

Funcionalism, scenography, photomontage Haus Nolden 1928

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Along with the construction of the Bauhaus building at Dessau, Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer designed a housing cluster for the director and the masters of the School. Gropius's house was the biggest and included service and guest rooms as well as other spaces to be used for representational activities, while the other three double houses included large art studios. Construction was begun in September 1925 and in August 1926, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Feininger, Mücke, Schlemmer, Kandinsky and Klee moved in with their families. If the Bauhaus building intended to be the architectural expression of the ideas of the institution, the masters' houses served as examples of a modern way of life, free of any superfluous element, the interior arrangements were made by each tenant and the furnishing came from Bauhaus workshops. The houses were characterized by a cubic, three-dimensional exterior appearance based on a series of intersecting cubes, as well as the interplay of white flat walls and wall openings, enhanced by the thin profiles of the steel windows sometimes emphasized with terraces. The language of modern architecture, although clearly different from previous domestic projects by Le Corbusier or De Stijl intended to become something like a Bauhaus style, appears in this case fully developed, due to the size of the houses and the way they are grouped together. It allowed a more sophisticated volumetric composition than that of the minimum dwellings by the same architects some years before.

Walter Gropius had been the first Director of the Bauhaus since 1919, until in April 1928 he was substituted by Hannes Meyer, who had already been master of the School for one year. He founded an architecture workshop in the School, where students and masters could work together in the productive process and Meyer himself carried out simultaneously his own independent practice and the direction of the workshop. In the architectural workshops, some real jobs were received and one of these jobs was Haus Nolden, which was regarded as a collective task. Hans Wittwer, Meyer's partner in the project for the Society of Nations in 1927, was the director of the project, collaborating with Hans Volger, a Gropius's student, who handled the execution and construction. The authors refer to this house as something between a minimum dwelling and a villa, as it has to include a single-family house and the medical office of

its owner, Dr. Karl Nolden. The project and construction documents for the City of Mayen were made very quickly, between April and August 1928. Haus Nolden is one of the rare examples of individual domestic architecture in which Hannes Meyer was involved, as his professional activity had been focused on collective housing and public and institutional buildings.

Although in Haus Nolden the architects made use of the language of modern architecture, simple volumes, flat roofs, flat surfaces and horizontal windows, this language is not used here, as it occurs in the Gropius's houses at Dessau, as an exhibition of the possibilities of cubic architecture in a house of a certain size. It intended to be a direct response to the functional duplicity involved in the job. The problem was how a public activity, Dr. Nolden's office, could coexist within a domestic building. A direct response to that particular program determined the final form of the building and the articulation of both functions. And although a precedent for this functional duplicity could be found in many of the studio-houses built in the same years, as the houses for the Bauhaus masters, in this particular case the independent volume occupied by the medical office was more isolated and without the spatial development characteristic of the places assigned to an artistic work.

Without any remarkable natural element or relevant access path, Haus Nolden appears as a free-standing construction in which a two-storey lineal block and a prominent one storey-volume perpendicularly intersect producing a particular volumetric complexity. The building has no clear physiognomy, and it looks towards nowhere, as the protruding volume limited by three planes with horizontal windows hides the two entrances, to the house and to the consulting room, placed on both sides and hidden behind the volumetric folding. If the existence of a front, of a face, usually depends on the location of the entrance, or the relationship of the building to an access path or a particular urban space, in this case, there is no privileged place from which the house exhibits a recognizable image.

The impossibility to achieve a unique image was taken to its limit in Gropius's houses at Dessau, where the shifts and breaks of the corners determined the dynamic perception of the buildings, especially in the double houses where a rotational movement around the central core of the living areas and studios is suggested. These houses, with the end volumes looking onto opposite directions, take a snake-like form, a sort of uniform body that twists and makes no difference between head and tail. Considering the particular authors of the houses, Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer, and also the individualization of the tenants, up to the point that they could make the interior arrangements and choose the furnishing of their homes, these domestic buildings could be considered as an identity mark of the architecture promoted by the Bauhaus.

Haus Nolden, on the contrary, intended

to be an anonymous product built for somebody with no significant links with the School or its activities. Wittwer and Volger developed a simple project based on some previous schemes taken from both collective housing and public buildings, adapted to the particular functional requirements of this case, but neither intending to build a model nor to exhibit the constructive or plastic potential of the new architecture. The plans show how the medical office is attached to the main block of the house, to that intermediate area of the living and service areas, but slightly off-centred. And while in the ground floor, the functional requirements of the three parts – kitchen and service, dining and living rooms, and medical office and waiting room – determine an organization in three unequal arms articulated in right angles, in the upper floor a linear and homogeneous organization corresponds to the three bedrooms and one bathroom.

