Putting Wilhelmine Design Culture Back on the (Art Historical) Radar

It comes as somewhat of a surprise to realize that despite the Bauhaus’s central position in historical studies of German Modernism, the English-speaking world has paid little attention to the fascinating pre-history of this most celebrated art, architecture, and design school of the twentieth century. Indeed, it can be argued that a persistent emphasis on the Bauhaus and its illustrious faculty is to blame for an obscured understanding of German Modernism. While certain key movements and events, primarily those leading to the founding of the German Werkbund in 1907, have attracted considerable scholarly attention, the fascinating interlacing of design reform with Wilhelmine educational and institutional politics has been largely ignored. To date, non-German-speaking readers had to rely on Nikolaus Pevsner’s seminal, albeit highly selective, study of central European architecture, Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius (1936), and John Heskett’s more recent survey, German Design 1870-1918 (1986) for information on German architecture and design before the Bauhaus. Although each of these important reform efforts has been studied previously, Maciuika places them into an effective dialogue with one another and shows how actors in different sociopolitical contexts grappled with one of the key dilemmas of Wilhelmine design reform: how best to cre-
ate and disseminate a modern design language.

The next chapter, entitled "The Prussian Commerce Ministry and the Lessons of the British Arts and Crafts Movement," unveils some of the tensions engendered by the shared administration of Prussia's applied arts education between the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Medicinal Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. Maciuika argues that despite a ruling of 1884 intended to assign a clearer jurisdiction, Prussia's applied arts lingered until 1896, at which point government architect Hermann Muthesius was sent to the German embassy in London to report on England's technical and cultural developments (pp. 71-72). The influence of John Ruskin and William Morris on Prussian, if not German, design reform has previously been investigated and Muthesius has always been seen as a key figure. Yet, by combining a careful reading of Muthesius's many publications with his subsequent activities in Berlin, Maciuika supplies a more nuanced picture of the ways in which English reform ideals were assimilated into concrete (Prussian) state measures and policies. This official embrace of a modern design language is seen by Maciuika as "lay[ing] the foundations for the path-breaking German design organization, the German Werkbund" (p. 103).

Chapter 3, "Prussian Applied-Arts Reforms: Culture, Class, and the Modern Economy," explores in more detail some of the specific educational reform measures implemented in the wake of Muthesius's return from London in 1903. Here, Maciuika sheds light on the institutional workings of the Prussian Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Medicinal Affairs. While this chapter is focused on Prussia, Maciuika effectively argues that through personal networks and supra-regional affiliations, Prussia's educational reform measures soon captured the interest of design reformers across Germany and, according to Maciuika, ultimately led to the founding of the German Werkbund in 1907. The road to a national applied arts association pushing for a modern design language was not smooth, however, and Maciuika is able to expose the dissent coming from within conservative craft associations and interest groups, such as the Semperbund, whose members belonged primarily to the Mittelstand, a sociopolitical category Maciuika discusses in the introduction (p. 15) and whose aesthetic platform was one of tradition and national patrimony.

Chapter 4, appropriately entitled "The Convergence of State and Private Reform: Impulses in the Deutscher Werkbund," puts forth the Werkbund as the culmina-

Chapter 5, "Herman Muthesius: Architectural Practice between Government Service and Werkbund Activism," returns to Muthesius as one of the key figures in Maciuika's narrative and looks at the dissemination of reform ideals through Muthesius's private architectural practice in Berlin. Here, Maciuika argues that the suburban architectural building type of the Landhaus supplied a theoretical and practical platform through which Muthesius was able to target Germany's upper middle classes specifically. As a place of "domestic comfort, cultural bourgeois living, and close contact with its natural surroundings" (p. 172), Landhaus architecture adapted important English country house traditions rooted in the Arts and Crafts movement to specifically German social functions, domestic rituals, and bourgeois tastes. What made these buildings German, Maciuika suggests, was their focus on a Wilhelmine Sachlichkeit, borne out in a design focus on lighting, orientation, and strictly prescribed furnishings (p. 172). This chapter is clearly designed as a case study through which to work out some of the larger arguments by specific example, but unfortunately, it does not sit comfortably with the rest of the book. It reads more like an independent article than an integral link in the chain of Maciuika's overall study.

