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AFTER 'ULM
AND AFTER'

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René Spitz

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All sorts of different currents, movements and initiatives – in the most diverse and even contradictory idioms – are described as 'modernist'. Yet as heterogeneous as they may be, they have certain fundamentals in common. Among them is a determination to live in the present, based on the conviction that today is more important than yesterday. It is not that modernists deem the past to be utterly irrelevant, worthy only of history's proverbial dustbin. After all, looking back can explain how we arrived at where we are now, and so expose those strong roots that may yet serve us as guidelines. But the past lends no legitimacy to the everyday life of the present, nor can it, given that conventions and traditions no longer carry any authoritative weight.

This radical commitment to the present is a defining feature of modernists. Some feel it to be an unreasonable demand that has led many despondent souls to feel alienated and lost. This in turn has made them easy prey for power-hungry demagogues with their anodyne promises of a life as simple, orderly and predictable as it was in the past, or so they claim. Hence the tendency among modernists to disdain traditionalists, who in their eyes cling onto the empty husks of obsolete practices and rituals that have long since been drained of all meaning. Modernists want to shape the future, a better future that will be brought about not by keeping the past firmly within our sights, but only by looking ahead.

Humane, Habitable, Hospitable

The question of how designers might further the development of society so as to prevent any repetition of the destructive insanity of fascism was central to the Ulm School of Design as it was to no other. The foundation of the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG), in the German city of Ulm, was motivated not by the desire to make the world more beautiful, but rather a perceived need to make it more humane, habitable and hospitable. So uncompromisingly radical were the school's key players, first and foremost among them Otl Aicher and Tomás Maldonado, that they happily left beauty to the domain of art, regarding it as neither a paramount nor even a primary concern of design. Design problems should be solved intellectually, they argued, and in this crucial respect set



A, B Architecture Max Bill, Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, DE, 1953–1955. The school was open for students till late in the evening. Courtesy: HfG Archive Ulm, DE.

C Austere Interior of the HfG Ulm, unpainted concrete, untreated natural timber, brick infill painted white, good lighting, glass boxes of student work – everything very simple and an effective illustration of the 'Ulm Standard' and unconscious education. On the right a passage to the main entrance and along the walls all the information lined up with push pins for students in lower case. Courtesy: Michael Penck, AU.

D Design Degree Show – the class of S. Nadkarni and M. Penck, HfG Ulm. The work produced over the year in metal, wood, plastic, plaster, typography and photography was exhibited and evaluated by the tutors over several days to decide who met the 'Ulm Standard', the end-of-year exhibition 1962–1963. Courtesy: Michael Penck, AU.

themselves apart from the Bauhaus, a school of art whose teachers were themselves artists for the most part and hence approached design from an artistic angle. The Ulm School of Design took a very different stance, regarding the form and aesthetics of the end result as just one aspect among many that design as a discipline had to take account of – and not the dominant one at that.

The design perspective propagated at the HfG viewed the individual as part of a larger social context. Thus understood, design endeavours to strike a balance between the wishes and needs of the individual on the one hand, and the contingencies and demands of society on the other. Ulm School students learned to identify these complex correlations by analysing their tasks in the light of a range of factors, such as material science and manufacturing methods as well as economic, environmental, cultural, sociological, philosophical and political considerations. This enumeration of the various lines of inquiry underpinning each new design is alone enough to show that, at the HfG, form and aesthetics were regarded as just one influential factor among many.

Secular Humanism

The HfG ethos rested on the belief that since the world can be grasped objectively, it can also be changed for the better, for and by each and every individual in it – a conviction perhaps best described as secular humanism. The role of design, therefore, was to further the development of ‘social modernism’ – ‘social’ not in the sense of ‘charitable’, but rather ‘conducive to social cohesion’. The ideal thus referenced is also expressed in the concept of the ‘common good’, meaning whatever is best for most people and for their harmonious co-existence in the long run.

There is something utopian about an approach to design that claims to be as inclusive and enduringly influential as this. In this respect, the Ulm School was in excellent company and takes its place alongside older, but similarly idealistic reform movements such as the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, and on the continent Jugendstil/Art Nouveau, the Deutscher Werkbund, the Dutch De Stijl movement and of course the Bauhaus. Design in each case was understood as an activity that oversteps the bounds of the old disciplines in order to integrate all objectively required findings.



^E Prof. Hans Gugelot, Architect from Zurich with Dutch origins, teaching at HfG Ulm, DE. One of the HfG Ulm's leading lights, Gugelot mentored Sudhakar Nadkarni, encouraging him to found IDC, IIT-B in Mumbai, IN. Courtesy: Michael Penck, AU.

^F Prof. Tomás Maldonado, Argentine painter, designer and thinker in the HfG Ulm typesetting studio. During his tenure at HfG Ulm from 1954 to 1967, he developed the legendary 'Ulm model'. Courtesy: Michael Penck, AU.

Shared Values

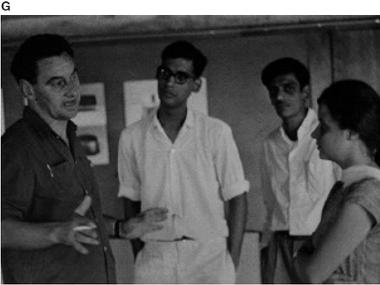
The German word *gestalt* lends expression to this same holistic ideal. According to *gestalt* theory, human perception does not consist in the accumulation of isolated stimuli. Instead, we apprehend our surroundings in terms of overall impact. The German verb *gestalten*, generally translated as ‘to design’, is thus the holistic practice of lending shape to something.