According to the photographs of the building process, there is no structural grid independent of the interior distribution, as the plans could suggest, as a system of massive walls surround the building and it is only interrupted by the window voids. The structure of Haus Nolden is hardly reflected in its exterior enclosure and the difference between structure and enclosure is made evident in the opposite character of the two small façades of the house, one of them a blank wall and the other a large window occupying its entire width and height from base to top. This large void suggests the existence of a principal space and the orientation of the house towards one of the small façades in the South side. Nevertheless, as the one-storey volume perpendicularly collides with the main block, the building reorients itself so that one of the big façades now becomes the front, although maintaining the frontal condition of the open South façade. So, Haus Nolden becomes a bicephalous organism, although the two heads could never be seen simultaneously.

In spite of this bicephalia, the volume of the medical office seems to be the most remarkable and visible feature of the building, although it remains aside of the functional and figurative spatial development of the house. This distinct body is not absorbed in the general volume of the building, as it happens to be in most studio-houses like those by Le Corbusier or even Gropius's houses for the Bauhaus masters, where the large spaces of the studios are literally swallowed by the domestic building in order to increase its expressive potential and achieve a more complex interior space. Haus Nolden will not experiment any transformation with the addition of this new one-storey block, connected to the house only through a small entrance hall. As in any domestic building using the language of modern architecture, the vocabulary used in Haus Nolden is extremely limited, simple volumes, flat surfaces, horizontal windows, small doors, flat roofs and an absolute lack of any constructive exhibition or figurative rhetoric. Nevertheless, the formal incongruence of a two-front building becomes evident as it is the importance

assumed by the independent volume of the medical office, a sort of blank protuberance advancing forward which hides the two entrances on each side of the building, corresponding respectively to the inhabitants and the patients. As the eyes of a whale, located on both sides and away from the blank forehead, these two small doors determine two different orientations, compelling us to choose one or the other when we are confronted with this close and inaccessible obstacle.

Along with the essential compositional incongruence which characterizes the two-front building of Haus Nolden, we will discover an additional element attached to its exterior volume. Instead of showing a clear volumetric interplay, the architects added an outdoor stair and a light structure placed on top of the lowest block, a metallic framework which totally transforms a building with evident problems to exhibit a unique image. With the stair and the bridge giving direct access both to the bedrooms and the terrace, a sloping line is introduced in the main façade, closing the possibility of an eventual opening of the living room to this side, while a new connection between the two independent volumes, that of the house and that of the medical office, is set up. And from a purely functional point of view, the direct access to the upper floor eliminates or at least softens the supposed dependence of the bedrooms from the living areas below. The upper storey frees itself from the ground floor as a new living area is created on top of the low volume, in this case an open-air living area.

Hannes Meyer had already used a light metallic structure attached to the exterior of some of his public building. For example, in his Peterschule, built in Basel in 1926, the most remarkable features were an exterior stair and an elevated platform to be used as a recreation area for the students, in order to preserve the empty urban space located below. This additional structure prevented any direct manifestation of the façades, as it gave priority to the circulation and service systems, those which now determined the image of the building. In Haus Nolden, although as a domestic building no additional circulation was required as it is the case of a public construction, this light structure respond to some functional requirements, such as giving a direct access to the bedrooms or the opportunity to place an exterior living area on top of the medical office. Besides this, the exterior stair, the bridge and the metallic grid, in spite of their lightness, will transform completely the volume of the building and give a new character to its façades, while radically altering its functional organization. The sloping line of the stair changes the orientation of the living room towards the South end of the building and therefore breaking the building in two parts, while a strong dynamism towards the terrace is produced.

In his houses at Dessau, Walter Gropius had also sought a dynamic composition, which he tried to accomplish through the shifts in the orientation of the volumes and some exterior elements such as corner terraces. And in the

double houses, the studios were placed above the living areas in order to achieve a greater spatial development of the central core of the house, while a more compact scheme was used for the bedrooms and service areas. So, the interplay of the independent volumes produces a greater complexity and results in a multiple image of the buildings. Nevertheless, no indication of the functions contained in their interior is shown in the stepped and broken façades, so that even the perception of the buildings as constituted by two almost identical parts becomes difficult to perceive. This difficulty is even more evident in Gropius's house, the biggest and most functionally complex. But in both cases, as the emphasis is put on the angles and corners, a continuity of the images is favoured, images that, although always different, are congruent with the others.

Walter Gropius had defined a sort of official style of the Bauhaus in which a unity between the exterior and the interior of the building was sought and where the compatibility between covering and content was its identity mark. But Hannes Meyer promotes from the architecture workshop a housing project which would focus mostly on its functional resolution with an absolute economy of constructive and plastic means. And, as a design referent, he will use some models taken from Russian Constructivism and his own previous buildings. Wittwer and Volger will adopt a dual scheme from the very beginning, a house and a working place. They will not intend to integrate both in a single building, but keep them as independent entities. So, there will be two fronts and two entrances, without a compromise or a hierarchical dependence of one another. As a result, the compositional unity of Haus Nolden will be broken whereas its essential dual character will be maintained, involving the function, the volume and even the image of the building, so the additional structure inserted in the body of the building will provoke the confrontation between the solid and stable volume laying on the floor and that metallic three-dimensional grid that climbs over the walls and shapes a more dynamic and immaterial volume.

