

Harald Kegler

## **Discoveries Behind the Curtains. From the Myth of 'Zero Hour' to the Fall of the Wall**

Now, over 20 years after German reunification was carried out, there is growing interest – especially among the "next generation" – to learn more about the "GDR" and above all to become familiar with the hidden debates among the experts. The scientific colloquium on 8 April 2011 at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany, was this kind of window, which was opened a) to cast a light in the darkness of the past epoch of German urban planning/development history and b) in this light, to explore the debates conducted on this side, which was usually shrouded in darkness.

As so much was either shrouded in darkness or was (and is) simply unknown, the opening of such a window not only brought a breath of fresh air to this dusty métier, but also enabled new views, as now light shone on it.

Yes, there existed – and in some cases still exists – a myth which purports that there was a "zero" hour back in 1989. A wide-spread assumption stated that the debates among experts on urban development which had been conducted in the GDR were purely ideological and obeyed political doctrine, i.e. appeared to be of little interest.

Yes, that also existed and therefore fit into the mainstream image of the GDR. According to this, the fall of 1989 really was a "zero" hour for the start of an actual debate among experts on urban development – freed of political paternalism/dictatorship. Yet of course we know from the many past German epochs that there has always been a debate which has been conducted in the "gap" and which in some cases has only seldom risen to the surface. For outsiders and those not familiar with the GDR, this was hardly to be expected. Only a few, who had actively sought contact to the experts of the GDR – and many of them are here today – could imagine that there is more to it than just the party line or the world of its victims.

If we now open the window further, we gradually have a view of a much more colorful world than had been conveyed by the "black-and-white" picture of the clouded window up until now. The conference in Weimar two years ago and here in Kassel make important contributions in addition to those made, for example, in Erkner or elsewhere. And we are not at a "zero" hour today.

When opening the window, the areas of the research community that now become visible can, of course, appear in a strange light. Therefore, it is a matter of finding the most objective interpretation for these occurrences. This is not quite so easy for those involved, who worked "behind the curtain", as is also the case for those who were on this side of the iron curtain. Everyone has their own view, fed by the respective socialization.

And as a result, I am less interested here in presenting sensational findings when looking out the window than I am in calling your attention to a methodology and demonstrating it with an example. Here I am primarily interested in processes of the change in insights, and not so

much in singular facts or even only what has been built. To pursue these in a suitable manner, criteria for their evaluation are a helpful companion.

For the evaluation of the GDR planning culture, the degree of internationalization is at the top of the list: Was the debate held at the same level as international discussion?

Secondly: Has the debate made suitable reference to the problems in GDR urban development?

And finally (and I will limit myself to these three standards): What perspectives were the participants in the debate, which continued beyond that magical year of 1990, looking for? 1990 is so important for the debate on urban development in the GDR, because (according to the specifications of the party leadership) by that time the housing problem was to have been solved. But what would have happened then?

These three questions simultaneously represent the connecting point - not just for a German-German consideration of the time around "zero hour". On the contrary, the year 1989 can become such a window which can be looked through from both sides with the same methodological compass. This is a way to handle nostalgia and glorification on the one hand and myth-building and scientific reduction on the other hand.

I'd like to open the window toward the Bauhaus colloquia at the former College of Architecture and Building in Weimar. They document the gradual turn toward interdisciplinary problems – based here on urban development or urban regional planning. In the process, at the same time the focus shifts to an important period for the change in positions. This must be viewed as a decisive condition for the upheaval of 1989/90 and helps explain why there was no "zero hour" and why, after the wall fell and Germany was reunified, the development was able to take a relatively intelligent course at all. And that with all the problems which, of course, I am familiar with (in part from my own experience!). But if we compare what a reunification between North and South Korea could look like, we would first have to determine how relatively simple German reunification was – even if that which we had hoped for in the 1980's has by no means happened!

Yes, the debates and the internal conflicts in the 1980's were the prerequisite for a further development of the German-German and the international culture of debate after 1990.

