

Deborah Ascher Barnstone  
University of Technology Sydney

### *The Dissolution of the Cities: Bruno Taut's Extreme Reform Vision*

#### SLIDE 2

The visionary architect, Bruno Taut, is known for his utopian projects, both built and unbuilt, particularly the 1914 Glass Pavilion, his Crystal Chain letters, and the colorful fantasy books he authored at the end of the First World War. Although deeply implicated in the *Reformbewegung*, this work is rarely analyzed in relation to the many reform ideas circulating in Germany between 1880 and 1930 but rather is usually situated in relationship to architectural utopianism and mysticism. While these were certainly potent influences on his work, Taut also borrows from many aspects of the various reform movements: garden city planning ideals, concern for health and hygiene, nature worship, back-to-nature schemes, the desire to improve mass housing especially the hated *Mietskaserne*, an interest in working with historical precedent rather repudiating it, and an anti-urban, agrarian utopianism. Rather than argue his interest in reform by examining his better-known work like the housing projects Reform and Falkenburg from 1913, executed before the First World War, or his postwar housing projects like Hufeisensiedlung, and the polemical writings like *Die Frau als Schöpferin*, from the late 1920s, I would like to focus narrowly in this presentation on one little studied book, "*Die Auflösung der Städte, The Dissolution of the Cities* from 1919. The reason for this is not just that, "*Die Auflösung der Städte* is largely ignored in favor of other visionary tracts like *Alpine Architektur* and *Die Weltbaum eister*, but that it situates Taut's reform beliefs more completely. Subtitled, "The Earth, a Good Home," *Die Auflösung der Städte* argues for the destruction of overcrowded and polluted conventional cities in favor of a new model of smaller settlements that are dispersed throughout the countryside.<sup>1</sup> It epitomizes the anti-industrial, pro-garden city agrarian utopian vision, with its overtones of Heim atstil, and concern for health and hygiene, as much as, if not more, forcefully than other polemical writings by Taut.

#### SLIDE 3

The *Reformbewegung* was fundamentally a reaction against, and critique of industrialization and industrial society, the so-called *Zivilisationskritik*, in particular materialism and urbanization.<sup>2</sup> Multiple strands of the *Reformbewegung* exist with no consensus on whether it was fundamentally modern or anti-modern; Taut's work is particularly interesting in this context because historians have the same difficulty placing his work as modern or something else. I need to point out that in spite of its name, *Reformarchitektur* should not be confused with the *Reformbewegung*. **SLIDE 4** *Reformarchitektur* in Germany appeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against prevalent 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism by drawing on vernacular, or Heim at, styles and a reduced classicism instead.<sup>3</sup> Architects like Peter Behrens, Heinrich Tessenow, and Wilhelm Kreis epitomize this strand of German

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Taut, *Die Auflösung der Städte* (Essen: Folkwang, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> Renate Fritz Kirchgraber, *Lebensreform und Kuenstlergruppierungen um 1900*. Dissertation. (Zurich: 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Sigrid Hofer: *Reformarchitektur 1900–1918. Deutsche Baukünstler auf der Suche nach dem nationalen Stil*. Edition Axel Menges, Stuttgart / London 2005, ISBN 3-936681-01-5 (Zugleich *Habilitationsschrift* an der *Universität Frankfurt am Main*, 1998 unter dem Titel: *Tradition, Reform, Innovation*); and Julius Posener: *Die Architektur der Reform (1900–1924)*. (= *Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Neuen Architektur*, Teil II.) In: *arch+*, Jahrgang 1980, Heft 5 (September 1980).

architectural practice. Although the names are similar, and architecture inspired by the *Lebensreform bewegung* was sometimes influenced by German Heimatstil, such architecture was not interested in classicism, moreover the broad goals espoused by these two approaches to design were very different. Architecture inspired by the *Lebensreform bewegung* was far more comprehensive in its ambitions; it hoped to help correct the atrocious living conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century city by providing cleaner, healthier, modern environments with abundant natural light and air, situated in nature; at the same time, aspiring to act as a social corrective to intense class divisions extant in Germany. Taut embraced many of the values of the *Reform bewegung* but had no interest in *Reform architektur*.

#### SLIDE 5

#### Anti-urbanism and the Garden City

#### SLIDE 6

Of course, the very name of Taut's book proclaims its intention: to reform the built environment by dissolving the existing cities in favor of a new constructed order. The anti-urban sentiment could not be stronger or more drastic than this. "Stone houses make stone hearts," Taut declares on the first page, "Let them collapse." The accompanying drawing pictures large, multi-story, urban buildings crumbling in on each other above an agrarian landscape. Later in the book he triumphantly declares, "The city is dead!" (5) and "The urban is repelled." (7) In place of the large, impersonal, grey stone blocks typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century German cities like Berlin, that was known as the "Grey City," with their multi-story structures, pollution, noise, and congestion, Taut imagines small-scale single-family houses, surrounded by gardens, farmland, and woods.

