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The Bauhaus in Chicago

László Moholy-Nagy's Schools

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On the evening of September 23, 1937, as described by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, "an unexpected crowd numbering eight hundred people jammed into the ballroom of the Knickerbocker Hotel in Chicago to hear Moholy describe his plans. For more than two hours he poured a stream of analysis and suggestion over their unprepared heads, presented in a language that shrank from nothing to be explicit, and omitted definite articles to save time. . . 'And now color. – My little daughter wouldn't walk. But then she discovers red. Across a lawn are red toys she wants, and she walks because red forces her to take action. Now you who can already walk, you find that color means a life beyond food, drink, sleep. Pleasant, I know. I love to eat. But there's more. Everyone can buy it, without money, with openness of eyes, openness of feeling, readiness to learn. You understand? Everybody is talented. I told you so.'" [1]

Lucia Moholy, László Moholy-Nagy, *1925-26, gelatin silver photograph.*

The New Bauhaus

It was not an accident that László Moholy-Nagy's school, The New Bauhaus, developed in Chicago. There was a history of local interest in combinations of the arts, design, technology, and industry. The Association of Arts and Industries (AAI, founded in 1922) was a Chicago-based organization dedicated to "American production of original creative work of modern character." The AAI had tried to establish a school of design within the Art Institute of Chicago but felt it was a failure, so when Marshall Field II gave them the old Field residence on Prairie Avenue they decided to create a new school there. In 1937, Norma Stahle, AAI executive director, invited Walter Gropius, the German architect who founded the Bauhaus, to head the new school.

But Gropius had already accepted a position at Harvard. Instead, he recommended Moholy-Nagy – Bauhaus teacher, artist and visionary, whose book *The New Vision* (1932) synthesized his Bauhaus principles. "Situated within the idealistic era of Modernism, Moholy saw the school as a place where artists and poets, philosophers, scientists, and technologists would work together to create a more vital civilization." [2]

Cables from the AAI: "Plan design school on Bauhaus lines to open in fall." "Marshall Field, philanthropist and businessman, other sponsors Avery, Gypsum and Montgomery Ward; Kohler, Wisconsin; Paepcke, Container Corporation. Their backing assured. Can you come to Chicago for negotiations?" brought Moholy to Chicago.

He signed a five-year contract and began an urgent race to create this new school by opening day in October 1937. The New Bauhaus would both reflect the principles of the original Bauhaus and refine them. There would be the preliminary "Foundation" course where students would explore the properties of materials, of surface effects, of space and volume. In addition, there would be classes in the sciences, to be taught by University of Chicago faculty members of the "Unity of Science" group, who were interested, as was Moholy, in the totality of education. Then students would choose a speciality from among six workshops, such as light/photography or wood/metal. An additional two years could result in a degree in architecture/planning.

Some of the core faculty were: Alexander Archipenko, the well-known Modernist sculptor, in charge of the modeling workshop; Hin Bredendieck, who had been Moholy's student at the Bauhaus, creating the Foundation course and in charge of the wood/metal workshop; and Gyorgy Kepes, who had worked with Moholy in Berlin and London, heading the light workshop.

Thirty-five students enrolled in the first semester, twenty more at night, and an additional twenty-five by the beginning of the second semester. Nathan Lerner, one of the original students, said that they were "totally immersed in a program of sculpture, graphics,

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poetry, sciences, photography, industrial design and even music made on instruments of student construction, performed by our own orchestra. We were given strange exercises picking up objects, feeling them, then drawing them; cutting and folding paper; shaping blocks of wood until we liked how they felt. This was all very mysterious and confusing until we realized objects and images we made were not to be judged by faculty but were meant to reveal what was happening to us, what we were absorbing, how we were growing." [3] Lerner (like many of the first students) remained involved for many years with the school, in addition to a career as a nationally-known product designer.

