Summary

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **Bauen + Wohnen = Construction + habitation = Building + home : internationale Zeitschrift**

Band (Jahr): **13 (1959)**

Heft 12

PDF erstellt am: **29.03.2024**

Nutzungsbedingungen

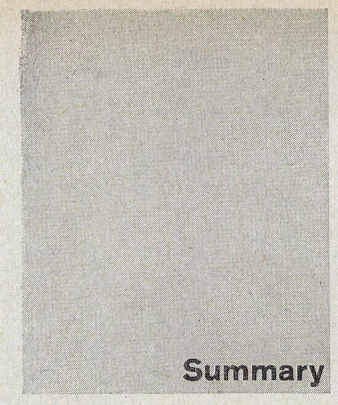
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.
Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.
Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Ein Dienst der *ETH-Bibliothek*
ETH Zürich, Rämistrasse 101, 8092 Zürich, Schweiz, www.library.ethz.ch

http://www.e-periodica.ch



Walter Gropius: Unity in Variety — A Cultural Paradox

Where have we failed?

I have had abundant opportunity to study the impact of American civilization on the cultures of older lands which have recently been transformed from feudal states or colonial dependencies into modern industrial countries. Everywhere the introduction of mechanization has brought about such confusion that the social frictions involved in the transformation are much more in evidence than any new advantages. I have been increasingly convinced that our failure consists in our having neglected to provide the proper leadership. While spreading throughout the world our technical and managerial skills, we have at the same time failed to export standards governing their wise application, for the very simple reason that we have scarcely become cognizant of such standards in our own countries.

What really is the goal of our astonishing economic progress? What do we really intend to achieve with our magnificent communications and transport facilities? Up to now they have merely accelerated our pace without bringing us any nearer our original democratic goal. The tools of our technical civilization threaten to swamp us with their manifold variety, exercising over us a power which prevents us from becoming aware of our deeper possibilities. Our subjection to the offspring of our own intelligence, the machine, levels all individual differences and obliterates our independence of thought and action — forces which were always the particular strength of America. We know, however, that only unity in variety leads to true democracy. If we remain incapable of combining variety and unity, we shall end up as robots.

We have succeeded in infecting the whole world with our own enthusiasm for new scientific and technological inventions and innovations; however, we are such abject worshippers of the machine that we risk exposing ourselves to the criticism that we have only contempt for the human being and for human values.

We can overcome this state of powerless incapacity to create only if we clearly realize that it is not the machine as such that actually determines our fate but that what we make of ourselves depends on our own intellectual and moral indifference or awareness. If we lose our grip on things, it is not our technical instrumentalities that are to blame but our own intellect and moral nature.

Why have we delayed so long to realize the ideals lying at the basis of the American way of life? Why does a nation that feels obliged to make schooling available to all need so much time to give its children adequate school facilities and a sufficient number of teachers? Why have we devoted so painfully little attention to the housing problem? And why have we not seen to it that our big cities and towns were developed as models of sound organic planning and harmonious design?

Perhaps one of the reasons is to be sought in the fact that the Puritan first settlers of America were mainly concerned with developing an ethical code and gave but little attention to the reformulation of aesthetic principles. The latter are therefore down to the present day still dominated by an outlook stemming from a long vanished feudal world. The Puritans were unaware of the fact that aesthetic principles have the power to unleash ethical force and that both principles ought to have been developed simultaneously. The resulting lack of any feeling for beauty in our society has had the consequence of stunting native talents, and the artist has retreated into his ivory tower.

Wherever aesthetic standards still exist in our world they stem in the main from the pre-industrial age — just look at our passion for collecting antiques! However, there is no longer any inherent connection between the artistic ideas of bygone epochs and the needs of the great mass of modern people.

Our tendency toward Puritanism, to mistrust of every emotional impulse, has so heavily influenced our development that natural propensities were inhibited and artistic fantasy received no stimulus. We shall have to get over such prejudices and broaden the basis of our entire educational system in that we shall have to recognize affective impulses and learn to control them instead of violently suppressing them. Such a development and enrichment of our creative capacities would contribute to producing an atmosphere in which the artist, no longer isolated, ignored or rejected by the masses, but taking his stand in the main stream of life, could create as the spokesman and representative of society as a whole.

Nothing encourages understanding for problems of overall planning so much as active teamwork. When such a common interest permeates all levels of society, the artistically gifted individual will quite naturally and enthusiastically follow his high calling. Then the artist's work and his message will be understood by all, and not merely by a coterie or a clique.