In chapter 6, "Cultural Fault Lines in the Wilhelmine Garden City Movement," Maciuika returns to one of his definite strengths: the teasing apart of complex institutional structures and political affiliations. Throughout his book, Maciuika is effective at getting beyond the highly-charged rhetoric put forth by various interest groups and this chapter is a case in point. By focusing on Karl Schmidt's Garden City in Dresden-Hellerau,
Maciuika unveils increasingly hardening fronts within Germany’s reform movement—in this case, between the German Garden City Society and the Werkbund. While Schmidt, Muthesius, Richard Riemerschmid, and Fischer pushed for a "pragmatic, business-oriented approach" (p. 217) to the planning and building of Hellerau, younger members of the Garden City Society such as Tessenow and Wolf Dohrn called for a much more individualistic and monumental architectural language. In a thoroughly researched chapter, Maciuika shows how these ideological and generational tensions, what he calls “cultural fault lines,” soon spilled over into the Werkbund itself and affected the organization of the First German Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1914.

Maciuika’s final chapter, “Werkbundpolitik and Weltpolitik: The German State’s Interest in Global Commerce and ‘Good Design,’ 1912-1914,” picks up some of the tensions and conflicts surrounding the Cologne exhibition. The infamous confrontation between Muthesius and Henry van de Velde during the Werkbund Congress over the issue of typification and individual artistic freedom stands firmly as one of the art historical founding myths of international modernism. Although Maciuika recasts this episode, he tries to give a more nuanced reading by placing Muthesius’ advocacy of types (Typisierung) within the context of Wilhelmine economic realities. He thus argues that supporters of Muthesius’ approach to design were directly implicated in German imperial policies, which aimed at international commercial growth and colonial expansion. Proponents of typification thus opened the doors for greater state involvement in the Werkbund and made it the “linchpin of an overarching plan according to which powerful German industries, influenced if not directly controlled by government, would deliver German products of high quality in a commercial economy defined by an unprecedented degree of organization” (p. 256).

In his relatively short conclusion, “World War I, Werkbund Propaganda, and Applied Arts Reform,” Maciuika tries to address some of the Werkbund’s more problematic rhetoric, which proclaims German form as Weltform. Yet, what starts out as a promising effort to explore the Werkbund’s implication in Germany’s war efforts soon jumps to the founding of the Bauhaus in 1919, which is seen as emblematic of the demise of Wilhelmine reform efforts. Still, as Maciuika emphatically declares, “however transformed, enlarged, or disguised, the debts of ‘Bauhaus thinking’ to German architecture and design culture before the First World War remained greater than Gropius—along with other members of the ‘generation of the 1880s’—ever cared to admit” (p. 298).

Maciuika’s book provides a long overdue account of some of the diverse tenets of the modern movement in German architecture and design that foregrounds the important interplay between individual reform efforts and state institutions. This narrative allows us to redress the development of German modernism during the final decades of the Wilhelmine Empire in its multiple facets and discontinuities, rather than postulating the genesis of the Bauhaus out of a complete void. This focus on Germany’s rich institutional landscape becomes one of the driving forces behind Maciuika’s study and makes for a fascinating and important reading of this long-overlooked moment in design history. Maciuika’s close attention to economic, social, and political structures provides a sturdy scaffolding for the construction of a more nuanced assessment of the contributions of Wilhelmine design reform to the Bauhaus agenda. One of the key insights that emerges from Before the Bauhaus lies in the realization that despite diverging rhetorics and pedagogies, both Wilhelmine reformers and Bauhaus masters were propelled by some of the same problems and questions: how to develop a truly modern architectural and design language; how to address mechanization and mass production; and how to retain artistic individuality, among others. With this in mind, it must be acknowledged that Wilhelmine design reformers actually left a much more tangible imprint on twentieth-century modernism than previously thought—which is not to suggest a teleological interpretation of Wilhelmine design reform that inevitably resulted in the Bauhaus.

