

Das Neue Bauen And The Notion Of A-Perspectival Space

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"A polished metal sphere is without any doubt a fantastic phenomenon for our mind, but a flower is an experience. To value geometric forms over things means to make things uniform and to mechanize these things. We do not want to mechanize things but rather their production. To mechanize things means, to mechanize their lives - our lives - which means to kill them. But to mechanize their production means to gain life. The form of things can be identical with geometric figures, like a crystal for example, but the geometric form found in nature is never the content or origin of the form. . . . We do not have to create our individuality, but the individuality of things. Their expression has to be identical with themselves."

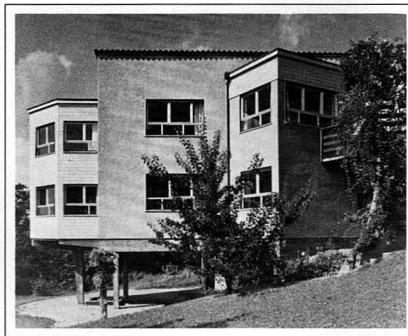
Hugo Häring,
wege zur form, 1925.

"... This world goes beyond our conceptualization. By the same token, the mental world once went beyond the experiential capability of mythical man, and yet this world of the mind became reality. Anyone who objects that the aperspectival world is, in spatial terms, unimaginable, incomprehensible, impalpable, inconclusive, and unthinkable—and there will be no end to such objections—falls victim to his own limitations of comprehension and to the visual representation imposed by this world."

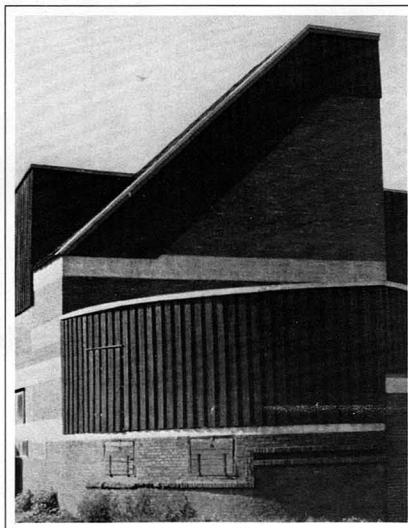
Jean Gebser,
Ursprung und Gegenwart, 1949.

"Working by calculation, engineers employ geometrical forms, satisfying our eyes by their geometry and our understanding by their mathematics; their work is on the direct line of good art."

Le Corbusier,
Towards a New Architecture, 1923



*House Werner Schmitz, Biberach, 1950
Hugo Häring*



Gut Garkau, Holstein, 1924. Hugo Häring.

The dramatic changes in our lives and environment, in the whole nature of work, and in the forms of media, transport and intercommunication mean that architecture and urban design have to search for opportunities to provide the public with possibilities of identification and orientation of their lives. Such a request is an inquiry of notion and conscious concepts. The search for new concepts and the re-evaluation of existing and abandoned ones can only be successful if the process of this search is treated in a creative way. The pluralistic interpretation and integration of space and time, as well as of meaning, phenomenalism and honesty will establish the basis for active change.

In a time where contemporary architecture is in desperate need of reconstruction and reconsideration, it is necessary to go back to the early years of modernism to analyze its roots and points of departure. With the end of the grotesque charade of post-modernism and the *vi sep aux* of deconstructivism, two directions in architecture which share the danger on the conceptual as well as on the built level, the danger of separation of form and function so far that architecture becomes a festival of never ending fashion. The reappearance of a nearly lost architecture based on reason seems to be recognizable and reachable. This architecture is available for a contemporary use after a comprehensive and careful analysis of previous solutions. A combination of austerity and purism along with freedom and exuberance characterize this direction. Parts of this movement try to establish a rela-

tionship to the work of Hans Scharoun and Hugo Häring, but not with a search for another direction of modernism as in the 60's. The danger of mere borrowing is that the language used by these early modern architects will be adapted for stylistic reasons only. This strategy, on the one hand, risks becoming inflexible through reduction into pure formalism, which is quite the opposite of the initial intentions of the early modernism. Instead, this architecture might be developed as a method which selects important thought processes; this way the method could live up to the promises of the initial point of departure.

