Chicago Bauhaus:
Past, Present and Future

Part 6, Period 1955 to 1969

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A previously unpublished speech given at a symposium honoring the 25th anniversary of the Institute of Design's merger with Illinois Institute of Technology. The all-day symposium and dinner was held May 11, 1974 at 632 N. Dearborn, home of the Institute of Design at the time of the 1949 merger. "Part 6" in the title of the speech refers to the schedule of talks. Jay Doblin was the sixth speaker in the program, commenting on the period of time between 1955 and 1969 when he was Director.

This publication follows the original typewritten draft of the speech with only very minor modifications to aid in reading. The copy of the original from which this version was created was found among James S. Montague's papers. It may be viewed in the Institute of Design's section of the IIT Archives at the Galvin Library of Illinois Institute of Technology.

Charles L. Owen

My assignment today is to fill in the fourteen year period, 1955 to 1969, when I served as Director. But rather than begin with September 1955, I would like to outline the background of design education that conditioned my actions.

Design education began in the studios of Europe during the Renaissance, a master-apprentice relationship, working directly on projects. This direct process became formalized during the 1600's in dozens of academies founded by royalty in major cities all over Europe to produce splendid artifacts in architecture, sculpture, painting, stained glass, woodcarving, metalsmithing, weaving, pottery, furniture and the rest. These academies, which ought to have been disbanded when royalty was overthrown during the 1700's, went right on producing artists, designers and artifacts for the church, government and the wealthy. The epitome of these academies, the École des Beaux Arts started by Louis XIV in 1671, still goes strong.

During the latter part of the 1800's fundamental changes began to occur in the arts and crafts. Photography introduced new ways to see, industry offered new techniques and materials, and there was a new climate in public attitudes. This change climaxed immediately after the first world war with the introduction of mass production and communication.

In this ferment there were many centers of change within the arts and design but the one that interests us here today is the Bauhaus which spearheaded a revolution against Beaux Arts education. In my opinion, the actual accomplishments of the Bauhaus have been misinterpreted. The Bauhaus has been called the first school of design to be in touch with emerging technology, but I believe this to be a fallacy. The Bauhaus was unconcerned with technological developments such as electrification, electronic communication, personal hygiene, refrigeration, telephone, motion pictures, the automobile, street furniture, mass transit, hospital equipment, industrialized building, airplanes, packaged foods, etc. The Bauhaus was not interested in the function of technology but only its form; it produced geometric shaped arts and crafts—lamps, pottery, tea pots, rugs, chairs, jewelry, custom architecture, painting-sculpture, etc. The Bauhaus in fact exerted an overwhelmingly negative influence on design by focusing interest on the pure form of products, not their utility.

The extraordinary accomplishment of the Bauhaus was not in design, but in visual education. True to the German mentality for analysis, the entire visual experience was dissected and taught as exercises. Rather than teach art and design directly as in the Beaux Arts method, visual exercises were reduced to color, shape, material, movement, structure, light, etc. The student later resynthesized all these fragments into a total experience. This "parts-to-whole" concept is the direct opposite of the Beaux Arts "whole-to-parts" method.

Gropius, a true genius, put together a faculty of the most advanced and able artists and designers in Europe. How he was able to predict the individual greatness of these teachers and convince them to come together and combine their efforts into a single coherent unity is awe-inspiring. The climactic turning point in formulating this revolution in visual education came with the second generation of faculty—Bayer, Breuer, Moholy, Albers, etc., some of whom were Bauhaus students. This stupendous achievement spawned two basic strains of design education—experimentalism and purism.

Experimental visual education, a Gropius invention, was brought to Chicago in 1937 by Moholy, who successfully adapted it to the American context of pragmatism. The ID program based on this was a great success propelled by the white heat of Moholy's genius and drive.

The second strain, purism, was clearly articulated by Mies during the later years of the Bauhaus. Mies brought purism to Chicago in the mid-1930's and developed it in IIT's school of architecture. This school was very successful based on Mies' uncompromising will to produce absolute purity.

There are fundamental differences between experimentalism and purism. Experimentalism trades on individual freedom, "anything goes"; there is a high tolerance for mistakes; there is no house style; the point is to get people to develop as themselves rather than to emulate some master. Purism, conversely, has all the answers; experimentation is forbidden; mistakes are not tolerated; the goal is the absolute adherence and perfection of style of the omnipotent "ideal master". Both of these strains were clear at the Bauhaus and Gropius understood this difference very well. In a letter to the AIA Journal in January 1963 he wrote:

"Last year I visited Frank Lloyd Wright's school in Taliesin which his widow valiantly carries on after his death. I saw the work of several scores of students turning out without exception designs in the vocabulary of their great master. No independent approach could be found. This experience assured me again that such a method of education cannot be called creative, for it invites imitation and results in training assistants, not independent artists in their own right.

