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Whimsy in Germany
A Modern Home Evolves

By Andrea Truppin
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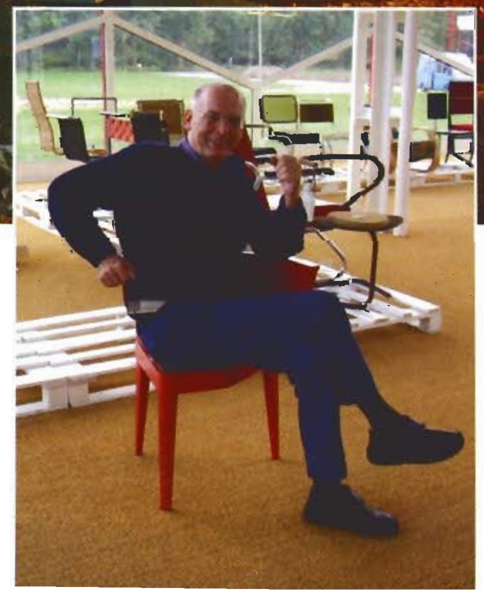
To call Axel Bruchhäuser a fanatic is anything but derogatory. For nearly 40 years, this engineer-by-training, sculptor-at-heart, has been driven by a single-minded obsession with modern design. Owner, with his nephew Christian Drescher, of the highly respected German furniture company Tecta, known for its exacting reissues of Bauhaus furniture and its commissions of risky new designs, Bruchhäuser knows no division between his professional and private lives. For more than 20 years, he lived a continually unfolding design experiment, as his diminutive home, on a steep hillside above the Weser River, not far from his rural Lauenförde factory, was transformed around him bit by bit into a poetic expression of his spiritual and aesthetic yearnings, thanks to the fanciful interventions of German sculptor and designer Stefan Wewerka and the British architecture team of Alison and Peter Smithson. These unorthodox designers,

Above Over 20 years, the British architecture team of Alison and Peter Smithson remodeled a traditional timber and limestone house for Axel Bruchhäuser, owner of German furniture manufacturer Tecta. To meld the house with its steep and thickly wooded hillside setting, the architects exploded walls outward to form latticed glass porches and cut apertures in interior walls, creating framed and layered views that sweep through the house and to the outside. Raised wooden walkways link the house to a meditation pavilion, left, and a treehouse retreat.



Right Axel Bruchhäuser seated in a three-legged chair by Stefan Wewerka, designed for Tecta in 1979. Behind Bruchhäuser is a section of his furniture museum containing his vast archive of 20th-century design, both famous and unsung, collected over four decades..

Top The Smithsons's alterations and additions to the original Tecta factory building, located in the rural town of Lauenförde, Germany, include a second level office dubbed the "Panorama Porch."

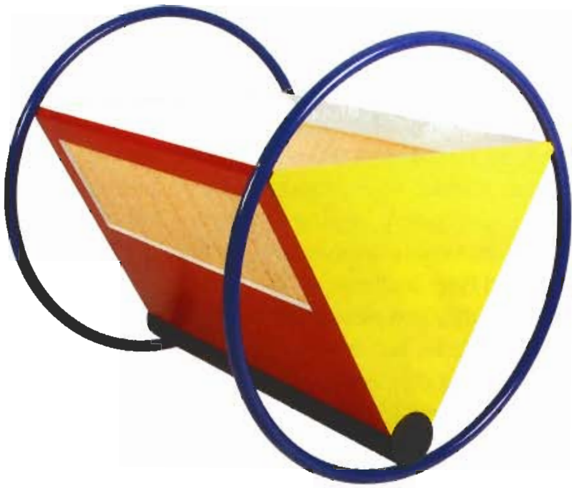
Above left and right As with Bruchhäuser's house, changes to the factory included the addition of glassed-in porches, with their signature zig-zag pattern latticed windows and faceted façades, where workers can take a break to enjoy the sunlight and greenery. Several of the one-story factory buildings surround a courtyard where the Smithsons created the *Yellow Lookout*. It invites a pause in a busy day to climb to the top to contemplate the landscape beyond the roofs.

who also created furniture for Tecta, sensed in Bruchhäuser a kindred spirit, and the designs that arose from their mutual appreciation sprang from their deepest creative impulses.

