BAUHAUS - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Robin Schuldenfrei
Tangen Reader in 20th Century Modernism at The Courtauld Institute of Art

Alan Powers
History Leader at the London School of Architecture

And

Michael White
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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. Bauhaus began in 1919 in Weimar, Germany as a school for arts and crafts combined, and went on to be famous around the world. Under its first director, Walter Gropius, Bauhas extended this to architecture, designing a series of white, angular, flat roof buildings reproduced from Shanghai to Chicago, aimed for modern living. And while the school itself closed after only 14 years under pressure from the nazis, its students and teachers continue to spread its ethos in exile. Making it even more influential. With me to discuss bauhaus are Robin Schuldenfrei, Tangen Reader in 20th Century Modernism at The Courtauld Institute of Art, Alan Powers, History Leader at the London School of Architecture and Michael White, Michael White, Professor of the History of Art at the University of York.

[Melvyn Bragg] Michael White, how did the Bauhaus come to be founded?

[Michael White] Well, as you've just mentioned, it's launched in the spring of 1919 as the amalgamation of two existing schools, an Academy of Fine Art and a School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar. And the combination of that date, 1919, and that place gives it a sense of real portentiousness. It's happening simultaneously with meetings of the National Assembly that will reformulate the constitution for a new republic in Germany. And it feels like a very innovative moment, a moment where new things can happen. But there's actually quite a long back-story to it. It doesn't come out of the blue. In fact, Walter Gropius has already been invited several years beforehand to potentially take over the School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar. There's also been talk of him launching an architecture seminar in the Academy of Fine Art there. And this move, actually, to bring these two institutions together is part of the long trajectory and thinking in Germany to unify a quite fragmented arts education - partly created through structures of aristocratic patronage that have now vanished after the war. And it's into that moment that Gropius steps with a plan, and it's taken up actually extremely rapidly by a new kind of local government.

[Melvyn Bragg] What does Bauhaus mean?

[Michael White] So one of the cleverest things that I think Gropius did was to come up with a new name for this institution. It gives it a sense of not having a precedent. So he doesn't call it an "academy", he doesn't call it a "workshop", which is various things that these places might have been called. He comes up with this actually very unusual title, becomes known as the State Bauhaus in Weimar. And in the center of that is this word Bauhaus "building house", "house for building". It's a bit of a neologism, but it's reminiscent of an older term, "Bauhuette", or a medieval mason's lodge that resonates quite broadly with his agenda, which is to revive crafts and to create a community. And that sense of community is very, very powerful in the early years of the Bauhaus' initial program. There's a whole section dedicated to the types of activities that might be conducted commonly and includes parties, eating and drinking together, ceremonial occasions. There's a very nice comment in some correspondence about the first Christmas at the Bauhaus in 1919, where Gropius goes around serving food to the students. So the director takes on that role and someone describes it actually as was having the feeling of a footwashing..

[Melvyn Bragg] Why was Gropius chosen to head it?

[Michael White] Gropius was extremely well positioned by that time to take on the role. He had sort-of manoeuvered himself into a particular position. There are at least two, several actually, biographies of Walter Gropius, and people have often tried to deduce him as a figure. He's one of those people into which lots of people could sort-of project their own ideas or see themselves reflected in him to some extent. And he managed to walk a very interesting tightrope between those who wanted the institution to be primarily about art or those who wanted it to be about industry and found an interesting sort of middle way. He had been involved very heavily in an organization called the Deutsche Werkbund, which had been agitating for bringing close connections between art and industry.

[Melvyn Bragg] But one of the key ideas is a well made table, a well made chair, which is worth [the same] consideration [as] a well made painting. That these two things should be locked together. There shouldn't be a pyramid, there shouldn't be a descending order. The making of things, whatever sort of things, was of equal value.

[Michael White] Yes. So in the first program, there's a heavy emphasis on craft, return to craft, return to manual skills. But there's ... a contradiction already embedded in the program, which is, Gropius says, that you can teach craft. Craft is something, everybody should be taught that kind of skill, but you can't teach art, he says. So already in that initial program there's there's a sort of creeping valuation for art in there still - a sort of notion of genius or innate talent that remains a sort of undercurrent all the way through.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. ... Robin Schuldenfrei, why was there an opportunity, why was there a need for this kind of school, which is what it was essentially, in Germany at that time, just after the First World War?

[5:27]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] This was a really important period in German history. It was a very turbulent time. Germany had just lost World War I, but they hadn't known they were losing during that period. And so in creating this new school, there was a very hopeful moment of bringing together the arts and the crafts, a unifying moment. And in doing so, Gropius was able to indeed transcend these divisions, social divisions. Women were admitted to the school. Students even walked there in their uniforms, they had no other clothes, and then they would sort-of hand tailor them to create sort of everyday clothing out of it. So it was a really difficult time in German history, and this was a very hopeful, unifying moment where you could possibly bring this division between craft, seen as lower down, and high art together and create a new society as well as creating new objects for people. But it also is deeply embedded in the craft training. In setting up the course, Gropius employed both "craft masters" and "form masters". The form masters were the artists, Kandinsky, Klee, Johannes Itten... And the craft masters taught the nuts and bolts of clay and metalworking, the kind of actual metalsmithing that the students would need. So the students were granted both real skills in the course, but also this kind of artistic training, this kind of higher bringing up of the work.

