

# Walter Gropius, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus” (1923)

## Abstract

In 1915, after the outbreak of World War I, the Belgian artist, architect, and designer Henry van de Velde was forced to resign from his post as director of the Grand Ducal School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar (*Großherzoglich Sächsischen Kunstgewerbeschule*), which he had founded ten years earlier. Van de Velde recommended the young German architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969) as a potential successor. In 1919, after the war, Gropius was appointed as the new director of the school, which he then merged with the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts to form the Bauhaus. He went on to appoint famous artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee to the Bauhaus faculty. In developing the school's signature pedagogy, he leaned on the theories of the Swiss painter and Bauhaus faculty member Johannes Itten. Innovative features of the Bauhaus curriculum included the Preliminary Course and the school's synthesis of aesthetic principles derived from theory and practice. The excerpt here describes the Bauhaus curriculum in 1923, at the time of its first and only all-school exhibit, which was staged in various buildings throughout the city of Weimar.

## Source

The dominant spirit of our epoch is already recognizable although its form is not yet clearly defined. The old dualistic world-concept which envisaged the ego in opposition to the universe is rapidly losing ground. In its place is rising the idea of a universal unity in which all opposing forces exist in a state of absolute balance. This dawning recognition of the essential oneness of all things and their appearances endows creative effort with a fundamental inner meaning. No longer can anything exist in isolation. We perceive every form as the embodiment of an idea, every piece of work as a manifestation of our innermost selves. Only work which is the product of inner compulsion can have spiritual meaning. Mechanized work is lifeless, proper only to the lifeless machine. So long, however, as machine-economy remains an end in itself rather than a means of freeing the intellect from the burden of mechanical labor, the individual will remain enslaved and society will remain disordered. The solution depends on a change in the individual's attitude toward his work, not on the betterment of his outward circumstances, and the acceptance of this new principle is of decisive importance for new creative work.

## The decadence of architecture

The character of an epoch is epitomized in its buildings. In them, its spiritual and material resources find concrete expression, and, in consequence, the buildings themselves offer irrefutable evidence of inner order or inner confusion. A vital architectural spirit, rooted in the entire life of a people, represents the interrelation of all phases of creative effort, all arts, all techniques. Architecture today has forfeited its status as a unifying art. It has become mere scholarship. Its utter confusion mirrors an uprooted world which has lost the common will necessary for all correlated effort.

New structural elements develop very slowly, for the evolution of architectural form is dependent not only upon an immense expenditure of technical and material resources, but also upon the emergence of new philosophical concepts deriving from a series of intuitive perceptions. The evolution of form, therefore, lags far behind the ideas which engender it.

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The art of architecture is dependent upon the cooperation of many individuals, whose work reflects the attitude of the entire community. In contrast, certain other arts reflect only narrow sections of life. The art of architecture and its many branches should be not a luxury, but the life-long preoccupation of a whole people. The widespread view that art is a luxury is a corruption born of the spirit of yesterday, which isolated artistic phenomena (*l'art pour l'art*) and thus deprived them of vitality. At the very outset the new architectural spirit demands new conditions for all creative effort.

### **The "academy"**

The tool of the spirit of yesterday was the "academy." It shut off the artist from the world of industry and handicraft, and thus brought about his complete isolation from the community. In vital epochs, on the other hand, the artist enriched all the arts and crafts of a community because he had a part in its vocational life, and because he acquired through actual practice as much adeptness and understanding as any other worker who began at the bottom and worked his way up. But lately the artist has been misled by the fatal and arrogant fallacy, fostered by the state, that art is a profession which can be mastered by study. Schooling alone can never produce art! Whether the finished product is an exercise in ingenuity or a work of art depends on the talent of the individual who creates it. This quality cannot be taught and cannot be learned. On the other hand, manual dexterity and the thorough knowledge which is a necessary foundation for all creative effort, whether the workman's or the artist's, can be taught and learned.

### **Isolation of the artist**

Academic training, however, brought about the development of a great art-proletariat destined to social misery. For this art-proletariat, lulled into a dream of genius and enmeshed in artistic conceit, was being prepared for the "profession" of architecture, painting, sculpture or graphic art, without being given the equipment of a real education — which alone could have assured it of economic and esthetic independence. Its abilities, in the final analysis, were confined to a sort of drawing-painting that had no relation to the realities of materials, techniques or economics. Lack of all vital connection with the life of the community led inevitably to barren esthetic speculation. The fundamental pedagogic mistake of the academy arose from its preoccupation with the idea of the individual genius and its discounting the value of commendable achievement on a less exalted level. Since the academy trained a myriad of minor talents in drawing and painting, of whom scarcely one in a thousand became a genuine architect or painter, the great mass of these individuals, fed upon false hopes and trained as one-sided academicians, was condemned to a life of fruitless artistic activity. Unequipped to function successfully in the struggle for existence, they found themselves numbered among the social drones, useless, by virtue of their schooling, in the productive life of the nation.

