

Notes on the New European Bauhaus

By Florian Schneider, January 2021

Rarely has a proposal by the President of the European Commission triggered so much attention across the artistic, cultural and creative sector as the recently launched initiative for a “New European Bauhaus”.

In her State of the Union speech on 16 September 2020, Ursula von der Leyen argued that the European Green Deal is bigger than just bringing together economic, environmental and social interests. She called for “a systemic change” which would require “broad engagement, wide support and lots of innovation and creativity”. Therefore, the EU-commission aims at building nothing less than a “bridge between the world of science and technology and the world of art and culture.”¹

Within weeks the proposal was picked up by many individuals, networks and organizations who brought themselves into position by either enthusiastically welcoming the idea as such² or mindfully elaborating on the legacy of the historical Bauhaus³ whose 100th anniversary of its foundation has been celebrated, last year.

All the manifold statements have one aspect in common: One can sense a certain relief that after all, the value of the arts and the impact of aesthetics, when it comes to the transition into sustainable economies and carbon neutrality, seems to become officially acknowledged. Climate change may no longer be understood as just another engineering challenge that is supposed to be mitigated by yet unknown technologies and allegedly artificial intelligences.

“The European Green Deal must also - and especially — be a new cultural project for Europe”, von der Leyen stresses her claim in an op-ed article published in several European media⁴. In fact, the idea of the New European Bauhaus is part of a “Renovation Wave” which “is not only about looking into existing building stock. It is the start of a forward-looking process to match sustainability with style.”

¹ "Press statement by the President on the New European" Accessed December 28, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_1902.

² E.g. "The New European Bauhaus Making the Renovation Wave a" Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://elia-artschools.org/resource/resmgr/files/NewEuropeanBauhausStatement.pdf>.

³ E.g. "Letter to object to the term “New European Bauhaus” – Jan" Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://janvaneyck.info/apply/letter-to-object-to-the-term-new-european-bauhaus/>.

⁴ "A New European Bauhaus: op-ed by Ursula von der Leyen." Accessed December 28, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/AC_20_1916.

Instead of slick furniture that upgrades corporate office space with high-end design items in black leather and chrome, “nature-based materials such as wood” are supposed to “play a crucial role in the design of the New European Bauhaus”⁵.

But will it be enough to frame a New European Bauhaus merely as a challenge in terms of aesthetics and style complementing a Green Deal? Of course, it would be hard to argue against the idea that sustainability should be fun and look good, rather than being a synonym for giving up on pleasure and resigning of desire.

However, “Bauhaus” is not a brand tantamount to modernism. Historically, it rather operated as a platform bringing together as well as driving apart a wide range of different attitudes and perspectives. In the advent of new social and technical division of labour it was about experimenting with a new role of the arts: industrial mass production replaced the autonomy of individual skills and craftsmanship by standardized, reproducible and measurable tasks organised and managed in assembly lines, while at the same time new technologies abolished most of the economic basis of traditional artistic practices.

Consequently, the original question of a due update of architectural education in Germany after World War I, had to address a number of fairly complex challenges in both practical and ideological terms. To reduce them to a cliché notion of “modernism” runs danger not only to re-enact and re-affirm the romantic and genuinely conservative (rather than fascist) resentment against the very idea that art would not only have an aesthetic function but societal impact.

More importantly, it would also ridicule the collective refusal across disciplines to further embellish, illustrate and entertain increasingly outdated but still existing power relations since it would deprive it of its social implications and potential political value. Rather than judging historical positions according to moral or aesthetic standards of today, it requires huge efforts to de- and recontextualise their impact on both their own times and ours -- or in other words: on Europe as a complicated political concept and the continuity of its colonial histories.

This brings us to a first lesson we can learn today from the historical Bauhaus: Let us not be afraid of instrumentality or fulfilling a social function — as long as it contributes to limiting damage, at the very least, or hopefully more positively to a better world. Rather than refuse it, we have to acknowledge, or sometimes even embrace instrumentality —

⁵ "Renovation Wave Communication - European Commission." Accessed December 28, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/eu_renovation_wave_strategy.pdf.

and, in doing so, revalue and re-politicize it⁶. By reading instrumentality *against the grain*, by reframing the urgencies of our times we can regain the ability to act together and build structures that are supporting a common good.

As much as the New European Bauhaus, the Green Deal relates to its historical precursor. If Roosevelt's New Deal is to be understood as a temporary suspension of class struggles to get over the Great Depression, it enabled a much longer-lasting accumulation model based on mass production and consumption. However, this model became successful only as a war economy, and it is inseparably linked to the short-term defeat of fascism in an alliance with historical Stalinism (paradoxically as a parallel project to eliminate social conflict on a national scale). Ironically, it is the very lack of sustainability in battling fascism, as well as the pertinence of industrial capitalism's exploitation of the world's human and natural resources, which characterise the dilemma in which we find ourselves today.