[Melvyn Bragg] But the first year was very important because whatever they done, they went on a comprehensive journey to learn about doing things and making things across the board. Is that right?

[7:05]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] That's right. They had to start over, essentially. So many of the students who had come already had perhaps some degree in art training or some amount of course work under their belt. But everybody started basically from ground zero once again, in the preliminary course, the Vor-course. And this allowed the Bauhaus to train students in their vision of breaking down preconceived ideas, experimenting with different materials. They weren't even allowed to choose what department they'd like to go into - metalworking or woodworking or stained glass - until they completed this year long preliminary course.

[Melvyn Bragg] And what results did that imposition have?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] The results were it was a place of experimentation, a place of really putting forth a creative ideal of working collaboratively together. They could come out with a journeyman's diploma from that. So it was actually quite practical for some of the students. But the idea [is] that we are remaking people and we are remaking our visual world. And I think that that's an important part of understanding these very complicated, turbulent years in Weimar.

[Melvyn Bragg] You mentioned one or two, but could you tell the listeners again, who are the early staff who stood out for you?

[8:15]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] Really important is Johannes Itten. He was behind the preliminary course, and this is something that did not change throughout the 14 years of the Bauhaus. He was very important. Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, as artists, also taught within this ... Vor-course, this preliminary course. Of course, Gropius, the director of the school, was very involved. And as the school grew, more members joined [such as] Oscar Schlemmer in theater. We also have students who came up through the ranks, such as Marcel Breuer, and become masters.

[Melvyn Bragg] How did they get there?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Anybody who just came were admitted in that point.

[Melvyn Bragg] How was it paid for?

[9:02]
Students scraped together fees, but it was quite affordable, and word spread. And Gropius was very keen to put out the word, he is a PR machine. And this is important, right from the beginning here, he had pamphlets, leaflets that explained the school and people encountered them and they came.

[Melvyn Bragg] And his catalogs were works of propaganda as well as works of record?

[9:31]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] Absolutely. I think this is really important. It showed visually and also through the graphic design, just the kind of institution the Bauhaus would be, as well as the early manifestos that he and others wrote, really encouraging people to understand this new ethos, this new spirit.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Alan Powers, why was Weimar chosen as the place for this school?

[Alan Powers] To explain why Weimar, you have to go back to Count Harry Kessler, who's a rather forgotten figure, whose mother was Irish and father was German. He was sometimes suspected of being an illegitimate son of the Kaiser, but this is probably not true. Anyway, his mother was so beautiful that people stopped their carriages to look at her. And he occupied a very high-ranking status both in Germany and in England, and was very well known in Paris. So in the years before the First

World War, he's moving between these places and he thinks that Weimar could be a field for his activity. So he brings people in. He supports Friedrich Nietzsche's sister, who's moved her brother in there for his last year or so.

[Melvyn Bragg] She had a bad effect on his writing, didn't she?

[Alan Powers] She did. Well, it was after he died.

[Melvyn Bragg] Even so, she had a bad effect ... she had to wait until he died...

[Alan Powers] She was a nasty piece of work. But Kessler is up to all sorts of things. He finally sort-of gets elbowed out because he puts on a show of Rodin nude drawings, which doesn't go well with the more conservative elements in the court.

[Melvyn Bragg] Really?

[Alan Powers] But he is the one who brings Henry Clemens van de Velde from Belgium. And Van de Velde creates the school, which, as Michael was saying, is the forerunner of the Bauhaus, the building itself and the sort of amalgamation of different activities and the avant-garde tinge that they acquire. However Weimar, is more than that because it has an earlier history associated with Goete, Schiller, Herde. You can't really compare it with anything in England - [it's] as though you amalgamated Stratford on Avon with the Lake poets, and then you add on something rather like the landscape garden at Stourhead, because the school is right on the edge of this fabulous 18th century garden with garden temples. So it is really a unique place and very beautiful.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we find - well you half- answered the question I was going to ask - but can we find much British influence in the early stages?

[11:45]
[Alan Powers] Yes....

[Melvyn Bragg] The Arts and Crafts movement for instance...

[Alan Powers] ...What had happened in the art schools in Britain in the 1890s, had set a precedent for this combination of working directly with materials, hands on, and, in a more general way, designing ... quite a wide field really, trying to bring the fine arts and the making processes together.

[Melvyn Bragg] Who are we talking about here?

[Alan Powers] Well, W.R. Lethaby, the founder of the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London and very influential within London, and then indeed a great influence through many other British cities. It ... spread very rapidly, this quite coherent group of people with the same ideas, and Kessler knew about that. He thought the methods were great, but the aesthetic was a bit backward. So this in many ways is a translation. Gropius knew about these. He often referred to William Morris as an inspiration, although Morris was never involved in teaching.

[Melvyn Bragg] And teaching was the basis of this whole... Bauhaus. When does it cease to be an experiment and become an institution?

[Alan Powers] Never. But it is important [that] it's a school. It's seen as being a number of other things as well, [a] factory or sort-of design business, but it really is fundamentally a school.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we go now, Michael White, to those early years? Was there a distinctive style of the Bauhaus.