Without this "inner opening" (of the window to the inside) in the world of the GDR experts, an in part critical examination of the planning culture of the FRG would hardly have been possible. The Bauhaus colloquia in Weimar are not a filed memory which must be pursued in order to maintain it. They don't just still exist today as a communicative platform. In retrospect they attract the renewed interest of the next generation.

On the one hand, the Bauhaus colloquia can be seen as a concluded institutional form between 1976 and 1989; from today's perspective they can, no they must at the same time once again be viewed as an incomplete chapter of the institutional development. This opens up the view of two interrelated categories of the analysis of the history (of urban development) as social history and as a history of the individual institutions behind the actual events: a question of Remembrance and repetition: "This means the decision for repetition would be the acceptance of the given, the courage which is spoken of here, i.e. that of the stoic. An individual, who neither nostalgically mourns the past nor banks on an uncertain future, but instead embraces the life which has now become his. 'He who chooses repetition, lives.'<sup>1</sup> (Kierkegaard)

## The prelude to the Bauhaus colloquia

In the period between 1976 and 1989 five Bauhaus colloquia took place at the College of Architecture and Building in Weimar.<sup>2</sup> The Bauhaus in Dessau was selectively included as a location for excursions and events. They were mainly supported by the Architectural Department, however were provided with various partners who came from other departments and colleges, from the National Building Academy in Berlin and the Humboldt-University Berlin or from the building, design and planning practical sectors. The colloquia had an international character from the start – mostly orientated to eastern countries. They were directed at the academic and student world and at the political and the practical building world. That was a balancing act, particularly since the political attention was accorded to the Bauhaus per se. And that was because, especially in the German-German situation, the Bauhaus had achieved a position not to be underestimated in accordance with the question of who the Bauhaus really belongs to? The Bauhaus colloquia can only be seen as a part and the result of a dialog which began long before 1976 in both German countries. They are part of a difficult approach of the GDR to the legacy which ranged from rejection up to gradual acceptance and which covered almost two decades.

## The Phases of the Bauhaus Colloquia

In the development of the Bauhaus colloquia, three different approaches in sequence can be discerned, which are characteristic of the respective colloquia. This began in 1976 with a basic interest in the Bauhaus legacy in the GDR and the appropriation especially of the architectural legacy, and in particular of the Bauhaus in Dessau. Basic contributions by Schädlich on the history of the Bauhaus and by Behr, from the Institute for Theory and History at the Building Academy in Berlin, on the Bauhaus building in Dessau, opened the round of the Bauhaus reception.<sup>3</sup> These and the other contributions basically reported on the status of research since the mid-1960's, including internationally. Following these descriptive, in some cases highly ideological and emphatic claims to the legacy for the GDR and the Weimar college, a more in-depth dialogue already began during the second colloquium in 1979.

Now Bernd Grönwald prominently appeared and began to initiate a serious analysis of the Bauhaus with the objective of making the legacy in particular fruitful for the form of architectural and urban development qualities in the context of the housing construction program. He initiated this debate with a remarkable recourse to the official reception of the Bauhaus by the GDR. He asked about the effects triggered in society by the valorization of the Bauhaus in 1976.

As a result, the first two Bauhaus colloquia focused on the development of the Bauhaus legacy and basically making it fruitful for the characterization of a primarily socio-cultural and aesthetic quality of the current architectural work. The establishment of the so-called "Scientific-Cultural Center" at the Bauhaus in Dessau beginning in 1976 was intended to gradually prepare for the refounding of an educational and research institution at the historical site. This was the main result of the activities surrounding the first two Bauhaus colloquia.

The Bauhaus was stylized to a proof of authority in order to press for the placement of the demand for design quality among the public. The fact that a virtually non-critical reflection of the extremely contradictory Bauhaus legacy took place can only be understood against this background. Although this functionalization of functionalism was understandable at that time, it did not appear to be viable enough to the players themselves. An expansion of the perspective was required, which was gradually achieved at the colloquia that followed.

This general reception was specified in the colloquia that followed (in 1983, 1986 and – the final - 1989). These conferences were devoted to the anniversaries of the birth of the directors Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and finally Hannes Meyer.

