Walter Gropius in Five Acts
In 1919, war-wounded and still in his German cavalry officer’s uniform, 36-year-old Walter Gropius was asked to revive Weimar’s failing State Academy of Handcrafts. The son and great-nephew of architects, Gropius had already served an apprenticeship with the firm of Peter Behrens, where his fellow employees included Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. In 1910, partnering with another Behrens employee, Adolf Meyer, Gropius designed one of the pioneering buildings of the new Modernism: the Fagus Shoe Factory in Alfeld, admired for its remarkable weightlessness and transparency.

Now, seeing Germany in ruins and roiled by political chaos, Gropius saw an opportunity to reinvent the culture of 20th-century design from scratch. He would replace formalism and classicism by turning back to First Principles—to the basic potential of process and materials to reveal fresh aesthetic invention. Gropius’ goal was to create “a new guild of craftsmen” who would meld art and craft by using industrial technologies that could deliver design to the masses.

At the Bauhaus (“School of Building”), many students arrived with traditional biases and little visual experience. To “reeducate” them, Gropius invented a six-month Vorkurs, or Basic Design course, to cleanse beginners’ perceptions. In unique exercises, students test-shaped many materials—paper, wire, sheet metal, glass—acquiring an instinctive understanding of the formative possibilities of conventional and modern palettes.

Students would then select a workshop apprenticeship in a particular field, advancing to the level of Master in the German Guild tradition. Each student worked with two masters—a trained technician and a practicing artist, collaborating on design solutions that unified form, use, and technique, while avoiding “art for art’s sake” ideas. After three years of collaboration, the journeyman was Guild certified as a Master—qualifying him for graduate study in the Architecture Studio of the Bauhaus.

Gropius’ vision was multidisciplinary; he believed in an all-embracing modern architectonic approach, seeing the unity of art in all manmade product—visual, applied, constructed—with the goal of providing “art in the everyday life” of all people.

With the rise of Hitler, Gropius left Germany, first for England and then the United States, where in 1937—already recognized as a founder of Modernism—he was hired by Dean Joseph Hudnut to head the architecture program at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Gropius envisioned “Basic Design,” his famed Bauhaus course, as a key component in the school’s move to Modernism. But for 12 years, Hudnut, who disagreed with its hands-on premise, barred it from the curriculum. Gropius was briefly permitted to teach a similar “Design Fundamentals” course for two years, beginning in 1950, which proved tremendously popular with students. But Hudnut cut funding for that class, finding that it drew many students away from his own introductory planning courses.

Here’s the irony: Basic Design, a foundation of American Modernist education, has been taught at design schools around this country, often by Bauhaus graduates, but not at Harvard. The school that imported its originator, a world expert, an inventor of Modernism, then curtailed his right to teach what he knew best. But it hardly mattered. By the time Gropius appeared in Cambridge, his philosophy of design had already preceded him. The theories of Walter Gropius and his Bauhaus acolytes would resonate through American modern architecture for a generation to come.
Little did Harvard know the depths of Walter Gropius’ difficulties during his temporary exile in England in the mid-1930s. Desperate to regenerate his architectural practice and uncertain of his status in Germany, Gropius found in Harvard’s 1936 invitation to chair the department of architecture a lifeline that allowed his career to flourish in America. The invitation came from Joseph Hudnut, dean and founder of Harvard’s new Graduate School of Design, and Harvard’s president, James Bryant Conant. Both saw in Gropius’ former directorship at the Bauhaus someone with the potential to lead their radical new educational agenda in collaborative design. Gropius would attempt to fulfill their expectations by adapting the concepts of functionalism, Bauhaus pedagogy, and the social agenda of the Modern Movement to the American scene.

Gropius taught his first master’s class in spring 1937, and in giving as his first problem a design for public housing around Fresh Pond in Cambridge, he confirmed the social agenda at the core of the Modern Movement. The war years saw enrollments plummet, but when the students returned in 1945 Gropius pushed forward with the key component of his training: a basic design course analogous to the one taught in the early days of the Bauhaus. The course intended to teach a visual language with a focus on function, space, scale, light, form, and structural studies. It was a vocabulary so important to Gropius that he hoped it would be applied to all levels of American education, from kindergarten onward.

Despite his initial enthusiasm, Hudnut increasingly disagreed with Gropius’ pedagogical vision. In the dean’s view, modern design training required collaboration among architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning, a triumvirate with roots in the predecessor schools of the GSD. In Gropius’ vision, collaboration occurred between architects and engineers, which he codified as teamwork; he neither appreciated nor understood the value of city planning and landscape architecture in America.

