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The influence of Hans Scharoun

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In connection with the Scharoun Exhibition held at the RIBA last February, Peter Blundell Jones and Nasser Golzari organised a one-day symposium about Scharoun and his influence. Among the invited speakers were Friedrich Mebes, whose contribution we published in the first issue of *arq*, and Günter Behnisch, the leader of the most distinguished German firm that could be said to follow the Scharounian spirit today. Behnisch & Partners first rose to world fame with the Munich Olympic buildings of 1972, but it has gone on to complete such prestigious works as the new Bonn Parliament, the Frankfurt Post-museum and the University Library in Eichstätt. Behnisch was invited to speculate on his relationship with Scharoun, and more generally on the master's influence in Germany today.

I never actually got to know Hans Scharoun or Hugo Häring. I must have seen them here and there, but we never spoke. And I did not enjoy reading Hugo Häring, either. For one thing, his writings struck me as rather 'tortured'. And later, after I had developed a deeper understanding of his philosophy and the designs and buildings that resulted from it, I did not find enough new ideas in his writings. Perhaps the closest I came to them was through Heinrich Lauterbach, the close friend of both and one of the authors of the first book on Häring. Lauterbach was my teacher in 'Introduction to Design' in Stuttgart when I went to study there in 1947. Today, I think of him as a good teacher, but then we had other worries. His sophisticated and subtle explanations were hardly our main concern. I had been released from a POW camp in Northumberland. I could not go back to Saxony, where I was born, because the Russians were there. And Stuttgart had been heavily bombed. Later on I regretted not having paid more attention to Lauterbach. But at the time other things seemed more important.

I was the product of a different age and a different world, 40 years younger. I had never known Imperial Germany, nor the First World War, nor the revolution that followed, nor the beginning of the Weimar Republic, nor Expressionism in art, nor the so-called Roaring Twenties. And I was born in Saxony - a land that had suffered repeatedly under Prussia's lust for conquest, a land that has a greater affinity with the South, with Bohemia and Austria. Our first reaction to events in Prussia was suspicion - not without reason, as it turned out. And Berlin, the place where Scharoun and Häring worked, was the hub of Prussian power. For the past 47 years I have lived in Stuttgart, in Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany, a land with a liberal tradition. Cities like Basle, Zurich, Munich, Strasbourg, even Geneva and Milan, are closer to us than Berlin, and our holiday homes are in Alsace, in Burgundy, in Provence, Ticino and Tuscany, not in the Mecklenburg lake district to the north of Berlin.

At the time of my studies, the Faculty of Architecture of the university was housed in the building of the State

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1. Hans Scharoun: Weissenhof house 1927

Academy of Fine Arts, in the Weissenhof development. Some of the houses built there for the architectural exhibition of 1927 were still standing, including, at one corner, the small house designed by Hans Scharoun [Fig. 1]. It was certainly a striking house, if only because of its unusual shape, but at the time I regarded it more as a 'rare bird'.

There was another side to the Stuttgart school of architecture. A leading teacher there from 1918 to 1945 had been Paul Schmitthenner, an architect born in Alsace, which of course is now French. Schmitthenner was an advocate of 'natural architecture' - building with natural materials, using craft designs in keeping with tradition. Today, I think his endeavours must have been the last attempt to fetch architecture back into the 'lap of nature'. It was voluntary restraint - limiting oneself to the framework within which building had been practised up to that time. The architects of Modernism, in contrast, attempted to liberate their buildings from the restrictions imposed by natural materials and craft methods. They did not want their buildings to cower like a Black Forest farmhouse, they wanted them to be free and self-assured. Of course, they did not have the materials and methods at their disposal that we have today - and which do allow us truly to exceed the limitations of the 'old' architecture. But in the realm of form, the modernists did manage to achieve what was denied them in reality, and their buildings really did look as though they had broken out of the old limits. Hans Scharoun's house in the Weissenhof development is clearly one such building.

