

# Bauhaus, HfG Ulm and New European Bauhaus – Design and Politics

Prof. Dr. René Spitz

## Wall decor template; street in Moscow; Party congress in Beijing



Quellen: <https://www.tenstickers.com/stickers/trump-maga-political-room-decor-14353>; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/putins-krieg-welche-bedeutung-das-zeichen-z-in-russland-traegt-17888602.html>; <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000140015541/xi-jinping-droht-taiwan-mit-militaereinsatz-kp-kongress-in-pekung>

What is the relationship between design and politics?

The answer is quite simple: design and politics are inseparable.

They are two sides of the same coin. And you know: There is no such thing as a medal that has only one side.

We can indeed separate design and politics. But we can only do that in our individual imagination, with words, as a mind game. In physical reality, design and politics are mutually dependent.

A different politics leads to a different design. And a different design leads to a different politics.

## Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, 1953-1968



Foto: Hans G. Conrad, 1954; Quelle: René Spitz

You are here in the place in the world that embodies this understanding like no other place.

Because this place, the Ulm School of Design, was not founded in the first place to make the world more beautiful, more colorful, more playful, more entertaining, more fashionable or more artistic.

HfG Ulm was founded to address a societal deficit.



The HfG Ulm was not founded to address an aesthetic deficit.

The HfG Ulm was founded to address a societal deficit.

In order to make this statement understandable, I must briefly explain what is meant by design.

Design does not mean any form.

Design is created by man, not by nature, not by God.

Design does not mean any form created by man.

Art is not design. Art is art.

Craft is not design. Craft is craft.

Architecture is not design. Architecture is architecture.

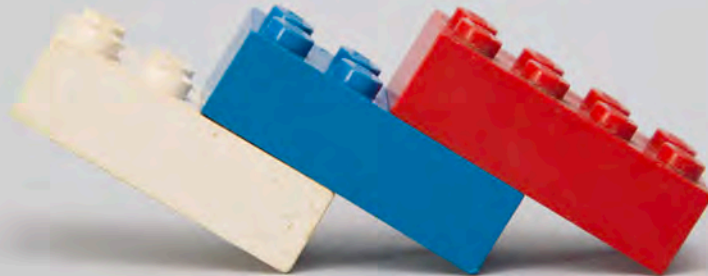
Engineering is not design.

Programming is not design.

Language is not design. Language is language.

We've only been talking about design for about 120 years. Design refers to a very specific, modern form of expression.

«Design»: A specific mode of creation in the modern era.  
Industrial, sequential, serial, commercial.

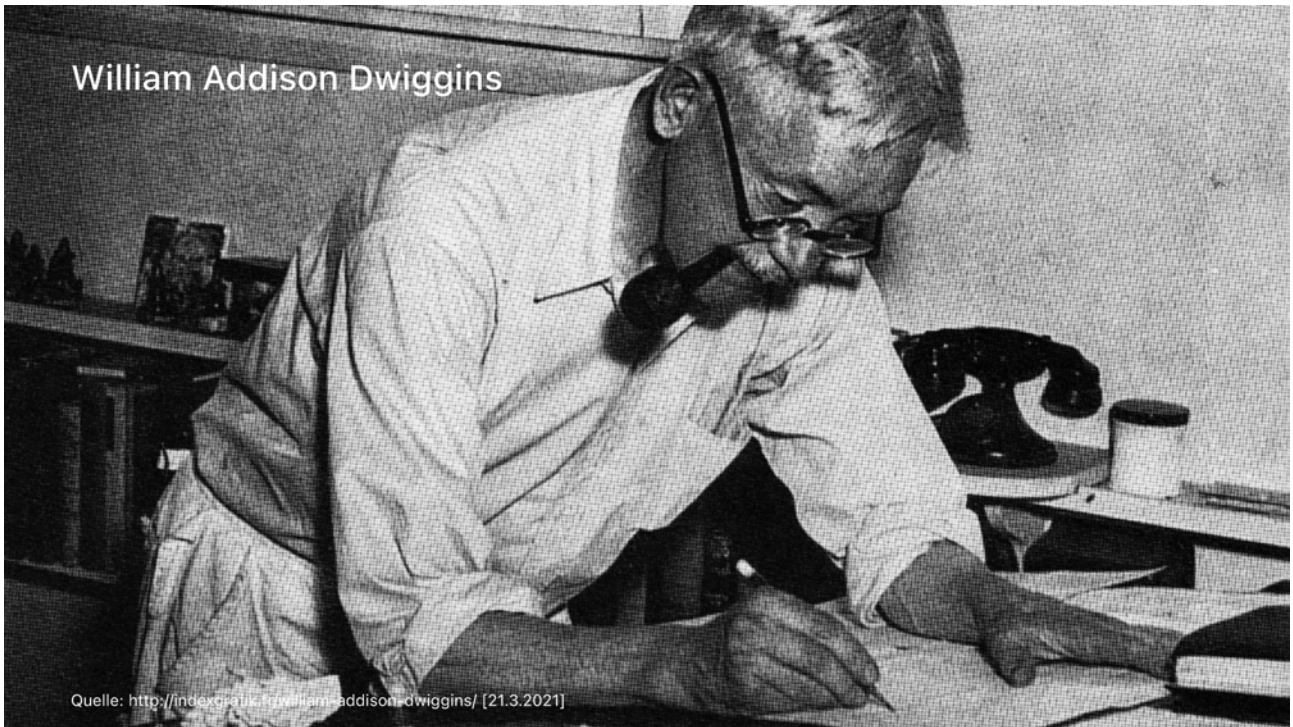


Ole Kirk Christiansen, Godtfred Kirk Christiansen (Patent): Spielsteine »LEGO«, 1958. Quelle: MAKK, 2015

Design is the phenomenon of a specific mode of creation in the modern era. Design is characterized by four features: First, the industrial framework. Before industrialization, there is no design. Second, the division of labor; it is a specialization in sequential processes. Thirdly, the series: We speak of design when it is a matter of mass and identical production according to a prototype. And fourth, commercial embedding.

The combination of these four elements is the basis of the difference to other ways of creation: Engineering, Architecture, Art (both performing and visual arts), and Craft. We refer to both the practice and its result as design.

