

Bauhaus vs Burg Giebichenstein. Two confronted models. Pablo López Martín

In 1911 a congress for the artists and craftsmen association known as Deutsche Werkbund took place in the small German town of Märl, belonging to the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The grouping was founded in 1907 and had the ultimate goal of bringing German industrial production to the forefront of excellence. The objective of the congress was to discuss how to spiritualize the production of architecture and applied arts, whose decadence had a wide consensus. Its founder Herman Muthesius (1861-1927), architect, writer and German

diplomat intervened with a decisive speech titled “Wo Stehen Wir?” (*Where are we?*) It obtained immediate repercussion on the receptive audience. Among those attending the conference there was a group of young people, still unknown, composed by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius or Bruno Taut, all called to lead the future of the German and the European architectural discipline during the following decades.

Muthesius had been assigned fifteen years earlier to the German embassy in London as a cultural attache. His mission was to study the keys to success of English industrial production, much more superior to the German one at a time, in order to be able to implant them in the architecture and applied arts in his origin country. Although in his speech of 1911 he acknowledges as something positive the ground already covered in such matters, as the sincerity of the materials used or the techniques of production¹. He also points out that the decadence of the present Man with regard to previous times lies in the loss of artistic sensitivity, being so more noticeable in the field of architecture. In the same century in which “constructive advances and technique pushed artistic activity toward higher and more magnificent tasks”², artistic sensibility had vanished with a formal expression blurred amongst the imitations of the past or “that greenhouse fashion” culminating in what he considered the monstrosity of Jugendstil or Art Nouveau. It was urgent to define a formal expression for the new German architecture without betraying the epoch’s spirit.

In the eight years between 1911 and 1919, this group of young assistants captained the country’s architectural avant-garde and came to occupy prominent positions in German institutions, clearly influencing the course of the discipline. These words penetrated deeply into a young Walter Gropius (1883- 1969) who led that challenge launched by Muthesius and turned it into a teaching project. In 1919 Gropius joined the old Kunstgewerbeschule of Henri van de Velde and the Grossherzoglich in Weimar - Saxon Academy of Fine Arts - to create a new school: the Bauhaus. In mid-April 1919, Gropius, newly appointed director, writes to his mother and informs her: “I have taken my place and in two days I have fulfilled all that I have proposed: the appointment of four radical artists in the cloister of the University and the authorization for my radical teaching scheme by the government”³. In his manifesto of the same date he makes clear what are the principles that will govern this new school will be:

“The aim of all plastic activity is to construct [...] there is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman ... Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the handicrafts! Let us desire, let us project, let us create the new structure for the future, in which everything will constitute a single set, architecture, plastic, painting and one day will rise to heaven from the hands of millions of craftsmen as a crystalline symbol of a new faith”.

These revolutionary proclamations magnificently illustrated by the cathedral of

socialism by Lyonel Feininger (1871- 1956), temple of the new faith enunciated by Gropius, made a pamphlet capable of reaching young people from all central Europe. Many of them would abandon their formal and academic artistic education - a paradigmatic example of that would be Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), who gladly left the *Kunstakademie* in Vienna - to be seduced by the promise of a teaching and pedagogical experiment that was about to get underway. However, at this point one might wonder, was the Bauhaus really being the pioneer when establishing an equivalence between artists and artisans and making them work together with architects? Was there no other school that, in the heat of the congresses of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, would advocate the death of salon art and claim an art projected on previously constructed space?

Thiersch-Gropius. Biographical coincidences-teaching analogies

Among those attending the Werkbund congress in 1911, besides Taut, Gropius and Mies another young architect from Munich was also present. This architect was much less famous than his colleagues from the same generation, he was called Paul Thiersch (1879-1928). In 1915 - four years before the founding of the Bauhaus - he had already taken over the management of a School of Arts and Crafts in the city of Halle, a modest town in the state of Saxony-Anhalt on the banks of the River Saale. The school will take from 1921 onwards the name of the castle where it will be transferred to Burg Giebichenstein for good. This will be the name the school still keeps until today⁴. The centre had been founded in 1879 but it was only after Paul Thiersch’s major renovation when the school became an avant-garde centre for the education in craftsmanship.