The attempt to deal through form with problems that cannot be solved in reality is one of the tasks of architecture. Consider, for example, the phantom shells of humanistic architecture, in which the solid walls that were in fact necessary and which tended to turn the building into a closed box appeared to be 'dissolved', or South German Baroque architecture, in which the interiors of domes appeared to dissolve into transparency, seeming to allow an unobstructed view of the sky. Throughout history, there were works of architecture that rose above the norm through being the expression of a different world - a higher world liberated from the rigours of the mundane, the preordained and the trivial.

The debate between the advocates of 'natural' and 'modern' architecture was fierce. It was a matter of opposing philosophies. This became clear when, under

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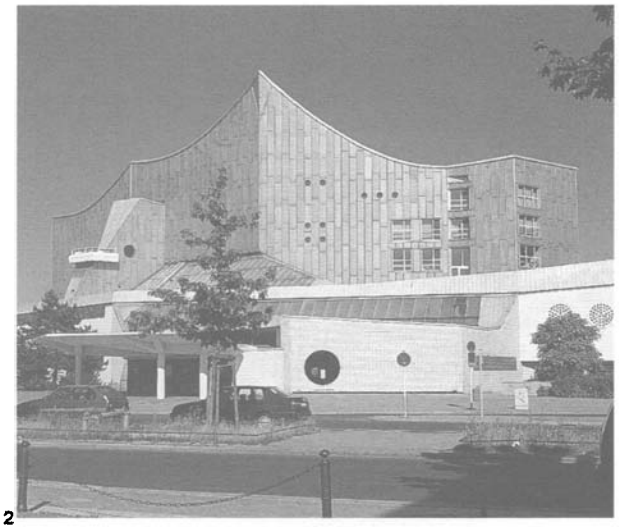
2. Hans Scharoun, Philharmonie, Berlin 1963
3. Rolf Gutbrod: Milkbar in Killesberg Park, Stuttgart, late 1950s
4. Behnisch & Partners: Vogelsangschule, Stuttgart 1957
5. Behnisch & Partners: Fachhochschule at Ulm 1959
6. Behnisch & Partners: Olympic Park, Munich 1972



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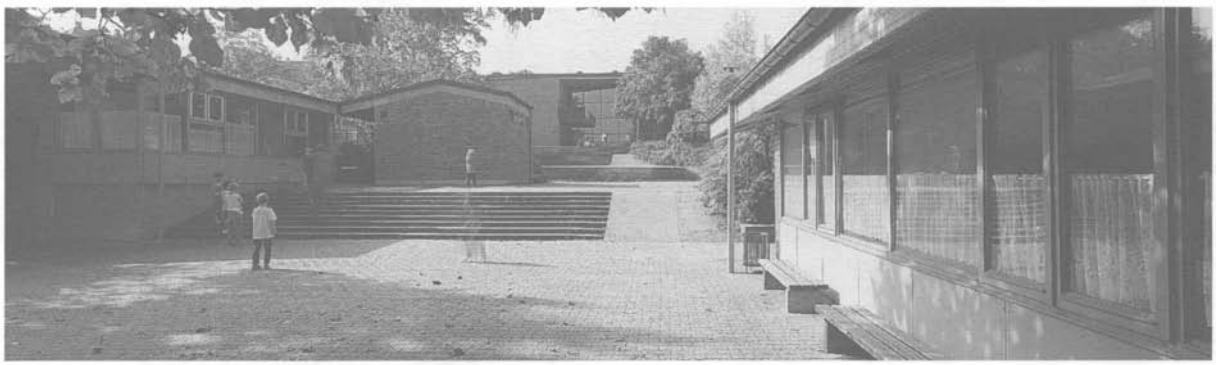

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the Third Reich, the 'natural' direction was declared to be the German way and the right way. Modernism was classified as alien and culturally Bolshevistic, and was defamed. I am not sure how the concept was defined if it was defined at all, but I know that it could be extremely dangerous for an architect to be assigned to that category. After the war this debate was revived. It ended, finally, with the defeat of the old architecture and of the architects who were its proponents. One result of this heated and undoubtedly necessary debate was that the subtler trends and approaches went unnoticed – for instance those of Scharoun, Häring and Lauterbach. Some architects declined to participate in the debate – Rudolf Schwarz in Cologne, for example, or Fehling and Gogel in Berlin, who tended to follow Scharoun, and Rolf Gutbrod, who created a distinctively South German, open and liberal style. And then there was Hans Scharoun himself, whose greatest work was created after the war – I mean, of course, the Berlin Philharmonie [Fig. 2].