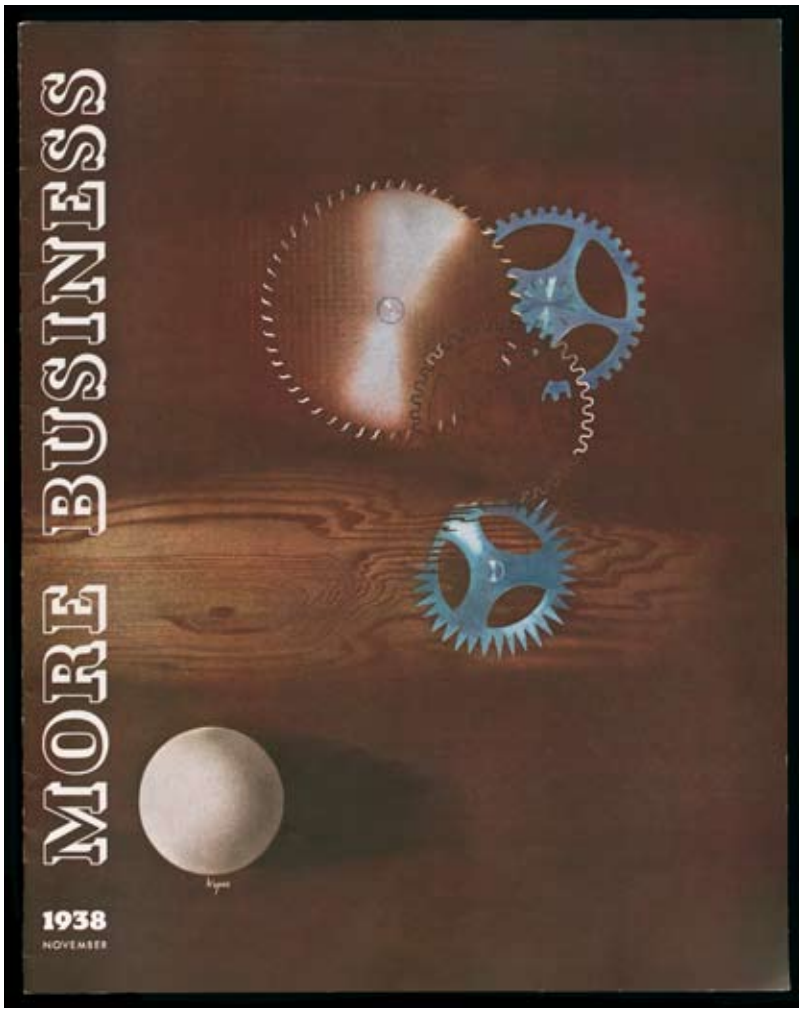
Although chaotic, the New Bauhaus seemed very promising; by the spring of 1938 there was a successful show of student work, Gropius included their work in a Museum of Modern Art exhibition, and 80 applicants were waiting to enroll for the fall semester. But there were also signs of trouble. From the beginning there had been financial misunderstandings, attempts at interference by AAI in educational matters, and even a vague plot to depose Moholy.

Still, it was a shock when AAI announced that for lack of funds they would not re-open the school in the fall. The underlying reasons remain murky. Why could no money be raised? Were the industrialists outraged by the student work? Was there a personal vendetta against Moholy? (He referred to Norma Stahle as "a first rate gangster.") [4] Moholy sued over the closing and the abrogation of his contract; he won but received only the mortgage to the Field mansion.

The School of Design in Chicago

He was determined to continue his school under a new name, financing it – to begin with – out of his earnings; many of the New Bauhaus faculty were willing to come with him, working at first without pay. Moholy appointed a prestigious group of sponsors, including educator and philosopher

György Kepes, More Business, *cover, November 1938 issue.* More Business *was a trade journal published by the American Photo-Engravers Association. Moholy-Nagy was given free rein to write and design this entire issue, which was devoted to the New Bauhaus.*



Courtesy The Newberry Library

Vision in Motion, *pp 80-81. School of Design student exercises exploring the potential of materials and machines. At left, types of woodsprings and a woodspring mattress. At right, sheet metal, structurally bent.*

John Dewey, Gropius, Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, and evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley, and mailed a prospectus.

