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Walter Gropius

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History

Walter Gropius, born May 18, 1883 in Berlin, Germany, has been recognized as one of the great modernist architects of twentieth century. Early on in his career, Gropius was praised as being revolutionary and forward thinking because of his association with the Bauhaus through which he tirelessly taught the idea that the function of a building is paramount. “According to Gropius, the spirit of modern times was crystallized not in glass and iron construction like glass palaces or bridges, which possessed no architectural qualities for him, but rather in those anonymous...buildings, absolutely determined by function, without any link to historical architecture.”¹ Gropius goes on to write in one of his early memoirs while at the Bauhaus, that the historical revival styles are like, “mummies that can bear no more children.” These were ground breaking ideas at the time because architectural styles like Beaux-Arts and Greek Revival were at their height in popularity. All traditional architecture schools throughout Europe and America still taught in the traditional manner of studying the Classical Orders and then applying those classical orders to any new buildings that were to be constructed. This thinking was to continue in the traditional architecture field for many years while Gropius taught at the Bauhaus. When Gropius arrived at Harvard in 1937, the architecture masters students had theses that were composed one hundred percent the teachings of the Beaux-Arts style.

Gropius is also credited with being one of the founding fathers of the “International Style” of architecture, which sought fresh new solutions to architecture in a world that was becoming more and more industrialized. The International Style architects embraced this industrialization where as other architects had fought solely against it, specifically

noting the arts and crafts movement. “In his first Bauhaus book...Gropius described and illustrated exactly this worldwide unification of cities and their architecture as a result of the prevailing powers of industrialization and mechanization. Internationalism stood as the opposite of the regionalism ridiculed by Le Corbusier and the avant garde. ‘The dynamic spirit of our time, connected London and Paris, New York and Berlin’ and made them more similar to each other than Nuremberg and Cologne, or Genoa and Venice had ever been before.”² This new International Style featured clean lines and minimalist exterior elements. The architects pictured these new clean lined buildings just as much at home in Berlin, as they would be in Los Angeles.

Walter Gropius was proficient at his early architectural studies. He attended the Munich Technische Hochschule where he studied the classical orders of architecture as well as building construction for architects. He stayed at the school for only one year, leaving to rejoin his family in Berlin after his brother, Georg, became ill. Upon returning to Berlin, Walter was recommended to an apprentice position with a local architecture firm, Solf and Wichards. “Walter advanced quickly from ordinary office drafting to fieldwork and clerk-of-works responsibilities. In the summer of 1904 Walter applied and was accepted for his voluntary military service into the 15th Hussar Regiment at Wandsbeck”³ While serving his military duty he became a distinguished horseman and was recognized on several occasions for his outstanding abilities. “In September 1905, [with] his military requirement completed, Gropius enrolled at the Konigliche Technische Hochschule in Berlin to complete his formal studies in architecture.”⁴ Gropius would stay at the school for the next two years, noting, at first, the curriculum was very rigorous. In the fall of

1906 he began to become bored with his studies, writing that architectural studies were dull, restrictive and irrelevant to the outside world and he left the school in 1907 without completing the program or taking his final exam. “He was growing dissatisfied with learning to apply historical styles to new buildings. The gap between what he was being taught and what he had already learned in design and construction was substantial.”⁵

While at the school, Walter would be contracted to design and build several buildings for family and friends. He would later refer to these buildings as his as “my youthful sins.” These early commissions were built in very traditional construction methods and design styles of the time but the experience Walter would acquire from these projects would be invaluable. In his journal he reported, “the master bricklayer had cheated everywhere and it was my task to find out everything. My head was throbbing intensely. For three hours I walked through the building with two foremen, two carpenters, one plumber and the client...but they couldn’t embarrass me and I found twenty-two mistakes which the master bricklayer must change.”⁶

Walter took an inheritance he had received from a family member and traveled throughout Spain for the next year returning back to Berlin in 1908. He accepted a position at the German General Electric Company (AEG) and would be responsible for assisting in all aesthetic considerations of the company including its products, advertising and buildings. It was while he was working under at AEG that he would be introduced to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Dietrich Marcks and Le Corbusier. After working just a

year at AEG, Walter felt that his opportunities began to plateau and left in 1910 to start his own company.

For the next several years Gropius worked hard on establishing his own firm in Berlin with quite a bit of success. He designed and built the Fagus Shoe Factory building as well as the corner office building for the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne. Both of these buildings were groundbreaking for their time and it was during these early years that Walter would begin to develop the ideas and philosophies that would launch him into the Bauhaus eight years later. 1914 saw the dawning of a revolution in Germany that ultimately led to World War I with Walter being called into active duty until 1918.

