

Nicole Heinzl

Environmental and Social Responsibility in Product Design: A Comparative Study of HfG Ulm and Bauhaus

The contemporary product and industrial designer recognizes himself as a shaper of objects in the material world and considers the relationships between inanimate objects and living beings during the design and planning process. Thus he not only ponders aesthetic questions but also and primarily reflects on the influence of and interaction with the-object-to-be as well as its usefulness to and usage by human beings and human needs in different built or natural environments.

In addition to economic and functional concerns, the designer also considers, among other diverse factors, the ecological impact of his idea: the consumption of material resources and energy required by its development, manufacture and use. The designer thus bears a great responsibility for the environment and the society in which he lives and for which he designs and creates objects intended for everyday use in those contexts.

Based on these criteria, which are now well-established in contemporary design, this dissertation project takes the form of an art-historical research examining the past which shaped our present. It investigates two early German design academies for signs of the origins of our contemporary understanding of the environment. On one hand, it will examine the renowned Bauhaus academy, established by Walter Gropius in 1919 during the Weimar Republic and closed in 1933 by the National Socialists, which drove the transformation of the self-image of craftspeople to that of designers. On the other hand it focuses on the Hochschule für Gestaltung school of design in Ulm, commonly known as HfG Ulm, which was officially founded in 1953 by Max Bill and existed until 1968. The institution served as the most successful attempt at reviving and further developing the spirit and ideas of the Bauhaus. The achievements of the school itself influenced the career image of today's university-educated designers and informed the pedagogical concept of at the root of contemporary German and international schools of design.

A range of questions will be put to the schools: Were there already ideas and developments at the work of both schools that cleared the way for modern environmental and social awareness in design? Through which reasoning and with which means did each academy come to its conceptions of design? How did they develop their ideas in everyday teaching, research and the design process itself? Wherein do they disagree? How are they deficient from a present-day perspective and why?