Luxury and Modernism: Architecture and the Object in Germany 1900-1933

Jean Marie Carey


In this study showcasing the paradoxes — hypocrisies even — of some of German Modernism's most illustrious utopian architects and object-makers, Robin Schuldenfrei is primarily concerned with the consumer wares and housing-retail showcases produced by the Bauhaus and Werkbund in the first decades of the 20th Century. Yet certainly for all the wheeling and dealing that emerges in this volume, Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius intended to make the school's new aesthetic part of a larger social reform. Many members of the public were no more receptive to politicized art and architecture than they are now. Only recently — with the international success of the German television program Berlin Babylon (2017-) heralding this revision in the broader culture following Juliet Koss's groundbreaking scholarship in Modernism After Wagner (2010) — has the myth of the Weimar as a non-stop erotic cabaret of creative and social freedom that was abruptly crushed by the Third Reich given way. The truth is that the artistic eruptions and experimentations in Germany before and between the wars took place against a backdrop of culture wars every bit as bitter as those of our own time.

The Bauhaus promoted itself as a beneficient for expanding the boundaries of instruction in the established Kunstakademie system. In Weimar Germany, however, this agenda of educational reform was repudiated as a Marxist incursion, a step toward forced economic redistribution. So too the egalitarian
machine aesthetic of the Bauhaus and the Werkbund was taken as a symbolic expression of solidarity with industrial workers. The very notion of transforming an academy of fine arts into a crafts school was an act of social leveling. It was recognized and resented as such, including, sometimes, by the schools’ own members. Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, the eminent Expressionist painters who taught, not always happily, at the Bauhaus, found themselves sidelined. Though the school’s predecessor, the Weimar Art Academy, offered training in painting, sculpture, and printmaking, under Gropius the school shifted its focus to architecture, the applied arts, and crafts.

Schuldenfrei, of London’s Courtauld Institute of Art, makes the case that the ideals of the artisans and architects associated with the German progressive arts movement particularly from 1918 to 1933 were more often expressed not in the intended wares for the masses but in unique dwellings and objects made of rare materials accessible to only a few. This scenario is illustrated in an anecdote from Luxury and Modernism’s fourth chapter, “Production: The Bauhaus Object and Its Irreproducibility.” The teapots designed by Marianne Brandt at the Bauhaus in 1924, numbered ME.8 and ME.49 [143], appear, with their flawless contours and reflective, repellent surfaces, to be factory-made and practical. They were in fact wrought by hand and at a high cost in both materials and labor hours. Such objects would have been acquired and meant to be “highly legible expressions of affluence” [141] by those who displayed them.

The book is divided into six thematic chapters, two of them (“Subjectivity: Mies van der Rohe’s Materiality and the Re-Inscribing of Modernism’s Meaning” and “Interiority: Mies van der Rohe, Auratic Space, and the Modern City”) substantive studies of the evolving interpretation of what constitutes “Modernism.” Particularly in Germany, one of the early 20th Century history’s key preoccupations concerned the struggle for individual identity in the depersonalizing metropolis, a theme taken up, of course, in literature (Alfred Döblins’ Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929)) and cinema (Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s 1925 Die Freudlose Gasse).

Luxury and Modernism is marred by an occasional reliance on academic jargon — degraded post-structuralist terms such as “interstitial” and “intervention” will be difficult to parse in an historical context for some readers and a signal of the encroachment of the social sciences into the hard humanities for others. An introduction that lays out its “thesis statement” in oddly seminar-paper-ish terms seems out of place given the sophistication of Schuldenfrei’s overall handling of the ambitious project. And although I found the not one but two parenthetical definitions of internationally iconic Leibniz Keks as “prepackaged baked goods and cookies” [59] to be unintentionally hilarious, these distractions in an otherwise dispassionate and professionally-toned text are something the robust editing staff at the Princeton University Press should have resolved.

In its majority however, drawing extensively on archival and textual materials from correspondence to advertising copy and supplemented with many photographs and renderings, Luxury and Modernism presents a trove of primary sources to pore over, along with interpretive details. As well, Schuldenfrei uses several conceptual foils with great panache to illuminate key ideas, making clear, for example, that the “Objectivity” in “New Objectivity” (Neue Sachlichkeit) cannot be severed from its focus on the physical
object. This is an important point because for both German and Anglophone scholars, Sachlichkeit/Objectivity has come to be taken as a casual synonym for the bitter realism of Max Beckmann and George Grosz. Often positioned as a reaction to the residual Romanticism of the artists active at the turn of the 20th Century, before World War I, the avant-garde underpinnings of late Modernism, however clear-eyed, still had a connection to the Expressionist devotion to utopia, emotion, and sensations, and was never committed to practical and utilitarian aspects alone. But while the masters and students of the Bauhaus aspired to create houses, public buildings, factories, artifacts, and durable consumer goods combining somatic pleasingness with technical and social efficiency, the economic conditions of inflation and defunding of the art and trade schools caused its masters — Gropius and Mies in particular — to seek alliances with corporate partners who seized upon the cachet of having a hive of “creatives” at their behest.

