



**Speech by Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier
at the opening festival marking the
100th anniversary of the Bauhaus
in Berlin on 16 January 2019**

In November 1917, almost two years before the founding of the Bauhaus, Robert Walser's book "Poetenleben" was published. It includes the "speech to a button". The author writes that, when repairing a buttonhole on his shirt, it occurred to him to finally thank the faithful shirt button for its quiet service. The eulogy ends thus:

"... the fact that you are what you are is what enchants me, moves, grips and touches me, and makes me think that there are things, every now and then, in a world so rich in unpleasantness, that give one joy and that make whoever spots them happy, cheerful and bright."

We do not know whether Walter Gropius and the other co founders of the Bauhaus were familiar with this text, but it seems to me, in its somewhat outlandish, to reflect something of the spirit of the institution that started life in Weimar in 1919 and which essentially always remained a movement.

A keen eye for the most everyday objects, like buttons! Looking at and questioning everyday objects with fresh eyes. What is a house, what is a table, what is a chair, what is a lamp, what is a pepper shaker? And then redesigning such everyday objects. And in such a way that, thanks to their functionality, and also thanks to their well thought out, elegant and well proportioned design, they make people "happy, cheerful and bright", as Robert Walser wrote.

A new interplay of many art forms and crafts was intended to give rise to an innovative form of design in the Bauhaus, one that sought to be a counterweight to the bombast of the often overheated "Gründerzeit" and Wilhelminism, and which also had to grapple artistically and politically with the immense destruction and chaos following the end of the First World War.

I believe that there is not only a temporal, but also an innate connection between the Bauhaus and the dawn of the democratic republic. Of course, an artistic ambition to come up with new designs was not defined politically in a simplistic sense. However, these innovations for reforming everyday life and society and the longing for artistic emancipation suggest to me that the Bauhaus needed the freedom offered by the Weimar Republic in order to grow whilst at the same time bestowing a unique form of expression upon the republic.

From 1919 to 1933, a group of inspired minds created amazing innovations in architecture, art, dance, design, typography, photography and film. And perhaps even more importantly, they gave rise to lasting inspirations that continue to make themselves felt to the present day and which give us pause for thought even now.

Today, we are kicking off this great anniversary year, which is not only being celebrated here in Germany, and not only in Berlin, Weimar and Dessau, but which is the subject of international attention at events and exhibitions from Paris to Tel Aviv to Brazil. After all, the Bauhaus has become one of our country's most important and influential cultural achievements internationally. Its traces are to be found everywhere, and architects and designers of everyday objects continue to take their cue from this movement all around the world today.

The so called Bauhaus style became synonymous with modernity – and particularly in architecture.

The overwhelming majority of the Bauhaus artists were democrats and perceived the Weimar Republic as a major opportunity for freedom – for political freedom and the freedom of artistic expression. They endeavoured to enter into a dialogue with international modernity and allowed themselves to be influenced by artistic developments beyond borders. Ultimately, they were forced to assume an international dimension as the Nazis had no place in Germany for the Bauhaus movement and forced their artists to emigrate. The Bauhaus community was destroyed; its students and teachers fled the country to the four corners of the Earth.

By no means all of them found a new artistic home and not all of them found sufficient conditions of employment. A number of them were able to continue to contribute to the development of the International Style, however. Teachers such as Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer taught according to Bauhaus principles and influenced architectural developments not only in the US especially, but also elsewhere.

Particularly Tel Aviv, unlike almost any other place in the world, is characterised by Bauhaus architecture as a number of former Bauhaus artists were involved in the construction of the city after

emigrating there. Israel is also calling this to mind this year as part of a German-Israeli cooperative partnership.

Its international impact was, at any rate, accelerated by the suppression of the Bauhaus in Germany and the forced emigration of its proponents after 1933. And after the war, the "Neues Bauen" movement made its way back to Germany as a kind of re import. Or new paths and scope for design were found such as at the new Ulm School of Design.

Architects influenced by the Bauhaus also created the buildings in the Hansaviertel district, in the vicinity of West Berlin's Akademie der Künste. The constructions of the fledgling German democracy after 1949 often greatly benefited from Bauhaus ideas, even if they are never "pure Bauhaus" – thus helping to promote a modern, liberal and democratic attitude to life in our country in the 1950s and 1960s.