After the war, Gropius organized a small art group which put on an exhibition entitled “Exhibition for Unknown Architect.” The group was small, yet very influential and in the years after the war, several other smaller arts and crafts groups came together to unify the advancement of both art and architecture in Germany. In 1919, Gropius was asked to serve on a four-person management team for the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. After the former chairman was forced to step down in due to nationality concerns, Gropius thrust himself into the chairman position. Under Gropius’ direction the Weimar Bauhaus prospered and grew from about forty members to well over one hundred members. “The Bauhaus manifesto announced, it would reunify all ‘practical arts’ – defined as ‘sculpture, painting, handicrafts, and crafts’ – under the primacy of architecture and combine the roles of artists and craftsmen.”⁷ “The school also attracted a world class faculty that included Paul Klee, Johannes Itten, Herbert Bayer, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy,

Otto Bartning and Wassily Kandinsky. Students were taught to use modern and innovative materials and mass-produced fittings, often originally intended for industrial settings, to create original furniture and buildings.”⁸ The Bauhaus became world famous under the direction of Gropius and still today, ninety years later, it is referenced for its innovative thinking and groundbreaking designs that sprang from its workshop floor.

In 1934 Gropius left Nazi Germany for Britain. As Europe began to slide into what would become World War II, Gropius looked for ways to leave Europe while still advancing his career in architecture. In 1937, Gropius accepted a position at Harvard University as head of the architecture department. The announcement of Walter Gropius’ arrival was met with great enthusiasm from both the student body and the faculty, as there had been much unrest due to the continued teachings of the classical orders that even the students saw as antiquated in 1937. A bold new person was needed to transform the Harvard architecture department and Walter Gropius was seen as just the man for the job.

Gropius House – Lincoln, Massachusetts

Upon arriving in Massachusetts, Walter immediately set forth to build a new house for his family. This new house would still embody all the Bauhaus teachings but it would be built of different materials, since after all he was in a new country and Walter taught that a house should be reflective of its environment. Walter chose a five and half acre plot of land in Lincoln, Massachusetts about a half hour car ride from Harvard. The land was owned by Mrs. James Storrow who knew nothing about modern architecture, but she agreed to donate the land and a small commission to Gropius to build his house. This

would be Gropius' chance to prove himself to the American design community, up until which he was still relatively unknown. The surrounding land was quite rural with winding two lane roads and an apple orchard directly adjacent to the property. Gropius proposed a truly modern design, with a long rectangular shape for the body of the house in a two-floor, upper and lower layout. The shape was quite simple and unadorned, with a simple projecting entryway with a long sloping roof off of the front of the house and an external spiral staircase leading the second floor. The back of the house would feature a projecting rear screened in porch and an open terrace area on the second floor that was covered in trelliswork to screen from the southern sun. "The appearance of the house was still decidedly European built on an asymmetrical plan with a flat roof and second-story terrace; ribbon windows and extensive use of plate glass; and prominent use of industrial materials like steel columns, spiral iron staircase and glass block. With the sole exception of the stair rail, all of the fixtures and building supplies were factory-made items readily available from catalogues and supply houses in this country."⁹



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gropius_House

The interior floor plan was open concept, keeping with the modernist ideas of the time period. The first floor was accessed through the covered front entryway and featured a living, dining, kitchen area as well as a separate room for the maid's quarters. Adjacent to the dining room, a screen in porch projected off of the back of the house. The second floor featured the bedrooms and a single bathroom as well as the second story terrace area that was open to the sky above.

There were early complication acquiring funding for the house. "The Federal Housing Administration refused to provide mortgage insurance because it considered the flat roof to be unsuitable in neighborhoods of colonial design, vintage or not. Though the cost of the house was not more than \$18,000, banks also were dubious about financing it until a Cambridge banker became interested and supported Mrs. Storrow in her sponsorship of Gropius."¹⁰ Construction began in March of 1938 with the first thaw and was completed by the fall.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gropius_House

Gropius used his the traditional modernist language when designing the house but then he responded to the local building materials seen in New England. The exterior of the house was covered in white wood clapboards that were commonly used throughout New England, but he turned the clapboards vertically instead of running them horizontally as was typical. Also for the first time Gropius used a screen in porch projecting off of the back of the house which was also commonly seen in New England. He also incorporated local fieldstones as low perimeter walls that ran around the property to ground the house to its surroundings. The house is sited on a small knoll that looks out over the surrounding grounds. Walter deliberately turned the view outward when laying out the interior living spaces. The use of large ribbon and plate glass windows on the upper and lower floors allows the viewer to gaze out upon the surrounding property. The second floor terrace and screened in porch invite the occupant to physically interact with the exterior environment. The idea of interior and exterior space is something that Frank Lloyd Wright was seen playing with throughout his career and Gropius was very influenced by this. After Gropius toured Fallingwater in the late 1930's he wrote Mr. Wright to congratulate him on the masterpiece he had created and Walter noted in his memoir that the play of interior and exterior space was exquisite.