Now the topics of the city or urban development and urban planning were put on the agenda for the first time. With the contribution of Joachim Bach in 1983 on the legacy of Gropius and the relation to progress in urban planning/development, an attempt was made to build a bridge and to link the honoring of the Bauhaus founder with current challenges.<sup>4</sup> Here as well, the reference to the founding fathers of the Bauhaus was more of a declaratory act in order to then come to current debates – packaged in an all-encompassing political context. Bach focused his expositions on the responsibility and the activity of the planning experts, which was ultimately also a reference to the situation at the HAB itself. He noted this as self-criticism:

"We discover – sometimes ashamedly – how little we knew about human beings and their needs, when we tackled such enormous tasks, and how imperfect and mechanical our role models were."<sup>5</sup> In order to then continue in a generalizing manner:

"... this means their necessarily existing relationship to the characteristics and needs of the human being is not just 'ultimately' produced in the form of social goals and results, but *directly* (emphasis by Bach) ... In connection with this, the tendency to a stronger socialization and humanization of science is a reflex of comprehensive processes, i.e. the necessity of specifying socio-ethical regulation and development programs for science. In this context alone, architecture can and must redefine its claim to universality – if it does not want to lose it. ... Between rational planning and the creative process lies a gap full of misunderstandings and narrow-mindedness. And here the important urban developers of this century had just begun to fill this gap. Today it is no longer sufficient, as the architects and urban developers do, to superficially explain the city as a *structural-spatial* environment from the objective-spatial conditions consisting of function, structure and design, and to consider planning measures as the goal accordingly. And it is also no longer enough to superficially explain the city and urbanization, as the social scientists do, as a *social* organism consisting of social processes, relationships, and behaviors, and to consider the structural-spatial conditions only as its expression.

On the contrary, it is necessary to grasp the city and the totality of the system of the settlement as a social-spatial form of existence of society in its dialectic inconsistencies and as a unit, interaction and movement, and to develop an interdisciplinary urbanistic concept which puts us in a position to examine all major aspects of this phenomenon and to combine the results of a large number disciplines."<sup>6</sup>

With this it can be stated – from today's standpoint – that the debate stands (more or less) for this long quote from Bach, the Director of the Department (Faculty) for Urban Development at the HAB, at the height of the international debate on the societal dimension of urban

planning , urban space and lifestyle of the inhabitants. It was – symbolically - a starting point of a fundamental change in planning in the GDR.

However, topics are already touched upon here which will unfold at the subsequent Bauhaus colloquia and which must be viewed in the context of the growing global problems. As a result, he saw the progress in urban development linked to the "solution of problems of a completely new dimension". Here he pointed, on the one hand, with regard to the striving for profit, toward the capitalistic West. However, there was no assignment of the other global problems to those addressed – so they were also directed at his own address in the GDR: „ ... – from the solution of the demographic and ecological, of the energy and food crisis, to the ending of the barbaric treatment of natural treasures, etc., etc. ... Today it is no longer possible to provide the basis of progress in urban development for a country, a region or a social system, or to determine growth, prosperity or lifestyle, without taking the global problems of the development of humanity into account and without answering the social question."<sup>7</sup>

These extensive quotations point to the change in perspective which became apparent. and which – with regard to the topics of urban development – assumed increasingly fundamental characteristics. As a result, the Bauhaus colloquium gradually became an arena for discussion which left the realm of veneration of the Bauhaus and dealt with current questions of urban planning. This development was certain in the interest of the founders of these colloquia, as was already outlined by Grönwald in his statements of 1979.<sup>8</sup>

And now the global question pushing to the forefront went beyond the search for adequate quality in the fields of architecture and urban planning.

## The Finale

With the Bauhaus colloquium in 1986, several new factors arrived on the scene. Urban planning, ecological orientated urban planning, and sociological aspects of contemporary planning were raised to their own major topics at the conference. (Fig. 2) The fixation of the history of the Bauhaus was expanded by not only focusing on the Bauhaus Director Mies van der Rohe in the anniversary year. With Ernst May – not bauhaus-person and an important planner - a new facet was added to the perspective of historical considerations. And last but not least, the Bauhaus in Dessau was once again chosen to be a separate research and teaching institution, completing the efforts for an international refounding of the Bauhaus, which had covered more than 10 years.