We are therefore considering what the Bauhaus stood for in this anniversary year, and, of course, also what its legacy is.

So what did it stand for? It was once a utopia that aspired to be strictly modern – and which also called to mind very old interrelationships, such as between engaged art and good craftsmanship. The name "Bauhaus" in and of itself calls to mind the builders' huts that united the various artists and craftsmen working on medieval cathedrals.

However, their aim was not to build cathedrals, but houses and living spaces for everyone, objects that were intended to be both practical and also pleasing to the eye. A better life – for many, if possible for all – was among the proponents' original intentions. And nothing, no salt shaker, no teapot – and, if you will, also no button – was too lowly for a determined ambition to design.

That is why this is, to my mind, part of a somewhat curious dialectic of history when Bauhaus design has practically become synonymous with the home furnishings of the better off today. Tubular steel furniture, Wagenfeld lamps and big white rooms that are as cool as can be have since become a distinguishing feature of the tastes enjoyed by a select elite, as it were. I am no exception here.

What we consider to be Bauhaus aesthetic was perhaps once the utopia of a tabula rasa inherent in a radical new beginning. The utopia of a tidiness of existence, of a neatly arranged world that people wanted and needed after 1918, after the war. For many today, however, this style exudes a coldness that affords precious little homeliness or comfort for some.

And yet the Bauhaus also stands for enchantment and for a passion for all that is aesthetically pleasing. Dance and photography stand for this, Paul Klee, the master of the magical in miniature, stands for this, certain posters that were rather for decoration stand for this,

that is to say abundance and seemingly superfluous things that are the spice of life and make it worth living in the first place.

When we ask ourselves today what its legacy is, then we recall with gratitude everything that was created by the Bauhaus. However, we should consider, first and foremost, the Bauhaus movement's legacy in terms of tasks, intentions, utopian thought and experimentation, things that should not simply copy but which we must translate into our present.

Ernst Bloch made a memorable pronouncement in his first work, "The Spirit of Utopia": "Birth forceps must be smooth, but by no means sugar tongs." In other words, there are things that we must allow to stand for more than pure functionality. There are, justifiably, things that are frivolous and there are, justifiably, things that are not useful. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to encounter things that are untidy, overlaid time and again, overgrown, crooked and neglected from days gone by.

And, time and again, we also come across things that have been reinvented. Only recently in Frankfurt am Main, a number of alleys, and not many buildings, were made accessible to the public as restored parts of the Old Town.

All of you have noticed this. You have also noticed how controversial this was and how many discussions there were about this issue. However, from the very first day, thousands have flocked there in the belief that they will perhaps discover something that they had apparently missed.

While we may find this perplexing, this is actually quite a useful sensation as our experience is about nothing more than a question pertaining to architecture or urban planning. Namely the following question: how must we create modern designs in such a way that, beyond aesthetics, elementary needs and expectations of people in their living environment are satisfied? This is not a question of the wrong alternative – yesterday or tomorrow. Rather, the question is this: how can we shape a liveable present? Bauhaus practitioners would say that there is no such thing as the good old days, and no such thing as an absolutely better future. However, today, as always, people need to have a habitable, pleasant city and environment.

In the year marking the centenary of the Bauhaus, we have a great deal to marvel at that we can celebrate with gratitude, as well as a number of things that we are also fortunate enough to be able to rediscover. One hundred years of the Bauhaus is an immense asset for helping us to find our bearings in the modern age of the 21st century.

The legacy of the Bauhaus is, I believe, not about avoiding the temptation to retrospectively elevate a past modernity to an absolute standard. Instead, its legacy is about endeavouring to shape a new

modernity, with new insights, with the experiences that we have made since then, and with the needs and dreams of the people of today in mind. This is the message sent by Dessau, Weimar and Berlin, and by all those working in the Bauhaus tradition. The best possible life for as many people as possible in our world that should be a home for everyone.

How might that work?

Robert Gernhardt needed but four lines to express this sentiment:

„Well felt

Well built

Well thought

Well wrought.“

I hope that we will all enjoy an exciting and joyful birthday celebration. Thank you very much.