Thiersch became the centre’s director after going through a selection process in which another seventy five candidates applied. He brought with him, a radical educational proposal that transformed the educational system that was being followed until that moment. Thiersch reformed the Halle handicraft school following the German Working Federation guidelines, inspired by the Werkbund⁵, turning it into a modern school of applied arts and established in a pioneering way a specific professional course in architecture and interior design which was not delivered in the Bauhaus until 1927, the period of Hannes Meyer in Dessau. Thiersch set the focus of training on the idea of a complete work of art around architecture, which implied, consequently, a certain collective creativity and the necessary interrelation of the arts. He implemented free classes in painting, graphic arts, sculpture and architecture, creating a centre that promoted plural formation beyond what any other applied arts school had ever done previously under its director ideology: “crafts and architecture have to be brought into a single unit.”⁶

It is significant to say that the great similarity between the pedagogical objectives of both schools was linked to the biographical coincidences between their two founders. Thus, Paul Thiersch was born in Munich in

1879, just four years before Walter Gropius had been born in Berlin. Both of them were born into a well-off family with artistic and academic concerns, and were raised within a framework of clear urban nature. The parents of both of them were architects, and in Thiersch's case his uncle Friedrich von Thiersch, professor at the Technical University of Munich, was also famous for his studies of proportions in architecture. Gropius's father instilled in him the love for Schinkel, which they both professed -Thiersch and Gropius himself- and which also brought them closer to the preferences of Muthesius, an inescapable reference. They showed a predilection for simplicity and immediacy, and a rejection for the overloaded and sentimental architecture.⁷

Thiersch obtained a heterogeneous formation that was divided between different centres: he studied until 1900 in the Winterthur Technikum, then the following course in the Basel School of Arts and during the period from 1901 to 1904 in the Technical University of Munich. In the same way, Gropius distributed his education years between this same school and the one in Berlin. Their education in both cases was therefore purely academic, opposed to other relevant and contemporary figures of architecture such as Henri van de Velde, Richard Riemerschmid, Mies van der Rohe, or the next generations', Marcel Breuer. All these figures never had a specific education in architecture and they accessed to the profession going through the different scales that converged in it, beginning with the manual work on the material and the exploration of its capacities.

The regulated education for the discipline was based on treatises taken as a support for knowledge and learning commonly accepted in Europe. The Treatise not only heightened those historic buildings that had already been considered exalted and therefore deserved to be visited and analyzed, but ultimately, would also be those which became canonical and worthy of being reproduced. Buildings were therefore presented as purely abstract objects, products of pure composition and geometry derived from the systematization of buildings which treatises had previously analyzed. Thus, they were represented as a pure geometric construction unrelated to any location, context or materiality. Then, it was reassigned a material code to that purely intellectual exercise, returning it to a physical contingency. Learning architecture, which had previously been something completely related to the masters' work, had accepted a deep distortion: it had been replaced by the learning of architectural iconography.

The architects we are talking about had a completely opposite approach to the profession. Their first contact with the discipline was precisely because of the direct contact with materials: Breuer in the Bauhaus carpentry workshop where he worked indistinctly with wood and steel, Van de Velde through illustration and cabinetmaking, or in the case of Mies, with stone in the stonework of his father in Aachen. This condition will become, very evident in his latter writings and built productions, but especially in the first five projects that meant his definite

entry into modernity. His famous theoretical projects that will give him a relevant position in the European architectural panorama will be the concrete office building, the two glass skyscrapers, the brick country house and the concrete house. All of them emphasize - from their own statement - the presence of a material as the starting point. Since this was the original decision on which all others had to gravitate around in a consistent way: it was the prelude to a new way of designing that gives the material presence, fully physical but incorporeal, a predominant role.

