THE BAUHAUS OR THE ‘CHILDHOOD OF DESIGN’

A STUDY ON RELEVANCE OF FROEBEL’S PEDAGOGY TO THE PRELIMINARY COURSE AT THE BAUHAUS

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Abstract: This study is focused on revealing the relevance of Froebel’s pedagogy to the preliminary course (‘Vorkurs’) at the Bauhaus. The preliminary course, which every new student at the Bauhaus had to take, asked students to abandon all accumulated informations before and encourage them to get his own knowledge through experience. It was under the influence of Froebel’s teaching idea asserting ‘education by play’ rather than imposition of knowledge. Adopting this course, the Bauhaus could renovate the ostentation and overdecoration and create a brand new and universal visual language in the industrial age. The Bauhaus, which went back to the artistic childhood to protest against the academies, became a child or a seed for the modern design itself.

Key Word: Bauhaus, preliminary course, Froebel

1. The Bauhaus and a stream against the academies
The Bauhaus was born in a stream against the academies.
- Until the middle of the nineteenth century designers had been trained by the parallel structures of academic art education and the apprenticeship system. In the latter half of the 19th century, the Wiener Werkstätte (the Sezession) showed the beginning of a protest against the influences of the academies. Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus pointed out that the academy had shut off the artist from the world of industry and handicraft, and brought about his complete isolation from the community.[1] The Bauhaus was established to train designers to meet industrial and social asks and unite art and technique. It was the first attempt to rationalize the theoretical and practical implications of the transition from hand to machine production and to develop a curriculum for training designers for industry on that basis.[2]

2. The ‘Vorkurs’ at the Bauhaus
The strong will of the Bauhaus against the academies was apparent in the preliminary course (‘Vorkurs’). Every new student at the Bauhaus had to take a trial period of six months to work in the preliminary course. He was asked to abandon all accumulated informations before he get his own perception and knowledge through direct experiences. If he is to work in wood, for example, he must know his material thoroughly; he must also understand its relation to other materials, to stone and glass and wool. Consequently, he works with these materials as well, combining and composing them to make their relationships fully apparent.[3]

There were additions and modifications by other teachers in the preliminary course since Itten left the Bauhaus in 1923, but the fundamentals of his teaching were retained: 1. detailed study of nature through materials, 2. plastic studies of composition, 3. analyses of old masters. It countered with the educational system of the academies to ‘to negate the present and conjure up fantasies of the past’ [4] and old ‘l’art pour l’art’ attitude.

According to Johannes Itten who formulated this course, first task of it was to free the creative powers and thereby the art talents of the students.[5] It was an effort to return to status of the innocence free from any prescription.

3. △□○ : geometrical forms to return to origins
The geometrical basic forms (△□○) and primary colors, which are repeated in the works of Bauhaus teachers and students, are not irrelevant to the aim of the preliminary course. The attachment to △□○ reveals the school’s interest in return to origins in hope of discovering a lost unity.

It is evidenced in Gropius’s Bauhaus Manifesto: he exclaimed “Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts!” and suggested to recover “true architectonic spirit” “lost”.[6] He was eager to recover the unity, harmony and fullness in the middle age as a woodcut of Feininger in the Manifesto expressed. The basic forms and primary colors resulted from the desire of the Bauhaus to find the most essential and universal visual language.

4. Froebel’s Gifts and Occupation
The geometrical forms as essential and irreducible things are also found in Froebel’s pedagogical toys – “Gifts and Occupation”, on which he worked between 1835 and 1850. Gifts and Occupation were consisted of solids, surfaces, lines and points. Gifts help children to understand the external world and give them insight, while Occupation encourages them to invent the world. They consist of a coherent system starting from the simplest activity and progressing to the most diverse and complex expressions.

Froebel uttered about the purpose of these play as follows: “(It) is to instruct human beings so that they may progress as individuals and members of humanity. (…) Collectively they form a complete whole, like a many branched tree, whose parts explain and advance each
other. Each is a self-contained whole, a seed from which manifold new developments may spring to cohere in further unity.”[7]

### Table 1. Construction of Gifts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solids</th>
<th>First Gift (Color)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Second Gift (Shape)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Third Gift (Number)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Fourth Gift (Extent)</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Wooden ball, cylinder and cube</td>
<td></td>
<td>Eight-one inch cubes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Eight brick shaped blocks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fifth Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Twenty-seven one-inch cubes, three bisected and three quadrisected diagonally</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sixth Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Twenty-seven brick-shaped blocks, three bisected longitudinally and six bisected transversely</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfaces</td>
<td>Seventh Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td>Squares and equilateral triangles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lines</td>
<td>Eighth Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td>Splits of various lengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rings</td>
<td>Ninth Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wooden, metal or paper rings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points</td>
<td>Tenth Gift</td>
<td></td>
<td>Beans, lentils or other seeds, leaves, pebbles, pieces of card-board of paper</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These educational ideas of Froebel are under the influences of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who asserted to cultivate children’s inherent abilities rather than to force the acceptance of knowledge, and Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) who recasted the teacher as a protective figure stimulating the child’s inherent intelligence. Taking this path, Froebel insisted education by ‘play and exertion’ to regard the originate nature of human being.

**6. The Bauhaus as the ‘childhood of design’**

In conclusion, the Bauhaus asked students to return to the spiritual and artistic childhood to create a brand new and universal visual language in the industrial age. It was trial to renovate the ostentation and overdecoration and retrieve the innocence as the concept of ‘child as artist’ and the ‘childhood of art’ meant in the end of 19th century. This mission could be accomplished in part by positing an artistic potential within every child.[10]

The educational methods of the Bauhaus has been adopted and modified in schools throughout the world. It also occupied the opening chapter of the industrial design. The Bauhaus, which went back to the artistic childhood to protest against the academies, became a child or a seed for the modern design itself.

**7. References**

2. Penny Sparke, An Introduction to Design & Culture in the Twentieth Century, Routledge, 2000; 160
3. Bauhaus 1919-1928; 34