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house & home



Omran al Owais

On the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Bauhaus, we trace the design school's enduring influence on architecture and design [hh3](#)

don't miss

If you're heading for Sweden this summer, catch the Ikea retrospective at Stockholm's Liljevachs museum. Tracing the phenomenon from its first 1950s flat pack to today, it's entertaining and full of surprises. www.liljevachs.stockholm.se



Above: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a former director of the Bauhaus school, designed Farnsworth House at the end of the 1940s; with its glass and steel planes, it is a seminal example of the International style and has spawned thousands of contemporary 'glass box' buildings. On the cover: the Emirati architect, Omran al Owais, acknowledges the influence of Bauhaus on his work, which includes the B22 houses in Al Barsha, Dubai. Landmarks Illinois

Happy birthday Bauhaus

Ninety years on, the Bauhaus spirit remains a constant source of inspiration to architects and designers, discovers Jane Strachan

Tadao Ando, the designer of the Maritime Museum planned for Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, has a dog called Le Corbusier.

This rather sweetly highlights the lasting impact of the Swiss architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris ("Le Corbusier") one of the greats of Modernism – the design philosophy that was distilled in the teachings of the Bauhaus school.

Perhaps even more telling of Bauhaus's legacy is the extent to which "less is more", a favourite aphorism of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the school's director of architecture in the early 1930s, has become part of our everyday vocabulary.

Founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 by the architect Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus laid the groundwork for a movement that would strive in all things to produce design that was balanced artistically, technically and practically. It produced a cadre of architects and designers for whom form would follow function, creating buildings, furniture, works of art and even shoes. While not necessarily echoing Adolf Loos's view that "ornamentation is a crime" they fine-tuned engineering and materials to ensure that function was paramount. Decorative detail gave way to clean lines.

So normal is that notion today we scarcely think about its origins.

The chromed-tube and black leather "Mies van der Rohe" cantilever chair in your living room, the Wassily Kandinsky or Paul Klee painting you covet, your unfussy door handles, the satin-chrome spotlight bar in your kitchen, the Anni Albers-style textile wall hanging – all of these owe their existence to the Bauhaus.

But the simplicity that characterised Bauhaus design represents more than just a paring back of ornamental fripperies; it signifies a great leap forward from what had gone before – an entirely new way of thinking about design.

Its predecessors could already be seen from around 1900, when architects first started questioning traditional styles and sought to integrate

them with emerging technologies, giving rise to the early Modernist movement. The work of Frank Lloyd Wright, for example, clearly shares a language with the Bauhaus greats.

The Bauhaus aimed to produce work that was morally elevated, concerned with the social aspects of design; the move by a number of prominent Bauhaus personalities to the US after the Nazis assumed power in Germany, and the adoption of Bauhaus thinking by other architects of the time, led to the International style, which quickly established itself as a popular approach for a more capitalist time and place.

Its principles of functionalism, of architecture conceived as spatial volume rather than as mass, its regularity of planning without axial symmetry, and avoidance of applied decoration resulted in buildings such as the United Nations Secretariat building in New York, the 1950s work, with Oscar Niemeyer, of that grand name Le Corbusier.

Mies van der Rohe moved to the US in 1937. Already on his way to becoming one of the century's most noted designers, in 1929 he had designed the German pavilion at the International Exposition in Barcelona, as well as the now-iconic chrome and leather Barcelona chair that furnished it. His work in the US included some of that country's most notable structures: the twin residential towers on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive (completed in 1951) and the Seagram Building in New York (1954, with Philip Johnson). His Farnsworth House, in rural Plano, Illinois (1946-51) a small-scale masterpiece of glass and steel planes hovering over a meadow, has spawned thousands of modern "glass box" houses – most notably, perhaps, Philip Johnson's own home in Connecticut, The Glass House.

Far from being a mid-century phenomenon, the Bauhaus heritage lives on. As George Katodrytis, the associate professor of architecture at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) says, the movement's most significant legacy was the way it used technology to transform design in the 20th century from a decorative and individually crafted art to industrially produced objects and modernist buildings. "It produced utility and everyday artefacts and addressed a large audience. New styles of designed objects and buildings were created, with novel, simplified and refined forms. Utility gained an aesthetic value. It opened new possibilities for experimenta-

tion and abstraction in both art and architecture."