The Bauhaus responded to the industrial scale of production, and its capacity to reproduce and replicate itself, by conceiving of it as a *challenge* for creativity on a societal level. This paved the way for new divisions of labour — as new ways of working together across gendered notions of arts and crafts, between different conceptions of the arts and a general production; and, while aiming to overcome the binaries of form and content, theory and practice, it revealed varying means and different ends rather than consistent policy objectives.

Though emblematic of societal innovation and progress in a more or less political fashion, it is the fearless relationship towards its own instrumentality that empowers and advances new notions of building. But the Bauhaus wasn't simply an exercise in ways of building: above all, it stood — and still stands — for mutual learning processes that draw as much on research in the social sciences or scientific methods, as from artistic practices in painting or poetry.

When "Bauhaus" is reduced to a mere style, we might be puzzled and struggle with the fact that its traces re-appear in the bridges and gas stations of Hitler's Autobahn as well as the proportional arrays of the barracks in Auschwitz–Birkenau. But as soon as we see it more properly as a proposal for new divisions of labour between the arts, art, craft and science, we glimpse its power and potential, both real and metaphorical.

Yet there is another, older lesson to be brought to bear here: that the way to hell is paved with good intentions. Too often artists, engineers or scientists have developed

⁶ "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility - Journal #77" Accessed December 28, 2020. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76322/the-incomputable-and-instrumental-possibility/>.

schemes to improve the human condition only to realize their destructive consequences. How can we avoid yet another grand failure of high-minded, well-meant plans to emancipate peoples, free countries and save the entire world? Clearly, there is no recipe for avoiding these failures — but merely raising this question might already be the beginning of its answer.

Obviously, to mobilise the legacies of the historical Bauhaus runs the risk of reproducing well-known fallacies and deceits from across many centuries, unless we recognise *climate change itself as the ultimate postcolonial condition*.

Rather than try to export “smart” and sustainable technologies camouflaged as charity to places where this kind of knowledge was often deliberately and systematically destroyed, a “New European Bauhaus” must break with these colonial traditions. In particular, it must repudiate hypocrisies in which life-worlds are treated as insufficiently “developed” by European standards.

A new Bauhaus would have to figure out how to base its ambitions and plans on the diverging needs of multitudes of people in the face of climate disruptions and the need for a truly systemic change to mitigate its consequences on all levels.

Therefore, it must first learn to *listen*. It should develop, or even *become*, an array of devices for inquiring, echoing and, at the same time, mobilising the collective intelligence of peoples and populations, both within Europe and beyond.

A New European Bauhaus must operate on the basis of an awareness that *everyone is an expert*. Rather than managing stakeholder interests, rather than defending privileges inherited from a past, its first challenge will be to discover the plurality of the natures and forms of that individual and collective expertise. The second challenge will be to explore how that expertise relates to collective endeavour, above all by staging new relationships between knowledges that push the concepts of self-learning and self-valorisation to the next level.

This kind of social innovation will not be limited to universities, research institutes and private companies. Indeed, it rarely develops in places deliberately designed or even *overdesigned* for it. On the contrary, innovation usually appears amidst the resistance to the omnipresent command to be reduced to monetary value and to serve demands that are expressed by current markets. Rather than affirming what presently exists, it looks for the new as a possibility but not yet powerful enough to deal with the contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes that we are encountering right here and right now.

Raising the social question, implies much more than levelling the path to just transitions. It requires the audacity to understand and conceive the registration of impact and the revaluation of conventional models of value as mutual learning processes across disciplines, sectors and actors. By responding to societal challenges, we might first and foremost learn to reinvent relations of justice that are neither based on identity nor enforcing consensus but operate in a collaborative, fluid, peer-to-peer fashion to achieve a dynamic equilibrium.

What would it then mean to develop and design a schoolhouse for the association of labour unions⁷, today? How could an alliance of artists, architects and designers respond to such or a similar commission in ways that were adequate as a reply to the burning questions of social movements of our time?

The problem is: Most likely, they cannot, and maybe they should not even try to do so, since the urgencies of today require radically broader alliances that go way beyond the arts and the conventional terms of service they offer to society as a whole. And this is again already part of the answer or a third lesson to learn.

Unlike a series of like minded proposals, such as various attempts to reissue a “New charter of Athens”⁸, the suggestion for a new Bauhaus has not originated directly from the academic or professional context of urbanists and architects. It was the renowned climatologist and atmospheric physicist Hans Joachim Schellnhuber who suggested it –inspired, however, by referring to a manifesto for climate friendly architecture by the German association of architects.⁹

Schellnhuber frames his idea of a revival of the Bauhaus under the conditions of the 21st century on planetary scale: a “Bauhaus der Erde” as a cultural heart chamber that should invigorate a wide range of activities from cultural theory to workshops. He suggested a “mission-driven transformation-process” with a focus on rather concrete challenges: “building with wood, a polycentric approach, and the new design of landscapes”.¹⁰

⁷ "ADGB Trade Union School, Bernau - Bauhaus Kooperation." Accessed December 28, 2020.