Situational architecture

My studies at Stuttgart opened under the influence of Schmitthenner's students. Their perspective was 'getting back to nature'. Pure Modernism – represented by former adherents of the Bauhaus – no doubt influenced me, but in the end I found their criteria absolute and dogmatic. Rolf Gutbrod's unideological, open, liberal approach, seemed to suit me better. We referred to the kind of architecture that was thus evolving as 'situational architecture' – meaning that the architecture was a product of the specific situation or context. Among Gutbrod's earlier designs, I would single out the Loba building, the Milk Bar [Fig. 3] and the Liederhalle concert hall, all designed in the late 1950s in Stuttgart. At that time, our practice was treading a different path, though we did then design the Vogelsangschule, a primary school in Stuttgart which developed according to the specific topographic conditions [Fig. 4]. Subsequently, however, we concentrated on creating technically

perfected, industrially pre-fabricated buildings. Typical of this phase in our work was the Fachhochschule (Technical College) in Ulm, the first large complex of industrially prefabricated buildings [Fig. 5]. Even today it shows its quality, both architecturally and technically.

As we worked on more and more buildings, we gradually noticed that we did have the methods and materials at our disposal to liberate our work from traditional constraints. It was becoming possible to design buildings to practically any form desired. They could stand on a single stalk-like leg or on one corner; they could be large, small, crooked, straight, sloping and so on. The old limits had indeed been broken. As a result, great freedoms had been created, an open void of opportunity providing scope for all manner of things. Everything crowded in to fill the vacuum – technologies, functions, capital, administrations, ambitions – and formalisms, too. In the end, the freedom that we had intended to put to a different use was already claimed.

It did not take us long to realise that if we wanted to prevent our architecture from being occupied by the powers of the time, we had to take charge of this free space ourselves. It was in this context – it may have been in the mid-1960s – that we arrived at ideas that were evidently also the basis of Scharoun's work, though only gradually did we recognise the fact. We thought, for example, that we should not have preconceived ideas about the form of things we design. Instead, we should search for form. It can be a lengthy process if you wish to take into account many factors, many aspects and many areas of a task, and this conflicts with the need to reach the goal quickly.

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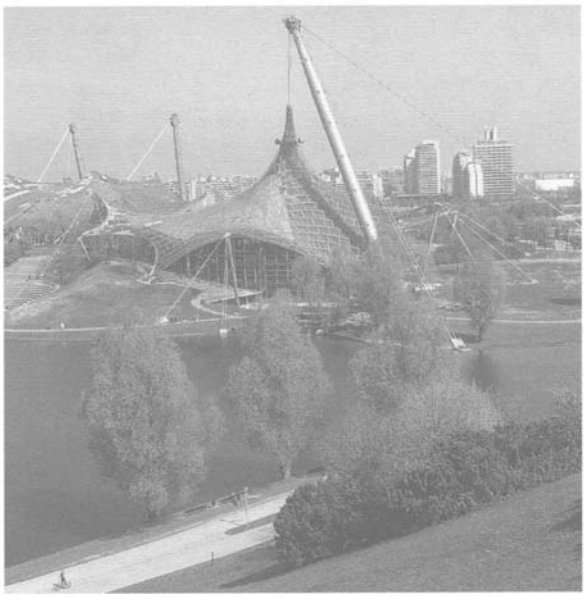

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The quest for the essential

Let me offer an example to illustrate the difference in approach. Two people walk through a house. One of them enters the house through the front door, walks through the hall and leaves through the back door. The other goes into all the rooms, onto all the floors, studies them, goes into the cellar, the attic and so on. Finally, he also leaves the house. Both have walked through the house, but only one of them has actually got to know the house in doing so. If we go into every room and onto every floor in our work, it takes us longer. We take more time, but we also learn more. And the resulting architecture will be more varied; it will not be one-dimensional, and it may even be diffuse. But this approach gives us an opportunity to get to know the house and its character; meaning, in our case, the essence of our task. Scharoun's sketches are typical of such things – indistinct, blurred. Things can result from them that were not developed deliberately and not just rationally – this is the quest for the essence (Wesen).

