

# **One More Oncet**

An Architectural Meander

Prepared by Mark S. Schlachter and  
Presented at the Literary Club of Cincinnati  
10 May 2021

## One More Oncet

In 1955 the Count, Bill Basie, took his orchestra into the studio to record what would be their most popular single cut ever. I can personally verify that statement. In my years as a radio jazz DJ “April in Paris” was the most requested Basie recording—period. Recorded at a bright 144 beats per minute, it ends with a big finish--lots of trombone and some piercing, high trumpet. As the band’s last chord decays Basie calls, “One more time.” The band responds by replaying the last 14 measures with even more conviction and energy than the first time. Again Basie calls to the band, this time, “One more oncet.” The band’s amazing response is that final fourteen bars with incredible and overwhelming intensity. We will now wander the twisting trail that leads to how this paper got its unusual title.

May first, 1851, slightly less than two years after the founding of our literary club, the English tried to equal us by opening the Great Exhibition of 1851. Their attempt was astounding. Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s consort, joined Henry Cole to sponsor what is generally viewed as the first world’s fair

The event had its naysayers. Some, including members of the Royal Family, were opposed. There would be riots. The event was uncommonly common. Who had ever heard of such a thing?

Prince Albert and his friends prevailed. They would invite the world to exhibit their wares, but would spotlight the technology, imagination, skills, and manufacturing prowess of England. This would be the definition of an event with a hometown -- no, home-country advantage

The exhibition would be housed largely in the Crystal Palace, a temporary, but breathtaking product of English engineering and manufacture. In practice, a giant greenhouse, the structure stretched more than 6 football fields in length and two fields in width. It was high enough to house full grown trees and in total it was breathtaking in size without mass.

Exhibits from the home country ranged from varieties of coal, to fine woven products, to working steam engines and a vast array of powered manufacturing equipment. Whether your interest was in coal, coke, zinc, slate, printing, pumping, cutting, weaving or turning, the exhibition had you covered.

Between the opening of the fair in May and its closing October 15<sup>th</sup> of the same year, more than six million people had paid admission to enter the Crystal Palace and wonder at its wonders.

But there were unintended consequences. Far from being a financial drain, the event earned a profit of 186,000 pounds sterling, roughly equivalent to twenty million pounds in 2021. The earnings financed construction of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum, the National Historical Museum and a scholarship fund still active.

Another unintended consequence also revealed itself.

Critics were not happy with the manufactured goods displayed as England's finest at the Great Exhibit. Common critical comments included, "excessively ornate, artificial, and ignorant of the materials."

Henry Cole, Matthew Digby Wyatt, and Richard Redgrave, all organizers of the Great Exhibit apparently agreed and supported Owen Jones and his statement in the Grammar of Ornament, "Ornament must be secondary to the thing." Redgrave added that style demands sound construction before ornamentation, and that utility must take precedence over ornament.

The implications and results were international.

After simmering for more than two decades, the myriad voices of discontent with England's manufacturing design and process came together under the unofficial, but very real leadership of William Morris. Morris espoused craftsmanship, sole product creation, and design respecting process and material. His concepts and ideals were labeled the Arts and Crafts movement, and it was adopted in various forms throughout Europe, the United States, and Japan.

If a chair was to be made Morris and his adherents would prefer that the design, wooden frame, finishing, and upholstery all be completed by a single artisan. Unfortunately, this created a product so expensive that only the wealthy could afford it. Eventually a middle ground was found. Designers, woodworkers, finishers, and upholsterers would all contribute their labors to the same piece.

Morris himself adopted this compromise. Although he strove to protect and revive traditional technique and handmade production, he created a series of wildly popular wallpaper designs, produced through wood block printing in a factory setting. Later these patterns were introduced as fabrics. The fabrics were as popular as the wallpaper and Morris, already wealthy, became very wealthy.

The English Arts and Crafts products tended to be ornate. Chairs had elaborate turned legs and spindle backs. Carving was common. The wallpaper and fabric from Morris featured great swirls of color.

The American approach was different. In 1897 Boston Massachusetts hosted the first exhibit of Arts and Crafts in the United States. More than a thousand objects created by one hundred sixty artisans were displayed. At least one half of the participants were women. Within months there were Arts and Crafts societies in Chicago, Minneapolis, Rochester, Dayton, New York, and Los Angeles.

The west coast enthusiastically embraced a form of Arts and Crafts heavily influenced by the Spanish mission architecture. This mission style was brought to its peak by brothers Charles Sumner and Henry Mather Greene. The Greenes were born in Cincinnati and spent their early years in Brighton. Later the family moved to Saint Louis and eventually settled in California. Charles and Henry graduated from a trades high school and then completed a special two-year program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They settled in Pasadena, formed an architectural partnership, and perfected the Arts and Crafts bungalow.

