

Can Europe rebuild the Bauhaus?

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In last week's Business x Design, Eamon noted that newly appointed European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, in her September 16 State of the European Union speech, called for a "new European Bauhaus" movement to complement the EU's Green New Deal.

Fortune's David Meyer, in a detailed assessment of the Commission's green agenda, reports that von der Leyen invoked the spirit of the original Bauhaus, a design collective founded in Weimar, Germany in 1919, as a part of an ambitious plan that would fuse more aggressive targets for carbon emissions with a panoply of environmental programs and pandemic-recovery initiatives.

The Commission's "Green Deal" proposes new restrictions on cars and buildings in order to cut EU carbon emissions by 55% by 2030, an increase from the previous benchmark of 40%. In her speech, von der Leyen asserted that meeting those targets will require nothing short of a "new cultural project for Europe."

"Every movement has its own look and feel," she declared. "And we need to give our systemic change its own distinct aesthetic—to match style with sustainability. This is why we will set up a new European Bauhaus—a co-creation space where architects, artists, students, engineers, designers work together to make that happen."

A week on, it remains unclear whether the phrase "co-creation space" refers to something that will have physical form—a school or campus of some sort? a digital platform? perhaps a think tank?—or was mostly meant as a rhetorical flourish. The Commission has set a target of €750 billion in green bonds to fund the pandemic recovery programs for the EU. So far there's no word as to whether any of that money would be earmarked for the new Bauhaus idea.

Even so, von der Leyen's Bauhaus reference won cautious praise from the editorial board of the Financial Times. "It is tempting to dismiss this as a mere rhetorical gloss on the hard work of making the economy carbon-neutral, which will require real upfront costs for businesses and households and profound behavioral change," the FT opined. "But that is precisely why a new Bauhaus might just be an inspired idea."

The original Bauhaus, launched in Weimar by modernist pioneer Walter Gropius, was a multidisciplinary design collective that brought together architects (such as Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe), artists (including painters Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee), photographers (Lazslo Moholy-Nagy), typographers, textile designers, and furniture-makers in an effort to marry the techniques and materials of mass production with the aesthetics of craftsmanship and creativity.

Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau (where it occupied an iconic complex designed by Gropius himself) to Berlin before the group was eventually chased from

Germany altogether in 1933 by Nazi officials. But its disciples helped spawn a new design ethos that came to be known as the "International Style" in which decoration was minimized for the sake of function. In Mies van der Rohe's famed aphorism: "Less is more."

FT editors lauded the original Bauhaus practitioners for working in "the crucible of a social and economic transformation" that accompanied the advent of industrial mass production and consumerism, and "responding to the opportunities offered by novel construction materials such as steel and poured concrete, technologies such as electrification, telephones and motor cars, and the new requirements of life in mass-industrial social."

FT editors suggest tackling the great perils of our modern age—containing a pandemic and forestalling the effects of climate change—will require just that sort of radical creativity. "Von Der Leyen has spotted that smart design and aesthetic innovation have a role to play in making both the economic and the cultural transformations we face go more smoothly," the paper concludes.

Last year, the Bauhaus's 100th anniversary was celebrated with a host of exhibits and events around the world—and inspired a flurry of thoughtful writing about the movement. I highly recommend Dan Chiasson's New Yorker profile of Walter Gropius, "The Man Who Built the Bauhaus," and New York Times design writer Nikal Saval's "How Bauhaus Redefined What Design Could Do for Society." (The most readable contrarian take, of course, remains Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House*.)

The most recent New York Times Sunday Magazine features an evocative meditation by Saval on the bleak, even existential challenges confronting designers today. His vision of modern designers' most urgent obligation matches that of the European Commission. "[T]he fundamental paradox of contemporary design," he laments, is that "in an attempt to make our environment more and more comfortable, we have destroyed that environment itself."

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