With the development of the academies genuine folk art died away. What remained was a drawing-room art detached from life. In the 19th century this dwindled to the production of individual paintings totally divorced from any relation to an architectural entity. The second half of the 19th century saw the beginning of a protest against the devitalising influence of the academies. Ruskin and Morris in England, van de Velde in Belgium, Olbrich, Behrens and others in Germany, and, finally, the Deutsche Werkbund, all sought, and in the end discovered, the basis of a reunion between creative artists and the industrial world. In Germany, arts and crafts (*Kunstgewerbe*) schools were founded for the purpose of developing, in a new generation, talented individuals trained in industry and handicraft. But the academy was too firmly established: practical training never advanced beyond dilettantism, and draughted and rendered "design" remained in the foreground. The foundations of this

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attempt were laid neither wide enough nor deep enough to avail much against the old *l'art pour l'art* attitude, so alien to, and so far removed from life.

### Dearth of industrial designers

Meanwhile, the crafts — and more especially the industries — began to cast about for artists. A demand arose for products outwardly attractive as well as technically and economically acceptable. The technicians could not satisfy it. So manufacturers started to buy so-called “artistic designs.” This was an ineffective substitute, for the artist was too much removed from the world about him and too little schooled in technique and handicraft to adjust his conceptions of form to the practical processes of production. At the same time, the merchants and technicians lacked the insight to realize that appearance, efficiency and expense could be simultaneously controlled only by planning and producing the industrial object with the careful cooperation of the artist responsible for its design. Since there was a dearth of artists adequately trained for such work, it was logical to establish the following basic requirements for the future training of all gifted individuals: *a thorough practical, manual training in workshops actively engaged in production, coupled with sound theoretical instruction in the laws of design.*

### Analysis of the designing process

The objective of all creative effort in the visual arts is to give form to space. . . . But what is space, how can it be understood and given a form? . . .

Although we may achieve an awareness of the infinite we can give form to space only with finite means. We become aware of space through our undivided Ego, through the simultaneous activity of soul, mind and body. A like concentration of all our forces is necessary to give it form. Through his intuition, through his metaphysical powers, man discovers the immaterial space of inward vision and inspiration. This conception of space demands realization in the material world, a realization which is accomplished by the brain and the hands.

*The brain conceives of mathematical space* in terms of numbers and dimensions. . . . *The hand masters matter* through the crafts, and with the help of tools and machinery.

Conception and visualization are always simultaneous. Only the individual's capacity to feel, to know and to execute varies in degree and in speed. True creative work can be done only by the man whose knowledge and mastery of the physical laws of statics, dynamics, optics, acoustics equip him to give life and shape to his inner vision. In a work of art the laws of the physical world, the intellectual world and the world of the spirit function and are expressed simultaneously.

### The Bauhaus at Weimar

Every factor that must be considered in an educational system which is to produce actively creative human beings is implicit in such an analysis of the creative process. At the “State Bauhaus at Weimar” the attempt was made for the first time to incorporate all these factors in a consistent program.

In 1915, during the war, the author had been summoned to an audience with the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar to discuss his taking over the Academy for Arts and Crafts from the distinguished Belgian architect, Henry van de Velde, who had himself suggested Gropius as his successor. Having asked for, and been accorded, full powers in regard to reorganization, in the spring of 1919 the author assumed the directorship of the Grand Ducal Saxon Academy for Pictorial Art (Grossherzogliche Sächsische Hochschule für Bildende Kunst) as well as of the Grand

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Ducal Saxon Academy for Arts and Crafts (Grossherzogliche Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule) and united them under the new name of “State Bauhaus” (Staatliches Bauhaus). The theoretical curriculum of an art academy combined with the practical curriculum of an arts and crafts school was to constitute the basis of a comprehensive system for gifted students. Its credo was: “The Bauhaus strives to coordinate all creative effort, to achieve, in a new architecture, *the unification of all training in art and design*. The ultimate, if distant, goal of the Bauhaus is the *collective work of art* — the Building— in which no barriers exist between the structural and the decorative arts.”

The guiding principle of the Bauhaus was therefore the idea of creating a new unity through the welding together of many “arts” and movements: a unity having its basis in Man himself and significant only as a living organism.

Human achievement depends on the proper coordination of all the creative faculties. It is not enough to school one or another of them separately: they must all be thoroughly trained at the same time. The character and scope of the Bauhaus teachings derive from the realization of this.

## THE CURRICULUM

The course of instruction at the Bauhaus is divided into:

### I. Instruction in crafts (Werklehre):

STONE	WOOD	METAL	CLAY	GLASS	COLOR	TEXTILES
Sculpture	Carpentry	Metal	Pottery	Stained glass	Wall-painting	Weaving
workshop	workshop	workshop	workshop	workshop	workshop	workshop

A. Instruction in materials and tools

B. Elements of book-keeping, estimating, contracting

### II. Instruction in form problems (Formlehre):

1. Observation	2. Representation	3. Composition
A. Study of nature	A. Descriptive geometry	A. Theory of space
B. Analysis of materials	B. Technique of construction	B. Theory of color
	C. Drawing of plans and building of models for all kinds of constructions	C. Theory of design

### Supplementary instruction

Lectures in fields relating to art and science, past and present.