Design is both a child of modernity and a driving factor that fuels, advances, and stabilizes the historical process of modernization.



Design is a new term for a new reality. William Addison Dwiggins is the first to use the term design to define his specific profession.



The term design arrived in the German-speaking world 80 years ago. It was used to name a new phenomenon, the specific form of creative expression that I have just defined. Before that, it was called industrial art.

At first, design was devoted to solitaires. These are individual tasks, independent of their context. The task for the design of the Coke bottle was that it should be clearly recognizable even from a single broken piece. This absoluteness of form beyond its context was typical of design in the first decades.

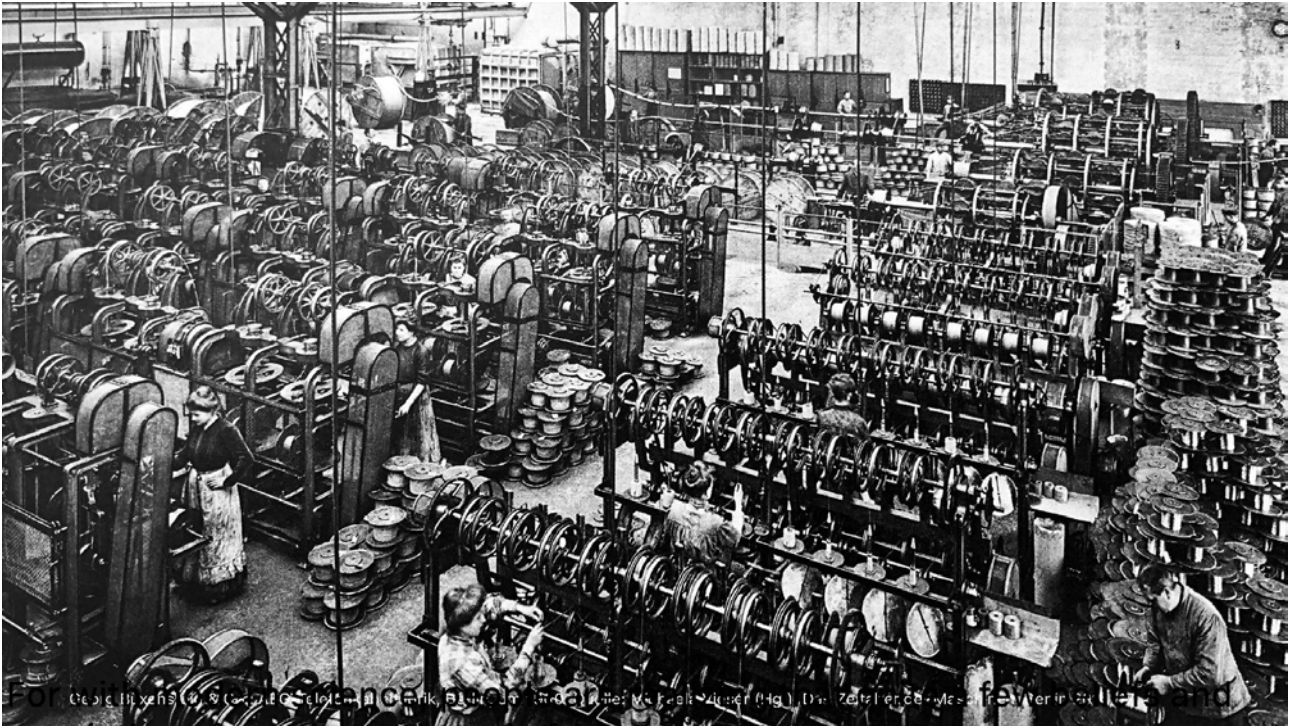
»Germania«



Friedrich August von Kaulbach: »Deutschland August 1914«. Quelle: bundesarchiv.de [1.4.2022]

Modernity is not an aesthetic phenomenon at its core. Modernity is a different understanding of time. Before modernity, the past was important. Traditions determined what had to be done, how it had to be done, and why it had to be done. People were guided by what was handed down to them from their ancestors.





For modernity, just the opposite is true. Modernity does not look back, but forward. The past does not help us to shape the future.



Because we have to make our own decisions, we have to form our own judgments.  
Modern man is fundamentally critical of all claims made by others.



For with modern science, people are realizing that quite a few beliefs and convictions from the past are in fact superstitions and errors.



Quelle: <https://current.org/2016/02/radio-stations-have-ample-opportunity-to-boost-listening/> [1.4.2021]

Every day people learn something new from science, every day they learn something with the mass media, every day industry brings a new relief to everyday life.

## Peter Behrens: modern design for AEG, 1907–1914



Peter Behrens: Arbeiten als künstlerischer Berater der AEG, 1907–1914

Therefore, the attitude that we cannot foresee what tomorrow will be, what the future will bring us, is characteristic of modernity. Time is moving faster and faster. At the same time, however, nothing is predetermined. Our future is not fixed. We can shape it. Each individual is free and autonomous. That is why modernity is thoroughly political at its core.

We beat them and  
subscribe war bond



Kunstanstalt Weylandt: »Wir schlagen sie und zeichnen Kriegsanleihe!«, 1914–18. Quelle: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a22794/> [1.4.2022]

The First World War shook the moderns' faith in progress. Everything that promised a prosperous future for mankind suddenly turns into an inhuman, unimaginably cruel slaughter factory.



War is industrialized. Cannons are operated like machines in a factory.



They kill people 40 kilometers away. Their murderers are unaware of it.



