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# Criticism of the Bauhaus Concept in the Ulm School of Design

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# Criticism of the Bauhaus Concept in the Ulm School of Design

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## Abstract

In 1950, the Swiss designer Max Bill was invited to assist Inge Scholl in planning a new school of design in Ulm similar to the Bauhaus because of Bill's experience at the Bauhaus and the modernist works he had developed from the 1930s to the 1940s in Switzerland. When the Ulm School of Design provisionally began its design courses in 1953, Max Bill became its first rector. When the new school building was officially opened on 2 October 1955, the school was expected to be a successor to the Bauhaus school.

However, in 1957, a conflict over educational principles became unavoidable; younger teachers, even Otl Aicher, the co-founder of the school, complained that Bill placed too much weight on art in the design education. In 1957, Bill left the school. New leaders such as Tomás Maldonado opposed certain Bauhaus concepts because they tended to believe more in the tenets of traditional art training. Therefore, in accordance with the complex requirements of the industrial society, younger lecturers encouraged a design education based on the latest scientific knowledge.

A similar reorientation was also seen in the Bauhaus. Hannes Meyer, the second rector, had attempted to exclude purpose-free art training so as to develop practical instruction using scientific approaches. This paper examines the historical significance of the functionalist reformation that took place in both schools with a focus on the fundamental problems with free art training as part of design education.

*Keywords: Bauhaus, Gestaltung, Modernism, Free Art, Industrial Design,*

## Introduction

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning of *Gestaltung*, which was the representative concept for modern design in German speaking areas. As there has been a great deal of research on the history of the Bauhaus and its influences, this study seeks to understand the history of the design concepts and their effect on design education. For this purpose, special attention is given to the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* Ulm (Ulm School of Design) because of its positioning between Bauhaus concepts and those of the more contemporary institutions. This study reconsiders the modernist concept of Gestaltung by: 1) comparing the three *Gestaltung* schools; 2) examining Hannes Meyer's Bauhaus reformation; 3) reviewing Max Bill's contribution as the successor to Bauhaus; 4) discussing the establishment of the Ulm School of Design; 5) investigating the criticism of Bauhaus in the Ulm School; 6) outlining the Ulm Model; 7) and briefly reviewing design education after modernism.

### Three Schools of Gestaltung

The names of educational institutions, departments, and subjects are important when tracing the changes in design concepts over time. In Germany from the late 19th century, *Kunstgewerbeschule* (schools of arts and crafts) was established all over the country. The Bauhaus, which started in 1919, had retained the practical workshop based training; however, it did not use the name *Kunstgewerbeschule*. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925 when the school was being developed as a central institution of modern design, it adopted a new name, *Hochschule für Gestaltung* (School of Design) as a second name for the school. The German word *Gestaltung* literally means giving shape and refers to a modernist construction concept that is often used as an equivalent for the English word 'design.'

There are three schools of *Gestaltung*, each of which represents design education in each period. The first was the Bauhaus (1919-1933), the second, *Hochschule für Gestaltung* Ulm (Ulm school of Design 1953-1968), and the third, *Hochschule für Gestaltung* Karlsruhe (University of arts and design 1992-). What these three schools have in common is the active inclusion of the scientific technology in order to meet contemporary social requirements; however, there were also differences.

From the following questions, it is possible to examine the changes in *Gestaltung* and design education: 1. How was the term *Gestaltung* used in each school?; 2. What was taught as the basic *Gestaltung* or design common to all special fields?; 3. How was purpose-free art such as painting integrated in the design education?; 4. How was scientific knowledge such as psychology incorporated in the design education?; What discipline was then selected?; and 5. What departments or special fields were embraced under the *Gestaltung* banner?

## Bauhaus

Established in Weimar in 1919, the Bauhaus did not adopt any of the names of its predecessors; the *Hochschule für Bildende Kunst* (Academy of Fine Art) or the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of Arts and Crafts); which clearly indicated that the Bauhaus was not interested in depictive art or decorative art; instead, the name “Bauhaus” was coined by Gropius to clearly show a preference for constructivist art. In 1926, a second name, *Hochschule Gestaltung* (School of Design), was attached to the Bauhaus in Dessau. The new school building expressed the conception of *Gestaltung* in its own appearance. The voluminous blocks of each unit are clearly assembled into the whole building. *Gestaltung* embraced the two modernist concepts of “composition” as artistic creation and “construction” as industrial production. The Gropius era balanced both these concepts.

In 1928, when Hannes Meyer became the second rector, the Bauhaus continued as a school of *Gestaltung*; however Meyer placed stronger emphasis on functional “construction” than on aesthetic “composition.” (Meyer, 1928, p.12) As a result, Meyer attempted to reform the Bauhaus by excluding purpose-free art such as painting, introducing scientific studies such as psychology, reinforcing architectural education, promoting cooperative projects, and becoming involved in city planning. Despite his beliefs, Meyer considered the artist teachers who had contributed to the basic design course, Klee and Kandinsky, by officially allowing them to conduct a free painting class, a class that even Gropius had not allowed. This exception exemplified the conflict regarding the inclusion of free art in design education.