The model bungalow featured natural materials, exposed beams, low-pitched gable roofs, and large covered terraces. Bungalows soon spread across the country, due in part to features in furniture manufacturer Gustav Stickley's magazine, *The Craftsman*. Stickley was already designing and building furniture and accessories that seemed made to order for the Greene's designs. Stickley also had a gift for marketing and growing his business in unusual directions. Through *The Craftsman* Stickley promoted his popular furniture line, but also offered to sell plans and fabrication instructions to the amateur craftsman eager to furnish his own home with the latest trend. Stickley also offered a line of hardware for these home crafters. It should be noted that Stickley's furniture designs were particularly well suited to home craft. While the English designs featured turned work and ornate trims, Stickley designs dealt with flat surfaces, minimal moldings and nothing requiring the extravagance of a lathe or a band saw.

Perhaps the most famous of Arts and Crafts homes was the one created in Pasadena for the David Gamble family. David had retired from Procter and Gamble in 1895 and annually wintered in Pasadena. In 1908 the Gambles commissioned the Greene brothers to create a home. The term bungalow frequently brings visions of modest, comfortable homes. The Gamble house breaks that mold. Comprising two floors and more than eight thousand square feet the residence features custom lighting fixtures and extensive art glass installations and rests comfortably on several acres of landscaped property. It survives today, largely intact and with most of its custom furnishings. It appeared in the movie *Back to the Future* as the exterior of Doc Brown's house.

Germany also developed an Arts and Crafts movement and it was unique.

While the English and the Americans equated Arts and Crafts with small shops and hand work, the Germans turned the concept on its head. Advanced manufacturing processes were embraced, but were coupled with an overarching concern for design and utility. Design was paramount whether for a new machine shop or a high-end tea kettle. No item was to simply happen. All products must be the result of careful thought, analysis, and development.

With the English looking to the nineteenth century for inspiration, the Germans forged forward in new directions. Not surprisingly by the late 1890s Germany had overtaken England in industrial manufacturing, and they had no intention of slowing down.

Nationalism now became part of the equation. Things German were favored. German heritage was prime. German style must be elevated.

In 1907 The Werkbund was formed. Twelve representatives, leaders in handcraft, industry, and art became a working group planning the direction and future of German identity through style. The Werkbund's challenge was to find and train the craftspeople and designers required to realize their vision.

A single revolutionary school would be created to provide the designers and administrators to put the concept in action. Germany's answer to Arts and Crafts was the Bauhaus.

The Bauhaus did not spring full-blown from the Werkbund. It was the culmination of a twelve-year process. There were significant developments in design and construction during that time,

including a revolutionary building conceived and made a practical reality by architect Walter Gropius. Gropius was commissioned to fashion a new manufacturing facility for the Fagus shoe last works. The building was unique, and is currently regarded as the first true curtain wall structure. Traditional design and construction relies on the exterior walls to provide much of the building's structural integrity. These walls are commonly referred to as loadbearing. With the Fagus plant Gropius provided a rigid structural steel frame supporting floors, ceilings, the roof and all the needed machinery. This steel skeleton was enclosed by floor to ceiling glass walls which met with minimal framing at the corners. The sole purpose of the walls was to keep the weather outside, outside.

The Gropius design was eye-opening and economically attractive. Compare the time and labor necessary to build King's Cross station in London with its millions of hand-laid bricks in walls that can be three feet thick at the base to a simple steel, or concrete frame protected by a thin, impervious skin. It is the curtain wall concept that allows the construction of all tall buildings.

The Fagus plant of 1912 became the beginning of the new German style, a statement that would not be truly acknowledged within Germany until after the second world war.

Finally, in 1919, The Bauhaus, technically the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar, opened its doors. Fittingly, the school's first director was Walter Gropius. Primary to the Bauhaus was the requirement that the students must learn to do as well as to imagine and think. Architects, photographers, graphic artists, potters, weavers, all had to learn the craft as well as the theory of their chosen path. A knowledge of materials and processes was coupled with respect and appreciation of the artisan.

Bauhaus faculty were not referred to as professors, but as masters. First year students were apprentices. Advanced students ranked as journeymen. The student body welcomed women and it was not uncommon for at least a third of the cohort to be female.

The Bauhaus never had an easy time. As a state sponsored school it was always susceptible to the whims of government, and Weimar was steadily becoming more conservative. State officials did not see the new concepts of Bauhaus design as German. Clean lines and functionality were not worthy goals. Substantial structures with figurative ornamentation were the ideal model, and the Bauhaus was subsequently dissolved in 1925.

Months later the Bauhaus reappeared not in Weimar, but rather in Dessau.

Dessau was experiencing a boom and needed designers not just for the thriving businesses, but to imagine and realize much-needed housing for the rapidly growing city. Welcoming the Bauhaus was a win, win situation.

In Dessau the Bauhaus finally got the home that reflected what it taught. Gropius designed the new building, and its image is often used to illustrate International Style architecture. The masters were housed in built-for-the-purpose residences also designed in the International Style.

Gropius continued to lead and shape the Bauhaus for three years. He, the masters and their students completed a number of design projects for Dessau, but the political climate was

changing. Walter Gropius left the Dessau Bauhaus in 1928 to be replaced by Hannes Meyer. Meyer's tenure was problematic, due in part to the rise of the conservative, nationalistic government, and after two years he was dismissed. It was Walter Gropius who suggested that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe be appointed the third Bauhaus director.

