

# The crisis of modernist design pedagogy

and its (possibly) gratifying consequences for museums of applied art

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It is a well known fact that in the first decades of their existence, museums of applied art lived with schools of design in a common world: the museums were used by the schools as they were intended to when the two were placed close together - as collections of exemplary artefacts.<sup>1</sup> It is quite a while since museums and schools enjoyed such a working relationship. For a couple of generations, the break between these two institutions gave the impression of being permanent. This had to do with the perception of modernist design philosophy current at the time which was instrumental in leading to the break. Modernism considered itself to be a final solution: asking a modernist about what would come after Modernism was just as impudent in those years as asking a communist what would come after communism. But the demise of Modernism, which came just as unexpectedly as the collapse of communism, has put both schools of design and museums of applied art in a new situation. It seems as if the demise of Modernism and the ensuing crisis of modernist pedagogy have opened up the way to make the original role of museums as educational collections of exemplary objects topical again. At least it is logically possible now.

Let me explain this more carefully. When museums of applied art were founded in the second half of the 19th century, following the example of the South Kensington Museum in London, their role as collections of exemplary artefacts from the past and present was of key importance. For schools of design, which were often also physically connected to these museums, the pedagogical concept of exemplary or model artefacts was completely natural and unproblematic. It was a continuation of traditional training in crafts and in art. Students were to learn to become designers by studying and copying, for prac-

tice, the excellent products of the past and present. But the 19th century also produced the germs of Modernism, and the modernist pedagogical principles later brought about a complete estrangement between museums of applied art and schools of design.<sup>2</sup> This process had started before the First World War. But even though Modernism was already becoming the day's dominating philosophy of design in the period between the world wars, it took time before the new pedagogical principles got a foothold in the schools of design and before the earlier example-based pedagogy was replaced by the modernist, "exampleless" one. The schools did, it is true, continue to use museums for quite some time, but this was more and more from habit; it was as if they had forgotten in the meantime what they were actually coming there for. In the end, the museums' collections were largely used for practicing the students' drawing skills. It seems that the left-wing radicalism which culminated in 1968 swept away the little that remained of the old deliberate ties between the institutions.

The new "exampleless" design pedagogy grew out of the modernists' belief, and hope, that there were aesthetic principles that existed independently of the market's preferences regarding taste.<sup>3</sup> This belief was perhaps formulated most succinctly by the American architect and designer Louis Sullivan when he wrote in 1896, "It is my belief that it is of the very essence of every problem that it contains and suggests its own solution."<sup>4</sup> Now to those who came to imagine that each problem contains its proper solution - including its proper form - the whole idea of studying exemplary artefacts must have seemed scandalously wrong. From the modernist point of view, it was on the contrary necessary to *go ad fontes*, to analyze problems and study functions, construc-

tions, the nature of materials, production processes, etc., in order to find in them proper solutions, including proper forms.

Modernism's main thesis, in other words, implied an unequivocal rejection of the example-based pedagogy. When Modernism became the dominant art ideology, its new vision of design began to undermine the *raison d'être* of museums of applied art as collections of exemplary artefacts. But since the museums' task had always been to collect and preserve, this task - originally meant as a means to an educational end - gradually filled the vacuum, and became the museums' prime goal. It is true that the museums' function of preserving became increasingly important in this age of radical changes. Nonetheless it seems that the museums have never truly recovered from the loss of their original goal.

Museums of applied art now began to live apart from schools of design, which carried on with their anti-normative, "exampleless" design education, isolated from the museums. All the same, there were two areas where links between schools and museums remained alive: exhibitions of current design and joint design libraries. Both continued to function in harmony with the museums' original intentions, as suppliers of model artefacts - though without either the schools or the museums now having this as a goal. This supplier function has been more obvious in the case of exhibitions than in that of libraries. Nonetheless, the way in which design students have used the libraries of schools/museums can be seen as empiric proof that the "exampleless" pedagogy actually never worked. Probably only a relatively small proportion of students at design schools come to libraries in order to study design history or theoretical *texts*. There is reason to believe that most come to study periodicals with *examples* of trend-setting solutions and books with *pictures* of works from the history of their craft. In other words, they are in search of the exemplary. It is hardly surprising that libraries and exhibitions have been used in this way. The point of studying design is after all to be a skilled practitioner, and one cannot become one without having a clear idea of what is considered exemplary, i.e. worthy of imitation.<sup>5</sup>

Modernist "exampleless" pedagogy indirectly received its death warrant in the 1970s with the widespread recognition that Modernism's design theory,

as reflected in its architectural practice, had been a fiasco.<sup>6</sup> Still, the "exampleless" pedagogy proved rather tenacious. The surreptitious supply of model solutions through exhibitions and libraries was not the only reason why this pedagogy appeared to work. Equally important was the fact that the "exampleless" pedagogy was normative all the same. This is, after all, not surprising, since anti-normative pedagogy is a contradiction in terms: every kind of pedagogy is normative by definition. Modernist teachers, like all teachers in all ages, had taught the *right* way of doing things. But in contrast to their predecessors, modernists claimed that they were not teaching aesthetic norms or any particular stylistic idiom at all, but only *methods* for attaining the proper solutions.

