otl aicher
the world as design

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with an introduction
by wolfgang jean stock

Ernst & Sohn
A Wiley Brand

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Otl Aicher was a good friend, mentor and working colleague. There was never a division between conversations on our work or any other subject – the topics ranged far and wide. Often as he was talking, Otl would pick up a piece of paper and illustrate his point with careful strokes of a ball-point. The combination was uniquely personal – witty, incisive and often thought-provoking.

During his summer retreats in August at Rotis, Otl would commit his thoughts to paper and these later became the subject of two books. Before then some of them had appeared randomly as articles in magazines or in editions. I remember being frustrated because I could not read German, even though I might guess at their content from the many hours spent with Otl hearing their story lines. I was also upset because I so much wanted to share Otl's insights with others around me; he seemed to be able to say with clarity and eloquence many of the things I felt needed to be said – as well as some of the things which we did not agree about. In his last years Otl was, I felt, at the height of his creativity in many fields, which ranged from visual communication and new typefaces to political and philosophical comment.

Following the tragedy of Otl's death I felt compelled to help make it possible for all of his writings to be translated and published in English. Otl saw through the stupidities of fashion and vanity. His opinions were so relevant to the issues of today that I believed it was important for them to be shared with a wider English-speaking audience – relevant to my own generation as well as students, professionals and the lay public.

Otl wrote rather in the way that he spoke and after some debate with those who were closer to him and who were also German speakers it was decided to leave the translation in its conversational form. We also felt that it was important to respect Otl's passionate objection to capital letters for starting sentences of marking traditionally important words. Perhaps it underlined his scorn for the pompous.

There was an integrity about the way that Otl lived, practised and preached. He would probably have been uncomfortable with the word preach, but I use it here in its most honourable and inspiring sense.

Norman Foster
London, January 1994

Introduction

by Wolfgang Jean Stock

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In 1950, on a very early visit to the Federal Republic, Hannah Arendt noted: "If you watch the Germans bustling and stumbling through the ruins of their thousand-year-old history, you realize that this bustling has become their principal weapon for protecting themselves against reality."

Two years after currency reform and five years after the end of the war the shock of defeat and horror about the crimes committed in the name of Germany had been largely suppressed. In the face of everyday privations the majority of West Germans had accustomed themselves to the normality of survival. Responsibility for the causes and consequences of the Nazi regime was left aside amidst the compulsory reality of occupation and handling shortages. People began vigorous clearance of the fields of rubble, but the rubble inside them stayed where it was. Finally the Nuremberg trials worked as a kind of general absolution from the outside.

"Rebuilding" became the slogan and stimulus of the times. As early as 1948, in the *Frankfurter Hefte*, Walter Dirks pointed out how treacherous this word, increasingly interpreted as restoring the old order, could be. Anyone who spoke up for a new social and cultural structure rather than rebuilding the old state of things was unwittingly placed on the fringes of Wirtschaftswunder society, which was forming early. No wonder that a large number of cultural initiatives, particularly non-conformist newspapers and publishing houses, had to give up.

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But one small group preparing around 1950 to find a new kind of higher educational establishment in Ulm on the Danube, managed to make a success of it. Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher had found out how great was the need for a new cultural direction in their work at the Volkshochschule in Ulm. With their friends they drew up a programme for a school of design on socio-political lines. Their educational concept combined an anti-fascist attitude with democratic hope. Graphics were to become social communication, and product design was to encourage humanization of everyday life. After a number

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of difficulties, especially in terms of finance, teaching started at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in summer 1953. Two years later it moved into its own building, designed by Max Bill, on the Kuhberg in Ulm. The HfG wanted to work as a successor of the Bauhaus from its heights above the Danube valley, admittedly with a fundamental difference. While the Bauhaus saw training in fine art as a requirement for the design of good industrial form, the HfG stood for a direct, functional approach to the matter in hand. For this reason Ulm had no studios for painters and sculptors and no craft workshops.

