



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*Irregular no. 17; Dec. 1968*

This is the Unpublished version of the following publication

UNSPECIFIED (1968) Irregular no. 17; Dec. 1968. Irregular (17). pp. 1-5.  
(Unpublished)

The publisher's official version can be found at

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An irregular publication for members of the Town Planning Research Group (not for general publication or republication).

XMAS ISSUE

WAS Gropius a Socialist ?

(by Alpha)

No; we don't mean: does he hold a ticket in some socialist Party or other ? We don't even mean: does he think of himself as a socialist ? We mean: does his thinking on his own subject correspond in essentials with the best thinking of the best socialists ?

We say: yes.

Walter Gropius, acknowledged one of the world's great architects, approaches a number of fundamental problems in a series of essays published when he was over 70 ("Scope of Total Architecture" by Walter Gropius. George Allen & Unwin 1956)

1/17/8

Acceptance of Modern Industry

His genius, in the writer's opinion, lay in ~~his~~ his attitude to modern industry and to the nature of work in a modern industrial society.

---"When we accuse technology and science of having deranged our previous concepts of beauty and 'the good life', we would do well to remember that it is not the bewildering profusion of technical mass-production machinery that is dictating the course of events, but the inertia of the alertness of our brains that gives, or neglects to give, direction to this development. For example, our generation has been guilty of producing horrors of repetitious housing developments, all done on a handicraft basis, which can easily compete in deadly uniformity with those ill-advised pre-fabrication systems which multiply the whole house instead of only its component parts" (pp 15-16)

This approach, like that of socialists, rejects backward-looking nostalgia for the crafts of a by-gone age to prettify today's industrial reality which has a character all of its own. Like socialists, whilst appreciating the arts and crafts of the past, Gropius welcomes the new technology and science as a challenge to be mastered: the material basis, if you like, for the mental "superstructure" which can give form and quality to the essential character of modern materials and methods.

It could be objected perhaps that some socialist countries, for example the Soviet Union, have "perpetuated multiplication of the whole house instead of only its components". That seems true. But it is not a process essential to socialism: perhaps it may be difficult to avoid for a socialist government saddled ~~may have difficulty~~ with what was essentially the historic task of capitalism i.e. rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of a semi-feudal country. With desperate shortages of technical and artistic skills and traditions the emphasis in the Soviet Union had to be, quite inevitably until only a few years ago, on quantity

This meant standardisation, even of the whole apartment house. However the standardised, small, but relatively-to-the-past comfortable and heated apartment home-unit was a vehicle of humane housing treatment not even remotely contemplated in the

equivalent periods of shocking industrial slums in which England for example housed, or rather "stabled" its uprooted peasantry.

Now, however, in the European socialist countries, the pressure of sheer desperation to solve quite primitive needs on a mass scale has begun to recede, and they are surely on the threshold of developing the type of "polytechnically-trained" worker in housing, as in other spheres, who should gradually become more capable, coupled with more productivity, of meeting the challenge of fine design based on standardised components. A few outstanding examples have already come to the surface.

2/27/8 "Polytechnic" and "Bauhaus" Training.

Gropius, ahead of this, in a more affluent strata of a more advanced country established the fully-fledged "Bauhaus" training school at Dessau, Germany, which had its first beginnings when he took over the former ducal Art School at Weimer as early as 1919.

In the words of Gropius, the object was to train "a new type of worker who is able to combine the qualities of an artist, a technician and a businessman", thus to "regain contact with production and to train young students both for handwork and machine work, and for design at the same time." (p.27.)

Socialists have always emphasised co-ordinated teamwork in production to creatively re-integrate the division of labor necessarily created by modern industry. Gropius understands this. He says:-

"If he (the architect) "will build up a closely co-operating team together with the engineer, the scientist and the builder, then design, construction and economy may again become an entity---a fusion of art, science and business" (p.85.)

Even if men have a "polytechnic" or "Bauhaus" type training, they must perforce later also specialise, and Gropius describes the peculiar and uplifting character of "collaborative work"

"The most essential factor of the Bauhaus work was the fact that, with the passing of time, a certain homogeneity was evolved in all products: this came about as the result of the consciously developed spirit of collaborative work; and also, in spite of the co-operation of the most divergent personalities and individualities. It was not based on external stylistic features, but rather on the effort to design things simply and truthfully in accordance with their intrinsic laws---". "---the individual alone cannot attain this goal: only the collaboration of many can succeed in finding solutions which transcend the individual aspect---which will retain their validity for many years to come." (p.32.)

Gropius' concept of the relationship between the creativity of the individual and his work-team is also a socialist one. He says: "It is true that the creative spark originates always with the individual, but by working in close collaboration with others towards a common aim, he will attain greater heights of achievement through the stimulating and challenging critique of his team-mates, than by living in an ivory tower " (p.90.)