## Bauhaus Successor

Swiss designer Max Bill was also a key person in this conflict. While Bill was basically a *Gestaltung* man, he was a multi-talented modernist who painted and sculpted, designed prints, products, and buildings, wrote many essays, and developed design theories. He also acted as a bridge between the two schools of *Gestaltung*; he studied at the Bauhaus and about twenty years later became central to the founding of the Ulm School of Design. Bill studied at the Bauhaus from 1927 to 1928, which was when Gropius left the rector position and Meyer was appointed; therefore, Bill experienced the Gropius era in his first two semesters (Hahn, 2008; Bill, 2008). At the Bauhaus, he studied with Klee and Kandinsky in the free painting class and enthusiastically created paintings [Fig.1 and 2]. Therefore, Bill possibly left the Bauhaus because of Meyer’s functionalism focus.

During the 1930s, Bill became representative of a geometric art called “concrete art,” and he applied his artistic composition experience to typographic composition; a development which became the foundation for postwar Swiss typography. Bill’s modernist perspective as a product designer was fully expressed in the Swiss Werkbund exhibition *Gute Form* (Good Design) held in Basel in 1949. This exhibition had about 80 panels and toured three Swiss cities, three Austrian cities, three Dutch cities, and six German cities, including Ulm (Müller, 2015), which was when Bill was noticed and invited to become one of the founders for the new school planned in Ulm.

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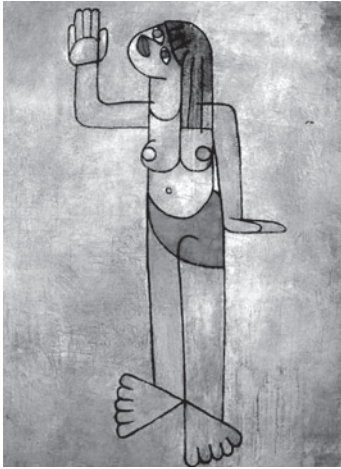


Fig.1 Max Bill, "Dancing Girl" 1927/8. Oil on canvas



Fig.2 Max Bill, "Spatial Composition" 1928.2 Oil on plywood

## Ulm School of Design

The Ulm School of Design grew into a leading contributor to postwar German design; however, it had originally been planned as a political-journalistic school for the democratization of Germany as its origins were in the White Rose student-based resistance movement against the Nazi regime. The original White Rose Group members, Hans and Sophie Scholl were executed in 1943 for the distribution of flyers; consequently, immediately after the war, their sister Inge Scholl and their friend Otl Aicher established the *Volkshochschule* (Adult Education Center) in Ulm. This school was so successful that plans were made to develop the school into the university named after the Scholl siblings, with the 1949 school plan putting significant weight on political education (Seckendorff, 1989, pp.25ff.).

Otl Aicher had an artistic personality and political ambitions. In 1946, he began studying sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. However, because he wanted to be involved in designing the built environment, he left the Academy after only one year. In 1948 he met Max Bill, who had studied in the Bauhaus and had been developing modern design concepts in Switzerland, a neutral country, during the war. In October 1949, Bill's exhibition *Gute Form* came to Ulm, which influenced Inge Scholl into redesigning the school to be similar to the Bauhaus (Seckendorff, p.34).

In 1950, Max Bill participated in planning the new school based on his Bauhaus design experiences. Bill corresponded with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, and referred to the curriculum of the IIT Institute of Design, which was a successor to the New Bauhaus in the USA (Seckendorff, p.39f.). To secure financial support from the American foundation, it would have been unable to recruit the support of the Bauhaus second rector, Hannes Meyer, as Meyer had once been labeled a communist. Gropius' model was, however, more acceptable to Bill as it was more tolerant of artistic creativity than the Meyer model which was hostile to purpose-free art. Even though the 1951 program for the new school of design did not include specific courses on



political studies, it maintained the original purpose of democratizing the country by integrating political education into the general education. While Bill had gained permission by Gropius to name the school Bauhaus (Seckendorff, p.42), Aicher objected (Aicher, 1991, p.124), so the name was finally settled as *Hochschule für Gestaltung*, as this still included the Bauhaus concepts and its modernist traditions. The 1952 brochure stated that the school was a successor to the Bauhaus.