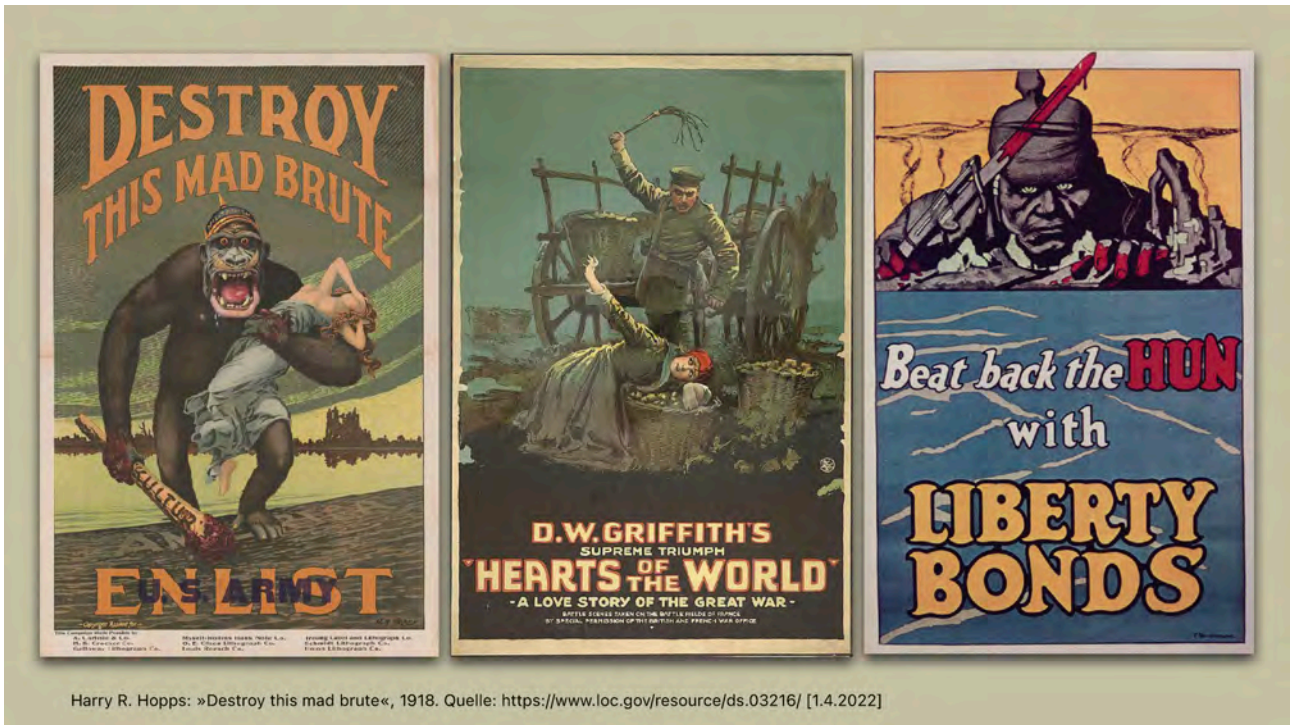


Science invents poison gas. For the first time, people die because they breathe. Nature is poisoned and the deadly poison is invisible.



Lucian Zabel: »Dein Vaterland ist in Gefahr«, 1918. Quelle: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/2006680285/resource/> [1.4.2022]

The Bauhaus is not understandable without this shock to the entire world.



Walter Gropius and his colleagues search for an answer to this terrible situation.

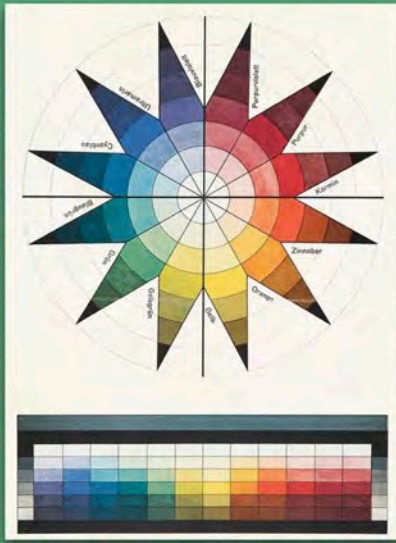


Modernity has not led mankind to paradise, but to hell.



What can they do not to despair? They look for the solution not in the past, but in the future.

## Bauhaus Weimar, 1919–1925



Johannes Itten: Farbkugel, 1921; Joost Schmidt: Plakat für die Bauhaus-Ausstellung, 1923; Herbert Bayer: Zeitungskiosk, 1924

They want to set up something new. They want to develop new forms to give expression to the new age. Art serves them as a guideline.



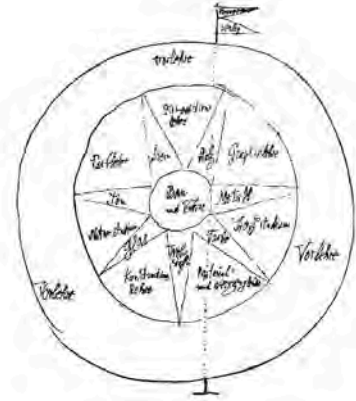
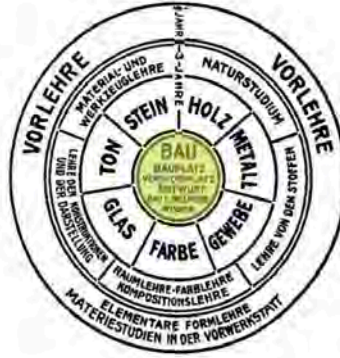
The Bauhaus is the most influential art school of the 20th century. The goal is to transfer art into everyday life. That is the idea.



The instrument to achieve this is architecture. Here we see artists all around the architect in the center. He is the conductor, the manager of them all.



»Kunst und Technik – eine neue Einheit«



Oskar Schlemmer: Emblem, 1922; Walter Gropius, Schema zum Aufbau der Lehre am Bauhaus, 1922, in: Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar, 1919-1923

The house is the center, everything is focused on making the building a total work of art. Industry is then added as a partner, especially at the Bauhaus Dessau.

## Art as everyday life



Wilhelm Wagenfeld, Carl Jakob Jucker: Tischleuchte BG 25 GL, 1923/24; Marianne Brandt: Tee-Extraktkännchen MT 49, 1924. Quelle: bauhaus.de [1.4.2022]

So the core of the Bauhaus is the idea: we shape everyday life as art. Because art is peaceful, free, autonomous and universal. Basically, all people are equal, and therefore it is possible and necessary to give all people equally the best possible artistic product.



This gives rise to designs that are subjected to the artistic rules of a new aesthetic, the so-called industrial aesthetic. Although it is a contradiction in terms, people are quick to speak of the Bauhaus style: actually, styles should be overcome and each form should be developed autonomously from its task.

1933



Iwao Yamawaki: Der Schlag gegen das Bauhaus, 1932; o.A.: Ernst Louis Beck beim Verlassen des Bauhauses Berlin, 1933

That these convictions and goals were thoroughly political can already be seen from the fact that the ruling politicians despised and fought the Bauhaus.