3/17/8 Standardisation Does Not Banish Design

However, even the problem of "multiplication of the whole house" which Gropius condemns above is (or seems, at any rate, to the writer) a tricky one. One finds in Gropius an apparent contradiction because elsewhere he says that our future house will be standardised but not necessarily regimented.

There is nothing inherently unsatisfactory, it seems to us, with the uniformity of standardisation, despite the emotions of some primitives, idealists and fadists. No one complains that well-designed refrigerators, cars, T.V.'s, kitchen sinks or lavatory

bowls "all look alike" or "have no individuality".

The writer is fascinated with Robin Boyd's concept that large "glass-house" type modern buildings are all structurally alike, and the desperate effort to give each a distinctive design is false and gimmicky and bound to be a passing fashion.. He talks instead of plain, well-designed unpretentious big buildings which could serve as a back-drop against which could be displayed with advantage the smaller and historic and pleasantly architect-designed smaller buildings.

This problem, however, of a "good standard form", a successful cross between good design and modern machine-produced buildings is one that Gropius struggles with. He says:-

"The desire to repeat a good standard form seems to be a function of society, and that was true long before the impact of industrialisation. The designation 'standard' as such has nothing to do with the means of producing it---the hand tool or the machine. Our future houses will not necessarily be ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ regimented because of standardisation and prefabrication" (p.83)

"---not necessarily be regimented---" is being rather cagey, and the distinction between "regimented" and "standardised" is being rather subtly politic. But one has to be.

At one extreme, it seems to us is the "regimented" house, always sited in relation to other similar standardised houses in an identical way. Australian suburbs come near to this because, although the houses are often at least slightly different, they are about a standard size, often with a standard or similar roof, and sited in a standard fashion on a standard-size block.

At the other extreme is the dogma of some modern architects that every single house has to be completely different from its neighbour. Reston, in America, for example, for all its advances, seems to the writer to suffer somewhat from this fad, especially at the hands of one of its architects. Jennings in Australia, in some parts is trying with incidental variations to distinguish one point block of flats from its neighbour with superficialities, which is ~~f~~ as irritating as a moderate degree of repetition can be pleasing.

How to avoid the two extremes? How to combine the advantages of standardisation inseparable from the machine age, with the levels of good design and taste inseparable from a humanised way of life ?

Standardised mass-produced building components are here to stay. Indeed their advent is belated. Man's habitat has succumbed nearly last on the long list of industries to be revolutionised by the machine.

The way we see it: though such components may be themselves well-designed, this is still no substitute for good design of the arrangement of the components to form individual home-units, and

this equally/~~is~~ is no substitute for good design of the arrangement of houses or flats (whether identical or not) in relation to each other and the site and the landscape.

Appalled by the desecration of nature to build suburbs "filled up by a developer with hundreds of insipid little house units that will never grow into a community", Gropius seeks alternatives.

"The human landscape which surrounds us is a broad composition in space organised from voids and volumes. The volumes may be buildings or bridges or trees or hills. Every visible feature in existence, natural or man-made, counts in the visual effect of that great composition. Even the most utilitarian building problems, like the location of a highway, or the type of a bridge are important for the integrated balance of that visible entity that surrounds us---this is what we might call 'total architecture'" (pp169-170)

(Incidentally, this concept of "total" regard for both countryside and urban areas is very much akin to the ideas of Theodore Osmundsen, ~~xxxxxx~~ President of the American Society of Landscape Architects now numbering some 9,000 as against 27,000 U.S architects. Osmundsen, in Australia for the recent Australian

It should be added that, in the spirit both of Gropius' commandment the concept of "totality" would not be confined as the above quote, to the visual---although, of course would be an important integral part of it---but would embrace also the ecological and most certainly the sociological as our next quotes from Gropius will make clear)

4/17/8 Measure Society By the Women

Turning to Gropius' grasp of history, socialists would find many familiar ideas

The essay "Sociological Premises for the Minimum Dwelling of Urban Industrial Populations", according to Gropius, is based on a German sociologist Muller-Iyer 1912, who seems to have been somewhat shamed socialist, because many ideas of Marx and Engels are there tucked away in camouflaged language.

