

## How did the Bauhaus get its name?

BY DIETRICH NEUMANN

Historians have always assumed that Walter Gropius (1883-1969) invented the name *Das Bauhaus* (somewhat inadequately translated as 'house for building') for the school he founded in Weimar in 1919.<sup>1</sup> Often, critics have noted the brilliance of this "unique creation",<sup>2</sup> as it announced the radical change from the "Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts" to a new institution that was going to be more accessible, grounded and humble. It promised both a new beginning and a connection to builders' guilds of the medieval past.

However, when Walter Gropius founded his school in April 1919, a *Das Bauhaus G.m.b.H.* had already existed in Berlin for four years (G.m.b.H. is the German acronym for a company with limited liability). Founder and owner was the prominent architect and developer Albert Gessner (1868 – 1953). In 1909, he had published a substantial volume on apartment houses<sup>3</sup> and had built several large, middle-class apartment blocks himself. His buildings found a very positive reception, in particular due to their sophisticated arrangement, their colorful façades and the spatial sequences inside. Historian and critic Julius Posener (1904-1996) considered Albert Gessner "the most important reformer of the apartment building".<sup>4</sup> His best known housing estate was the "Sophie – Charlottenpark" at the corner of Bismarck- and Grolmanstrasse in Berlin's Charlottenburg section, built 1905-1907 and destroyed in WWII. Julius Gessner himself lived there with his family and his office was located there as well. The unusual corner arrangement at this housing estate was often noted with great admiration – instead of the usual solution with badly lit rooms at the interior angles, Julius Gessner opened the corner up and created a communal garden, shielded from the street on the first floor by a low structure for a cafe. The resulting clash of gables above provides a dramatic, provocative outline. The resulting loss of rentable space was partially remedied by better lit interiors.

Julius Gessner and Walter Gropius knew each other from the *German Werkbund*, that

important organization of artists, architects and industrialists, which had been founded in 1907. Julius Gessner had been one of the first members and instrumental in formulating its concept. Five years earlier, he had founded an artist society called *Werkring*, which had the architects Alfred Grenander (1863-1931), August Endell (1871-1925) and Bruno Möhring (1863-1929) among its members, as well as several sculptors and painters. The group participated in numerous exhibitions and countered the predominant *Art Nouveau* style of the time with a simpler and more functional approach to spatial and structural design. This *Werkring* was one of the inspirations for the *German Werkbund* and was absorbed into it at its founding. Both terms *Werkbund* and *Werkring* mean essentially the same thing – an association for the creation of works – implicitly assuming works of craft or design.

Two years after the *Werkbunds* founding, Gessner himself created a new company, called "*Das Werkhaus G.m.b.H.*" – an "institution for the creation of furniture, furnishing and works of applied arts."<sup>5</sup> It was quite successful for a number of years, and by 1914 operated four stores in Berlin, which sold furniture, tableware, lamps, metal fittings etc. that Gessner had designed.<sup>6</sup> "The *Werkhaus* sees its task in lending all furnishings of a building that are commercially available a unified artistic character..." Gessner wrote in one of his sales brochures.<sup>7</sup> Albert Gessner's undertaking was not unique. Since 1879, there had been Hermann Hirschwald's store for applied arts in Berlin - renamed "Hohenzollern Kunstgewerbehaus" in 1892, to acknowledge the crown prince's (of the Hohenzollern dynasty) interest in good design.<sup>8</sup>

At the start of WWI, Albert Gessner (1868-1953) faced economic difficulties and decided to restructure his businesses. He sold his *Werkhaus* to the architects Otto Dochow, Friedrich Greve (1907-1994) and Arthur Hamburger, who ran it for another two years, and then closed it due to the economic hardships of the war. Albert Gessner, meanwhile, tried to attract new customers for large architectural projects. Since architects were