Quelle: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute/buch-mit-historischen-berichten-warum-ich-ein-nazi-wurde-100.html>

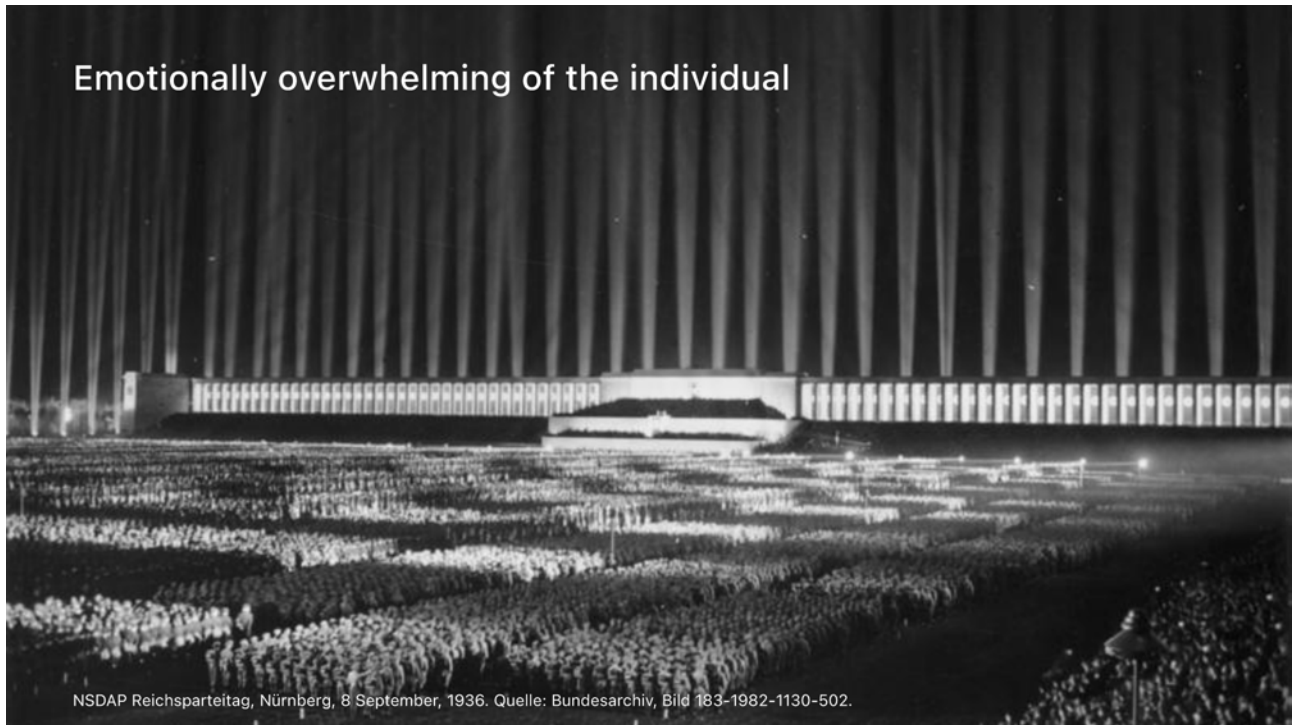
Otl Aicher was born during the Weimar Republic (1918 to 1933). It was the phase of the first democracy in Germany. The cruel experiences of the First World War (1914 to 1918) had profoundly shaken German society. The slogans of radical parties stirred the mood; their supporters battled each other on the street. Thus, most people's everyday life at the time of Otl Aicher's childhood was marked by violence, economic uncertainty and political extremes.

## Visual, verbal, and physical brutality of Nazi propaganda



Quelle: bundesarchiv.de [1.4.2022]

Otl Aicher was ten years old when the National Socialists came to power. Throughout his youth, their physical brutality, their inhuman recklessness, and their intellectual incapacity were omnipresent.



These examples are only making up a microscopic percentage of all the elements which constituted everyday Nazi terror with design means between 1933 and 1945.

We could continue with our analysis of these elements. The mass-stagings for example were no friendly, humane encounters. They only served the purpose of emotional overwhelming and disabling of critical thought.



This is why the Ulm School was not founded to remedy an aesthetic deficit. Otl Aicher, Inge Scholl and Max Bill, the founders of the Ulm School, were not primarily interested in designing beautiful posters and lamps. They wanted to contribute to the development of a peaceful, democratic and free society. Because the world had changed so fundamentally through the Nazi regime, Otl Aicher was deeply convinced that the Germans could not pick up seamlessly where they left off in 1933.



## Inge Scholl (1917–1998), Otl Aicher (1922–1991): Zero Hour



Ike und Hanne Rosenberg: Otl Aicher und Inge Scholl, 1949. Quelle: HfG-Archiv, Ulm.

First initiatives after World War II were underpinned by the pathos of this historic zero-hour. This meant a continuation from a point in time before 1933, as if the Nazis had been a mere mishap of German history, was unthinkable. All traditions had become questionable, as they did not prevent the Nazis seizure of power and daily terror-regime.

## German design after 1945 – with Nazi propaganda elements of style



Horst Naumann: und du? 1945; Wilhelm Deffke: Magdeburg lebt, 1947; Dorothea Mönkemeyer-Corty: 2. Deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1949.

Picking up the thread of previous international design movements appeared as questionable and dubious as well. The traditions and discourses of English Arts and Crafts, French Art Nouveau, Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, Dutch De Stijl and German Werkbund or Bauhaus had all in common that art was in the center of their attention.

Their ideal of a life which is only perfect when it has become art is based on the genius idea of the romantic movement. It contradicts universal principles and had been misused by Nazis.



Therefore the HfG founders chose from the get-go to search for a radical new way. Only a radical new start could lead Germany to develop a liberal, democratic, emancipated and peaceful civil society, in which something like National Socialism could never happen again. That is what design in Ulm is all about.

## »IDEA 55« (1955)



The «Hochschule für Gestaltung» at Ulm is a foundation of the «Geschwister-Scholl-Stiftung». It has set itself the task to train creatively gifted young people with a view to their contributing to the civilization of the forms of life of our technical age.

Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, in: IDEA 55, Text von Margit Staber, hg. von Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart 1955.

