

# The Modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its Preservation

By Bárbara Coutinho

Interior design had a major relevance for Modern Movement and Modern Living. Actually, for the fully understanding and experiencing of Modern spatiality, interior design is determinant. Furthermore, the study of interiors is now marked by an increasing interest, with recent literature that emphasizes interior spaces globally and summons architecture, design and fine arts in an interdisciplinary approach. Despite all this, interior design is still a subject that requests a more in-depth study and a more extended debate in order to improve appreciation, understanding and preservation. Questions like modernity, privacy, efficiency, economy, comfort, utility, beauty in daily life or consumption need to be discussed when talking about interior space design. Product design, new materials and techniques, equipments and devices also have to be considered. In fact, Modern interior design engages these and many other issues, demanding a multidisciplinary study that stresses Modernity's encounter with interiority and acknowledging the importance of its conservation. It is fundamental to expand the discourse on interiors beyond traditional boundaries with a plural perspective, either thematical or geographical.

Moreover, interior design has to be, by nature, a synthesis of all the arts, particularly in the Modern Movement, where it also meant the demand of new aesthetics in response to new technology and *gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork that embraces all the expressions into a Unitarian (and also utopian) environment for Humanity. Therefore, interior design can give us a complete expression of Modernity itself. The ideal of a *gesamtkunstwerk* as a perfect unity between all types of art, including painting, music, architecture, literature and so on, into a work where the whole is larger than the sum of its individual parts is not new. We recognized this ideal of the interior as an integral feature, for instance, in Baroque churches where architecture, visual arts and music created a dramatic and theatrical scenario for the triumph of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Some kind of unity between buildings and their inner spaces is also visible in *Art Nouveau*. In

Victor Horta's interiors we recognize a strong and coherent style, resulting from a unity between architecture, interior design, decorative arts, furniture, utilitarian objects, cutlery, textiles and light. The same spirit is present in many of Antoni Gaudí's interiors, Adolf Loos' houses or Fischer von Erlach's spaces. Special reference must also be made to Henry van de Velde and his *Havana Cigar Store* (Berlin, 1899) or the *Family House* (Uccle, 1895) where he achieved a complete synthesis of all the arts, including costumes for his wife, with the same decorative motifs and sinuous lines of the interior space<sup>1</sup> creating an absolute unity. This higher unity is also demanded by Peter Behrens, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Gerrit Rietveld, among many others. Russian Constructivism also helped the new society and men to propose a new and coherent aesthetic, recognized from the smaller utensil to the urban plan. Even Albert Einstein held the belief that "all the individual arts were supposed to give up something of their own nature in order to create a higher unity".<sup>2</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright deserves a prominent place: *Fallingwater House*, *Robbie House*, *Larkin Building* or the *Unity Temple* as perfect paradigms of the way Wright conceived each place as a total *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

A distinctly approach to the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* emerged in the Bauhaus. The vision of a union between art and design is visible in Gropius' *Proclamation of the Bauhaus* (1919), where he described a utopian craft guild combining architecture, sculpture and painting into a single creative expression, in each object designed, but also in the craft-based curriculum that would spin around workshops of artisans and designers capable of creating useful and beautiful objects for a new world.<sup>3</sup>

**docomomo's** Conference, which took place simultaneously with Helsinki as the World Design Capital 2012, focused on what Walter Gropius conveyed "design from the coffee cup to the urban plan". In **docomomo** Journal 46, published during the conference which took place last August, the articles aimed to address the multiple ways in which Modern heritage has been claimed, presenting dif-

ferent and complementary perspectives of preservation, highlighting recent examples and successful case studies. It was important to discuss the method and extension of each intervention, the material, formal or ideological authenticity regarding the original program, durability, and anticipate future needs. Emphasizing housing as the central theme of study and innovation, two essays explored the recently restored *Tugendhat House* by Mies van der Rohe and the coherence and unity of Charles and Ray Eames' work and thought was also analyzed. Two other articles focused more directly on Modern furniture and its relation with Modern architecture, concentrating on the complementarity between design and architecture. Focusing on Finnish Modern design, Journal 46 emphasized the role of Alvar Aalto, stressing the way he represents a different path in Modern Movement, one which is more organic, prefers bending wood and seeking cosy and comfortable environments with as much natural light as possible. Two other articles stressed a more global perspective between furniture and interior designer: Clara Porset—stressing the way she linked Modernity with local Mexican tradition and crafts in her interior designs—and Belgian architect Gaston Eysselinck. The Journal also intended to look at the legacy of ethics and Modern philosophy, namely Dieter Rams' importance for the praxis and ethics of nowadays design.