"When I started the Bauhaus as its responsible Director, I had come to the conclusion that an autocratic, subjective approach must block the innate budding expression of differently-gifted students, as the teacher—even with the best intention—imposes the results of his own thought and work on him. I have convinced myself that a good teacher must abstain from handing out his personal vocabulary to his students, but rather let him find his own way even via detours; that he should encourage the growth of independence in the student.

"Accordingly, handicraft in the workshops was right from the start, not an end in itself, but laboratory experiment preparatory to industrial production. If the initial products of the Bauhaus looked like individual craft products, this was a necessary detour for the groping student whom we avoided to prod with a foregone conclusion."

But strangely, neither of these powerful concepts of visual education became the basis of art or design education in the United States. The schools in America, Europe and Japan adopted one of two different approaches: in the over 800 schools of art and design, over 700 were warmed over Beaux Arts teaching based on "do your thing" in the studio. Extensions of liberal studies programs or basement museum operations, these programs produced truckloads of visual debris. The successful students output by these programs had to be so personally strong and talented as not to be destroyed by these flabby experiences.

The remaining one hundred or so commercial art schools train "hands" to be immediately useful in factory design departments, consultant offices, art studios, advertising agencies, etc., to "give the public what it wants". It is commercial designers who produce the illustrations, packages, ads, products that fill American supermarkets, television screens, stores, streets and homes. Pure or experimental designs are rare in Ameri-

can mass production and communication, maybe a couple of percent of the total.

Only two schools were clearly neither Beaux Arts nor commercial: the "experimental" Institute of Design and the "puristic" school of architecture at IIT. These two schools were diametrically opposite in educational concept.

So much for the fore-play. When I was approached in early 1955 I was told that IIT's School of Architecture was to be joined to the Institute of Design in Crown Hall. Having been an avid reader and admirer of Gropius, Mies, Moholy and Kepes, I could not imagine a more exciting development in design education. At that time I had already resigned from Raymond Loewy and had planned to leave commercial design. I was disappointed by the lack of research and planning that produced the shallow products and communications that were being foisted on American society. This was an extraordinary opportunity that I could not pass up. But a visit to Chicago showed me the deep troubles at the Institute of Design. The school's emotional troubles were debilitating to the faculty and students. IIT's administration, confounded by this turmoil, had reached the point of closing the school. I felt I could bridge the gap between the ID and IIT by acting as interpreter to reestablish a rational dialog between the two.

No one could have been less appropriately established than myself. As a Pratt graduate, as chief designer for the "king of commercials" and as Vice President of the American Society of Industrial Designers, I represented the commercial hard core designer, a philosophy that was opposed by both experimentalism and purism. I was met with furious protest, but took the job anyhow.

I must confess that at that moment I felt more for purism than I did for experimentalism. I was awed by Mies and his work but quickly fell out of love with this narrow concept of education which I found stifling and arrogant. Purism knew all the answers before the questions were asked. Not only did they press all the problems into the "Procrustean bed" of pure form, but they also pressed the students into it as well. I believe that one day the world will deal harshly with Mies and his blithe disregard for the economics, the human use, the efficiency of his buildings which were sacrificed for purity.

I had some disdain for experimentalism; I felt that it was not a fundamental way of producing effective design. I knew that experimentalism was a powerful educational tool, but its very nature defeated finishing anything, inculcating a sort of "diddling" attitude which became an end in itself. Every experiment led to four more experiments. To solve the problems that faced our society it was essential to develop a new kind of serious design based on accurate information and not on experimental flights, puristic form, or commercial fantasies. The goal was to develop designers capable of constructing an informational base on which proper solutions could be made. A typical instance of where experimental design misfired was Moholy's famous wooden bedspring, an answer to replacing steel which was in short supply. Instead of making such a complex mechanism, the designers should have first studied how people sleep, and once having gained an understanding of sleeping, produced the least complex, most efficient means of making sleep possible. The wooden bedspring was a complicated way of achieving a spurious goal. The answer is probably some sort of simple mat, like the Japanese bed or a sleeping bag. My goal was to establish a school where serious research underpinned the design activity.

