
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Style Debates in Early 20th-Century German Architectural Discourse

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In spite of the negative connotations ‘style’ has in contemporary architectural discourse, in early 20th-century Germany there was no consensus on the meaning or value of the concept amongst architects and critics. 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 1927, were very diverse understandings of the term. This plurality was partly due to conceptual confusion between ‘the styles’ and ‘style’, but it was also a legacy of Gottfried Semper’s and Alois Riegl’s respective efforts to resituate style as a practical and historiographical tool. Although style was endlessly debated between 1910 and 1930 by German architects, critics, and intellectuals of all stripes, later scholars have either largely overlooked its significance or used the term as a way of describing a particular group of works with a narrow set of formal tropes. The debates, the conceptual confusion, and the incredible variety of opinion over style in early 20th-century discourse have not been addressed, especially in relation to practicing architects. This essay examines some of the intersecting positions of several important German practitioners to show how the notion of style served as a conceptual framework for divergent modern practices.

Introduction

Although written in the late 1930s, Sigfried Giedion’s observations about style were based on his experiences in the decade before:

There is a word we should refrain from using to describe contemporary architecture. This is the word ‘style’. The moment we fence architecture within a notion of ‘style’, we open the door to a formalistic approach. The contemporary movement is not a ‘style’ ... it is an approach to life that slumbers unconsciously within all of us. (Giedion 1982: xxxiii)

His warning captures the negative attitude toward ‘style’ that many architects had in Germany at the time, one that is still common today. For Giedion, ‘style’ described architecture of the past, not the present, something outmoded, old-fashioned, and rooted in historicism. The word style was doubly problematic because it referred to outward appearance rather than essence, the invisible and ineffable aspects of an architect’s intentions embedded in the form. In spite of these negative connotations of style, there was no consensus on the meaning or value of the concept amongst architects and critics in early 20th-century Germany, and the subject was hotly contested.

If style was a dirty word for some, like Hermann Muthesius, for the influential architecture critic Walter Curt Behrendt it represented the pinnacle of achievement. Behrendt returned to the question of style repeatedly between 1910 and 1930, adjusting his position but never abandoning his belief that a new style was imminent and necessary (Behrendt 1920; Behrendt 1927). For others, like Peter Behrens, style was not a particular concern but rather the natural result of the design process, difficult, if not impossible, for contemporaries to discern (Behrens 1922). There were even calls to abandon style in order to discover a new style, a way of using negation to affirm the actual importance of style (Hausmann et al. 1921). These differences in the German attitude toward style were partly due to a conceptual distinction between ‘the styles’ and ‘style’, famously articulated by Viollet-le-Duc, but they were also, as other essays in this collection of *Architectural Histories* show, a legacy of Gottfried Semper’s and Alois Riegl’s respective efforts to resituate style as a practical and historiographical tool (Mallgrave 1996: 372–82). The position assumed by architects and critics when they considered style depended on what aspect of style they privileged: building form, aesthetic ordering system, the architect’s intention, or the architecture’s symbolic meaning. This differentiation was further complicated by the fact that these aspects of style were rarely treated completely separately from each other.¹ Here, the focus will be less on the intellectual background to the debates and more on the actual debates themselves, looking at some of the key exchanges and statements on style in early 20th-century Germany.

How to Understand Style

Style can mean different things. Paraphrasing the philosopher Nelson Goodman, style can be analyzed as the *how*, the *why*, or the *what*, which is precisely what makes it so complex to understand or discuss (Goodman 1975: 799–811). When style describes how a building is designed, it refers to strategies like symmetry, proportion, and repetition, as well as spatial and compositional techniques. When style refers to why a building has come into being, it alludes to the motivations behind design, such as satisfying functional imperatives, site conditions, a spiritual movement or a philosophical concept, or responding to societal circumstances. And when style refers to the ways in which architecture is manifest, it indicates the specific ornamental motives, material palette, color, pattern, construction and technical systems.² All three of these understandings were present in early 20th-century discourse, often in overlapping and unclear formulations.