[Michael White] So the question of a Bauhaus style is quite a vexed issue, really, in that Gropius and his fellow teachers would always have denied there was such a thing and that the look of any object would be the result of certain technical questions, the overcoming of technical problems. But it's quite clear that as the years go on, something like a Bauhaus style is becoming more apparent in people's minds and ultimately will be imitated by others. One way to think about this is to take the example of chair design in one of the first issues of the Bauhaus magazine. It's presented as a sort-of five stage film strip, the development of a chair. And it begins with an object that has the name originally of the romantic chair and then later acquires the name of the African chair that looks rough hewen and out of wood and has a very extraordinary sort of woven backrest to it, which is a collaboration between Marcel Breyer and Gunta Stölzl when they're students. It then morphs into the slat chair by Breuer and then the famous tubular metal chairs and ends actually with a figure who seems to be resting on a cushion of air, a sort of futuristic chair where where we won't see the chair at all. And this is presenting the act of sitting as a technical problem to be responded to by chair design. However, you can see through that transition certain stylistic features or things that become recognizably Bauhaus. So, the elimination of unnecessary ornament and attraction to transparency, an idea of reflectivity, things that actually look really good here photographically, which is something that Robin has studied a lot, and these sort-of stylistic aspects then... So there's a very funny comment that critic makes many years later that "everything in small case letters, everything in uppercase letters", this is what the Bauhaus becomes identified with. And that notion becomes important as it tries to turn itself actually into something like a brand.

[Melvyn Bragg] Robin, it fell out of favor with the authorities in Weimar and moved to Dessau. Why did it fall out and why did it go to Dessau?

[15:26]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] As the conservative government in Weimar gained power, they were disinvited. They were first asked to show what they were able to do, and they had a really important exhibition in 1923 in which they built a full-scale small house. They exhibited all of their work in all of their studios, and yet it wasn't enough. They were asked to leave, and their contracts were not renewed.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you know more specifically why they were asked to leave? Was it because of the art or was it because of the funding?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] It was a tightening of cultural time and conduct in the period. They were quite expensive to run, for what they were able to produce. They did not like the behavior of these very sort of gangly and strangely-dressed artistic students romping

around the conservative city of Weimar with its history of Goethe and important theater, and they were just generally not embraced by their local...

[16:33]
[Michael White] Yes. I think I mentioned earlier about income for the Bauhaus. I often point my students to the end point of the first program, and you can see already at that time, foreign students were paying double fees. So ripping off foreign students is actually a very old idea, and actually a large number of students come from outside Germany as well. So it partly comes to be seen by reactionary conservative[s] in the area as a foreign influence, as something alien.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...Alan Powers, It was at this stage, I think, that architecture took off for the Bauhaus. Can you tell us more about that?

[Alan Powers] Well, the architecture is a strange story because there is Gropius as an architect, and the word Bauhaus is associated with architecture, but they don't actually teach it until, almost the point where he leaves in 1928.

[Melvyn Bragg] Why is that?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] The idea is that the architecture would come at the end of the course. It was sort-of the pinnacle of the Bauhaus career, and many students actually graduated before they performed the kind of architectural work that they needed to. But Gropius also kept his own atelier at the Bauhaus, and students would then have, basically internships with him. He then decided in 1927-1928 to solidify and add more formal instruction, and that's when he hired Hannas Meyer.

[Melvyn Bragg] You lived in a Bauhaus house. What was it like?

[17:56]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] I had the opportunity to live in one of the Master's houses during the summer - summer spell - and it was quite extraordinary for ... someone who's known the buildings as a tourist, as a scholar. It was quite extraordinary to actually sleep there, to see in the morning the way in which these big open-plan spaces, the way the light functioned, the way the windows opened, the access to the outdoors into nature. This idea of inside and outside, that's very important for modern architecture. When you live in those spaces, having those access doors to the balcony from all rooms really created a different experience than what I had previously sort-of imagined. Also the play of light of these stark white walls. As the sun would rise and set, you would have the shadows of the tall pines, really as if you're sort-of in a clock itself, or something sort of cinematic. So it was a really actually revelatory experience for me.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I come back to you, Alan, to talk about Gropius' influence in this area?

[19:00]
[Alan Powers] Well, I think it needs to be said that whatever was done with architecture by Gropius, or his associates at the Bauhaus, is at that stage in Germany, and indeed many parts of Europe, quite generic. They are all traveling in a very similar direction.

And I think the name again was picked up to describe something that didn't even originate from the Bauhaus. One place I think is very helpful to visit is a house in the nearby city of Jena that was built for an academic couple. And Gropius designed the house and one of his students did color schemes for the rooms inside. And it's really the color schemes that make that one special because they sort-of create an internal geometry with a lovely palette of quite soft colors and it's been beautifully restored.

[Melvyn Bragg] So ... color was very important, too? Because you tend to think of it as a place of whiteness and a sort-of encroaching sterility, really.

[Alan Powers] Well, this comes about because in that period there were very few color images and a lot of the ... original color schemes were lost. So that's an interesting example. The buildings of Dessau have been given back their color and it makes a huge difference to their perception.

[Melvyn Bragg] Coming down to the financial side, were they making things and doing things that could be afforded by anything like ordinary people?

