

“REPARATION OF ARCHITECTURAL EYESORES”– EXAMINING THE REJECTION OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN GERMANY 1933-1945

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INTRODUCTION

For Germany, the lost First World War and the foundation of the first democratic state, the Weimar Republic, turned out to be an important break in history at the beginning of the 20th century. In the aftermath of War, the visual arts and literature experienced a period of prosperity, despite the financial and moral crisis. At the same time a new architecture was developed, known today as the “New Building”, the “New Objectivity” or the Modern Movement. The outcomes of the industrialisation process and of the deep-seated economic and social changes from the mid-19th century onwards constitute the background to these developments.

However, modern architecture was observed with scepticism if not rejected by the majority of the educated classes. Conservative opponents criticised the new aesthetic, with its unusual and ‘aggressive’ forms, and this critique culminated in a controversy around the concepts of “flat roof or pitched roof”. The debate was strongly related to political differences as the avant-garde architects were supposed to be from the left wing party, or even communists, and they were insulted as being “building bolshevists”.¹

For avant-garde architects, their architecture consisted of principles aimed at making buildings cheaper, more comfortable and more functional. For the opposition, it was a purely stylish architecture supported by the new government: a dysfunctional fashion, just to be in vogue as an architect, denying the traditional ways of building and the occurrence of structural damages. The truth lay, as so often, somewhere in between.

After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 the rejection of modern architecture became the official policy. Many modernist architects were forced to quit their jobs, and they left the country or were prosecuted.² The visual and performance arts, along with architecture and cultural policy, formed a central focus of the national socialist regime as a means to consolidate their leadership, which in the end led to the Holocaust and World War II.

A widely known phenomenon is the national socialist prosecution of so-called „degenerate art“. Paintings and sculptures of – for example - Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Marc Chagall and others were exhibited in a defamatory way; they were partly destroyed or profitably sold to foreign collectors or museums.³ The disliked writings of Jewish or social democratic authors were burnt, too.⁴

But what happened to the modern architecture which had already been created? In my presentation I show that there have been attempts to transform, or to “de-modernise” buildings of the Weimar Republic in the Third Reich, often affiliated with drastic terminology but at the same time inconsistent.

¹ See for background information: Miller Lane, Barbara: *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1945*, Harvard 1985. Gimmel, Jürgen: *Die politische Organisation kulturellen Ressentiments. Der "Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur" und das bildungsbürgerliche Unbehagen an der Moderne*, Münster 2001. Mengin, Christine: *Guerre du toit et modernité architecturale. Loger l'employé sous la république de Weimar*, Paris 2007. See for contemporary resources: Curt R.: *Bausünden und Baugeld-Vergeudung*. Hannover 1931. Senger, Alexander: *Krisis der Architektur*. Zürich 1928.

² Brenner, Hildegard: *Die Kunstpolitik des Nationalsozialismus*. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1963; Miller Lane, Barbara: *Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1945*, Harvard 1985.

³ Zuschlag, Christoph: *"Entartete Kunst" - Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland*. Worms 1995.

⁴ Treß, Werner: *"Wider den undeutschen Geist!"*. Bücherverbrennung 1933, Berlin 2008.

TRANSFORMATION

THE BAUHAUS

The most prominent examples of transformation are the core buildings of the Bauhaus and the nearby Masters' Houses⁵ in Dessau, in the State of Sachsen-Anhalt. At the time of the Weimar Republic these buildings were all in the ownership of the municipal authorities of Dessau. Problems of humidity and poor insulation were reasons for complaints by students and inhabitants already before 1933.⁶

After the Nazi party achieved a majority in Dessau, in 1932, the Bauhaus was closed, in fact there was a serious proposal to demolish the building. Fortunately, this plan was dropped and instead it was used by Nazi organisations. The roof of the design studio of the Bauhaus became a flat wooden roof in 1934. Several newspapers reported this.

