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Style Debates in 1920s German Architectural Discourse

In spite of the negative connotations “style” has in contemporary architectural discourse, there was no consensus on the meaning or value of the concept amongst architects and critics in 1920s Germany. Although style was a dirty word for some like Hermann Muthesius, it represented the pinnacle of achievement for others like Walter Curt Behrendt. Against the backdrop of Behrendt’s famous *Victory of the New Building Style* of 1928, was a range of very diverse understandings of the term. This plurality was partly due to conceptual confusion between ‘the styles’ and ‘style’ but also was a legacy of Gottfried Semper’s attempt to elevate the discussion of style from historicist debates to consideration of the artistic intent that results in an aesthetic system.¹ Articles in the German journal *Kunst und Künstler* during the 1920s exemplify the issue: in one article from 1920 on Hans Thoma, the writer asserts that “art historical writing is accustomed to understanding the style of a period as a unity,” and contemptuously observes that many believe “style is more essential than quality;”² in another article from 1922, Behrendt praises a Deutsche Werkbund exhibition for showing work that “achieved a new style;”³ while in 1928 Karl Scheffler weighs in with yet another perspective, “style does not give art value,” he asserts, nor is “art in any way identical with style.”⁴ Scheffler warns that style is seductive because it is easy to perceive but what gives art its worth is the unique expression of a master, or a talent, and the underlying aesthetic aims embodied in that work. Writing for *Die Form*, many architecture critics and architects echo these sentiments. For example, in 1922 Richard Riemerschmid affirmed that true style emerged organically as an outward expression of the times. “Only when artists are alienated do they try to *invent* a ‘style’ or to ‘stylize.’”⁵ This paper will briefly explore the multivalent aspects of 1920s German debates on style through the beliefs of a handful of key figures in order to better understand the nuanced meanings of the term in contemporary discourse.

¹ Viollet-le-Duc had already articulated this problem in 1866 in his dictionary entry on “style.” He wrote, “Il y a le style: il y a les styles” to indicate the difference between historicism and the more lofty goal of developing an artistic approach. Harry Mallgrave in his dissertation, 1983, v.

² Curt Glaser, “Zu Thomas Landschaftszeichnungen,” *Kunst und Künstler* Heft 1, 1920, 23.

³ Walter Curt Behrendt, “Deutsche Gewerbeschau Munchen 1922,” *Kunst und Künstler*, Heft 1, 1922, 60.

⁴ Karl Scheffler, “Kunst und Geschichte,” *Kunst und Künstler*, Heft , 1928, 48.

⁵ Richard Riemerschmid, “Zur Frage des Zeitstiles,” *Die Form*, 1922, 8.

Any discussion of style in the 1920s in Germany needs to be partly framed by the expectations that Germans had for the Great War: most artists and leading cultural figures believed that war would act as catharsis to cleanse German art of its stale and bankrupt elements to result in a completely new German art. They felt that the war experience would either render artists more sensitive and therefore more expressive, or would tear them apart so completely that they would be forced to discover new forms, which would ultimately lead to something totally original.⁶

Although by the end of the Great War, he was an elderly man, Muthesius continued to have an influential voice in German architectural circles until his death in 1927. Muthesius' critical contribution to the style debates was his 1902 *Stilarchitektur und der Baukunst*. The title reflects what Muthesius saw as the polar opposition between superficial uses of historic styles in the 19th century and the true building arts of the past, when style was thought to be the outer expression of the essence of the culture. Muthesius' view was certainly influenced by Alois Riegl's famous formulation the *Kunstwollen*, loosely translated as "will to art," that tied artistic style to historic periods and posited art as the representation of an idea, a desire, rather than reality. Muthesius called the 19th century, the "inartistic century" and suggested that architecture had lost its way. In his mind, architecture could no longer claim to sit at the pinnacle of the arts because, unlike in the Gothic era, it did not combine all the arts into one *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Muthesius concurred with Semper's analysis of the origins of style but did not agree with Semper's conclusion that neo-classicism was the appropriate solution for the stylistic crisis in contemporary architecture. In Muthesius' view, neo-classicism could never assume such a role because it was rooted in the historical and social conditions of a bygone era and therefore did not reflect the *Zeitgeist*. According to Muthesius any new architectural form therefore had to respond to the new industrial processes and materials, and the spatial needs of the new building types appearing because of industrialization like train stations, factories,

⁶ Karl Scheffler in *Kunst und Künstler*, "Der Krieg," Heft 36, 1915. ... war is only the means with which to secure the peace and a new spiritual and moral deepening. This deepening power of war...can even be welcomed as a blessing in the name of art and artists, despite worries, hardships, and the material losses that he will have in the aftermath. It is from this that we hope for a powerful regeneration of idealism; yes, this regeneration has already begun in a gorgeous fashion...in this war with all its sorrows and its curative distress brings us the awaited new culture.

and exhibition halls.⁷ He writes, “That the real values in architecture are entirely independent of the stylistic question, indeed that a real way of looking at a work of architecture will not speak of style at all,” but simply embody the lessons found in the new engineering marvels, like train sheds, bridges, and steamships.⁸ That is, Muthesius believed style was no longer relevant to artistic production. But Muthesius’s critique of the idea of style was not universally accepted by German architects in the 1920s, instead, there was a plethora of opinions, often similar but still subtly different, on what constituted style in the new industrial age and whether it was desirable or not.

