

The New Bauhaus

The German Bauhaus (roughly “building-house”) was a touchstone for 20th C. Western art, architecture, and design founded after WWI by Walter Gropius and other creative thinkers which introduced both new ideas and philosophies to a then shattered Germany. Based first in Weimar (from 1919) and later in Dessau (in 1925), its teachers proved an immense influence grounded in the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total artwork”) in which all the arts would eventually be combined.

Bauhaus style later became one of the most influential currents in modern design, [modernist architecture](#), and architectural education. The movement had a profound influence upon subsequent developments in art, architecture, graphic design, interior design, and [typography](#). Led by the work and writings of Gropius, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and the radical Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, the program lasted until 1933, when it was closed under pressure from the Nazi regime.

Moholy-Nagy eventually moved to Chicago in 1937, where he spearheaded “The New Bauhaus,” which took its inspiration from the famous German school and brought together both art and design students, an innovation at the time. This school’s story is the subject of the current documentary “The New Bauhaus,”

From his Bauhaus experiences, Moholy-Nagy took a pioneering interdisciplinary, mixed-media approach to art and design that was vastly ahead of its time. Though the school had early financial troubles, it ultimately found an angel in Walter Paepcke, Chairman of the [Container Corporation of America](#) and an early champion of industrial design in America. Seeing clear financial advantage in the school’s focus, Paepcke offered his personal support, and by 1939, Moholy-Nagy was able to re-open the school as the Chicago School of Design. In 1944, it became the Institute of Design, where it still resides at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

The film chronicles the lively history of the Institute, illustrated by myriad clips and photos of the period, showing both the ideas germinating in classrooms and exhibits, and interviews with one-time students, many of whom became prominent designers and creators of their own. To solidify this history are occasional quotes in an over-voice narrative by Hans Ulrich Obrist, reading the words of the master. More up-to-date material is covered in intimate interviews and sequences with Moholy-Nagy’s daughter, Hattula, who adds some personal flavor and an in-depth exploration of both her father’s vast and groundbreaking work, as well as his compelling personality and boundless energy (Moholy-Nagy died in 1946 at 51 years of age).

What is thrilling about this review of the work of Moholy-Nagy and his colleagues is the amazing scope and ambitions of the documentary’s filmmakers, led by co-writer and director Alyssa Nahmias, who carefully and fruitfully

compiled--from mountains of material and serious research—the movement’s major works, from stunning new buildings through well-wrought crafts to more pedestrian advertising designs.

“The New Bauhaus” offers an illuminating portrait of a visionary teacher and thinker—and his legacy.

(The film is on VOD, including Apple TV and Vimeo, runs 89 minutes, and is not rated).

(July 2021)