The styles, in the German debate, referred to 19th-century historicism, which relied on the application of historical ornament to a building. Hans Poelzig typified contemporary attitudes toward the styles when he wrote, ‘We the elders, were hungry for a field that was not plowed, where no written, historicizing stylistic idea governed ... it had become customary to see Gothic churches, Oriental synagogues, and to produce post office buildings in German Renaissance. For court buildings one even used cloister Baroque’ (Poelzig 1931: 10). The styles were seen both as a system of design and one of classification. If the styles described Goodman’s *how* and *what* in a work of architecture, depending on how it was used, style in the singular indicated its *why*. As Richard Riemerschmid asserted, ‘Style — overall and so also in the fine arts — is an expression of life’ (Riemerschmid 1922: 8). That is, style is the outward manifestation of every aspect of modernity — politics, society, economics, and culture.

If the concept itself was confusing, debates over style in Germany between 1910 and 1930 were further muddled by the expectations that Germans had for the aftermath of the First World War. Most artists and leading cultural figures on the political left and right initially believed that war would act as catharsis to cleanse German art and culture of what was seen as their stale and bankrupt elements. They believed the result would be a completely new art and culture, a desperately needed break from the aesthetic straitjacket of the long 19th century. People such as the art critics Karl Scheffler and Richard Braungart, the writer Thomas Mann, the artist Franz Marc, and the architect Peter Behrens believed that the war experience would either render artists more sensitive and therefore more expressive or else tear them apart so completely that they would be forced to discover new forms, which would ultimately lead to something totally original and fully German.

From the very start of the First World War, a series of articles and artist declarations appeared that proclaimed the end of the old, ineffective art and culture and the beginning of the new.³ One of the most eloquent, and typical in its sentiments, was Karl Scheffler’s essay, ‘Der Krieg’

[The War] in the January 1915 issue of *Kunst und Künstler* [Art and Artists]. Scheffler begins with this claim:

[W]ar 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. (Scheffler 1915: 2)

Scheffler concludes by asserting that the war must be a ‘school for talent’, after which national cultural regeneration would be possible. In an article published several weeks later, Scheffler explicitly connects the expected new culture and a national style (Scheffler 1915: 111). Scheffler delineates what he saw as the terms of rejuvenated post-war German art; it would consist of a totally new formal language, motivated by sensitivity to contemporary life and idealism. How artists and architects would actually develop this language and deploy it, however, is not clear.

The Style Debate

The pervasiveness of the question of style in the period is apparent in the range of publications that treated the subject, from professional journals like *Die Form*, *Deutsche Kunstblatt*, and *Kunst und Künstler* to popular satirical magazines like *Simplicissimus*, *Wahre Jakob* and *Lachen Links*. Behrendt’s book of 1920, *Der Kampf um den Stil im Kunstgewerbe und in der Architektur* [The Battle for Style in Applied Arts and Architecture] may have been one of the very few publications to deploy style in its title, but a raft of books by critics and architects explored the issue. Examples include Adolf Behne’s 1919 *Der Wiederkehr der Kunst* [The Return of Art] and 1926 *Der Moderne Zweckbau* [The Modern Functional Building], Bruno Taut’s 1926 *Die neue Wohnung: die Frau als Schöpferin* [The New Apartment: The Woman as Creator], and Ludwig Hilbersheimer’s 1928 *Internationale neue Baukunst* [New International Architecture]. Many of the articles and books dealt with problems related to new building form, but not exclusively; writers were also concerned with the essence of the new architecture, its relationship to contemporary societal challenges, and its ability to positively affect users and the environment.

In 1922, the Deutsche Werkbund released the first issue of its short-lived new publication, *Die Form: Monatsschrift für gestaltende Arbeit* [Form: Monthly Journal for Design Work]. The decision to feature six articles by well-known practicing architects addressing the question of style in the inaugural issue signaled how critical the question of style was at the time.⁴ The contributors were Walter Riezler (1878–1965), Peter Behrens (1868–1940), Richard Riemerschmid (1868–1957), Wilhelm Kreis (1873–1955), Otto Bartning (1883–1959), and Hans Poelzig (1869–1936).