From this picture (pic. 1), published in a local newspaper, it looks as though the Bauhaus had been given a steep roof, but these are only two photographs cleverly placed. In fact the roof was so flat that one could not see it from the street. Wrangling about the costs between municipal and state authorities prevented further parts of the building from getting a roof. There is a clear difference between the internal correspondence, which appears very practical and sober, and the emotionally and ideologically charged tone of the press coverage.



1 The Bauhaus in Dessau is given a new roof

THE MASTERS' HOUSES

The Masters' Houses were redesigned in 1939 by minimizing the window areas, while the interior arrangements were changed to suit new user requirements.⁷

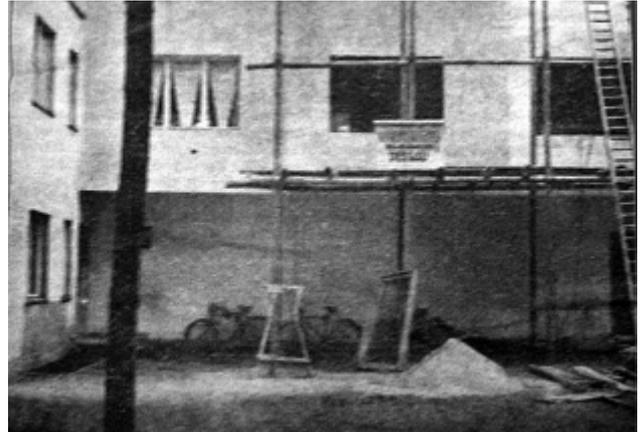
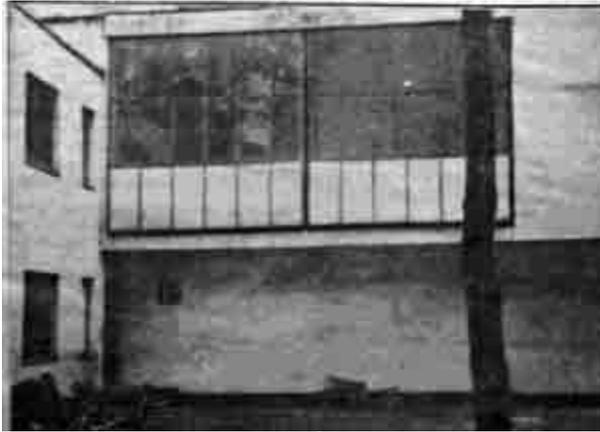
Entitled "Bauhaus errors are removed", these more or less successful reparations were celebrated in the local Nazi press as "radical redesign". Two cut-out photographs show the before and after of the window areas of one of the Masters' Houses (pic. 2 and 3).⁸ The curtains on the second picture demonstrate that the results meet conventional ideas. Again the documents sound much more sober about these changes.

⁵ These were houses of those professors who taught in the Bauhaus.

⁶ Kentgens-Craig, Margret: Kunst und Politik: keine "neue Einheit", in: Kentgens-Craig, Margret (Ed.) Das Bauhausgebäude in Dessau 1926-1999. Basel 1998, p. 66-85, see here p. 75.

⁷ Borgert, Ulrich: Bau- und Nutzungsgeschichte der Meisterhäuser, in: Gebeläber, August (Ed.): Gropius. Meisterhaus Haus Muche/Schlemmer. Stuttgart 2002, p. 46-69.

⁸ At least the window areas of the Kandinsky/Klee and the Muche/Schlemmer Houses were redesigned while the Feininger house remained unaltered.



2 and 3 Bauhaus 'errors' of judgement are removed.

THE STUDIO OF ARNOLD ZWEIG

In 1930 the poet Arnold Zweig commissioned the building of a studio-house in Eichkamp, Berlin-Charlottenburg. Eichkamp was a small suburb of mostly traditional cottages at that time.⁹ Arnold Zweig chose the Jewish architect Harry Rosenthal, who in the late nineteen-twenties had already attracted attention in Berlin with several detached houses designed by him in modernist forms. The cubic structure of the Arnold Zweig studio stands out by means of its clear design and large glazed front facing the garden, presenting itself as a typical building of the "New Objectivity" (pic. 4).