[Alan Powers] Robin is really the expert on this. They, strangely, ended up marketing products made in such a way that they looked as though they could be machine-made, but actually a machine couldn't make them, so they had to be made by hand. Therefore they cost a lot. They were also very often intended for rather a sort of high level bourgeois lifestyle of tea parties.

[Melvyn Bragg] And in fact, one of the famous ones was a tea pot.

[Alan Powers] Yes. What was more effective at a later stage was their wallpapers, which [are] hardly ever talked about, but those actually made money. The weavings were also very successful.

[Melvyn Bragg] We've got to go to you now, Robin. He keeps looking across at you. And weaving brings in the women, because the women went there on so-called equal terms, but more or less not relegated, but directed towards the weaving area, which was very successful.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Yes, indeed. Gunta Stölzl was put on as the Master of the weaving workshop. Women were encouraged and quite often then shunted to the weaving workshop. But it was an area of extraordinary collaboration, experimentation, and they were able to produce meter wares and fabric by the meter that was successful. Someone like Anni Albers completed her diploma, and in doing so, she made a special fabric for Hannes Meyer's auditorium for his very important trade union building. This was made out of cotton and cellophane, and that's just an example of where, using innovative materials that were both light reflective and sound absorbing, she really created a useful product. Gropius had coined the phrase "art and technology - a new unity". And this is really important in thinking about the products they were going to design. They never meant to mass produce their own objects, but they foresaw that they would place their graduates in factories and factories will then [produce] mass-produced, well designed, well built objects for the masses. Again, this was a proposition that did not take off, in part because people didn't always want to buy these very sort-of austere, stripped-down objects that we gravitate towards today

as icons of modernism. But in the period, people wanted fancy decoration, at least the average person.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you want to come in, Michael?

[22:46]
[Michael White] We shouldn't forget that some of the most successful Bauhaus products are not so feted today, but actually still on sale today are toys - lots of little children's toys, a rather wonderful chess set. So actually, some quite minor, small objects. And one of the most successful commercially, one of the most successful workshops in the early days, was actually the pottery, where they could sell things at a cheaper rate. But the Bauhaus didn't have its own pottery. That was actually 15 miles from Weimar in a town called Dornberg, and they didn't take it to Dessau either. So when we're thinking about the Bauhaus style, pottery actually was something they could sell, but it didn't quite fit the image. There [were] two notable women potters who started their own factories. Well, one did. Grete Marks, who later came to England, had her own business manufacturing pottery for the market. So that was post-Bauhaus, but obviously derived from it. Margaret Friedlaender, designed for one of the major manufacturers.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Another important figure would be Marianne Brandt in the metal workshop. And she was someone who ended up leading the workshop for a short period. And then she ultimately did take up a position as director of design within a factory and very much improved the quality of ... [?] lights, for instance, which were mass produced in the period. So there are some instances where this idea of well designed objects being mass produced from the factories did come to fruition. But indeed, by and large, the legacy of the Bauhaus is much more about this idea of creating well designed objects for the masses and an educational program, and less so the actual success of the specific products themselves.

[Melvyn Bragg] If it had an ethos, could you tell us what it was?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] I think the ethos is trying to push the boundaries of what we understand, for instance, a chair to be. A chair doesn't need to be made out of wood. It could actually be made out of tubular steel, which has a strong resilience. It's lightweight, it's flexible, it's not as ponderous. And a cantilever chair by Mies van der Rohe has a certain springiness to it. It's a very innovative product, and it also looks modern. It sets a certain tone for a forward looking, very hopeful future in a very complicated 1920s period.

[Melvyn Bragg] Is the idea of it being modern coming into play as a factor in its favor?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Absolutely. Not only modern materials, such as the use of tubular steel, a preponderance of glass, innovative weaving materials, putting metal threads through the fabrics themselves, but also modern lifestyle that you might live in a light-filled house without all of the 19th century decorations.

[Melvyn Bragg] Antimacassars...[laughter]

[25:44]

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Exactly, out with antimacassars! Perhaps you just need a strip of leather to support your back at just the right moment. In Marcel Breuer's Wassily chair, it's quite comfortable with just a few very-well-proportioned, ergonomic pieces of material. Really researched, and that's part of it. It's the research, design research in the period, not necessarily what came out of that, but [the] research is a product of that education.

[Alan Powers] One of the things it really did was to make teachers as much as products. Because a great number of them went on. And even if they didn't teach in a school, like Marguerite Friedlaender went to California, set up her own sort-of rural craft workshop, and took a lot of students in and had a routine and a regime. There's a weaving workshop not very far away, just outside Erfurt, where one of the weaving students lived and worked through the whole of the rest of her life, through the Nazis, through the DDR, with a teaching studio. And the peoples came in and they were given this severe training about getting it right.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] I also think, just on that note, the way in which, after the Bauhaus was closed, Gropius goes on to the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe goes on to IIT in Chicago. László Moholy-Nagy starts the New Bauhaus in Chicago that then turns into the [Illinois] Institute of Design [IIT]. So, in fact exactly, the teachers go out, not only students who go on to teach, but the main protagonists of the Bauhaus also go into the greater world, and that becomes important as they go into exile, as it were.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I come to you, Michael White? It had an extraordinary explosion. The way you've all talked so far, clearly tells people this was a smallish group, not many funds. When it made things they were too expensive for most people to buy. And life was going on for the mass people without the Bauhaus and didn't seem to influence them very much. But quite soon it's all over the place. It's in America, it's in Calcutta, it's in museums. What happened to make it explode like that?