However, as it has already been mentioned above, in spite of having a specific, regulated and canonical education in architecture, both Thiersch and Gropius developed a special sensitivity towards handicrafts with the conviction of finding there the projectual method of a new era. The new form that Muthesius alludes to would arise from the optimization of the capacities of each material, able to reformulate traditional types established by themselves. This simultaneous awareness in both Gropius and Thiersch for the decisive role of training as a tool for shaping a new form of architecture is difficult to understand as fortuitous. Most probably we will find in the fact that they both coincided with another figure of non-architectural formation and that would end, like the previous ones that we have seen, resulting from a decisive influence in the discipline: Peter Behrens (1869-1940). Behrens' training was also purely artistic through the Art Schools of Karlsruhe and Düsseldorf, where he also served as the director of the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Arts and Crafts), and later led the architectural discipline in which he was self-taught.

After finishing his studies in Munich, Thiersch moved to Berlin where he held the position of director at Peter Behrens' office in 1906. Behrens soon discovered his talent through the drawings and watercolors he submitted as his portfolio to access the job. Behrens placed great trust in him not only relating to the internal tasks of the office but also in the management of trade agreements. However, after half a year there was a strong disagreement between them on the personal level that led him to leave the office:

"The requirements of Behrens came to surpass all human and personal consideration," he would accuse him of "terrorism even in the most insignificant things"⁸

Gropius would arrive at Behrens' office under the mediation of Karl-Ernst Osthaus and accessed the office's managing director position - later shared with Mies - one year after it having been left by Thiersch. After three years under his tutelage (1907-1910), he left the office also because of major disputes relating to the issue of his independence. Thiersch would go to Bruno Paul's office in Berlin, where Mies had previously been, until 1910, the year Gropius embarked on his adventure as an independent professional. They both also joined the Werkbund the same year and they did it in an active way since Gropius soon celebrated several conferences on industrial production and Thiersch

began to teach part time in the Museum of Decorative Arts and in the Secondary School of Decorative Art.

Coherently, way we can also observe great analogies between their architectural productions. They are especially noticeable in their first creations as the Barn-houses that both will develop in the localities of Rittergut Pölzigen and Miroslawiec in Pomerania, between 1912 and 1914. Also, we will find analogies in their interiors, installed in the refined Viennese taste in which both of them had been educated, visible both in the hall of the Dresden Decorative Arts Exhibition (1906) in the case of Thiersch, and in the lobby of the Fropus Leine building (1911), in the case of Gropius. However, such brilliant, audacious and premature interventions as the Fagus Factory (1911-1914) or the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne (1914) means a great gap between these two figures. While it is true that the hangar at Halle-Leipzig airport at Schkeuditz in 1926 is very much in line with what Gropius proposed in buildings such as the Dessau school itself, it is equally true that it arrived ten years later than the Alfeld factory for which Gropius became known. Thiersch was at that time very attached still to neoclassical legacies inherited from his Schinkelian education and Behrens residential architecture during the years he coincided with him, as can be verified in the Landhaus Syla in Niepölzig (Berlinchen) of 1912.

The Halle precedent

However, as it had already mentioned, this did not prevent Paul Thiersch, partly thanks to the mediation of Bruno Paul, to obtain the position as the director of the Halle School above a large group of aspirants, some of them as reputed as Josph Maria Olbrich, Wilhelm Wagner or Franz Schwechten. The new teaching program that Thiersch submitted prevailed over the other candidates and it already contained many of the ideas later attributed to Gropius. It is fair to emphasize that the ideas both of them learned from their master Behrens, were also very present. Thiersch had coincided with him in 1907, before his work in Dusseldorf, at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Arts and Trades) where Behrens had been the director since 1903 and where he ended up assuming the position of his assistant:

"The idea of the total work of art as a quality must start from the architecture. The concept should not be understood as a mere meeting of different artistic procedures (as it happens in an exhibition), nor as a concept close to decoration, which forces the conjunction of the different arts. It is rather the attainment of an outwardly perceptible effect that necessarily requires a specific relationship between them."⁹

Thiersch demands were clear from the beginning: it would be his exclusive responsibility the complete school organization as well the complete renewal of the curriculum. It would also be reserved to him exclusively, as a personal attribution and without restrictions, the hiring of professors specializing in decorative arts.

