

To what extent is Bauhaus even possible nowadays?

An interview by Christiane Wagner
for the Art Style Magazine's Bauhaus Special Edition,
with the author Bernhard E. Bürdek of the book
Design: History, Theory, and Practice of Product Design.

Introduction

This above work is an essential reference for understanding the development and importance of Design. It has been translated into many languages and reached many different cultures worldwide, recently being released in Spanish by Editorial Experimenta, Madrid. The book, which has already become a classic of Design literature, introduces the history of Product Design in the socio-cultural context of the development of industry and technology. Further, it addresses the fundamentals of Design theory and methodology, the aesthetics and communicative function of products, corporate design and services, design management, strategic design, interface/interaction design, and human design.

The literature on Design opens up an essential space for researchers interested in aesthetic effects. At the same time, some aspects of Design have been considered a priority in scientific research. Bürdek, in the above-mentioned work, makes particularly explicit remarks in discussing the various definitions and descriptions of Design by postmodern authors. Bürdek suggests that:

"instead of a new definition or description of design, we have to talk about certain problems that design must always solve. For example, technological change, prioritization of handling and easy use of products (hardware or software), making the context of production, consumption and reuse, service promotion and communication, but also when it is necessary, to exercise power to avoid products when it comes to nonsense."

Both Product Design and Graphic Design, for example, have enjoyed recognition and even prestige. Indeed, there has been a growing demand for professionals who operate in the economic production sector, with a comparable situation for the designer. The professional needs to express the characteristics of each product through its configuration; it is necessary to make visible the function of the product, as well as to allow a clear reading on the part of the user. Further, we know that Design must extend beyond the product itself, and be answerable to the environment and the issues of energy-saving and reuse – that is to say, to respect the principles of sustainable development and ergonomic design.

Beyond these introductory points,
various questions of potential interest for readers
of the Art Style Magazine's Bauhaus Special Edition
are now posed to the author:

Christiane Wagner

To what extent is Bauhaus even possible nowadays?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

Bauhaus is a historical phenomenon, which started in 1919 in Weimar and was stopped in 1933 by the fascist regime in Berlin. This year, more than 100 events have been dedicated to the Bauhaus phenomenon in Germany (www.bauhaus100.de). Two new museums have been built: one at Weimar, the place where the Bauhaus was founded; and another at Dessau, which was the most productive area for the Bauhaus. Founded after the First World War, the Bauhaus tried to combine art and technology (*Kunst und Technik*) in a new unity, called "Design". It was very successful in architecture, where new forms of living were developed; many of these buildings symbolised progressive living and are still in use. The Bauhaus did not concentrate on new products alone but on new forms of living (*Lebensgestaltung*, which is very different from today's Lifestyle Design). The Bauhaus was primarily a social phenomenon and not a Design or art phenomenon. The attitude of the students and teachers was the most important aspect of the Bauhaus.

When the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau, this was an important step. Dessau was a highly industrialized city in Eastern Germany and the Bauhaus made a lot of contacts with the industries there. With this step began more or less what we call today "Industrial Design". The projects of the students were orientated to the industrial reality of the time. No longer was the single product important, but the design, for serial production in the local Dessau industries. A similar situation occurred at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. The people there concentrated on the function of products or buildings, and also on their meaning. This became very important at the end of the 20th century, when Design became a global tool.

I can't see any similar phenomenon today. Especially in Design, many of the young people are concentrating on individual products, produced very often by themselves or by people skilled in small-scale crafts. This is a strong European tendency, but not a match for the high technology of mass production in Asian countries. Sebastian Herkner is a good example. He is one of the more successful designers, and an alumnus of the Offenbach Design School (www.sebastianherkner.com). He works for many small and medium-sized companies to help them create a new identity.

Another aspect is that Design still suffers in terms of relevant disciplinary knowledge. Over the last few years, many authors have tried to upgrade Design as a universal tool for saving the world – which is a real nonsense. In my dissertation at the University of Applied Art in Vienna/Austria (2012), I demonstrated that Design is on its way to becoming a discipline. Fundamental knowledge is provided by Product Semantics (Klaus Krippendorff) and by Product Language (Offenbach Design School). Design can't save the world, as many people think, but it can play an important role in the development of new products, especially in the digital world. And this is not only a theoretical concept, but one orientated to the practice of Design. Thomas Ingenlath, Chief Design Officer for Volvo Cars and CEO of Polestar, and who was a student at the Offenbach Design School, recently said in an interview (Design Report 2/2019): "With the theory of product language we have really learnt to verbalize Design".

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However, the significance of Art – devoted to architecture or Art and Crafts – always has a multiplicity of meaning in the configuration of projects, in the same way as the work of the designer. How do you explain the difference between Art and Design?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

This is very simple: Art is dedicated to individuals, Design is dedicated to the use and meaning of products for people. Important products are today consumer products, capital goods, transportation systems, interface/interaction designs, medical products and so on. They are playing an important role in current global industrialization.

The idea of Walter Gropius – the founder and first director of the Bauhaus in Weimar – was to find a new synthesis of art and technology, but this is obsolete today. Even politicians are claiming that they want to “Gestalten”; this is really a much better term than Design. “Gestalten” means to change conditions, reality and social patterns – and also societies.

In Frankfurt am Main (Germany), there was a strong line in Architecture and Design: the “Neue Frankfurt” was based on Bauhaus attitudes. People say, the Bauhaus was the laboratory for buildings and products, the “New Frankfurt” was the place where actual realization took place.