[27:52]
[Michael White] One very simple explanation is the fact that it's closed in Germany - that the Nazis effectively make it impossible for it to function there, and then many of its staff and students leave Germany.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can you just tell us a bit more about the conflict between the regime, the Nazi regime, and the Bauhaus?

[Michael White] Yes. So Robin's already mentioned that there's a long trajectory for this. Again, that rightist agitation against the Bauhaus exists in Weimar, in its first incarnation there. And it follows the Bauhaus. They moved to Dessau. That seems to be a much better situation but again, the National Socialists .. actually achieved ... power... in the city authority there, and then managed to close the Bauhaus there. It then moves to Berlin...

[Melvyn Bragg] Why did they object to what Bauhaus is doing? Why did the Nazis object to it?

[Michael White] There are a number of reasons, both aesthetic and political. In the mid 1920s, ... Gropius has a very interesting sort-of public debate with a conservative cultural critic and architect called Paul Schuetzenamberg [?], where they start debating nationality, identity and architecture. And you start to see this kind of creeping into the discourse about modern architecture actually being an alien foreign thing,

[Melvyn Bragg] Even though it was engendered in Germany?

[Michael White] Exactly. Exactly. And that legacy goes on for a very, very long time. And interestingly, the Bauhaus also falls out of love from the left as well. So we have an incident with the second director, Hannes Meyer, who's a committed Marxist. There's a development of a communist cell within the Bauhaus and a big scandal erupts around him about the potential diversion of funds into political activities and he's ejected from the Bauhaus. And at that moment, actually, the far left falls out of love with the Bauhaus as well, which has a long legacy into East Germany.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you want to come into this dispute,... Alan?

[Alan Powers] Well, moving onwards, I think it's often assumed, quite understandably, that the Nazis would have nothing to do with modern design, but actually it's not true. And while the best known examples are chosen to show their conservatism - classical, pitched-roof houses et cetera, a lot of buildings go on being built through the whole Nazi period, admittedly more for industrial purposes, which are flat roofed with big glass walls and domestic products don't change very much either. So it's one more paradox in the received idea of the Bauhaus.

[Melvyn Bragg] So why is there that paradox? Why is the received idea against the facts?

[Alan Powers] Well, the received idea is a huge part of what we have to know about the Bauhaus. And Gropius was very largely responsible for creating it. First when he came to England and lectured, published first book about the Bauhaus in English, and then even more so in the US where he arranged for a big exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938 with a catalog that very selectively focuses on the things that he wanted to be seen.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] And I think that's a really important point in which, after the Bauhaus closes, there begins another life with the Bauhaus in that image is important. Exhibitions, the publications, especially this catalog, and also the actual photographs at the point in which the world is at war, and then the Cold War, where access to the original Bauhaus buildings was no longer possible, these images from the 1920s become the image of the Bauhaus. In part that is the photography of Lucia Moholy, Lás Moholy-Nagy's first wife, and the way in which these are reproduced. The reproduction of the image of the Bauhaus continues to resonate on. And thus we have a kind of coherent vision of the Bauhaus, even when, as we've all discussed, it's much more complicated.

[Michael White] Yeah. So when Gropius publishes a major treatise on on modern architecture, "New Architecture and the Bauhaus", he uses precisely those photographs that Robin has referred to, even though at that moment the building did

not look like that. Actually, it had been taken over by the Nazis. They had actually removed a lot of the glass curtain wall. So he's actually using these historical images to talk about modern architecture.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you want to come in, Alan?

[Alan Powers] Yes. The use of images, the editing, it's taken a long time, and the job is not yet finished, even past the centenary of the foundation to try and readjust, to bring in the periods of the second two directors, even, which are often more or less skated over which both of which were very interesting. Hannes Myer, he said, "we want practical things for people, not luxury things". And he acted on it. And therefore a lot of the tubular steel and so on disappears and wooden furniture becomes the thing. And I think the Hannes Myer's period is great, actually. Mies van der Rohe's relatively short time there as well, has many points and he really got into architectural teaching while he was there, which he then continued in Chicago. So there's a great irony that Hannes Meyer,...this ardent Marxist, actually creates the most commercially successful version of the Bauhaus. Maybe he just understood how capitalism works better than other people. But both he and Mies van der Rohe have an understanding that Gropius actually lacks. Gropius does not really understand how intellectual property rights work, so he's interested in objects and products, but he doesn't understand actually how he might license some..

[Melvyn Bragg] What did he not understand about intellectual property rights?

[Alan Powers] So Marcel Breuer, who starts making this tubeless steel furniture, actually creates a spin-off company from the Bauhaus, and Gropius is devastated. He thinks this object is actually going to finally make some cash.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] He's livid. Not just devastated, he's livid. It's a crisis.

