

LESSONS LEARNED?



Uncovering the lasting relevance of the Bauhaus and the Vkhutemas schools of design.

From left to right:
The main Bauhaus building in Dessau, 2005; Joseph Albers and students at the Bauhaus, c. 1928; the Bauhaus metal workshop; a rare shot of the Bauhaus masters on the roof of the Bauhaus building, 1926; Vkhutemas teachers Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, c. 1920.

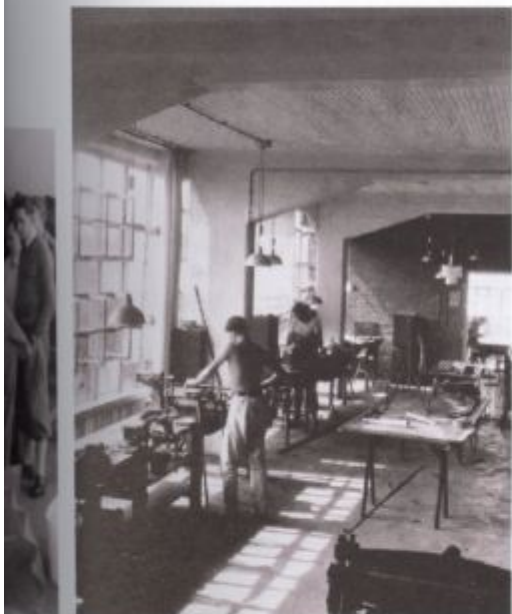
It was once a lot simpler to be a designer, whether one's expertise was in the design of graphics, products, or interiors. Today, many factors come into play in what it is a designer does and those factors will continue to evolve. To get a better sense of how designers might work in the future, it makes sense to review some outstanding achievements of the past. However, it is not past forms that provide insight into what the future holds, but rather how forward-thinking people in the design community came to terms with circumstances that were radically different from what they had known before.

It is worth a look back at several classic schools of art and design to consider why they continue to loom large, what we can learn from their successes, and, perhaps more importantly, what their impact on the future might be, given that the situations in which designers work are considerably different between then and now.

Simply stated, to effectively look toward the future, we need to look at the past for some context. Both the Bauhaus,

which celebrated the 90th anniversary of its founding in 2009, and its Russian counterpart, the Vkhutemas, can serve as laboratories from which we can derive inspiration and insight. While less recognized for its impact, even though it was a bigger and more comprehensive school, the Vkhutemas introduced many radical ideas about art, architecture, and design to the new Soviet Union. Both schools were multi-faceted institutions, hotbeds of competing ideologies. They were staffed with some of the best artists, designers, and architects of their day—men and women (mostly men) who held wildly differing views of how their particular talents should be used. Both flourished briefly in the years following World War I, which was a time of accelerated social transformation.

The political and social framework for the Bauhaus was the new Weimar Republic, whose federal and state governments were populated with political progressives, although these governments were not without their conservative detractors, including Hitler's National Socialist Party. In



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the Soviet Union, the Vkhutemas opened a year after the Bauhaus, in 1920, with the strong support of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, leader of the Bolsheviks, who were still fighting for control of the country, which they gained the following year. In both cases, the schools were supported with public money, a policy that was justified by the expectation that they would produce valuable results for local governments in the case of the Bauhaus, and the new national government in the case of the Vkhutemas.

The ideal of the Bauhaus—formulated by its first director, the architect Walter Gropius, and embodied in the school's founding manifesto—was collaboration, a notion that might be one of the school's lasting legacies. In the opening sentence of the manifesto, Gropius declared, "The ultimate aim of all the visual arts is the complete building!" For him, architecture was the organizing activity that would unite all the arts. His plan was to support the collaboration of artists and craftsmen by creating workshops that would be held together by a common core—the foundation course, whose aim

was to awaken the senses, expose students to different materials, and provide a broad visual grounding for the more specialized workshop activity that followed. To guide the training in each workshop, Gropius appointed an artist and a craftsman. The artist was to inspire the students to create new forms, and the craftsman was to train them in specific techniques.

Ironically, the first architecture workshop was not established until 1927, when Gropius hired the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer to head it. Until that time, Gropius used various architectural commissions and projects to foster collaboration among the workshops. First was the Sommerfeld house in Berlin, built for a wealthy timber merchant. In the tradition of Josef Hoffmann's more elaborate Palais Stoclet in Brussels, which featured the work of craftsmen in the Vienna Workshops, Gropius invited students from the different Bauhaus workshops to help him decorate and furnish the Sommerfeld house. Joost Schmidt, who had come to the Bauhaus to study sculpture, designed and carved

reliefs on the doors and staircases, Josef Albers created stained glass windows with abstract patterns, and Marcel Breuer, then a student in the carpentry workshop, created stuffed leather rectangular chairs for the entrance hall.