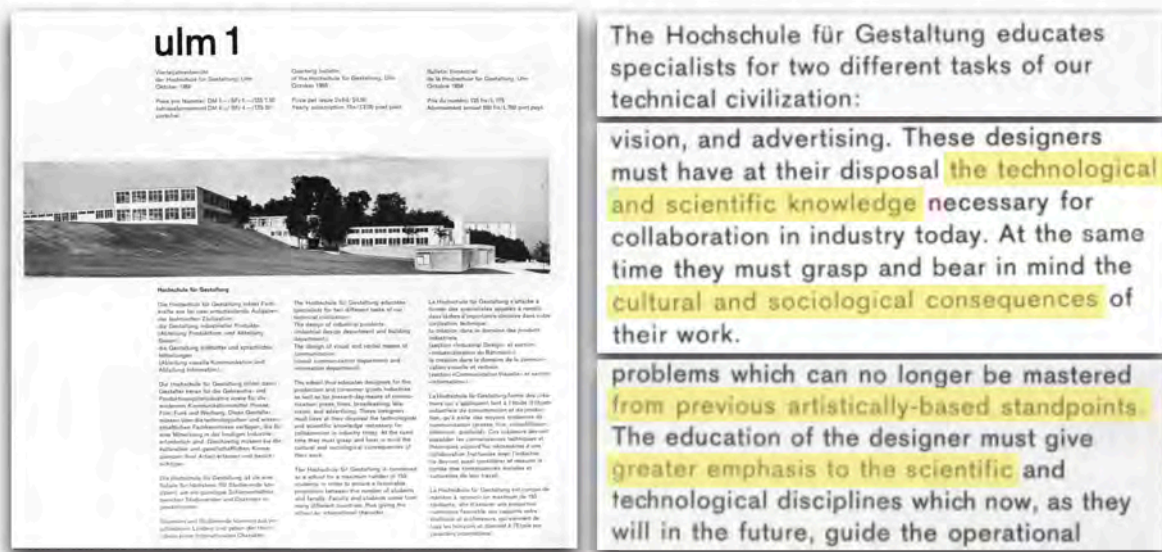
As the Ulm School had presented it with this early brochure of 1955: The concept was about »contributing to the civilization of the forms of life of our technical age«.

Characteristic is the concentration on

- what is concerning most of the people (and this are not luxury goods);
- and what is coining recent culture in aspects of science and technology (and this is neither handicraft nor art).

Shaping a new society, creating something new with new methods (new in regard to design), with new way of thinking and new goals.

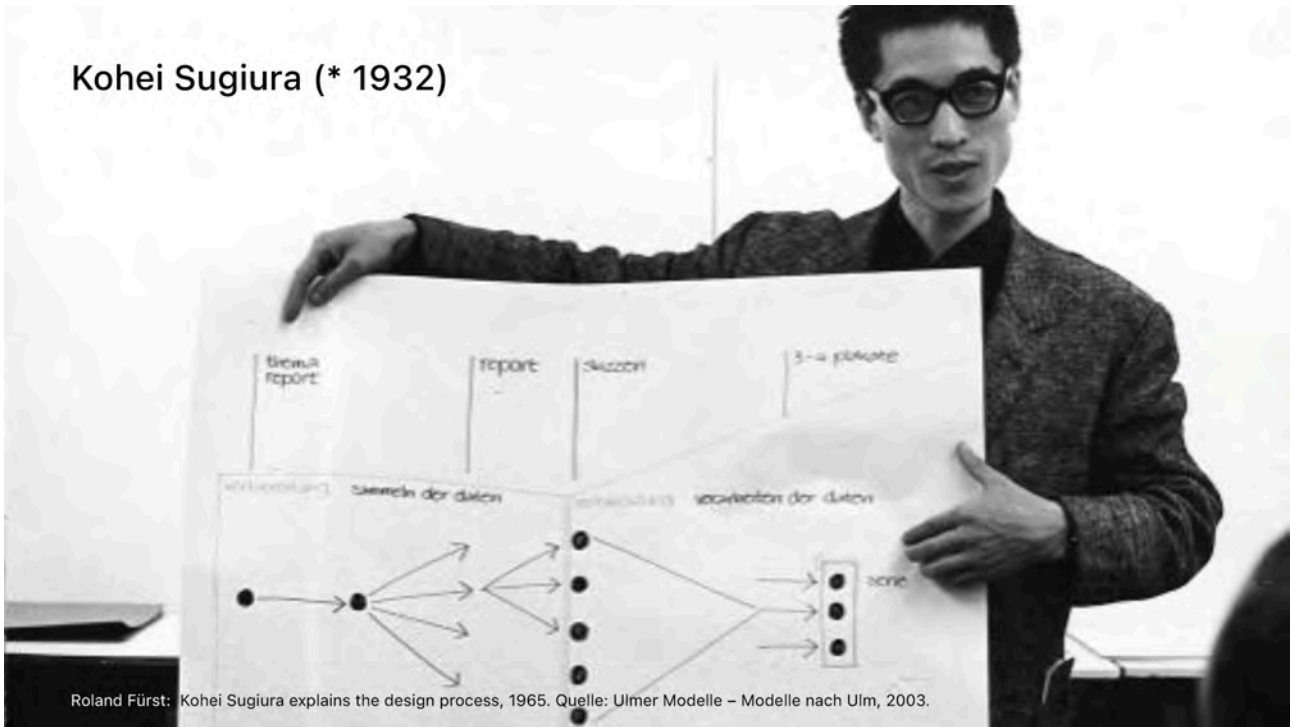
## »ulm« vol. 1 (1958)



