

...a useless aquarium which became a  
centre for the Nazi war machine...

# the Bauhaus story

by Vikram Bhatt



signet of the staatliche bauhaus - 1922

**D**uring the First World War, Henry van de Velde, founder of the School of Arts and Crafts at Weimar, being a foreigner (Belgian), felt himself increasingly persecuted in the xenophobic atmosphere in Germany and decided to leave the country.<sup>1</sup> In 1915 he wrote to Walter Gropius asking him to take over the directorship of the School, but it was not until 1919 that Gropius was formally offered the directorship of the School of Arts and Crafts which was now part of the Grand Ducal Academy of Arts.<sup>2</sup>

In a letter written to a state official at the time of accepting the directorship, Gropius wrote, "...Before I accept this honourable appointment, it will be necessary to call to the attention of the proper authorities that the momentary financial situation does not promise favourable working conditions. In the following, I am presenting a closely calculated account of the necessary expenditures."<sup>3</sup> A look at the budget shows that 'the momentary financial situation' was indeed bad; in his total 1919-1920 budget of DM 163,000.00 the support requested, apart from fee income, was DM 123,400.00, a mere 75.71%!<sup>4</sup>

The School of Arts and Crafts which Gropius had taken over and which was to become *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar* on the forty-second day after his request for financial assistance, was thus, even before it was born, dependent on state funds, and 'the momentary financial situation' persisted until the closing of the school in 1933. Moreover, the considerable financial assistance which the Bauhaus received during its entire existence insured that the fate of the institute remained tied to the whim of the politicians in control of public funds.

Some of these politicians, however, were supportive, among them, Max Greil, a State Minister in Thuringen. During the early years of the *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar*, he remained loyal to the institution, protected it from the attacks of other politicians and above all was a help in keeping the state funds flowing. 1924 brought a rightist government to power in Thuringen. State financial support for the *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar* was slashed to half of what Gropius considered essential for running the institution and in December of that year a declaration of dissolution was made by the Faculty.<sup>5</sup> However, in Dr. Fritz Hesse, the lord Mayor of Dessau, the Bauhaus found another saviour. Within three months of the dissolution, Dr. Hesse had successfully obtained approval from the city council of Dessau (1927 population 70,000)<sup>6</sup> for an annual subsidy of up to DM 100,000.00, as well as additional money for a new building for the institute. The new Bauhaus at Dessau was to incorporate the municipal school of arts and crafts and was also to incorporate an existing technical school in the city. The *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar* thus moved to Dessau in 1925. Within a year a new building complex designed by Gropius and also known as the Bauhaus was completed.



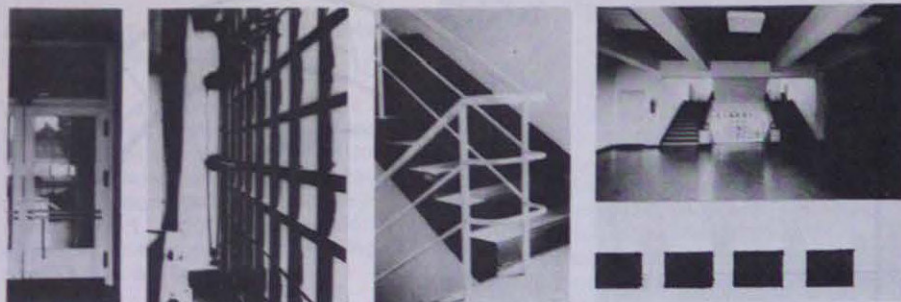
signet 1919-1921

After I had already found my own ground in architecture before the First World War, as evidenced in the Fagus building of 1911 and in Cologne Werkbund Exhibition in 1914 (Germany), the full consciousness of my responsibility as an architect, based on my own reflections, came to me as a result of the First World War, during which my theoretical premises first took shape.<sup>7</sup>

I became obsessed by the conviction that modern constructional techniques could not be denied expression in architecture and that that expression demanded the use of unprecedented forms.<sup>8</sup>

It was in the new buildings for the Bauhaus at Dessau, that Gropius' pre-war architectural experience and post-war theoretical maturing came together.

The fate of the Bauhaus at Dessau was in good hands as long as Mayor Hesse's power base was secure. In 1932, however, the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party became powerful in the city council. The funds for the Bauhaus, which in the eyes of the National Socialists was a "Jewish-Marxist institute of design",<sup>9</sup> were cut off and the institute at Dessau closed. Mies van der Rohe, who was director of the institute, tried to continue the work of the Bauhaus, as a private school, in Berlin. However, by 1933, the lack of financial assistance from the state compounded by harassment from the National Socialists (by now the party in power in Germany) proved insurmountable and this institute, too, had to close down.



the workshop wing - 1926

Because of the post World War I political climate in Germany, the Bauhaus as an institution lasted only for 14 years and produced less than 500 graduates<sup>10</sup>, but it "was not an institution with a definite program, it was an idea"<sup>11</sup> and the spirit lives on, almost fifty years after the institution was closed.

