

# Introduction

by Wolfgang Jean Stock

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In 1950, on a very early visit to the Federal Republic, Hannah Arendt noted: "If you watch the Germans bustling and stumbling through the ruins of their thousand-year-old history, you realize that this bustling has become their principal weapon for protecting themselves against reality."

Two years after currency reform and five years after the end of the war the shock of defeat and horror about the crimes committed in the name of Germany had been largely suppressed. In the face of everyday privations the majority of West Germans had accustomed themselves to the normality of survival. Responsibility for the causes and consequences of the Nazi regime was left aside amidst the compulsory reality of occupation and handling shortages. People began vigorous clearance of the fields of rubble, but the rubble inside them stayed where it was. Finally the Nuremberg trials worked as a kind of general absolution from the outside.

"Rebuilding" became the slogan and stimulus of the times. As early as 1948, in the *Frankfurter Hefte*, Walter Dirks pointed out how treacherous this word, increasingly interpreted as restoring the old order, could be. Anyone who spoke up for a new social and cultural structure rather than rebuilding the old state of things was unwittingly placed on the fringes of Wirtschaftswunder society, which was forming early. No wonder that a large number of cultural initiatives, particularly non-conformist newspapers and publishing houses, had to give up.

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But one small group preparing around 1950 to find a new kind of higher educational establishment in Ulm on the Danube, managed to make a success of it. Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher had found out how great was the need for a new cultural direction in their work at the Volkshochschule in Ulm. With their friends they drew up a programme for a school of design on socio-political lines. Their educational concept combined an anti-fascist attitude with democratic hope. Graphics were to become social communication, and product design was to encourage humanization of everyday life. After a number

of difficulties, especially in terms of finance, teaching started at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in summer 1953. Two years later it moved into its own building, designed by Max Bill, on the Kuhberg in Ulm. The HfG wanted to work as a successor of the Bauhaus from its heights above the Danube valley, admittedly with a fundamental difference. While the Bauhaus saw training in fine art as a requirement for the design of good industrial form, the HfG stood for a direct, functional approach to the matter in hand. For this reason Ulm had no studios for painters and sculptors and no craft workshops.

In his essay "bauhaus and ulm", which is the biographical key to the essays and lectures collected here, Otl Aicher emphasizes this distinction: "at that time in ulm we had to get back to matters, to things, to products, to the street, to the everyday, to people. we had to turn round. it was not about extending art into the everyday world, for example, into application. it was about counter-art, the work of civilization, the culture of civilization."

This also shows the strong feelings of the man coming back from the war, born in 1922, for whom "coming to terms with reality" was on the agenda, and not a concern with pure aesthetics. Thus HfG was dominated by the view that art was an expression of escape from life. But above all the intention was to keep the field of product design free of artistic demands, to avoid formalism.

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Once more the German provinces became the home of modernity and progress. As was the case with the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, a middle-sized town did not merely offer the possibility of concentrated work. The restricted nature of the milieu, along with local reservations and animosity, were particular factors in compelling HfG to explain and justify its practice. In this tension they felt independent on the Kuhberg – and they really were independent. The Geschwister-Scholl Foundation as an independent source of finance guaranteed a relatively large distance from the state, and the school's own income, often half its annual budget, reinforced selfconfidence.

As an institution, HfG was a dwarf, but its influence was felt world-wide. What drew students from 49 nations to Ulm? Certainly the advanced syllabus, with the social dimensions of design at its centre, and also its

educational aims, including training in argument and education that went beyond the subject rather than being specific to it. Admittedly it was essential for the success of HfG that the pioneering spirit of the founders rubbed off on teachers and students. There was a hint of the Messianic in the commitment to building up a new industrial culture: from product design and individual communication via information systems to serial building. Technology and science were to put into effect this forward-looking design of everyday culture.

In the conservative cultural climate of post-war West German society, HfG was a creative island. It held its own until 1968 as an experimental institution at a time when elections were won with the slogan "no experiments". It taught social and cultural responsibility with a view to the future precisely at the time when the universities were reactivating the bourgeois, museum-style canon of education. Faced with the "thousand-year fug" and the plushy cosiness of the economically successful republic, Ulm was looking for practical ways towards enlightenment, criticism and authenticity. In this way the outlines of a functional, democratic culture of things, open to the world, grew up in the midst of West German "neo-Biedermeier".

HfG itself and also the devices, corporate images, printed items and building systems developed there were perceived as evidence of a "different Germany" in countries abroad that were as suspicious as they always had been. The lack of frills, indeed the austerity of the objects and designs showed a farewell to the "clear being". Like the German pavilion by Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf for the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, the Ulm creations were convincing because of the unity of technology, functionality and aesthetics.