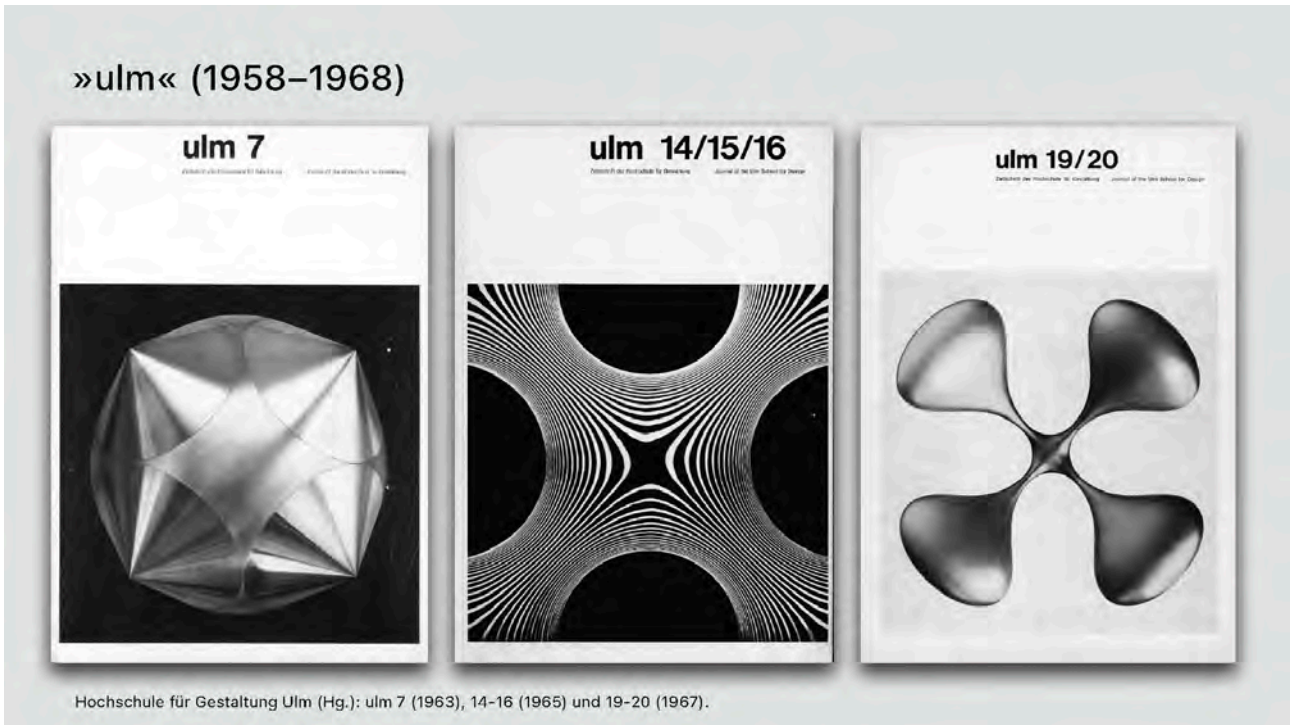
Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (Hg.): ulm 1 (1958). Quelle: René Spitz.

In the very first issue of the »ulm« magazine, this HfG characteristic combination is named: It's not art, but science and technology which shape the culture of present time.

## Kohei Sugiura (\* 1932)



Ulm was convinced that rational thought and argument would be expedient in finding the best solution for everybody involved. Ulm was convinced of the rationally structured process of communication.



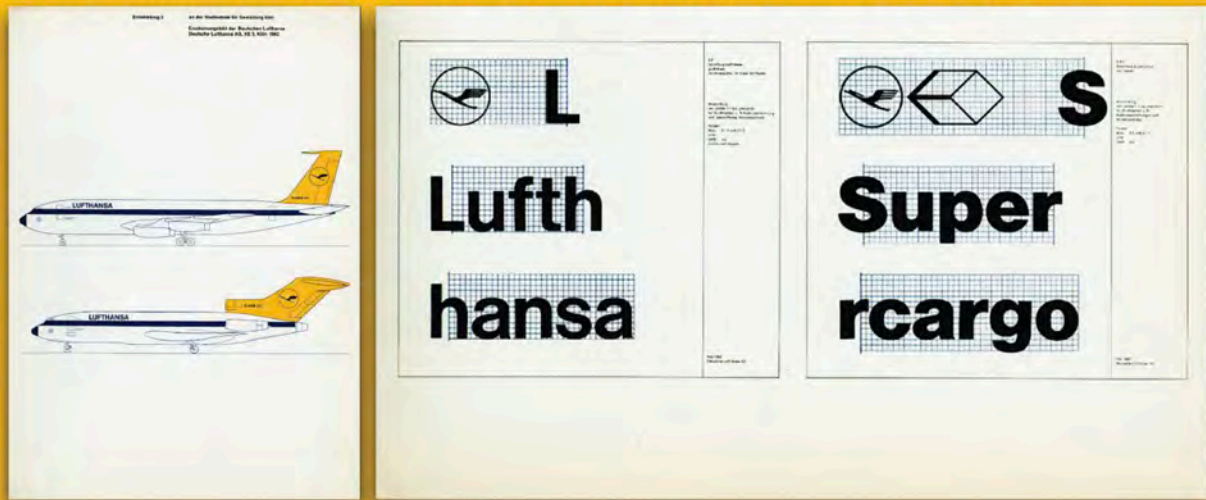
The results of the Ulm School's insights and convictions were spread with the help of the magazine »ulm«.



The results became apparent in the newly founded magazine »form« which had been published for decades by an Ulm graduate, Karlheinz Krug.



### Otl Aicher, HfG development group 5: Study »1400/0«, 1962



Entwicklungsgruppe 5 / development group 5: Tomás Gonda, Fritz Querengässer, Nick Roericht. »Information 63« Ulm 1963. Source: René Spitz

And they became visible as commissioned works for Lufthansa, for Braun, or the Olympic Games in Munich, 1972.



This previous and the following short film excerpts demonstrate the characteristically scientific, neutral style of visual and verbal rhetoric. It becomes apparent in language where there is no talk of fashion, taste, or genius, but there is only talk of un-individual, un-personal, general requirements and principles or rules.