Modernist design education led to most students being locked in a single stylistic convention without being aware that this was the case. If students were made to realize that they always, in one way or other, employed models, it would have been possible for them to take a rational attitude to their choices. But when the modernist idiom was viewed in terms of truth, as "the inevitable logical product of the intellectual, social and technical conditions of our age,"<sup>7</sup> then the possibility of taking a rational attitude to one's choices was eliminated. The only "choice" that remained was the choice between alleged truth and alleged falsehood.

The modernists' linking of a specific style to the notion of truth was very flattering to designers since it gave a profession with craft status an intellectual aura. With this linkage, the profession's old priorities were turned upside down: designers who had previously been the servants of the market now perceived themselves as members of an *avant garde* in the moral struggle for the new epoch's genuine idiom - one that necessarily collided with the market's aesthetic preferences. This linkage of style, truth, and morals may shed some light on why the modernist design philosophy had become a *credo* for so many designers, and why they held on to it for almost two generations.

We can see how normative this professedly anti-normative education actually was back in the Bauhaus of the 1920s - the school that was the principal model for all later modernist design pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> In the Basic Design Course, and later in Kandinsky's

and Klee's classes, the Bauhaus students received instruction in elementary principles of form and composition, and they *used* the basic vocabulary the way their teachers had inadvertently taught them - as a style in its own right.<sup>9</sup> The basic language of forms never became a base for a non-basic language of forms. This basic language became the *final* language. Elementary training led to a kind of elementarist style, even though the founder of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, like all modernist teachers after him, resentfully rejected all hints that students were taught stylistic norms.<sup>10</sup>

Now I have finally come to my main thesis, which I already indicated: if design schools succeed in coming to terms with the fact that design education unavoidably deals with the exemplary, then this might open up a new chapter in the relations between design schools and museums of applied art. If design teachers come to acknowledge that model solutions play a key role in design education, then a need will naturally arise to provide students with more than two-dimensional examples. When an exemplary product is studied at libraries, students miss the object's tactile qualities, scale, and its three-dimensional existence in general. In addition, students often also miss the object's fourth, historical, dimension. I am thinking of the concrete circumstances that make or made a product fashionable or trend-setting. How did a once-fashionable product come to be considered old junk later on? How did it still later acquire a new identity and a new status as an antique or perhaps a classic in its field? Representative examples of both contemporary design and earlier stylistic epochs and fashion periods could be discussed and analyzed in this connection, and used in different kinds of exercises intended to help students see clearly what the exemplary consists, or consisted, of. And many other relevant themes could be found.

The road to this kind of collaboration is opening up, but there are still roadblocks on both sides. The largest barriers for schools are probably the ingrown but not quite explicit notions about the artistic, i.e. aesthetically independent, status of the design profession. These notions are based on the idea mentioned above that problems contain and suggest their own aesthetic solutions, i.e. on the suggestion that there is a link between aesthetic and truth. The

idea that a designer is "actually" a truth-seeker invested with the right to ignore the market's tastes has proved wishful thinking - but designers still find it difficult to give up the idea of aesthetic autonomy. They seem to have a suspicion that acknowledging the fact that normative examples play a central role in both the process of teaching and the process of designing would lead to an implicit demotion of the profession to its previous craft status. And it is difficult to see, outside the confines of Modernism, an alternative which would preserve the coveted artistic autonomy that the modernist design theory conferred on designers. This is apparently why many designers still cling to the mental world of Modernism - regardless of whether they are adherents of the modernist aesthetic or not. The sensitive question of the designer's artistic status will thus tend to curb the pedagogical rapprochement between schools and museums.

A number of hindrances stand in the way of museums, too. To what extent, for example, are museums of applied art willing to let themselves be disturbed by the prospect of closer collaboration with budding designers? And if they are willing, how far should they go in buying the contemporary products of industrial design? Should capital goods also be included? What about the conflict between the museum's function of preserving objects and the students' need to touch and manipulate them? I do believe that most of these problems could be solved in cooperation with the schools, since where there's a will, there's usually a way. To aim at meeting the students' need for knowledge about exemplary products would give the historical research of artefacts, at which museums have traditionally excelled, a new practical function. Cooperation with schools of design could actually prove attractive for museums, among other things because the educational links would give museums of applied art a strongly pragmatic aspect which they otherwise have a difficult time demonstrating to the authorities that fund them. And last but not least, perhaps concrete contributions of this kind to the education of industrial designers could justify funding for the museums' operations from industry.