[Alan Powers] So Breuer...creates a company and then sells on the rights from that company into other companies. So actually, that furniture we think of as owned by the Bauhaus actually loses the rights over it. And that has legacies right [now] today, [with] what you think you buy when you come by cantilevered chair.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] Also important to this end period of the Bauhaus, just when Mies van der Rohe was getting going with the architecture, finally doing what Gropius had set out to do, he was working very closely with his partner, Lilly Reich. So, really contending with the external architecture and also the interior design and the fabrics and the furniture, and working also with Ludwig Hilberseimer, creating visions for urban planning and the way in which you might reproduce and propagate these buildings, multiples, so that you could really build in a mass produced way, architecture, housing for the masses. All of that really is just getting going in these last three years, 1930 to 1933. And then when it closes in July of 1933, again that is moved forward to other lands, other places. But it really was kind of just getting going in that period.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I come to Michael for a second? Why did it close and why did the Bauhaus close? And what consequences followed?

[35:04]

[Michael White] The actual formal closure of the Bauhaus is like everything to do with the Bauhaus - there's a simple answer and a more complicated answer. So it's been attacked in each of its locations. It's suffered from the development of, say, of the rise of right wing politics that have targeted it and actually, say, removed its funding and and forced it to close. So the big one comes in 1933 with the accession of the National Socialists to the Chancellorship and the seizure of power at that moment. It's one of the very first things they do culturally, is a raid on the Bauhaus in April 1933. They close the building... by that time, it's in a telephone - X-telephone - factory in Berlin iving on a shoestring. But they close the building, they check everyone's identity papers and so forth. But there is then a very complex negotiation that happens behind the scenes between Mies van der Rohe and high-ranking Nazis. He's communicating with Alfred Rosenberg, who then ... later in the Nuremberg trials ... having looted works of art from all over Europe. And actually, the Nazis, they offer a deal to the Bauhaus to say "you can carry on". They specifically named two members of staff that they want fired. That's Kandinsky and Ludwig Hilberseimer, that Robin has mentioned, that are seen to be somehow particularly dangerous or subversive, but will also want closer state control of the institution. Now, those are terms that Mies van der Rohe and his colleagues were not going to accept. And so, actually, the Bauhaus closes itself, they decide to formally dissolve. And that's an interesting sort of attempt to retain some civil autonomy in a very desperate situation.

[Melvyn Bragg] Did its closure help its reputation, Robin?

[Robin Schuldenfrei] It helped in an international sense in that it was finished in Germany and then it moved elsewhere. It had been moving. It was very well known internationally in terms of the publications. But the actual emigration of the key figures, many people first to London and then on to the US and also Turkey, Calcutta, China, Japan and other states as well. And that was really important because that allowed it to also mingle with the local modern influence and the local craft traditions of those places. And so it's not a monolith. It could change, it could grow and it could adapt in some ways to local conditions. And that's, again, this pliability and this flexibility of this Bauhaus idea, this consideration of how you might train, how it might be an educational ethos, how it's a time of great experimentation with materials, forms, and ideas about living. And that, I think, really helped the Bauhaus to be able to spread and find relevance beyond this core episode in history.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan?

[Alan Powers] There's a huge impact during the Cold War period when the Bauhaus myth gets revived again because it serves the Americans in league with the West Germans as the good bit, as it were, the bit that you can take from interwar Germany and give back again. So the foundation of the school in Ulm, for example, which was seen as the successor to the Bauhaus, is funded by American money to begin with. And then the program of exhibitions and so on. And at that point, the East Germans have renounced the Bauhaus because they're under the Stalinist influence, cultural influence. Later on, they take it back again. And there is a funny story I was told, that there was an exhibition in Stuttgart, the first big postwar Bauhaus exhibition, and there were people in England who wanted to bring it to London, which they did succeed in doing, but only by going to the West German cultural commissar in London and getting a plot, she [cultural commissar?] was in league with this, to say that there would be an

exhibition coming from East Germany unless the West Germans put up the money to bring the show to London.

[Melvyn Bragg] Was there any sense towards the end when the Bauhaus was challenged, if that's possible?

[Alan Powers] Yes.

[Melvyn Bragg] Who challenged them?

[Alan Powers] Quite often by quite a lot of people, I think. Not necessarily a head on challenge, but a questioning of skepticism about was it all it was cracked up to be? It happens in the 1930s, you know, quite politely, but I think people can see through this slightly incredible sort of facade that Gropius creates. In America it's challenged by people who are not massively culturally conservative, but just a bit more. And there are very funny things about "Beware of the Bauhaus" in Homes and Garden Magazine and so on. Well, they seem funny to us, perhaps they weren't then.

[39:51]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] Also important in this post war period is the beginning of the Bauhaus archive and Hans Wingler as a particular figure in West Germany who sets up the original first archive of these materials. He sends round letters to Bauhaus members who are alive to send back their memories, donate their objects, donate their papers and documents. And that's also in addition to what Gropius is doing on a kind of all out PR front that he's been doing since he left the Bauhaus. It's also very important this institution becomes founded. Even in the early days, Wingler had an estate car and he would drive around and pick up Bauhaus furniture when he found it on flea markets and from people's houses when they wanted to donate it. And so it becomes institutionalized in this post war period, sort of despite itself and despite its flexibility.

[Melvyn Bragg] Finally, where does it stand now, Michael?

[Michael White] Rather remarkably, being revived in all kinds of different contexts. I'll just give you two. So one is the European Union has launched a new European Bauhaus. It's actually a whole project that's to do with encouraging sustainability in architectural design. Meanwhile, it's been used over in China as the foundation of their first design museum [that] has a core Bauhaus collection, which is part of a government project, really, to move from being a manufacturing country into a design economy, to stop being the factory of the world and to start getting other people to make their stuff.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you. Thanks to Robin Schuldenfrei, Alan Powers and Michael White, and our studio engineer, Michael Millum.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvyn and his guests.