not allowed to advertise in Germany,<sup>9</sup> he founded a separate company in 1915, through which he could promote his work. It was clearly meant as a counterpart to his former *Werkhaus* and called *Das Bauhaus G. m. b. H.* Instead of furniture and furnishings, one now could commission or acquire entire buildings. In Berlin's address book of 1915 advertised: "Execution of houses of all kinds, from the smallest vacation home to the richest residential palace, as well as entire housing estates, designed by Albert Gessner and other artists. Managing Director: architect Richard Friebe!"<sup>10</sup> This *Bauhaus* was located at the above mentioned "Sophie – Charlottenpark", housing estate at Grolmannstrasse 1/2, in close vicinity to Albert Gessner's apartment. It is mentioned in all Berlin address books from 1915 to 1920.<sup>11</sup> Albert Gessner closed his *Bauhaus G.m.b.H.* in 1920 – there was little building activity, due to a major economic crisis after the war and the Versailles Treaty. Albert Gessner himself noted that his architectural career lost its dynamic in the following years. He became engaged in local politics, accepted a professorship at the Charlottenburg University and was elected into the Academy of Arts. Albert Gessner feared that German architecture was losing its local relevance under the onslaught of internationalism. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn (1887-1953) and other modernists had, in 1926, founded an association called *Der Ring*. In opposition, Albert Gessner formed a group called *Der Block* (the meaning of ring and block is very similar in English) in 1928, together with conservative architects Paul Schultze-Naumburg (1869-1949), Paul Bonatz (1877-1951), Paul Schmitthenner (1884-1972) and others, who were vehemently opposed to the ideas of the Dessau Bauhaus and argued for a conservative regional architecture. Paul Schultze-Naumburg was a key figure in the expulsion of the Bauhaus from Dessau. Albert Gessner enthusiastically joined the NSDAP in 1932, and the Nazis closed the Berlin Bauhaus in 1933.

It is certainly possible that Walter Gropius found the name *Bauhaus* independently and did not know about Albert Gessner's enterprise. After all, during the war Walter Gropius was rarely in Berlin, as he used his occasional furloughs from the front to visit his wife Alma and their daughter Manon in Vienna. New compound words employing the word *Bau-* were not uncommon at the time: In 1910 the weekly architecture magazine *Bauwelt* (building world) began to appear, in 1918 the magazine *Baugilde* (building guild) followed, and in 1919 Martin Wagner (1885-1957) founded, simultaneously with the *Bauhaus*, a socialist building society, called *Baubütte* (literally: building hut – the

**Das Bauhaus G. m. b. H.,**  
 Charlottenburg, Grolmanstr. 1. 2  
 Tel. Steinplatz 9220.  
 Ausführung von Häusern aller Art, vom  
 kleinsten Ferienhaus bis zur reichsten  
 Schlossanlage, Miethäuser u. Industrie-  
 bauten, auch ganze Siedlungen nach  
 Entwürfen von **Albert Gessner**  
 und anderen Künstlern.

01 Berlin address book, 1915.



02 The location of the first *Bauhaus*: Albert Gessner's housing estate at the corner of Bismarck and Grolman streets in Berlin Charlottenburg.

term that had long been used for medieval church building guilds).

On the other hand, Albert Gessner was prominent and frequented the same circles as Walter Gropius. His *Werkhaus* had been well known in Berlin, and his economic troubles and the founding of his *Bauhaus* were probably subject of architects' gossip at the time. Walter Gropius might have simply seen Albert Gessner's advertising in the Berlin phone book, or walked by Albert Gessner's housing estate, where the *Bauhaus* was located, in an area which was familiar to him since childhood.<sup>12</sup>

And, of course, adopting an existing name would have fit into Walter Gropius *modus operandi*, as he would, "throughout his life, adopt - rather nonchalantly - the ideas of others."<sup>13</sup> Magdalena Droste (1948-) has convincingly demonstrated that his Bauhaus Manifesto owes much to the ideas of Otto Bartning (1883-1959) and Bruno Taut (1880-1938),<sup>14</sup> and his buildings in Alfeld, Cologne and Dessau profited greatly from congenial collaborators such as Adolf Meyer (1881-1929), Carl Fieger (1893-1960), Ernst Neufert (1900-1986) and others. Without a doubt, it was one of Walter Gropius' strengths to recognize good ideas and outstanding talents and to employ them for his purposes. Thus, in the end, the origin of the word *Bauhaus* might be less crucial than Walter Gropius' brilliant understanding of its enormous potential as a name for his new institution. At first sight, the name was a better fit for Albert Gessner's enterprise than for a school that lacked an architecture department for eight years of its existence, while it employed painters, weavers, potters and furniture makers as teachers. Ultimately, however, the name signaled the school's ambition, purposeful direction and continuity over its 13-year existence. It provided easy,

unmistakable name recognition and helped conceal the fact that behind the scenes there was much turbulence and many contradictory trends under its three very different directors.