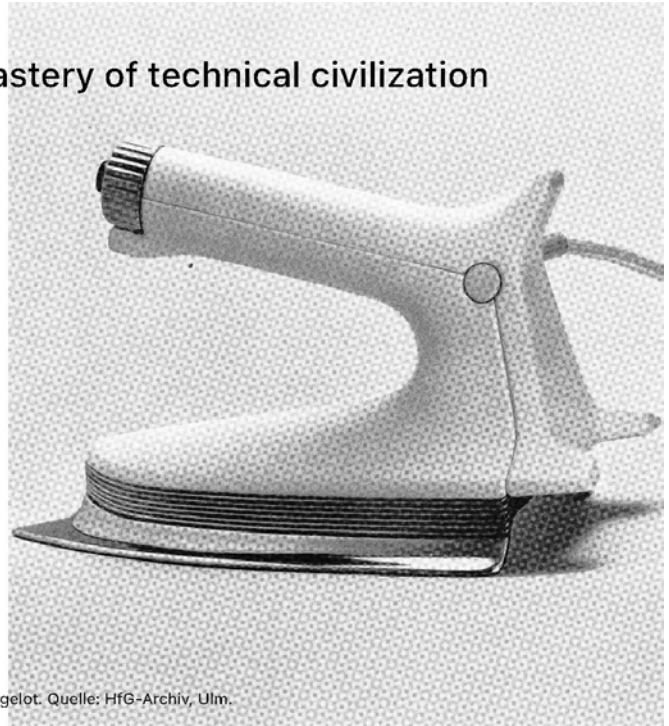
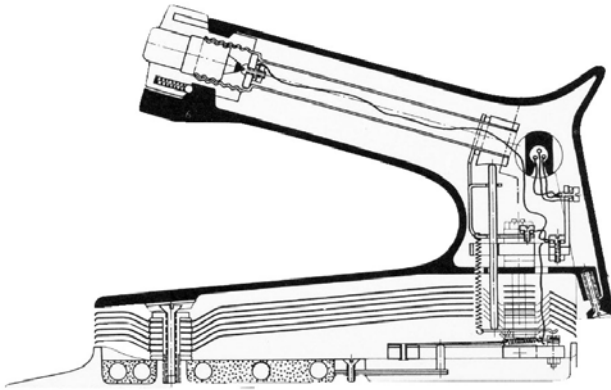
## Otl Aicher: Posters for Ulm adult education center, 1946–1960



Source: Martin Krampen: Otl Aicher – 328 Plakate für die Ulmer Volkshochschule. Berlin 2002.

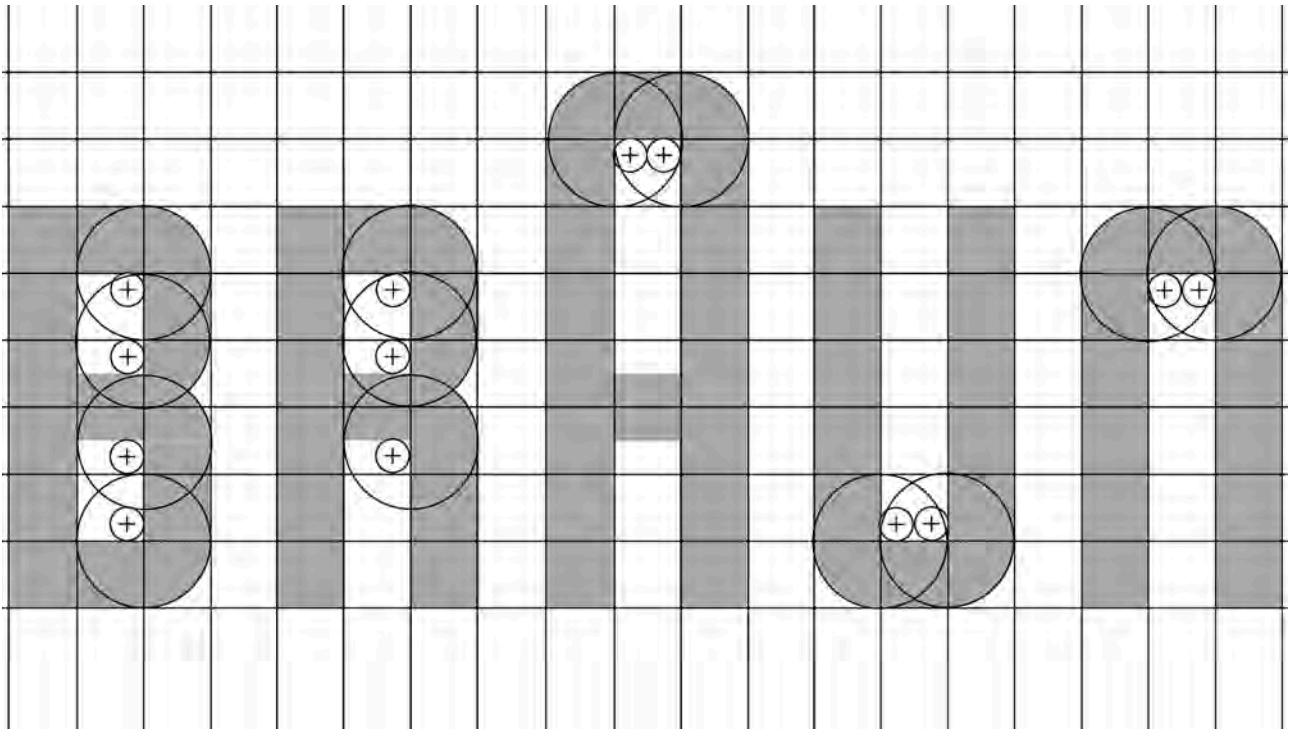
Design should not manipulate people with tricks, but rather persuade by conclusive argumentation. Better results should be drawn from better reasonable foundations, not from the loud and shrill, the short-term surprising and the fashionable effect.

## Humanistic approach: cultural mastery of technical civilization



Reinhold Weiss: Praktischer Teil der Diplomarbeit, 1959. Dozent: Hans Gugelot. Quelle: HfG-Archiv, Ulm.