[41:38]
[Melvyn Bragg] Right, [I can see] two hands up. Alan, we'll start with you.

[Alan Powers] Well, I'd like to come in on the discussion point where we ended about where the Bauhaus is now because I think the word has become almost meaningless. It's a brand name, as Michael suggested earlier, it was from the beginning. But I've described it as the zombie Bauhaus. It goes around looking as if it might be the real thing still living, but it isn't, and it's actually quite deceptive. At the same time, there's a really important task of establishing and communicating what it really was. And people will use that word, but I think ... we shouldn't be relying on that as an empty phrase in the way that we are.

[Melvyn Bragg] So what would you substitute?

[Alan Powers] New words.

[Melvyn Bragg] Not easy to come across new words. [laughter]

[Michael White] I think in reference to that, there's a very amusing, quite-telling confrontation between two very different characters who tried to seize the legacy of of the Bauhaus in the 1950s. So, Alan mentioned, the ... Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm is a direct school that kind of grows out out of the Bauhaus. That's led by Max Bill, who'd been a student of the Bauhaus and sees it very much as a design project about coming up with practical solutions to everyday needs. And he enters a very interesting correspondence with an avant-garde Danish artist called Asger Jorn and they sort of have completely diametrically opposing ideas of what the Bauhaus is. There's Bill, who's making stools and bits of furniture, and Jorn who sees it just fundamentally as a creative stimulus. And in their correspondence, then Jorn comes up to this idea of the Imaginist Bauhaus is what he describes it as, contrasting it with what he says that Bill has, which is the "imaginary Bauhaus"..

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you want to develop that a bit? It's interesting.

[43:54]
[Michael White] Yeah. So if you look at - we were talking earlier about Johannes Itten or Moholy-Nagy - if you look actually at their at their writings, what is fundamentally important to them is the development of people. Alan spoke about about the legacy in teaching. The ultimate product of Bauhaus is people and their creative potential being unleashed. And that's what Jorn is really excited about. It's about engaging with materials, but in a creative fashion. It's not actually about producing objects that are going to be made in factories, and you can find that repeatedly in those early documents of the Bauhaus. Moholy talks about the biological functions of the human being and enhancing sensory perception, and all of these sorts of things are actually about people fundamentally.

[44:38]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] I would take a slightly different tact on that because I think there is a legacy to the products of the Bauhaus and the way they're designed. So if you think of Dieter Rams at Braun and the products that he designed, they come out of this idea of well-functioning, well-designed objects, a high production value, and if you can

remove a button or two to make your mixer or your shaver or your slide projector function that much better, be that much more intuitive to use, that might serve people well. And I think the postwar products, there was a proliferation of objects in the post war period, many of them were cheaply designed with planned obsolescence - a new color of your Sears refrigerator, your bathroom has to be a different color...- whereas some products, such as those produced by Braun, really stand the test of time. That has important implications for Steve Jobs and Apple products. The iPhone has certain connections to the way in which those Braun calculators were designed. And so I think there has been a place in the post war ... also with [...who?] and important designers in our contemporary period, there is a legacy that you can trace from that idea of art and technology and new unity, from 1923, that we can bring up to the everyday present. IKEA is also an example that's bandied around - it is well designed objects for the masses. We can debate the ecological implications of essentially what's, throw-away furniture now, but I think that legacy is connected to the Bauhaus and I think that the design, training and the products that came out of the Bauhaus, successful or not in their time, have been successful in the long run.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan?

[Alan Powers] I think Moholy Nagy would be absolutely on side with sustainability because that was the direction he was traveling away from the sort-of the physics towards the biology and holistic view of way beyond simply objects or images towards something much bigger. And a friend of his, Serge Chermayeff, who took over from him in Chicago for a few years, had exactly the same idea and he said we need a space program for Earth. All that money that's being spent on going to the Moon, we actually need it here, and how right he was.

[Melvyn Bragg] What does Germany think of the Bauhaus at the moment?

[Alan Powers] There's a big claim on the Bauhaus being made by Germany. There's a very concerted attempt to repatriate it. And we see that, Robin mentioned earlier the Bauhaus Archive that was brought back and then a building created for it in Berlin. We've seen that linked up with the museum in Weimar, which still retains some objects from the early Bauhaus and now the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau, which looks after the building. Those three have come together post-reunification of Germany to work together to reestablish a kind of home for the Bauhaus in Germany.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] And very important to that point is each of these institutions has just opened a brand new building or is completing a building now in the case of the Bauhaus Archive, which then moved from Darmstadt to Berlin in the postwar period, as the ... Germany became more and more divided. And so not only is that a sort of claim about iconic modernism and a certain period of German history and German modernism, but now actually backed by physical buildings of architecture.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan?

[Alan Powers] The problem, I think, is that it's cast such a big shadow over the whole of the rest of that period, but particularly in Germany, there is so little available to discover what else was going on, which I think from what I've discovered, was just as interesting in a great many ways. And that is something that does need rebalancing.