However, all three factors were also linked to a further qualitative change. As a result, it can basically be noted that, on the one hand, there was a gap between the increasingly political and dogmatic official statements at the conference. And there was an increasing thematic expansion toward an analysis of the inherent problems of the urban development in the GDR – with all the restraint in the specific statement. The background to this development is certainly also the opening up in the culture of debating which was introduced when Gorbachev took office in der USSR. This led to an insidious drifting apart of the increasingly dogmatic elite of the party leadership and parts of the scientific community without being able to speak of a "black-and-white situation" here.<sup>9</sup>

In the part of the colloquium which had been devoted to urban planning, the expanded view of the object was expressed in four talks. Bach carried his remarks on the topic of progress made in 1983 further and attracted attention to the challenges of the urban planners themselves. Here he mixed in a very critical undertone which emphasized the global risks of progress. Without naming it directly, the atomic disaster of Chernobyl in 1986, which had occurred just a few weeks previously, played an important role: "But for the sake of sincerity I must also say that, despite the historical optimism that is part of our Marxist-Leninist world view, I also feel somewhat uneasy when I imagine how things will be in the future. ... we should also not overlook the risks which grow out of the uncontrolled spread and the unknown use of the possibilities of new technology for the human being, as exactly that 'biopsychosocial' creature which modern science recognizes it to be. Above all ... the MARXian sentence ..., that culture, when robustly advancing, leaves behind deserts ... is given a new meaning."<sup>10</sup>

Putting this to constructive use, Bach formulated a socio-cultural claim to the city of the future:

"However, in the near future it will still be a matter of quite everyday questions when we build the city of the future. For the city of the future it is not a futuristic vision, but is instead made of the stuff of history and the present. It is a matter of decent living conditions, ... of nature versus too much synthetics, ..., yes, even of imperfection versus the precision of machines and the logic of the computer. For us, it should be a matter of not only preserving existing beauty as a backdrop and even of creating much more that is beautiful and of grasping the grandeur of the city like the poetry inherent to it, which can hardly be 'designed', but instead only results through appropriation and identification."<sup>11</sup>

Reaching for this dimension, Edmund Goldzamt, the Nestor of Polish urban development, who lived in Moscow during the time of martial law in Poland, conjured up the "destinies of the urban in housing construction". A critical analysis of the legacy of urban development of the modern age and – considered in this context – a discussion of the current "urban decay" took place here for the first time. He combined the debate on de-urbanization with the criticism of the current type of urban development in the socialistic countries, "The interests of technology and the narrow, departmentally extensive economy of the construction industry gained the upper hand in a series of cases concerning the social criteria of housing construction. ... In this way, the elements of urban decay, which have become apparent over the past several decades, can to a great degree be traced back to the extensive methods of housing construction, to the extensive use of materials, energy and space and to the low social efficiency of the significant funds to be invested."<sup>12</sup>

These basic articles were to a certain degree operationalized with two additional talks. On the one hand, Sylvia Böhme outlined the relationship of urban ecology and urban planning as a new challenge, which is reflected in the call for the "establishment of an integrative socio-ecological conception of the city and urbanization".<sup>13</sup> The other side was formulated by Kühne and Schwarzbach, who reported on practical approaches to the rehabilitation of residential areas from the 1960's. Here the exact goal lay in the rebuilding of these de-urbanized areas, which Goldzamt had denounced. Bell supported this with an essay on the holistic planning of urban regional areas in which urban redevelopment ("transformation") of the urban region results in changing basic conditions and deficits of the newly built districts.<sup>14</sup>

This outlines a range of topics which was located at the height of the international debate, however was of course far from the official discussions in the state and party leadership.

