



Walter Gropius, Bauhaus building, Dessau, Germany, 1925–1926. © Aufbacksalami, 2018.

Walter Gropius and Operative History: An Architectural Palimpsest¹

BY JASMINE BENYAMIN

This essay evaluates the legacy of the pedagogical model set by Walter Gropius and other founders of the Bauhaus on subsequent curricula for schools of architecture. More specifically, it uses Walter Gropius' views on history as a backdrop for a closer reading of operative history. While at the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius did not initially mandate the teaching of history. Later, as Dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Design, he re-structured the history sequence as electives, thereby undermining its hitherto central role in what he viewed as a traditional approach to pedagogy that was overly analytical and intellectual. Rather, he encouraged his students to "make history" for themselves.

What are the manifestations of operative history in architecture schools today, and how have they gone beyond references to 20th century Modernism? It is undeniable that there is a concerted effort among contemporary historians to complicate the history of the movement. Nonetheless, the impulse to self edit persists, such that imagery of like minded practitioners converge and sometime eclipse other architectural production.

From here onwards, a critical re-assessment will be offered of the central role the founding members of the Bauhaus played in shaping the discourse and subsequent historicization of architectural modernism. More specifically, proposing the use of Walter Gropius' views on history as a snapshot of operativity in historical accounts and their resultant teleological narratives. In *Theories and History of Architecture*, Italian historian Manfredo Tafuri (1935–1994) defined operative criticism as a mode of writing that self-reflexively consolidates the history leading up to the Modern Movement in order to present the latter as a definitive "break" from the past.² Such a short-circuiting required an unbroken linear genealogy for the movement, in part by simplifying the historical tendencies in opposition to it. This criticism was in turn tied to the so-called "pioneers" of modern architecture, among whom Walter Gropius (1883–1969) assumed a central position.³ Manfredo Tafuri identified these figures not only with their practices, but also in the way they crafted their stories alongside and often in concert with, the discipline of architectural history.

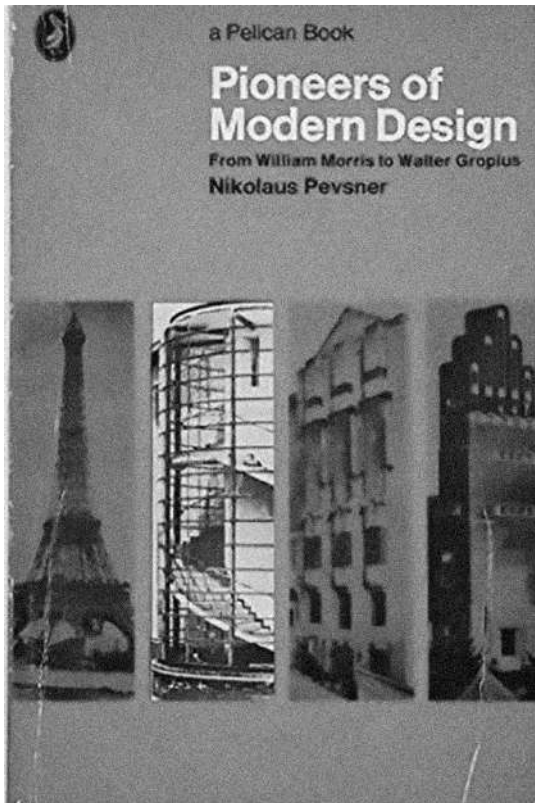
Post-war historians such as Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–1983) and Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968) self reflexively consolidated the history leading up to the Modern Movement in order to present the latter as a unified amalgam of practices and outcomes.⁴ Such a consolidation required a selective historical reading that delineated a clear genealogy for the movement, in part by simplifying the historical tendencies in opposition to it: the battle of styles in the 19th century and its resultant era of eclecticism. Historians in this category believed it a mandate of their discipline to re-read the past

through the lens of the present and retained only those aspects of the former they deemed "still vital".⁵