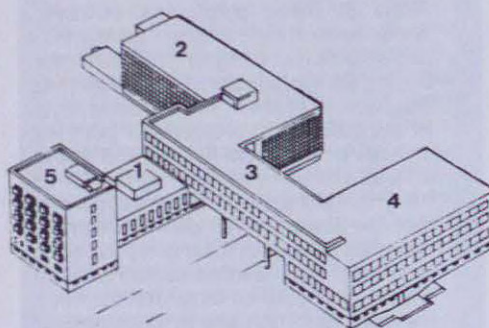
### The Building

The life story of the Bauhaus building at Dessau is remarkable. Unlike the institution which it was designed to house, it has assumed many colours, it lived through severe changes of political climate, and survived. And in all likelihood it will be with us for generations to come.

The building, built in 1926, was, in my opinion, the ultimate architectural manifestation of what that institution stood for. The Weimar announcement expressed it this way:

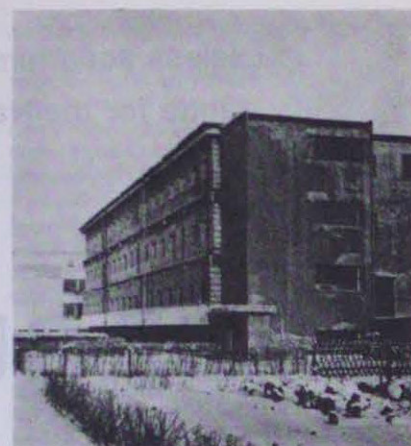
The complete building is the final aim of the visual arts. Their noblest function was once the decoration of buildings. Today they exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, co-operative effort of all craftsmen. Architects, painters and sculptors must recognize anew the composite character of a building as an entity. Only then will their work be imbued with the architectonic spirit which it has lost as *salon art*.<sup>12</sup>

The Bauhaus building was commissioned by the City of Dessau in 1925, and was built in a relatively open north-western part of the city near the Junkers Aircraft Factory. The building consisted of five main parts: a single storey auditorium, stage and dining hall wing including the main entrance foyer to the building complex (1); a three and



the bauhaus building

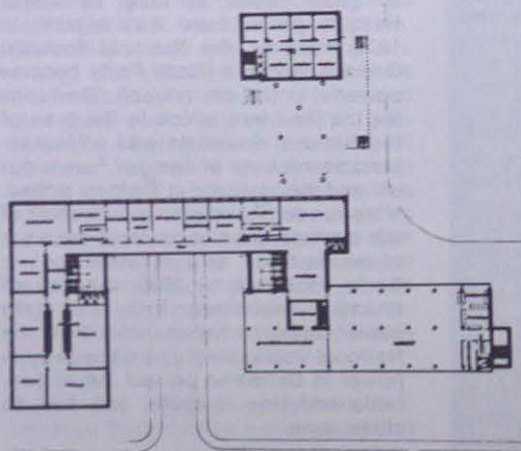
a half storey building containing laboratory, workshop and classroom space (2) - studio space in present architectural terms - whose upper two floors are connected via a bridge (3) containing two floors of administrative offices to the technical school (4), which is also three and a half storeys high and has a separate entrance; a five and a half floor studio wing (5) next to the dining area of the auditorium. The building occupies about 28,300 square feet. The total construction cost amounted to DM 902,500,000.00 and the



cost of furnishing was DM 126,000,00.00.<sup>13</sup>

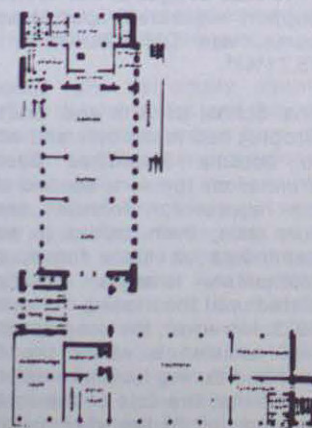
When the National Socialists succeeded in stopping the flow of funds from the city to the Bauhaus, the city council representative Mr. Hofmann proposed that the building itself be demolished. That motion was defeated in the council by a vote of 25 to 15<sup>14</sup>, but the National Socialists were unwilling to accept defeat, as is illustrated in the following which appeared in the pro-Nazi newspaper *Anhalter Tageszeitung*, Dessau, on 10 July 1932:

...since the National Socialists will probably not be able to get a majority for the proposed demolition of the institute buildings, efforts will have to be made, for the time being, to use the building for other purposes. This is likely to be very difficult, since the glass and steel skeleton structure can be used neither for educational nor for health facilities, nor for administrative or industrial purposes. Maintenance...will put such a heavy financial strain on any owner that only **nabobs** (my emphasis) would be able to afford such luxury. Whether one likes it or not, then, some day the building will have to be taken down...may the total demolition follow soon



plan b - second floor

plan a - ground floor

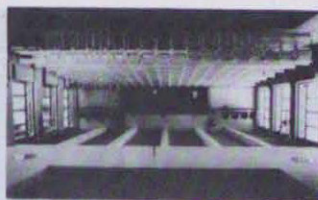




and may on the same spot where today stands the somber glass palace of oriental taste, the 'aquarium', as it has been popularly dubbed in Dessau, soon rise homesteads and parks that will provide German people with home and places for relaxation. 'The robe has fallen, the Duke must follow.'<sup>15</sup>

After closing the Bauhaus in 1932, and until 1938, the building was used as a technical school, a trade school for construction, a home economics school for girls and at one time as an office for the National Socialists.<sup>16</sup> According to Dr. Georg Opitz, the present Director of the Scientific and Cultural Centre of the Bauhaus, when I met him in Dessau this summer, after 1938 the technical school wing was still used as such but virtually all the remaining space was taken over by the Third Reich. The laboratory workshop classroom space being converted into an aircraft design shop for the Junkers factory down the road, and the rest occupied by the S.S. supervisory staff. What an irony of fate: this useless 'aquarium' now became a centre for the Nazi war machine. A new robe was made up for the Duke, the S.S. nabobs were coming!

Dessau, at the end of the Second World War, was more than 84% destroyed,<sup>17</sup> as a result of air raids, but the Bauhaus buildings suffered relatively little damage. Only the laboratory, workshop and classroom wing, enclosed in a steel and glass curtain wall, was badly damaged. The structural frame of the building however was still safe, and the curtain wall portion was eventually bricked in. In the early post-war period (1945-1946) Dr. Hesse was reinstated as Mayor of Dessau and he tried to re-open the Bauhaus with the help of a former Bauhaus member, Professor Hubert Hoffmann. According to Hoffmann's account, Dr. Hesse was able to help in the restoration of the building and he succeeded in having it declared a historical property. During these years (and later as I learned from Dr. Opitz)



the workshop wing - 1958

the Bauhaus building was mainly used as a school premises where five different schools ran in shifts.<sup>18</sup> However, under the subsequent Soviet Russian army occupation, Dr. Hesse and Professor Hoffmann, despite their best efforts, were never able to reopen the Bauhaus.

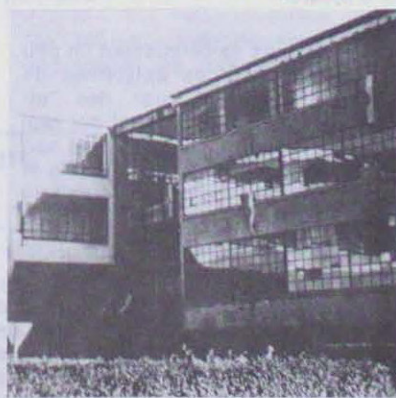
So, until 1976, the Bauhaus building remained in its early post-war condition. The genuine restoration of the building was initiated by Dr. Paul, the state architect in Dessau. For the restoration, help was sought from two former Bauhaus students: Professor Konrad Puschel of Weimar and Professor Selman Selmangic of Berlin. Sixty students from the Weimar School of Architecture and Engineering and engineers from Dessau also participated in the process. The restoration work as of September 1982 (when I was in Dessau) was almost complete. At present, the building is used for the following functions:

- The Bauhaus archives and exhibition (open to the public);
- An experimental centre for building design and architecture (Bauhaus);
- A cultural centre;
- A teachers training school;
- A technical school;
- A home economics school for girls.

After looking at the quality of restoration, and the pride and care shown by the people involved in re-building the Bauhaus building, I had the profound

#### dessau 1965

main entrance of the bauhaus with incorrectly reconstructed glass panel



impression that while the Bauhaus story was certainly coloured by the politics of the times, its real history was made by individuals and small groups of dedicated people.

#### Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Hahn of The Bauhaus Archives museum in Berlin in facilitating my visit to Dessau, Dr. Georg Opitz, Director Scientific and Cultural Centre of the Bauhaus at Dessau for providing much information on the pre and post-war use and restoration work of the building and my friend Professor Chan for taking me around Germany.

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#### Notes

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