Max Bill was the first rector of the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* (Ulm School of Design), which began classes in August 1953 at the Adult Education Center. Bill believed that the students should first work on “purpose-free aesthetics” in their basic education so as to comprehend design principles through the geometric art (Bill, 1987, p.67). Except for Bill who taught the basic courses, from 1953 to 1955, lecturers Walter Peterhans, Josef Albers, Johannes Itten and Helene Nonné-Schmid, who were experienced in Bauhaus, taught design fundamentals in mostly intensive courses (Wachsmann, 1993).

Based on the Bauhaus model, Bill engaged an international teaching staff, which was the most anti-nationalistic part of the school. The main staffs were Bill (Switzerland), Walter Zeischegg (Austria), Hans Gugelot (Dutch descent, born in Indonesia), Maldonado (Argentina), Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, a German artist who had been engaged in the international movement from 1920s to 1930s, and Otl Aicher, also a German who had had a difficult time under the Nazi regime. From December 1954, classes were taught in a new school building designed by Max Bill. In the official opening of the school building held on October 02, 1955, Gropius gave a speech looking back on the Bauhaus. This ceremony was reported as the actual founding of the Ulm School of Design by regional papers in West Germany, mostly with the Ulm school being introduced as the Bauhaus successor [Fig.3 and 4].



Fig.3 Kölner Stadtanzeiger (1955, October 4)  
“The new Bauhaus”



Fig.4 Heidelberger Tageblatt (1955, October 8)  
“The Bauhaus comes back”

## Criticism of Bauhaus

As the school settled into the new building in 1955, it was expected that the educational courses would go well; however conflict between rector Bill and the younger lecturers arose because

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of Bill's apparent aggressive governance, forcing Bill to resign in 1957 (Spitz, 2002). As educational policy was a controversial matter at the Ulm School, the reason for Bill's resignation was reported as being because of differences in educational ideals. While Bill believed in the predominance of free art, he was unwilling to introduce the natural sciences; however, the younger lecturers thought that it was anachronistic to begin with artistic practice, claiming that design needed to incorporate the latest scientific knowledge. After Bill's resignation, the Ulm teachers developed the "Ulm model" in which more weight was given to science than free art and which had a strong connection with industry (Aicher, 1975). The reformers claimed that they wished to dispense with a strictly Bauhaus model; however these policy changes were an echo of the Meyer era, as the problem of "free art" in design education was again at the center of the conflicts at the Ulm School of Design.

Even though Otl Aicher founded the Ulm School of Design with the assistance of Max Bill, from the beginning, there were differences in their dispositions. Bill had been familiar with free art since his time as a Bauhaus student, from which he had developed geometric art or "concrete art" as the foundation for his design works. In contrast, Aicher had dropped out of the Academy of Fine Arts because he was discontented with sculpting and because he wanted to change society through the development of social products. While Aicher appreciated Bill's contribution to the establishment of the new school, he felt that Bill was an old modernist connected with the old Bauhaus and was still in favor of an artist-oriented school (Aicher, 1991).

Argentine Tomás Maldonado was invited by Bill in 1954 to become one of the early teaching faculty at the Ulm School of Design; however, Maldonado also objected to Bill's artistic orientation. After Bill's resignation in 1957, Maldonado took the helm. His lecture in September, 1958 in Brussels titled "New Developments in Industry and the Training of the Designer" was significant as he critically analyzed prewar modernism as the background to the development of the new policy at the Ulm School of Design. The text of this lecture was officially published in the journal "Ulm 2" (Maldonado, 1958). In the beginning, he declared that some ideas which defined Bauhaus ideology "must now be refused." Certainly, throughout this speech, he recognized the historical importance of Bauhaus; however, he then claimed that the two ideas were no longer compatible for contemporary requirements.

Maldonado noted that the predominance of aesthetics in the Bauhaus movement corresponded to the overestimation of the need for purpose-free art in Bauhaus education. Most problematic he felt was that the artist designer fell into formalism by perusing the "formal purity" of simple geometry and briefly cited Hannes Meyer, who he admired as a functionalist who had been the "only one who saw the danger of the artistic formalism of the Bauhaus, the only one to denounce it publicly and courageously." (p.29) Maldonado then discussed the American concept of "styling" to promote a frequent exchange on the surface to attract consumer attention. Now it's clear that these seemingly opposite design practice poles of Bauhaus rationalism and American industrial design "styling" were essentially the same because of the predominance of aesthetics. Maldonado argued that "the aesthetic factor merely constitutes one factor among others with which the designer can operate, but it is neither the principal nor the predominant one. The productive, constructive, economic factors-perhaps, too, the symbolic factors-also exist. Industrial design is not an art nor is the designer necessarily an artist." (p.31)

Second, Maldonado objected to the overemphasis on manual practice in Bauhaus education; students in the preparatory course should free their creative power, re-educate their senses and regain their lost psycho-biological unity. This idea of “education through doing” had originated in the late 19th century and was still a key consideration at the time. (p.39) “But this educational philosophy is in crisis,” because “it is impossible today to act without knowledge” as is also impossible to know without doing. At the end of his speech, Maldonado claimed that there needed to be an active introduction of applicable knowledge under the motto of “scientific operationalism.” (p.40)

## Ulm Model

Studies at the Ulm School of Design lasted for four years; in the first year, students received basic education and in the following three years, they completed special education in each department. After Bill’s withdrawal from the school, the focus began to change. Until 1957, a basic education through artistic practice was common for all students to acquire the basic principles useful for all design fields. However, the basic education from 1958 more emphasized scientific methodology and included mathematical disciplines such as topology and semiotics because of its applicability to understanding the signs in society. From 1961, the basic education was conducted by the individual departments.

