teams (Gropius, 1955, p. 56)**

Gropius understood that the design field is often too demanding and too vast for a single designer and that teamwork is often essential for successful results. Gropius sought a flexible approach to design that would be based on creative teamwork. He stated, "I feel that the art of building is contingent upon the coordinated teamwork of a band of active collaborators whose orchestral cooperation symbolizes the cooperative organism of what we call society" (Gropius, 1935, p. 57).

Many course projects, especially in a studio situation, allow the possibility of student group interaction and the practice of communication skills involved in successful teamwork. Even more beneficial to the student would be the interaction with students of other related disciplines in project situations. The latter situation would more closely resemble the design profession and

would involve such activities as learning new vocabulary, new methods, and communicating ideas to others in design, engineering, and construction.

#### **10. History studies should be started in the third year**

Gropius was concerned with the treatment of history. He felt that designers too often borrowed directly from history and that history should instead serve to help the more mature student analyze the origin of past masterworks and the relationships of the masterworks to culture, religion, society, and current means of production. For Gropius, the third year of study seemed to be the proper placement to avoid intimidation and imitation.

The Bauhaus has often been accused of rebuking history. The stylistic design work of the Bauhaus faculty and students would support this claim. However, Gropius' writings regarding history suggest a thoughtful placement of historical studies. Intimidation and imitation could serve to inhibit a more complete development of the creative interior designer.

#### **11. The number of students per teacher should be 16 at the most (Gropius, 1955, p. 57)**

Efficiency of teaching performance depends on the ratio of students to faculty. Gropius contended that a teacher with too many students will be overburdened and therefore inaccessible to all of the students.

A design student needs individual coaching for proper development. The most effective studio instructor is able to perceive, understand, and adapt to the individual student's talents and weaknesses. If there are too many students in a studio course the faculty will be drained either of time or energy.

While it is difficult for many institutions to financially support the concept of a 16:1 ratio, the long-lasting effects of more teacher accessibility for the student and less burden for the faculty member would allow the more fortunate programs to become ever stronger. Employing capable graduate students as studio teaching assistants in large sections is one way some institutions ease the burden.

#### **12. A comprehensive vision across disciplines is necessary for an integrated society**

Gropius claimed that specialization was leading to further separation of artist and scientist. This caused the dispersal of knowledge and experience to be too self-contained. If communication and collaboration were more common between artist and scientist, Gropius argued, society would benefit by the more rapid growth in knowledge and the more thorough understanding and implementation of technology.

A comprehensive vision would assure that the interior design student becomes aware of the goals of society. To best serve a client, designers need an understanding of the aims and ambitions of their client. It would stand to reason that to best serve society, a designer would be aware of the aims and ambitions of society. To attain this awareness a designer must possess a general knowledge of many aspects of life, be able to assimilate and integrate this knowledge into their problem solving approaches, and especially to reach a general level of competence in relating to and understanding fields such as product design, textiles, lighting, building engineering, architecture, construction, and real estate.

## **Conclusion**

The basic principles and objectives spelled out for the Bauhaus by Walter Gropius have a timeless relevance for present and future interior design programs. Gropius was well versed and insightful in education. He saw education as the catalyst which could bring society and its expression in architecture, design, and art together. Gropius (1955, p. 41) stated that:

Good education, aiming at preparing the individual for a creative attitude and for equipoise in life, must certainly lead a student beyond mere fact information and book knowledge into direct personal experience and action. Only if educators make students find facts by themselves can knowledge turn into wisdom.

Many interior design curricula are under constant fluctuation and alteration. It is relatively easy to make individual course changes and relatively difficult to see that those changes still adhere to the vision and intent of an integrated curriculum. The educational philosophies of Gropius could serve as a powerful and consistent thread to bind the entire curriculum of an interior design program.

Gropius' edicts can be highlighted, at least, to suggest the importance of developing and following program philosophies and goals. Upon further examination, his edicts also point out the possibilities for course content concepts which drive to the very core of interior design education; namely, method of approach, visualization skills, teamwork, internships, proper placement of history courses, technical development, and integration of subject matter.

Perhaps these principles have not been considered or widely applied because Gropius' examples of design largely fall under the Machine Aesthetic designation of the International Style. The Bauhaus has taught many the ill effects of displaying and dictating style. While the Bauhaus style commands a place in architectural and design history, the future holds the possibility of prominent application of the philosophies, principles, and objectives that were well conceived but not always followed.

Gropius (1955, p. 57) contended that a program which fosters search and creativity, "...will lead the potential designer from observation to discovery to invention and finally to an intuitive shaping of our contemporary scene." Such a positive, forceful statement offers a compelling point of departure when constructing or renovating an interior design curriculum.

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