Gropius wrote that he wanted this house to be as relaxing as the surroundings in which it is placed and he surrounded the house with a great many trees and bird feeders. Gropius remarked, "beyond the glass screen is a constant, ever-changing spectacle that the occupants of the house never weary of watching. This is much a part of the life of the house as the electric dishwasher or the automatic garbage disposal in the kitchen."¹¹

The house was acquired in 1974 by Historic New England, formerly SPNEA, as their first modernist historic house. Ise, Walter's husband, continued to live in the house until 1983 and the house is open for tours on a seasonal basis with all of the original furniture still remaining.

James Ford House – Lincoln, Massachusetts

In 1938, Walter was commissioned to build a house for fellow Harvard professor, James Ford. The house was sited at the far end of the orchard on Mrs. Storrow's property and bears many similarities both in shape and layout to his own house.

In researching this house it should be noted that the architect that is given credit is Marcel Breuer, as Breuer was running the day-to-day activities of Gropius office at Harvard University. After Gropius began working in the United States, Breuer and Gropius worked on a great many buildings together and most citations as found as Walter Gropius (with Marcel Breuer).

The overall shape of the house is a rectangle with two projecting spaces and a flat roof. Off of the south façade is a large projecting dining room that opens out onto a flagstone terrace. The terrace is covered with a simple trellis that defines the outdoor space. The south side of the house is composed of six large plate glass windows - three on the first floor, three on the second floor that look out onto the surrounding grounds. Over the top of the windows, Gropius installed small trellises made of redwood boards, similar in design to those covering the terrace, to filter the southern sunlight entering the house. Off of the north side of the house, a central stair that services the second floor projects out from the façade, being flanked by two smaller terraces. On either side of the central stair are two large plate glass windows mimicking those found on the north side of the house.



The interior of the house is an asymmetrical open concept plan very much in keeping with the Gropius house. The first floor contains a living room, dining room, kitchen, two half-baths and a space for maid's quarters. The second floor contains two bedrooms, a study, two full baths and a dressing area. The overall footprint of the James Ford House is smaller than the Gropius house almost taking on a single pyle plan layout.

The exterior of the house was clad in white painted redwood siding. Again Gropius took the traditional wood clapboard siding of New England and turned it vertical as seen on his house. Walter used low stonewalls made of local fieldstones around the Ford House to ground it to its surroundings. "The plan is superbly rational. Disposition of rooms in one narrow block, unbroken by a stairwell, means that single, uninterrupted rows of joists can cover the uniform span. A second advantage is that all major rooms can face the south and overlook the adjacent forest."¹²

The Ford Residence is cited in several modernist websites although the current condition of the house is not discussed. Recent pictures of the property show the house with the same layout as the original blueprints and the exterior of the house retains the wood clapboards although they have been stripped to expose the wood grain underneath. Whether the clapboards are original and have been stripped or whether they are replacements is unknown at this point. The house is not accredited to any historic preservation societies at this time.

End Notes

¹ Winfried Nerdinger. *The Walter Gropius Archive, Vol. 1. Garland Architectural Archives*, (Routledge, 1990) 9.

² Winfried Nerdinger, 9.

³ Reginald Isaacs. *Gropius: An Illustrated Biography of The Creator of the Bauhaus*, (Bulfinch Press, 1983) 12.

⁴ Reginald Isaacs, 12.

⁵ Reginald Isaacs, 17.

⁶ Reginald Isaacs, 15.

⁷ Reginald Isaacs, 68.

⁸ Collection Tate. *Bauhaus*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=40> (accessed May 2, 2010).

⁹ Reginald Isaacs, 235.

¹⁰ Reginald Isaacs, 232.

¹¹ Sigfried Giedion. *Walter Gropius*, (Dover Publications, Inc, 1992) 72.

¹² J.M. Richards and Elizabeth B. Mock. *An Introduction to Modern Architecture*, (Penguin Books, 1963) 123.

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