Behrens and Poelzig were transitional figures widely credited with bridging the gap between historicist design and modernism, whereas only Bartning represented the 1880s generation (to which the more radical architects Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut belonged) that assumed leadership roles after the war. Although the more extreme viewpoints to the left and right were not represented in *Die Form*, the inaugural issue did address many of the contemporary perspectives on style, with Riezler, Riemerschmid, Kreis, and Bartning supporting the development of a new style, while Behrens and Poelzig were far more skeptical.

In his introduction to the issue, Riezler did more than equate form with style; he declared:

The goal ... is the new style. We are still far from that, and any attempt to use force to create the style would be disastrous. Yes, it is better not to think of [style] at all, to be devoted to every task, to seek the proper form, and not control but serve the powers of the mind and fantasy: of course they do not serve any human power but the the divine power of nature. (Riezler 1922: 4)

If architects could solve contemporary design challenges with novel formal approaches, then the new style would emerge (Riezler 1922: 4). Form was not 'the content of a formalistic aesthetic', 'the exterior of art', and 'not even an aesthetic concept' (Riezler 1922: 2). Instead, he argued, form was the essence of architecture and the quality that gives 'new meaning' to the world. In this, and in line with the German idealist tradition, Riezler saw form and style as a truthful artistic mirror of the essential qualities of a period. He made clear that the question of style in the 1920s could not be separated from the First World War and the cultural crisis that was part and parcel of it, a view shared by Riemerschmid, Kreis, Bartning, and Poelzig. Riezler also wrote that it was crucial to consider the ways in which industrialization and machines had changed the world. Industrial processes were at the heart of the new type of destructive warfare whose consequences needed to be understood, and were central to the social and technological changes that were affecting all aspects of interwar life.

The critical questions for these writers were the following: is style a relevant consideration, why and how does a style emerge, and what constitutes a style? If style was not necessarily a desirable thing, it was certainly a germane topic that merited discussion. Despite their subtly nuanced opinions, they agreed that true style was more than the outward aesthetics, it was a reflection of the essence of the times. Riemerschmid made the clearest argument in this regard: since any good design must by definition relate to the conditions of contemporary life, he wrote, style was manifested in the things that humans make, such as architecture, furniture, clothing, household utensils, as the 'mirror picture' of the world. By extension, the genesis of a new style lay in the formal challenges of new building types that constituted the essence of modern life, like railroad stations, factories, and cinemas. Poelzig extended Riemerschmid's argument by surveying the development of style over time and explaining the

connection between architectural expression, style, new materials like steel and concrete, and construction systems like steel-frame (Poelzig 1922: 22–29). All six writers described the manifestation of style using visible aesthetic attributes of building, including its form, layout, material palette, and construction systems. Yet herein lay a paradox, since they all believed that true style reflected essential and invisible aspects of contemporary society. Poelzig attacked the 'logical error' made by some architects in the 1920s who looked to the machine and technology as the basis of new formal solutions because machines and technology were seen as expressions of modernity. According to Poelzig, this was the result of two false beliefs: that style is made by the application of surface ornament to a building and that because style is a visible attribute of architecture, it is something that can be consciously created. In other words, style is the *result* of artistic creation, not the goal.

Of the contributors, only Poelzig and Behrens rejected the notion that an architect could intentionally create a style. Behrens anchored his ideas in arguments first promoted by Muthesius in his influential 1902 essay, *Stilarchitektur und der Baukunst* [Style Architecture and the Building Art]. According to Muthesius, any new architectural form had to respond to the new industrial processes and materials, and the spatial needs of new building types that had appeared because of industrialization, like train stations, factories, and exhibition halls (Muthesius 1902; Maciuicka 1998: 119–20). He wrote that 'the real values in architecture are entirely independent of the stylistic question', and indeed, 'a real way of looking at a work of architecture will not speak of style at all'. Buildings will embody the lessons found in the new engineering marvels, like train sheds, bridges, and steamships, Muthesius believed, without succumbing to a narrow set of aesthetic parameters, to style (Muthesius 1902). In 1922, Behrens affirmed Muthesius' position, writing that 'every period has its unique style, including ours', although 'a style is not recognizable in one's own time but rather can only be perceived at a later time' (Behrens 1922: 5).