The diversity and importance of this theme justified a second Journal. In this issue, the common denominator is the *Gesamtkunstwerk* philosophy and its different embodiments. Consequently, we invited **Monika Markgraf** to write a paper about the Bauhaus and Ulm Schools, exploring the pedagogical strategies towards the creation of a global design, emphasizing the practice-based training and the interdisciplinary work in order to develop a synthesis of all forms of artistic activity. **Thomas Danzl** focuses on Bauhaus Master Houses' painting scheme, stressing the guidelines, methods and strategies developed in their restoration. Moreover, he questions the authenticity and theoretical principles that are behind the different options of recovery, restoration or conservation. Three examples demonstrate how this idea of a total work of art can be expressed in different fields and typologies. **João Paulo Martins** signs a paper about Portuguese schools, putting the emphasis on the way they materialize the concept of global design, seeking formal coherence and a close functional and ideological articulation between all components. **Susana Constantino's** essay on Alberto Pessoa's furniture design, focuses on the Central Library and the building for the Student's Facilities of the University of Coimbra, proving how Pessoa used construction details and furniture design to bridge the gap between the different scales of the project, thus becoming a funda-

mental element in the building's formal and plastic characterization, in the pursuit to deliver a *gesamtkunstwerk*. The third example comes from Werner Max Moser and the New Alstetten Church. **Arthur Rüegg** and **Silvio Schmed** show how Moser achieved a total work in the church interior where everything is designed down to the wide-span benches, the lighting fixtures and the bronze door handles, linking this goal with the subsequent space restoration. **Sander Nelissen** and **Mariël Polman** write about Duiker's Open Air School and the questions that informed its restoration and rehabilitation, seeking to ensure the color scheme and the interior-exterior space relationship. Underlining also the need of an interdisciplinary approach to develop a sustainable action of restoration, **Rosend Casanova** writes about *Casa Bloc*, an important residential building built between 1932 and 1936 in Barcelona, focusing on its recent musealization as a strategy to increase our knowledge and appreciation of the design of objects and spaces as a total work. Also related with *Casa Bloc*, **Antonio Pizza** stresses the importance of GATEPAC's AC magazine in Modern edition and as the affirmation of the Modern Movement. Still reinforcing the role of GATEPAC, the Catalan section of GATEPAC, **Mercè Vidal** writes a paper about the perspective of Le Corbusier, focusing the question in furniture design and its contribution to the integral harmony of each space. **Ariadna Alvarez** explores the work of Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and their disciples in Chandigarh, one of the most important examples of global design. Finally, in order to evaluate the significance of *collect, curate and exhibit* for the preservation and communication of Modern architecture/design we interviewed **Alexander von Vegesack**, founding Director of Vitra Design Museum, freelance curator and collector of industrial furniture. The aim was to be aware of the most suitable strategies to communicate and present Modern Movement in all its diversity and global approach.

#### Notes

1. Frampton, Kenneth (1st edition 1980; 1994), *Historia crítica de la arquitectura moderna*, Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili, 98-99.
2. "Gesamtkunstwerk", *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press Ed. 1972.
3. Frampton, Kenneth, *Ibidem*, 125-132; Wilk, Christopher, *Modernism. Designing a new world (1914-1939)*, London, Victoria & Albert Museum Publications, 2006, 59-62.

#### Bárbara Coutinho

Director of MUDE-Design and Fashion Museum, Francisco Capelo's Collection—since 2006 and member of Francisco Capelo's Collection Management Board. Invited Assistant Professor at the *Instituto Superior Técnico* and collaborator in the Curatorial Studies Master in Lisbon University. Master in Contemporary Art History, at present she is developing a PhD on the phenomenology of the contemporary exhibition space. She has signed essays and articles on contemporary creation, design, architecture and museology and has participated in conferences, juries and seminars. Curator of *Centro Cultural Belém*, 1998-2006.