This Sommerfeld House prepared the way for another collaborative project, the Haus am Horn that Georg Mueche designed for the Bauhaus exhibition of 1923. Here, too, the workshops collaborated on the interior design—only this time the intent was to create an interior that was technologically and aesthetically modern. It was filled entirely with furnishings designed by students. Ceramics came from the pottery that was affiliated with the school, lighting fixtures were designed in Moholy-Nagy's metal workshop, and weaving students produced textiles.

With each cooperative project, there was increasing collaboration among the workshops. The culmination of this process was the new Bauhaus building in Dessau, completed in 1926. Students in the mural-painting class designed the interior color scheme—light hues on the

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classroom and library walls and white walls with red and black divisions on the ceiling in the dining room. The auditorium featured rows of chairs made of bent tubular steel with taut cloth seats and backs, thus highlighting this new furniture type that Marcel Breuer, the recently appointed head of the joinery workshop, had devised. Breuer also designed tables and stools for the canteen, while Max Krajewski and Marianne Brandt from the metal workshop introduced lighting comprised of short fluorescent tubes, perhaps inspired by the de Stijl designer Gerrit Rietveld's light for the de Hartog medical clinic in Maarssen, Holland. Even the printing workshop was involved. Herbert Bayer, the workshop's new head, created the large supergraphic lettering spelling the word "bauhaus" that was placed on the building's exterior.

To consider other collaborations within the Bauhaus—first in Weimar and then in Dessau—would be require a lengthy excursus. Suffice it to say that even though students were assigned to separate workshops, the school was open to experiments, some of which grew out of the spirit of community that Gropius originally encouraged and cultivated. The marionette plays of Kurt Schmidt and Oscar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet are two such new artistic forms that resulted from this encouragement.

After Gropius left in 1928, the workshops became more focused on design for commercial production, and Gropius's successor, Hannes Meyer, achieved considerable success in marketing Bauhaus designs during his tenure as director. Mies van der Rohe replaced Meyer in 1930 and wielded a strong hand in shaping the curriculum toward ends that supported his own formal and technical interests and architecture became the school's primary focus.

Where the Bauhaus went through several distinct phases shaped by a succession of forceful directors—phases that

ranged from envisioning cathedrals of socialism to building private villas—the Vkhutemas retained its orientation to social improvement throughout the ten years of its existence. The Vkhutemas was considerably larger than the Bauhaus and the size of its student body and faculty—more than 1,500—made the community spirit that Gropius valued much harder to achieve.

Similar to the Bauhaus foundation course, the Vkhutemas offered a basic division, which focused on fundamental concepts of design. Students were introduced to a theoretical framework, strongly influenced by the Constructivists, which featured line, plane, surface, volume, and color as elements of composition. Workshops or faculties specialized in graphics, painting, sculpture, metal work, woodwork, textiles, and architecture. The metal work and woodwork faculties were eventually joined together in a single department. Ideologically, the school sought to downplay individualism by encouraging students to work in teams, which corresponded more closely to the idealistic Communist vision of collective activity.

Nonetheless, the different faculties operated relatively autonomously, even to the point of developing competing pedagogies, especially in architecture where Nikolai Ladovsky's rationalism rivaled Mosei Ginzburg's Constructivism. Collaboration occurred more often within the faculties than between them. Some faculties were quite conservative, but, in others, the energy was directed to the creation of new forms that would suit a revolutionary society. Among the teachers, the school had its stars—Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, Vladimir Tatlin, and El Lissitzky among them. In the metal workshop, Rodchenko taught his students to design new objects for daily life, especially furniture, kiosks, and exhibition stands that were modular and could be easily folded up. Some of his students'

work was on display in the Soviet pavilion at the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris as was his own Workers' Club, which he presented as a totally integrated environment. Other results of experiments at the Vkhutemas were the clothing designs of Varvara Stepanova, who invented new typologies for women's fashion, the bentwood furniture and sleigh designs of Vladimir Tatlin and his students, the novel designs for books and posters, and the Constructivist buildings of Moisei Ginzburg in Moscow—especially the Narkomfin apartment building, with its facilities for collective living.

While the method of collaboration differed in the two schools, for the most part, social purpose rather than idiosyncratic individuality infused the spirit of each, thus encouraging cooperative and collaborative endeavors. We find ourselves today in a process of change that can be argued as being even greater than that of the 1920s when both the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas thrived.

Despite the cult of individualism that pervades much of contemporary society, new design studios and collectives that feature collaboration have emerged in recent years. Blue Dot, founded in 1997 by three college friends, has found new ways to produce and distribute attractive and inexpensive furniture. Built, a design firm in New York, creates a wide variety of cases for objects out of new and colorful materials, while Established & Sons, a British-based design group, works with a large network of designers to generate regular collections of furniture and lighting.

Although the world is far more complicated than it was in the 1920s and '30s, we might well be stimulated to move even further in the direction of collaborative design by turning our attention again to the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas, recognizing both as early examples of how collective efforts can help us work more productively in a world that calls for dramatic new forms of cooperation. •