The term 'essence' was very important for both Scharoun and Häring. It is true that this term does not seem very precise, and it is impossible to define it in a single sentence. To describe it, one would have to go through every area of our reality. And every architect will arrive at a different result. One will discover this, the other that, and both will hold them to be 'of the essence'. We enjoy this open-ended approach to our work. Often, we are surprised when we at last recognise what was trying to come into being as a result of our efforts.

Another problem we encountered is the inherent order of geometry, which also tends to leave its mark on architecture. What is more, it lays claim to being a pre-ordained, definitive truth. If we draw for long enough, the drawing becomes fixed by lines, circles, axes, symmetries and so forth. It takes a great deal of energy to liberate oneself from it. For Scharoun, buildings and their functions were 'organs of society'. They were not to be defined on the basis of general orders, nor on the basis of geometric orders; they were supposed to be formed from the special forces inherent in these 'organs'. There are many other influences and agencies which impose upon a building with their own laws imploring to be translated into reality – mechanics, cost control, profitability, plasticity, the graphic element, colour, production methods, planning processes and so on. All these things influence the form of buildings, yet they have

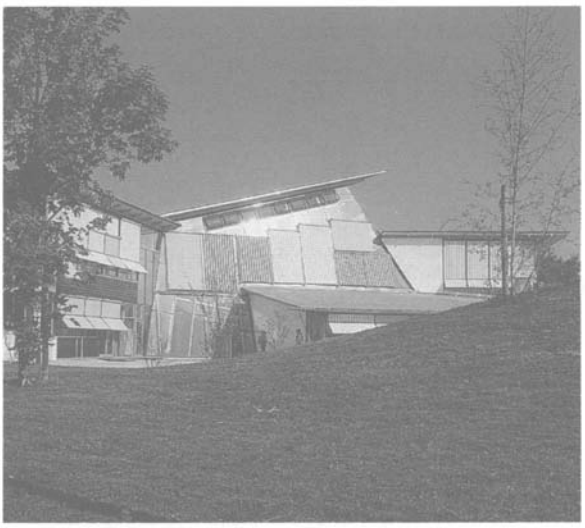
little to do with the essence of the building. When our practice designed the Munich Olympic Park at the end of the 1960s [Fig. 6], we had only just become aware of these relationships. Much more important in helping us accomplish that work than our knowledge of the theory of structures was Goethe's statement about the Arena in Verona seen during his Italian journey. Goethe described the 'essence' of such arenas, and I think that, not least as a result of that help, we may have come closer to achieving an open, essential type of architecture.

Putting technology in its place

The recognition of such things in our work was accompanied by a growing concern about the domination of technique, which tends to oppose the pursuit of essence. This is a crucial problem of our time. In the eighteenth century, great importance was attached to the logic of craft methods and the inherent laws of materials. I suppose that subordinating oneself to natural preconditions was the compensation for the loss of the higher worlds that had informed earlier architectures. To this extent, compatibility with materials and compatibility with methods – two key concepts – were absolute qualities in those days. Even today, this approach is applied in practice and in the training of architects.

However, we ought to stop using these concepts. Today, we work with artificial materials and industrial methods. Neither is immutable, and they are not answered for by a higher world. On the contrary, they have a tendency at first to detach themselves and to go their own way. And that way is no longer justified in relation to the whole, as was the case with 'natural' building, and therefore it is not reasonable. These technologies have become a law unto themselves, and now it is our job to put them in their place within the overall context – and to answer for them. If we do not assume this task, these liberated forces of the 'systems' that are behind technologies will take possession of architecture. And it is a fact that some works of architecture already seem to be manifestations of the world of the 'systems'.

