

"Expressionism, Collectivism and the Development of Modern Architecture"



The development of a modern Expressionist movement in German art and architecture before and after World War I was integrally tied to the proliferation of whole variety of new artists' groups, associations, and councils. Although Expressionist *art* was very much based on the expression of individual visions, urges, and the "inner necessities" of each particular artist, the success of the larger Expressionist *movement* was dependent on the collaboration of artists, both with each other, and with the community at large. Despite the mandate of individual artistic expression, little of the Expressionist dream could be achieved by the solitary artist. Collectivism, it can be said, was one of the most fundamental hallmarks of the Expressionist movement.

Architecture presents a special case within the development of Expressionism in Germany. Although the functional nature and technical requirements of architecture at times makes it difficult to compare it to, or link it up to the more "expressive" arts--indeed very few truly "Expressionist" buildings were ever constructed--architecture is by nature a collective art. There may be a single artist-architect who dreams and expresses the core idea or forms at some point in the complicated process of architectural creation, but architecture--even so-called "paper-architecture"--, rarely comes to fruition without the aid of like-minded colleagues, office staff, critics and publishers, building officials, construction workers, clients, and of course, users. Many architects of the period even understood architecture to be the "mother" of all the arts, harnessing paintings, sculpture, sound, and performance to create totally immersive artistic environments.

Perhaps because of this collaborative underpinning of architecture, it played a surprisingly important role within the trend of Expressionist collectivism, and this collectivism in turn had a pronounced effect on the development of modern architecture in Germany. Most of the painters in the very first Expressionist group, Die Brücke, founded in Dresden in 1905, were disgruntled

architecture students, inspired to paint in part through their architecture professor. The first collective formed in Berlin in the wake of the Great War, the “Arbeitsrat für Kunst” (Working Council for Art), was founded and led by the architects Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius, intent on making art and architecture central to the formation and vision of the new German State. The Arbeitsrat lobbied the government for more control of museums, schools, and State building departments. They sought visions and patronage for purposefully new, “experimental architecture,” and legislation and financing for monumental new public buildings to be created by unified teams of all kinds of artists (though led by architects)--like the Gothic cathedrals. They created radical exhibitions dedicated to causes such as “Unknown Architects” and “The New Building.” They published books of manifestos and portfolios of drawings on utopian visions for how a new architecture would lead to a new society. They even had plans to publish a new type of populist journal called “Building” (Bauen), dedicated to inspiring “the people” to “the highest act of man: *building*,” in the physical, spiritual, and psychological sense.

Through an investigation of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, this paper explores the special role played by architecture in the development of the collectivist nature of Expressionism, and the reciprocal impact that Expressionist collectivism had on the development of modern architecture. Although the Arbeitsrat, like so many Expressionists collectives, was a fleeting venture and folded after little more than two years, it served as an ideological and organizational model for more long-lived groups such as Berlin’s Novembergruppe, institutions such as the Bauhaus, and countless small collectives of Expressionists artists and architects in cities all over Germany. Nonetheless, the influence of the Arbeitsrat and other Expressionist collectives on the art and architecture of the “New Objectivity” that followed remains misunderstood. As the historian Sigfried Giedion observed many years ago, the “expressionist [sic] influence touched almost every German worker in the arts.” Rather than see Expressionism as an “unhealthy” antecedent to be overcome, as Giedion did, I make the case that the legacy of Expressionism lived on throughout the Weimar era as a healthy counterpoint to objectivity. It inspired modern architects to work in groups, despite their differences. It allowed the forms, materials, and construction techniques of modern architecture to remain more expressive than engineers might have wanted. It helped insure that architecture remained connected to the arts, and not just to the construction industry and scientific thinking. Above all, it kept the focus of architectural design on the human being, not only the physical needs, but the communal, spiritual, psychic, and artistic needs as well. Modern architecture’s revolutionary critique of the city and its emphasis on the development of community and social housing was greatly dependent on the Expressionist collectivism that preceded it.