Disputes over Form

Even though much of the stylistic debate focused on issues deeper than appearances, periodically formal arguments inevitably bubbled to the fore. After all, the visual qualities of architecture were easy to identify and argue about. As the architectural historian Richard Pommer points out, one of the recurrent flashpoints was the flat roof, which for some became a potent symbol for modern architectural aesthetics (Pommer 1983: 158–69). While modernists were usually pitted against traditionalists, within the progressive groups there was also disagreement about what aesthetic qualities constituted the new architecture and whether aesthetics should be codified at all (Gropius 1926; May 1926; Schultze-Naumburg 1926). The flat roof controversy reached a fever pitch at the Werkbund exhibitions in Stuttgart (1927) and Breslau (1929), as well as in the 1929 housing projects for the Gehag building society that were designed by Bruno Taut and Martin Wagner in Berlin-Zehlendorf.⁵

In spite of being profoundly suspicious of formalism, Mies van der Rohe recognized the necessity of projecting some kind of aesthetic unity at the Werkbund exhibition in Stuttgart to demonstrate the arrival of the new building style. He therefore insisted on selecting a group of 'leftist' architects and developed a set of formal rules for architects designing the project that included using flat roofs, simple volumes, roof gardens, and off-white exteriors (Pommer and Otto 1991: 28, 46, 59). In Breslau, the organizers instituted far looser guidelines because they recognized how aesthetically varied the new architecture actually was. Most of the buildings still featured a flat roof, but Gustav Wolf's house had a pitched one and others used vivid exterior colors and more complex forms (Barnstone 2016: 51–81). The Gehag development was divided into two parts, Taut's Uncle Tom's Hut Colony and Wagner's Am Fischtal Colony. The two are famously pictured across the street from one another, so that the flat roofs and boxy volumes with large, blank walls at Uncle Tom's Hut stand in stark contrast to the pitched roofs over symmetrical facades peppered with punched windows at Am Fischtal. The projects seem to be in conversation with one another, engaged in a visual dialectic about the new architecture. The image captures the tension between modernity and tradition endemic to Weimar-era culture, usually referred to as the Kultur/Zivilisation dichotomy, and evident in every aspect of German cultural production (see, for example, Rohrkrämer 1999 and Bollenbeck 1994).

Style as a New Formal Language

Walter Gropius was one of the first architects who looked to the realms of industry, commerce, and transportation, that is, the new building types that Muthesius and Behrens had pointed to, not only as the locus in which a new style might be developed but for the elements of that style. By the beginning of the 20th century, progressive German architects recognized the aesthetic opportunities inherent in designing buildings for the new industrial age; here were building types for which there was no historic precedent and therefore no aesthetic expectations. Industrial, commercial, and transport buildings were therefore seen as sites for experimentation and the development of a new style – the work of pioneers like Poelzig and Behrens constituted this approach. Gropius realized, however, that such architecture had even more to offer – the simple functional forms and practical hardware used in industrial buildings could be adapted to other architectural programs. That is, not only could industrial buildings be designed as works of architecture but the constructive elements of industrial architecture could also contribute significantly to the development of a modern style.

In 1914, Gropius wrote 'Der Stilbildende Wert industrieller Bau-formen' [The Style-Forming Value of Industrial Building Forms], one of several essays he wrote between 1911 and 1926 in which he laid out the ways a new style could emerge (Gropius 1988 [1914]: 58). In the essay, he referred to the 'Wille zur Kultur', [will to culture] and the 'Wille zur Form' [will to form] as two ingredients necessary for the development of a contemporary style (Gropius 1988 [1914]: 58). His formulation connected the drive to create a meaningful culture in the

broadest possible sense – to encompass all the arts including architecture – with the determination to give specific form to that culture, to the appearance of a new style. He wrote, 'the beginnings of a strong and unified will to culture are unmistakable today ... [as] art's longing for a uniform form, for the new awakening of a style; people again realize that the will to form is always the only determining factor in the work of art' (Gropius 1988 [1914]: 58). Gropius also made clear that such form must necessarily derive from the social, political, and spiritual conditions of the time: when these conditions are in flux, as in the 19th century, it is impossible to develop a clear style: 'As long as the spiritual concepts of the time fluctuate uncertainly, without a definite clear goal, art also lacks the possibility of developing a style, and hence of gathering the creative will of the many into one concept' (Gropius 1988 [1914]: 58). Gropius even went so far as to suggest that the 'first meaningful signs' of a new style manifested themselves in architecture because architecture bridges the practical and the purely aesthetic arts.