If we tread this new path – that is, if we question the forces of the systems and put them in their place, structural elements such as walls and columns will, finally, resolve into areas and lines. Material objects detach themselves from matter, and from their initially trivial purposes, and appear in a new context, one that is less tied to the constraints of our reality. Then, the so-called 'attractive details' will also lose their meaning. Clearly, Scharoun also recognised this in his later works, for example the Berlin Philharmonie and the Wolfsburg Theatre. Then, the essence of a building is no longer tied to the material. It is more likely to be found in the immaterial, in the enclosed space, in its mood, in its character, its 'spirit'. It is here that we encounter the ideas underlying German idealism, whose proponents held that the essence was the spirit, which would transcend matter. The interior of the Berlin Philharmonie, for example, seems to be a highly successful example of this type of architecture. Here is a room, a space, that does not glitter with beautiful materials and sophisticated



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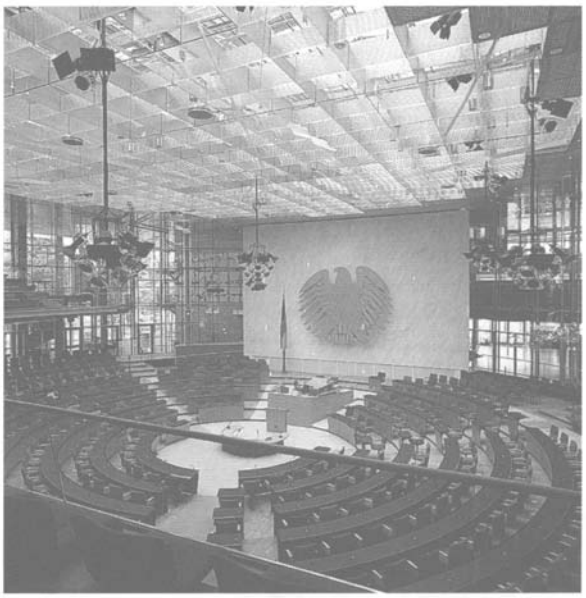

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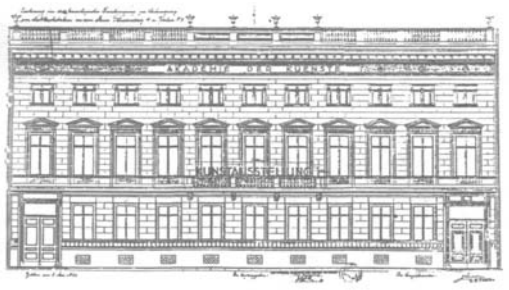
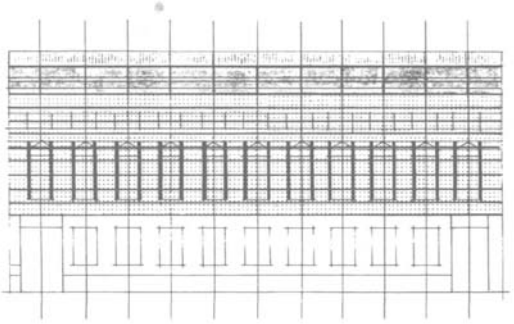
constructions. It is a place where people meet to experience music. It is a magnificent space!

Renzo Piano has produced a design for concert halls in Rome. His idea is to develop Scharoun's Philharmonie a stage further. That will not be easy. After all, the thing that Renzo Piano has attached the most importance to so far is precisely what was put in the background in Scharoun's late works, that is, efficient, organised construction and the material element. In fact, the exterior of Scharoun's Philharmonie Hall has a rather dismembered, deconstructive air, which reinforces the impact of the interior.

We have seen a lot in Scharoun's work and learned a lot from him. In our own work, we have repeatedly come across his experiences, ideas and solutions. But we have not really become disciples of Scharoun. That was evidently not possible, even if we had wanted it. Nor do I see any other architect today who would consistently follow the path of Scharoun. But I do see Scharoun's



Pariser Platz, Zustand 1933 M 1:200



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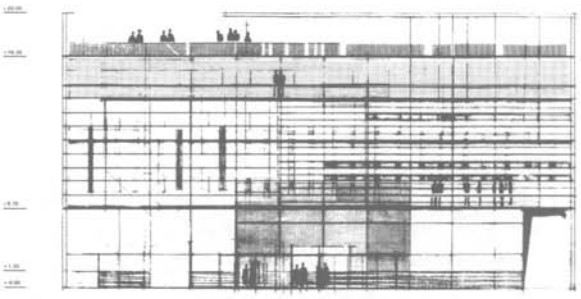