The book’s organization into seven coherent and connected stand-alone chapters makes Maciuika’s book an effective teaching tool. It features a great number of illustrations, 129 in total, and an appendix that reproduces Muthesius’s and van de Velde’s Leitsätze and Gegenthesen from the 1914 Werkbund Congress episode. The source material cited in the footnotes is comprehensive and demonstrates a thorough understanding of Wilhelmine Germany’s institutional and intellectual landscape. Maciuika’s extensive bibliography brings together an unprecedented number of key texts and thus serves as an important reference for further studies of the empire’s design world, despite the fact that a bit more care might have been applied to assuring the correctness of publishers and dates.

Although Maciuika’s social history of modern German design “before the Bauhaus” is an invaluable contribution to the historiography of central European ar-
architecture and design that will hopefully trigger further studies of this crucial moment, three important issues should be raised with regard to Maciuika’s methodology. First, a strange discontinuity seems to develop over the course of Maciuika’s argument between his stated objective of revealing how “new material forms in architecture and the applied arts were not simple reflections of changing design sensibilities; they also presented a record of ambitions and struggles among various, often competing institutions in the private as well as governmental spheres” (pp. 12-13) and a seemingly increasing focus on individual reformers in the second half of his book, especially Muthesius and Gropius. Although there is nothing wrong with either model–institutional study or history of great protagonists—the two make for uncomfortable bedfellows in Maciuika’s book. While initially effective as a means of illustrating how individual reformers navigated a complex web of institutional and personal affiliations and relationships, the focus on Muthesius becomes increasingly unconvincing. Indeed, Muthesius seems to mutate into one of Pevsner’s “pioneers” of the modern movement, a model that Maciuika so clearly sets out to revise.

Second, Maciuika draws his argument about German design reform almost exclusively from a Prussian context. To be fair, most developments of interest to Maciuika took place within the geopolitical boundaries of Prussia. He also dedicates chapter 1 to design reform in the southern states. Yet, if one sets out to write a study of “architecture, politics and the German State,” then such a courteous nod to the southern states is not enough. Even if it was a conscious strategy on Maciuika’s part to focus his discussion on Prussia, he still misses out on an important dynamic within Wilhelmine Germany: the constant tension between the national and the regional. It thus comes as a bit of a surprise that Maciuika does not elaborate on the ways in which the United Workshop system, for example, became an ideological minefield, not just in the context of design reform, which he explores in great length, but also in terms of political allegiances and regional identities.

This observation raises a final point about the chosen timeframe for Maciuika’s narrative. Given his obvious interest in the trajectory of Germany’s modern movement, and in the Werkbund in particular, it makes a lot of sense to begin the study in the 1890s. Yet, a second, and in my opinion equally important, investigative strain is that of German design reform and education. In this context, a starting point of 1890 is less effective. In order to understand fully the rhetoric employed by reformers from the 1890s onwards as well as the internal logic of Germany’s institutional and educational geography, Maciuika would have been well served to dedicate at least one chapter to the 1870s and 1880s. The issue of historicist design and the search for a national German design language did not simply disappear during the 1890s and should be taken into account in any discussion of modernism. More specifically, the founding of applied arts associations, museums, journals, educational institutions, and exhibitions from the 1860s onwards not only jumpstarted German design debates, but set the tone for the 1890s. One might be tempted to argue that such a pre-history of Maciuika’s pre-history is too much to ask for, but it speaks to a larger issue in the field of German design history: the repeated exclusion of the first two decades of the Wilhelmine Empire, because its historicist design language is seen by many historians as a style retardaire. This remark is made not to argue for a recuperation of historicist design practices, but rather to call attention to the fact that many developments during the 1890s were deeply rooted in the structures and discourses of the 1870s and 1880s. Thus, as a study of the heterogeneous trajectories of the modern movement, Maciuika’s book is a great success, but as a study of German design reform and education it might have missed an opportunity to truly open up the field.

Notes

