

Adolf Behne, “Bruno Taut” (1914)

Abstract

The values of innovation and novelty figured as importantly in the architecture of Wilhelmine Germany as they did in painting and sculpture. Technological advances, including the development of lighter and stronger materials, such as steel, transformed the formal language architects used to design buildings. In the account below, architect and critic Adolf Behne describes Bruno Taut’s (1880–1938) use of new materials and building techniques in developing his own conception of modern architecture.

Source

With his pavilion for the Federation of Steel Industries at the Leipzig Building Trade Exhibition, Bruno Taut has achieved his first great sweeping success! The “Monument of Iron,” as the building was succinctly christened, also caught the attention of those who would otherwise not have been moved by architectural creations. Everyone felt that in this sparse, unadorned and wonderfully energetic structure a genuinely modern and altogether contemporary artist had revealed himself. But unfortunately this great interest in the Leipzig pavilion has not sparked a general reawakening of interest in the rest of Bruno Taut’s work. This is all the more regrettable since Bruno Taut has, in fact, produced achievements more significant than the Leipzig pavilion. Just now in one of the western districts of Berlin he has completed a new residential apartment house – one constituting a rare, genuinely exciting architectural achievement.

The house in question is on the corner of Hardenberg and Schiller Streets in Charlottenburg; [it is] a building that Bruno Taut constructed on a site plan by Arthur Vogdt, which was very interesting in terms of urban planning.

Nothing could be further from Bruno Taut’s intentions than extravagance, whimsy or bluff. His defining characteristic is a rigorous functionalism—naturally it is an artistic functionalism, and not the functionalism of the utility-driven “practical artist,” or that of the “puritan.” In this artistic sense the “Monument of Iron” was totally functional. The golden globe that rested on the octagonal pyramid and provoked uncertainty in some quarters had, in fact, in terms of practicality and economy of space, no function at all! But artistically, to be sure, it certainly did fulfill its function; it was simply indispensable!

In this same artistic sense the Hardenberg house (the building is not called this, but for the sake of brevity I will use this name here) is also completely functional. With this design Bruno Taut consciously returns to the earliest elements [*Urelemente*] of construction and leaves aside everything that represents only convention or derivation. Like the best artists of our time, he too is striving for a new simplicity, for primitivism. All this was already captured in the Leipzig pavilion, which had a very profound effect on visitors without making its intentions clear to them. In the Hardenberg house Bruno Taut’s intentions reveal themselves, to be sure, with much more significance and gravity.

A new conviction, a new feeling for life inhabits this architecture! With this design everything extraneous, all finery and decoration have been swept away, as if with an iron broom! Whoever allows his eyes to take in the surrounding houses and then returns his gaze to Bruno Taut’s façade must breathe the deepest sigh of satisfaction. He is inevitably overcome by an almost redeeming feeling of peace. It is as though after listening to a polyphonic, indefinite and confusing sound, he then hears a pure and full tone. Purity! That is perhaps the word that comes closest to the essence of Taut’s architecture.

I said earlier that for his facades Bruno Taut has returned to the earliest elements [*Urelemente*] of all construction. These elements are the wall and the opening!

Where in today's buildings does one actually see something of a wall?! They are covered up by caryatids, columns, cartouches, busts, and reliefs—although compared to earlier practices this situation has improved somewhat. Taut reveals the wall, which is after all the prime focus of all building, in all its unbroken amplitude – and beauty. And he relieves the window of its accidental, inextricable character, which it has almost everywhere, employs it as the second grand prime mover, and gives it its full justification! He is not afraid that large windows might somehow spoil the façade; he makes them as large as possible, does away with cross beams and window lattices, and gains from the window something full of expression that is capable of proportioning the wall! Wall and opening—now each has a definite role, they mean something, they have an effect!

What has been accomplished here is once again finally something complete, something personal, something enduring. It is a liberation of architecture from convention, a contemplation of what is genuine.

Among the earliest elements of construction there is of course a third: the pleasure from adornment. The work of Bruno Taut is characterized by this pleasure in a very pronounced and lively fashion. When required, he builds as simply and unaffectedly as no other architect can (his urban garden architecture in Falkenberg is proof of this), but when the essence of the task at hand calls for a certain representation, he is not timid! The fact that a contract for an expensive apartment house on the elegant Hardenberg Street entails the need for adornment is self-evident. Taut did justice to this need and here again has created something daring and unusual by blending his architecture with sculpture in an open and completely free combination! Once more the wish to create something authentic instead of a mixture is the guiding principle. The genre of so-called decorative architectural sculpture is after all still a mixture in which the sculpture disturbs the architecture and vice versa. Taut commissioned Georg Kolbe to collaborate on the project as a free agent. Following Taut's sketches only very generally, Kolbe created under the roof a series of hovering female nudes, in a nearly complete circle, conveying a sense of lightness and free movement, and endowing the house with something lively and pulsing. In the case of these figures it would again be wrong, as with the golden globe in the Leipzig pavilion, to ask about their "function"! They have none, other than an innate artistic function! If they were not there, something would definitely be missing!

That is precisely the beauty of it; that Bruno Taut builds not from his intellect, nor from his sense of "taste," but rather from his imagination!

Source: Adolf Behne, "Bruno Taut," *Der Sturm*, no. 198/199 (February 1914), p. 182 f; reprinted in Jürgen Schütte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 592–96.

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