Walter Gropius and History

In his pre-Bauhaus years and as a young member of the Werkbund, Walter Gropius understood the power of media manipulation to exert control over the narrative of architecture within a larger arc of history. His early interactions with Karl Ernst Osthaus (1874–1921) and the Deutsches Museum — in particular his role in coordinating and curating that institution's substantial photography collection — helped shape his later activist attitudes. Through the vehicle of the museum's traveling exhibitions, and his own burgeoning collection of photographs, Walter Gropius exploited the value of architectural images to polemically craft readings of the built environment. In fact, by the time of the relocation of the Bauhaus to Dessau, he had already begun curating the visual output and dissemination of his own projects. As the historian Winfried Nerdinger (1944–) has noted, Bruno Zevi (1918–2000), a former student of Walter Gropius at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, indicted the elder for his "reactionary and biased concept of history".⁶ This statement was based on the fact that art and architectural history at the Bauhaus was never taught regularly as required courses. In fact, even as Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) formally initiated an architectural curriculum in 1927, history was left out.⁷

In an essay entitled "My Conception of the Bauhaus Idea" (1937), Walter Gropius elucidated the core principles of his pedagogical approach. Central to this was his



01 Nikolaus Pevsner, cover of *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London, Penguin, 1936.



02 Walter Gropius, *Internationale Architektur*, Munich, Albert Langen Verlag, 1925.

notion of so-called “training” through the development of a language that prioritized visual over technical skills. The architect equated this formal thinking with “a special language of shape,” which manifested in the “visible expression” of ideas.⁸ He went even further to define the evolution of visual literacy as constitutive of a “scientific knowledge of objectively valid optical facts”, of which examples included “optical illusions”.⁹ As in his lectures dating from his earlier *Werkbund* career, Walter Gropius repeatedly incorporated images of industrial architecture in presentations from the 1920s, as well as his own Fagus project. Rather than framing modern architecture within a broader engagement with precedents, he used history selectively to favor his own intentions and agenda, both before and after the formation of the Bauhaus. His interest in history was targeted; he viewed it as a vehicle to understand the use of materials and the deployment of techniques, and not in their wholesale adoption in form making. His anti-imitative stance could be summed thus: “clear cognition of what lies behind the forms... should be the only topic of these studies”.¹⁰ Furthermore, studies in architectural history provided the basis for what Walter Gropius in “Blueprint of an Architect’s Education”, referred to as “fact-knowledge”, an element of architectural pedagogy that, in his view, had been overemphasized to the detriment of design intuition. It was after all the latter that provided the “eternal source of all creative action”.¹¹

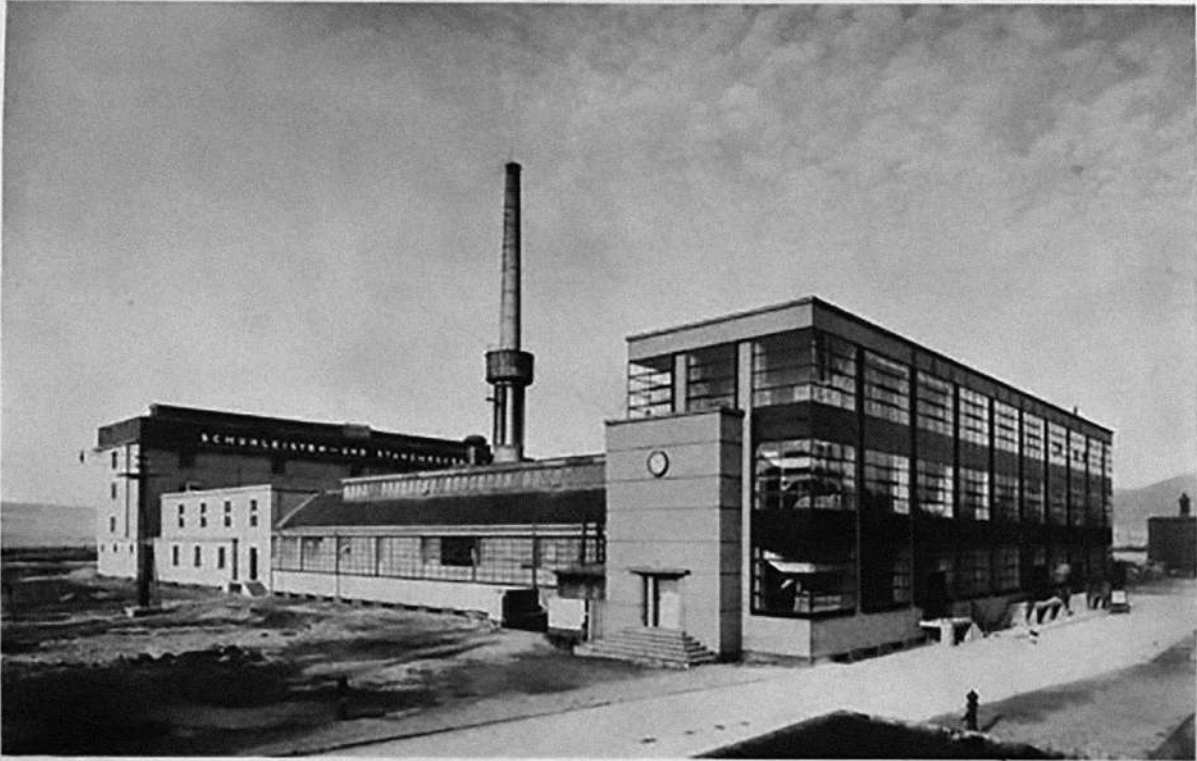
Walter Gropius’ stance *vis-a-vis* history was further codified at Harvard, where he was chair of the architecture department between 1937–1952, and where under his

