

# ARCHITECTURE AND TOTALITARIANISM

## THE CLOSING OF THE BAUHAUS IN 1933

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Throughout history architecture has always been linked to power. The linkage has been a mutually beneficial relationship for architects and their patrons. Despite difficulties and tensions, architects were able to maintain a great deal of independence. Michelangelo, for example, felt free to write to the assembled cardinals regarding the design of St. Peter's:

*I neither am nor will be obliged to tell your lordship or any other person what I intend to do for this work. Your office is to procure money and to take care that thieves do not get it. The designs of the building you are to leave to my care.<sup>1</sup>*

In the 20th century, however, architects encountered not autocracy but totalitarianism and everything changed radically. A totalitarian regime by its very nature is an ideocracy, which needs to do much more than exercise power. Totalitarianism needs to wield total control over every aspect of life, and in this process the arts play a very special role.

Hellmut Lehman-Haupt has stated that the art policies of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia were more than just rigid censorship or extremely thorough propaganda.<sup>2</sup> The dictator is threatened by the arts because they are a part of the very nerve center of the social organism, which is why they have to be absolutely controlled. A dictator cannot tolerate art and architecture if they are thought provoking and challenging, or if they heighten perception and nourish thought, qualities that are anathema to a dictatorship. Instead art and architecture must create the illusion of a secure, serene world, glorify the collective aims of society and propagate complete faith in the methods of the regime. The dictator, who must both please and dominate through the arts, seeks a language understood by all and acceptable to the majority. He also needs authentication or at least the illusion of it.

"This he must accomplish by appealing to a power beyond him, an established, recognized authority who is accepted by the public without reserve," explains Lehman-Haupt. "And where does he find this power? In classicism, of course, because by its very nature classicism asserts validity by appealing to the universally accepted culture of Greece and Rome."<sup>3</sup>

That the Nazis would proscribe modern architecture was predictable, indeed inevitable. Modern architecture

was just that: modern, a quintessential part of the broad spectrum of modernism that was sweeping the western world in the wake of the French revolution and the industrial revolution. Modernism stood for change, for a dynamic concept of society as opposed to the static nature of the old order. Modern architecture expressed and paralleled modernism in its dynamic concept of space. In contrast, Nazi ideology was backward-looking despite its eagerness to embrace technology. The autobahns, Stukas and propaganda films were highly prized, but it was the Wagnerian Middle Ages that were seen as the ideal forms of existence.<sup>4</sup> Or as Karl Bracher put it:

*The national-socialist concepts of the structure of society contain a strange combination of conservative cultural romanticism and economic-technological progressivism.<sup>5</sup>*

In contrast, modern architecture was optimistic, representing reason and clarity. National Socialism, rooted in Spengler and Heidegger, stood for blood and soil and for unreason.

One must also consider the particular circumstances surrounding the development of modern architecture in the Weimar period that brought it under attack not only by the Nazis but by some conservative architects and politicians. Barbara Miller Lane has done a splendid job of documenting the extent to which architectural issues became imbued with politics and the extent to which architecture was brought into the political and ideological arena.<sup>6</sup> Among the many who attacked modern architecture in Weimar Germany, two names stand out: Paul Schultze-Naumburg and Alfred Rosenberg.

Schultze-Naumburg, who before World War I had been a well regarded architect working in a Tessenow mode, first attacked modern architecture on pragmatic grounds in his book, *ABC des Bauens* (Stuttgart 1926), and then introduced virulent racism into his arguments in *Art and Race* (Munich 1928) and the *Face of the German House* (Munich 1929). He ended up as a major spokesman for the Nazis on architectural issues.

Rosenberg had even greater importance because of his position as chief theoretician of the Nazi party. In addition, he was editor-in-chief of the *Voelkischer Beobachter*, the daily organ of the National Socialist

party. Influenced by Schultze-Naumburg, he used the newspaper and his book, *The Myth of the 20th Century*, (Berlin 1930), for his attacks on modernism.

The emblematic event of the struggle between Nazi totalitarianism and modern architecture was the closing of the Bauhaus in Berlin on April 11, 1933. I would like to discuss this event, an account of which my fellow graduate students and I heard from Mies (with corroboration from Hilberseimer) in the winter of 1953. Earlier, Mies had described the closing to six students at the School of Design at North Carolina State College in February 1952. The transcript of that interview has been the principal source of information on the event for virtually every book dealing with this matter. There are some minor-but not significant - differences between the two accounts.