Gropius first attempted to find a method of transforming industrial architecture into an art form by making it 'monumental', that is, by trying to develop an aesthetic language that would make industrial buildings timeless in the same way that classical temples, Renaissance palaces, baroque churches, or other great masterpieces of the past were (Gropius 1988 [1911]: 28–52). In much the same way that cathedrals embodied the essence of the Gothic period, because of their monumental scale and exemplification of social and cultural values of their time, he believed that industrial buildings were the embodiment of modernity and therefore critical for contemporary architects to design. He wrote, 'by virtue of their entirely new formal character, [industrial buildings] comprise the harbingers of a coming monumental style' (1988 [1911]: 28–52). Again Gropius asserted, 'the longing for a uniform form begins to awaken to a style, [when] the people realize again that the will to form is always the single value-determining aspect in the work of art' (1988 [1914]: 58). In other words, it was not the form itself that determined value or style but the impetus behind the form, the intention.

Gropius foresaw a fruitful collaboration between architect, industrialist, and technologist to probe the possibilities in the factory building form. 'Precisely shaped form', he wrote, 'no randomness, clear contrast, the arrangement of the same parts and the unity of form and color will become, according to the energy and economy of our public life, the aesthetic armor of the modern architect' (1988 [1914]: 58–59). Even more significant, Gropius explained that to develop a modern style, it was necessary to develop appropriate 'Formtypen', form types, by which he meant fundamental forms that constituted an aesthetic system. Form types in Greek classicism, for example, include the Doric column, pediment, metope, triglyph, and architrave:

A new development of form must take its starting point from these works of industry and technology ... [T]he expression of our common lifestyles must also gain in unity. This would then lead to a style that ultimately reaches into the last branches of

human art. But it is only when the great happiness of a new faith is to be restored to human beings that art will again fulfill its highest goal, and will be able to reinvent the serene form of ornament to the bitter forms of the beginning as a sign of inner refinement. (Gropius 1914: 59)

This new system has to be deeply rooted in modern society and culture, which in Gropius' mind meant that it had to respond to new technologies and the conditions of modern industrial society in a meaningful way. Gropius revisited these themes again and again both before and after the First World War, making only small adjustments to his positions after 1918.

Although Gropius used the word style in his prewar essay, he did not return to it after the war. Likely, he came to view style as too easily misconstrued and too closely tied to qualities he disliked in art, such as 'dogma' and 'uncreative academicism.' He vociferously refuted what he saw as the conceptual inaccuracies and limitations in the concept of Functionalism, or Neues Bauen, equally rejecting the notion of a 'Bauhaus style' and Hitchcock and Johnson's 'International Style' (Gropius 1955 [1935]; 1958). He did continue to use other concepts from the prewar essays, however, and treated many of the same concepts that he believed were inextricably tied to style, such as the question of form and where it comes from, the demands of industrial society on architectural invention, the relationship between technology and architecture, and the development of a new architecture reflective of the times (Gropius 1986 [1925/26]: 107–11; Gropius 1986 [1927]: 114–55). Gropius also repeatedly advocated freedom from historic styles and preconceived notions of form, was convinced that form is symbolic and not just functional (1986 [1925/26]: 109). This last belief is critical for several reasons; it constituted the basis of his arguments against pure function as the driver of aesthetics, but also extended Muthesius' arguments to suggest that meaning is the penultimate determinant of value in architecture.