In his essay "bauhaus and ulm", which is the biographical key to the essays and lectures collected here, Otl Aicher emphasizes this distinction: "at that time in ulm we had to get back to matters, to things, to products, to the street, to the everyday, to people. we had to turn round. it was not about extending art into the everyday world, for example, into application. it was about counter-art, the work of civilization, the culture of civilization."

This also shows the strong feelings of the man coming back from the war, born in 1922, for whom "coming to terms with reality" was on the agenda, and not a concern with pure aesthetics. Thus HfG was dominated by the view that art was an expression of escape from life. But above all the intention was to keep the field of product design free of artistic demands, to avoid formalism.

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Once more the German provinces became the home of modernity and progress. As was the case with the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, a middle-sized town did not merely offer the possibility of concentrated work. The restricted nature of the milieu, along with local reservations and animosity, were particular factors in compelling HfG to explain and justify its practice. In this tension they felt independent on the Kuhberg – and they really were independent. The Geschwister-Scholl Foundation as an independent source of finance guaranteed a relatively large distance from the state, and the school's own income, often half its annual budget, reinforced selfconfidence.

As an institution, HfG was a dwarf, but its influence was felt world-wide. What drew students from 49 nations to Ulm? Certainly the advanced syllabus, with the social dimensions of design at its centre, and also its

educational aims, including training in argument and education that went beyond the subject rather than being specific to it. Admittedly it was essential for the success of HfG that the pioneering spirit of the founders rubbed off on teachers and students. There was a hint of the Messianic in the commitment to building up a new industrial culture: from product design and individual communication via information systems to serial building. Technology and science were to put into effect this forward-looking design of everyday culture.

In the conservative cultural climate of post-war West German society, HfG was a creative island. It held its own until 1968 as an experimental institution at a time when elections were won with the slogan "no experiments". It taught social and cultural responsibility with a view to the future precisely at the time when the universities were reactivating the bourgeois, museum-style canon of education. Faced with the "thousand-year fug" and the plushy cosiness of the economically successful republic, Ulm was looking for practical ways towards enlighten-ment, criticism and authenticity. In this way the outlines of a functional, democratic culture of things, open to the world, grew up in the midst of West German "neo-Biedermeier".

HfG itself and also the devices, corporate images, printed items and building systems developed there were perceived as evidence of a "different Germany" in countr-ies abroad that were as suspicious as they always had been. The lack of frills, indeed the austerity of the objects and designs showed a farewell to the "clear being". Like the German pavilion by Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf for the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, the Ulm creations were convincing because of the unity of technology, function-ality and aesthetics.

If there was one person who could fundamentally make his mark on the development of HfG as a teacher and model it was Otl Aicher. He represented personal continuity from the preparatory phase onwards, but also got his way in the two great clashes: the question of whether art should be part of the syllabus, which was decided against, leading to the departure of Max Bill in 1957, and in the early sixties in the dispute between "theoreticians" and "practitioners". Aicher took the prior-ity of practical work for granted. In 1963 he inveighed sharply against "uncritical faith in academic theory with its inflated tendency to analysis and increasing impotence in terms of doing".

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No master without an apprenticeship: HfG was an out-
standing school for its teachers as well, perhaps for them
in particular. Otl Aicher explained and sharpened up his
view of a realism that was not untypical of the early six-
ties in conflicts between theory and practice that were
built into the programme. Martin Walser wrote at the
time, for example: "As this realism is not an arbitrary
invention, but simply a long overdue way of looking at
and presenting things, one can say that it will make pos-
sible a further step towards overcoming ideabased, ideal-
istic, ideological approaches." What Walser hoped for
literature became Aicher's maxim for the correct use of
things.

Aicher always retained his optimism about affecting
the shape of the world, which was a motive force behind
the whole of HfG. But his opposition to a belief in an
ability to plan circumstances also goes back to his Ulm
experiences. Today Aicher is clear that large-scale social
and economic planning using technical processes and
scientific perceptions as instruments, is an invalid means
of humanizing the world. However efficient individual
areas may be, they actually accelerate the breakdown of
social ties and devastation of the planet to the point of
endangering the fundamentals of human existence. As
man has increasingly made the world into an artefact his
inability to control development has grown. Because the
production of things follows abstract rules, they subju-
gate the living world.