After Arnold Zweig had left Germany in 1933 on account of his Jewish background, Leonhard Kaupisch, a general in the German Airforce, bought the studio-house in 1938. His response to the building led to radical changes. Among the most drastic ones were the replacement of the flat roof with a pitched roof and the reduction in size of the windows (pic. 5).

Both practical and aesthetic considerations led Kaupisch to redesign the house and expand the living space; no previous structural defects were reported. But the episode revealed its ideological motivation, when a neighbour protested against the project: Specifically, the new garage violated the building boundary. But the authorities supported Kaupisch with an official letter welcoming the redesign as an "excision of a foreign matter".¹⁰ The counter-claim was dismissed. This previously exceptional house in a conservative residential area was therefore 'adjusted' and made compatible with its unexceptional surroundings.



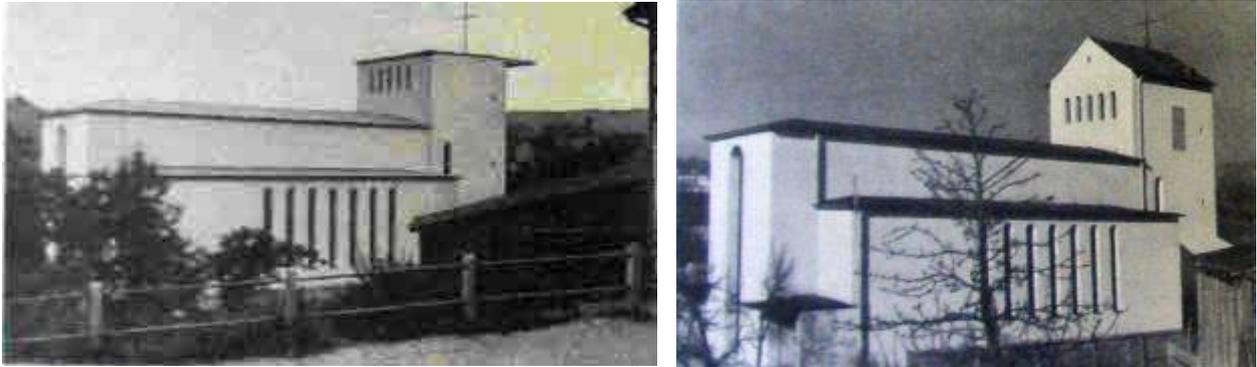
4 and 5: Arnold Zweig House before and after transformation

⁹ Goos, Manuela; Heyde, Brigitte: Eichkamp – Eine Siedlung am Rande mitten in Berlin, Berlin 1999.

¹⁰ Bau- und Wohnungsaufsichtsamt Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, Städtische Baupolizei Wilmersdorf-Charlottenburg, Bauakte Kühler Weg 9, letter dated 21.6.1938.

ST. ANTONIUS IN STUTTGART-KALTENTAL

The next example is located in Stuttgart, the city of the Weißenhof-Siedlung.¹¹ In 1928 the Catholic church of Stuttgart-Kaltental decided to erect a new church building for the fast growing parish of St. Antonius. A prominent building plot had been acquired at the mountain side, directly visible from the main street. The restricted tender was won by Hans Herkommer, who was well-known for church architecture at that time.



6 and 7 St. Antonius's Church, Stuttgart-Kaltental, before and after transformation

As there was only a small budget, the new building had to be quite small and simple. Nevertheless, Herkommer determined to give the church a convincing modern design (pic. 6). It is a “pseudo-basilica” with three naves but without internal columns, a design giving all members of the congregation an unrestricted view towards the altar. This aspect of the construction was clearly visible from the outside. The tall spire characterized by an overhanging concrete slab became the dominant landmark when viewed from the main street.

The municipal authorities of Stuttgart did not at first agree with the unusual shape of the building at such a prominent location. But in the end they had to agree. The priest and his parish were content with their new church, especially because a modern character of the design and the meditative atmosphere inside provided an ideal space for contemporary worship.