leadership, the architectural history curriculum radically altered. In yet another essay from 1949 entitled “Not Gothic but Modern for our Colleges”, the architect decried the “purely analytical and intellectual approach” to pedagogy, in which history courses played a central role. The consequence of this system, Walter Gropius explained, was that visual apprehension was developed in light of historical and critical methods of appreciation.¹² He continued: “we seem to have forgotten that there is an opportunity to make architectural history for ourselves, and to have buildings designed in unmistakable terms for our period”.¹³ As a result of these prevailing views, he re-designated previously required survey courses as electives.¹⁴ In short, history for Walter Gropius was useful insofar as it validated his conception of modern architecture.

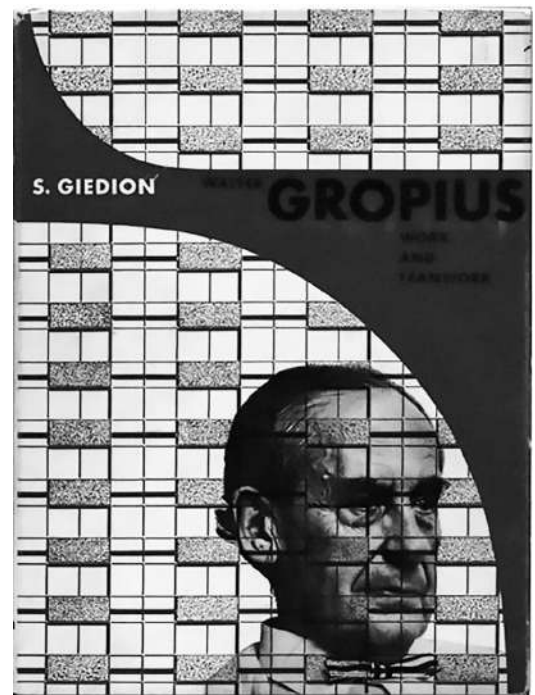
Operative History in Action

One can also look at Walter Gropius’s own narratives of Modernism (and his place in it) to find examples of curated self-historization. In a publication from 1925 entitled *Internationale Architektur*, Walter Gropius’ “Picture Book” (*Bilderbuch*)¹⁵ “wrote” a new history of modernism almost entirely in images. The polemical introduction made his intents even clearer: the purpose of the images was central and accounted for their graphic dominance on the page. As he pronounced, the images succinctly defined the “common features” that bound the examples and further, manifested “the will to develop a unified world picture, the will which characterizes our age”.¹⁶ The particular formal features of

WALTER GROPIUS, Dessau, Anhalt, – Schuhleisten- und Stanzmesserfabrik C. Benscheidt „Fagus“, Alfeld a. L. Backstein, Glas, Eisen. 1911



03 Walter Gropius, Fagus Factory as photographed by Edmund Lill, in *Internationale Architektur*, Munich, Albert Langen Verlag, 1925, 15.



04 Sigfried Giedion, cover of *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork*, New York, Reinhold, 1954.

the buildings were neutralized by the common treatment of the images, thus enabling the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Modern Movement to manifest “a uniformity of character”.¹⁷ By extension, the architectural examples — though disparate in their provenances — were united in their “strict utilization of time, space, material and money”.¹⁸

Published the same year as the opening of the Bauhaus campus in Dessau and designed by his colleague Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), the book positioned Walter Gropius’ own recently completed Fagus project in the lineage of Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud (1890–1963), Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), Le Corbusier (1887–1965), who similarly embraced new tectonic conceptions. Walter Gropius’ efforts to parse his conception of tectonics were also evidence of his deployment of the photograph as an editorial tool; the Fagus was part of a select group of pre-war projects that in his view ushered a new language. Walter Gropius’ choice of only one photograph — an exterior view highlighting the glass and metal curtain wall of the administrative building — is logical, since it was only through this angle that the building could be neatly positioned as a direct precursor to his Dessau campus design. This image and others were selected to highlight shared formal traits that referred not to a bygone style but emanated from their technological “will to form” (*Gestaltungswille*),¹⁹ and thus represented work of national and international significance.

