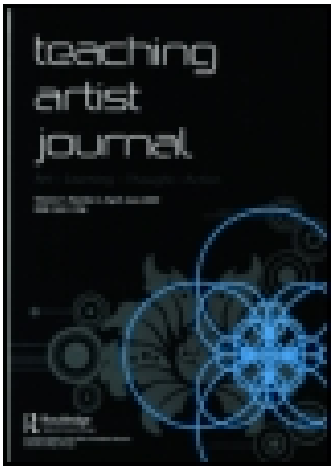

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The Bauhaus Artist-Teacher: Walter Gropius's Philosophy of Art Education

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ABSTRACT

A look at the great experiment in art education that was the Bauhaus, and the ethos of its key founder, Walter Gropius.

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G. James Daichendt

The Bauhaus was a landmark in the history of modern art and art education. The innovative school featured artist-teachers who individually and collectively influenced contemporary art education more than any educational institution in recent history (Elkins; Logan; Phelan). While many of the artist-teachers working within the school are significant, none of their accomplishments would have been possible without the leadership of its founder and longtime director, Walter Gropius. Gropius's vision integrated and recalled a philosophy with roots that extended back to medieval craft guilds; one that sought to bridge the gap that had developed between "artist" and "craftsman." His experience and education as an architect greatly influenced and infused his educational approach. The unifying pedagogy of the Bauhaus posits the artist-teacher as one who uses his or her artistic discipline to inform educational issues (Daichendt).

Historical Context

Walter Gropius built the internationally known movement and art school known as the Bauhaus between the years 1919 and 1928. This new institution was born by combining two fledging schools: the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts with the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts. In this new academy all media were regarded as acceptable, as Gropius sought to combine imaginative design with technical proficiency (Gropius, *The New*). The Bauhaus is not synonymous with Gropius since the school continued after his departure (he returned to his architectural practice in 1928) but as the first Director and the intellectual leader, Gropius's experiences informed the school arguably more than any other individual. As an architect it is clear his education and practice were a lens for his views on education, the organization of the school and the hiring of teachers (Gropius, *The New*).

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Tremendous political turmoil and economic calamity characterized Germany after WWI. This context informed the utopian and socialistic ideals typical of Bauhaus students and faculty. At the same time the uncertain political direction of the country hampered the organizational and financial development of the school. Bauhaus was originally located in Weimar and moved to Dessau in 1925 and again to Berlin in 1932. Throughout its history the school was buffeted by the rapidly shifting political and economic pressures of the period.

For Gropius and many progressive artists and architects in Germany, the end of the war was the beginning of a new history. From its inception the Bauhaus was associated with the idea of rebuilding a bankrupt nation. Gropius's and the Bauhaus's forward looking and implicitly leftist emphasis succeeded in capturing the imagination of many young people who sought a new Germany after the devastation of World War I. Gropius's own utopian ideals were overlaid on this uncertain political context:

> *Let us desire, conceive, and create the new building of the future together. It will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting in a single form, and will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith. (Gropius,* Manifesto*)*

The school was publically funded, but hostility from local townspeople, politicians, and the press constantly threatened this support. Conservative local residents saw themselves as defenders of a traditional culture in opposition to a school that was sympathetic to socialism (Way). The young Bauhaus students were seen as political agitators and a liability to the town's reputation and ethics. Student interest in German mystics, Expressionist principles, Buddhism, Taoism, and Mazdaism was in stark contrast to the values of an older local population (Cimino). The influx of young people in Weimar was linked with economic issues and a housing crisis (Cimino). Many of the students arrived with only their military uniforms and were characterized by their unkempt dress. The radical theories espoused by students led to drastic changes that swept the school and hardened a sense of student and faculty dedication to one another. This type of commitment and bond is a defining characteristic of the Bauhaus and of Gropius's vision.

Curriculum

At the center of Gropius's pedagogical approach was his effort to provide a common language (knowledge of principles and a sureness of hand) for visual communication to his students (Gropius, *Teaching*). This educational grounding would then allow the artist/designer to move forward in expression and creation. The Bauhaus curriculum was a three-stage process that started with a preparatory class followed by specialization in an area of choice and eventually finished with assistant work, which rounded out the curriculum. The three stages were as follows:

- Basic Course/Preparatory Instruction (6 months)
  - —Elementary training in design
  - —Experiments with different materials
- Technical Instruction (3 years)
  - —Apprentice work in training workshop
  - —Obtaining of Journeyman's Certificate
  - —Supplemental advanced instruction
- Structural Instruction (varied in duration and was reserved for promising students)
  - —Alternate research and manual work on specific sites
  - —Obtaining of Master-Builder's Diploma

The preparatory or basic course lasted roughly six months and was divided into three topics including two- and three-dimensional instruction for the senses, emotions, and the mind. Johannes Itten (*Design*), one of the foundation instructors strongly influenced the way it was taught and listed the objectives of the course as follows:

- To free the creative powers and thereby the art talents of the students.
- To make the students' choice of career easier.

