

The Culture of Criticism: Adolf Behne  
and the Development of Modern Architecture in Germany, 1910-1914

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## ABSTRACT

### The Culture of Criticism: Adolf Behne and the Development of Modern Architecture in Germany, 1910-1914

Kai Konstanty Gutschow

This dissertation investigates the early career of the German architectural critic Adolf Behne (1885-1948) and the crucial role he played in defining and promoting an early vision of modern architecture. During the particularly vibrant cultural moment in Germany before World War I, Behne became intent on finding artistic and architectural alternatives to what he perceived as the elitism, materialism, and decadence of Wilhelmine society. Influenced by the cultural program of the Socialist party, Behne believed that modern art had to be made accessible to all, and that modern architecture must be grounded in a "social conscience." The theories of Expressionist artists he encountered in Berlin's Sturm Gallery led Behne to the very different conviction that art must primarily express the inner experience and creative urges of modern man. Combining ideas from Expressionism and Socialism, Behne embraced one of the fundamental paradoxes of modern culture: that art could be simultaneously an ideal, autonomous object of the avant-garde, and also politically and socially engaged to benefit the masses.

Behne found a resolution to this paradox in architecture. His interpretations of Bruno Taut's early apartment houses and experimental exhibition pavilions as

syntheses of fantasy and functional form-making--an "artistic *Sachlichkeit*"--inspired the critic to invent the concept of an Expressionist architecture. At the same time, the heated debates promoted by the German Werkbund about the relative merits of art and industry in leading architectural reform, provoked Behne to write trenchant criticism about the nature of contemporary architecture and its place in the social fabric of modern society. Far more than an objective reporter or passive filter of the moment, Behne worked in conjunction with artists, architects, publishers, and a nascent media culture to help bridge the gap between the producers of the new architecture and the ever-expanding consuming public. In this early criticism Behne established the themes that would propel him to become one of the most perspicacious critics of the twentieth century architecture and culture.

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## Preface

Curiosity about the complex and controversial history of modern German architectural culture and criticism was first piqued by my grandfather Konstanty Gutschow, who began practicing architecture in Germany during the 1920s. Later, discussions with my uncle Dr. Niels Gutschow and his colleague Prof. Hartmut Frank allowed me to ask my first naive questions and to explore the ideas that continue to percolate through my research. They encouraged me to look for continuities in German architectural history where others have seen primarily anomalies and ruptures, and they were the first to point me to the need to take a closer look at the critics of modern architecture. I focused my interests in inspiring lectures by Kaori Kitao at Swarthmore College, and later in seminars and working as a research assistant for Spiro Kostof at Berkeley. Each revealed a rich understanding of architecture that came from looking beyond the architects and buildings to the surrounding social, political, and material cultures. My M.Arch thesis at Berkeley, an essay on nationalistic undertones in the architectural criticism of Behne's colleague Walter Curt Behrendt, led me for the first time into the diverse array of magazines, journals, newspapers, and books that defined the architecture of Weimar Germany, a body of material that continues to intrigue me. In time there evolved a personal fascination with this print media that accompanied and defined the development of a modern architecture in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Developing a framework that reveals the powerful influence of the press, media, and publishing industry on the development of modern architecture is challenging. Thematic studies on single topics risk minimizing the understanding of the complexity of the day-to-day work of the critics. Studies of multiple critics reveal how individualized each critic's work and professional situation was, making it difficult to generalize on the nature of architectural criticism. Explorations of the general nature of architectural criticism and the publishing industry risk downplaying the specific agency of the individual critics through the media. The expansive and heterogenous sources related to the culture of architectural publishing, and the fact that relatively few of them have been studied in the context of architectural history, encourages a narrower focus. Yet, investigations of any one periodical or even a whole publishing genre can fail to reveal the overall scope and inter-connected nature of Berlin's publishing culture.

Focusing on a single critic, even one as prolific, complex, and wide-ranging as Adolf Behne, risks the same narrow focus that makes architectural biography an imperfect genre for true understanding of a period and the forces that shaped it. Nonetheless, some of the most insightful precedents for this study were recent monographs by scholars such as Roland Jaeger and Lutz Windhöfel on critics such as Gustav Adolf Platz, Heinrich De Fries, and Walter Müller-Wulckow.<sup>1</sup> The turbulent

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<sup>1</sup> See Roland Jaeger, Gustav Adolf Platz und sein Beitrag zur Geschichtsschreibung der Architekturmoderne (2000); and Jaeger, Heinrich De Fries und sein Beitrag zur Architekturpublizistik der Zwanziger Jahre (2001); as well as Gerd Kuhn, ed., KonTEXTe. Walter Müller-Wulckow und die deutsche Architektur von 1900-1930 (1999); and related studies on art critics and historians such as Lutz Windhöfel, Paul Westheim und Das Kunstblatt. Eine Zeitschrift und ihr Herausgeber in der

nature of German history and architectural developments, the many ruptures that marked the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the complex process of motivating cultural change, makes studying even the career of a single critic who worked during the first three decades of the century particularly challenging.