In February 1939 he rented the second floor of 247 E. Ontario Street. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy said: "It took an enthusiasm beyond the reach of discouragement or despair to see in this empty loft a future school of functional design. A commissary which had occupied the space before had gone into bankruptcy and left without cleaning up. The cockroaches had developed into a new species . . . and they were touchingly tame. The window panes were broken and . . . the snow drifted in onto the stone floor." [5] Nevertheless, the School of Design in Chicago opened on February 19 with 18 day and 28 night students.

One of the most important faculty members was Gyorgy Kepes, head of the light workshop until 1943. His influential book, *The Language of Vision*, was published in 1944 and in 1947 he initiated a program in visual design at MIT, which became the digitally-oriented Center for Advanced Visual Studies. The early modernist architect, George Fred Keck, known for his solar houses, taught the architecture course and John Cage came to teach for a year, experimenting with the students on his compositions, including nonmusical sound and absence of sound. The Unity of Science professors, physicist Carl Eckart, neurophysiologist Ralph Gerard, and semiotician Charles Morris lectured frequently.

The School of Design operated in idiosyncratic ways. Harold Allen, who was a part-time night student in 1940, remembered Moholy's attempts at conveying a sense of the overall activity at the School: "Every night after our regular classes were finished, Moholy would call us into his offices and talk with us about half an hour, as a group, showing us what was going on in the school. Most of it was work in progress,…I was never in a class with [Moholy], but I learned a great deal from him." [6] Edgar Bartolucci, a full-time student, recalled: "School started at 9 am, but everybody had made their own key, so most students got in around eight in the morning and they didn't leave until ten at night." [7] This strong working community produced new ideas and inventions (17 patents applied for in the first two years), awards, and prizes in competitions.

The school quickly expanded its scope. Walter Paepcke, the only original AAI industrialist who still believed in Moholy, offered the use of a rural property that he owned for summer sessions. And the evening classes were increased with emphasis on practical applicability, especially after 1941. War-time subjects included The Principles of Camouflage, Model Airplane Building, and Design in Plastics.

But the war began to cause severe problems. Faculty and students were disappearing into the armed forces; materials, especially metals, were in

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short supply; and the school was in danger of becoming irrelevant to the times. In response, Moholy created three work programs which utilized the school's educational strengths: one in camouflage, in conjunction with the city; a second in ways to substitute wood for scarce metals; and one relating to occupational therapies.

Nothing, though, resolved the financial stresses. Substantial grants from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation helped, but were not enough. In 1944 a group of businessmen under the leadership of Walter Paepcke proposed the formation of a board of directors and a change in name to Institute of Design in an attempt to strengthen the structure of the school. This did not increase enrollment and the directors were about to abandon the school when the number of students suddenly shot up thanks to the G.I. Bill of Rights. In the fall of 1945 800 were enrolled – up from 92.

