Walter Gropius and Paul Schultze-Naumburg, “Who Is Right? Traditional Architecture or Building in New Forms” (1926)

Abstract

In these two texts, Walter Gropius, the famous proponent of modern architecture and founder of the Bauhaus school, and Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an advocate of traditional “*Heimatschutzarchitektur*” [cultural conservation architecture], argue about which direction architecture in Germany should take. The two opposing answers were published together in the monthly magazine *Uhu* in April 1926. While Gropius’s text already breaks with the grammatical rules of capitalization in German and argues in favor of the rejection of ornament and traditional styles in favor of functionality in architecture, Schultze-Naumburg insists on the necessity of a historically evolved, genuinely German architecture reflecting the values of “northern culture.” He would elaborate on the cultural chauvinist and racist criteria he applies here when discussing different architectural styles in his book *Kunst und Rasse* [*Art and Race*] two years later.

Source

Who is Right? Traditional Architecture or Building in New Forms

WALTER GROPIUS

The pleasure taken in building, in lending form to our architectural structures and cities, is growing throughout the population. The complete change in the technological means of construction, which over two generations has entailed transformations surpassing perhaps the entire preceding millennium, has posed the world of building with such a multitude of new problems that, in practice, we are not yet fulfilling even the smallest fraction of what is possible.

Technical problems, the inspiration just a short while ago for utopian dreams, have been solved with the aid of newly-discovered forces—steam and electricity—with the result that the methods of our traditional way of life have been declared outmoded and left far behind. The natural inertia of the human heart hinders any quick adaptation to these recent advances. At first only a small portion of our needs will be met through the exploitation of the newly harnessed natural forces and their tool, the machine. But building in particular, that vast complex of heterogeneous crafts, still operates with the artisanal methods of the Middle Ages; the incorporation into this area of mechanical forces has just begun to cast off traditional materials, designs, and forms. The new materials—iron, concrete, glass—were available either not at all or only minimally to earlier generations. Their use today is beginning to give architecture a completely new, unexpected face. Just as we can identify a complete formal transformation of individual aspects of our surroundings, such as heating and lighting due to the application of industrial methods of production, the forms buildings take are beginning to change fundamentally.

This change becomes apparent first of all in buildings devoted to the new arrangements of space dictated by modern needs, such as factories, train stations, and bridges. These structures quite logically supplied architecture with a source of inspiration, for new inventions today, as always, are necessarily of critical significance for the development of architecture.

But ominously erroneous ideas interfere with the extension of these foregone conclusions to the great

mass of other types of architectural design.

The decline of medieval handicrafts was accompanied by the rise of an academic concept of craft, and the custodians of architecture, architects, lost their natural connection to the technical advances spurred by the discovery of new materials and designs. They consequently became stuck in academic aestheticism, grew tired, gave in to convention, and ultimately let the formal vitality of dwellings and cities slip from their grasp. For the generation just prior to our own, the art of building declined into an enfeebled sentimentalism that saw its purpose in the formalistic employment of motifs, ornaments, and profiles attached to the body of buildings, so that the latter became, instead of living organisms, the carriers of dead, extrinsic, decorative forms.

The leaders of the modern movement in building took the field in decisive opposition to the exhausted and dying practice of a derivative, decorative architecture. In this technological epoch it cannot but seem senseless for people to surround themselves with imitations of past times—Gothic, Rococo, Renaissance, Baroque—so utterly different in structure from our own. Previous epochs never thought of imitating the past; they were proud to lend their own expression to their life. The effect of imitating past styles for both the interior and exterior of our buildings is just as silly as if we were to wander about our streets in the clothing and hairdos of those times. Modern individuals of 1926 need cities, buildings, dwellings, and appliances from their own time, the clear results in form and technology of the means and methods that *our* intellectual achievements have made available.

