Artistic Crafts Architecture Spotlight Germany Featured Stories Heritage

Why Germany’s far right hates the Bauhaus movement

Co-funded by
the European Union

Germany's far-right AfD attacks the Bauhaus movement, claiming its modernist, internationalist design philosophy threatens national identity and traditional culture, reigniting a historical ideological conflict over German artistic and cultural values.

Katrin Schreiter, King's College London

At a time of political tension in Germany, the Bauhaus – arguably one of the most influential architecture, art, and design schools in the world – has become the target of far-right attacks.

Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, a member of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a member of the regional parliament of Saxony-Anhalt in Eastern Germany, has blamed his area's economic problems on Bauhaus modernism.

His unlikely diagnosis came in response to the regional conservative CDU government's "think modern" campaign, which seeks to attract investment into the area and cites the Bauhaus movement as an example of locally grown excellence.

Tillschneider asserts that for the area's economic stagnation to be resolved, "we do not need to think modern, we need to think conservatively." He rejects Bauhaus ideas as diffused with communist ideology. With these attacks, Tillschneider has started a quasi-re-enactment of a historical culture war over German national identity and social anxieties.
Founded in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius in the German city of Weimar, the Bauhaus and its staff shared a programme of material utopianism. This was expressed via an explorative workshop concept that departed from traditional modes of teaching.

Such avant-garde practices moved the Bauhaus politically to the left, which would make it vulnerable to ideological attack throughout the Weimar Republic, Germany's first (and failed) democracy.

In the contentious debate about national identity that followed the end of the monarchy in 1918, Bauhaus artists inhabited an uncomfortable position between two schools of thought among the educated elite.

Co-funded by the European Union

One side had opened up to modern aesthetics (such as impressionism and expressionism). The other – the conservatives – instead embraced an artistic nationalism that had manifested with German unification in 1871.

They saw “true art” as coming from the people and in turn educating them as loyal citizens. Aesthetically, conservatives found these values expressed in Weimar classicism. Curiously, given the emphasis on art by the people, this was a rather exclusive, highbrow form of literature, theatre and visual arts.

Bauhaus ideas, instead, were anti-bourgeois, avant-garde and experimental, while at the same time postulating the importance of creating art for everyone to access and enjoy. Such democratisation of style, however, was difficult to achieve, and most of what the Bauhaus produced remained unaffordable to the masses. Nevertheless, these clashing visions politicised culture during the interwar years.
The reconstructed Bauhaus school in Dessau. Wikipedia/Lelikron, CC BY-SA

In 1925, the school had to move from Weimar to Dessau (in Saxony-Anhalt) after it lost its funding. This was the fallout of a dispute with the conservative political parties that ruled the city at the time.

In Dessau, the Bauhaus teachers built a school building that followed their modern aesthetic principles. Despite repeated attempts by Gropius to depoliticise the Bauhaus by pointing to its aesthetic pluralism, internal debates about the place of architecture in society and politics continued.

The point of contention was the concept of “New Objectivity” (Neue Sachlichkeit) which found expression in Neues Bauen: modularised construction which introduced the industrialised pre-fabrication of building parts in a turn away from traditional crafts.

Eventually, Gropius left the Bauhaus and in his place came the openly socialist architect Hannes Meyer. After taking over as director in 1928, he repoliticised the school and moved it back to the left.

In the heated political climate of the late Weimar Republic, the Bauhaus encountered a new existential threat. When the Nazis took over in local elections in 1931, they requested the destruction of the Bauhaus school.

The Bauhaus moved again in 1932, this time to Berlin, where it

continued as a private institution to avoid renewed conflict with the ever more powerful Nazis. Nevertheless, when Adolf Hitler seized power in early 1933, the school and its staff became victims of the Nazis' anti-socialist measures.

The Bauhaus school closed on July 20, 1933 and its staff dispersed, often to faraway places. Many went to the United States, where they continued in the legacy of the "Bauhaus spirit" by joining the international modernism movement that became the defining Western aesthetic in the 1950s.

Although the artistic influences and expressions had remained diverse throughout the lifetime of the school, postwar discourse has streamlined it to simple geometric shapes, a preference for the colours white, blue, red and yellow, and an emphasis on horizontal lines and perspectives.

The Nazis had labelled Bauhaus aesthetics as "degenerate". In the Cold War era, the socialist East German government called out Bauhaus modernism and its disciples as cosmopolitan in the pejorative sense.

They were accused of abandoning German national heritage for the sake of international "formalism", elevating form – as pertaining to function – over cultural content. Tillschneider has put it even more provocatively: "They denied man's connection to land and his cultural roots". While a huge interpretative overstretch, these statements do not come as a surprise.

This year marks the centennial of the move to Dessau, where the school building still stands proudly as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tillschneider used this moment to perpetuate the culture war that the AfD has become known for over the past decade.

He is equating the CDU to an oversimplified depiction of the Bauhaus legacy – one that is anti-crafts, anti-bourgeois and internationalist – he implies his political rivals are against German tradition and culture. These are the nativist sentiments that fuel the AfD. It is a strategy of cheap wins at the expense of the electorate's anxieties about Germany's cultural and national identity.

Katrin Schreiter, Senior Lecturer in German and History, King's College London
Image: Shutterstock/meunierd
Image: Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. Wikipedia/Louis Held