European modernist architects of the interwar period also drew from the ideology and techniques associated with efficiency and uniformity models consecrated by the Americans. But the leaders of the Chicago Movement and their most distinguished inheritor, Frank Lloyd Wright, failed to establish a strong presence in schools of architecture and therefore did not have a following of disciples of the same caliber — and ferocity — as Gropius and Mies. Between the middle of the 18th and the early 20th centuries German architecture had suffered from academic dogma, historicism, and stylistic confusion. Few if any new building methods or materials were incorporated into the architect’s presentation for almost 200 years. An inordinate enthusiasm for revivalism and reluctance to part with Biedermeier decorative styles subsumed architecture and interior design into such a creative deadlock and chaos that reform and renewal did not emerge easily from within.

So when the group of innovators began to make stylistic and commissioned inroads — described by Schuldenfrei in the story of Mies’s 1928 designs for the Adam department store on Berlin’s Friedrichstrasse — associated activities — reimagined furniture, and household objects — produced an aesthetic companion to the sweeping reinterpretation of spaces for shopping and housing. The reconstruction of architecture as an organizational field along a new set of professional ideals and techniques emerged at the Bauhaus, but this upstart discipline was almost immediately reified by industrial concerns, as documented in the chapters “Consumption: Peter Behrens at the AEG and the Luxury of Technology” and “Capital: The Haus am Horn and the Early Bauhaus.”

Founded in 1919 by Gropius, the Bauhaus was originally based in Weimar, and later in Dessau. The school operated for only 14 years, its life span corresponding to that of the Republic. As a state school, dependent on government funds and subject to official review, it was in financial as well as philosophical peril for this entire time. As Schuldenfrei notes, “Gropius regularly made additional appeals for sums of money and other support at Parliament,” [126], but of course architects and artisans alike, particularly the Germans who were in no danger of being deported as were Klee, Kandinsky, and, peripherally, Theo Van Doesburg who had come to Weimar but left the official Bauhaus faculty to offer his own De Stijl courses, were free to solicit commissions as individuals. In this matter I would like to have seen a more glaring
light cast upon Mies’s attempts to cut deals with the culture and capital czars of the incipient Third Reich.

One of *Luxury and Modernism*’s most interesting inquiries is framed in “Objectivity: The Werkbund Display Window and Architecture’s Object.” While ostensibly a more professionally than philosophically oriented enterprise from its establishment in 1907, the Deutscher Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen) nonetheless produced and exhaustively documented detailed analyses of various positions. Schuldenfrei explains:

“In setting out to improve the quality of German design and the country’s economy, Werkbund members sponsored a many-pronged set of large-scale – and small-scale – initiatives, which manifested themselves as publications, ambitious exhibitions, built architectural exemplars, and other programming including … reform of the display window.” [61]

It is a testament to the amount of theoretical elaboration about the question of aesthetics that took place in Germany during this era that reams of guidelines and opinions in forms ranging from straightforward manual instruction to the manifesto not just on art and architecture and their public realization but to attributes as specific as street-level, public-facing windows. Indeed the Berlin artist Elisabeth von Stephani-Hahn in 1919 published the definitive book on this topic, *Schaufensterkunst* (The Art of the Display Window). Schuldenfrei confines the narrative of this very particular Werkbund effort to the moment. The well-intentioned window display reform tale thus safely operates on “the premise that taste could be taught via consumption” [88], protected from the ridicule it would otherwise reap. The concept of the window as an object of paradox, both solid and translucent, and as a metaphor of perception, also had origins in fin de siècle French thought and art, with August Macke, who is mentioned only briefly here, being the conduit between the countries, and deserving of more attention.

One of *Luxury and Modernism*’s great accomplishments is the disinterment of many archival photographs of both buildings, street scenes, and interiors, inclusive of abundant descriptions of each view. Thus our perception of photos of Mies’s Villa Tugendhat [228-229] in the Czech Republic is enhanced by knowing the thickness of the walls and windows of the three-story structure; the materials and colors of its furnishings and upholstery, and how its sleeping spaces were divided. (Fans of season three of *The Wire* (2004) will recognize the Villa’s living room from its careful reconstruction in Russell “Stringer” Bell’s apartment, meant to further confound detectives who examine the deceased drug kingpin’s refined living space, discovering its knee-high bookshelves filled with volumes by Adam Smith amid low-key but luxurious furniture.)

Despite their clarity of shape and clean forms, these photographs underscore our ambivalent reception to the Villa, the Haus am Horn, and other of the Bauhaus and Werkbund designs, architectural feats admired more with the mind than the mind’s eye. It is instead the Jugendstil façade of August Endell’s Salamander shoe store built in 1913 [77] that captivates us; and our thoughts wander to wishing that more than just a few photographs of Bruno Taut’s colorful 1914 Glass Pavilion had been preserved.
In April 1933, three months after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor, the Gestapo closed the Bauhaus; the Werkbund hung on until 1938. Gropius and Mies were able to flee to the United States, where they found great success in corporate architecture. Perhaps then the great theme that emerges from the evolving study of Modernism is the fragility of the expression of the uncorrupted imagination.

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