At this point it is important to identify and to question the origins for their potential value in reconstructing modernism. This process must also ask why the expressionist and organic movement in Europe, especially in Germany, was pushed into an isolation which still exists now. The following must be understood as being simplified by the author for the benefit of a better understanding and cannot be understood as a complete coverage of the subject.

The antithetical position between expressionism and functionalism documented by historians like Pevsner and Giedion strongly favored functionalism. Pevsner's characterization of modern architecture was that of an anonymous, objective, scientifically based architecture. The belief in science, the source for positivism, was communicated as a ticket to an unvarnished reality. The belief in dividing art from sci-

ence thoughtlessly overlooked the fact that the celebrated architecture of functionalism was in most cases the result of a merciless reduction which was symbolic for perfectionism. The Modern Movement and in particular functionalism was often understood as a conscious selection of new roads and seemed to abandon its past and any belief in the so much refused historicism. This refusal was the foundation for a universal architecture, an "International Style", which could be applied all over the world independent of context, social or cultural differences. The reduction towards an essential vocabulary and the establishment of a universal aesthetic abandoned pre-existing values. This is especially true of the later generation of modernists who were, unlike the pioneers of the Modern Movement, not trained and educated in a traditional way. A more in-depth analysis of the early work of these pioneers reveals a careful selection of existing buildings which were used as points of departure. To be able to uncover and to reconsider these stages of the early Modern Movement, it is necessary to suspend the concept of modernism as a totally new start and to place modernism in the field of conscious continuation and ongoing evolution. The analysis of German Expressionism and its spatial and social awareness can be understood as part of such a point of view.

Functionalism and expressionism as complementary, archetypal powers of giving shape and form, were both simultaneously involved with founding modernism. Germany, the Netherlands and, to a lesser degree Austria and Czechoslovakia were the original birthplaces where important groups of both movements could be recognized. In Germany it was the group around Gropius and Mies, and the group around Taut, Poelzig and later Häring and Scharoun. In the Netherlands they could be identified as De-Stijl representatives and as representatives of the Amsterdam School.

After the worldwide victory of functionalism, the expressionist movement disappeared gradually from the scene. Only the

late work of Hans Scharoun, such as his school projects for the Geschwister-Scholl-School (Lünen, 1958) and the Volksschule at Marl (Marl 1960-8) and the Philharmonie in Berlin (Berlin 1956-63), brought attention to a movement which continued to exist in seclusion. Members of this group were involved with the development and testing of the notion of a-perspectival space.

The subject of a-perspectival space was first mentioned and extensively covered by Jean Gebser in his 1949 book *Ursprung und Gegenwart*. Gebser argues that the human

being experiences space and time in a three-step development, which he defines as the pre-perspectival, the perspectival and the a-perspectival world. In the pre-perspectival world human beings were not able to recognize consciously the separation between themselves and the phenomena of time and space. The perspectival world was characterized through the discovery of space and the a-perspectival world is identified through awareness of the phenomenon of time.

The notion of the a-perspectival world is concerned with our view of the entirety.

Gebser describes the whole as something

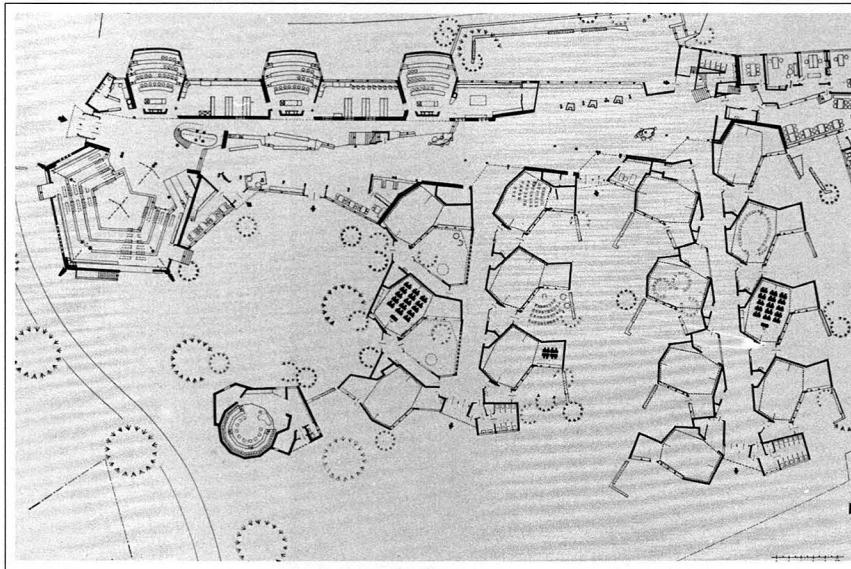
... which we simply experience in magic, which becomes visible to us in the polarity of the world of descriptive imagery, and which we attempt to conceptualize in a mental-rational summation of parts: the whole becomes perceptible throughout all time; origin becomes present.¹