These projects were a natural step towards the present for Bruchhäuser, following years of tracking down designs lost for more than half a century — glimpsed in a sketch published long ago or in the background of an old photograph — wooing their elderly designers, or their wary wives, ex-girlfriends, children or colleagues, so he could measure a prototype or plumb its fabrication. Along the way, he gathered a loyal following that eventually encompassed a good deal of the surviving Bauhaus crowd.

Bruchhäuser was born in East Germany in 1943 to an entrepreneurial family that managed to hold onto its furniture manufacturing company long after most private enterprises had been nationalized by the post-World War II Communist government. Although he had always planned to join the family business — he even recaned chairs for pocket money as a youngster — he knew early on that he was not interested in the "old family line" of traditional upholstered furniture. Rather, inspired by Bauhaus designs he saw in books and magazines, he was eager to produce modern furniture, like the starkly geometric cradle designed by Peter Keler in 1922 — a triangle suspended between two circles — with a primary color scheme suggested by Wassily Kandinsky. But the East German government would not permit the production of what it considered "elitist" furniture.

In 1972, the family company was expropriated and the 28-year-old Bruchhäuser and his father, Werner, arrived in West Germany with nothing but a couple of suitcases. They immediately looked into purchasing Tecta, a furniture company founded in 1954 by architect Hans Könecke to produce his own designs; the Bruchhäusers had



produced some parts for the company in the past. Hoping to secure a loan, they visited the owner of the Fagus Shoe-Last Company, with whom Bruchhäuser's grandfather had collaborated in the 1930s. His office was still located in Walter Gropius's famous 1911 building in Alfred and, while waiting in the lobby, Bruchhäuser noticed a wooden armchair that he guessed was by Gropius. After research confirmed his hunch, he contacted Gropius's wife, Ise, in the United States and received permission to reissue it. It would be the new Tecta's first Bauhaus product.

In 1978, Bruchhäuser attended the opening of a new building in Berlin for the Bauhaus Archive, designed by Gropius and completed after his death. There, he met Ise Gropius in person for the first time, establishing a relationship with her that would lead to an introduction to Marcel Breuer, among other designers. Breuer, who had left Germany in the 1930s, had expressed no desire to return to the designs of his youth. He nevertheless allowed Bruchhäuser to reissue a number of them, including a folding tubular steel chair with fabric bands, designed in 1927, a cousin to his famous *Wassily* chair. In 1979, in a letter to the Bauhaus Archive two years before he died, he poignantly wrote: "The surfacing of this design is like an old, forgotten dream..."

In a telling example of Bruchhäuser's doggedness, he learned from the elderly Erich Brendel, who had studied at the Bauhaus, that he had given his single prototype of a folding table, designed in 1924, to his girlfriend of long ago. Tracking her down to the town of Aachen, Bruchhäuser wrote to her and, receiving no reply, drove to her home one weekend and rang her doorbell. The elderly woman who answered refused to admit to the existence of the table, until finally, she relented, won over by Bruchhäuser's persistence (he returned repeatedly), his pitiful plea to merely measure the table, his interest in her sculpture or perhaps his agreement to pay 500 Deutsche marks. Her sister, however, snapped, "Not enough," and Bruchhäuser finally handed over the entire contents of his wallet, perhaps 1000 marks. "You can measure it," said the ex-girlfriend, "and repair it for me," and so began a fast friendship.