By the 1920s, many leading thinkers like Hans Poelzig, equated style with fashion, which was seen as fleeting, superficial, and therefore irrelevant (even though being fleeting was also considered a positive attribute of modernism). Poelzig was one of the pioneers responsible for breaking through to a new approach to architecture in exactly the way Muthesius had predicted this would occur: in his designs for new building types like the chemical factory in Luban (1912) and the department store in Breslau (1912) where Poelzig developed an architectural language of simple forms and functional spaces without applied ornament or recourse to historicist motifs. Yet paradoxically Poelzig did not see his work as constituting the beginnings of a style but rather as individual responses to specific design problems. He was deeply suspicious of any stylistic label. In a lecture to the Bund Deutscher Architekten from 1931, he railed against *Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), which he saw as a style, with prescribed aesthetic treatments like white stucco facades, flat roof, large surfaces of glass, not a true response to functional imperatives.⁹ Poelzig believed that style was dangerous no matter how it was manifested. In a letter to Bruno Taut from 1919, he reminded Taut that once Biedermeyer was considered kitsch fashion and Jugendstil was seen as art, by the time of the letter, the reverse was true. In other words, it takes historical distance to be able to differentiate between fashion and style; Poelzig was worried that many works that appeared to be good in 1919 would not stand the test of time while others that were overlooked might be greatly appreciated in the future.

⁷ Hermann Muthesius, *Stilarchitektur und die Baukunst*, reprinted at: tu-cottbus.de; see also John Vincent Maciuicka, *Hermann Muthesius and the Reform of German Architecture, Arts and Crafts, 1890-1914*, dissertation University of California, Berkeley, 1998, 119-120.

⁸ Hermann Muthesius, *Stilarchitektur und die Baukunst*, reprinted at: tu-cottbus.de.

⁹ Hans Poelzig, Lecture to the BDA, June 4, 1931, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Poelzig Archive, I.C.

Poelzig famously took issue with the direction that the Arbeitsrat für Kunst was assuming under Taut's leadership because he felt the group's manifestos over-emphasized the role technology should play in architectural expression. He warned that everything related to the machine should not be holy to contemporary architects lest they fall into the same rut of their 19th century predecessors who worshipped styles.¹⁰ That is, technology-inspired and machine-inspired forms can easily become stylistic elements. "One forgets that all technical forms, in contrast to the absolute meaning of art, only have a relative meaning..."¹¹ Technical form changes over time, so it cannot be the basis for art or style; architecture is about symbolic form and higher meaning. "The logic of art," he wrote to Taut, "is not computable but goes against computation, [it is] mathematical in the higher meaning of the word."¹² Poelzig was not only at odds with Taut but many others including Behrendt.

For Taut the word "style" connoted a historicist approach to design that considers the surface of architecture, and its appearance, instead of the space and its essence. Taut disparaged the notion of style as the measure of architectural surface rather than form, which in German means both the spatial and shape dimensions of architecture. Taut particularly despised Jugendstil, literally the "youthful style," which he derided as "swamp chaos" and part of the dreaded "style brew" because it worked on the surface of buildings often with complicated applied ornament.¹³ In several articles penned between 1904 and 1914, Taut argued that it was in nature and the Gothic that architects had discovered the principles of modern design. In nature existed "the space, that we can never emulate, but which drives us to shape a picture of its glory in our buildings;" in the Gothic, was the mystical space architecture should aspire to, the marriage of all the arts in the service of architecture in a manner reflective of its time, and the perfect integration of ornament and architecture in a seamless construct.¹⁴ Gothic architecture too incorporated the ineffable magic of light and color that, together, created an otherworldly interior experience. It was this quality that Taut sought for in his visionary projects like *Alpine Architektur* and *Auflösung der Städte*, with their unbuildable yet fantastic and enchanting glass structures. Taut loathed style

¹⁰ Hans Poelzig, Second Letter to Taut, dated Jan. 23, 1919, GN/ABK, I.C.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 17.

¹³ Bruno Taut, "Aufruf an die Architekten," (1919) 101.