Such a view of the entirety uses the integral to establish the overall view of the parts and their relationship and superimposes this system with its antitheses.

It is important to discuss the meaning of such a concept for architectural development. For a better understanding it is necessary to compare the perspectival and the a-perspectival interpretation of the whole.

During the Renaissance the correct and scientific definition of the phenomenon of perspective allowed the world to discover space. The phenomenon of a correct reproduction of the relationship of object size to distance from the viewer was common understanding until the time of modernism. Today we are aware that the perspective reflects only a partial reality with a fixed subject-object relationship. Such a limited way of thinking has a significant impact on our creation of space. Prior to the recognition of a-perspectival space, the process of creating space was limited by its boundaries which were defined in terms of perspectival representation.

Through modernism and its contemporary movements, like Cubism, the preeminence of the perspective was fundamentally questioned and reconstructed. The static subject-object relationship found in the perspectival world is replaced by an understanding of the whole as the simultaneity of all parts. This simultaneity implies the simultaneity of different standpoints of the observer. Such a reformulation will influence all spatial creation. The results are complex, layered space systems in which the many fragments of space and their fragmentary relationship can be recognized simultaneously.



Geschwister-Scholl-School, Lünen, 1958-62, Hans Scharoun, Ground Floor



Geschwister-Scholl-School, Lünen, 1958-62, Hans Scharoun, View from the South

Häring and Scharoun were both well aware of Gebser's theory. This is documented through Häring's critical response in a lecture with the title *Vom Neuen Bauen* in which he states:

... it seems to us that the definition of the a-perspectival world does not react completely to the new and different approach. ... Gebser's definition, through which he mentioned the coming age as an a-perspectival one, only contains a technical

instruction, through which the coming age differs from the previous one, whose technical characteristics was for example, perspective. No doubt his definition is one characteristic of the new age, but the reason which had caused this change, is not visible...²

Scharoun, on the other hand, adopted Gebser's point of view. He often pointed out that he understood cultural development as something dependent on space and time. In his understanding, culture is

tied to the materialistic environment of a specific geographical location and timewise, culture is tied to the prevailing modes of human consciousness. He differs from others who would impose a priori schemata over contextual issues. He acknowledges his debt to Gebser:

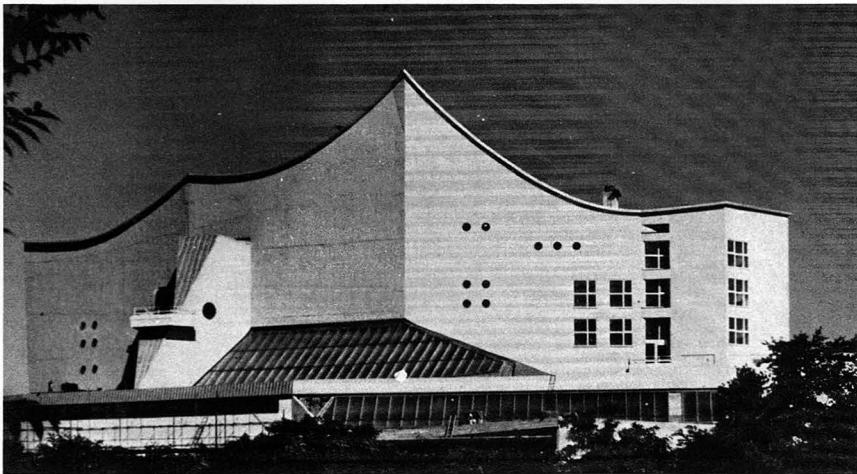
... Gebser speaks about the levels of conscious awareness of humanity: the archaic level, the magical and mythical level, and finally the mental level, which undoubtedly is relevant to our present situation. This is the level on which the spiritual powers are developed with respect to reason, with the ultimate goal being the integration of human beings themselves into the creative process.³