Bruchhäuser formed a close working relationship with Sergius Ruegenberg, draftsman for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe during the years that he designed the *Barcelona* and *Tugendhat* chairs. Ruegenberg, who has designed several chairs for Tecta, was a mine of information for Bruchhäuser's research into the development of the cantilevered chair — an interest that morphed into an obsession — and he recounted Mies's reaction to the groundbreaking 1926 cantilevered chair by Dutch designer Mart Stam that would spawn countless offspring. Sketching Stam's chair, Ruegenberg remembered, Mies commented, "Ugly, those fittings are really ugly. If only he'd rounded them off — there, that looks better," changing the square arms and legs into sinuous curves, and thus creating his famous tubular steel and wicker cantilevered chair of 1927.

Bruchhäuser also got to know Jean Prouvé, with whom he shared

Above left Tecta manufactures Peter Keler's wood, wicker and steel-tube *Bauhaus Cradle*, designed in 1922 at the Weimar Bauhaus; Wassily Kandinsky, his teacher, suggested the primary color scheme.

Above right In 1972, newly arrived in West Germany, Bruchhäuser happened upon a wood chair (then without upholstery) in the lobby of the Fagus Shoe-Last Building, a 1911 curtain-wall structure by Walter Gropius. He guessed, correctly, that Gropius had also designed the chair, contacted the Bauhaus founder's wife, Ise, and received permission to reissue it. Now known as the F51, it was Tecta's first Bauhaus product.

Below It required sleuthing and persistence for Bruchhäuser to obtain the only prototype of Erich Brendel's folding, rolling tea table of 1924, reissued by Tecta in 1985 in two different sizes, the M10-4, shown here, and the smaller K10.

Above left Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's cantilevered armchair of 1927, designed with Lilly Reich, of bent steel tubing and wicker.

Above right Tecta's B25 tubular steel and wicker chair, its best-selling product, is the culmination of Bruchhäuser's fascination with the cantilevered chair form. Introduced in 1987, it incorporates Jean Prouvé's concept from 1924 of flattening the steel tubing at the chair's "knees" for improved strength and stability; the technique was patented by Bruchhäuser in 1990.

a respect for engineering and the unique properties of materials. He was particularly interested in Prouvé's idea of flattening steel tubing for strength, and in 1987 designed his own caned cantilevered chair, the B-25, the company's best selling product, incorporating that feature into the "knees" of its tubular steel legs.

The stories he collected, Bruchhäuser says, were "endless," and he had also amassed an enormous archive of 20th-century design — drawings, photographs, prototypes — so he created a museum to house them in. It now comprises four one-story buildings, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson, on the grassy field next to the Tecta factory (which they also altered), containing a mind-boggling profusion of chairs, tables and other furniture. One building is devoted to the cantilevered chair and to nameless designs: the "Anonymous Aristocrats" collection, which contains everything from tractor seats and dentist chairs to early airline seats. "We have collected many that are at least as good as Prouvé and Breuer," says Bruchhäuser. "They were made because people need to sit. It shows very nicely what goes on today with modern design: that even a simple idea will be sold like it's a big invention. These pieces bring us back to earth."

Another building contains prototypes and production models by Prouvé, including many simple school desks, as well as furniture for Tecta by Stefan Wewerka and the Smithsons. The newest building, completed in 2008, displays Tecta's current production of new and reissued designs.

It is dizzying to stroll through these buildings, essentially glass sheds with the lightest of steel armatures, the furniture lined up on low platforms, strewn across the sisal rug or suspended overhead, and contemplate the endless variation in solutions for seating

the human form. One begins to understand Bruchhäuser's urge to incorporate within himself all previous discoveries in order to arrive at hitherto unimagined solutions, until he could finally say, "The Bauhaus is ended. Now let's make new things."

