

Beyond the Bauhaus

A Review of: Beate Störtkuhl and Rafał Makąła, eds, *Not Just Bauhaus. Networks of Modernity in Central Europe*, Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2020.

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Keywords

Bauhaus; Tér és Forma; Adolf Loos; CIAM Ost; architectural modernism

<https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2022-2-10>

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Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919. Even though the school existed only in the Weimar Republic until 1933, its ideas and methods have since spread across the globe – not least due to the forced emigration many of its teachers and students had to endure because of Nazi persecution. In popular memory, the work of these emigres in places such as Nigeria, Palestine and the United States led to the birth of the ‘Bauhaus style’ as a synonym for international modernism in design and architecture. The flip side of this success is a reduced view of the Bauhaus as a technology-driven, rational, and functionalist venture, whose lasting influence has overshadowed similar, parallel developments elsewhere.

The centenary ‘Bauhaus year’ of 2019 spurred wide-ranging aims to reconsider and recontextualise the school and its legendary status. A notable example of this is Elizabeth Otto’s book *Haunted Bauhaus*, which revealed the school’s spiritual undercurrents and challenged the ‘myth of rationalism’ by showing that religious and queer identities had a significant stake in the work of Bauhaus students and masters alike.¹ With the same intention to dismantle longstanding aspects of the ‘Bauhaus myth,’ the edited volume *Not Just Bauhaus* offers another reconsideration of the school. It challenges the primary position usually given to the Bauhaus in creating modernist architecture in central Europe and shifts attention to the broader networks of architectural modernity in the region and its connections to other parts of the world.

Beyond the ‘Bauhaus myth’

The publication resulted from a conference with the same title in Görlitz, Germany, and Wrocław, Poland, in the ‘Bauhaus year’ of 2019. Yet while the timing of the event and its name place *Not Just Bauhaus* in line with a comprehensive programme on the occasion of the centenary celebrations, the conference and the publication take quite a different direction.² Instead of focusing on the Bauhaus, they contextualise its prominent role as part of a network of modernity in central Europe and emphasise that the school’s monolithic status ought to be recalibrated. Indeed, as the main point of departure in *Not Just Bauhaus*, editors Beate Stört-

1) Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus. Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

2) Bauhaus Dessau, ‘Centenary Programme,’ *Bauhaus Dessau online*, <https://www.bauhaus-dessau.de/en/centenary-2019/centenary-programme.html>.

kuhl and Rafał Makąła emphasise the general importance given to constructions of modernity as part of the cultural politics in the imperial successor states in central and eastern Europe after 1918. From this point of view, their introduction suggests, the Bauhaus can be ‘decentred’ as a unique occurrence and reintegrated into a wider network of institutions with a similar outlook, which preceded and succeeded it. Schools that introduced progressive methods of art education, for example, included the Technical College Charlottenburg in Berlin, founded in 1879, as well as the Academy of Arts and Crafts in Breslau / Wrocław, founded in 1911.³ Discussed in the volume by Stefanie Fink and Vladimír Šlapeta respectively, both of these institutions show that the reform and professionalisation of architectural education was part of wider modernisation processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which the Bauhaus could draw on upon its founding in 1919.

One of the book’s main tasks, in this light, is to reconsider the position of ‘Bauhaus modernism’ in central Europe, to juxtapose it with other aspects of architectural modernism in the region, and, not least, to show a kind of genealogy of which the Bauhaus was part. Rather than accepting the school’s founding as a ‘point zero’ in this sense, the introduction of predecessors and contemporary institutions has a levelling effect, in which ‘Bauhaus modernism’ is inscribed in and historicised. In the volume, the lasting impact of Adolf Loos in Czechoslovakia, the important Hungarian architecture journal *Tér és forma* (1928–1948), and the importance of CIAM Ost as a springboard for international collaboration all represent further points within this network.

As varied as these contributions are, the introduction chooses a wide-angled point of view to encompass them. With reference to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and the concept of entangled history (*histoire croisée*), the editors build on a set of ideas that have, in recent years, become an established way of approaching the diversity of modern art and architecture in the region to foreground developments and relationships reaching across national borders.⁴ The main issue they identify for choosing such an approach is that the ‘greater region between Tallinn, Posen (Poznań) and Budapest’ has remained a ‘blindspot’ in the history of architectural modernism written from ‘western perspectives’ (p. 9), which is not least owed to the predominance of the Bauhaus. Based on the strong geopolitical focus implicit in this statement, the introduction would have benefitted from an expanded discussion of the transnational perspectives of modern east central European architecture that the volume endorses, and the potential it has in order to revisit established perspectives. Instead, the primary focus lies on juxtaposing the Bauhaus, with its disproportional presence, and ‘competing or alternative concepts of modern art.’ While this serves as a good starting point, it remains open as to what the rescaling of the Bauhaus within a wider network of east central European modernism might add to debates on modernist architecture. The introduction gives an impressive overview of the different angles taken by the chosen contributions, yet their wider impact as a collected volume of texts, which indeed constructs its own ‘network of modernity,’ remains tentative.

3) See Deborah Ascher Barnstone, ‘Not the Bauhaus: The Breslau Academy of Art and Applied Arts,’ *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 62:1, 2008, 46–55.

4) Examples include Beáta Hock, Klara Kemp-Welch and Jonathan Owen, eds, *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism 1918–1956*, London: Courtauld Institute, 2019; Marie Rakušanová et al, *Bohumil Kubišta a Evropa*, Prague: Karolinum, 2020.