Poelzig was one of the pioneers Gropius deeply admired for breaking through to a new approach to architecture in exactly the way Muthesius had predicted. In his designs for new building types like the chemical factory in Luban (1912) and the department store in Breslau (1912), Poelzig had, Gropius thought, 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 the beginnings of a style but 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 Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity], which he saw as a codified style, with prescribed aesthetic treatments like white stucco facades, flat roofs, large surfaces of glass, and not a true response to functional imperatives (Poelzig GNM, IC 1931):

[I]s New Objectivity so absolutely objective?
...This kind of new objectivity has in it just as much false romanticism [as other styles] and in the end, inauthenticity is hidden like in any period that

gets drunk on a buzzword. It is totally unobjective if I use expensive trusses over long spans without having to, if I omit columns that only make the construction cheaper and easier, and the delusion of the vast expanse of window space is in itself no less erroneous than the earlier architect's attitude, who believed that proper architecture had to have heavy, damp and thick walls. (Poelzig 1931: 10)

Poelzig called these design attributes 'fashion', a pejorative term. To him, fashion connoted low art, versus high art, and a passing mode or craze that had no lasting value. Fashion was to be avoided because it was fleeting, superficial, and therefore irrelevant (even though being fleeting was also considered a positive attribute of modernism).

In 1919, in a letter to Bruno Taut, Poelzig reminded Taut that Biedermeyer was once 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. He pointedly asked, 'Who can guarantee that in another fifteen years a large part of today's modern production will not again fall prey to the concept of kitsch?' (Poelzig 1919: 20). Poelzig famously took issue with the direction that the Arbeitsrat für Kunst was taking under Taut's leadership because he felt the group's manifestos over-emphasized the role technology should play in architectural expression. He warned that not everything related to the machine should be sacred to contemporary architects, lest they fall into the same rut of their hated 19th-century predecessors who worshipped historic styles. That is, technology- and machine-inspired forms can easily become superficial stylistic elements that are no different than Doric columns, baroque ovals, or Gothic tracery. 'One forgets that all technical forms, in contrast to the absolute meaning of art, only have a relative meaning', he admonished. 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, [and is] mathematical in the higher meaning of the word' (Poelzig GNM IC 1919). Poelzig was not only at odds with Taut but with many others, including Gropius, Riezler, Riemerschmid, and Behrendt, who believed that any new style had to relate to modern materials and industrial technology.

Architecture beyond Style

Bruno Taut's polemical embrace of technology was short-lived. By 1920 he had been forced from the Arbeitsrat leadership and turned his attention to other concerns. He became convinced that it was necessary to move beyond style, and he used his many publications, including the journal *Frühlicht* [Early Light] to promote his beliefs. In Taut's mind, 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. Nineteenth-century understandings of style were inadequate,

in Taut's view, since they ultimately were concerned with the physical appearance of architecture. To illustrate his point, Taut quoted Paul Scheerbart: 'In the style, the game is the goal – In the game, the goal is the style – At the goal, the style is the game' (Taut 2007 [1920]: 280). Taut used this kind of circular reasoning, from which it is impossible to extract a definition of any term, to illustrate what he saw as the futility of debates over style. His disparaging attitude toward style was directed at all the elements of fashionable contemporary architecture; rhythm, for instance, is 'military, organization, imperialism, mass murder' (Taut 2007 [1920]: 281). Rather than worry about style, it was important to design and construct.

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 (Taut 1998 [1919]: 186–87). While many of his contemporaries saw Jugendstil as one of the first advances toward a non-historically based approach to design, for Taut, Jugendstil repeated the mistakes of classical, Renaissance, baroque, and other historic styles, by relying on an applied ornamental system to create their visual and aesthetic effects.

While spurning historical styles, Taut did not reject history as a source of inspiration. In several articles penned between 1904 and 1914, Taut argued that it was in nature and the Gothic that architects could discover 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 (Taut 2007 [1904a]: 51; Taut 2007 [1904b]: 53–54). 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* [Alpine Architecture] of 1919 and *Auflösung der Städte* [Dissolution of the Cities] of 1920, with their unbuildable yet fantastic and enchanting glass structures. He called for architects to design using 'the experience of the soul', to respond to all the lessons of history and nature. Taut loathed style and function in equal measure, seeing both as enemies of good architecture. In 'Eine Notwendigkeit', [A Necessity] from 1919 he called for the design of buildings that were beyond function, and, in fact, this was how Taut described the Glass Pavilion of 1914; it 'had no other purpose than to be beautiful' (Taut 2007 [1914a]: 59–61; Taut 2007 [1914b]: 65). He wrote, 'Greatest wisdom: Build the space!' (Taut 1998 [1919]: 101). In 1920, in 'Architektur neuer Gemeinschaft' [Architecture of the New Community], Taut explicitly declared that style was not the goal of architectural design (Taut 2007 [1920]: 134). Taut hoped for a form of expression that was beyond style – that was both mystical and spiritual.