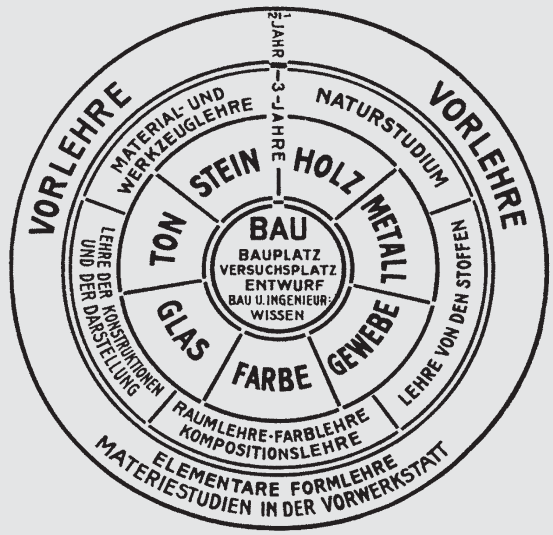
- To convey to the students the fundamental principles of design for their future careers. (9)

The second phase of the curriculum included a process similar to choosing an emphasis or focus area in contemporary art schools. The specialization was then studied for three additional years. During this time, students would work with two masters as apprentices (a major and minor area of focus) which was intended as a means of unifying areas of creative work (Gropius, *The New*). The final phase of the curriculum was reserved for students who hoped to complete an apprenticeship with a local design company. This is comparable to a modern day internship, where students learn and apply practical skills in a professional atmosphere. Students who completed this training were awarded a certificate of completion.

This course of study is referenced by Macdonald as "the most purposeful ever practiced in art education, planned to foster creativity, analysis and appreciation of art craftsmanship, and technology in order to produce the artist/craftsman/industrial designer" (315). Overall, the school curriculum progressed from a basic vocabulary to practical training. Gropius (*The New*) confirms that this scheme was intentional as "intellectual education proceeded hand in hand with their practical training" (78). In this system, students could explore a number of correct answers or processes to solve artistic issues. This diverse strategy supported individuality and different understandings of art products. In these cases, the finished product had to be a solution that worked. This is a pragmatic philosophy, akin to the Gropius's artistic practices as an architect.

The Architect-Teacher

Gropius's vision of this new kind of art school called for cooperation between the artist and technician in order to progress beyond the stylistic forms of industrial products. This idea followed from his critique and analysis of outdated pedagogy



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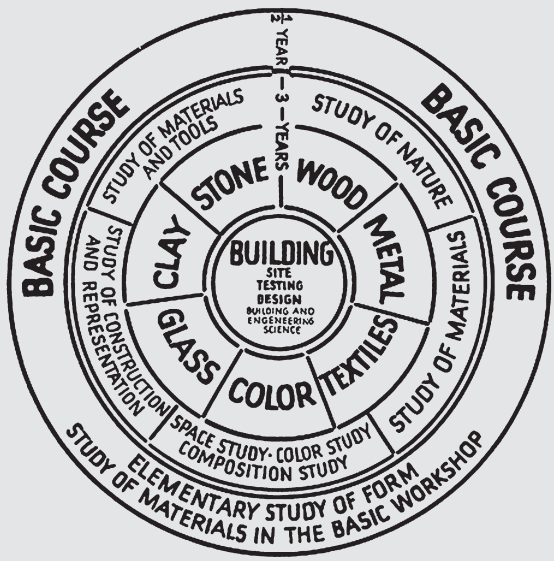

(b)

The Bauhaus curriculum of 1922. The outer circle is the starting point for a student whose goal is to progress to the center.

Walter Gropius designed the Bauhaus building in Dessau. It was built in 1925 and is a manifestation of the Bauhaus design philosophy.

and curriculum in the field of architectural education. Gropius's frustrations with archaic training and his interest in new technologies were both part of his growing curiosity about new possibilities in art education. He felt much progress could be made by embracing new technologies in the classroom. In the preface to his text about the new architecture and the Bauhaus, Gropius addresses these concepts through an analysis of his work (Gropius, *The New*). He discusses the divide between education and technology: "The New Architecture is a bridge uniting opposite poles of thought, to relegate it to a single circumscribed province of design" (Gropius, *The New* 23). Writing about the Bauhaus philosophy and the progress accomplished, Gropius states: "Handicrafts and industry may be regarded as opposite poles that are gradually approaching each other" (Gropius, *The New,* 54).