¹⁴ Bruno Taut, "Natur und Kunst," (1904) reprinted in *Ex Oriente Lux* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2007), 51; and "Natur und die Baukunst" (1904) reprinted in *Ex Oriente Lux* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2007), 53-54.

and function in equal measure seeing both as enemies of good architecture. In “Eine Notwendigkeit,” (A Necessity) he calls for the design of buildings that are beyond function, and, in fact, this was how Taut described the Glass Pavilion of 1914, it “had no other purpose, other than to be beautiful.”¹⁵ He wrote, “Greatest wisdom: Build the space!”¹⁶ In 1920 in “Architektur neuer Gemeinschaft” (Architecture of the new Community) Taut explicitly declared that style was not the goal of architectural design.¹⁷ Taut hoped for a form of expression that was beyond style -- that was both mystical and spiritual.

For Erich Mendelsohn, style itself was a quasi-mystical concept that in its very nature embodies the *Zeitgeist*, “the strong spirit that means style for us,” and therefore exceedingly difficult to achieve but still the ultimate goal for architectural aesthetics.¹⁸ In a letter from 1911 about Hofmannsthal’s *Rosenkavalier* to his future wife, Luise Maas, Mendelsohn praises “The victory of poetic content and wordy delicacy over geometrical style laws and form.”¹⁹ While this was describing an opera, not architecture, the sentiment was one he applied to all the arts. Although he sought for a new means of expression that responded to modern building materials and systems as well as the demands of contemporary life, Mendelsohn believed that architecture had to embody eternal values.²⁰ In this view, he aligns himself with Hans Poelzig but differs from many other members of the avant-garde for whom “eternal and immutable” values belonged to the classical arts, not to the modern ones. New materials like steel and concrete, he was sure, would lead to both “new form” and “new style.” But Mendelsohn never explains precisely how the discovery of these things will occur although he contended that architects must use statics, the logic of form, harmony, balance, and the expression of loads in their composition in order to advance the art. Rather than attempt a clear description of how style emerges, or how it can be recognized, he resorted to asserting, “that everyone must feel, that it is right,

¹⁵ Bruno Taut, “Eine Notwendigkeit,” (1914), reprinted in *Ex Oriente Lux* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2007), 59-61; and Bruno Taut, “Glashaus,” (1914), 65.

¹⁶ Bruno Taut, “Aufruf an die Architekten,” 101.

¹⁷ Bruno Taut, “Architekture neuer Gemeinschaft,” 134.

¹⁸ Erich Mendelsohn to Luise Maas, letter dated 14 March, 1914, , Mendelsohn Archive, Kunstbibliothek Berlin.

¹⁹ Erich Mendelsohn to Luise Maas, letter dated 19 March, 1911, Mendelsohn Archive, Kunstbibliothek Berlin.

²⁰ Erich Mendelsohn to Luise Maas, letter dated 14 March, 1914, , Mendelsohn Archive, Kunstbibliothek Berlin.

as it is;” style is ineffable, tied to the spirit and the times, impossible to define, but recognizable none-the-less.

In contrast to Mendelsohn, Mies van der Rohe found the concept of style problematic because it suggests conformity, rather than originality, and appearance rather than essence. Similar to Taut, he believed that style described the outward and superficial aspects of architecture, but he criticized Taut’s mysticism and romanticism and emphatically pointed to “reason, realism and functionalism” as the driving forces for the new age and its architecture.²¹ Also like Taut, Mies asserted, “Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space.”²² The danger, and the way that style might emerge, Mies believed, lay in “formalism;” it is ironic that he recognized this problem so early on as his mature work was the subject of endless superficial imitation in the 1950s and later.²³ According to Mies, formalism was concerned with outward appearance and surface, with *what* was made rather than *how* or *why* it was made, with the exterior rather than the interior, the space and the concept behind the space. Formalism meant the mindless repetition of design tropes of every kind for façade composition; plan organization; massing; material choice; construction systems; and details – what he decried as the use of “doctrine” rather than a true response to the program at hand. Put in Mies’s words, “We reject all aesthetic speculation, all doctrine, and all formalism...Create form out of the nature of the task with the means of our time.”²⁴ In this critique, Mies is repeating Karl Scheffler’s notion of a dualism between formalists and functionalists in German architecture during the 1920s.²⁵ As Detlef Mertins pointed out, inherent in Mies’ position was antipathy towards predetermined forms and solutions: in Mies’ view, style was just such a thing.²⁶

²¹ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Architecture and the Times,” (1924) reprinted in Philip Johnson, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (NY: MOMA, 1947), 191.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “A letter on form in architecture,” reprinted in Johnson, 192-193.

²⁴ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Working Theses,” reprinted in Ulrich Conrads, *Programmes and manifestoes of 20th century architecture*, 74.

²⁵ Detlef Mertins, Introduction to Walter Curt Behrendt, *The Victory of the New Building Style*, trans. Harry Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty, 2000), 52.

²⁶ Detlef Mertins, “Architecture of Becoming: Mies van der Rohe and the Avant-Garde,” *Mies in Berlin*, ed. Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll (New York: MOMA, 2001), 110.