The subjection of all aspects of building for our needs to industry and the economy, to their precision and efficient exploitation of space and material, will determine the form of our creations. A resolute consideration of all modern methods in the erection of our buildings must be promoted, even if the resulting forms in diverging from the traditional appear strange and surprising. For the ability to make a building “beautiful” is founded on the mastery of the entire array of economic, technical, and formal preconditions, the result of which is the architectural organism. The way in which the builder orders the masses, materials, and colors of the building creates its characteristic face. Its cultural value lies in the proportions of this ordering not in the external application of decorative profiles and ornamentations. Such things disturb the clear contours of a building as soon as they are not functionally justified, which is to say, justified in a technical and spatial sense.

The new architecture articulates its affirmative manifesto as follows:

The formal development of things organically from the point of view of laws appropriate to the present, without romantic prettification and cuteness.

The exclusive use of typical fundamental forms and colors that are understandable to everyone.

Simplicity in multiplicity; the efficient exploitation of space, material, time, and money. The affirmation of the living environment of machines and vehicles, of their tempo and rhythm.

The mastery of increasingly daring formal devices to overcome the earth-bound inertia of buildings with the effect and appearance of suspension.

Tied to the enormous expenditure of technical and material means, development only haltingly pursues the rapidly advancing idea. Since building is collective work, its vitality depends not on individual interest but on the interest of the whole. A positive inclination for building must be promoted. Our overwhelming need for residential dwellings supplies us with a natural pretext for doing so.

How can we create *cheap,* good dwellings appropriate to our time? Generally applicable answers appropriate to this time have not yet been discovered because the problem of residential building as such has never been grasped in all its sociological, economic, technical, and formal aspects, much less

adequately solved from the ground up in a fashion subject to responsible planning. A strategic general plan, the “how we want to live” as the universally valid result of thought geared to the intellectual and material possibilities of the present, does not yet exist. Does it correspond to our contemporary way of life that every individual has a domicile that differs fundamentally from everyone else’s? We all wear the same modern garments, which nevertheless leave latitude to every individual; why do we not build our houses likewise?

The *economic issue* towers in the foreground. Attempts to economize traditional handicraft methods of residential construction through more rational operating procedures have brought only slight improvement. The problem was not attacked at the roots. The new goal is *dry-assembly construction, that is, the mass prefabrication of residential buildings to be constructed not at the building site but for the most part in assembly-ready units by special factories. That would mean something like a full-sized set of building blocks that would make it possible to order a house from the factory inventory as one orders a pair of shoes*.

Experts estimate the savings to be expected from constructing houses in this way at 50 percent or more compared to traditional methods. The reduction in the cost of our daily-consumption items resulted from an increase in the use of mechanical forces—steam and electricity—in comparison to individual manufacture by hand; the reduction in the cost of housing construction likewise depends on the exploitation of mechanical forces.

The majority of inhabitants of civilized countries have similar residential and daily needs. It is therefore not clear why the residential dwellings we create for ourselves cannot exhibit the same unitary concision as our clothes, shoes, suitcases, and automobiles. There is no justification for the fact that every house in our new outlying developments displays a different floor plan, a different exterior appearance, a different construction style, and different construction materials. On the contrary, such variety exhibits senseless waste and the uncultivated formlessness of a parvenu. The old peasant house in the north and south and the urban dwelling of the eighteenth century display a unified, nearly uniform arrangement of floor plan and overall structure in all European countries. However, making houses completely uniform must be avoided, for the violation of individuality is always short-sighted and wrong.

The planned construction methods must therefore aim at standardization and industrial reproduction of *structural elements,* not entire buildings, so that they can be used to construct various types of houses. Inventory planning would extend to the production in various special factories of all the structural elements required for construction, so that they could be delivered to the site as needed, as well as to tested assembly plans for various types and sizes of houses. Since the parts will be produced mechanically to standard specifications and always fit together, assembly will be possible following precise assembly instructions, in part by unskilled laborers, in the shortest time, with the least expenditure of labor power, and regardless of season and weather.

Practical approaches to the execution of prefabricated serial construction have already been tried in Germany and other countries.