The curriculum includes three departments (compare with the plan):

1. The preliminary course, lasting half a year. Elementary instruction in problems of form, combined with practical experiments with different materials in the workshops for beginners.

Result: Admission to one of the workshops.

2. Instruction in a craft in one of the workshops after signing legal articles of apprenticeship; advanced instruction in form. Three-year course. Result: Journeyman's Diploma of the Chamber of Crafts (Gesellenbrief der Handwerkskammer) and, under certain circumstances, Diploma of the Bauhaus.

3. Instruction in architecture.

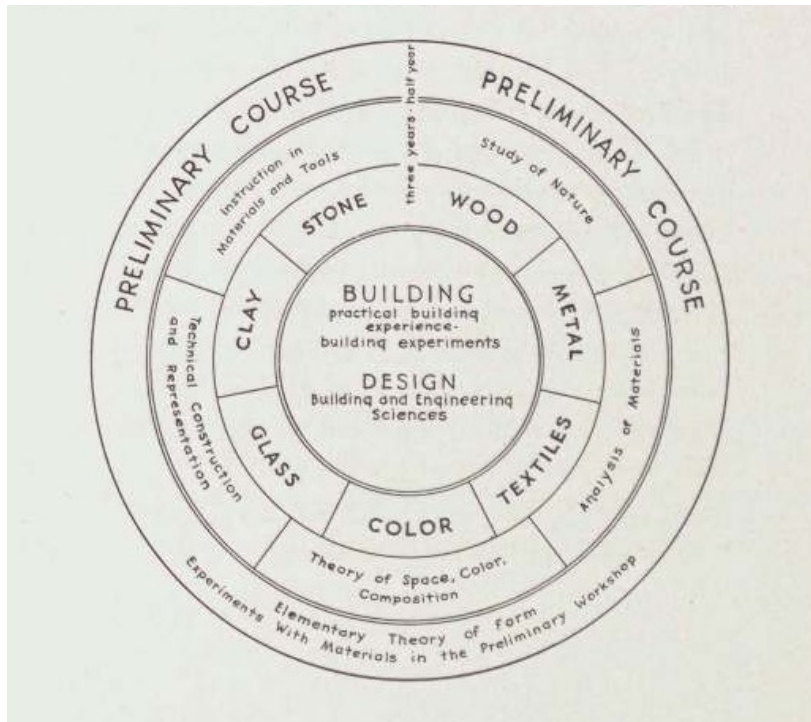
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Practical participation in buildings under construction and, for especially talented journey men, independent architectural training in the Bauhaus Research Department.

Duration: depending on achievement and special circumstances. Architectural activity and experimental work represent a continuation of instruction in crafts and form.

Result: Master's Diploma of the Chamber of Crafts and, under special circumstances, Diploma of the Bauhaus.

During the entire curriculum a practical course in the fundamental relationships of sound, color and form is followed, designed to harmonize the physical and psychic qualities of the individual.



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### The Stage

Theatrical performance, which has a kind of orchestral unity, is closely related to architecture. As in architecture the character of each unit is merged into the higher life of the whole, so in the theater a multitude of artistic problems form a higher unity with a law of its own.

In its origins the theater grew from a metaphysical longing; consequently it is the realization of an abstract idea. The power of its effect on the spectator and listener thus depends on the successful translation of the idea into optically and audibly perceptible forms.

This the Bauhaus attempts to do. Its program consists in a new and clear formulation of all problems peculiar to the stage. The special problems of space, of the body, of movement, of form, light, color and sound are investigated; training is given in body movements, in the modulation of musical and spoken sounds; the stage space and figures are given form.

The Bauhaus theater seeks to recover primordial joy for all the senses, instead of mere esthetic pleasure.

### Conclusion: the Bauhaus in education

An organization based on new principles easily becomes isolated if it does not constantly maintain a thorough

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understanding of all the questions agitating the rest of the world. In spite of all the practical difficulties, the basis of the growing work of the Bauhaus can never be too broad. Its responsibility is to educate men and women to understand the world in which they live and to invent and create forms symbolizing that world. For this reason the educational field must be enlarged on all sides and extended into neighboring fields, so that the effects of new experiments may be studied.

The education of children when they are young and still unspoiled is of great importance. The new types of schools emphasizing practical exercises, such as the Montessori schools, provide an excellent preparation for the constructive program of the Bauhaus since they develop the entire human organism. The old conservative schools were apt to destroy the harmony within the individual by all but exclusive headwork. The Bauhaus keeps in touch with new experiments in education.

During the first four years of constructive work, many ideas and problems have evolved from the original idea of the Bauhaus. They have been tested in the face of fierce opposition. Their fruitfulness and salutary effect on all phases of modern life have been demonstrated.

Source of English translation: Walter Gropius, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," in Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius, eds., *Bauhaus, 1919-1928*. Exhibition catalogue. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938, pp. 22-26, 31. Available online at:

[https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_2735\\_300190238.pdf](https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2735_300190238.pdf)

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