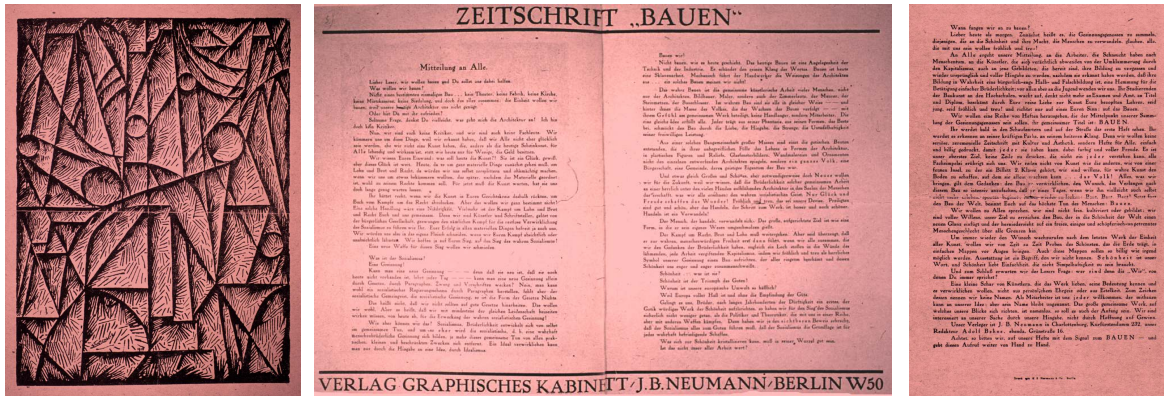


"Bauen: Expressionism and the Course of Modern Architecture."



In September 1919, the German architectural critic Adolf Behne and his architect friends Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius announced with great fanfare, in a three-page, hot-pink flyer, the launching of a Bauen (Building), a new journal dedicated to inspiring “the people” to “the highest act of man: **building**” (emphasis in orig.).<sup>1</sup> Amidst the social, political, and artistic chaos of post-war Berlin, the authors sensed not just an opportunity to re-shape modern architecture, but a chance to revolutionize the very nature of what constitutes art and culture. “Building” was to be the operative action, whose literal and metaphorical constructions would “radicalize” society’s “way of thinking.” Unlike traditional art magazines, Bauen would be an inexpensive “series of leaflets,” “completely free of jargon,” accessible to *all* people, “in shop windows and on the street” everywhere. In the announcement, and in extensive correspondence which survives, the friends outlined how the journal would explore means by which all artists, and indeed the entire “*Volk*” (population) of war-torn Europe, could come together to cooperate in the creation of monumental, “beautiful” buildings. The result would necessitate not only the integration of all the arts and the comradeship of people and society into a seamless whole--“a

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Adolf Behne, "Mitteilung an Alle," flier for the periodical Bauen. (Berlin: Verlag Graphisches Kabinett Neumann, Sept. 1919); partially translated in German Expressionism, ed. Rose-Carol Washon Long (New York: G.K. Hall, 1993), pp. 203-205.

unity” as they described it--, but more importantly would result in the “victory of a true Socialism.” Their’s was an ambitious proposal using modest means of guerrilla broadsheets to change the world through art.

The economic and political situation of post-war Germany prevented even a single issue of Bauen from being published. Although its announcement has been included in several anthologies of manifestoes of German Expressionism and modern art, the potential significance of the journal has been largely ignored. In part, Bauen has been forgotten because many of its radical ideas, which Behne and his friends had been exploring since before the war, were absorbed in the creation of far more famous enterprises: Gropius’ Bauhaus, including in the famous “Bauhaus Manifesto,” as well as Taut’s avant-garde “Crystal Chain Letters.” When Bauen is mentioned, it is as yet another fragment of the explosion of utopian ideas and short-lived journals associated with the “end of Expressionism.”

This paper demonstrates how Bauen was not an end, but a beginning. It differed fundamentally from both the high-minded focus of Gropius’ early pedagogical program, and the utopian and ultimately elitist stance of Taut’s crystal dreams. Whereas Gropius and Taut later consciously abandoned Expressionism for a radically pragmatic “New Objectivity,” the ideological framework and the articles proposed for Bauen pointed to a middle ground. Bauen synthesized the utopian longings of Expressionism, with the more realistic, political, and social problems that forced the hand of so many architects and artists soon after. Had the radical program of Bauen come to light, modern architecture in Germany may have found a more sustainable resolution to 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. Rather than the “end” of a fleeting dream, Bauen would be recognized as a fundamental building block of the modern architecture that followed.