For Erich Mendelsohn, like Taut, style was a mystical concept embodying the very essence of the Zeitgeist, 'the strong spirit that means style for us', and therefore

was exceedingly difficult to achieve but still the ultimate goal for architectural aesthetics (Letter of 14 March, in Mendelsohn 1910–1953). Like Gropius, Mendelsohn defined his position on style before the First World War, then continued to reassert his beliefs in the 1920s. In a letter from 19 March 1911, about Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Rosenkavalier* to his future wife, Luise Maas, Mendelsohn praised 'the victory of poetic content and wordy delicacy over geometrical style laws and form' (Mendelsohn 1910–1953). While he is describing an opera, not architecture, the sentiment is one he applied to all the arts. Poetry is the ultimate defining aspect of art and it cannot be reduced to codified laws or mathematical formulas.

Mendelsohn believed that style was a particular kind of expression of the Zeitgeist (Mendelsohn 1923). In his opinion, in a letter dated 14 March 1914, by responding to the inherent qualities of new materials like concrete and steel, a 'new form' and 'new style' world emerge:

The way that building material demands a form, that will fully exploit its technical potential, in order to bring the latent formal possibilities to light ... the Egyptian pyramids (stone); the Greek temples (marble); the Pantheon as Roman dome construction (form stone); the cathedral (brick); suspension bridges (iron) ... the great technical revolution in iron...gave the possibility to be more creative, the means to design something new, to give shape to new building form. ... reinforced concrete is the building material of our new Form-will, the new style. (Mendelsohn 1910–1953)

He would later describe the process of discovering the Form-will by saying, 'But we search for the elemental, [and] form is the logical consequence' (Mendelsohn 1925).

Mendelsohn's 'Form-will' is similar to Gropius's 'Will to Form', but unlike Gropius who believed in a comprehensive cultural source for style, Mendelsohn privileged architecture-specific culture: new construction systems, materials, functions, and spatial tropes. Simply imitating engineering form would not result in a new architecture, he wrote; architects had to reveal the essence of modern inventions and technology (Mendelsohn 1919: 8; 1923: 1).

While he sought new forms that responded to modern building materials and systems, Mendelsohn was certain that architecture had to be more than mere form. 'If he [the architect] feels his work is only a general endeavor to find new forms, he will not be able to recognize false solutions' (Mendelsohn 1919: 7). Architecture had to embody eternal values, he wrote in his March 14 letter (Mendelsohn 1910–1953). In this view, Mendelsohn aligned himself with Poelzig, but he differed from many other members of the avant-garde for whom 'eternal and immutable' values belonged to the classical arts, not to the modern ones. Mendelsohn never explained precisely how the discovery of new forms and style would occur, although he contended that to advance their art architects must use statics, the logic of form, harmony, balance, and the expression of loads, in their composition. 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, as it is’. In other words, style is ineffable, impossible to define, tied to the spirit, but nonetheless recognizable in the flesh.

Unlike Mendelsohn, Mies van der Rohe found the concept of style problematic because it suggested conformity rather than originality, and appearance rather than essence. His beliefs were similar to those of Taut in that he believed style described the outward and superficial aspects of architecture rather than the conceptual and spatial, 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 (Mies van der Rohe 1947 [1924]: 191). Also like Taut and Behrens, Mies asserted, ‘Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space’ (1947 [1924]: 191). The danger, Mies believed, lay in a ‘new formalism’, that is, in the superficial application of aesthetic tropes to a design (Mies van der Rohe 1927: 59). 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, or the meaning. 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. 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’ (Mies van der Rohe 1970 [1923]: 52). In this critique, Mies repeated Karl Scheffler’s notion of a dualism between formalists and functionalists in German architecture during the 1920s. As Detlef Mertins pointed out, inherent in Mies’s position was an antipathy toward predetermined forms and solutions: in Mies’s view, style was just such a form of predetermination (Mertins 2000: 110).