So there we were, the remains of the foremost school of experimentalism; the triumphant school of purism; and a commercial designer, all locked up together in Crown Hall. Three divergent philosophies on a collision course. But instead of the hostile reception I expected, the ID faculty and students got to work under extraordinarily difficult conditions and we all got along famously. ID had two great teachers, Misch Kohn and Aaron Siskind, who brought stability and rationality and the students were excellent. Under adverse conditions of little money, no equipment and an unfinished building, we soon grew into what I believe was a first rate program.

We salvaged the best of experimental education (which had survived many changes since the Bauhaus) and added to it a carefully constructed program of information based design that produced noncommercial products that worked. It was a different school with different people with different goals in a different time. Our aim was to produce designers who had the will, ability, and the ethical base to change American production for the better. What concerned me most was

the fact that this concept might be a middle-of-the-road position which might fail because it did not have the clarity of some polar position like purism or experimentalism. I do not think we failed; many of the students are doing important work all over the world.

In the middle 60's it became clear to me that the practice of design was undergoing an enormous change. No longer were narrow specialties effective, designers must be a very broadly educated lot. With this realization a small committee including James Montague, Charles Owen, Chad Taylor, and myself began to reconstruct the undergraduate program so that general designers rather than specialists would be produced. We believed that specialties should be taught in the graduate school and that the Institute of Design should focus on graduate programs that would produce better professionals than anyone had previously considered. The word "professional" as it relates to advanced design needs defining.

A practice is the direct application of some sort of accumulated knowledge. If people break legs, than someone will try to fix them. Soon people develop skill at fixing broken legs and begin to tell each other how to do it, gradually distilling and passing along the most effective techniques. From this informal teaching of such practices, an educational program will be organized to teach practitioners. To structure that program requires analysis of a practice in order to develop the curriculum—what must be taught first, and how much of each subject. Once education gets organized, the educators begin to realize that pieces of the necessary knowledge are missing, which inevitably leads to research to fill in the gaps. Once the research gets organized (usually leading to doctorates), the flow practice-to-education-to-theory reverses itself and become theory-to-education-to-practice. This reversal of flow is evidence that a practice has transcended to a profession. Under this definition design is still a practice, not a profession. So far design has gone from practice to education and stalled; it has not progressed to theory. There is no body of knowledge, no organized research, no doctorates in design, no downward flow of information from research to education to practice. Design education is still training practitioners.

It seems about time that design matures from a practice to a profession, beginning with properly structured problem-solving research groups in universities at the graduate level. It is here that

the greatest challenge and opportunity for professional design education exists. The plan was a one-two operation: a general undergraduate foundation in visual education and specialized professional education at the graduate level. In September 1969, IIT's administration made it clear that the Institute of Design had a low priority on their "to-do" list; they would not support this plan. In addition, IIT announced a reorganization of the two schools. The Institute of Design was to report to the Dean of Liberal Studies, the School of Architecture to the Dean of Engineering. This intentional separation of two schools, that should have been made closer not farther apart, was a giant step in the wrong direction, not only from the point of view of operating efficiency, but of philosophy of design as well.

At this point I decided to pause and take stock, and so I resigned. This five-year interval has given me the opportunity to see visual education in a new perspective. To me the challenge of developing professional designers and artists is still important, but it is less demanding than the larger challenge to visually educate the entire populace.

First rate professional curricula for art and design can be organized. These should not be solely commercial, experimental, puristic or Beaux Arts, but a carefully programmed mixture of all of these. And added to it should be the requirement for developing the base of information that, as in any science, underpins every project. But today's designer is in an untenable position. However talented and well trained, the designer's effectiveness is blocked by a visually illiterate public. An unprepared public that has been programmed to demand bad design and bad art presents overwhelming opposition. The big issues that confront design—communications, transportation, housing, environment, education, energy—are beyond the power of the designer to solve. Because of this, what we are now getting is a higher standard of lower living. In the face of public pressure, today's designer can take only one of two positions: to design for a small, highbrow elite, or to compromise with the mass demands.

And now to look to the future. To me the critical task for tomorrow's visual education is not only to produce super designers and artists, but to visually educate the entire public. People must learn to live with simpler, more economical, more efficient and fewer products. This is the direct opposite of the concept of excess to which people have aspired since mankind began making things. The automobile is a typical example. The bigger, fancier, more expensive, more symbolic, less efficient the car, the more desirable it is. This is a tragic outcome of irresponsible manufacturers interacting with a public that has an insatiable demand for more status and luxury. What is needed is a structure of visual education.