Neither Albert Gessner nor Walter Gropius ever trademarked the name, and thus it has been used in many different ways over time, be it as the name for a British Gothic Rock Band, a Vancouver restaurant, or, most visibly, for an international chain of building supply stores – a faint reminder of its original intended purpose.

#### Notes

- 1 A shorter version of this essay was published by the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on October 8 2019 – unnecessarily sensationalized with the title: "Wie Gropius seinen Namen stahl" (How Gropius Stole a Name).
- 2 Annemarie Jaeggi, "Ein geheimnisvolles Mysterium: Bauhütten Romantik und Freimaurerei am frühen Bauhaus" in: Christoph Wagner (Hrsg.) *Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik* (Bielefeld, Kerber Verlag: 2005), 37-45, quote 38.
- 3 Albert Gessner, *Das Deutsche Miethaus. Ein Beitrag zur Städtekultur der Gegenwart*. (München, Bruckmann Verlag, 1909).
- 4 Julius Posener, *Berlin auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Architektur* (München: Prestel Verlag, 1979), 323.
- 5 Claudia Kromrei, *Albert Gessner, Das Städtische Miethaus* (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 2012), 157. Gessner's new term replaced the notion of an association with that of a location.
- 6 The Berlin address books are available online at: <https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/cms/141/> and show the addresses of Gessner's *Werkhaus* branches between 1912 and 1914, as well as his advertisements of the *Bauhaus* from 1915-1920.
- 7 Quoted from Claudia Kromrei, *op.cit.*, 158.
- 8 Ludwig Pietsch, "Das Hohenzollern-Kunstgewerbehaus – Berlin" in: *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* — 15 (1904-1905), 169-176. From 1915 to 1921, an interior design store with similar goals called itself "Werkkunst G.m.b.H."
- 9 Sina Keesser, "The Architects' Ban on Advertising. On the conflicts between Architectural Professional Ideals and Mass Media" in: Andreas Brenneis, Oliver Honer, Sina Keesser, Annette Ripper, Silke Vetter-Schultheiss (Hrsg.), *Technik*

– *Macht – Raum. Das Topologische Manifest im Kontext Interdisziplinärer Studien* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 229-250.

- 10 Berliner Adressbuch 1915, S. 125. Richard Friebe was a Berlin builder, who had worked with Gessner and other Berlin such as Hart and Lesser. (See for example their Trunck department store at Kronenstrasse 10 of 1902 and 1910 and his own cemetery chapel in Michendorf near Potsdam of 1932.
- 11 Claudia Kromrei, a. a. O., 117. It is a somewhat poetic coincidence that Le Corbusier stopped by Gessner's apartment block on his journey through Germany in 1910. Claudia Kromrei even suggests that the building, of which Le Corbusier made several sketches, had an impact on his later studies for large apartment buildings.
- 12 Walter Gropius' parents had lived in Rankestrasse 16 (until 1911) and then Lietzenburgerstrasse 13. Walter Gropius' own apartment was located at Nikolsburger Platz 4 in Wilmersdorf, and, from 1914 on, he rented office space at Kaiserin Augustastrasse 69. All these addresses were not far from Grolmanstrasse, where Albert Gessner's *Bauhaus* was located.
- 13 Winfried Nerdinger, *Walter Gropius. Architekt der Moderne 1883-1969* (München: C. H. Beck, 2019) 65.
- 14 Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933* (Köln: Taschen Verlag, 1991), 17, 18.

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(b. Goettingen, Germany) Studied Architecture at the Technical University in Munich, and at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. PhD. in the History of Architecture at the Technical University in Munich. In 1989 was visiting professor at Brown University, later in 1991 became assistant professor in 1991. His research concentrates mostly on late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture. He has published several essays on the history of building materials, architectural illumination, individual buildings and projects, and books on German skyscrapers of the 1920s, on the history of film sets and lighting design. He has also curated a number of exhibitions, such as "Film Architecture", (Providence, Los Angeles, Frankfurt) "Richard Neutra's Windshield House", (Harvard University, RISD, Washington, Pittsburgh) "Unbuilt Providence", (Brown University) "Friedrich St. Florian: Retrospective", (Brown University) "Luminous Buildings: Architecture of the Night" (Stuttgart and Rotterdam) and edited their catalogs.