#### SLIDE 7

Taut presents three schemes for settlement: The Worker's Cooperative, Agricultural Cooperative, and Necessary Work Centers. The first is a rural factory community, the second an agrarian one, and the third is the center for trade with the outside world. They are designed to be a mutually dependent system similar to the English architect Ebenezer Howard's Three Magnets and Garden City propositions.<sup>4</sup> SLIDE 8 Though he draws on ideas first proposed by Howard for a network of small, agrarian communities, connected by a network of roads and rail, Taut's vision is distinct. SLIDE 9 Like Three Magnets, Taut's model communities are all situated in rural setting but they are far less schematic than Howard's, showing more resolved architecture with differing sized buildings, individual functions, transport systems, and a variegated landscape.

#### SLIDE 10

#### Agrarian Utopia

#### SLIDE 11

Each community is laid out in combination with some form of agrarian settlement in combination with other functions. The Agricultural Worker's Community shows a group of long, rectangular buildings arranged in a three-quarter circle around two concentric rows of small, Heimatstil houses, with the director's building in the center. Gardens lie between the houses. The plan resembles Ledoux's famous layout for the Saltworks in Chaux, France, with workers' housing on the periphery and the Director's House at the center, from which the Director can see all. A second three-quarter circle of service buildings lies below the

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<sup>4</sup> Ebenezer Howard, *Three Magnets and Garden Cities*, which was translated into German in \_\_\_\_\_ and sold widely.

residential quarters. Fields surround the complex on most sides, with woods and allées of trees. The community produces potatoes, honey, wheat for flour, milk and more. "All of the fruits of the world are produced here," Taut asserts. Private gardens occupy the space between the residential buildings while communal fields are located outside, surrounding the settlement. While the overall design scheme provides for agricultural production to meet as many needs as possible, Taut recognizes that no community can grow everything it needs, which is why the plan includes industrial plants and trade with other communities. Still, his negative attitude to industrial and trade necessities is reflected in the name, "Necessary Work Centers."

The text describes a communist, or mutualist, organization in which each community member contributes to the common wellbeing according to his or her abilities. Community is only possible when every individual takes part -- "Einheit als Vielheit." The community can accommodate 600 – 800 people who, according to Taut, work "in the gardens and do handwork." "Through help and exchange, everyone lives from what the group creates together. Bread and any missing necessities, they receive in exchange for what their commercial diligence produces." Amongst the many products it will produce, the "Agricultural Workers Community," will make milk and honey, an old Testament reference to the Promised Land (Exodus 3:8; Numbers 14:8; Deuteronomy 31:20; Ezekiel 20:15). The social organization Taut describes reflects the desire to use architecture and physical design to correct the social divisions common to late 19<sup>th</sup> century cities.

#### SLIDE 12

#### The Anti-Urban Infrastructure and Anarchism and Anti-Materialism

#### SLIDE 13

Beyond the new communities, Taut designs a complex system that reimagines the Earth without large cities. The system he devises will constitute an enormous interconnected network of dispersed communities that covers the Earth, brings man closer to nature, creates a communal form of government, and fosters perfect unity amongst humanity. On page 5 Taut pictures the network he envisions; it is comprised of an oblique grid of paths, roads, canals, and rivers, as well as air routes. The grid is not rectilinear and it is crisscrossed in unusual patterns so that it covers the pictured area effectively but without mathematical precision. Nowhere does Taut use precise rectilinear forms, other than for certain utilitarian building types like industrial installations; otherwise, he works either with crystalline or irregular forms. Like Raymond Unwin and Ebenezer Howard, he is proposing a group of connected rural settlements as replacements for the city and as a curative antidote to the ills of urbanization and industrialization. His scheme differs from those of his English predecessors in its geometry and its vision. This plan has interconnected canals and rivers as transport avenues and roads for most transport. He also includes flight paths for airplanes.

#### SLIDE 14

There is a political dimension to this work that differs from the British visionary communities he studied; Taut is indebted to Peter Kropotkin and Gustav Landauer. From Landauer's notion of "social anarchism" no doubt came the ideas governing the non-hierarchical communities; from Kropotkin came the mutualist ideal in which a society could produce all that it needed.<sup>5</sup> In case the reader does not recognize the anarchist influence,

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the impossible: A History of Anarchism* (PM Press, 2009); Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1899); Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of*

Taut emphatically says, "State and nation do not exist anymore. Neither do war and peace." (12) Taut proclaims, to describe the design and human aims of his designs. (9) And he repeats the fact that in this new society there is no organized government several times throughout the book.

