

MODULE 5

Utopia in my city

SCHOOL, WORKSHOP

Age 12–14, 3 Hours, 3-4 Lessons

Mind map, mood board, Society, community, active citizenship, design, utopian spirit, the New Human, Bauhaus in my city

YOU WILL NEED

Sticky notes or round moderation cards in different sizes and colours, flipchart paper, marker pens, A3 paper, pens, glue sticks, paper and fabric remnants with different colours and textures, magazines to cut up, grasses and leaves

INSTRUCTIONS

In this module, participants learn about the social motivation of the Bauhaus and its utopian spirit. What did the idea of the “new human” involve? What did it mean in practice, this utopia of “designing” society as a whole by giving aesthetic shape to everyday routines? After a historical contextualization, examples of houses and housing projects are critically examined. Which objectives, ideas and utopias were they able to put into practice? Which utopias remained utopian and failed the hurdle of implementation? Following the introduction to the topic, participants are encouraged to apply the ideas about optimization of housing and urban space to everyday life today, and to their own city. What would I like to change in my city, in my surroundings? What can I change myself by shaping my surroundings? What effects do colour, form and material have? What moods do they generate?

Step 1: To begin, participants are given an introduction on the founding of the Bauhaus, the historical context, the aftermath of the First World War, and Walter Gropius’s ideas about art training.

Step 2: Next the concept of the “new human” is critically examined. The objectives and principles of experimental training at the Bauhaus are explored and concrete examples investigated (chairs by Marcel Breuer, housing by Walter Gropius). Do the objects and buildings fulfil the utopian ideas about the new human?

Step 3: Participants form small groups to take a closer look at their everyday surroundings and identify specific places or spaces they would like to change, places where they could put their ideas about the ideal life into practice. This could be a public square, the schoolyard, a place in the neighbourhood, a shared courtyard in a residential building, a sports facility, a playground – or even a classroom or a specific room at home.

Step 4: Now a mind map is produced for the selected case. Each group takes a large sheet of flipchart paper and a couple of round coloured cards or sticky notes to create a mind map. First of all, the place must be given a name. The name is written on a coloured card and stuck in the middle.

Step 5: Now smaller cards or sticky notes are used to note important aspects and describe the ideal condition. Individual terms and keywords may be used or longer descriptions. To begin with, all the participants’ ideas and dreams should be noted freely and without limits or contradiction (brainstorming). Social, community and ecological aspects should also be noted, alongside absolutely personal interests. At this stage, it is irrelevant whether the ideas remain utopian or have a chance of becoming reality. The cards are attached in a circle around the name of the place and joined to it with lines.

Step 6: Now the group discusses its mind map. What feelings do participants connect with their utopian place? What colours and images do they associate with it? How would they like to change it?

Step 7: Now each participant creates their own mood board to express their ideas. This takes the form of a collage using various materials and colours, as well as drawings, keywords, and pictures and details cut out from magazines. Before choosing materials to combine with the colours they should touch and feel them and investigate their effects.

Step 8: The completed mind maps and mood boards are displayed in the classroom or workshop space and the participants present their ideas to the group as a whole. What do the colours, materials, images and descriptions convey?

Optional: Step 9: In a further step the question of implementation could be investigated. Which aspects could actually be put into practice? What would that involve in practice? What problems might arise? How could they be solved? What rules would be needed for the place to function in everyday life? What would the next concrete step be, who could I take my ideas to?

BACKGROUND

From the outset the Bauhaus propagated a reduced, unornamented style of design orientated on basic geometric forms. While each teacher pursued their own concept, priority was always given to function, production, suitability, and visibility of construction. When he founded the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius was seeking to bring together the arts and crafts. The goal was to train a new type of artist in the field of design and architecture to create products suitable for industrial mass production.

When the Bauhaus was founded the horrors of the First World War were still very fresh and generated deep uncertainty. Many of the teachers had experienced the war as soldiers, and seen the devastating impact of the new military technologies. Even so, they placed their great hope in technical progress as the key to a better life. They used experimental approaches to conduct a completely fresh investigation of human motion and perception in order to identify the technical and natural essence of the "new human". The yearning for a new way of life was strong: they dreamt of a new human in a new society.