In 1932, when the Nazis seized power in the provincial legislature and in the Dessau city council, the fate of the Bauhaus was sealed, but not before it was humiliated by an "evaluation" from a commission headed by none other than Paul Schultze-Naumburg.

"It was then I knew it was absolutely hopeless," Mies later recalled. "It was a political movement. It had nothing to do with reality and nothing to do with art. I had nothing to lose, nothing to win, you know. I didn't want to win."<sup>8</sup>

In August 1932, the Bauhaus was ejected from Dessau, but prior to the expulsion the school was turned over to Mies by Fritz Hesse, the Social-Democrat mayor of Dessau, who always had been a loyal supporter. Mies acted with amazing energy and alacrity. He signed a three-year lease for an empty factory building, a dark, depressing two-story brick building in the Steglitz district of Berlin. He had the students paint the building white. Incredible as it may seem, classes began on October 18, 1932.

Twenty years later, talking to his graduate students at I.I.T., Mies would reminisce with great fondness about the place, describing it as "wonderful." He also talked about it with a strong sense of personal possessiveness. He remembered with particular relish a "big party — wonderful you know" that must have been the Faschingfest, or carnival, held in February 1933. He had to create two distinct areas in a very large room for the party, working around a free-standing column, awkwardly located in the middle of the room. He solved the problem with a double-curved partition, a very flattened S, continuously tapered toward each end and encompassing the column. Not at all what most people would expect from Mies.

After January 30, 1933 when Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany, things happened quickly. On March 22 an Enabling Law was passed to give Hitler dictatorial power. The atmosphere was filled with foreboding, false optimism and above all confusion. So much confusion that Erich Mendelsohn, who was Jewish, expressed shock that he had not been invited to compete for the design of the Reichsbank.

The Nazi regime lost no time in moving against the Bauhaus. On the morning of April 11, as Mies was walking to the building, he saw it surrounded by the Gestapo in their black uniforms, wielding bayonets. The Gestapo searched the building for incriminating documents (none were ever found) and then locked up

the building. As Mies later related the incident, he then called Alfred Rosenberg and asked for an appointment. Rosenberg replied he was too busy. He finally agreed to see Mies that evening at 11 p.m.<sup>9</sup>

For a man who was virtually hat in hand, Mies demonstrated remarkable self-assurance, bordering on arrogance. When Rosenberg told Mies that he should have changed the name of the Bauhaus, Mies replied, "Don't you think the Bauhaus is a wonderful name? You cannot find a better one." When Rosenberg asked the goal of the Bauhaus, Mies replied: "Listen, you are sitting here in an important position. And look at your writing table. Do you like it? I would throw it out the window. That is what we want to do. We want to have good objects that we don't have to throw out the window."<sup>10</sup> Not exactly the reply of a humble supplicant.

After the unsuccessful Rosenberg visit, Mies tried to see Rudolf Diels, the head of the Gestapo that had jurisdiction over the Bauhaus. For almost three months, Mies went to Gestapo headquarters "every second day" and waited endlessly and fruitlessly, sitting on a very narrow bench.

Diels was a young man, who was not a bad gut, compared to other Nazi officials. He would later get into trouble when he refused to obey an order to round up Jews for deportation. At that point in time the Gestapo, which would soon be taken over by Himmler, had not quite become the dreaded instrument of terror it would soon be.

Goering soon found himself in a power struggle with Heinrich Himmler over the Gestapo. Himmler won and transformed the Gestapo into the fearsome instrument of terror that the world came to loathe. Diels was fired from the Gestapo in 1934 and worked in a variety of local government posts. While working in Hanover, he refused an order to round up Jews and escaped punishment only after Goering intervened.

Mies finally got to see Diels and found him somewhat receptive. Diels made no promises, but agreed to talk to Goering. He even intimated that Wassily Kandinsky, who was unacceptable to the Nazis, might be allowed to stay, since Mies agreed to vouch for him and accept full personal responsibility.

Then, at the end of July, Mies got permission to reopen the Bauhaus and simultaneously decided to close it. The sequence of these events as told by Mies in North Carolina conflicts with documents in the Bauhaus archive.<sup>11</sup> Mies's account also conflicts with what he told his graduate students in 1953. There obviously is need for clarification.