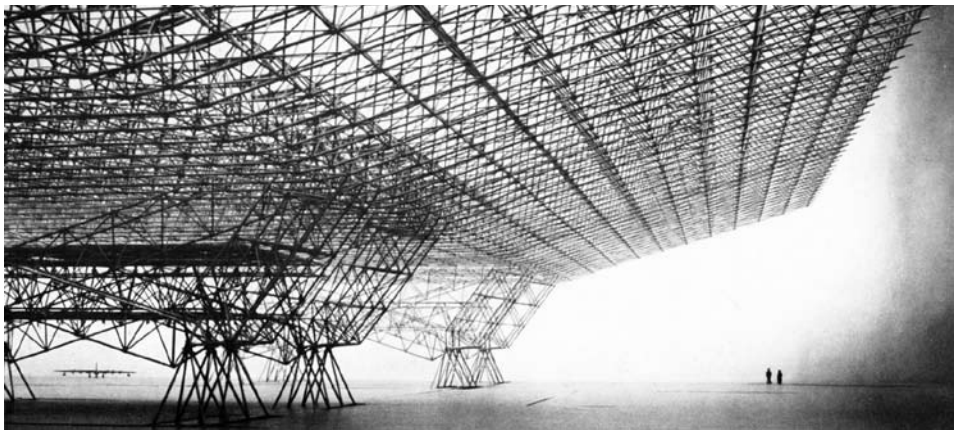
Institute of Design

A new home had to be found; the Ontario Street property had been sold in the summer of 1945 and the second floor at State and Oak, which the school was leasing temporarily, was inadequate. The old Romanesque-style building of the Chicago Historical Society at 632 N. Dearborn was for sale; the board agreed to provide the down payment and after massive renovations the Institute of Design (ID) moved in August 1, 1946.

As the school grew, so did the faculty. Hugo Weber, an artist and an inspiring teacher, brought new ideas with his leadership of the Foundation course. Another artist was Emerson Woellfer, whose influence was felt almost as much in his studio, which was a jazz-filled mecca, as in his classes. James Prestini, educated as an engineer and combining art with consummate craftsmanship, rejoined the ID. And Arthur Siegel, one of the earliest students and a noted photojournalist, took over the Light Workshop.

Though he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1945, Moholy continued to work in all areas at

Konrad Wachsmann and Institute of Design advanced level students, Space frame structure, 1950-51. A research project commissioned by the US Air Force, this space frame hangar was designed to be assembled from pre-fabricated components.



FACING PAGE, TOP Vision in Motion, *pp. 188-189. The photogram (photography without camera) is strongly associated with Moholy and his schools. Photograms are photo-negatives, produced by laying objects on an emulsion-covered surface and exposing them to light. At right, a photogram by Moholy-Nagy.*
BELOW *Harry Callahan*, Eleanor, Chicago, 1952, *gelatin silver photograph.*
BOTTOM *James Prestini, Lathe-turned mahogany bowl, c. 1945.*

an enormous pace and added the goal of completing his book, *Vision in Motion*. It was published by Paul Theobald in Chicago shortly after his untimely death in November 1946.

It is in this book that he most completely articulated his educational philosophy – using many examples of his students' work, especially from the Chicago schools. Hans Wingler, founder of the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, said: "More than ever before, he emphasized the totality of experience and forcefully assigned an essential, actually a decisive, role in the creative process to the emotional moment. . . .*Vision in Motion* is Moholy-Nagy's artistic and educational legacy. It became, especially in the United States, a standard work in the literature of art." [8]

This remembrance by Edgar Bartolucci, one of his students, is a good summation of Moholy and his teaching: "After you left the Institute, you were interested in everything and anything. Moholy was more child-like than anybody I know. He would see something that others thought was ordinary and make you realize that there was more to it.... He would make you look at things differently and students eventually developed that eye, the ability to see things in a new light." [9]

Acting on the advice of Gropius, Paepcke, as Chairman of the Board, invited the internationally-known architect Serge Chermayeff to become the new director of the ID. Chermayeff, who had been chair of the design department at Brooklyn College, arrived in 1947.

Under Chermayeff the curriculum of the Institute was tightened; the Foundation course was extended to three semesters and the workshops were reduced to four areas: Architecture, Product Design, Visual Design and Photography/Film. To bring the Institute more in line with the academic world, bachelor degrees would now be granted in the four departments.

Chermayeff focused his greatest attention on the architecture program. Konrad Wachsmann was appointed to head Advanced Building Research; he and his students developed a seminal space-frame system hangar for the U.S. Air Force. The eminent architecture critic Martin Pawley wrote: "Wachsmann was a pioneer theorist, practitioner and teacher of industrialised building . . . and must surely be a contender for the title of architect of the twentieth century." [10]

And Chermayeff brought in for the 1948-49 year another great innovator, R. Buckminster Fuller. Fuller lived in a trailer in the ID parking lot and turned part of the basement into "a Merlin's cave," as Chermayeff described it. It was there that Fuller and twelve of his students constructed the first successful model of the geodesic dome; it was demonstrated in public the following summer.