In another book written in the same year (but only published in English in 1935) entitled *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*.²⁰ Walter Gropius again reduced his own architectural history pre-Bauhaus to the Fagus. In this instance, he referenced the primacy of the building’s “outward” formal appearance, which he viewed as an “inevitable logical product” of the building’s material and spatial development.²¹ Through the fundamental transformation of the wall to “mere screen”, the term window underwent a similar transformation, such that the ratio of (solid) wall and (void) window — as “sparkling insubstantiality” — exemplified a substantial reversal in ratio.²²

This paradigmatic semantic shift from “wall” to “screen” was cited by Walter Gropius’ friend and collaborator Sigfried Giedion in *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork* (published simultaneously in English and German in 1954), in which he referred to the Fagus project as evidence of a “trend towards transparency and absence of weight”.²³ Walls were no longer load bearing, but rather had receded to “mere screens”. Again, photographs were deployed to further their larger operative agenda, and to draw a clear and inevitable direction for modern architecture.²⁴

This editorial logic is consistent with Siegfried Giedion’s earlier remarks on history in *Space Time and Architecture* from 1941. In his forward to the first edition, Siegfried Giedion stated that his study cast a wider net by asserting the role of history to uncover an otherwise “secret synthesis” in order to help society navigate its way through the chaos of unfolding events. Continuing in literally photographic language, Siegfried Giedion argued for a history defined not as a “compilation of facts” nor “obtained by

the exclusive use of the panoramic or bird’s eye view”.²⁵ Rather, he asserted that the historian’s responsibility was to offer “insight into a moving process of life”, by “isolating and examining certain specific events intensively, penetrating and exploring them in the manner of the close-up”.²⁶ I would argue that this interpretive model superimposed both men’s attitude towards images. The Fagus project and many other proto-modern buildings like it had undergone a similar telescoping, which enabled ex post facto a visually uninterrupted line of vision from 1911 to 1954.

Today, with several decades of hindsight and subsequent operative historicizing, it is clear that both Walter Gropius and Sigfried Giedion retroactively crafted — indeed cropped, re-framed, and in some cases eliminated — examples from the former’s pre-war career in order to serve as a more fitting precursor to the architect’s Weimar era production at the Bauhaus and at Harvard. Towards the end of his career, one could argue that Gropius’ view had in some ways come full circle. In his introduction to *Scope of Total Architecture*, a collection of essays predominantly written during tenure at the Graduate School Of Design, Walter Gropius proclaimed that the discipline in its most complete or “total” sense mirrored the constituent feature of democracies since both had to engage in an effective “interplay” of seemingly contradictory aims: maintaining a diversity of ideas in the discourse, while also holding fast to the “essential” and “typical” features of regional expression.²⁷ In so doing, Walter Gropius reinforced the modernist trope of a movement without precedent, as a “decisive break from an eclectic period of architecture to an entirely new material language”.²⁸ Sigfried Giedion’s remarks on the Fagus (and their appropriation via highly curated images) constituted part of a larger normative trend *vis-à-vis* the Fagus and its role as a significant benchmark for the Modern Movement. In fact, his particular historiography of the project must be read in the context of Nikolaus Pevsner’s teleological account: if one were to follow Nikolaus Pevsner’s lead, one could only encourage and hasten the arrival of the “new” architecture, or one could be irrelevant. Therefore architects only needed to pay attention to those figures and works that complemented the message of the inevitable new world order.

