

INSIDE
THE



BAUHAUS

HOWARD DEARSTYNE

edited by
DAVID SPAETH




INSIDE THE BAUHAUS

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I N S I D E T H E B A U H A U S




HOWARD DEARSTYNE

Edited by

D A V I D S P A E T H

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Art Direction by Charles Davey
Designed by Beth Tondreau



for my wife

BARBARA TIMMINS DEARSTYNE

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editor's acknowledgments

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DAVID A. SPAETH
LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY
JUNE 1985

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introduction

This is the story of an idea, an idea full of hope and promise. It is an idea about how people might live. It is also the story of a school, the Bauhaus, whose life span coincided with the Weimar Republic's and whose history mirrors German history between the two world wars.

Through mass-production, the Bauhaus, like the German Werkbund, hoped to change the quality of the designed object and the designed environment for everyone. Quality of life was an important design consideration in the housing schemes developed by Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer, respectively the first and second directors of the school, and Ludwig Hilberseimer, whose teaching responsibilities at the Bauhaus included the planning curriculum. Frequently predicated on the concept of prefabrication as a way to reduce building costs, their proposals to house Berlin's (and Germany's) working class were also based on a genuine concern for function as well as hygiene; on the importance of solar orientation, cross-ventilation, and easy access to open green space; and a convenient relationship to places of employment. From our vantage point, it is easy to see how naïve this boundless faith in technology was. However, Walter Gropius and his new school offered hope, based on a new order that was life-giving, humane in its application of technology, and full of light, not just light reflected from polished metal surfaces or unadorned planes—seemingly, the Bauhaus hallmark—but the light of reason and objectivity.

Under Gropius and the Bauhaus masters, students were urged to discard their preoccupations and approach each problem as if it were completely new, from zero, studying both functional re-

quirements *and* the technical means necessary to realize a solution—a synthesis of art and craft, of aesthetics and serial production. There was also a subjective, non-rational aspect to the Bauhaus experience which, in the teachings of Johannes Itten, had a quasi-mystical quality.

Howard Dearstyne, the author of this work, was one of a handful of Americans to study at the Bauhaus and the only one to earn a diploma in architecture. He learned of the Bauhaus in the summer of 1928 when he was touring Europe. Like so many other Americans, Dearstyne was drawn to Europe for the educational opportunities travel abroad offered. Seeing Europe's monuments and experiencing its cultural legacy confirmed a passionate interest in architecture which was to last his lifetime.

It was in the summer of 1926 that Dearstyne made his first trip to Europe. That fall he returned to Columbia University to resume his graduate studies in architecture, which he completed in 1928. After graduation he returned to Europe still not satisfied with his education but unclear as to how to proceed. (As an undergraduate he briefly studied journalism and also for a time pursued medicine.) Dearstyne was aware only that a gulf existed between what he had learned in school and what he had seen in Europe.

At this time, architectural educators considered the monuments of the past as the "creative well" to which talented and astute designers would continually return, imitating and adapting past solutions to their own work. Dearstyne viewed history differently, not as a source for so-called creativity but as a source of intellectual inspiration. Unconsciously, he had come to understand that architecture is an expression of its time, its structure, and its technology. In Europe Dearstyne discovered the emergent and as yet unnamed Modern Movement. Its appeal was immediate: the Modern Movement manifested a new way of thinking about how to make architecture.

During the summer of 1928, Dearstyne began to articulate the limitations of his professional education. A visit to the Bauhaus reinforced his misgivings. In retrospect his matriculation at the Bauhaus seems both obvious and inevitable. He was seeking an approach to problem solving (and ultimately to architecture itself) based on something more rational than historic precedent.

The Bauhaus attracted students from all over Europe. Americans were in the minority, and at the onset Dearstyne was essentially an outsider. However, being both egalitarian and gregarious, he sought people out, making friends among students and faculty regardless of social class: an outsider became insider.

Dearstyne's tenure at the Bauhaus coincided with important changes taking place within the school. In 1925 Gropius moved the Bauhaus from Weimar to Dessau, resigning as director in 1928.

He was succeeded by Hannes Meyer, who attempted to change the curriculum and offer a diploma in architecture, one of Gropius's stated, but unrealized, intentions.