Finding networks in diversity

The book is divided into four main sections: (1) Scholarly Entanglements; (2) Transnational Networks; (3) New States, New Architectures; (4) The Longue Durée of the Avant-garde. In their use of several keywords of recent (art) historical theory, such as ‘entanglements,’ ‘transnationalism’ and the ‘longue durée,’ the sections highlight the varying ties that the individual contributions have to wider contemporary thought, even though they are not consistently addressed within the texts themselves.⁵ This loose engagement with the wider questions posed in the introduction and by the sub-sections points to one of the book’s main disadvantages: the length of the individual chapters, which leaves only little room for detailed explanation, theoretical or otherwise. It is also notable that contributions are printed in either German or English without offering translation into the other language. This raises the question as to who the intended readers of the volume are. As English has widely replaced German as the *lingua franca* of art and architectural history, the higher number of German texts indeed leads one to assume that the publication is predominantly directed at German speakers. This, in turn, would have invited a closer introduction to the diverse historical circumstances in the countries covered in the – often very specific – case studies. Thus, while the idea of a bilingual publication per se is an important step taken in making research accessible to international readers, the inconsistent manner in which this is pursued means that this volume is not as inclusive as it may seem.

The longest section with six contributions: ‘Schulische Verflechtungen / Scholarly Entanglements,’ includes a detailed account of architectural training, an introduction to internationally lesser-known figures of Central European architectural modernism, such as Hans Scharoun (1893–1972) and Lubomír Šlapeta (1908–1983), as well as a critical reframing of the Bauhaus as a ‘springboard to the world’ (p. 120). While the latter closely relates to the volume’s aim of positioning the Bauhaus as a facilitator of exchanges in a wider network, highlighting, for example, the work of Polish Bauhaus student Arieh Sharon (1900–1984) in the Middle East and in Africa, the other contributions in the section focus on locations and individuals outside the Bauhaus nexus. Implicitly, this underlines the editor’s point in the introduction, that architectural modernism in central Europe had many different foundations because of its pivotal role in the cultural politics of imperial successor states. However, with the absence of a guiding thread linking the contributions, a distinct overarching argument is missing with many different case studies in its place.

Aside from the section focusing on architecture as a modernist practice that was complicit with new state ideologies (‘New States, New Architectures’), it is not always easy to discern the broader narratives that the section headers suggest. Not least, this is due to the fact that beyond covering various topics and media in a diverse geographical area, the individual contributions take varying approaches to their chosen case studies, ranging from a comparative history of institutions (Panzert) and individual figures (Long, Wenzel) to printed media as networks (Binder, Sebestyén). There is also an impressive range of illustrations for each text, which gives visual evidence for the different approaches to modern architecture addressed. These range

5) Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, ‘History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée,’ *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32:2, 2009, 171–203; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison. Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,’ *History and Theory* 45:1, 2006, 30–50.

from interior compositions by Polish artists Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951) and Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1951), to the building for the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense by Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (1893–1993), and *Neues Bauen* designs by the Christoph and Umack company in Germany after 1945.

Notably, the role of the Bauhaus, which so prominently features in the book's title and leads one to expect some closer engagement with the school, appears to be of little to no significance in some of the contributions. While selected individual contributions do address this (Hock, Binder), the book overall thus runs danger of replicating the narrow image of the functionalist / rationalist Bauhaus in its attempts to challenge the school's pre-dominance.

The post-conference volume as a limiting format

Just as in their broad engagement with theoretical concepts, the brevity of the texts suggests that this approach, too, is owed to the demands of the publication format. Rather than pinning the blame on individual contributions here, the volume's main shortcomings seem to stem from the book's format as a post-conference volume. As a standard procedure, the publication of presentations in an extended format is a common practice in central Europe. However, the wide range and the sheer number of contributors that are habitually involved in an international conference bring two main disadvantages with it.

The first is that the wide-ranging coverage of any given topic at a conference does not translate well into the structure of a book. Even when efforts are made to provide coherence, the diversity of conference papers rarely functions in the same way as an organised sequence of written texts. This, precisely, is illustrated in *Not Just Bauhaus*: while the inclusion of subsections divides contributions into themes, these resemble the broader format of conference panels, rather than selected essays that speak to each other as one might envisage from a collected volume.

Second, as a direct result of efforts to include many, if not all, conference presentations, the length of individual essays must be shorter than a standard academic essay. Thus, authors have only limited space to present their arguments, let alone forging connections to the wider framing of the publication. Especially when a volume covers a diverse geographic and linguistic region such as central Europe, this makes it difficult for readers to find coherence.

Conclusion

Regardless of the contributions that the authors make – in this case, an important re-examination of central European architecture and its networks – the publication format does not give contributions the space they deserve. The overall result is a wide selection of texts that focus broadly on the nexus of modern architecture in eastern and central Europe. While the publication no doubt has important things to say about this topic, considering, for example, the strong presence of other innovative art schools, the diversity it presents is positioned at the

expense of a unifying argument to emphasise the importance of looking beyond the Bauhaus.⁶ In the end, the book's emphasis on the fact that it was 'not just' the Bauhaus that advanced modernism in the region's design and architecture schools seems diluted among the many different case studies. A bundling of diversity in this format rather shows that while the Bauhaus was indebted to pedagogical and artistic innovations happening across the region, its position as a hub – or a springboard – for a wider network of modernity was, indeed, exceptional.

6) A similar consideration of institutional similarities can be found in Simona Bérešová, Klára Prešnajderová, and Sonia de Puineuf, eds, *School as a Laboratory of Modern Life: On the Reform of Art Education in Central Europe (1900–1945) / Škola ako laboratórium moderného života / Schule als Laboratorium des modernen Lebens*, Bratislava: Slovak Design Centre, 2020.



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