<https://www.bauhauskooperation.com/the-bauhaus/works/architecture/adgb-trade-union-school-bernau/>.

⁸ E.g. "New Charter of Athens 2003 - ECTP-CEU." Accessed December 28, 2020.

<http://www.ectp-ceu.eu/index.php/en/publications-8/the-charter-of-european-planning-213/31-publications/85-new-charter-of-athens-2003>.

⁹ "Bund Deutscher Architekten » Planet Home: Towards a" Accessed December 28, 2020.

<https://www.bda-bund.de/2020/05/planet-home/>.

¹⁰ "Sustainability needs Deceleration needs Basic Income ... - Issuu." Accessed December 28, 2020.

https://issuu.com/basic_income_livelihood/docs/basic_income_livelihood.

While Schellnhuber might not be a distinguished expert of the pitfalls of avant garde movements in art or architectural history, he seems at least not to be intimidated by the overdetermination of the brand name he insinuated. But rather than painting apocalyptic scenarios of doom and gloom, the scientist proposes two austere alternatives: Climate change will either radically transform our environment, or it will transform us, with equally drastic consequences. In case of the latter, we have the possibility to become an active part of this transformation process ourselves and co-design it.

The implications are potentially far-reaching. The challenge is to overcome the rigid and strict divisions between anticipatory and participatory practices. This division between disruption on one hand, and cohesion on the other, is constitutive for the different flavours of modernism; the irreconcilability of partaking and breaking apart runs like a red thread through the biographies of many, socially or politically engaged artists as well as the histories of the arts in the 20th century.

Today, participation is no longer an option -- as opposed to the beliefs of climate change deniers; it is not based on acts of either individual volition or generous allotment. Participation has become the *conditio sine qua non*, although it seems to operate through modes of anticipating and experimenting with future strategies of valorisation.

To participate means then to propose and stress test new value relations by forestalling effects that are not evident yet and revisiting causes that might change their impact accordingly. In return, anticipation is no longer the privilege of a few self- or otherwise entitled stakeholders of knowledge production, such as scientists, artists, financial experts, property owners, you name it. Therefore, anticipation opens up to a revaluation of participatory practices as complex processes of subjectivation which are certainly exceeding the conceptual limits of citizen science or the relics of European nation states as target audience.

To anticipate means to involve and engage what Gilles Deleuze called with the Bauhaus teacher Paul Klee "a people who are missing"¹¹ – a concept that reaches far beyond its most obvious instances, such as all those who are not present in the European frame of a Green Deal, but most affected by climate disruptions, not to mention climate refugees, let alone future generations who are not supposed or not allowed to participate yet in the current processes of decision making.

Furthermore, by insisting on difference, by appreciating unexpected leaps and searching for the tipping points, anticipation becomes a resistance to epistemological

¹¹ "Paul Klee in Jena | ZEIT ONLINE - Die Zeit." Accessed December 28, 2020. https://www.zeit.de/1999/14/199914.klee_.xml.

regimes of linear growth and continuous expansion. Maybe it even becomes the leverage for our emancipation from the repetition of the same and its extrapolation into the future.

The complexity of societal challenges and technological developments cannot be conceived any longer from an individual perspective that would be reducible to “human scale” and reiterates everything to known stories of human versus machine, nature versus culture, and so on. Responding to the urgencies of the present requires collective intelligences, hybrid combinations of human and non-human creativity and concepts of self-learning based on ethics of self-authorisation to unlearn the very idea of a self that is siloed by or within its identity.

Much more than merely “building bridges” between art and science, a vision for a New European Bauhaus should experiment with the shifting baselines of their relationships — perhaps by reverting to earlier, freer, bolder models, or by reaching for unexpected and counterintuitive ones implied by current obstacles and prohibitions. These experiments, sometimes joyous, often painful, could spark new efforts to reconcile aesthetics and sustainability. Beyond that, it would instill trust across many other registers: creative confidence and professional expertise, political awareness and scientific accuracy, and more.

One can envision real-world laboratories where scientists produce narratives, while artists remodel complex data sets; where architects design with dynamic parameters and build with living materials, while engineers dig into technology's past as an archeology of unexplored ideas and paths not taken; where labour and climate activists meet, while old and new generations of hacker or migrant communities contribute their expertise; where theory intervenes into everyday life and, rather than “risk aversion” and “best practices”, failure once again enters the fold of learning. All that is human made can still be changed by humans.

Unless the Green Deal would be reduced to rebranding funding opportunities on the European level, it will entail a massive transformation of both the role of science and art, as well as in their multiple relations to foster systemic change. The twilight of fossil fuel economies demands great efforts to break with a delusional, petrified, extractive mode of knowledge production.