Gropius would be surrounded by a group of convinced individualists as they were Lyonel Feininger, Johannes Itten, Gerhard Marcks, Georg Muche Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee or Wassily Kandinsky among others, with a potentially permanent conflict of egos. In fact we have many examples of the various occasions when Gropius had to act as a referee between such a constellation of personalities. A risk implicitly taken as the least bad option because of the enormous talent treasured by his faculty: "We cannot afford a mediocre start," said Gropius¹⁰. However, Paul Thiersch surrounded himself with a praetorian guard much more loyal to the standards imposed by him in detriment to the artistic, rebellious and plural atmosphere that could be felt in the Bauhaus. In this way, he counted on artists closely linked to ideas established by the Werkbund as a guarantee of a certain uniformity in criteria: Gerhard Marcks, Benita Otte, Marguerite Friedlaender, in the first place and to be incorporated later, Erich Consemüller, Erich Dieckmann, Heinrich Koch, Rudolf Widelhain and Hans Wittwer.

One of the didactic proposals which has been commonly attributed to the Bauhaus - and which emerged from its manifesto of 1919 - is the workshop system by which all students, after passing a preparatory course of six months and a test of apprenticeship entered one of the workshops available in the school - stone and wood sculpture, weaving, typography, carpentry, metal, glass or theater - where they specialized in a trade for three years. However, in the Burg Giebichenstein School there were already professors in the workshop, such as Rudolf Baschant, Walter Herzger and Wolfgang Tümpel.

In other words, that Proclamation Manifesto text of the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919 which encouraged its students to create "a new guild of craftsmen, without class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between the craftsman and the artist" and then added: "let us conceive together and create a new building of the future that will encompass architecture, sculpture and painting in one unit" was actually being implemented in another school since 1915 by another student of Behrens.

The Bauhaus' teaching group character had its direct correlative in the artistic amalgam that occurred in the school, mainly in its first time under the baton of Gropius. The Bauhaus stylistic itinerary it remained parallel to avant-garde Expressionism, De Stijl, Constructivism and New Objectivity - while in Halle school remained always close to Viennese decorative style, much linked to the liking of its founder. The faculty's monolithic character around his figure was also essential for Thiersch's School development, since mass migration of teachers to the new Weimar school - so feared by Paul Thiersch himself - would never materialize in the end. Moreover, the situation was just the opposite: when in 1923 the Bauhaus decided to make a clear commitment to education linked to industrial production in some members of the faculty, uncomfortable with the new drift taken by

the school, sought refuge in the Burg where the expression of the individual artist was still perceived as an estimable value.

Two irreconcilable positions

As it has previously been mentioned, the Halle school carried out an expansion of its workshops in 1922 with the definite move to the castle of Burg Giebichenstein, from which it would then take its name from that moment on. Each school's distinctive character goes through significant transformations and enlargements. The Bauhaus builds a new building whose appearance brings it closer to the image of an industrial factory, while the school of Halle seeks a medieval building to provide a shelter for students and artists who sought the beauty of the artisan's self-absorbed and ancestral work. At that time both schools were Germany's two artistic epicenters and they competed between them to place themselves at the forefront of teaching.

As the first chronicler of the school, Wilhelm Nauhaus (1889-1978) -binding teacher and author of the most complete monograph on the history of the institution tells us about the relationship between the two schools, it was close and agreeable, Students and visiting professors had a certain sense of brotherhood that led them to take part in the same events, exhibitions and fairs. However, from 1923 on, they took radically different directions and it is in this bifurcation of ways where we can find the reason why the Bauhaus would become a centre of universal influence and the Burg school a local and infinitely smaller influence. While the Bauhaus focused more and more on industrial production and on the unity between art and technique - according to Muthesius' acceptance as a union of mathematics and the sciences of nature¹¹-, Burg continued to focus on the single work or produced in very small series.