If there was one person who could fundamentally make his mark on the development of HfG as a teacher and model it was Otl Aicher. He represented personal continuity from the preparatory phase onwards, but also got his way in the two great clashes: the question of whether art should be part of the syllabus, which was decided against, leading to the departure of Max Bill in 1957, and in the early sixties in the dispute between "theoreticians" and "practitioners". Aicher took the priority of practical work for granted. In 1963 he inveighed sharply against "uncritical faith in academic theory with its inflated tendency to analysis and increasing impotence in terms of doing".

No master without an apprenticeship: HfG was an outstanding school for its teachers as well, perhaps for them in particular. Otl Aicher explained and sharpened up his view of a realism that was not untypical of the early sixties in conflicts between theory and practice that were built into the programme. Martin Walser wrote at the time, for example: "As this realism is not an arbitrary invention, but simply a long overdue way of looking at and presenting things, one can say that it will make possible a further step towards overcoming ideabased, idealistic, ideological approaches." What Walser hoped for literature became Aicher's maxim for the correct use of things.

Aicher always retained his optimism about affecting the shape of the world, which was a motive force behind the whole of HfG. But his opposition to a belief in an ability to plan circumstances also goes back to his Ulm experiences. Today Aicher is clear that large-scale social and economic planning using technical processes and scientific perceptions as instruments, is an invalid means of humanizing the world. However efficient individual areas may be, they actually accelerate the breakdown of social ties and devastation of the planet to the point of endangering the fundamentals of human existence. As man has increasingly made the world into an artefact his inability to control development has grown. Because the production of things follows abstract rules, they subjugate the living world.

For this reason Aicher campaigns for a radical return to consideration of the individual. Instead of trusting governments, economic powers or spiritual courts of appeal, people should develop a need "to live according to their own ideas, to carry out work determined by their own notions, to proceed according to their own concepts". Only then will they not be controlled by circumstances, but shape their own lives. Activity based on such reflections designs things on the criterion of their use and not in expectation of abstract exchange values. The correctness of the design emerges from whether the result is appropriate to the task examined from all sides. The question why is replaced by the question for what purpose. Purpose has to be tested for meaning.

This concrete utopia lies behind more than forty years of Aicher's activity as a designer of posters, sign systems, books, exhibitions, corporate images and his own typeface. In his confrontation with work from industry, services businesses and the media he has developed a design

principle that is fundamentally different from design in the popular sense. For him design is precisely not surface design or the production of visual stimuli. This means that Post-Modernism with its borrowings from art and fashion is a regression into randomness and waste. Its formalism follows the cult of the superfluous and it is not for nothing that it reaches its peak in the "useful object that can no longer be used". A need to assert validity has suppressed use: styling instead of design.

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Design means relating thinking and doing. Aesthetics without ethics tend towards deception. It is about the product as a whole, not just about its outward form. The criterion of use also includes social and ecological effects: "design relates to the cultural condition of an epoch, of the period, of the world. the modern world is defined by its design condition. modern civilization is one that is made by man, and therefore designed. the quality of the designs is the quality of the world."

Design of this kind requires appropriate partners. In his insider's view of doing things, Aicher also cites institutional reasons for why not every person giving a commission is suitable. Firstly original design requires complete commitment from all involved. It then needs the culture of the "round-table" at which businessmen, engineers and designers consult each other. Because small and medium-sized businesses are manageable and their structures less alienated, they are most suited for the emergence of original design. Aicher: "design is the life process of a business, when intentions should concretize into facts and phenomena. it is the centre of business culture, of innovative and creative concern with the purpose of the business."

Otl Aicher calls places like this, where there has been successful cooperation, "workshops". They are not used for planning and administration, but for development and design. The design is guided towards the right result in a process of examination and correction. The principle of guidance by alternatives permits an exemplary start in something that already exists. Models of a "world as design" come into being.

Otl Aicher's writings are explorations of that world. They are a substantive part of his work. In moving through the history of thought and design, building and construction he assures the possibilities of arranging existence in a humane fashion. As ever he is concerned with the question of the conditions needed to produce a

civilization culture. These conditions have to be fought for against apparent factual or material constraints and spiritual and intellectual substitute offers.

Otl Aicher has a taste for dispute. For this reason this volume contains polemical statements on cultural and political subjects as well as practical reports and historical exposition. Aicher fights with productive obstinacy above all for the renewal of Modernism, which he says has largely exhausted itself in aesthetic visions. He insists that the ordinary working day is still more important than "cultural sunday". But aesthetics can still not be reduced to art: "everything concrete, everything real, relates to aesthetics. art as pure aesthetics is even in danger of distracting attention from the aesthetic needs of the real world. there is no case in which there can be different aesthetic categories, a pure one and an everyday one. in moral terms we can also not distinguish between religious morality and the morality of every day."

Design as a way of life instead of cosmetic design: Otl Aicher trusts training of the senses. His life's work guarantees the fact that this trust remains modern.