By way of conclusion, we can say that although it is now up to the schools (it was the schools' new design philosophy, not that of the museums, which led to the divorce), we can hardly expect a sudden

re-marriage between the two institutions. The future rapprochement will depend on how much individual teachers are willing to rethink the inherited and ingrained modernist attitudes to notions such as imitation, originality, truth, honesty, *Zeitgeist*. No doubt museums can contribute to, and support, this rethinking. When the new, more realistic and matter-of-fact attitudes to these notions have established themselves within the walls of design schools, the logical possibility of a renewed working relationship between schools and museums, opened by the demise of Modernism, may become a mutually gratifying enterprise.

## NOTES:

1. A recent history of ideas behind this concept is given in Ingeborg Glambeck, "One of the age's noblest cultural movements," On the theoretical basis for the Arts and Crafts Movement," *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, 1 (1991), 47-76, especially in the section "The museum as a classroom," 62-3.
2. It seems that the modernist concept of design had some of its deepest roots in the very Victorian design theories that led to the establishment of the museums of applied art and their close relationship with schools of design. The later divorce of the two, under Modernism, can be seen - to simplify an intricate matter - as a consequence of the modernist development of the logic inherent in the Victorian idea of "principles of design." For a descriptive discussion of the notion of design principles, see Alf Bøe, *From Gothic Revival to Functional Form: A Study in Victorian Theories of Design*, Oslo and Oxford, 1957. The idea of design principles and the whole body of Victorian design theories was radically reevaluated by Brent C. Brolin in *Flight of Fancy: The Banishment and Return of Ornament*, London, 1985.
3. For the background for these ideas and phenomena, see e.g. Brent C. Brolin, *op. cit.*, especially chapters IV and V, and Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*, London, 1982.
4. This was another version of Sullivan's notorious idea that form ever follows function. Both concepts come from the article "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered (1896)," in *Kindergarten Chats (revised 1918) and Other Writings* (ed. Isabella Athey), New York, 1947, 203, 208.
5. The fact that models have played a key role in this process can be seen most clearly where it is least expected: in the great figures in the history of art, from the Renaissance onwards. Without exception, the artists who were later declared to be geniuses were often apprenticed to their masters for several years, and even such a modern giant as Picasso painted unashamedly in the manner of Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, and other painters he considered exemplary before he began to strike out on his own path at the beginning of the century.
6. See e.g. Brent C. Brolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture*, London, 1976; Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked*, Boston/Toronto, 1977; David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture: The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford, 1977; Hans Asplund, *Farväll till funktionalismen!*, Stockholm, 1980.
7. Cf. Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, London, 1935, 18.
8. A survey of educational theories which formed the Bauhaus Basic Design Course is given in Anita Cross, "The educational background to the Bauhaus," *Design Studies*, 4 (1, 1983), 43-52. See also Jørn Guldberg, "Funktionalisme og kunstpædagogik - mest om den kunstpædagogiske Bauhaus-reception," *Tema: Funktionalisme* (ed. Jørn Guldberg), Odense University Studies in Art History, 4, 1986, and Gillian Naylor, *Bauhaus Reassessed: Sources and Design Theory*, New York, 1985.
9. It was, for example, pointed out that neither Kandinsky's *Punkt, Linie und Fläche* nor Klee's *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* gave any hints on how "sentences" should be made from these elementary "words" which the authors present, and that without Kandinsky or Klee in the classroom there was actually little that could be done with these elements. Cf. Peter Lloyd Jones, "The Metaphor of Language in Design Education," *Form and Vision: Articles and Writings from the International UIAH '87 Conference at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki 6.-9.1.1987* (ed. Susann Vihma), Helsinki, 1987, 118. See also Peter Lloyd Jones, "The Failure of Basic Design," *Leonardo*, 2, 1969, 155-160; and his "The Death of Abstraction," *Common Denominators in Art and Science* (ed. M. Pollack), Aberdeen, 1983, 149-163.
10. Gropius wrote in the mid thirties, "The object of the Bauhaus was not to propagate any 'style,' system, dogma, formula, or vogue, but simply to exert a revitalizing influence on design. We did not base our teaching on any preconceived ideas of form, but sought the vital spark of life behind life's ever changing forms.... A 'Bauhaus Style' would have been a confession of failure and a return to that very stagnation and devitalizing inertia which I had called it into being to combat." Cf. Walter Gropius, *op. cit.*, 62. For a critique of the formalist nature of modernism, see e.g. Alexander Tzomis, "The Cube whose Sides Were Yellow, Red, Blue, White, Grey and Black," *Towards a Non-Oppressive Environment*, Boston, 1972, 85-91; and Jan Michl, "On the Rumor of Functional Perfection," *Pro forma*, 2 (1990-1991), 67-81.