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Whose Modernism? The 1953 Bauhaus Debate and the Right to Define Modern Architecture

Abstract

With the 1941 publication of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, the Bauhaus's role in the genesis story of Modern Architecture was codified just as the Bauhaus's best-known architectural protagonists became established in the United States. The synergy between those Bauhaus émigrés and the architectural agenda of the United States as victor nation continues to influence architectural history writing, but the implications for West German architecture remain largely undescribed. Central to understanding this fraught relationship was a scathing 1953 essay by Rudolf Schwarz published in the *Werkbund* periodical *Baukunst und Werkform*. At the kernel of Schwarz's argument lay an explosive recrimination: that the moral vacuum he believed was endemic to the era's architecture could be attributed not only to National Socialist intervention, but also to the Bauhaus insistence on functionalism and technocracy. In response, Gropius mobilized his minions. Their published letters to the editor show much was at stake. The resulting "Bauhaus Debate" speaks volumes about the conflict between an emergent, uniquely West German modern architecture and the International Modernism, in whose apotheosis an assimilated Bauhaus in America played a central role.

Keywords

West German Architecture, Post-War Architectural History, Rudolf Schwarz, Walter Gropius