[Michael White] Yes. So, it happens to me that I regularly visit a small town near Hanover called Celle, which has remarkable architecture dating from the 1920s, built by an architect called Otto Haesler, who was working in a Neues Bauen, a new building style, throughout this period. This is now being rebranded or remarketed as Bauhaus architecture. It was happening completely independently in a very surprising location. It's not in a major urban center and it's now become a strong marketing ploy to bring people to ... look at modern architecture by calling it Bauhaus.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] I think this actually brings us full circle because in fact nationalism and the Bauhaus was always entwined in one way or another what was going on in Germany and what was perceived as German or the future of Germany and future direction of Germany was always at play in each period. In 1919 when it was set up, in 1923 when "art and technology and new unity" was sort-of the way forwards, for the way of the Bauhaus, the move to Dessau an industrial town that had the Junkers airplane and then it's sort of exile and then re embraced in the West German and post reunification Germany.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you think that one of the basic ideas that it should bring together technology and art that should bring together industry and artistic thing? Do you think that happened, Alan?

[Alan Powers] They did it with better publicity, with flair. I wouldn't denigrate any of it, but it doesn't stand out so far beyond other things - in Germany and elsewhere. It's part of a European wide movement.

[50:21]
[Robin Schuldenfrei] We've forgotten also the theater, the innovations in theater design and these kind of other things that were going on at the Bauhaus that really influenced ... we've talked about graphic design a little bit, but really it's many, many directions. New ground was broken; it became important in other fields as a sort-of jumping off point. And so we might also understand the Bauhaus as a point of departure, at many points of many departures. And I think that also is probably its legacy.

[Alan Powers] Again, I'm going to argue somewhat against that because well, typography, for example: Jan Tschichold was really the founder of New Typography, and many people say that the way the Bauhaus did it was a bit inexpert and they didn't really know what they were doing. So in that and - the theater, I know less well, but I have a suspicion that it would have happened anyway. Yes, it's very nice to have it sort of encapsulated within this sphere of associated activities, but that's the one we hear most about and we hear less about the others.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] But don't you think it's important that they were able to then broadcast and perhaps popularize - if they weren't that Ur-point, that [origin] point. There may be an interesting way in which just being a sort of broadcaster, a megaphone, which is something you sort of see in their imagery, the gramophones and these kind of mouthpieces for a movement, they may have just been an amplifier. I don't think they were always the originator of these objects because, as we've seen, they started, they were there already. Nothing comes from nothing, and I think we've really gone round that topic. But rather, I think the way in which the Bauhaus has sort-

of broadened and reached more people, even today as we're sitting here talking about it, is not unimportant to their legacy.

[Melvyn Bragg] You were going to say something?

[Michael White] I was going to say that we've spoken about the afterlife of the Bauhaus and its legacy in a number of different ways in relation to teaching, in relation to the revision of the teaching of art and those sorts of curricula, in relation to design of objects and also buildings. I think what is developing now in research is this kind of nuancing of those narratives and see where the Bauhaus penetrated in different sorts of environments. And its trajectory into what might call developing countries was quite different into those that were already heavily industrialized, where it might have penetrated further into pedagogy than actually into, let's say, building.

[Melvyn Bragg] There was an idea, as I read in the notes of one of you, it was the notion to "create a complete person". Whoever wrote that ...

[Michael White] That would be me. [laughter]

[Melvyn Bragg] Yes. Can you can you describe what happened to that idea?

[Michael White] I think that hit the buffers a bit, ... that's one of the the early Bauhaus is it has a kind of ecstatic utopian tenor to it in its writings that feels like a venture into a new world. But a lot of what we've described is how that has to negotiate very kind-of practical things. How do you make money? How do you sustain this school? How are you actually going to negotiate with this manufacturer? And all those questions keep on drawing the Bauhaus back to mundane things. But within the writings, within the concept of many of the people at the Bauhaus, is this sense of we are addressing the whole person, and that is the ambition. It's not just my hand and wrist that is making this object. My whole body is involved, if you look at Itten's encouragement of gymnastic exercises and breathing exercises before the making of artwork. This is something that was actually engaging the physical person completely in the making of the work, or thinking about Moholy-Nagy later, his product design actually fitting or corresponding to the shape of the hand, [for example] the modern trimphone, whatever arises out of sculpting or carving things that actually relate to the body very, very directly. And this idea of actually improving or enhancing our sensory capacities, we will see more, we will feel more. There's lots in the Bauhaus teaching program which actually about touch and feel and sensation and that that can be actually made better. We will actually be more sensitive.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you agree with that Alan?

[Alan Powers] Well, yes, we all need to do this. And it was happening in England - dance troops dancing on the hills and on the seashores and people doing all sorts of experimental community things. So, yes, it's true, but it's not uniquely true, I think.

[Robin Schuldenfrei] But it is unique that the school would be focused on the whole person, on really creatively training, so that that would be the onward direction of travel, although there was sort of Lebensreform movements where they were focused on dance or particular aspects. It's interesting that the Bauhaus so much

encompassed this as a foundational part of what they were doing, that it was baked into the school itself, that there was jazz evenings and concerts and a film series and visiting lectures and a very robust subscription to international journals. And so they were really training up people for this kind of whole life, modern life, a life where they didn't know what the next step was really going to be or what history is going to hold for them.

Thank you very much.

In our time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.