

Walter Gropius on the Creative Responsibility of the Architect (1955)

Abstract

In this 1955 radio interview, the architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969), founder of the trailblazing Bauhaus school of art and design in 1919, shared his views on architecture and its place in people's lives. Gropius implicitly rebutted the critics who characterized his buildings as concerned more with cost and functionality than with aesthetics and the human soul. He insisted that his approach, in fact, pursued beauty and focused on inhabitants' "psychological needs" as well as their functional ones. Gropius also vigorously defended the role of prefabrication in housing construction, arguing that it actually enabled greater individuality in design because so many different companies made the elements that went into a building.

Indeed, when Gropius published the Bauhaus Manifesto in April 1919, at the very start of the Weimar Republic, he envisioned a program that would bring together artists, architects, and craftspeople to bring art into the center of daily life. He believed that good design improved social interaction, so long as people had ready and affordable access to those well-designed objects and spaces. To that end, Gropius began pushing Bauhaus teachers and students in 1923 toward mass production and the creation of standard "types," often with simple parts that producers and consumers could configure in variable ways. Some commentators, such as the writer Joseph Roth, lambasted the Bauhaus style for its ostensible sterility and cost-cutting emphasis, but Gropius saw his approach as one that would alleviate the acute housing shortage in Germany, while also bringing "light, air, and sun" into people's homes, in sharp contrast to the stale, dimly-lit tenement apartments that comprised the bulk of the housing stock in large German cities at the time.

This recorded interview took place as the West Berlin city government sought to secure Gropius's help in rebuilding the Hansaviertel neighborhood in the heart of the city, which still lay in ruins after the Second World War. By this point, 1955, Gropius had lived in the United States for 18 years, having left Germany after the Nazis came to power. He eventually did participate in the Hansaviertel project, which brought together some of the world's leading modern architects, many of them strongly influenced by Gropius's sensibilities and philosophy.

Source

Reporter: Professor Gropius will also be attending the meeting of the steering committee for the reconstruction of the Hansaviertel. The following conversation will surely strengthen the desire to bring this great architect back to Berlin, where countless urgent tasks await an imaginative and generous solution. But Professor Gropius feels too old to leave his adopted country. There is a very simple remedy for the hurried and troubled city dweller: solitude and calm. But Professor Gropius, the architect's life is not so simple; he cannot prescribe such easy solutions.

Gropius: He should build in the city, he should build for the masses, but at the same time in such a way that people can still live in a human dwelling. I am convinced that the essential thing is that the designer,

the architect, starts from the human being in all points. He must study how the family lives, and the difficulty is that the family is dynamic. When a family starts out without children, their needs are different than when young children are growing up, then there are teenagers, then they leave home and the old people stay in the home. And the home still has to fulfill all of these needs. So a great deal of versatility and flexibility is needed in the home in order to fulfill all of these changing and fluctuating concepts.

Reporter: Do you think that today's architects can still find the right balance between adapting to financial and technical requirements and between artistic responsibility?

Gropius: The question is simply whether the architect in question has artistic blood, whether he has the natural talent to do more than just fulfill technical needs. Psychological needs are just as real and important as all practical needs. Unfortunately, this has been largely forgotten. People have always talked about functionalism in building. I have also been criticized as a purely technical person who only wanted to create realistically functional things. This is absolutely untrue. For me, the question of beauty is a basic human need that must be fulfilled. And that means fulfilling psychological needs. If I paint a wall yellow, it comes towards me; if I paint it blue, it recedes. So the dimensions change, so to speak, and that goes into all the details of the construction, of course. And whoever takes on the artistic responsibility must fulfill these psychological concepts of beauty just as much as all the practical and technical ones.

Reporter: Fortunately, you still take the time today, Professor, to pass on your insights, to work as a teacher, just as you did during your time at Bauhaus.

Gropius: Yes, I no longer do it now; I have not been a professor at Harvard University for two years, where I was head of the architecture department, but for many years I built and taught at the same time. And I think it is important that teachers of architecture never give up practicing, because they have to rejuvenate themselves again and again and also find ways to give their students something by creating new work. For me, the most important thing is to pass on a kind of attitude to the student. In any case, he will receive information. If I manage to stimulate him, then he will start to walk by himself. Then he will look for ways to orient himself. And you can never give information 100 percent completely. It is only one tool to create a whole. What is essential is that I teach him an independent way of thinking, which he fights for and stands up for, and for which he also makes sacrifices.

Reporter: It is particularly noteworthy that you, Professor, who is in favor of individuality and not of the norm, have not only written about the topic of prefabricated houses, but have also influenced its technical development, because you know that today's modern construction methods require precisely such rational methods?

Gropius: For me, this whole question, which interests me very much, lies in the cultural field. I have found, especially on a trip around the world last year in Japan, that the hallmark of a truly old, pervasive culture is that, in addition to a common denominator of expression, there is the greatest possible individual diversity. That sounds very simple, but this fulfillment of an antipolarity, so to speak, is not at all easy to achieve. I never thought that by prefabrication we would mechanize people to such an extent that everyone would live in the same house. Far from it. If we consider that the number of types of our everyday things in the age of craftsmanship was limited, we can now say that the machine that duplicates everything has resulted in many more types being on the market today than in the age of craftsmanship. The same will happen with prefabricated houses. Not that entire houses will be manufactured in a factory, but the many parts that make up a house will all go through the machine, so that one day we will find a very large number of competing partial products from which the architect can then put houses together. The construction process will no longer take place at the construction site itself, but in the factory. We will be able to buy parts from the factory, based on standardized dimensions, that all look different. This gives us a great deal of variety, and the parts are designed so that they can be

used in different ways, so that despite the duplication of the machine, we will find a great deal of individuality.

Reporter: Thank you very much, Professor. We completely understand that you don't want to say anything about the Hansaviertel yet, before you have gotten to know the project in its entirety and before you have gotten to know your own commission thoroughly. We know, in any case, that for the International Building Exhibition in 1957, the Hansaviertel will include a building by Walter Gropius.

Source: Deutschlandfunk interview with Walter Gropius, interviewer: Rainer Höynck, September 14, 1955. Accessed via ARD Audiothek

<https://www.ardaudiothek.de/episode/deutschlandradio-retro-kulturfunk/gespraech-mit-walter-gropius/deutschlandfunk/12043827/>

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