In the same way, many points of convergence between the two schools can be partly explained through the biographical coincidences of their respective directors - similar formation, same family education, same reference figures or membership of the same association of artists and Artisans. We could also attribute the differences between them to the disparity of their personalities. Behrens was able to appreciate something in one and the other and to admit them both in his select work group. The study of architecture, most desired by students and recent graduates of all those students in Germany at the time¹². While Thiersch convinced him of his talent through the magnificent watercolors that he submitted as a cover letter, we know that Gropius did not have a special talent for drawing but did have it as a speaker, ideologue and Group manager. It becomes understandable, then, Gropius felt more comfortable in the realm of pure ideas - almost Platonic ideas type - and instead felt more detached from the material contingency of artistic production: personal and nontransferable talent, Particular of the craftsman's selflessly dump on a certain piece. The artistic quota in his Bauhaus production could not be based on these values but on universal types that did not depend

on the artist's hand. Pieces of art should preserve intact such valuation although the intervention of the author was limited to the purely projectual action.

Thiersch, however, pursued more conservative positions, close to those defended by Henri van de Velde within the Werkbund, who ultimately came to defend the imperative need for individual contribution in the work of art so that it could hoard such Consideration, even if this came from new industrial techniques and language developed from them.

On returning to that Werkbund congress of 1911 this article was opened with, the two schools were only materializing via teaching proposals the discussion that the guilds of artists, architects and craftsmen were developing in the centre of their association. Muthesius's position considered as irrevocable three factors for the recovery of artistic sensitivity and a new formal expression in architecture: independence of aesthetics with regard to material quality, introduction of normalization as a virtue and abstract form as design aesthetics basis. These arguments were incorporated from the very first moment to the proposal of the Bauhaus which differentiates it from the work attached to the personal contribution of the artist promoted by the Burg Giebichenstein. The words of one of the first teachers at the Bauhaus about this issue, László Moholy Nagy, clearly explains it: "The single work, not the greater individual realization, must be imposed, but the creation of the commonly usable type, evolution to the standard"¹³. Walter Benjamin, would synthesize only a decade later (1936) what happened in his writing *The Work of Art in the Era of its Technical Reproducibility*¹⁴. There he explains how the value of the work of art had undergone a shift in the same way press had done with books centuries earlier. The value was no longer in the object itself, - those codices elaborately executed - but in the content of the text, reproducible and arranged for its massive disclosure. The type, was the valuable thing and the Bauhaus was the leader of this change.

The Bauhasian proposal not only contributed to the most successful and lasting modern era portrait of all the avant-gardes and to establish the unification of applied arts to the service of architecture, but its fundamental contribution was to close the dialectic between industrial object and craft object by means of two non-written precepts but which become palpable through its production.

On the one hand, the new forms would be the consequence of physical capacities optimized expression of new materials rather than the subjective expression of the artist, and above all a displacement of the artistic content out of the object. From the Bauhaus on, it will be commonly accepted that artistic content no longer resides in manual contribution from artist's skill, - until now understood as an addition to the fulfillment of the function but as something inherent to the very development of its function. The industrial object can be considered artistic because artistic content

will no longer reside in the manufacturer that produces it but in the type that sustains it. A Copernican turn of the object to the project that will mean the development of Applied Arts to Industrial Design, a real precedent for the modern movement.

Both schools' different positions were only the evidence of the great disciplinary discussion that divided the guilds of architects and craftsmen in Germany at that time. The US industrial takeoff at this time is largely due to the American Taylorist pragmatism and did not immerse themselves in this kind of debates. The break within the Werkbund soon moved to the Bauhaus and part of the teaching staff - such as Gerhard Marcks, Marguerite Friedlander and Wolfgang Tümpel, or the paradigmatic case of Benita Koch-Otte, who together with Gunta Stözl had been one of the most renowned students in the School - decided, due to the clear decision taken by the school about this matter, to abandon and move to Burg. Johannes Itten, responsible for the initiation course at the school and one of its mythical founders, also abandoned it years later for the same reason. However, the story would end up evidencing that the way followed by Burg was destined to be forgotten. Today, Burg Giebichenstein School remains one of the most important artistic training centers in the country with an extensive training programme hardly comparable although to its elder sister since its influence was very local and its production never had the historical recognition. On the other hand, Bauhaus would only exist until 1933: a fire burnt it down very quickly due to its intensity. The Bauhaus managed to transcend its own status as a school to reach the status of myth, and managed to find a worldwide acknowledgement and recognition to this day.