At the Documenta art fair in Kassel, Germany, in 1978, he saw a sculpture by Stefan Wewerka, who was working with the theme of skewed and deconstructed chairs. When Bruchhäuser commissioned a similar sculpture for a Tecta stand for furniture fairs, Wewerka mentioned that he had always wanted to make a chair that one could actually sit on. Thus began a 10-year collaboration with Tecta that produced, among other products, a three-legged chair derived from the melding together of two traditional wood

Above Bruchhäuser's study looks out through a sunny glassed-in porch facing southwest, created in the mid 1980s and extended to either side in 2000. A Rietveld *Red and Blue* chair (in green and black) is at left; the desk is a prototype of Tecta's M24 table; the square stool is by Breuer. On the wall at right is Stefan Wewerka's B1 three-legged chair.

Right A view through the house from the kitchen to the large porch. A glass shelf serves provides inventive display space.

Opposite The Smithsons removed some walls and cut crescent-shaped apertures through others in Bruchhäuser's house, so that one can glimpse different pieces of it from a variety of vantage points. Bruchhäuser has hung some of his favorite designs from the walls and ceiling like sculpture, including a red version of Marcel Breuer's folding *Wassily* chair, produced by Tecta as the D4. Tecta's pendant light fixture (L40) was designed by Gerrit Rietveld in 1920 (center) and Peter Smithson's *Popova's Lattice* armchair (foreground) was designed in 1998.

Above The large porch set up the Smithsons's theme of the latticed, faceted glazed façade, used throughout the house and at the Tecta factory, to draw the occupant into the surrounding natural landscape. The sofa at right is *Trundling Turk II* by the Smithsons, with cutouts in its polished steel frame. Hanging from the wall at left is a chair by an anonymous designer from Bruchhäuser's "Anonymous Aristocrats" collection. The drawing on the window is a Christmas card by the Smithsons.

chairs, geared to allowing one to sit comfortably in a variety of positions and moods. Wewerka also designed a "Kitchen Tree," a six-foot-high hollow steel post that can house utility lines and supports a variety of interchangeable "branches" – sink, light fixture, mirror, stove, countertop, shelf, magnetic band for holding implements – enabling its use not only as a compact kitchen, but an office, bathroom or whatever one might invent.

Wewerka made the first changes to Bruchhäuser's house, including painting the floor on the second level with a black and white pattern and turning it into a bas relief, raising some sections and cutting out others and filling them with white stones. He also introduced Bruchhäuser to the Smithsons, fellow members of Team X, a group of architects formed after World War II who championed a human-scaled approach to urban development. The Smithsons' particular focus was ameliorating living and working conditions for less privileged segments of society through the use of mass-produced materials and prefabricated components. Some of their better known projects are the all-glass Hunstanton School in Norfolk, which was equally praised and condemned, and their plastic, mass-producible House of the Future, shown at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition in 1956. Their reputation suffered, however, after a high crime rate and structural flaws at Robin Hood Gardens, their social housing development of 1972, came to be seen as a symbol of the failure of progressive modernist architecture.

Bruchhäuser was initially interested in their furniture – he has produced, among other designs, their comfortable and quirky *Popova's Lattice* upholstered arm chair, that resembles a skewed, relaxed version of Le Corbusier's *Grand Confort* – but a letter ostensibly from Bruchhäuser's cat, Karlchen, requesting a lookout perch, led the Smithsons to follow Wewerka in working on Bruchhäuser's house in 1984.

The locals had dubbed the little two-story wood-timber and sandstone cottage, built in the 1940s, *Hexenhaus*, or Witch's House, and one can easily imagine Hansel and Gretel stumbling upon it among the massive trees of its ancient woods. The house clings to a hillside so steep that its peaked roof merges with the leafy slope behind.