These changes in educational policy could be seen in the departmental name changes. The architecture department was first named *Architektur und Stadtbau* (architecture and city construction); however, in 1957, it became *Bauen* (construction) and in 1960, was renamed *Industrialisiertes Bau* (Industrial construction); that is, the more artistic concept “architecture” was replaced by a more industrial concept “construction.” This department was engaged in the standardization of materials to industrialize building processes. Similarly, the product design department was originally named *Produktform* (product form) by Max Bill; however, in 1958, the name was changed to *Produktgestaltung* (product design) to break away from the formalism that the artist designer could fall into as this department was focused on designing all kinds of instruments rather than luxury goods [Figs].

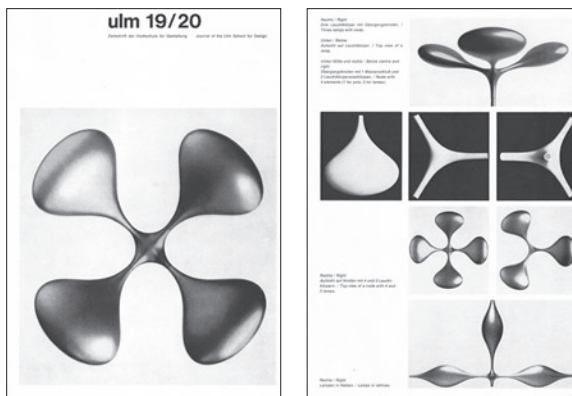


Fig.5 Street Lighting 1966

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The department of visual communication was first known as *Visuelle Gestaltung* (visual design); however, in 1956, it became *Visuelle Kommunikation*. This change of name indicated the philosophy that a designer should pay attention not only to the visual product but to the whole communication process. There was no name change, however, for the department of Information, which maintained its original concept as a political-journalistic school and had the original aim of developing non-genre specific mass media writing for newspaper and television (Oswald et al., 2015). The department of Film became independent of visual communication in 1962 when German film production was somewhat behind that of the French. This Film department was one of the first institutes for film education that put greater weight on documentaries for both film and television (Schubert et al, 2012).

The department of product design at the Ulm School of Design had the most students and was a major contributor to elevating the school's reputation through its model product development. The department of visual communication was no less active in meeting the requirements of the information society and the department of information, and also the department of film, was instrumental in shifting interest from the product to information.

The Ulm School of Design was not only concerned with design education but was also involved in company design development. In 1958, specific development work was separated from education department as a Development Group, which was organized as a design office in the school to undertake company projects under the guidance of each lecturer and only accepted projects that matched the school's rationalist policy; for example, group E2 designed Braun's industrial products and group E5 developed Lufthansa's visual signs. Students could work in the Development Group to earn money during vacation time, which was advantageous because of its strong ties with leading companies.

### After Modernism

Despite its popularity, Bauhaus was short-lived. The Ulm School of Design also existed for only 15 years. As the school was privately managed by the Scholl Foundation, in the late 1960s, the financial situation became perilous. However, as political independence was crucial to the school, the leading members could not reach an agreement on the merger with University of Stuttgart, which was governed by the State of Baden-Württemberg; consequently, the school finally closed in 1968. The end of the Ulm School of Design corresponded with the end of a modernism that included the *Gestaltung* or rationalist approach to the living world.

In conclusion, it is worth quickly examining *the Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe*, which was established in 1992, together with Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Different from the Ulm school of *Gestaltung*, the Karlsruhe school of *Gestaltung* has never denied its identity as an art school, as its official English name "Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design" shows. However, the notion of art itself has changed, with its autonomy already in crisis. Art is no longer a self-sufficient activity, with most artists today being participants in social practice. Certainly, even though the school retains part of the old name *Hochschule für Gestaltung*, the name for the design departments have grown; for example, *Ausstellungsdesign* (exhibition design), *Kommunikationsdesign* (communication design) and *Produktdesign* (product design).

Design today demands less functionalism than in the modernist era because artistic creativity is widely considered to be an essential part of technological innovation. The modernist concept of *Gestaltung* was actually replaced by the contemporary concept of design.

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