However, the modern movement that has reached our days is due to a generation of artisans coming from all work scales and of many different offices. The contribution of an educational co-creation project involving architects, designers and craftsmen around architecture as a physical support for their production, as well as learning the workshop as a step prior to any artistic development - whatever the discipline scale to be faced - is attributable to be fair, to Paul Thiersch and his small and unknown Burg Giebichenstein School.

6. DOLGNER, Angela. "Burg Giebichenstein: die halleische Kunstschule von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart" (Burg Giebichenstein: Halle School of Art from its beginnings to the present). Moritzburg National Gallery; Burg Giebichenstein - University of Art and Design of Halle; Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe, 1993 p.215.

7. As Gropius recounts in a letter to his mother dated January 1919 and recorded in: ISAACS, Reginald R.: "Walter Gropius, Der Mensch und sein Werk". Berlin: Mann, 1883, p.38.

8. Idem, 217.

9. Peter Behrens quoted by Gabriele Bryant in "Peter Behrens and the problem of the total work of art at the dawn of the twentieth century". This essay corresponds to the verbatim transcription of the lecture given at the Superior Technical School of Architecture of Madrid, March 13, 1996, translated by José Manuel García Roig.

10. Letter from Walter Gropius to Ernst Hardt of April 14, 1919, collected at ISAACS, Reginald R.: "Walter Gropius, Der Mensch und sein Werk". Berlin: Mann, 1883, p.208.

11. Idea expressed by Hermann Muthesius in his 1912 text "Wo Stehen Wir?" The text content corresponds to a conference developed by Muthesius at the annual meeting of 1911 and published in the Werkbund 1912 Yearbook (Jena 1912).

12. Let us remind a young Le Corbusier also moved from his native Switzerland to Düsseldorf to work under Behrens.

13. MOHOLY NAGY, László. The new vision and review of an artist. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Infinito, 1963, p.29. Original title in German: "Von Material zu Architektur". First edition in German in 1929.

14. BENJAMIN, Walter. The work of art in the era of its technical reproducibility. Interrupted speeches I. Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1989.

Bauhaus
Burg Giebichenstein
Gropius
Thiersch
Crafts

1. As Pevsner points out in *Pioneers of Modern Design*, it was a distinctive sign of those times that the progressive depletion of the production of objects as a consequence of a misunderstanding of the possibilities that mass and industrial production could offer: "Thanks to the new machines, manufacturers were able to launch thousands of inexpensive items using the same time and cost as was necessary to produce a single well-made object. Nature of materials and technology."

2. Taken from Muthesius' speech "Wo Stehen Wir?" (1911), which appeared transcribed the following year in the Yearbook of the Werkbund (Jena 1912). The translation offered by José Manuel García Roig has been taken. The "Deutscher Werkbund", technique and culture: the German debate in the "werkbund" through the texts. Journal Notebook, no.3 1995.

3. ISAACS, Reginald R.: "Walter Gropius. Der Mensch und sein Werk" (Walter Gropius. The man and his work) . Berlin: Mann, 1883, p.212.

4. The production of this school and its relevance in the pedagogical revolution of the arts in Europe was shown at an exhibition in 2011 at the National Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid under the title "Bauhaus and Burg Giebichenstein. Education as a model".

5. The influence of the Werkbund became notable in the German academic world, and at this time many renovations took place at the top level of artistic education centers throughout Germany: Peter Behrens was directly responsible for reforming the Düsseldorf Academy, Hans Poelzig the Breslau Academy, Bruno Paul of the Higher School of Berlin, Otto Pankok the School of Arts and Crafts of Stuttgart, Henry van de Velde was in charge of Weimar.