Over 20 years, the Smithsons undertook 20 different design interventions, many of them involving creating new apertures, and thus layered vistas, through the house and out to the surrounding landscape. They first pushed the house's façade out into the landscape at the site of an entrance door, creating a glassed-in porch of uneven shape and establishing a distinctive theme

that would resonate throughout the house (as well as in their designs for the Tecta factory and the museum buildings): a series of variegated, zig-zagging wood lattice that frames the landscape, merging with the diagonal lines of the surrounding trees and throwing complex patterns onto the floor and walls. Later came crescent shaped perforations in interior walls; the replacement of stone triangles, shaped by the house's traditional timber structure, with clear glass; and glass-domed oculi crowning luminescent chimneys cut through the roof. There are nooks for reading, thinking, working or contemplating the trees, including a window seat for Bruchhäuser, and opposite, a higher one for his cat, so the two can sit

Right The bathroom on the second level features a "tree" designed by Stefan Wewerka and Tecta, incorporating a sink, mirror, towel rack and other functional accessories. Above is the smaller of two skylit wells cut through the ceiling. The latticed door accesses the raised walkway leading to the treehouse.

Below The treatment of the floor in the upstairs bedroom and the slanted window, which follows the roof's incline, invite one to consider the ground a useful perch, much as a chair or a bed. The floor was transformed into a *bas relief* by Stefan Wewerka, with subtly raised and lowered sections; cut-outs filled with loose white stones; and a painted pattern. The latticed door slides to close off the porch to the right; the rectangular window above the desk provides a spectacular view of the river below.

Above and opposite Raised 35 feet in the air, the *Hexenbesenraum* (Witch's Broom Room), sways gently among the treetops. Reclining on its bench, with clear glass underfoot, above and on three sides (the front of the structure is enclosed for privacy from the small road below), one can contemplate the changing seasons or the stars at night, feeling miles away from everyday life. Bruchhäuser considers it his "weekend home."

Inset The *Hexenbesenraum* seen from the large porch of the house. The window lattice echoes the many shapes outside: the tree branches, the roof of the treehouse and the support structures.

together in a sunny bay window. There is a long, low window that frames the river above a second floor desk; a glass-filled patch in the floor on the first level, so the cat can watch for mice; and a glazed porch, pushed out from the second floor bedroom. This luminous bay opens onto a wooden walkway on tall, slender stilts leading a short way up the hill to a glassed-in meditation pavilion. These details, which speak to the pleasure to be found in ordinary things, were geared to the most minute perceptions of the person occupying the space. They pay serious attention to the romantic side of this businessman, who sometimes balked at their suggestions, but ultimately went along with them.

The intervention Bruchhäuser resisted most adamantly was the *Hexenbesenraum*, (Witch's Broom Room), a treehouse perched on 35-foot-high wooden posts. The treetops clustered close around, the river far below, the sky with its scudding clouds, witnessed through the glass floor and ceiling and the variously shaped windows, seem acutely alive from the vantage point of this small container, as it sways — alarmingly, at first — in the breeze. Up here, one feels far away from daily life, and, indeed, Bruchhäuser considers it his "luxury weekend home." "All you need," he insists, "is light, air and water."

When Alison Smithson proposed the idea for this room, Bruchhäuser called it "unrealistic." But in 1993, she died, "and it was a shock," says Bruchhäuser. "I said, 'Peter, I will realize Alison's idea of the *Hexenbesenraum*.' It took four years and unbelievable energy." With no building permits, they snuck the wooden posts at night across the river, and narrowly avoided having to tear it down. "At first I said, 'I don't need this,'" recalls Bruchhäuser, who had no money to spare on such a folly at the time, "and now years later, I realize that it was the biggest gift."

On the treehouse door hangs a 100-year-old Tibetan priest's woven silk robe that had belonged to Alison Smithson; she left it in her will for Bruchhäuser, and he keeps it in the *Hexenbesenraum* in homage to her. Peter Smithson died in 2003. From the strict Miesian modernism of their early years, the Smithsons had moved towards an understanding of what makes a space come alive and humanizes it, no matter the "style." "Peter said that all artists need someone in their life that supports their work," says Bruchhäuser. "He said, 'I found out all about Axel. Axel will do this'... There is no explanation," he says, finally, summing up his fascination, his willingness to embrace all this. "You cannot explain art."

Bonus Content Online

For more about the Tecta factory and museum, visit www.modernismmagazine.com/online.