Dearstyne witnessed the events surrounding Meyer's departure after two years, Mies van der Rohe's appointment as Meyer's successor, and the closing of the Dessau Bauhaus. He followed the school to Berlin, as a special student, remaining until the political turmoil surrounding Hitler's assumption of power in 1933 forced the closing of the school.

From the richness of this experience coupled with his long-term friendship and professional association with many of the Bauhaus faculty, Dearstyne decided to write his account of the school. What began as a short article in 1958 became, twenty years later, an exhaustive commentary on the Bauhaus and its times.

Dearstyne sent numerous letters home during the summer of 1928 and later, which his mother had the foresight to preserve. When he began work on this manuscript, he used these letters as one of the sources for his work. The letters were very much of the moment—not written with posterity in mind. They are full of descriptions and observations which were of interest or concern to him and which he shared with his family.

His account of life and education at the Bauhaus is drawn chiefly from contemporary sources, from his letters, from journals and letters kept by members of the Bauhaus faculty, from newspaper articles, and from the recollections of others. There is a vitality in his prose, a sense of actual participation. We are part of the forces which shaped the Bauhaus; we are caught up in the internal and external struggles which beset the school. Dearstyne includes historical background of the structure of the curriculum of the Bauhaus as well as discussions of the various workshops and how they functioned prior to his admission to the school.

Dearstyne learned about the Bauhaus from a young woman he met in Düsseldorf and later married, Maria Gödde. When the Bauhaus closed, Dearstyne returned to the United States. Their subsequent divorce was an unpleasant topic about which he seldom spoke. If his narrative is vague about the first Ms. Dearstyne, it is because of the rancor associated with the dissolution of their marriage. After his return to the United States, he worked as an architect in New York City. For a time he was employed in Wallace K. Harrison's office. During World War II, Dearstyne held teaching positions at Black Mountain College, Lawrence College, (now Lawrence University) and the Cranbrook Academy. It was during his year at Lawrence College (1944) that he met Barbara Timmins, who later became his wife and to whose memory this work is dedicated.

After the war, Dearstyne was employed as an architect in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg and taught at the College of

William and Mary. During his years in Williamsburg (1946–1957), he published the following books: the English translation (with Hilla Rebay) of Wassily Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1947); *Colonial Williamsburg—Its Buildings and Gardens* (1949); and *Shadows on Silver* (1954), (the last two in conjunction with A. Lawrence Kocher). In 1957, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe invited Dearstyne to teach architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Dearstyne remained until his retirement in 1970.

There is no question that Mies's influence on Dearstyne was profound and long-lasting. Obvious affection colors the description of his experiences as one of Mies's Bauhaus students. The same can be said of his attitude toward the Bauhaus, for the experience there changed his life, opening up a new way of thinking about and making architecture, and marked his coming of age. Perhaps this helps to explain the tension which came to exist between him and Gropius. For, while Gropius is rightly given praise for founding the Bauhaus and preserving the idea of the Bauhaus through its difficult early years, it was Mies who worked to preserve both the school and the idea against forces which, to Dearstyne, were far more hostile and threatening than the provincial legislature Gropius faced. In Dearstyne's mind, Mies was the more heroic figure as well as the better architect.

At the time of his death in 1979, Dearstyne was editing the manuscript, and seemed pleased with his results. Three years passed before work resumed when I undertook the task of editing with the support and encouragement of Dearstyne's sister-in-law, Marjorie Smolka, his literary executrix. I had many reservations about this and did not excise one word until I had read the complete manuscript several times. When the actual process began, I started each day by recalling Dearstyne's voice—not just the sound of it but his manner of speaking. As one of his students during my undergraduate years at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Department of Architecture, where he was a professor, and as a frequent guest in his house, I had ample opportunity to hear him speak. It was not hard, then, to bring him to life again, if only in my mind.

In general the deletions I made were done to strengthen the narrative and sharpen the focus of Dearstyne's work. An entire chapter on the history of the *Novembergruppe* was removed: as important as this chapter was, it disrupted the narrative flow. The most important historical facts concerning this group are included in a footnote. I made one addition: Mies van der Rohe's description of the closing of the Berlin Bauhaus. Mies's description was so poignant that it demanded inclusion. It is my hope that Dearstyne would have approved these changes and that he would have understood my deletions. Like any good editor, I hope that I have made another's work better, leaving few "tracks" of my own in the process.