The modern artist is frequently reproached for dwelling in an exclusive world and remaining indifferent to the problems confronting his fellow men. But a true artist is always a mirror of the society that has produced him. If the given society has no clearly defined goals and standards, the artist's work will reflect this lack. Instead of blaming him for not producing light entertainment for us, we should rather try to understand his message or his indictment and take it to heart. The ideal conception of beauty alters with developments in philosophy and science, and since the artist reacts sensitively to the intellectual and scientific knowledge of his age, he expresses it intuitively in his work. If we are not always able to follow him, the fault may lie within ourselves in that we often are totally unaware of the forces that are really shaping our world. There is no reason to accuse the artist of intentional mystification or even frivolity when we ourselves, his public, have lost interest in his quest for symbolic expression of cultural phenomena. Rather we should extend grateful recognition to his creative endeavours in the direction of laying the cultural foundation for a truly sound democratic society. Only the artist can see man as a unified whole; his freedom, independence and intuition are the counterforces acting against the excessive mechanization that afflicts our age. Our disoriented society urgently needs a stabilizing influence to compensate for the furious tempo of development in the sciences and in technology.

What sort of cultural climate should surround the budding artist in order for his imagination to be stimulated and in order for him to develop a sure technique?

At Bauhaus we endeavoured to work out a transmissible, impersonal idiom based on psychological and biological factors. This idiom was intended to furnish the student with an objective knowledge of optical facts. It was our goal to create a common background for spontaneous artistic activity, i. e. to preserve the work of the artist from arbitrariness and isolation and to encourage it to become an integral part of the cultural fund of our age without going astray into a cult of the egocentric personality. It was not our intention at all to prescribe new formulas, but it was our endeavour to create new concepts of value reflecting both the intellectual and the affective aspects of our age.

Our students learned what psychological reverberations were set going by design, colour, material constitution, contrasts, rhythms, light and shadow. They were familiarized with the rules of proportion and scale, and they were in particular encouraged to explore the fascinating world of optical illusions, which is so indispensable for the elaboration of new designs. They worked through many stages of creative training employing the most various materials and tools intended to make them aware of various technical possibilities and of the limits of their own creative gift.

After this basic preliminary course the students were trained in a craft of their own choosing. This craft training in Bauhaus workshops was not an end in itself, but must be understood as a pedagogical device. The aim was to train designers who, thanks to their basic knowledge and detailed acquaintance with materials and working procedures, would be in a position to create models for industrial mass production which were not only designed in Bauhaus but also produced there. These designers had to know about industrial methods of manufacture and as a consequence during their period of instruction they would be given practical training from time to time in factories. And in turn, factory supervisors used to come to Bauhaus to discuss the requirements of industry with the instructors and students.

Bauhaus was never concerned with the design of fashionable articles; it was rather a research laboratory devoted to problems of design. Both teachers and students were able to give their work a homogeneity which was neither merely external nor expressed in a stylistic fashion, but which rested on the designer's fundamental approach.

It was our desire to stimulate a creative intellectual attitude with our system of training, an attitude which was to be a contributory factor to making contemporary architecture and design once again social arts which would belong to the community as a whole.

Bauhaus has exercised far-reaching influence on design and the training of designers in America.

Its doctrines are nowhere more at home than in the States, where assembly line production is most widespread and where, consequently, there is the most pressing need for high-quality norms to act as guides for mass production.

A definite decision on the part of industry to manufacture mass products of a high cultural and not simply a high technical standard would be an important step forwards. The world has always expected to find its pioneers in the United States as regards guidance on trends in the machine age. It has eagerly accepted many machine products and ideas on design from the States, but even more often, however, it has been swamped by an avalanche of badly designed goods, the products of an industry which is only concerned to adapt itself to the superficial vagaries of fashion and, sacrificing high standards to entertainment value, to tickle its clients' fancy instead of offering them quality products. Respect for an article which combines sound taste and functional properties must vanish. Slogans which laud the value of the most worthless goods to ensnare the customer lead him into a maze. No serious attempt is made to reveal those features and characteristics of our gigantic industrial civilization which are of the highest and most lasting value and which should provide the kernel for a new tradition of the machine age. Instead of acknowledging that every cultural advance stems from the selection of the most vital and typical elements, we allow mere quantity to mount to our heads.