The photography department, which from the start had been central to Moholy's educational concepts, became by the end of the ID so famous that the school was often identified by it. When Art Siegel came in 1946 to head the photography department, he organized a six-week summer symposium, "New Vision in Photography," which was attended by many of the leading names in photography. This symposium, the first of its kind, made a major impression, elevating both the school and the medium itself.

Also in 1946 Siegel introduced photographer Harry Callahan to Moholy, who immediately hired him. Callahan became head of photography in 1949, and in 1951 he brought Aaron Siskind into the department. The legendary Callahan-Siskind combination made the ID the leading school for photography for many years.

Moholy's schools had never been solidly funded, and when the GI bill students tapered off there were financial difficulties again. It was necessary to affiliate with an established

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institution; in 1949 Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) welcomed the ID and Henry Heald, the IIT president, promised that it would retain its autonomy.

In 1951 Serge Chermayeff resigned to teach at MIT and Crombie Taylor, an architect who had taught at the ID and been its secretary-treasurer for many years, was appointed acting director. The students continued to win awards and to sweep competitions, including a high-profile one for lamp designs which the Museum of Modern Art sponsored in 1951. There were major projects other than Wachsmann's space-frame hangar; in 1952 Taylor suggested that Siskind's students document Louis Sullivan's buildings, many of which were threatened with demolition. That project ultimately brought fame and death to Richard Nickel, the student who became the heart of it.

No one could agree on who should be the new director; finally, in 1955 IIT – without consulting anyone connected with the ID – appointed a new director: Jay Doblin from the design firm of Raymond Loewy. Immediately, everyone at the ID was united in opposition and many of the faculty resigned. In 1956 the school was moved to IIT's south campus, in the basement under Mies van der Rohe's architecture department; more faculty were terminated; and Moholy's era of experimentation was over.

But Moholy's ideas and Bauhaus concepts were spread to many other educational institutions by both faculty and graduates, most notably Kepes at MIT, Hin Bredendieck at his School of Industrial Design at Georgia Tech, James Prestini and Jesse Reichek, an ID student and teacher, at the University of California at Berkeley, and the ID ex-faculty members who settled at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In this sense, one could say that Moholy's school lived on.

§§

NOTES

[1] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969, pp. 148-49.
[2] Peter Selz, "Modernism Comes to Chicago: the Institute of Design," in Lynne Warren, ed., *Art in Chicago, 1945-1995*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, p. 39.
[3] Nathan Lerner, "Memories of Moholy-Nagy and the New Bauhaus," in Terry Suhre, *Moholy-Nagy: A New Vision for Chicago*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 13.
[4] Walter Gropius Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
[5] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, pp. 168-69.
[6] Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, "Educating the Eye: Photography and the Founding Generation at the Institute of Design, 1937-46," in David Travis et al, *Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937-1971*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2002, p. 29.
[7] Emily King, *Robert Brownjohn: Sex and Typography*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p. 21.
[8] Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969, p.203.
[9] Emily King, p. 21.
[10] Martin Pawley, "Konrad Wachsmann: The Greatest Architect of the Twentieth Century," in *Architects Journal*, 2 December 1999 issue.

Bookmarks...

Looking ahead to fall...

SEPTEMBER LUNCHEON

September 12, 2014, Union League Club: "A Lost Piece of Chicago History, Found! Cable Cars and Their Startling Stories," presented by award-winning Chicago journalist and author Greg Borzo, including over 75 seldom-seen Chicago images.

SEPTEMBER DINNER

Nancy Gwinn, Director of Smithsonian Libraries since 1997, will speak about the trials and rewards of running 20 libraries. This will be a special event with other guests invited by the Smithsonian.

OCTOBER LUNCHEON

Friday, October 10, at the Union League: Chicago businessman, Union League Club member and published and recognized Teddy Roosevelt aficionado Joseph Ornig brings new insights into our 26th President, by examining his literary output.

OCTOBER DINNER

Our speaker will be Marianna Tax Choldin, talking on Russian censorship. "Where Books Go to Die" is the title of her recent book. See her October 15 at the Union League Club.