In his talk with the North Carolina students, Mies, without citing any dates, said that he finally got a letter permitting the reopening of the Bauhaus. He called Lilly Reich and asked her to order champagne; she complained that the school was broke. Mies called the faculty together and told them the news.

*Here is a letter from the Gestapo that we can reopen the Bauhaus. I visited the Gestapo for three months just to get this letter ... And now I make a proposition and I hope that you will agree with me. I will write them a letter back: 'thank*

*you very much for permission to open the school again, but the faculty has decided to close it! Everybody accepted and was delighted. Then we stopped.*

Adding to the confusion, a leaflet sent to the students August 10, 1933 informs them "that the faculty had resolved to dissolve the Bauhaus" and that announcement of the decision to the Gestapo "has crossed a notification from the Gestapo in which we are told that 'in agreement with the Prussian Minister of Science, Art and Education, the reopening of the Bauhaus is made dependent upon the removal of some objections.' We would have agreed to these conditions, but the economic situation does not allow for a continuation of the Institute."

It is impossible to take this announcement at face value. The idea that Mies would have waited three weeks to notify the students that the Bauhaus was closed does not make sense. Even less credible is the statement, "We would have agreed to these conditions." Can anyone really believe that Mies would have fired Ludwig Hilberseimer, his closest friend? And Kandinsky? And then replace them with "individuals who guarantee to support the principles of National Socialist ideology?" To say nothing of other humiliating conditions.<sup>12</sup>

The dates of all these letters, memoranda and documents in the Bauhaus render this account confusing if not downright incomprehensible.

To make some sense out of these seeming contradictions, one has to see all these letters, announcements and minutes of meetings as being "pro forma," an attempt to have a record on file that might in an uncertain future provide some protection from possible reprisals. Here it will be helpful to look at the slightly different account of these events as told by Mies to some of his graduate students in the 1952-53 academic year. After describing the closing, the meeting with Rosenberg, the endless visits to the Gestapo, and the meeting with Diels (whom he did not name), he told us the following:

*And then I was told that we were going to be allowed to reopen. We would have to fire Hilbs<sup>13</sup> and Kandinsky and kick out all the Jewish students. As soon as I heard this I went to my wine merchant and told him to deliver a couple of cases of champagne, and I sent word to everybody to get together that evening. When they were there, the champagne was in the middle of the room. I pointed to it and said 'ladies and gentlemen, here is the champagne. Open it up and drink it. This is the last night of the Bauhaus.'*

The picture that emerges from this account is quite clear: there must have been some verbal communications preceding the official, written documents. Mies must have heard, possibly from Diels, directly or through an intermediary, that the letter would be forthcoming and

the nature of its contents. This enabled Mies to send his letter one day before the Gestapo's document arrived.

The get together at which Mies announced the end of the Bauhaus must have taken place on the evening of July 19. Faculty and a good number of students ("sent word to everybody") must have been present; there would have been no need for two cases of champagne - approximately 160 glasses - for just nine faculty members.

The question then arises, why did Mies go to so much trouble to obtain permission to keep the Bauhaus open, only to close it as soon as permission was granted?

The answer is really quite simple. The conditions imposed by the Nazis for keeping the Bauhaus open were clearly unacceptable and sufficient grounds to lead to the decision to close. But the decision must have been made earlier: Mies was always slow and deliberate. The key to the answer is found in Mies's character. Anyone who knew Mies well understood that, in his quietly understated way, he was an extraordinarily stubborn and proud man. Precisely the kind of man whose thoughts might go something like this: "Close the Bauhaus? Let these hooligans close it? Oh, no! If the Bauhaus is to close, and I know that it must, then it is I who will close it. I and no one else."

Thus, there was an intensely personal component to the outcome. But the event itself was emblematic of an intense, ideological clash, a clash which found modern architecture in the line of fire between the ideas of progress, optimism and rationality versus reaction and unreason. A clash between architecture and totalitarianism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari cited in Martin Briggs, *The Architect in History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (1954; reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Laqueur, *Fascism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The Age of Ideologies*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1945* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> *Student Publication of the School of Design* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State College, Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring 1953).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Hans M. Wingler, *Bauhaus*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), pp. 188-189.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Nickname of Ludwig Hilberseimer.