Seeking to remedy Walter Gropius and Sigfried Giedion’s historical cropping, the English historian Reyner Banham (1922–1988) rightly noted that the degree to which Walter Gropius’ pre-war buildings could be considered as the “first” of the Modern Movement owed their “high esteem in part to (his) personal relationship to (their)... historians and also, in part, to the accidents of photography”.²⁹ The truth of course was that the purported functionalist “modernity” of the factory complex was “visible, indeed, only on parts of two sides...” and “...(in) strong contrast to the unadventurous neo-Classical regularity of the rest...”³⁰

As with many other examples from the pre-Bauhaus period, the Fagus can be thought of as a kind of architectural palimpsest: its material reality was effaced and eclipsed by its photographic re-framing; its particular story was written and re-written through images. Along the way,

the ideological forces driving the *Werkbund* were replaced by the self-fulfilling rhetoric of the so-called “new” Bauhaus, which favored a hegemonic message in words and images. In doing so, its singular rendering in operative discourse effectively suppressed all previous anxieties of the turn of the century — captured then erased.

Conclusion

The example of the Fagus’ operative instrumentalization is by no means unique in the discourse of architecture. What is the role of operative history in architecture pedagogy today? Certainly with regard to educating students on the Modern Movement, there has been a concerted effort to “muddy the waters” so to speak, by re-inserting hitherto erased examples from that period that did not neatly fit into the narrative the movement’s founders wanted to craft. Today, our histories are more accommodating of cultural, social, and political heterogeneity. Furthermore, the proliferation of blogs, websites, and online journals devoted to the built environment consistently challenges the impulse to design in a historical vacuum. Nonetheless, and as was the case 100 years ago, current histories in the making tend to converge around clusters of like-minded architectural impulses.

One such group currently in favor is that which revolves around the topic of the “postdigital” — a conception of material thinking that literally and figuratively flattens distinctions between the domains of physical and virtual. What results is work that similarly flattens history: The reliance on precedents is unapologetic, but notably limited to the recent past. History is treated in much the same way as its formal language, namely as collage and montage. It requires an activist editorial process of cutting and pasting distinct moments in an apparently seamless space-time continuum.

Notes

- 1 This essay was presented at the 16th *docomomo* Germany/3rd RMB Conference, which took place on the 1st of March 2019, in Berlin, Germany. Its presentation was included in the parallel session dedicated to education, moderated by Aslihan Tavil. More information available at: <http://www.rmb-eu.com/conferences-2/3rd-conference/>
- 2 Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, New York, Harper and Rowe, 1980, 141-169.
- 3 Indeed, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock announced in 1929, Walter Gropius “was the first architect in Germany to build in a fully developed post-eclectic style”. Author’s italics. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture – Romanticism and Myth* (1929-reprinted in 1993), New York, De Capo Press, 1993, 187.
- 4 Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999, 39.
- 5 Sigfried Giedion, *Space Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, 6. Also cited in Panayotis Tournikiotis, op.cit., 45.
- 6 As cited in Winfried Nerdinger, “From Bauhaus to Harvard: Walter Gropius and the Use of History”, in Gwendolyn Wright and Janet Parks (Eds.), *The History of History in American Schools of Architecture, 1865-1975*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press and Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, 1990, 89-98.
- 7 Ibid., 90.
- 8 Walter Gropius, “My Conception of the Bauhaus Idea”, (1937), reprinted in Walter Gropius, *The Scope of Total Architecture*, New York,

- Harper Collins, 1943. This citation is taken from a 1974 reprint by Collier, 25.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Cited in Nerdinger, 91, 94–95.
- 11 Walter Gropius, “Blueprint of an Architect’s Education”, in *Scope of Total Architecture*, 45.
- 12 Ibid., 66.
- 13 Ibid., 67.
- 14 Nerdinger, 94.
- 15 “Die ‘Internationale Architektur’ ist ein Bilderbuch moderner Baukunst”. In Walter Gropius, *Internationale Architektur*, Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925, 5. Author’s free translation.
- 16 “der Wille zur Entwicklung eines einheitlichen Weltbildes der unter Zeit kennzeichnet”. In *Internationale Architektur*, 7. Author’s free translation.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 *Internationale Architektur*, 6. Author’s free translation.
- 20 Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1965, 26.
- 21 Ibid., 20.
- 22 Ibid., 26-29.
- 23 Sigfried Giedion, *Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork*, New York, Reinhold, 1954, 23-24.
- 24 It is worthwhile (and perhaps not accidental) to note that this manifesto for globalizing Modernism pre-dated the so-called “International Style” codified by Hitchcock and Johnson in 1932.
- 25 *Space Time and Architecture*, vi.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 *The Scope Of Total Architecture*, 13.
- 28 Helmut Weber, *Walter Gropius und das Faguswerk*, Munich, Callwey, 1961, 7-8.
- 29 Rayner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992, 79.
- 30 Ibid.

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