

# Transparency

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## Abstract

Transparency belongs to the connate notions of the Bauhaus. It can be found already in Lyonel Feininger's frontispiece for the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto. Transparency is also evident in the work of the other Bauhaus masters, as for instance that of Walter Gropius and László Moholy-Nagy. The workshop wing of the Bauhaus building in Dessau and the *Licht-Raum-Modulator* are among the main representatives of that notion. In their context, transparency was preferably associated with glass and perforation, light and reflections.

Sigfried Giedion, who was aware of the Bauhaus since he had visited its 1923 exhibition in Weimar, became a powerful disseminator of the notion of transparency within the modern movement. When his 1938/39 lecture series on modern architecture delivered at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) was published in 1941 (*Space, Time and Architecture*), he also incorporated a comparison between a cubist painting by Pablo Picasso and a photograph of the Bauhaus workshop wing, which had far-reaching consequences. Giedion emphasized the simultaneity of different aspects of the same object and connected that with the notion of transparency.

A few years later this provoked criticism by two young opponents of Gropius's GSD, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, the latter being trained by the former Bauhaus master Josef Albers. Both Rowe and Slutzky considered Giedion's comparison as inadequate since Gropius's prosaic way of building lacked the refinement presented by Picasso's cubist paintings. Yet it was met by other CIAM architects, particularly by Le Corbusier, as they supposed. Therefore Rowe and Slutzky in 1955 devised their essay *Transparency* as a somehow indirect response to Giedion.

Thus, the Bauhaus had caused one of the most influential and brilliant essays in the field of architectural theory. It can be demonstrated that the entanglements released by the divergent conceptions of transparency within the Bauhaus are strong, and ambiguous.

## Keywords

Gestalt Psychology, Glass Architecture, Layering, Spatial Interpenetration, Visual Perception