Today the work of Günther Behnisch represents the duality in German architecture represented by the rational and the expressionist movements. Behnisch, who is obviously influenced by Scharoun and Häring, does not try to create an antithesis to the existing rationalism, but tries in his work to overcome the dialectic as the foundation of the process and re-

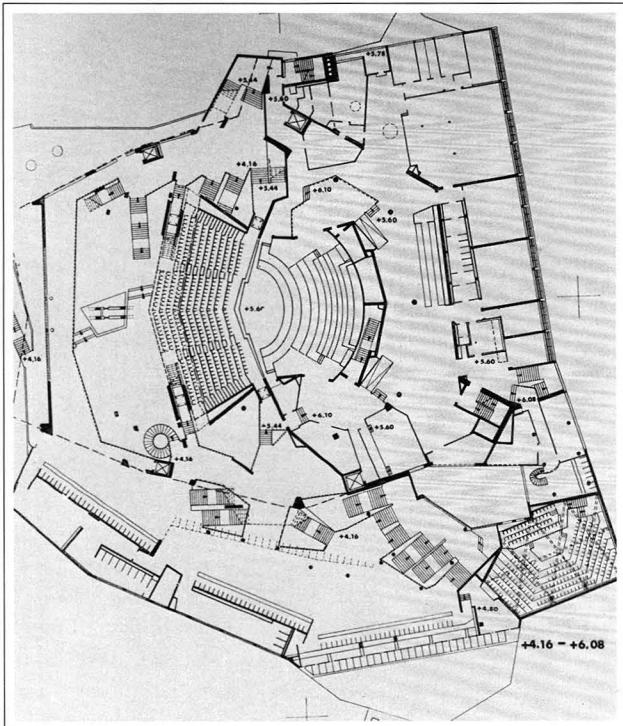
places it with a complementary thought process. This inclusive thought process can be also found in the work of physicists Werner Heisenberg and reflects a pluralistic conception of the world, which offers the most contrasting opinions, the simultaneous right of existence. The individual element is no longer understood as an exchangeable part of the whole, but gains, based on this understanding, identity and form which are derived from its task.

This might be best documented through Hugo Häring's words:

... We want to find things and to allow them to develop their own form. It is against our belief to give them form and to determine them from the exterior, or to apply any derived rules to them, or to do violence to them. We were wrong, when we transformed them into a scene of historical demonstrations, and we were also wrong, when we transformed them into objects of our individual moods. It is equally wrong for us, if we trace back things to geometric and crystalline forms, because again we do violence to them. (Le Corbusier) Basic forms



Philharmonie, Berlin, 1956-63. Hans Scharoun, General View



24 *Philharmonie, Berlin, 1956-63. Hans Scharoun, Floor Plan*



Philharmonie, Berlin, 1956-63. Hans Scharoun, Interior View Concert Hall

*based on geometry are not prototypes. Geometric forms are abstractions which are derived from regularity. The unity, which we put up over the gestalt of a lot of things and which is based on geometric forms, is only the unity of form, not a unity of life. But we want the unity of life together with the living.*⁴

This philosophy might describe the basis of Behnisch's definition of space. Behnisch always interprets space as a container for meeting between different phenomena whose meaning and reason can be found outside of the actual space. This spatial phenomenon can be approached in two different ways which allow us to experience space in different ways. These two approaches can be analyzed separately but in reality they appear as phenomena which are constantly changing their position relative to each other. Therefore in reality they are inseparable. One approach is that of the observed object. This method makes a clear distinction between elements which define and activate space and their inherent characteristics. This allows us to examine and to define every space and to trace its constitutive, objective elements. The second approach is the one which comes from the observing subject. It makes a distinction between three subjective areas of spatial experience. The first is the visualized space which is based in the field of intellectual experience, an experience which is developed on the treatment of abstraction, reduction and communication through plans and sections. The second area is the spatial experience which is described through the psychological experience which arises through the real observation of the space. And finally, the last one is the perception of the space, based on physical experience and its effect on our senses.