This explains, too, why Bauhaus-based furniture still has tremendous presence: many people are right now sitting in chairs, working at tables or lit by lamps that come directly out of that school and its proponents.

In fact, the cantilever chair remains the all-time favourite piece of Bauhaus design of the prominent Milan-based Lebanese architect William Sawaya. "It is still so modern and contemporary. Alone, it tells the story of the Bauhaus," he says.

In 1972 Axel Bruchhäuser, an escapee from East Germany, bought the Tecta furniture company and began reproducing old and sometimes forgotten products from the Bauhaus masters and other modernists. In some cases, starting from a photograph, they meticulously reconstructed furniture pieces; in others they travelled all over Europe and beyond to find the original masters. Bruchhäuser found Mart Stam after four years of searching in Switzerland, Eli Lizzitzky's widow he tracked down to a housing estate in Siberia.

Today Tecta's range includes historical icons such as the Gerrit Rietveld L40 lamp, the Gropius Director's Chair, the Marcel Breuer Foldable Armchair D4, (1927), the Bauhaus Cradle, by Peter Keler (1922), and furniture pieces by Peter and Alison Smithson from the 1950s onwards.

"The Bauhaus spirit keeps working in the modern world," says Tecta's director Christian Drescher, "particularly when times and fashion become more and more superficial". Tecta's Bauhaus re-editions carry the "Original Bauhaus" signet given by the Bauhaus archive in Berlin, who guarantees license payments to the Bauhaus masters and their heirs. However, despite Germany's strong copyright laws, fakes from Italy, China and elsewhere have, perhaps inevitably, flooded the world.

In the Middle East, in 2007 the Gallery of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar held the region's first exhibition on the Bauhaus interior, aimed at inspiring a new generation of designers here.

While there is no indication that a great deal took hold, there are, here and there, some elements of the philosophy. Kevin Mitchell, a colleague of Katodrytis at AUS, points out that The Architects Collaborative (TAC), founded by Walter Gropius in the mid-1940s, and on which his influence continued for decades



thereafter, designed Abu Dhabi Library and Cultural Centre (now the Cultural Foundation) in the 1980s.

And Katodrytis singles out Dubai's World Trade Centre: "It is an elegant high-rise building. Buildings of that period [the 1970s] were clear statements of modernism, commissioned by the Ruler to reposition the city and look at the future, yet relating to their environment."

More recently, the innovative young Dubai architect Omran al Owais, the founder & creative director of Centimetercube, is introducing Bauhaus thinking to the local landscape. Witness his B22 houses in Al Barsha, and a pair of commercial villas in Umm Suqeim, both in Dubai. "When I started my career I mimicked a lot of the main Bauhaus architects [Van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Gropius, Johnson], which gave me a good understanding of how they worked. Today I try to fuse some of the ideas they had with our Emirati culture."

He believes the UAE could do with a bit more Bauhaus: "The movement was radical in the changes it brought to thinking and I am, for example, hoping to change the current approach to mosque design, maybe to be more simply oriented toward our current time by using new methods of construction, spicing it up with a greener architecture."

Another practice that is bringing fresh, creative architecture to the UAE, with more than a passing nod to the Modernists, is dxb.lab, founded in 2000 by Khalid al Najjar. The beach



Above: Marcel Breuer's Foldable Armchair D4 (1927) and Walter Gropius's F51 (1920) are both manufactured by Tecta. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, Gropius designed its new school building; it reopened this year as a hotel.

house it designed in Umm Suqeim is surely one of the UAE's most exciting contemporary homes.

Perhaps, then, the idea of using both craftsmanship and mass production, of learning from both modernist typologies and traditional craftsmanship, could provide an interesting "Bauhaus-type" moment for the UAE.

Unlike pastiche, this would, simply, recognise the inter-connectedness of everything – of which William Sawaya says: "Nothing exists if not linked to other realities. If I don't know, for example, what young

people like as movies, theatre, cuisine, art, music and design, how can I be innovative?"

And so to Tadao Ando: his minimalist work seems to reflect Bauhaus style in its use of geometric principles. His dhow sail-inspired design promises to be restrained while making a strong mark. It will be, as the German journalist Heiko Klaas wrote in *Der Spiegel*, both honest and purposeful. Which bring us back to the essence of Bauhaus ...

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