

# The Bauhaus in its centenary year



An entrance to the Bauhaus Building by Walter Gropius (1925–26) in Dessau, Germany in 2011  
Photo: Marczoutendijk / Creative Commons

As for most students, I learned about the Bauhaus in history of architecture classes in my undergraduate course (in my case at the University of New South Wales). But when I started work in Marcel Breuer's Madison Avenue office in 1979, there was a real sense that my serious architectural training was about to start. This was a time when modernism was under attack in the press and postmodernism was reaching its zenith. Historicism and eclecticism were getting a lot of oxygen from a new generation of architects led by Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, Charles Jencks and Robert Stern. It was ironic that my personal discovery of Breuer and the Bauhaus in the late '70s and early '80s came at a time when they were not in fashion and had become, for many, irrelevant (just read *From Bauhaus to Our House* by Tom Wolfe).

Despite that milieu, it was a unique privilege and opportunity to spend a year in Marcel Breuer's New York headquarters. I worked on a large industrial plant in North Carolina. Herb Beckhard, Breuer's long time collaborator, was the partner in charge and Breuer showed up intermittently for design reviews. I was invited to spend a weekend at Beckhard's wonderful family home at Glen Cove which epitomised Breuer's portfolio of residential masterpieces and later featured in the book *Architecture Without Rules*. Hazram Zainoedin, another gifted and long standing design collaborator of Breuer's, became my tennis partner and, just to keep me in my place, dealt me a regular thrashing. Nevertheless, I carried out my office tasks with determination and diligence, and delighted in searching through the office plan chests to find original transparencies for working drawings of great buildings like the Whitney Museum, now known as the Met Breuer. I immersed myself in an environment and an approach to architecture that sent me on a long future trajectory. This was especially poignant because Breuer was one of the last remaining and practicing Bauhaus 'masters' still alive, passing away in 1981, shortly after my departure.

On return visits to the United States, Gropius's family home in Lincoln, Massachusetts – not far from the Harvard campus – was top of my agenda. It was a treasure trove of architecture, industrial design, interior design, fabrics and furnishings – the embodiment of the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art. Several years later and just prior to the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, I was invited by the then East German government to visit the Bauhaus in Dessau. I was taken through the studios, workshops, offices and theatres of an impeccably restored building. It was functioning, once again, as an architectural school behind operable steel-framed glass curtain walls with fully repaired slab blocks; all the interiors were good as new. It was a pleasure to accept an invitation to spend a few nights in the student dormitory – small but efficient sleeping quarters with ribbon windows offering panoramic views of the exterior landscape.

The principles espoused by the Bauhaus – functionalism, industrialisation, the synthesis of art and technology – were still alive and relevant at the end of the 20th century as they were groundbreaking at its start. Of course, times have changed – politically, socially, technologically and environmentally – as they continue to change, but the principles which underpin good architecture had not. Commenting on postmodernism at the end of his life, Breuer's observation was the curt German phrase *nur abwarten* (just wait). True to Breuer's prediction, postmodernism was dead by the end of the century and in its place came a resurgent regional modernism based on the expression of program, technology, structure and materiality. As the Bauhaus celebrates its centenary this year, a new generation of architects would do well to revisit it as a critical link between the revivalism of the 19th century and the modern world of the future we inhabit. This is a

world which includes high performance, lightweight architecture, virtual technology and, the critical issue in the 21st century, environmental sustainability.

The principles of Gropius's Bauhaus came from a conviction that architecture and design should embrace contemporary technology, utilise the potential of new materials and address social inequity to create a better world for global citizenry. From a historical perspective, there is nothing new about this. Unshackled from the orthodoxy of 19th century revivalism and steered by a visionary as Gropius was, these principles manifested a revolution in early 20th century Germany. It's not surprising that right-wing suprematism – Nazism – sought to keep closing down the Bauhaus until it eventually resurfaced on the east coast of the United States.

Since the end of World War II, there has been massive construction of residential and commercial tower blocks around the world as populations grow and become more urbanised. This has relied on the technical capabilities of a modern building industry. In the hands of less capable design professionals and civic authorities, many of these developments have proven as socially and environmentally disastrous as they were a bad and inaccurate reflection of the ideals of the Bauhaus and modern architecture generally. While prefabrication – a central tenet of the Bauhaus – was a historic inevitability, there's no doubt that poor quality architecture is the result of technical skill, on its own and without the corresponding creative sensibility. The Bauhaus centenary is a poignant reminder of the critical importance of art, technology, materiality and social conscience – essential ingredients for enduring architecture of its time and place.

Ed Lippmann

is the founder and director of Lippmann Partnership.