The recommendation of van der Rohe by Gropius is made more interesting by the fact that Gropius had rejected van der Rohe as a participant in the Exhibit of Unknown Architects in 1919.

Knowing the direction of the political winds van der Rohe immediately did everything in his power to distance the Bauhaus from the left, and communists. Though not a communist, Meyer was viewed as a suspicious character who attracted "the wrong sort" of students. Van der Rohe interviewed each Bauhaus student and rejected all who supported Meyer. Several of the spurned students did indeed move to Russia. The Socialists, who were now in the majority, made the Bauhaus their whipping boy. The students and faculty were communists, the modern designs were un-German and the school was a civic embarrassment.

In 1933 Mies van der Rohe voluntarily closed the Bauhaus after continued visits and harassment by the Gestapo.

From my viewpoint in 2021, the majority of the contemporary architecture that I have enjoyed has been inspired or heavily influenced by the modernists of the Bauhaus, and as a result is supremely German.

In 1937 van der Rohe visited the United States and finally met Frank Lloyd Wright. The earliest work from van der Rohe was decidedly neo-classical, but exposure to Wright's designs during the mid-teens was transformative to van der Rohe. He changed course and never looked back. Van der Rohe now returned to America and in 1938 became the Director of the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago.

Upon reaching Chicago van der Rohe first assumed his position at Armour and immediately opened his own private practice. An early design venture was the creation of an entire new campus for the school. Within two years the campus was taking form and the school adopted the new name, Illinois Institute of Technology.

Mies van der Rohe kept a very full plate. While acting as Director of Illinois Institute of Technology and Dean of Architecture, he completed an impressive list of commissions. The Promontory Apartments, Farnsworth House, Lakeshore Drive Apartments, Seagram Building, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Pavilion Apartments and Townhouses at Lafayette Park all came to fruition in this period. Mies van der Rohe also found time to become a U.S citizen in 1944.

There is one more van der Rohe project to discuss, but not quite yet.

Indiana University is blessed with a host of generous benefactors. In 2016 the university brought several departments together to form the Indiana University School of Design, Art and Architecture. Included in the school is the Indiana University Museum, housed in an I. M. Pei structure. 2016 was also the year that I.U. graduates and Indianapolis philanthropists Sidney

and Lois Eskenazi gifted the university with fifteen million dollars for major renovations to the Pei museum building. Three years later the Eskenazis returned bringing another gift. This time the school received twenty million dollars and expressed institutional gratitude by naming the school for them.

High on the Eskenazi School of Design, Art and Architecture's list of needs was an administration building. For those not familiar with the Indiana University campus we will try to describe the basics. The campus extends from Third Street on the south to Seventeenth Street on the north. Jordan Avenue bisects the campus north-south. Seventh Street runs through the heart of the academic area and serves the aesthetic center. In one block the visitor finds the Lily Library of rare books, The Auditorium with its spectacular Thomas Hart Benton murals, the studio arts building and the Eskenazi Museum. To complete the picture, add the magnificent Showalter Fountain and several significant abstract sculptures. There was property available adjacent to the art building, but a suitable and sympathetic new structure would be a challenge.

Sidney Eskenazi had an idea. As a student he had been a member of Pi Lambda Phi when the fraternity was planning a new building. The university approved a location on the traditional Third Street fraternity row. Pi Lambda Phi commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design their new house. Van der Rohe accepted the challenge and produced a design for a two-story structure of ten thousand square feet to comfortably fit on the proposed property. Despite common belief, things can move fast in academe, and by the time the plans were presented for review, the university had decided that all new Greek houses would be built north of tenth Street. The concept was tweaked to work in the new location, and then totally abandoned.

Eskenazi remembered the stillborn frat house and felt it could be repurposed for the proposed new administration building. The problem would be to locate the plans. Since the structure was not a university property, the plans were not part of the school architectural archives. The van der Rohe successors had no knowledge to share, and things were not looking good.

University architect Adam Thies was intrigued by the project and became totally invested in finding the errant designs. Perseverance was rewarded when Adam finally located the documents in a cache at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

There was surprisingly little to change when adapting the van der Rohe design to its new function. The building's front elevation is reminiscent of a two story version of the classic Farnsworth House. While the Farnsworth is basically a single room, the Pi Lambda Phi house was a cluster of small bedrooms. The bedrooms translated nicely to faculty offices; several were combined to form larger offices for the Dean and Assistant Dean. Common areas became conference and meeting space. To satisfy health-safety requirements, a second stairway was added, and to comply to ADA standards an elevator was provided.

In June of 2020 ground was broken on what is likely the last new Mies van der Rohe building to be realized. It will be dedicated on homecoming weekend, October 15, 2021.

If you haven't yet discerned the significance of the title we will explain. Pi Lambda Phi was to be on Third Street, but no, one more time, it will be on North Jordan, but no, one more on cet--it is on Seventh Street.

Behind me you see the new Eskenazi School of Design, Art, and Architecture, under construction.

One last thought. I have tried to keep my tale compact, respecting Shakespeare's admonition that "Brevity is the soul of wit," and Mies van der Rohe's firm belief that "Less is more."