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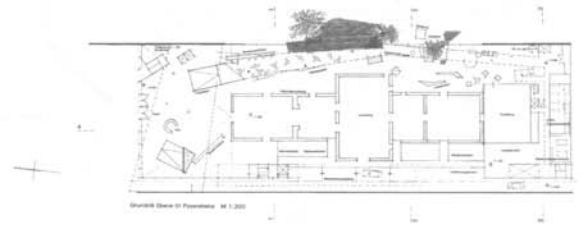

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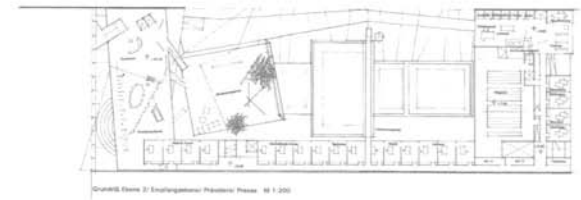

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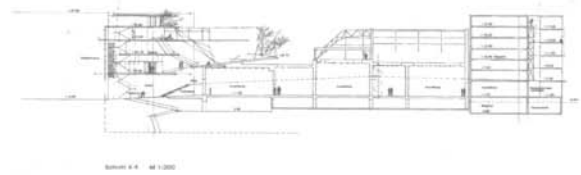

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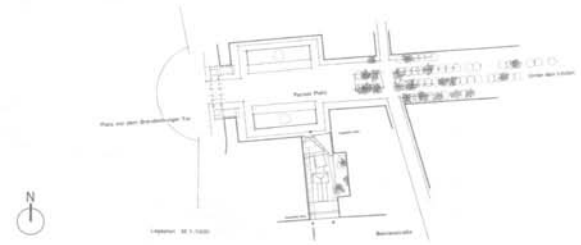

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influence scattered through the work of several architects. In my view, Scharoun created singular works of architecture that had a great deal to do with his time, his person, and his world. It is not repeatable, but as I have said, something of Scharoun's architecture also crops up in today's architecture, including our own. This can be seen, for example, in the school in Bad Rappenau [Fig. 7], in the new Plenary Chamber of the German Bundestag [Fig. 8], in the Hysolar Institute building in Stuttgart, and in various other buildings. But no one has managed a real 'Scharoun'.

Berlin today: the Academy of Arts

Peter Blundell Jones has asked me to tell you something about Berlin. At the moment there is not much talk of Scharoun or his work in Berlin – nothing positive, at least. On the contrary, the secretary of state responsible for building has said publicly that there would be no place for Scharoun in Berlin today. The city, and the people who live there, are at a loss – they want a lot, but they cannot say what they want. Sometimes I have the impression they are trying to rebuild a nineteenth-century metropolis, at least in some districts. One of the objectives of the city's building policy is apparently a 'Berlin in stone' – whatever that may mean.

Our practice has never designed anything in Berlin before, but now we are to design a new building for the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Arts – a very interesting brief [Figs. 9, 10]. The Academy of Arts unites some outstanding artists. It is expected to advise the government and promote the arts. The site – 40 metres wide and 100 metres deep – is on Pariser Platz. The old exhibition halls still standing in the middle of the site are to be preserved. Everything else was destroyed and has

7. Behnisch & Partners: School at Bad Rappenau
8. Behnisch & Partners: Plenary chamber at Bonn Parliament, 1993
9-13. Behnisch & Partners: Project for a new Academie der Künste on its old site in Pariser Platz in Berlin just east of the Brandenburg Gate
9a. Top façade of the old Akademie which was destroyed in the war. Bottom: Behnisch's analysis of its proportion system which was transferred to the new façade design
10. Ground floor plan. The thick walls show an existing building to be retained
11. Second floor plan, showing the new reception rooms overlooking Pariser Platz, left, the library overlooking Behrenstrasse, right, and a line of offices overlooking the roofs of exhibition spaces in between
12. Long section: the Pariser Platz façade is to left
13. Site plan, showing the location of the building between Pariser Platz, top, and Behrenstrasse, bottom