The revolutionising effect of major changes in the means of production are shown, but only at points, rather than systematically. The major class relationships to the means of production are grasped, but the word socialism, or communism is not used, any more than the word primitive communism, slavery, feudalism or capitalism. But many of the concepts are there in genteel terms if not always in such a thoroughgoing scientific way

In terms of the impact of different forms of society on the domestic household we are told by Gropius:-

"Thus the concept of the tribe and the patriarchal family evolves into the ideal of our independant individuals, and finally, into that of a future communal union which transcends the individual"

The home has ceased to be a productive unit its functions giving away to socialised industry (food) and the State (education) and now, according to Gropius:-

"the confined dwelling is also losing its suitability for social intercourse, and intellectual inspiration is sought outside the family circle" (p 108)

So, "the family is losing its home, just as the tribe lost its territory---"

22 "---Past development thus shows steadily progressing socialisation of former family functions of legal, pedagogical and domestic nature, and thus we perceive the first beginnings of a communal era which might someday replace the era of individual rights " (p 109)

The ~~result~~ result, for Gropius, of delving into the past with an attempt at a scientific approach is an inevitable foreshadowing of far future developments and (his particular concern) their impact on the family home.

"As the family transfers numerous domestic chores to the machinery of socialist production, woman's sphere of domestic activity shrinks and she looks beyond the family for an outlet for her natural need for occupation. she enters the world of business and industry. In turn, industry, rejuvenated on basically new foundations by the machine, shows woman the impractical nature of her domestic hard labor."

"Recognition of the shortcomings of the individual household awakens thoughts about new forms of centralised master households which partially relieve the individual woman of her domestic tasks by means of an improved centralised organisation which is capable of performing them better and more economically than she can perform them herself, even when she applies all her efforts." (p.109)

5/17/8 Houses, Walk-ups or High-Rise Apartment Blocks ?

Inevitably then, on such a theoretical-historical basis,

Gropius, in addition to examining the far past, and foreshadowing the distant future, grapples with the immediate present under the above title, a work, incidentally, penned as long ago as 1931, but terribly relevant for Australia today

He starts with elementals: "The essentials for wholesome life are, in addition to adequate food and warmth: light, air and elbow room " (p. 119)

He traces the historical cause of the strong public desire for a one-family house in a garden to the revolt against early crowded tenements. "However", he says, "the cause for the misery of these undignified dwellings is not the dwelling form of the ~~xxxx~~ multi-storey apartment house as such but the shortsighted legislation which permitted the construction of this class of low-cost dwelling to fall into the hands of unscrupulous speculators without adequate social safeguards." (p. 119)

"The ~~special~~ special character of metropolitan housing developments for settling large numbers of working people around a concentrated city core makes for short travelling distances, which implies the use of multi-storey construction to reduce horizontal distances. The single family house", Gropius points out, "is contradictory to this basic trend of the city" (p. 120)

Gropius explores quite carefully the mathematics of the problem of apartment blocks of different heights, and comes to the conclusion that "conditions as to air, sun, view and distance from neighbour block are improved with the increased height of the ~~building~~ block---the higher the building, the less land is needed for the same amount of living space" (Illustrations after p. 129)

He regards it as "sentimental self-deceit to assert that a 4th. floor apartment without elevators is in more intimate contact with "nature" than on the 10th. floor---", to him, the economics of the situation is one key factor: "the limits of economic expediency as defined by the height beyond which the increase in construction cost is no longer compensated by savings in site and road requirements" (p. 124)

However, the high-rise apartment, he considers "a biologically motivated type of dwelling, a genuine by-product of our age" (p. 123)

"The individual's need for seclusion, which frequently ~~enters~~ enters the argument against the high-rise buildings should not be over-estimated. It is best satisfied by fulfillment of the requirements that each adult shall have his own room, small though it may be, to which he can retire. Very much is made of mutual co-operation among families, which is, of course, much more ~~re~~ readily possible in a high-rise apartment building than in an individual home. And only high-rise apartment blocks can relieve the individual occupant of a large fraction of the most tedious and time-consuming chores by means of its centralised service installations; these are also of importance from the viewpoint of national economy because of their overall savings in material and time. Is it of no importance that the overburdened housewife in the modern industrial worker's family no longer needs to carry the coals upstairs and tend to the furnace for heat and hot water? "(Don't laugh, there, you 1968-brand pampered Australian house-husband and house-wife: this was written in 1931, remember, and for cold countries---and anyway, you have more to read ! ) "That the service centre handles her laundry more efficiently than she could herself? That the advent of electric refrigerators, ~~vacuum~~ vacuum cleaners, mechanical ventilators, centralised kitchen installations, and finally, even communal recreation rooms, sports facilities and kindergartens is approaching ? The costs of such conveniences can be distributed economically over a large number of families in a high-rise apartment block, costs whose purpose ~~is~~ it is to transform saved time into the most valuable commodity of all: creative leisure ! " (p. 128)

Of course, socialists must be democrats. If people want cottages and long distances and drudgery, they will have to be supplied even if it costs them more. But socialists, like Gropius, should surely embrace the new ?