One year after the church was consecrated the National Socialists took over political power. For the general population, the church now stood out in a negative way. In 1935 an author published a photograph of the church questioning whether it was “Industrial Building or Church?” He complained about the functional and “soulless” architecture and deprecated it as “God’s Power Station”.¹²

Here the classification as an “eyesore” begs the question: How should a special building type look? Obviously the author could not appreciate or approve of the mixture between industrial and sacral architecture.

In 1938 a new Protestant church was erected on the opposite hill of Stuttgart-Kaltental. The stonework was crowned by a slightly curved slate roof. The completion of the Protestant church was followed by a letter from the local building department to the Catholic parish of St. Antonius:

“The Catholic church in Kaltental is such a failure and so distorted in its architectural design that it has to be denoted as unsustainable from the town planning point of view. It clearly shows signs of the previous “Building Bolshevism” and it may not be unknown to you that this building is a target for mockery. As the opposite Protestant church is excellently adapted to the scenery I suppose that it is your own need to change this completely unsatisfying situation.”¹³

No protest of the parish followed. In June 1938 the architect Hans Herkommer replaced the concrete slab by a small pitched roof – of course paid for by the church. We do not know if the result of the transformation satisfied the aspirations of the local authorities, but we may doubt it since it is not really a radical transformation.

¹¹ Blümm; Anke: „Fabrik oder Kirche? Das neue Dach der St. Antonius-Kirche in Stuttgart-Kaltental im Jahr 1938“, in: Bantelmann, Anne; Schmidt, Leo (Ed.): *Forschen – Bauen – Erhalten*, Jahrbuch Cottbus, Berlin/Bonn 2008.

¹² Schuster, Felix: „Fabrik oder Kirche?“; in: *Schwäbisches Heimatbuch 1935*, p. 166.

¹³ Diözesanarchiv Rottenburg, St. Antonius Stuttgart-Kaltental, G. 1.3 Fasz. 14, letter dated 15.3.1938.

But for the author of the critique in 1935 the redesign was a success. In 1940 he published two 'Before-And-After-Photos', described as "Reparation of architectural eyesores".¹⁴

CONCLUSION

What do we learn from these examples about the rejection of modern architecture in Germany in the period of the Third Reich?

The democratic Weimar Republic represented a period of artistic freedom and liberalism. It allowed new architectural ways in the face of housing shortage and financial crisis. But we can assume that for the average citizen "New Building" was not understood and therefore mostly considered as an offence, or at least as an interruption of their viewing habits.

The National Socialists used these resentments for their propaganda, and when they took over power an ideological hardening took place. Press and municipal authorities were immediately brought into line, so it is difficult to say whether some supported the Nazi ideology or was only forced to do so. But despite this we can assume that mainly the educated class acknowledged the architectural and artistic leadership of the Nazis. The National Socialist motto „public interest goes about self-interest“ was for many people at that time the right answer to all the problems of the past, including the architecture.

Modern architecture was thought to be a problem to be dealt with somehow. So the ideologically deterministic climate promoted redesigns, and I have presented three of them: Dessau as the centre of the Modern Movement with the Bauhaus and the Master Houses, a private house in Berlin and a church in Stuttgart.

I have identified round about 30 similar examples throughout Germany. All of them had experienced some critical comments already before 1933. Sometimes, but not for all of them, structural defects had occurred. They were all given a more or less visible pitched roof and sometimes new window areas.

But what was their "crime against architecture"? I would like to point out two items that show the very normative thinking which was typical for that time, but which also latently existed already before 1933. Again it is difficult to differentiate between common conservative beliefs and Nazi ideology.

One was the unwritten rule that architecture has always to be adapted to its environment, be it an architectural or natural context. Adaptation meant a modest integration and subordination to the existing situation. Of course this was a rule the modernists tried to exceed: On the one hand they wanted to contrast nature with a clear cubic structure; on the other hand the boundaries of nature and architecture should be dissolved.