Victory of the New Building Style

The dispute over the meaning of style did not eradicate the hope that the changed world ushered in by the end of the First World War would lead to something new in German art and culture. As Behrendt’s 1927 declaration in *Der Sieg des neuen Baustils* [*Victory of the New Building Style*] attested, by the end of the decade some believed that this had come to pass. At the beginning of the book he proclaimed:

Influenced by the powerful spiritual forces in which the creative work of our time is embodied, the mighty drama of a sweeping transformation is taking place before our eyes. It is the birth of the form of our time. In the course of this dramatic play — amid the conflict and convulsion of old, now meaningless traditions breaking down and new conventions of thinking and feeling arising — new, previously unknown forms are emerging. Given their congruous features, they can be discussed as the elements of a new style of building. (Behrendt 1927: 89)

For Behrendt, more than most practicing architects, style represented the apotheosis of design: it was no accident that he paired ‘victory’ with ‘style’ in the title of his book. Behrendt viewed style as the positive outcome of successful responses to, and architectural expression of, the competing pressures from societal changes and technological inventions in an historic period. Behrendt repeatedly stressed that style is the spiritual embodiment of contemporary values, the reduction of those values to the most fundamental principles and basic aesthetic elements, in a system that was similar to classicism (Behrendt 1927: 107).

If this new architectural style was characterized by certain visual elements, such as ‘simple, austere form and a clear organization, with smooth, planar walls, and always with a fat roof and straight profiles’, these were secondary to the forces driving the design (Behrendt 1927: 89). Importantly, Behrendt explained the distinction between the functionally derived forms of new technology, such as automobiles, airplanes, and appliances, and aesthetics extrapolated from common characteristics of these inventions, like streamlined shapes, clear proportions, and shiny surfaces. Simply using the forms from modern engineering without a deeper intention would be pure formalism of very the kind Mies was worried about. But this is not what Behrendt believed was occurring. The new style did not imitate technological elements, he wrote, but rooted itself in the same design method that had brought them forth; that is, style strove to express the qualities and phenomena of contemporary life in the simplest, most logical and direct manner.

Key to Behrendt’s understanding, therefore, was the notion of style as a process rather than an aesthetic system (Mertins 2000: 60). In this way, Behrendt addressed the concerns of Mies, Mendelsohn, Taut, Poelzig, and Muthesius all at once, by imagining an approach to design that was beyond superficial expression, and therefore not fashion, not formalism, and not functionalism. If Giedion would come to define style in superficial aesthetic, visual terms only, Behrendt was certain that it was more. ‘The new forms will be understood as the result of a new formulation of the problem’, he wrote. Style was the result of ongoing efforts of architects to ‘shape these new realities [of modern life] spiritually and to master them creatively through design’ (Behrendt 1927: 137 & 102). The process Behrendt described was one of trial, error, and discovery, realized through dialectical exchange — a response to the new norms, inventions, and speed of modern life.

Notes

- ¹ Although style was debated endlessly in 1920s Germany by architects, critics, and intellectuals of all stripes, later scholars have either largely overlooked its significance or used the term as a way of describing a particular group of works with a narrow set of formal tropes; see Goldhagen (2005: 144–67) and Mertins (2001).
- ² The origins of the term ‘style’ are dealt with in other essays in this volume.
- ³ Some of the noteworthy essays were those by Richard Braungart, Thomas Mann (1968), and Karl Scheffler,

and an essay, 'Die deutsche Kunst und der Krieg', by the editors of *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration: Monatshefte fuer modern Malerei, Plastik, Architektur, Wohnungskunst u. kunsterlisches Frauen-Arbeiten*, 35 (1914): n.p. (<https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/dkd1914/0400/image>).

⁴ This version of the journal folded after one year and was replaced with *Die Form ohne Ornament* [Form without Ornament] in 1925 with a new editor, Walter Curt Behrendt. In addition to the architects, the politician Theodor Heuss authored a short contribution.

⁵ Today the so-called Zehlendorf War of the Roofs is memorialized with a plaque. See <https://www.gedenktafeln-in-berlin.de/nc/gedenktafeln/gedenktafel-anzeige/tid/zehlendorfer-daecher/>.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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