It is commonly thought there are two structured languages—verbal and numerical. But there are three; the third is visual. When a child begins schooling, he is taught the "three R's": Readin', Ritin' and Rithmetic. But these are only two of the three forms of communication—verbal and numerical, leaving out visual. Verbal and numerical languages have developed structures backed up by reading systems and math programs that are taught in logical sequence. Verbal begins with spelling, goes on to grammar, composition, and up through the more complex uses—literature, poetry, technical writing, etc. Numerical is the same—beginning with addition, through multiplication, to algebra, to calculus, and so on. A student transferring from PS 156 in Brooklyn to Harding School in Los Angeles stays in step and may even continue with the same text.

Visual language, on the other hand, is taught at random or not at all. This situation is true of all but the few who are trained as visual professionals—artists, designers or architects. Only a fraction of Americans have any training in visual language or can command its functional use. Primary schools use art as a time-killer to amuse the children. In secondary schools art education has become a form of occupational therapy. Art courses are the "dump" for students who can't make it in the more rigorous verbal or numerical programs. In the main, art is regarded by most school administrations as a cultural frill. There is good reason for this attitude toward art education. Superintendents, if they do not know, at least suspect that art courses as they are taught today are ineffective. There is no structure or knowledge supporting art courses. Today's art programs start by tracing a pumpkin with a crayon, go on to paper flowers and paper maché clown faces to producing imitation Picassos. Most art courses are pointed to having children "express themselves". This presents only one part

of visual language, the aesthetic aspect, leaving out the two more important areas for everyday use—visual symbology and visual communication.

Each art teacher presents a fragment of the whole, drawn from their personal interests—without regard to what other teachers have taught or will teach. If the teacher is interested in basket weaving or paper folding, that's what the students get. Imagine if English or mathematics were taught this way, with no structure or texts to guide the program. Visual language can be structured and taught, but art education is failing to do it.

The solution to the enormous problem of visual illiteracy lies in the introduction of studies in visual language into the educational system. The American public will never become more visually literate until courses in visual language are structured systematically as are verbal and numerical courses, and included with equal intensity through primary and secondary schooling.

What must be done is to develop an interrelated program of visual education based on an analysis of visual language. This identifies the "grammar" and packages it so that it becomes the logical foundation for the program. From this base the various class programs are developed that correlate all the exercises and materials needed to make the program go. Only through such a plan can boards, superintendents and teachers be convinced of the efficacy and validity of a visual education program.

There are at least three important reasons for becoming visually literate:

• First, a more visually sensitive public would demand better design, which would lead to a better environment. It is visual insensitivity that tolerates chaos and ugliness; it can accommodate to such a condition by "turning it off".

• Second, while visual illiterates lose out on the richness of life, this is relatively unimportant when compared to the loss of one-third of one's mental capacity. Visual is one of the three functional methods of thinking and communicating.

• Third, the failure to see accurately with a structured capacity causes a failure to separate the real from the symbolic world. For a century now, the public has grown farther from reality as mass communications, education, entertainment, symbolic products, etc. have disconnected us into a world of unreality. We have become actors in a giant Disneyland where we climb fiberglass mountains where electronic birds twitter, ride in phony riverboats where automated Indians shoot rubber arrows at us, and the Victorian city nearby is elegantly replicated at 4/5 scale. Our contacts with the world are largely visual, and if we become unable to discern real from artificial, we are in trouble.

The artifacts and communications which surround us—automobiles, furniture, entertainment, clothing, education, news, homes, appliances, and all the rest—are becoming more symbolic and less real. Only well structured visual education can keep people in touch with reality. We have reached a threshold where we may lose reality, which will not be restored until some enormous catastrophe occurs.

Instead of training super designers, we should be preparing to train super customers. This begins by developing programs for visual education that will first be debugged in well organized visual education programs at the university level. These programs can also serve as the basis for graduate professional artists and designers. Once these programs are functioning, they can be compressed and taught to all the students in the university regardless of major, then moved down to secondary and finally to primary level schools. There is only one way to produce a visually literate public: to develop the visual education programs that will eventually reach everyone. This may sound grandiose, and yet this is where we must start. the seed of the concept began at the Bauhaus in the experimental work of Gropius and Moholy which so far has only been used to train professionals. There is great power in the idea, and the time to organize a university of visual education is now.