Furthermore, Hudnut believed that a knowledge of architectural history was paramount in training design professionals, but, crucially, that it should be taught in undergraduate programs before students encountered the rigors of graduate training. Gropius saw studying architectural history as an impediment to creativity and experimentation. If students took architectural history courses, they should take them much later, after the formal language of Modernism had been fully inculcated. Finally, Hudnut, a fierce proponent of American Modernism in the 1930s, saw in Gropius’ architecture and his teaching in the 1940s a reductive functionalism that took the humanistic spirit out of architecture. The inevitable result was a bitter split between two individuals who initially had shared a grand dream.

Charismatic and highly articulate, Gropius excelled more as an insightful design critic and ideologue than as a designer. Inspiring many students, he succeeded in propagating his call for teamwork in which the architect would lead engineers, manufacturers, and contractors. His devoted followers reinforced his canonical views as practitioners and teachers, and spread the Harvard method to many other schools. But the role of architectural history as a prerequisite for advanced study was usually forgotten.

Although Gropius resigned from teaching in 1952, he cast a long shadow at Harvard. Even an adept commentator like the critic Ada Louise Huxtable thought he had been dean of the GSD. And while Gropius’ fame flourished up to the arrival of Postmodernism, Joseph Hudnut, the first dean of the GSD and the person who had coined the term Postmodern in 1945, disappeared into oblivion.
Social Theorist

Walter Gropius wasn’t a preacher or a didact. It can be tough to pin him down to a set of values because of his distaste for absolutes and simple answers. But underlying much of his career are a few core beliefs. They’re social and ethical beliefs, not mantras about architectural form.

Like many in his generation, Gropius emerged from the havoc of the First World War believing that the old world of princes and empires had crashed and that a new world was waiting to be born. It wouldn’t be created by heroes on horseback but by the collective social action of people working together. Architecture, for Gropius and others of his generation, was a branch of social reform. The architect’s responsibility was to promote the welfare of society by creating rational, economical, and well-designed places for people to live and work in.

As we might put it today, Gropius didn’t believe in “starchitects.” He wrote in his prospectus to Harvard: “The nature of teamwork will lead the students to good, ‘anonymous’ architecture rather than to flashy ‘stunt’ design.” The Gropius-trained architect would not be an ego-driven form maker but would be the democratic leader and coordinator of a team of creative people.

In Gropius’ career, these social and ethical ideals played out in three realms: teaching, practicing, and dwelling.

Teaching: At both the schools he led, Gropius promoted collaboration. At the Bauhaus he hired painters and sculptors who worked directly with students. Believing that the old world of handicrafts was disappearing, he sought to merge artistic creativity with modern factory production. Like Descartes, he believed a thinker should “start from zero,” without preconceptions. He hoped to shape “the man who has been able to empty his mind of prejudice and all non-essential considerations and has thereby arrived at a state of new innocence which allows him to penetrate to the very core of his task.”

Practicing: Gropius and the firm he helped found, The Architects Collaborative, became known not for private mansions or art museums — the building types loved by high-style architects — but rather for socially responsible programs such as housing, hospitals, and schools. TAC architecture seldom drew attention to itself, but did its job while respecting its context. The very firm name is a nod to the ideal of anonymity. At Six Moon Hill in Lexington, young TAC families and their friends created a semi-commune where they lived as a group, albeit in individual houses. Their inexpensive dwellings, assembled like houses of cards from simple wall and window panels, were a metaphor for the adaptable, industrialized construction Gropius believed in.

Dwelling: When Gropius arrived at Harvard, Dean Joseph Hudnut told him, “You have to live in Beacon Hill to be socially acceptable.” Instead Gropius collaborated with his former student Marcel Breuer on an unpretentious house in rural Lincoln. The result was a livable home that embodied ethical lessons: lessons in the value of collaboration, in personal modesty, in respect for the natural world, and in trusting the tools of contemporary technology. Perhaps Beacon Hill felt too European: The American suburb was a memory of the green frontier.
When Walter Gropius first visited the United States in 1928, he was eager to explore the massive concrete grain elevators and automobile assembly plants of Detroit and Chicago. These stark, industrial buildings had been the focus of a seminal article he had written for the 1913 yearbook of the Deutschen Werkbundes, which promoted industrial design in Germany, and he couldn’t understand why Americans did not admire them more. To Gropius, they were an inspiration. “When I was a boy my family lived in a city apartment with open gas-jets and coal-heated stoves in each room,” Gropius recalled in the article. “There was no electric streetcar, no automobile, no airplane; radio, film, gramophone, X-ray, telephone were nonexistent.” Compared with Britain and France, Germany had been slow to industrialize, and Gropius believed the future lay in industrial workplaces and the products mass-produced there. It was this desire to add industry to the twinned creative spaces of studio and workshop that became the basis of the Bauhaus.

