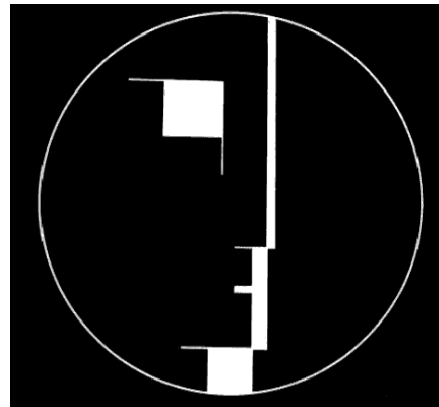


Appreciating the Bauhaus

by Peter Jamieson



*The logo of
the Bauhaus,
designed by
Oskar
Schlemmer*

This year has seen the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the 'Bauhaus'. You may be familiar with the 'Bauhaus' or possibly not. If not, then I should explain that it was a school of design founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany during the turbulent times following the First World War. It was harried by the emerging rightwing politics of the time, moved to Dessau in 1926 and was closed by the Nazis in 1933: it had a very short life. But nevertheless it had a profound affect upon both the teaching of design and the engagement of hand craft with machine production throughout Europe and beyond. The Bauhaus teaching philosophy still forms the basis of many design college foundation courses and the continuing interface with mass production is to be seen in such contemporary manufacturing outlets as Habitat and even in a more startling way in the flat-pack products of IKEA.

An important example of the Bauhaus approach is to be found in the Tugendhat Villa at Brno, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1928 and who later became the last director of the Bauhaus. This iconic building and its contents encapsulate all that the Bauhaus stood for and it remains an almost timeless reminder of those aspirations.

The skills that were developed at the Bauhaus arose from a concern to perpetuate the craft traditions of the mediaeval German guilds, which had been the foundation for maintaining the high standards and exclusivity of hand work in Germany. The designs that were produced by both Bauhaus teachers and students were so advanced that many of its products have a timeless quality and are still being manufactured almost a hundred years after they were first produced. It is natural therefore that the



Left, the Bauhaus building in Dessau; right, students of weaving in 1927

hundredth anniversary of its foundation should be marked this year by numerous events.

In Britain it is sad to say that the initial influence of the Bauhaus before the Second World War was minimal and the former teachers and students escaping the Nazis who passed through found an unresponsive culture, which caused many of them to move on to America after a short, frustrating time here. The bent-wood furniture produced by Isokon in the 1930s is an example of what they left us. This situation is in contrast to the important influence that the British Arts and Crafts movement had on the early days of the emerging Bauhaus philosophy in the 1890s. The link man in this story is Hermann Mathesius, a German architect sent to Britain in the 1890s by the German government to study domestic building in which, surprisingly, Britain was quite advanced. While in Britain he met many Arts and Crafts architects including William Lethaby, an architect and teacher, who helped to found the Central School of Arts in London in 1896 and had the same concerns about craft and production. Returning to Berlin, Mathesius was influential in the foundation of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, an early association of designers and subsequently the Bauhaus. This piece of cultural crossover is set out well in the current exhibition at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, 'Pioneers' (until 26th January). But somehow we lost our way here in Britain, perhaps partly because of the ambiguous position we held towards the relationship between hand craft and machine production. Both John

Ruskin and William Morris saw hand craft as giving dignity and independence to the tradesman, and mass production as its antithesis. But if the aim of the Bauhaus was to produce for the masses, then it can generally be said that through its successors and contacts with industry it succeeded whereas the laudable objectives of the latter day Arts and Crafts movement tended to be sustained by one off crafted objects or limited exclusive runs of high value.

If we concern ourselves with the way buildings are put together or are cared for, then uppermost is the struggle to keep craft traditions alive and to find a balance between factory production and site based skills. There can be as much craft skill in the design, manufacture and installation of all building components, be they dressed stone blocks or sophisticated metal windows. Beyond this is the judgment that has to be made as to what is appropriate for the circumstances. What to do in any given set of circumstances is often the most difficult call and comes with a knowledge of materials and experience.

Visiting the former Bauhaus building in Dessau recently for the first time I saw a museum quality building carefully restored but largely lifeless. It was full of the ghosts of those who had taught and studied there in that vibrant period. There is a haunting photograph of the young women students of weaving on the staircase, which is just as it was when they posed there in 1928. They are gone but what they stood for is still with us.