The Bauhaus set out to shape society as a whole by influencing the way people lived. Walter Gropius saw the school as a step towards an all-encompassing utopia, in which all the free and applied arts would serve and educate the new human. The creative utopia of the Bauhaus was set on realisation, to put its findings into practice through collective work. The teachers and students hoped that their work would level social differences and foster understanding between nations.

Under the motto "the needs of the people instead of the need for luxury", they sought to produce model objects for the future society. The plain and simple forms of Bauhaus products represented a revolution in design. The form was completely subservient to the functionality: "form follows function". Many of the products developed by the Bauhaus are world famous today, such as for example the cantilever chair, the Wagenfeld table lamp or Bauhaus wallpaper (although today these are expensive design objects

rather than “the needs of the people”).

Like other movements before, the Bauhaus was seeking answers to industrialisation and its consequences. The artistic avant-garde it gathered wanted to become a socially transformative force, to shape a modern type of person and the environment to match. To conceive and “build the future” in a trans-disciplinary creative community. The challenge was to channel these grand ideas into a real course of training. Their engagement was associated with a strong social strand, although numerous ambivalences between ideal and reality can be identified in the work and ideas. Gropius propagated the compatibility of individualisation and standardisation – which was unrealistic (and not only in connection with architecture). In housing construction the simultaneity of individualisation and standardisation quickly encountered its limits. Nevertheless the influence and impact of the Bauhaus are still felt today, especially the idealistic stance and the will to pursue fundamental rethinking.

QUOTES AND STATEMENTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Quote from Lothar Schreyer:

“The word ‘utopia’ has been doing the rounds for a while, at the Bauhaus and among everyone in Weimar who had dealings with the Bauhaus. This has led people to worry about the extent to which the Bauhaus could become reality, or whether it would have to remain a utopia. After all, utopia is the construction of an idea whose realization observers believe from the outset to be impossible.”

Angela Pfotenhauer wrote in June 2009 in her essay for monumente-online.de, „Fasse Dich kurz!“
Vor 90 Jahren forderte das Bauhaus Revolution – statt Dekoration!“:

“With ‘New Building’ they wanted to create spaces for the ‘new human’. And the new human, that was the sovereign citizen of the democratic society, in which the worker possessed the same rights and duties as the industrialist. Bauhaus was about revolution, not decoration. And revolution is not about expensive, narcissistic one-offs for a small elite of taste. Instead it means observing every manufacturing process with an eye to simplification, in order to increase the speed and volume of production while reducing the price.

An architect working for local government in the 1920s would have witnessed great poverty every day, whether in Berlin, Dessau or Frankfurt am Main. And the consequences too, the spread of epidemics like tuberculosis through unhygienic housing with poor heating and ventilation. Then as now, the challenge was how to expand the availability of clean, healthy affordable housing? That is only possible if the construction process itself is analyzed and rationalized, the dimensions normed wherever possible, the construction elements manufactured independently of weather and season, and then rapidly assembled on the prepared site. Students and teachers at the Bauhaus worked on experimental houses to explore these aspects. How that transferred to series, so to speak the reality test, was demonstrated by Ernst May with his large-scale housing development program for Frankfurt am Main (New Frankfurt).”

Source (German original):

https://www.monumente-online.de/de/ausgaben/2009/3/fasse-dich-kurz.php#.XJT6_5Pgrcs

FURTHER READINGS AND MATERIALS

Vom Bauen der Zukunft – 100 Jahre Bauhaus, Niels Bolbrinker, Thomas Tielsch, D 2018 | 90 minutes
<http://icarusfilms.com/if-bau>

bauhaus utopien: Arbeiten auf Papier, Herzogenrath, Wulf (ed.), Edition Cantz, Stuttgart 1988, paperback, ISBN: 3922608973
<https://www.abebooks.com/9783922608974/Bauhaus-Utopien-Arbeiten-Papier-3922608973/plp>