Gropius used the bridge as a powerful metaphor for his philosophy of art and education. He felt the architect was more than a builder who focuses on methods, but rather a master of space. Design was emphasized in the foundation course and was the common language all students mastered in order to focus on a particular discipline. Gropius (*The New*) speaks like an artist whose architectural design is supposed to satisfy the aesthetic emptiness in the field of architecture. The bridge metaphor points to the practical realization of his vision through the use of the new technological resources (steel, concrete, glass) available to the architect in the early twentieth century. Freed from the structural limitations of the past, Gropius's vision for architecture resulted in a host of innovations including transparent/open/better-lit spaces, larger windows, flat rooftops, and lower construction costs (Gropius, *The New*).

Gropius was sensitive to the possibilities as well as the problems inherent in the relationship of the arts to industrial economy (Hoffa 12–13). This sensitivity was an artistic quality present in his design of both buildings and curriculum. He noticed "a breach" caused by the break with past that needed to be repaired (Gropius, *The New* 19). This was a new civilization breaking from the old traditions that required New Architecture to mend it. The invention and construction of a built environment is the product Gropius created when establishing the Bauhaus, a fact that follows from his fundamental view of himself as an architect who designs systems to meet people's needs.

The new solutions of the Bauhaus were designed for the new problems of the post-academy world. Gropius's artistic perspective, both personal and in relation to his surroundings, was ultimately an attempt to create a new education for a new problem. Phelan writes,

> *However, the Bauhaus was founded and developed its methodology over the years in response to the needs of modern art, and its offspring, modern design, which differ greatly from that tradition of Western art which evolved from the Renaissance. (7)*

The problems Gropius encountered in his own education and with the advent of new technology were essentially pragmatic. He wanted an art education that would work for practical reasons. In this sense his pedagogy had much in common with his architecture and his aesthetic of box like structures, which address all available space; his views of art and education seem to intersect and the connection between his architectural theories and his art educational objectives is unmistakable.

Artist-Administrator

The metaphor of a bridge is also apt for understanding Gropius as an administrator (Gropius, *The New* 23). Collaboration and connection is an important aspect of Gropius's writings and teaching philosophy and his language emphasizes the connection or combination of traditions not generally associated with one another and the assembling a diverse artistic faculty. "The art of building is contingent on the coordinated team-work of a band of active collaborators whose orchestral cooperation symbolizes the cooperative organism we call society" (Gropius, *The New* 57). Bringing together a diverse faculty and combining artistic techniques (imaginative design with technical proficiency) are examples of Gropius's attempt to bridge distant enterprises in his workshop (Gropius, *The New* 52).

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Gropius (*The New*) writes, "The idea of a fundamental unity underlying all branches of design was my guiding inspiration in founding the original Bauhaus" (51). Gropius was influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzche and Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, who also saw design as a uniting philosophy and language. Nietzche's writing called for the artist and architect to work together towards establishing a new language of design (Cantz 73). The emergence of the artist as leader in society was ingrained within Gropius's thinking. Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon proposed the artist as a powerful individual in society capable of effecting real change because of his creative potential (Cantz). As an architect, Gropius impacted individuals metaphysically on a site-specific basis through his buildings. However through the design language of the Bauhaus his impact on art and education defies physical borders.

Bridging the Building; Bridging Art and Craft

The Bauhaus building in Dessau was designed by Gropius and built in 1925–26. The building itself can be viewed as an

example of the Bauhaus approach to education and the bridge metaphor. Divided into three different wings, it represented the educational focus of the school. The workshops, studio spaces, and the north wing all have particular spaces yet all connect to one another. Glass was used extensively to soften the harsh divide between exterior and interior so light and air could pass through the walls (Pevsner). "There is no central view of the Bauhaus, but, for that, there are a number of entrances, which emphasize the building's various functions" (Baumann 21). Even the word *Bauhaus* is conceptually rich, meaning to build or building a home or dwelling place. For Gropius, a house of architecture, which he saw all arts integrated under the mother art (architecture) (Moynihan).

The time was right for the achievements of the Bauhaus as an academic art education establishment rooted the late nineteenth century became unstable. The academy began to lose control over art instruction as early moderns continued to challenge the academy's relevance. In addition, a growing disillusionment about the current state of design spawned calls for quality craftsmanship. An animosity between the artists and craftsmen that had originated at least as early as the Renaissance reached a certain peak in the early twentieth century. Gropius addressed the decline of the craftsman and the lifelessness of the machine with the claim that the artist's role in this situation should be to improve the quality of the machine product.