Choice is the criterion of culture; randomness leads to anarchy. If we are to establish a genuinely valid scale, we must first discipline ourselves and recognize that a voluntary restriction of creative energy is a greater stimulus to and holds out more hope for a larger number of truly artistic achievements than unbridled excess. To make a national fetish of change for change's sake will tire even the most avid hunter after novelty and alienate our most ardent admirers abroad. The concept of limitation has never struck a resounding chord in the hearts of Americans. Early on in their history they had fixed their eyes on the ambitious plan of enabling everyone to participate in all the various forms of economic progress. Today we must explore other approaches. One of the most promising of these is the ordering of our chaotic environment by general planning and group action.

In my capacity as an architect, I regard the realization of unity in variety and the creation of flexible standard structural elements as one of the most vital goals. Prefabrication is the most versatile of procedures. Our initial efforts were misdirected, however, since we began with the prefabrication of entire houses indistinguishable from their neighbours, instead of prefabricating interchangeable structural elements. The result was uniformity in the place of unity. The general public reacted against prefabrication because people are determined to resist regimentation. Nowadays the intention latent in prefabrication is to satisfy demands for individuality, in that separate structural elements are produced from which various types of combinations may be built up. In this way prefabrication will one day offer the low-income groups the prospect of better, cheaper and more individual housing. Historical precedence justifies such an optimistic forecast. An artistic and extremely subtle form of prefabrication was extant in Japan as early as the seventeenth century. Naturally enough, this was based on a handicraft tradition. Even in the Japan of today it is still possible to buy all the parts for a house of the size desired and to put them together rapidly.

Every house will consist of the same elements and yet all will look different from one another and their beauty and architectural value be in harmony with their surroundings. What a contrast this forms to the chaotic confusion of the shapes, building materials and colours of our Main Street! It is true that the typical Japanese house can no longer satisfy the demands of modern life, especially as regards comfort and convenience. Its conception, however, displays such an admirably mature and selective process of development that we ought to incorporate what it has to teach us within the scope of our modern technological conditions.

It is clearly apparent that ideas which are to crystallize finally in an aesthetic principle must be rooted in society and not simply in the mind of a genius. The artist requires the background provided by communal life in order to add his own contribution to the existing social order successfully. In all the great periods of culture human settlements have displayed a unity of form which we in retrospect call "style."

To reach this goal again we must allow the artist to exert an increased influence. In industry he must be introduced into a working team as the equal of the engineer, the scientist and the businessman. Beauty of design, technical finish and low prices can only be united as a result of the exchange of ideas within a team. Business initiative must be counterbalanced by cultural initiative. If democracy is to mature, it must grant the artist the prestige that is his due.

The contemporary American aesthete is engaged on a sentimental journey through the world in search of objects which do not bear the stigmata of mass production and publicity. He is on the lookout for what he has lost at home: good, standard articles manufactured by generations of skilled and patient craftsmen to be both objects of beauty and utility. Ironically enough, these are now rarities for connoisseurs and discovering them becomes daily more difficult as economic pressure forces other countries to copy the example set by America with its mechanized mass production. In the meantime, however, those who are turning their backs on their own culture in this manner are losing an opportunity of helping their country in a way open to them because of their intellectual heritage and general viewpoint, for it is just these people who are capable of furthering the transformation of the wretched consequences of the machine age into their opposites and of stimulating a desire for quality and beauty among both producers and consumers.

As long as our "cultivated" élite believes that it is impossible to improve the undiscerning taste of the masses and that the only safe measure is to force arbitrary aesthetic principles upon an uncomprehending public, they will be betraying the special duty laid upon a democratic society, namely to work from the lower classes upwards instead of from the top downwards. Such ukases of the learned are the product of an epoch in which cultural matters were the concern of an élite able to impose standards of taste and manufacture. This is no longer the case in our present-day form of democracy. A social system which has granted the same privileges to all must, in the last analysis, bear in mind its duty to protect these privileges from being wasted on account of ignorance and coarse insensitivity. This can only be accomplished if the general level of receptivity and judgement is gradually raised, and not by means of the blind acceptance of aesthetic principles. A lively feeling for what is beautiful can be preserved neither as a unique privilege of the aesthete nor in the form of purely external decoration of our contemporary environment's ugly features. It is a primary demand that is laid upon everyone and it must be rooted in the customs and practices of the whole nation. „Unity in variety" — this is the symbol and most important expression of culture.

It is possible that following generations will experience such a unification of society. The task of the artist will then be to symbolize the strivings and ideals of society. Thanks to his capacity to make a higher social order visible in works of art, he will perhaps again become the seer and mentor of the community, and as the guardian of its conscience lead the way to a resolution of the American paradox.