

The Bauhaus of the Earth: Caputh Declaration

Vast swathes of humanity are on the move (WBGU 2016). For many women and men in the pre-industrial Europe of the 18th century, cradle and deathbed were under the same roof. In the 21st century, most life stories move from house to house, from rural to urban life, from the town to the metropolis, from homeland to neighbouring country, from continent to continent. Sedentarism, which gave rise to our civilisation in the Neolithic Revolution some 10,000 years ago, has given way to a global restlessness that sees billions of people moving past, towards and away from each other. And even those who stay put want to build themselves a new home if at all possible.

And this is before the greatest of all drivers of migration, human-induced climate change, has even begun to unfold its powers in earnest. If global warming isn't curbed, the low-lying coastal regions will go under, the permafrost zones will thaw into mud, landslides will disfigure mountainsides, the deserts will move and the inner tropics will become a humid hell. But even if climate change can be stabilised within the Paris corridor (no more than a 1.5–2°C increase in global mean temperature), we will be faced with a task unprecedented in history: to relocate and rehouse hundreds of millions of people in a peaceful and humane way.

If civilisation is not only to survive but to make progress in a spirit of solidarity and diversity, we must take a *new, holistic look at the built environment*. Although buildings determine the material and cultural reality of every society, discourses about sustainability have so far almost always ignored them – apart from banalities such as facade insulation, rooftop solar panels and the densification of inner cities.

That electricity must become green, that steel production must be climate-neutral, that the internal combustion engine belongs in a museum as quickly as possible, that industrialised agriculture represents a dead end for civilisation, even that the tourism industry should find its way back to nature: all of this is considered almost self-evident in, if not an actual precondition for, the scenarios for the “Great Transformation” towards sustainability. But the notable fact that the structural and engineering projects currently planned worldwide might, on their own, use up most of humanity's remaining carbon budget if they are executed with conventional materials and techniques remains largely unknown to politicians and public alike. While failing completely to recognise the dimensions of the problem, at best we argue about premiums for scrapping oil-fired boilers from the post-war years.

But even if there were no climate crisis, a look at the modern built environment would be sobering: Never before in the history of civilisation has so much ugly dysfunctionality been poured out over the earth with so much expenditure of material and energy. Most elements of this artificial world are already rotting; and yet plastic and plutonium waste will remain with us for millennia.

The resources that fed the rebuilding of the continents after the Second World War – in explosively growing America, in reawakening Asia, in largely destroyed Europe, in emergent Africa – are starting to run dry; even sand of the kind suitable for making concrete is growing scarce. Much of what has gone wrong can be explained by the historical circumstances and geographical contingencies. But it's a tragic joke that the often trivial and soul-crushing architecture of recent times has claimed its

intellectual justification on the basis of the cultural programme of the Bauhaus, founded in Weimar exactly 100 years ago.

A joke because the Bauhaus used experimental methods to promote human creative potential. Its explicitly humanistic ideal demanded “organic design, avoidance of anything rigid, preference for creativity, freedom of individuality” (Gropius) – in other words, the opposite of the brutalist high-rise. The Bauhaus wanted “to learn from nature” (Klee), break through the “equilibrium of mediocrity” (Kandinsky). Walter Gropius himself abhorred the idea that his students would produce “some kind of Gropius architecture”. Rather, each of them was to “bring forth from himself what is in himself.”

The Bauhaus movement, itself a total work of art, was finally destroyed by the Nazis in 1933, but its ideas live on in many places, especially outside Germany. Nonetheless, there is no organising centre, no true intellectual home. Now that a whole century has passed since its birth, it is doubtless high time to venture a restart with the aim of completing its original programme. Or maybe not?

After all, the state of the world today is radically different from in 1919 – not only in terms of the conditions for the long-term survival of a civilisation (see above), but also with regard to our notions of the political and technological development of the humanist project. In any case, with digitisation, which in the medium term may be further accelerated by quantum computers, we are facing, or already in, a cultural revolution with unforeseeable consequences. So anyone today who wants to create designs for the built environment must be thinking in terms that are bigger, broader and deeper than was the case for the Bauhaus in its homes first in Weimar, then Dessau and finally Berlin. The plans now to found a *Bauhaus of the Earth* are aimed at making this happen (see founding concept “Bauhaus of the Earth – workshops for a sustainable 21st century”).

The unifying idea for a sustainable modernism of the future in architecture, art, design, manufacturing, infrastructure, urban development, landscape design, spatial planning, etc., is an orientation towards the *organic* – just as our dying industrial modernism was oriented towards the *mechanical*. The new guiding science must therefore be not physics but biology, or rather the interdisciplinary connection of our best knowledge. The boundaries between analytical, technical and creative intelligence are obsolete.

The Bauhaus of the Earth must also develop in an organic way in its material and virtual dimensions. To this extent it would be counterproductive to present a detailed blueprint for this construct today. However, five keywords can already be identified:

Material, form, function, structure and culture.

To give some examples of the kinds of issues relevant here: By shifting from reinforced concrete to timber as a main construction material, a global carbon sink could be created that would help limit climate change (Churkina et al. 2020). The architecture of termite mounds could serve as a model for creating well-ventilated buildings in a much hotter world. On a planet of migrants, “functional” slums are needed more urgently than palaces. The settlement structures of the 21st century should look more like living tissue than dead chessboards. And it is high time to rediscover the polycentric culture that would be able to overcome the ever-increasing contradiction between the urban and the rural, between the metropolis and the periphery. Not least because all over the world the new nationalist populism is drawing its dark energy from these contradictions.

The Bauhaus of the Earth could structure its workshops for thinking, teaching and creating according to the keywords above. The legal and organisational form chosen must, to quote Albert Einstein, be as simple as possible – but no simpler. During a lively development phase, the ambitions of the new Bauhaus would steer it to form an international, intercultural and innovative *network* bringing together scientists, architects, artists, engineers, investors and politicians. One that includes the *young generation* from the beginning. Momentum can already be seen in current initiatives, as reflected for example in the position paper “Haus der Erde” (“House of the Earth”) published by the Association of German Architects (BDA), and this could be drawn on.

But above all, every creature needs a nucleus or a strong heart. This could be at *Caputh*, near Potsdam, where for many years art, science and nature have found inspiring ways to come together. The plan is to form a central body, a *narrative atelier*, in which diverse stories for a sustainable modernism and its building culture can emerge in friendly competition. There would also be an *encounter site* for passionate discussions on precisely these themes. And ultimately it would be a base from which “*deep demonstration projects*” for the renewal of the built environment could be initiated and coordinated.

The *signatories* hereby declare that they expressly **welcome** the ***founding and development of the “Bauhaus of the Earth”*** with the statement of aims outlined above and intend ***to support it to the best of their abilities and opportunities.***

Caputh, 16 December 2019

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