In his own work, Gropius stressed functionality and simplicity, using mass-produced fittings of steel, chrome, and glass in the factories and office buildings he designed. He believed it was not only efficient and sensible to use mass-produced materials; it also created egalitarian spaces where people of all economic and social classes could mix.

Look, for example, at the architect’s design for the Fagus Shoe Factory in Alfeld. Believing that improvements in lighting and ventilation would increase workers’ productivity, Gropius designed large curtain windows that surrounded each of the three stories. The building had a steel frame to support the entire structure, thin brick piers to mask the vertical steel framing, and horizontal brick layers that separated each of the stories. A similar form of curtainwall illuminated the Bauhaus building he designed in Dessau in 1926. In both instances, Gropius’ structural innovations reveal him to be a sophisticated engineer.

Yet it remains unclear why the delicacy and audacity of Gropius’ earliest efforts—the Fagus factory, Werkbund pavilion, and the Bauhaus—did not continue through into his later work. With fine massing, figuration, relief, and tautness, these façades appeared on both sides of World War I, but the visual refinement did not cross the Atlantic.

What Gropius did bring to America was a continued desire to use industrial elements in his buildings. He envisioned the armament plants of World War II converted to the manufacture of prefabricated housing made of glass, steel, and concrete. They would be trucked to building sites and added to, room by room, as families grew. In 1942, Gropius partnered with Konrad Wachsmann to promote the Packaged House System, which used prefabricated panels, though it failed to sell.

Gropius’ belief in the use of industrial materials remains a constant in American design—whether used well or poorly. Today, some of our best architects are realizing Gropius’ invocation of scientific precision with complex new advances in glazing technology. Though frequently shaped by environmental objectives that were secondary during Gropius’ working life, the influences are nonetheless present. One need only look at the glass façade of William Rawn’s new Cambridge Public Library to see echoes of the Fagus factory.

Even as he reduced the connection between science and manufacturing to a matter of mass production, Gropius never forgot the spiritual potential of the artist. Architects all too easily take his 100-year-old insights for granted—and we may even imagine that they are our own.
Mentor  by Alex Cvijanovic

When I graduated from Harvard’s GSD in 1954, I asked my friend, “What is the best architectural design firm in Cambridge?” He told me, “The Architects Collaborative, but you’ll never get a job there. Everybody wants to work there. You have no experience.”

But I went anyway to make an application. It turned out that one of the partners, Bob McMillan—who had been a GI stationed in Paris during the war—had met his wife there. She was French and, since I spoke French, he thought I would be useful. Then I met Gropius, and he discovered I spoke German, also useful.

Those were exciting times; TAC was exploding with work. In a few short years, we built 50 schools all over New England. McMillan used to take me on “supervisory trips,” where we would go and check on the progress of one of these schools in the morning and then find someplace to have a good lunch. All those partners knew how to enjoy themselves.

In those years, Gropius began getting work for TAC in Germany; he was still much admired there, and he needed someone to go with him who also spoke German: me. I was born the same day and year as his daughter, Ati, and I think that was significant. We had a connection; I was the son he never had, and he was the father I lost as a young boy. I was with him for his work on many of his German projects, including Gropiusstadt, a Berlin housing complex; the Bauhaus Archive; and the Rosenthal Glass factory.

Gropius was a generous man, even as he could be rigorous and demanding. He wanted to be treated like everyone else. For him, everything was teamwork. I remember we had one designer whom nobody liked. We all wanted to fire him, but Gropius refused. “He’s got something,” he told us. “Everybody’s got something to offer; you just have to find it.”

We designed two factories for Philip Rosenthal’s ceramics company in Germany, and Gropius began by asking the industrialist how he treated his workers. Women would sit on the assembly line for hours, just painting one line on a plate. Gropius thought it was inhumane. By the time he was done, he had Rosenthal build a library for the workers, and a concert hall. He also thought the women should have something beautiful to look at while they painted their plates, so he designed a greenhouse filled with tropical plants.

At another lunch, he asked Rosenthal what the factory did to celebrate the New Year. “My workers chase a pig, catch it, and then we have a pig roast,” Rosenthal said. Gropius didn’t think they should kill the pig; it was bad luck. So he offered to design a house for the pig, KoKo. Out of marble. Right there, next to the factory. ■