The new construction procedures must be affirmed from an artistic point of view. The assumption that the industrialization of housing construction entails a decline in aesthetic values is erroneous. On the contrary, the standardization of structural elements will have the wholesome result of lending a common character to new residential buildings and neighborhoods. Monotony is not to be feared as long as the basic demand is met that only the *structural elements* are standardized while the contours of the buildings so built will vary. Well-manufactured materials and the clear, simple design of these mass-produced elements will guarantee the unified “beauty” of the resulting buildings, rather than something like aesthetic, decorative forms and profiles that are not determined by function and material. The satisfying form of the individual buildings depends on the builder’s gift for working creatively with space;

builders will maintain the individual latitude we all desire in their use of the structural elements. The reappearance of individual elements and the same material in various buildings will have an orderly and calming effect on us, as does the uniformity of our clothing, which nevertheless does not violate individuality.

The comprehensive goal of industrializing residential construction can only be achieved through an outlay of specifically dedicated public funds. We are lacking in points at which what has already been achieved is brought together and developed in a planned fashion according to a unified conception. *We need publicly funded experimental building sites*. For just as the form of an object intended for industrial manufacture is systematically developed over the course of countless experiments involving the salesman, the technical expert, and the artist before its formal type is constituted as a norm, so is the manufacture of standardized structural elements possible only through the large-scale cooperation of representatives from the realms of industry, the economy, and art.

Such a thoroughgoing transformation of the construction economy will clearly be achieved only gradually. But despite whatever objections can be raised, it is not to be stopped. A major product of the industry of the future will be *the massive residential building ready-made from inventory*. Only once the comprehensive goals of modern architecture have been achieved will our epoch have defined a style of its own!

DR. SCHULTZE-NAUMBURG

I

Those who have assimilated an image of our country and its buildings carefully and with their eyes open for its physiognomy will not have difficulty recognizing the following categories:

There is first of all a stock of buildings that can probably best be summarized as stemming from earlier times, even if they were constructed over many centuries, extending roughly to the Wars of Independence or the Congress [of Vienna] Period.

Then there has been an ever more rapid growth of buildings of all sorts that, as such, are obvious products of the modern period. In blunt contrast to the earlier stock, which displays clear, extremely memorable forms—so that together the buildings make the impression of a collection of splendidly hewn busts of knotty peasants, manly artisans, delicate scholars, and gallant aristocrats—we are suddenly confronted with a chaos of forms, more precisely of formlessness, such as if we were to find ourselves at a market square filled only with the dregs of a people. Everything here bears the marks of artificiality; the materials are artificial, so is the historical style—like a threadbare evening dress thrown on over shabby, soiled undergarments; artificial is the attitude that is constantly trying to appear as something other, if possible something “finer” than that which it actually signifies. This modern stock is utterly helpless even to offer a reasonable fulfillment of purely objective requirements—not to mention lending them an artistic and clearly defined form; it is dreary and sullen in its expression.

Then, at the end of the 1890s, a new movement suddenly began to halt the disaster spreading across the landscape like a gigantic malignancy. Initially it attempted to clear the table, to identify the actual needs of the time and to formulate them into a clear program on which building can be based. In form it did not want artificially to conserve bygone developmental stages that have disappeared from our purview, but it did seek to preserve our vital treasure of capacities and knowledge, which no single individual can ever conjure out of nothing since they are the fruits of long cultural epochs. Thus should new buildings acknowledge their origins in our northern culture and continue the tradition to precisely the point where it can be developed consistently and healthily until—for reasons that cannot be examined here—it arrives at a dead end. This new movement sought to contain the interregnum of the great style

masquerade and allow it to decay.

The movement soon gained ground, gradually grew stronger and stronger and was accepted in various shadings by all serious and well-trained representatives of the architectural profession, even if it was not possible for us to emerge overnight from a period of utter confusion into a new epoch secure in its tradition.

II

Alongside this development, interrupted to be sure by the war, there have recently appeared attempts to break radically with our entire past. Buildings are being recommended to us that have nothing in common with our German spirit and German landscape.

At issue here is quite obviously a clear separation of spirits: on the one side, those who consciously gather together in the northern culture they cannot do without; and on the other those who intentionally eschew what is dear to the German heart, contending that they are drawn to it neither intellectually nor emotionally. We have no choice but to believe them.

Since all of this is not the product of a single school but represents the appearance of quite various, often conflicting forces, it is necessary to attempt to separate out what has been thrown together and look at each one individually.