#### SLIDE 15

The anarchist strain in Taut's writing includes an emphatic anti-Materialist thread. Again and again, he stresses that in these new communities, people will share labor equally and share material goods as necessary. There is no hierarchy of scale, no rich or poor, all the houses are exactly the same. "The common interests of the community are the result of natural cohesion in life and work - and they form their own institutions for protection, exchange, education and development." (12)

#### SLIDE 16

##### **Nature Worship**

#### SLIDE 17

Nature worship, coupled with the anti-urban vision, permeates *Dissolution of the Cities*. "Holy Earth! Man at one with the Earth," he writes and "the Earth produces religion and cult..." (7) The Earth and her nature are presented not only as sacred, and therefore worthy of admiration and worship, but as the generators of religion, the practice that codifies human spirituality. Towards the end of the book, Taut writes that the people will bring the fruits of the earth and flowers to the temples and holy buildings as an offering in what reads as a modern version of a pagan ceremony.

#### SLIDE 18

"Everywhere man must have the bit of Earth that he requires from Nature," writes Taut suggesting that the connection to the Earth and Nature is a fundamental human need. (p.4) Again and again, Taut emphasizes the importance of "the most intimate connection with nature." (4) The scheme for a "workers' community" is typical of his design propositions. A small village, the public amenities are arranged in radiating arms around a central crystalline building, presumably the town hall or Volks Haus, while homes are situated like flower petals in an outer ring. Paths connect to the center and also circle the periphery. Buildings are intertwined with the landscape and plants. This is certainly related to English Garden City concepts of good planning but with Taut's unique stamp on the design. Between public and private architecture are a series of small woods and a great deal of open space that is meant to house gardens. "Work is here happiness!"

#### SLIDE 19

Again and again he refers to the natural elements, "water, earth and air" as key to the design of this new community. He even claims that his buildings will use solar power rather than industrially-generated electricity! And enormous flowers populate the landscape; they are symbols of fertility as well as healthy living and the

One of his house designs is directly inspired by flowers and crystals. It has a central space with radiating rooms. These are made with foldable walls that can open and close like a flower responding to the sun but also can be rearranged so that every day the house has a new plan. According to Taut, the house form can change in response to wind, sun, and its

site. (7) The house is only one story, which Taut believes keeps it closer to the land and to nature, in contrast with the multi-story urban edifices.

An important aim of the intellectuals in the community is to research the qualities of nature: its scholars will be engaged with this pursuit. On page 13 Taut draws a "Scholars' Home" located by the sea, it includes an observatory to study astronomy and astrology, combining the scientific with the mystical. This is another example of the unity Taut imagines he can create in his new model for communal living.

#### SLIDE 20

##### **Bodies, Health and Hygiene**

Like many proponents of the *Reformbewegung*, Taut is interested in the healthy body as a necessary part of human wellbeing. His vision is not that of the Wandervogel or nature worshippers, however, but he still sees clean and healthy living as key aspects of the new society. And he believes that it is the new architecture, the new order of society, that demands and helps create new ways of living.

Taut repeatedly speaks of "cleansing" and "rebirth" and "renewal" that will take place in the community. When new members arrive, they must undergo a re-education in order to understand how to live in this place. Taut seems to see the temples and holy buildings as the places for both physical and spiritual cleansing. The red glass Glowing Shrine, page 15, is both "affirming and cleansing." Taut writes that everyone will work in the gardens, to produce for the common good but also because this is a healthy environment and healthy activity. In addition to hiking and exercise, garden work was typically promoted by followers of *Freikorperkultur* in the *Lebensreformbewegung* as healthy for the mind and body.<sup>6</sup>

In another pointed reaction against repressed Wilhelmine-era bourgeois repression and taboos, Taut declares that sex is no longer a forbidden thing in this new society but a natural desire to be encouraged and enjoyed. After all, sex is a fundamental biological human drive and necessary for the propagation of the species. He goes even farther to write that, "The concept of ownership is gone: so is marriage," (14) a radical social idea fashionable among certain leftist thinkers but also a reflection of the natural order – many animals do not commit to a single partner for life.

#### SLIDE 21

##### **Happiness**

One of the driving premises for the book is to design a society that bring happiness to all in contrast to contemporary society, in which only the minority ever achieve real happiness. "Man is so re-educated that he cannot do any work that does not bring him joy. There is simply nothing by force." (14) Happiness is, of course, related not only to doing work that brings joy but to feeling valued,

Like many of Taut's other visionary projects, *Dissolution of the Cities* concludes with mystical and fantastic propositions like structure-less glass architecture and inhabited stars along with a cosmic vision, but this does not diminish the originality or force of his work. Among his prescient insights are solar-generated power, the ascendance of automobile and air over rail travel, and the importance of urban and peri-urban agriculture to successful human

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<sup>6</sup> Kirchgraber, 31.

settlement. Taut was well aware that his propositions were utopian but he believed that imagining utopia was key to creating reality: "Is not the safe reality, floating on the swamp of illusion ...' (p. 30) Visionary propositions are a means with which imagination could transform reality, means of a true *Reform bewegung*.