The last Bauhaus colloquium held in the GDR took place in the year the Wall fell. It was devoted to the 100th birthday of Hannes Meyer, the "leftist" Bauhaus director who was less well-known in the West, but all the more appreciated in the GDR. A biography by Hannes Meyer, written by Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, appeared in preparation for this colloquium.<sup>15</sup> With the conference in Dessau – the last part of the Weimar Colloquia, attention was also attracted to the new institution of the Bauhaus in Dessau, which was distinguishing itself at this time. In addition, information was provided on the ongoing preparations for the 2nd International Walter Gropius Seminar, which was to take place from 4 to 10 November 1989 and with which the new Bauhaus was to clearly establish itself as an experimental institution for urban development in the times of the upheaval of industrial society. As a result, the Bauhaus in Dessau was given the role of the experimental "wing" of the researching and teaching institution in the field of architecture and urban planning in Weimar.<sup>16</sup>

The number of talks on urban development or urban planning in Weimar had in turn increased. These ranged from lectures on the history of planning (Fehl and John) to socio-cultural aspects (Hunger, Wirth and Queißer) and critical reflections on new technologies in urban development (Brake) and the English planning system of the Thatcher era to theoretical planning questions on the "pattern language" of Alexander (Siepl-Coates).<sup>17</sup> In the final theses on the workshop introduced to the Bauhaus colloquium as a new element with the title "The ethics of progress and the future of cities", Bach, as the host of this workshop, summarized the results in a basic statement which extended into the future. "At the threshold of a new age, we have the task of critically examining the results of a century of urban development and of redefining goals - fundamentally."<sup>18</sup>

This was a "silent revolution" ...

This sounds trivial, but in view of the escalating internal political situation in the GDR, which was primarily fed from a critique-free "carry-on mentality" of the party leadership, this is similar to a call for societal change – on the political basis of an alternative to capitalistic urban development.

Following this cursory glance through a recently opened window, the question arises of an outlook which permanently holds the window open – to remain in the metaphor.

*Meeting of three networkers in the cellar of the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1991 – the speakers of the morning session (Harald Bodenschatz, Max Welch-Guerra, Harald Kegler).*

#### **Final remarks:**

This colloquium here shows that Kassel is a forum for the history of planning – on this side of the former iron curtain. In addition to Erkner or Weimar and the other places of research and teaching in history of planning, building, landscaping etc., this is a further node in the growing network of research for planning history, which then adds an inspiring facet to the discussion on the past and future of planning in a world in transformation.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Bürger, Peter: "Ich tanze nicht" – Annäherungen an Kierkegaard ("I don't dance – Approaches to Kierkegaard), 2011, in: <http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/essayunddiskurs/1630182/> (12/18/2011), Pg. 5

<sup>2</sup> A total of 11 Bauhaus colloquia took place up to 2009. The next one is planned for 2013. <http://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/portal/Bauhaus-Kolloquium-1976/index.php>

<sup>3</sup> Most of the lectures are available for reading in digital form. See: <http://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/portal/Bauhaus-Kolloquium-1976/index.php>

<sup>4</sup> Bach 1983, Issue 4/5, Pg. 429-431

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, Pg. 430

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, Pg. 429

<sup>8</sup> Grönward 1979, Issue 4/5, Pg. 312

<sup>9</sup> Henn 1987, Issue 4/5/6, Pg. 192-193. This article is a typically stiff welcoming addresses in which stereotypes were declared without a trace of reference to the changes becoming apparent in the world.

<sup>10</sup> Bach 1987, Issue 4/5/6, Pg. 225. He began his article by stating that he intended to spend more time asking questions than providing answers (Pg. 224).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, Pg. 225

<sup>12</sup> Goldzamt 1987, Issue 4/5/6, Pg. 227

<sup>13</sup> Böhme 1987, Issue 4/5/6, Pg. 233-234, especially Pg. 234

<sup>14</sup> Beil 1987, Issue 4/5/6, Pg. 231-233

<sup>15</sup> Winkler 1989

<sup>16</sup> Kuhn 1989, Pg. 223-230, especially. Pg. 228

<sup>17</sup> See: Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar (Scientific Magazine of the College of Architecture and Building in Weimar), 1990, Issue 1-3, Pg. 165, printed lectures of the Bauhaus colloquium

<sup>18</sup> Bach 1990, Issue 1-3, Pg. 147-148, especially Pg. 148



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