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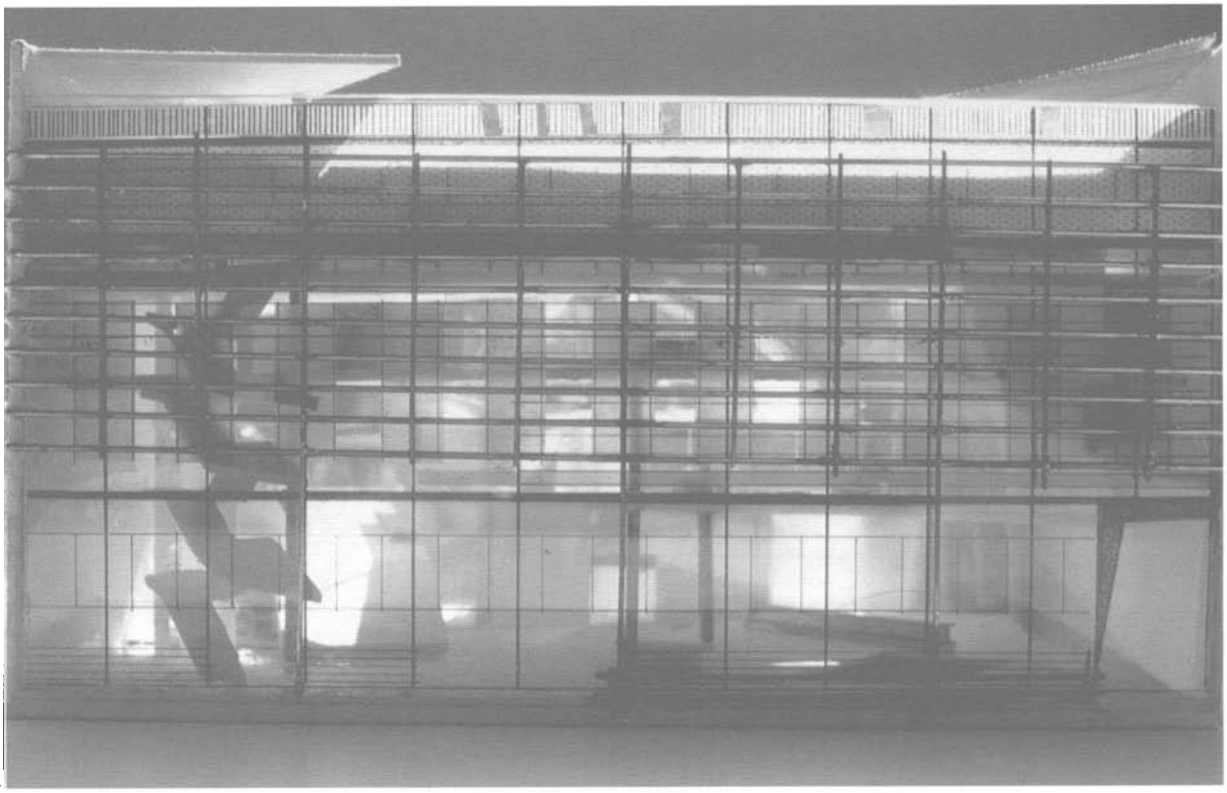

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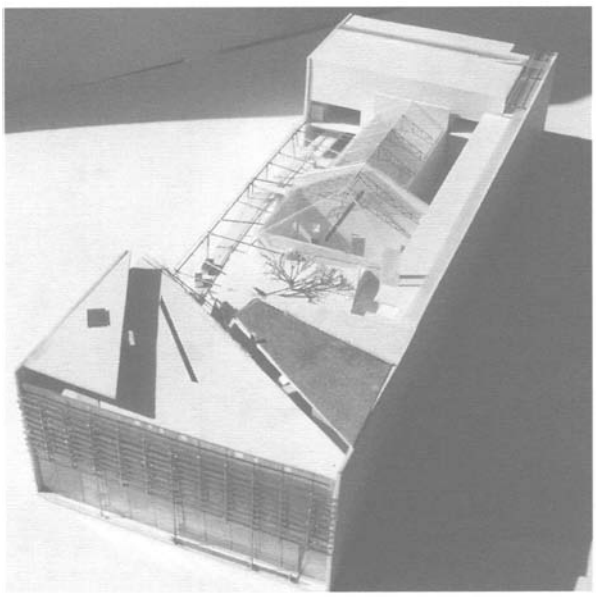