> *We can reach our aim only when arts, crafts and industries interpenetrate each other. Today they are widely separated from each other, so to speak, by walls. The crafts and also the industries need a fresh influx of artistic creativity in order to enliven the forms which have gone stale and to reshape them. But the artist still lacks the craft training which alone will safely enable him to shape materials into masterly form. (Gropius,* The Bauhaus: Crafts *32)*

Craft became a core doctrine linked to the infusion of technology within the school. Gropius's "back to basics" language reflects a reaction to his own education which he felt had not adequately prepared him for the modern era. Gropius felt the training offered at technical schools was not appropriate for the changing technological context, so he reflected on art educational methods to reinvent design education (Wick). His own education had been characterized by a divide between the encyclopedic information learned and the practical expectations in the field (Cantz). The Bauhaus approach represented not just a return to handicraft but an emphasis on aesthetic education in a new manifestation of the medieval lodge. The artists and craftsman who worked for Gropius were not followers but collaborators with independent ideas who worked toward a common goal.

Gropius's vision of this new kind of art school called for cooperation between the artist and technician in order to progress beyond the stylistic forms of industrial products.

Conclusion

The varied philosophies of education and approaches practiced by the diverse faculty of the Bauhaus contributed to the complex pedagogical goals of Gropius's school. The curriculum was instituted by a number of artist-teachers including Johannes Itten, Josef Albers, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Oskar Schemmer, and Joost Schmidt who did not necessarily agree with one another or with Gropius (Cantz).

> *I saw that an architect cannot hope to realize his ideas unless he can influence the industry of his country sufficiently for a new school of design to arise. … I saw too, that to make this possible would require a whole staff of collaborators and assistants: men who would work, not automatically as an orchestra obeys its conductor's baton, but independently, although in close cooperation, to further a common cause. (Gropius,* The New *48–51)*

The combination of these ideas was a stark contrast to the highly uniform Academy. Gropius ("The Bauhaus Contribution") desired a school that would stimulate creativity and was appalled at schools like Frank Lloyd Wright's that created apprentices

by subjecting students to a monolithic philosophy. While artistic creation was an important aspect to being a teacher, Gropius did not want his artist-teachers teaching their own artistic vocabulary. "I succeeded in convincing great artists … that altogether we should humbly try to find a supra-individual objective method, a teachable common denominator for all which would be conductive to creative work" (Gropius, "The Bauhaus Contribution" 15).

Despite the diversity, not all ideas were acceptable to Gropius, and he carefully considered what each teacher brought to the community. A good example is Gropius's refusal to hire the painter Theo van Doesburg in 1922 (Gropius, *The Bauhaus: Crafts*). Who Gropius considered too theoretical and aggressive for the Bauhaus melting pot, a careful mixture intended as a medium for growth.

Political upheavals sparked the beginning of the end of the Bauhaus in Weimar. The Social Democrats lost power to the Nationalist party in 1925 and the school's budget was quickly eroded (Stella). A technical school in Weimar eventually replaced the Bauhaus and Gropius sought a new amenable location for his school.

The impact of the Bauhaus on the contemporary era cannot be understated. Individual educational theories derived from the school's approach continue to be implemented in high school and college classrooms today (Cramer; Wasserman). Modern furniture design is one of the most powerful examples of the Bauhaus's impact. The unification of craft, art, and technology made these designs affordable in an era in which the artist, designer, and craftsman embraced technology and consumer needs. Today one can stroll the aisles of Target and see lamps and chairs that bear an eerie similarity to the Bauhaus products of the early twentieth century.

Gropius denied propagating a particular style yet historians argue convincingly that his language set the context for a style (Erffa). In Gropius's view the building of the future required many hands that valued the end product just as the building of a house requires the combination of many parts in the harmonious completion of a functional dwelling place. Bauhaus students and faculty were united in spirit and expression, which contributed to a style and approach to art education that continues to have a profound effect on design and teaching today.

Cantz writes, "The phrase 'Bauhaus pedagogy' is too richly faceted-and the pedagogical practices of the artist-instructors active at the Bauhaus too varied-for it to make sense to search out the educational theory" (11). Cantz's observation speaks to the Bauhaus's strength in its diversity of instructors whose methods were as diverse as their artistic practices. The school was not merely a building but a unique coalition of administrators, faculty, and students that continued to change and morph along with the artistic theories driving it. Gropius articulates how he hoped to liberate students from narrowly defined roles and reintroduce creativity in design: "Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the crafts! For art is not a 'profession' there is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is the exalted craftsman" (Goldstein 261). With the example of Walter Gropius and his philosophy of education, one can extend this truth and say that the architect is the exalted artist-teacher.

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