In order to evaluate Behne's work within the larger context of the pervasive influence of the media on modern architecture, it is essential to address areas beyond the individual critic and to embrace the entire range of published media of the day, along with the complex network of cultural institutions and provocative agents that created and disseminated it. Behne, for example, received commissions from many different publishing houses, and wrote for a wide variety of newspapers, professional journals, and popular magazines, most of which had a cause or ideology they were explicitly promoting. After 1912, he taught at various *Volkshochschulen* (adult education schools), and gave lectures at art schools throughout the country. He was involved with the *Zentralbildungsausschuß* (Central Educational Committee) of the Socialist party, often borrowed images from the *Illustrationszentrale* (Illustration Center) of the German Werkbund. Throughout his career, he visited and was invited to many museums, galleries, and exhibits all over Germany, where he often confronted the directors about their collections and special exhibits. In addition, Behne actively engaged many individual artists and architects intent on promoting their own agendas. The architectural offices with which he interacted, the contractors he dealt with on

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Weimarer Republik (1995); and Sokrates Georgiadis, Sigfried Giedion, An Intellectual Biography (1993). See chapter 1 and Bibliography IV for more sources.

construction site visits, the non-profit housing organizations and propaganda organizations such as the Garden City Association and the Heimatschutzbund that regulated and developed many of the projects Behne reviewed, all extended the web of networks in which his architectural criticism was enmeshed even further. The residents of the houses, the workers in the factory, and the casual sidewalk passer-by added further agendas that Behne incorporated into his criticism. Research into a representative selection of these institutions contained in this study has begun to reveal the extent to which Behne was following or challenging established ideas, and offers a more nuanced analysis of how his criticism helped shape the course of modern architecture.

The radical changes in scope and topic that this dissertation underwent from original conception to final product underscore the difficulties described. The original ambition was to write an in-depth study of architectural criticism in Germany from the founding of the Werkbund in 1907 to the rise of Hitler in 1933. The intent was to reveal the work of critics, theorists, the press, and even individual texts in promoting change and in confronting the problems of modernity, and thereby go beyond the traditional focus on the architect, the client, the available technology or the socio-political context as the primary generators of architecture. Eventually, in an effort to reduce the spectrum of materials, at one point this dissertation focused on three major themes of the day where critics played a particularly important role: reactions to the developing *Großstadt* (metropolis); the changing nature of daily life, especially for women and

workers; and the influence and reaction to the phenomenon of technology and the machine.

In order to focus even more closely on the influence of individual critics and texts, yet still acknowledge the great variety of critical practices that influenced architecture, I began to focus exclusively on two very different critics who both supported the rise of a new modern architecture through their criticism: the professional architect, bureaucrat, and free-lance critic Walter Curt Behrendt, about whom I had written a master's thesis, and the more avant-garde oriented Adolf Behne, who wrote with equal force about art, architecture, and society.<sup>2</sup> In order to look more closely at the inter-related sides of their criticism, I organized the study into three parts: 1) the "business of criticism," which analyzed in great detail how Behne, Behrendt, and other critics collaborated with architects, publishers, museums, and governments to reach a wide spectrum of audiences with ideologically charged arguments; 2) the "form of criticism," which outlined the multiple venues and media employed by Weimar critics such as Behne and Behrendt in order to reach the broadest possible audience; and 3) the "content of criticism," which outlined the major themes that each critic tackled in order to effect cultural change and forge a new architecture.

When Behrendt and Behne proved too disparate to include in a single study, my focus shifted exclusively to Behne. Although the original intent was to present a survey

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<sup>2</sup> Kai Gutschow, "Revising the Paradigm: German Modernism as the Search for a National Architecture in the Writings of Walter Curt Behrendt," M.Arch thesis, University of California at Berkeley (1993).



of Behne's entire career, the amount of work he produced that had not been properly analyzed, the breadth of topics that Behne covered in his writings, and the large number of important figures and cultural institutions with which he interacted over the course of his career, proved overly voluminous. Compiling a bibliography of his writings and locating all the sources was more time and travel-intensive than anticipated.<sup>3</sup> Finally, an attempt to reveal the origins of his well-known post-war criticism on *Sachlichkeit* and functionalism, led me to focus on the Behne's very earliest writings on reform and Expressionism from 1910 to 1914. It is my intention to extend my monographic study of Behne into the Weimar years, at least until 1930, when Behne's influence reached a climax with his article on the sterility of the Dammerstock housing settlement, and eventually expand to a larger analysis of architectural criticism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Bibliography III for a list of Behne's writings located so far.

<sup>4</sup> Behne, Adolf. "Dammerstock," Die Form 5, no. 6 (Mar. 15, 1930)163-166; reprinted in Felix Schwarz, ed. Die Form (1969), pp. 168-174; Behne, Adolf Behne -- Eine Stunde Architektur (1984), pp. 46-54; Christian Mohr and Michael Müller, Funktionalität und Moderne (1984), pp. 327-9; and Kristiana Hartmann, ed., Trotzdem Modern (1994), pp. 362-366.