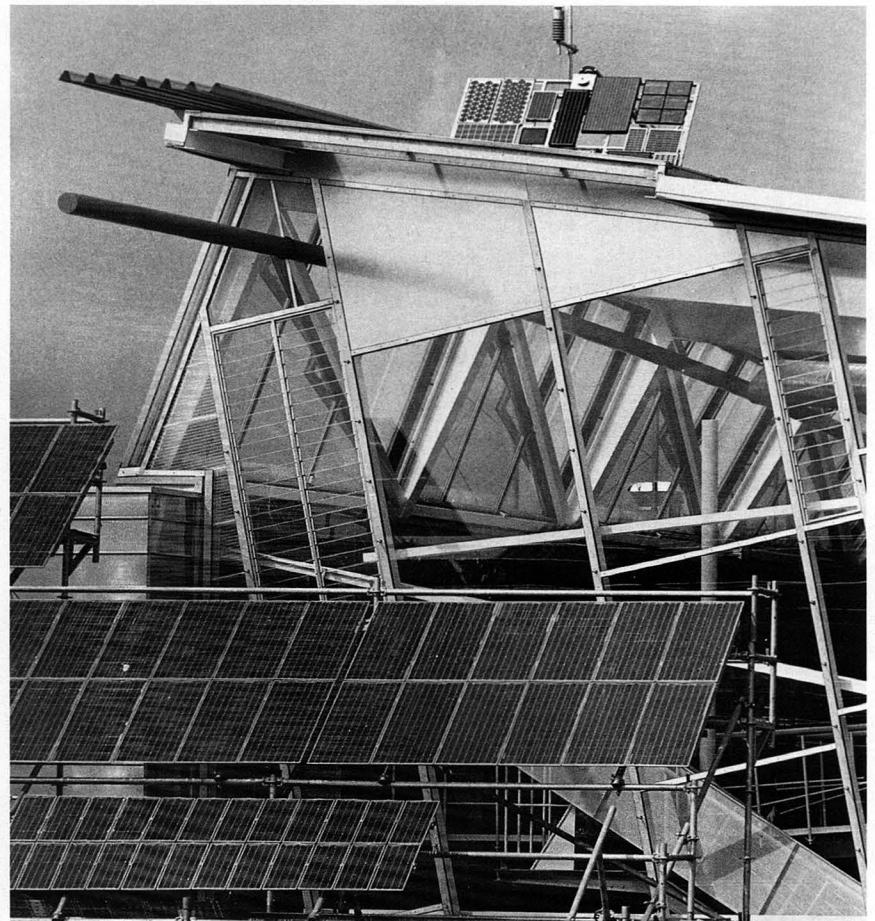
Such spatial understanding allows us to recognize the limitations of the orthogonal continuum of space, one of the main meanings of the Modern Movement. The study of expressionist theory and of the work of its pioneers confirms the limitations of restrictions established by the more

celebrated tendencies in Modernism. It becomes obvious to us that this formal domination of Modernism is only part of the ideas behind Modernism and only reflects a single part and therefore calls for supplementation and expansion. The relation of an extended belief will again enable architecture to produce a direct and emotional impression.

The interaction of several, non-orthogonally organized systems, which function as space-defining elements, generates spatial relationships which will question our preconceived ideas about the experience of space. The liberation of space and its constituting elements can then be seen as the first step towards a democratic architecture as well as a mirror of contemporary mankind, which includes a strong reflection of the self-determination and self-realization of the individual.

Notes

1. Gebser, Jean, *The Ever-Present Origin* Translation of: *Ursprung und Gegenwart* DVA GmbH, Stuttgart, 1949/53 Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1985.
2. Häring, Hugo, *vom neuen bauen* Technical University, Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1952 Translated by author.
3. Scharoun, Hans *Struktur in Raum und Zeit* Reinhard Jaspert, Berlin, 1957.
4. Häring, Hugo, *wege zur form* Die Form, Nr. 1, 1925 Translated by author.



Hysolar Research Building, Stuttgart, 1986, Gunther Behnisch, General View



Hysolar Research Building, Stuttgart, 1986, Gunther Behnisch, Interior View