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What should we expect from a good design?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

Sorry, this term is also obsolete. After the Second World War, the Swiss architect Max Bill (who was a student at the Bauhaus) coined the term “Good Design”, and there have been many exhibitions dedicated to this subject. The “Gute Form” was a paradigm in the 1950s and 1960s. It helped companies give special value to their products. Today, in the era of globalization, this term is no longer relevant.

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What designates Art and Design
in the configuration of the image nowadays?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

Again: Art and Design have nothing in common. Remember history: the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (The Ulm Design School) began in 1955. Walter Gropius, the former director of the Bauhaus, came to Ulm to give an inauguration speech, and he gave them the right to use the name “Hochschule für Gestaltung”, which was the subtitle of the Bauhaus. All of the teachers came from Art, but they didn’t continue this line. They were interested in Design as a cultural factor in society. Especially in Germany, many companies have followed this line: for instance, Braun became the “Model for German Design”. Bulthap, Dornbracht, Erco, Hansgrohe, Interlübke, Lamy, Loewe, Mono, Moorman, Tecta, Wilkhan and many others present the German model: high technology and excellent design.

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What is the relationship of Design with politics, society, and economics?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

This is a very complex question. Economic questions go along with social questions, and vice versa. And as I mentioned: Design has nothing in common with Art. When you are looking at the Asian countries, then you can see that they are bringing together high technologies and excellent design. For them, Design is a very important tool for developing the economy and the nation. In China, for instance, there are more than 150 Design schools today, but I can't discuss the quality of them. Korea puts a lot of energy into Design (industry, schools, exhibitions etc.) – and they are very successful.

Some more remarks. Design today is linked with technology, the economy, society, ecology, and of course, aesthetics. Technology is the most important of these, because that's where the new concepts are developed – for instance, in transportation design, medical design, and in capital goods etc. Designers are not the inventors of these technologies, but they do transform them into products. Designers are the interpreters of new technologies into user-friendly products, which visualize the social values of their users. The car industry is the best example of this approach. Many people are using SUVs – not to go outside of the city, but to take the kids to school. They are safe in these cars, and the drivers are communicating their social status.

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Is Design an activity that can transform the individual and society?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

This, again, is a complex question – like the one before. There are no studies which can answer this question. But looking to the global markets, they are dominated by Asian Design, and this transforms individual values and the cultural standards of society. The German social scientist Andreas Reckwitz made a brilliant analysis of western societies: the change of values in all categories is very obvious. Sandra Groll, one of my doctorate students at the Offenbach Design School, is just finishing her dissertation about "Lebenswelten", which is something totally different from lifestyle. Especially in Europe, we are seeing a serious change in society and this is influencing product development and product design.

There is no way back to the 70s and 80s. New political, technological, and social movements (for example, in the digital medias) are changing society. There is a lot of stress in society; nothing is stable, and movements are rising and falling. What role is Design playing today? This is an open and virulent question.

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It is expected of the designer that they innovate, create new models for an object, and ensure these are both functional and beautiful. Either way, one thing is given the culture of consumption, the new product, including its shape, its style, aesthetics, design, materials and, of course, the market value and system in which the product is situated immediately after its release – quickly approaches obsolescence.

How do you explain this?

Does this happen because of its usefulness changing or because of the emergence of new products and possible technological innovations, the creation of new designs, or just aesthetic modifications which transform it into a "new product" several times over?

Bernhard E. Bürdek

I wouldn't use the term of "beautiful" for products. Flowers might be beautiful. The semantic term (Klaus Krippendorff) and the concept of product language have shown, that product development and Product Design are complex subjects. But again: Art and Design have nothing in common. It would be very helpful to do some research on these questions.

On the other hand, Design is becoming more and more about lifestyle. In the 1960s, some Italian companies recovered the heritage of Bauhaus furniture. They made copies – at low prices – and medical practices and even hairdressing salons bought these items of furniture to illustrate their up-to-date status. This was the beginning of Lifestyle Design in Europe.

In Salzburg (Austria), they have been celebrating Design this year – a festival of Design. Many shops and galleries have been presenting new lifestyle products – for example, lamps and furniture – reflecting Interior Design, Fashion Design, and Graphic Design. This is a three-day event where anybody can go along, to speak and interact with the designers or buy their wonderful products in the galleries and shops. Such events are the bottom line of Design today: it's pure commerce.

This example shows how the world of Design is divided up today: on the one hand, there are all these lifestyle events, exhibitions, fairs etc. – which I have just described as the bottom line of Design.

On the other hand, there are all these new high-tech companies, like Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Google etc., etc., which represent today's avantgarde. Today, Silicon Valley has its own technology: they are not asking what people really need (for example, as they did in the Bauhaus days), but are developing new digital technologies and are offering these to the world regardless.

In 1963, Tomas Maldonado published an article in "Ulm" (the magazine of the Ulm Design School; No. 8/9), in which he asked, "Is the Bauhaus Relevant Today?". He wrote that the Bauhaus, "tried to lay open a humanistic perspective of technical civilization, i.e. to regard the human environment as a `concrete field of design activity`".

Today – more than 50 years later – it has to be said that the Bauhaus was the avantgarde of yesterday. The world has completely changed in the 100 years since the Bauhaus. Today, the Bauhaus of the 1920s is a myth.

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Professor Bürdek, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview, which will give the readership of Art Style Magazine a sharply observed portrait of Design in the present day.

Author Biography

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