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14 and 15. Behnisch & Partners: Project for a new building for the Academy of Arts, Berlin, model

been removed. One end of the site borders Pariser Platz. This square is part of the axis which dominates Berlin, extending from the city centre – where the palace used to be (it was demolished by the GDR regime and replaced by the 'Palace of the Republic') far into the west of the city. The Brandenburg Gate, no better or worse than others of its kind, stands astride this axis of the city, marking the western border of Pariser Platz.

Quite a lot has been built along this urban axis: Schinkel's Neue Wache, Pariser Platz, the Soviet War Memorial, the Siegessäule – the Imperial Victory Column, Ernst-Reuter-Platz, the Palace of the Republic and so on - things that do not all awaken pleasant memories. In the course of history, this great axis has been much used and abused: for military parades, torchlight processions, tank parades, POW parades; by the SA, the SS, the Hitler Youth and so forth. Happily, it is also where celebrations took place to mark the reunification of the two parts of Germany. So it is a place that is occupied in the extreme by Prussian, German, Fascist, GDR and Federal German history. There are many who feel that it ought to remain so, and that buildings and streets which no longer exist today should be rebuilt. People today evidently no longer believe they are capable of producing anything good.

The Berliners certainly want to see these buildings around the Brandenburg Gate restored, and Pariser Platz as well, even though there is not a single building standing there today. And this is where our problem with the city of Berlin begins; because the new academy building will be on Pariser Platz. Some Berliners want to rebuild the square as it used to be, including the façades of the houses that stood around it, and this is really

problematic. Others want something similar: not replicas of the actual façades, but new façades conforming to orders derived from the old, all in stone, and with small windows. At present, this is still the position of the Berlin city authorities. Finally, there are others who think it would be enough for the façades around the square to stand along the old lines, thus enclosing the space of the square, and perhaps even be of uniform height. But everything else should be left to architects who (live and) work in Berlin.

If common features are still wished for, they should agree on them among themselves. That is our view. For you, it may not seem a big problem. After all, the British tend to smooth over ruptures in reality by carrying on traditions. But in Germany, an applied Protestantism has developed in the course of history, as a result of which we think that things should look like what they are, in architecture too. I imagine that Scharoun's work was also influenced by this.

The debate only concerns the façade, [Fig. 9]. While one group are of the opinion that the academy should have a stone façade with window openings, such as the city wishes at the moment, the academy thinks the old façades should be translated into today's style. So they would be made of steel and glass, and would open up the view from the academy to Pariser Platz, and from Pariser Platz into the academy. I do not yet know how it will evolve. One could also see it all as a large spatial collage. The archive building would be at the back, on Behrensstrasse, the old exhibition halls would be at the centre, and the façade itself would be facing the square on Pariser Platz. In between, levels, areas and spaces would evolve which do not obey any higher geometrical order, but which, instead, have developed out of the situation. In that case, the nature of the façade might no longer be so important.

Berlin is in turmoil, and no one really knows where it is going. Only one thing seems certain: the path will not lead to Scharoun, at least not in the next few years. The times have changed. Scharoun's buildings were children of their time, of the decades after two world wars, a time that was extremely hard, but also open to innovation, to hopes and ideals. This was the open door that Scharoun used. He set his course towards new shores, and perhaps also towards a higher level of consciousness. In the architecture of our time, such hopes are only rarely kindled. I regret this, but I cannot alter it. And, in the final analysis, I am glad that Hans Scharoun's works existed and still exist. For me, they express the hope for a better world.

Acknowledgement
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Biography
Günter Behnisch practices as an architect in Stuttgart.

Peter Blundell Jones is Professor of Architecture at the University of Sheffield and is author of a monograph on Scharoun and a forthcoming work on Häring.

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2,4-8 and 14 and 15 by Christian Kandzia for Behnisch & Partners