The next rule was that for all building types only special styles were considered to be permissible. I refer here to a thesis of Gerhard Fehl¹⁵ who described the National Socialist handling of architectural styles as "programmatic eclecticism": Building types get different styles in order to demonstrate their hierarchical sequence. National socialist representative buildings were in the first level of the hierarchy and they were designed in a neoclassical manner. The level below was house building, where vernacular elements should be used. At the lowest level were industrial buildings, where modern architecture was chosen, not only to show that for the least appreciated buildings the cheapest building construction is appropriate, but also to demonstrate that National Socialism is modern and technical.

Given this normative thinking, we can understand why dwellings in a modern style were not "allowed" and had to be "repaired". It was the "wrong style" for dwellings. It was regarded as profaning the emotionally highly valued living space and was strongly connected to the Nazi ideology of family, country, blood and nation. And it was the same with churches: in terms of conservative and National Socialist thinking, modern churches were seen as a threat to the value system. A church designed in an international, "Bolshevik" way was for them a contradiction in terms, because the Bolsheviks were

¹⁴ Schuster, Felix: „Wiedergutmachung von Bausünden“; in Schwäbisches Heimatbuch 1940, S. 128-129.

¹⁵ Fehl, Gerhard: Die Moderne unterm Hakenkreuz. Ein Versuch, die Rolle der funktionalistischen Architektur im Dritten Reich zu klären; in: Frank, Hartmut (Ed.): Faschistische Architekturen. Planen und Bauen in Europa 1930-1945, Hamburg 1985, S. 88-122.

not regarded as having any religion or spirituality. For critics of modern architecture, the boundaries between building types had to be respected. Therefore you would never find a transformation of industrial architecture after 1933 although mostly all of them have flat roofs.

Not all modernist buildings were redesigned after 1933. There was no general order by the National Socialist government itself to change modern architecture it so disliked – in contrast to the way in which they put down so-called “degenerate art”.

Why do we only find a relatively small number of such cases, even though architecture in general was so highly appreciated during Nazi times? It was both for practical and conceptual reasons: one practical reason was the financial crisis – few had the money for such redesigns. This relates to the general perceived difference between visual arts on the one hand and architecture as “art of daily use” on the other. The highest Nazis like Hitler and Speer were much more interested in monumental plans to redesign cities.

The housing shortage was the second reason – it could not be afforded to destroy buildings or settlements, because every living space was needed. In fact sometimes flat roofs were replaced by pitched roofs, simply to create more living space, even though this was accompanied by the typical assaults on modern architecture.

A third reason was the nature of property law. The Nazis did not dare to request every owner of a modern building to have it redesigned at his own expense because they did not want to spoil their appeal to the average citizen. In the case of the so-called “degenerate art”, it was all in public possession and so no private owner was bothered.

Furthermore no one could really define “vernacular architecture”. Even convinced Nazis knew that they could not return to old manual construction and build houses brick by brick with thatched roofs. It has been demonstrated in several publications that the innovations of modern architects, notably prefabrication and industrialized building, were of course not stopped but extended.¹⁶

“Degenerate architecture” therefore remained – and for this reason not comparable to the so-called “degenerate art” – a catchword. It was a symbol of the unloved Weimar Republic through which the liberal building policy could be defamed in a sweeping way.

You can also find negative opinions concerning these redesigns, but not expressed very often. Every practically thinking architect knew that a pitched roof on a flat roof house did not produce great new architecture. I quote an author from a renowned building journal:

„The purification of architecture according to the actions against “degenerate art” would change our environment profoundly. [...] But a poorly designed flat roof house will not be better with a pitched roof.”

This normative thinking did not die with the end of the Third Reich. There is continuity from the nineteen-twenties to beyond 1945 in Germany. We can summarise by positing that in the Third Reich modern architecture officially experienced the most hatred, incomprehension and polemical attacks ever – with all the contradictions and problems this caused when faced with the actual handling of it.

¹⁶ See for instance: Harlander, Tilman: Zwischen Heimstätte und Wohnmaschine - Wohnungsbau und Wohnungspolitik in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Basel 1995.