Before the language of modern architecture was finally codified at the beginning of the nineteen-thirties, stating the priority of volume and asymmetrical composition as the main characteristics of the new style, the house had become one of the most important and at the same time most difficult problems for the new architecture. Le Corbusier had proposed and successfully built along the nineteen-twenties a wide range of possibilities for any sort of houses, from minimum dwellings to big villas, so that his influence was felt even in such apparently distant examples as Walter Gropius' and Adolf Meyer's houses for the masters of the Bauhaus mentioned above. Only in very few cases, as in Dutch Neoplasticism and German Expressionism, some distinctive features could counteract Le Corbusier's hegemony within the field of domestic architecture. But inevitably the Bauhaus had to offer its own proposals for the house of man, although its main aim was the production of furniture

and objects of use. So, both Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer had a remarkable activity in planning and designing settlements of collective houses, while they scarcely designed any single-family house.

One year before Haus Nolden was built, Le Corbusier's houses in the Stuttgart Weissenhof of 1927 had been acutely criticized for being excessively French and excessively suburban villas, while Gropius's houses built nearby were considered banal, almost mere warehouses, and with no character at all. Hannes Meyer, who was not invited to participate in this experimental Siedlung, responds as the Director of the Bauhaus to a real job, House Nolden, giving up his personal authorship so that it could be the anonymous product of the architectural workshop of the School. And far from seeking an alternative to the language already developed by other architects, they simply used it without any limit in order to fulfil their own interests and give an adequate solution to the stated problem in the most direct and economic way. Neither novel constructive systems nor spatial exhibitions were employed, as they could obliterate a direct manifestation of the building functions, in this case not only domestic functions but also those involved in a work place. In Haus Nolden, along with the functional disintegration of the building, different compositional schemes are used in every part according to their particular requirements, without trying to accomplish a global form. In this way, the modern language becomes a simple support to a functional manipulation, with the result of a built organism in the limits of the formally aberrant.

The building will now be the support for a strange tissue, because it is built with different materials and remains in the exterior, which will become a colonizer agent of its own architectural entity. The large blank protuberance of the doctor's office, which keeps the two entrances apart as the eyes of a whale, and the metallic grid climbing over the walls to construct an immaterial volume over the terrace will be the most characteristic elements of a building which uses in a totally free way the cubic forms and flat surfaces of the modern language. Thus, modern architecture will be reduced to a mere material support of a scenography, a scaffolding, which will resemble some of the most recognizable schemes of Russian Constructivism, such as colliding volumes or the sloping line of a stair which leads to an elevated balcony.

Hannes Meyer writes in 1925 his essay "Die neue Welt" where he shows the images of the metallic structures of electric posts or cranes and also some scenes of Meyerhold's theatre in which, instead of rooms or furniture, there were ramps and outdoor corridors, over which the actors climbed, in order to represent with their own movements, the new man. Hannes Meyer also developed some performances of experimental theatre and the exterior stairs will become one of the identity marks of his buildings from 1925 onwards. Nevertheless, his activity was focused in the production of collective housing and public

buildings, especially schools, while his legacy in the field of single-family houses was limited to a few examples over which he did not theorize at all. In his writings, he tried to define how the interiors inhabited by the new man should be, and showed his ideal of neutral interior spaces with utensils made of industrial materials such as aluminium, plastic or glass. Wittwer and Volger will reproduce these interior spaces in Haus Nolden, using blank walls and scarcely a few pieces of furniture, mostly chairs and tables, as it is shown in the photographs of the private rooms and also the patients' waiting room of the medical office. In both cases, isolated individuals appear motionless, while reading papers or simply looking through the window.

Along with the utilitarian and material theories which marginalize the decorative and aesthetic function of architecture, pure functionality could enter the Bauhaus as the main criteria for the construction of form, although Haus Nolden were an isolated experiment without any continuity even within the School, as Mies van der Rohe would be appointed Director of the Bauhaus two years later, in 1930. But, although for a brief period of time, Hannes Meyer promoted in the School workshop the montage procedures as a way to agglutinate the different building components, putting aside other criteria based on composition, proportions or even perspective. Haus Nolden appears as a set of different images, as every façade or room suggests a different organization. So, the observer faces the impossibility to perceive a unique form and, as a counterpart to this decomposition, the iron scaffolding attached to its surfaces turns the building into a sort of constructivist stage which suggests a dynamic action. Even in a single-family house, the architects tried to show that architecture has to do mostly with the action of man and so it must resemble the production process of a big factory.

Note:

There is a monograph on Haus Nolden written in German:
PETSCH, Wiltrud & PETSCH, Joachim Haus Dr. Nolden. Ein BauhausBau in der Eifel, 1928
Hindesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1982

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