III

Without doubt the range of architectural tasks has grown immeasurably over the course of the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century, and our architectural tradition can no longer serve as the only guide. Steamships, automobiles, and airplanes, though they are so often presented as model examples, can scarcely be counted as architectonic tasks. Their job is more to lend expression to the functions of a machine, even if their formal definition derives not only from the solution of mathematical design problems but is also the result of an artistic process. Still the architectural traditions at issue here are quite certainly inappropriate for application to railway stations, industrial plants, and various other things.

Under the pressure of these new needs there has arisen (more correctly, is still in the process of arising) a wholly new architectural sub-branch, the aim of which is to find appropriate architectonic expression for the rich variety of technological advances made in recent decades. The time when a smokestack was simply crowned with a Corinthian capital or when an electrical plant dressed in Gothic forms is past, leaving one scarcely able to comprehend how such conceptual errors could ever have been made.

IV

But one commits exactly the same error today in attempting to force upon the German residential dwelling, which has a very long and distinguished ancestral heritage, forms deriving from an utterly alien functional context, namely that of the machine and technology. Human beings are constantly creating for themselves more and better tools, and the more forcefully the utilitarian functions involved come to palpable expression the better those functions will be. Now, however, the ancient forms of human life, as they come to expression in household functions, have little in common with what has transpired in technology, and to seek in industrial forms a tuning fork for this aspect of life, not to mention machines, is neither particularly clever nor correctly felt on an instinctual level. Eating, drinking, sleeping, sociability, and cozy togetherness are extremely conservative things. And if it is admitted that nation, race, culture, and developmental stage also play a momentous role in forms of human life, they manifest an even higher degree of constancy, as becomes immediately evident by comparison to, say, the evolution of our systems of transportation or other specifically technological developments. One would

find, for example, no great transformation in the eating styles of people of similar social status between the years 1825 and 1925, but there is a great difference in the way they might have traveled from Leipzig to Berlin. Or the way in which a cosmopolitan lady of the last century received guests in her salon is distinguished from the same procedure today by all manner of nuance, but is scarcely a different world.

Indeed, there even exists a general tendency to set domestic life into *conscious* opposition to the tumult of public life and the environment into which so many people are forced every day by work and habit. The industrialist experiences it as a blessing to forget his factory at the end of the day, and even the scientist, though he sees in technology not only a means of earning one's daily bread but the object of his passion, clearly wants to maintain a boundary between his laboratory and his living room.

Even in those areas in which technology is an integral part of our household life, such as in heating the home and supplying it with water, electricity, a telephone, and the like, the clear effort to make these things as *invisible* as possible is evident everywhere. One wants to be served, but the presence of the servant should not be allowed to make us feel uncomfortable.

V

A particularly German characteristic is the granting of such great influence to alien forms that we are not only capable of penetrating deeply into other cultures but we become carried away by a desire to adopt the alien forms ourselves. No doubt this inclination played a central role as the heritage of classical cultures was taken over so comprehensively during the Renaissance. Yet one should not overlook the fact that the Renaissance was undertaken by people with very closely related bloodlines. If one now characterizes it somewhat harshly, though not altogether unjustly, as theater when someone builds an Italian palace under our northern skies—despite the plethora of climatic contradictions that thereby arise—what kind of theater is being indulged when one recommends to Germans dwellings whose models are clearly seen in East Asian, Indian, or even Negro art?

VI

Alongside these hybridizations, often the cause of strange bloomings indeed, others occur of much greater magnitude when one makes the vulgar assumption of a genuine blood relation between Germans and peoples utterly alien to them.

Since the German national body represents a universal mingling in which Mongoloid, Negroid, and several other bloodlines play a considerable role, it should not be surprising that aesthetic instincts sometimes diverge quite sharply as well, for they are a matter not so much of education as of inheritance. There will therefore occasionally appear personalities who, without necessarily knowing it, do not feel themselves drawn by blood to the world of our Nordic forms but who are commanded by their blood to separate themselves from it.

Source: Walter Gropius and Paul Schultze-Naumburg, "Who is Right? Traditional Architecture or Building in New Forms" (1926), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 439–45. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

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