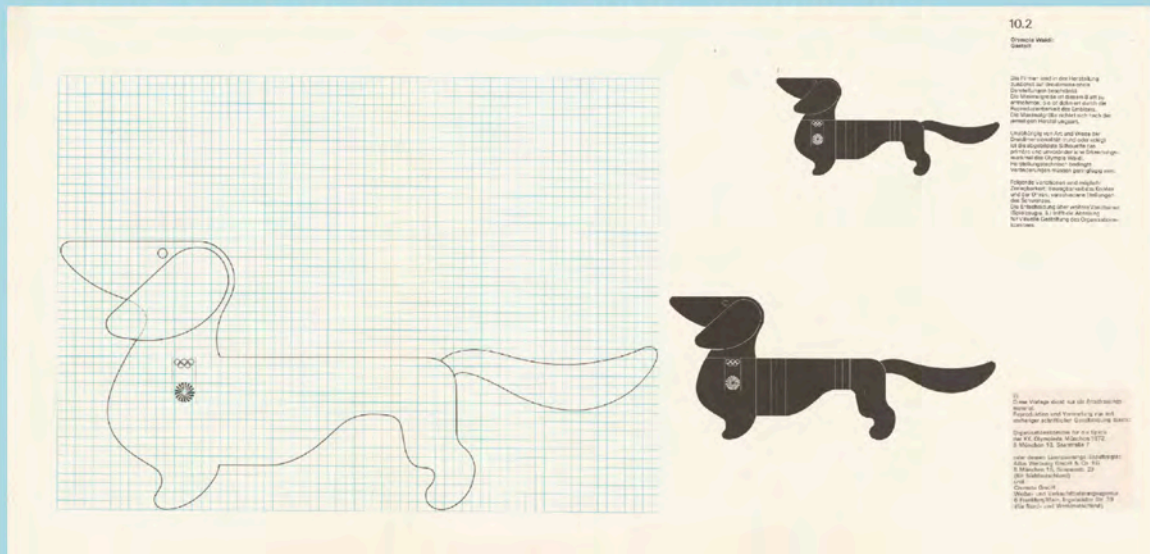
Ulm's conviction was: Responsibility is indivisible. Design is not a value-free occupation. The designer cannot delegate his responsibility for shaping society, but he has to take care of it himself. Designers have to become knowledgeable about politics, history, economy, culture and technology, without being a one-track specialist, to be able to make informed and responsible decisions. As Otl Aicher called it: Design is about moral decisions.



Ulm was never about the Good Form.

Ulm was about the cultural mastery of technical civilization.

## Otl Aicher, Elena Winschermann: »Waldi« mascot, 1972



Source: IOC, Lausanne

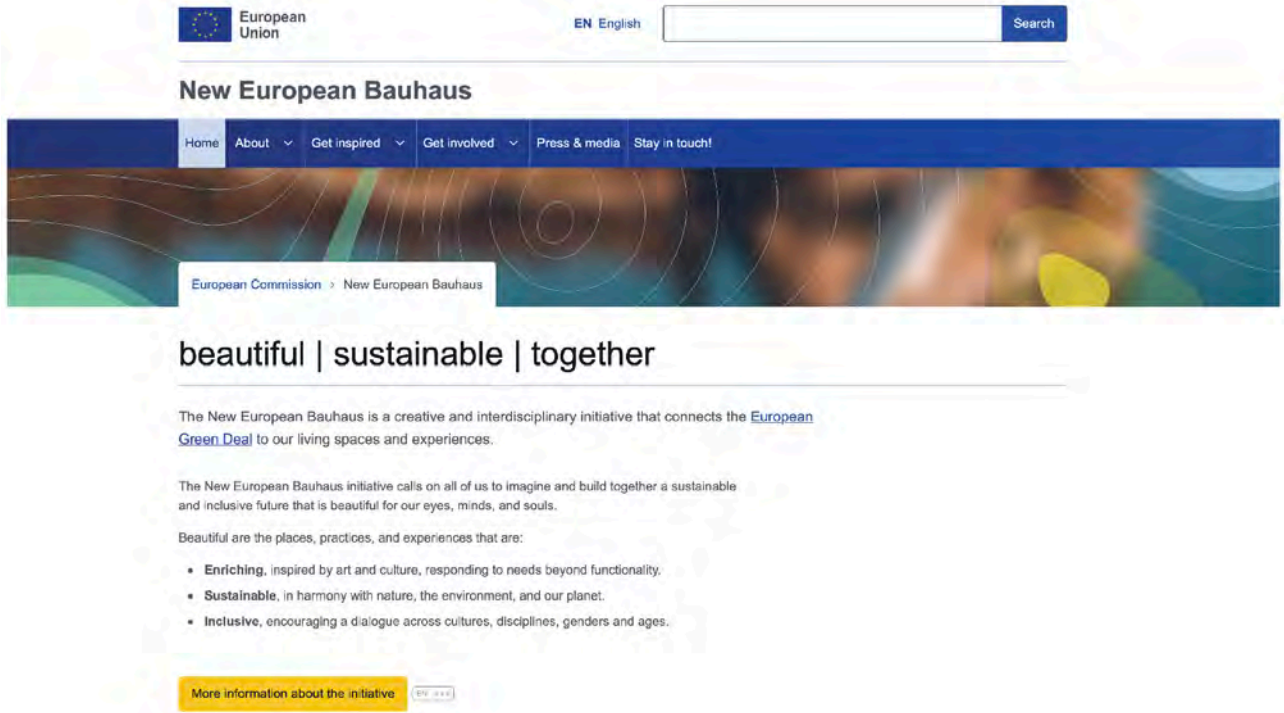
But: It is a fundamental misunderstanding, to see Ulm as anti-artistic in its core. Ulm did not object to art. Ulm did just not consider it a helpful contributor to their mission.

»The aesthetic factor merely constitutes one factor among others with which the designer can operate, but it is neither the principal nor the predominant one.«  
Tomás Maldonado, 1958



Besatzung der NASA-Mission Apollo 17: »Blue Marble«, 7.12.1972. Source: <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/view.php?id=55418> [1.4.2022]

Design, according to Ulm, is about politics. It's about shaping everybody's life for a humane future. Yes: Design, according to Ulm, has to do with aesthetics. But, as Tomás Maldonado stated: the aesthetic factor constitutes only one single factor among others – it is neither the principal nor the predominant one.



I have been studying this initiative for some time. I will keep this brief. I lack the clues for an appropriate evaluation. I read many words that are very general and abstract. Positive intentions are drawn from them. To what extent these are transformed quite concretely into positive effects remains to be seen. – We know a comparable vagueness and blurriness from the first programs of the Bauhaus and the Ulm School. That's why I would like to wait a little longer and see whether words are followed by facts.





We know a comparable vagueness and blurriness from the first programs of the Bauhaus and the Ulm School. That's why I would like to wait a little longer and see whether words are followed by facts. –

Maybe this could be a starting point for our exchange now. Is there anything you would like to know, are there any questions?

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