This was the conviction underlying modernism’s appreciation of those shared, transcendent values that bind all people together. After all, the lesson the modernists learned from the devastating experience of the Second World War was that emphasizing the unique and the peculiar tends to be divisive and ultimately has the effect of pitting people against each other. Hence modern design’s aspiration to universal validity.

Such a view pushes culturally specific aspects to the sidelines, which should not be taken to mean that they are unimportant. Applied over a period of several decades, however, such a principle inevitably gave rise to styles of architecture and design that were felt by the majority of the population to be anonymous and interchangeable, or were experienced as foreign bodies imposed on them by some arrogantly remote hand. Such is the impact of these forbidding grey blocks on their neighbourhoods that their specific cultural diversity is wrecked beyond repair. Abstract, know-it-all modernism has not won any friends in this way, which perhaps helps explain the success of silly, irrational, upbeat Postmodernism.

Universal and Specific

Yet modernism’s universalist approach has lost none of its appeal. Its heyday, specifically the two decades between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, saw the founding of India’s National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad in 1961, for example. It was no accident that the most important inspiration for the NID – alongside Charles and Ray Eames – was one of the HfG Ulm’s leading lights, the lecturer Hans Gugelot. Right from the start it was clear that in India, at any rate, any brand of modernism that failed to take account of key cultural factors would be unfit for purpose. The integration of aspects both universal and specific thus counts among the primary motives behind the NID’s efforts to develop a social modernism in line with the times.



Ⓒ Prof. Hans Gugelot explaining the ‘Ulm model’ over tea during one of the visits to NID – National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, IN. Courtesy: Gugelot Archive, Hamburg, DE.

Ⓗ Prof. Hans Gugelot with students at NID. He was one of the most important inspirations for the NID alongside Charles Eames. Courtesy: National Institute of Design Ahmadabad Archive, IN.

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his conviction that cultural influences have to be factored in,

and his perception of the rational, the emotional and the multi-sensory as one.

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The work of Satyendra Pakhalé stands out against this backdrop as an approach that articulates the values, ideas and convictions of a social modernism fit for the 21st century. Pakhalé trained as a designer under Professor Sudhakar Nadkarni at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) of the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IIT-B) in Mumbai, India. Nadkarni had been a student at Ulm, where his tutor and mentor was Hans Gugelot. The two men became close friends during Nadkarni's four years in Ulm and it was Gugelot who encouraged his Indian protégé to go back to India and launch a design school there. On his return, Nadkarni started teaching a design program at the NID – Gugelot having recommended him to its director, Gira Sarabhai – and the following year, 1969, he founded the IDC at the IIT-B in Mumbai. Pakhalé, having studied at the IDC, is directly connected with the work of the HfG Ulm and Hans Gugelot.

Multi-Sensory Design

Pakhalé began his studies in 1989, the centre's 20th anniversary, which it celebrated with an international conference called 'Ulm and After'. That opportunity to meet so many HfG alumni in person – and not just from Germany, France and Japan but from all over the world – was a great boost to Pakhalé's young, aspiring mind and made a lasting impression on him during those crucial formative years.

Pakhalé cultivates a design approach that does not reject rationality, but that invariably takes it a stage further, pushing the boundaries to create truly human, multi-sensory designs. Taking the cultural context into account, he creates designs based on a sense of responsibility that is rooted in his experience and world view. His commitment to secular humanism results in designs that connect humanity and that aspire to be universal. At the heart of his work are two key concerns. The first of these is his conviction that cultural influences have to be factored in, which leads to design solutions that draw on past forms of expression without succumbing to either nostalgia or traditionalism, since only then can their positive value be protected and used. The second is his perception of the rational, the emotional and the multi-sensory as one.

By revisiting and then synthesizing these two aspects, Pakhalé has developed a brand of social modernism rooted in social cohesion that is at once contemporary and forward-looking.

ı IDC – *Industrial Design Centre*, late night working culture, all workshops accessible to students for 24 hours and 7 days a week. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

ı Amphitheatre at the rear of the IDC for informal discussions and meetings for students and faculty, Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

κ *Ulm and After* – 20 Years of the IDC. International Design Conference, 1989. Courtesy: IDC Archive, IIT-B, IN.

ı IDC visiting faculty Kohei Sugiura, a designer Japan with Prof. Nadkarni walking through the Infinite Corridor that connects all departments at IDC, IIT-B campus. Kohei Sugiura taught visual communication at HfG Ulm in the 1960s. Courtesy: Sudhakar Nadkarni, IN.

His work recalls a special moment in the history of the HfG Ulm, specifically the visit of Walter Gropius, who was invited to speak at the inauguration of the HfG's new building on the Kuhberg in Ulm on 2 October 1955. Gropius used his address to caution against the glorification of reason and rationality and to urge the students and lecturers present not to forget what he called 'the magical' just because it eludes our cognitive faculties.

Such a vision calls for staying power and persistence. Yet it is worth the effort, for only when design strikes the right balance between the rational and the magical is it truly human.