

EXPLORATIONS
IN ARCHITECTURE

A	METHODOLOGY
B	NETWORKS
C	DIDACTICS
D	TECHNOLOGY

STUDIO CASE STUDIES

54	LAPA	Laboratoire de la production d'architecture [EPFL]
98	MAS UD	Master of Advanced Studies in Urban Design [ETHZ]
141	ALICE	Atelier de la conception de l'espace [EPFL]
182	DFAB	Architecture and Digital Fabrication [ETHZ]

HISTORICAL CASE STUDIES

12	REM KOOLHAAS	<i>Deane Simpson</i>
26	INSTITUTE FOR ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN STUDIES	<i>Kim Förster</i>
48	VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN, AND IZENOUR	<i>Martino Stierli</i>
78	LUCIUS BURCKHARDT	<i>Martin Josephy</i>
90	CONSTANTINOS DOXIADIS	<i>Jeannie Kim</i>
114	TEAM 10	<i>Tom Avermaete</i>
122	CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER	<i>Andri Gerber</i>
134	ALDO ROSSI	<i>Filip Geerts</i>
158	HOCHSCHULE FÜR GESTALTUNG ULM	<i>Tilo Richter</i>
176	BUCKMINSTER FULLER	<i>Mark Wasiuta</i>
200	EAMES OFFICE	<i>John Harwood</i>
208	HENRY VAN DE VELDE	<i>Ole W. Fischer</i>

KEY ARTICLES

14	STOP MAKING SENSE	<i>Angelus Eisinger</i>
34	A DISCOURS ON METHOD	<i>Sanford Kwinter</i>
80	AN ANT'S VIEW OF ARCHITECTURE	<i>Bruno Latour, Albena Yaneva</i>
124	UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN	<i>Daniel Bisig, Rolf Pfeifer</i>
166	ARCHITECTURE AS MEMBRANE	<i>Georges Teyssot</i>

A

B

C

D

DIDACTICS Historical Case Study

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT FOR THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT: THE HOCHSCHULE FÜR GESTALTUNG ULM, 1953–1968

Tilo Richter

From its founding in 1953 until its closure in 1968, The *Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm* was considered one of the most important international centers for the design of industrial products. Not only did graduates of the HfG become key players in contemporary product design, but the pedagogical concept developed at Ulm has had a lasting influence on the education of designers.

In 1949 Inge Scholl, Otl Aicher and Hans Werner Richter began to configure an institute at Ulm that was equally oriented toward politics, science and the humanities. Education in politics and the comprehensive design of the environment, both in structure and content, would establish and reinforce humanistic ideals and democratic thought—nothing less than a “new culture.” During its initial year, the faculty included former Bauhaus instructors Josef Albers, Johannes Itten, Walter Peterhans and Helene Nonné-Schmidt. The first classes were held in the *Volkshochschule*, while on Oberer Kuhberg the building for the new institute was being constructed according to the designs of founding director and former Bauhaus pupil Max Bill.

When Bill’s school buildings were opened in 1955, Walter Gropius spoke of a “continued, organic development” of the Bauhaus, and the new institute was even sometimes referred to as “Bauhaus Ulm.” However, in contrast to the legendary Bauhaus of Weimar, Dessau and Berlin, the teachers and students at Ulm thought of themselves less as artists and individualists than as industrial designers, the ones whose task it was to form and to sustain what Aicher termed the “culture of civilization.” Education at the HfG consisted of one year of basic study and three years of specialization, in product design, visual communication, construction, information (until 1964) or film (beginning in 1961). A main objective common to all subjects was sensitizing students to cultural and social issues, and scientific and scholarly approaches accompanied the design process. In the classrooms, workshops, studios and dormitories designed by Bill, the cooperative efforts of students and faculty from around the world reflected the pedagogical approach of the HfG: design, scholarship, and society were tightly interwoven, and life and work formed a unique symbiosis.

As its first director, Max Bill primarily influenced the early years of the HfG. Already by the mid 50s, the orientation towards the Bauhaus had become the subject of controversial discussions. The younger instructors called for a modified curriculum that would make greater

use of science and theory. Tomás Maldonado, an Argentinian who had previously taught in Italy, became an opponent of Bill, and Bill left the HfG in 1957 as a reaction to the impending change of course. At the International Exposition in Brussels in 1958, Maldonado gave an impassioned speech on the conceptual reorientation of the HfG—the “Ulm model”—which he would play a decisive role in shaping in the coming years.

From that time on, under a council of directors, the institute at Ulm became more closely allied with the production of industrial goods. The new symbiosis of design and industry was, for example, evident in the products of Max Braun AG, the renowned manufacturer of electrical household appliances. Braun’s department of product design, developed by Fritz Eichler, cooperated closely with the HfG, as did Dieter Rams (“Mr. Braun”). Several of the HfG faculty did design work for Braun directly, such as Hans Gugelot (who designed the SK4, “Snow White’s Coffin,” with Dieter Rams), Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher (Corporate Design). As quickly and intensively as new design ideas flowed into production, so the experience and knowledge gained there was fed back into teaching.

According to some of the faculty, in the 1960s the teaching was becoming increasingly subject to scientific premises. Maldonado and those who had supported him in the dispute around Aicher and Gugelot now became the target of opposition. Lecturers such as mathematician Horst Rittl, sociologist Hanno Kesting and industrial designer Bruce Archer advocated a strictly analytical methodology quite distinct from their colleagues’ orientation toward industrial practice. In the mid 60s, internal conflicts around the pedagogical orientation of the HfG intensified, and were increasingly accompanied by public criticism. The institute’s closure in 1968 was the result of multiple factors: a lack of political support led to the elimination of necessary financial subsidies from the government of Baden-Württemberg, which also had not been able to offset the considerable debts of the Scholl Foundation. Gui Bonsiepe, a designer who had received his diploma from Ulm in 1959, said of the institute in the year of its closing, “Although the HfG did not meet a heroic end, the hope at its beginning was indeed heroic. The HfG should not be measured by what it achieved, but by what it was prevented from achieving.”

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C HOCHSCHULE FÜR GESTALTUNG ULM Tilo Richter

- 1

Max Bill with Ray and Charles Eames at Ulm, 1955 (Photo: Ernst Hahn)
- 2

Inge Aicher-Scholl and Walter Gropius at the opening of the HfG campus, 1955 (Photo: Ike and Hannes Rosenberg)
- 3

Photo studio at HfG, 1957 (Photo: Wolfgang Siol)
- 4

HfG campus buildings by Max Bill, 1955 (Photo: Wolfgang Siol)
- 5

Tomás Maldonado teaching, 1966 (Photo: Roland Fürst)
- 6

Students room in the “Wohnturm” at HfG campus, 1958 (Photo: Wolfgang Siol)