For this reason Aicher campaigns for a radical return
to consideration of the individual. Instead of trusting
governments, economic powers or spiritual courts of
appeal, people should develop a need "to live according
to their own ideas, to carry out work determined by their
own notions, to proceed according to their own con-
cepts". Only then will they not be controlled by circum-
stances, but shape their own lives. Activity based on such
reflections designs things on the criterion of their use
and not in expectation of abstract exchange values. The
correctness of the design emerges from whether the
result is appropriate to the task examined from all sides.
The question why is replaced by the question for what
purpose. Purpose has to be tested for meaning.

This concrete utopia lies behind more than forty years
of Aicher's activity as a designer of posters, sign systems,
books, exhibitions, corporate images and his own type-
face. In his confrontation with work from industry, ser-
vices businesses and the media he has developed a design

principle that is fundamentally different from design in the popular sense. For him design is precisely not surface design or the production of visual stimuli. This means that Post-Modernism with its borrowings from art and fashion is a regression into randomness and waste. Its formalism follows the cult of the superfluous and it is not for nothing that is reaches its peak in the "useful object that can no longer be used". A need to assert validity has supressed use: styling instead of design.

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Design means relating thinking and doing. Aesthetics without ethics tend towards deception. It is about the product as a whole, not just about its outward form. The criterion of use also includes social and ecological effects: "design relates to the cultural condition of an epoch, of the period, of the world. the modern world is defined by its design condition. modern civilization is one that is made by man, and therefore designed. the quality of the designs is the quality of the world."

Design of this kind requires appropriate partners. In his insider's view of doing things, Aicher also cites institutional reasons for why not every person giving a commission is suitable. Firstly original design requires complete commitment from all involved. It then needs the culture of the "round-table" at which businessmen, engineers and designers consult each other. Because small and medium-sized businesses are manageable and their structures less alienated, they are most suited for the emergence of original design. Aicher: "design is the life process of a business, when intentions should concretize into facts and phenomena. it is the centre of business culture, of innovative and creative concern with the purpose of the business."

Otl Aicher calls places like this, where there has been successful cooperation, "workshops". They are not used for planning and administration, but for development and design. The design is guided towards the right result in a process of examination and correction. The principle of guidance by alternatives permits an exemplary start in something that already exists. Models of a "world as design" come into being.

Otl Aicher's writings are explorations of that world. They are a substantive part of his work. In moving through the history of thought and design, building and construction he assures the possibilities of arranging existence in a humane fashion. As ever he is concerned with the question of the conditions needed to produce a

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civilization culture. These conditions have to be fought for against apparent factual or material constraints and spiritual and intellectual substitute offers.

Otl Aicher has a taste for dispute. For this reason this volume contains polemical statements on cultural and political subjects as well as practical reports and historical exposition. Aicher fights with productive obstinacy above all for the renewal of Modernism, which he says has largely exhausted itself in aesthetic visions. He insists that the ordinary working day is still more important than "cultural sunday". But aesthetics can still not be reduced to art: "everything concrete, everything real, relates to aesthetics. art as pure aesthetics is even in danger of distracting attention from the aesthetic needs of the real world. there is no case in which there can be different aesthetic categories, a pure one and an everyday one. in moral terms we can also not distinguish between religious morality and the morality of every day."

Design as a way of life instead of cosmetic design: Otl Aicher trusts training of the senses. His life's work guarantees the fact that this trust remains modern.

insights can give you a shock. i had a shock like that on a visit to moscow in the mid seventies. i had been invited to discuss certain questions with the people responsible for the olympic games, which were to take place in moscow in 1980.

in this context i suggested that pioneering works of russian constructivism should be renovated, as visitors from the west were very interested in this architecture. i said that this architecture had been a crucial stimulus for the development of modern architecture.

i was met with incomprehension and rejection. this was still the period of "socialist realism", when painters were concerned to remain near to the people with superficial fidelity to nature and credible symbolism and gesture. this also means comprehensible to the simple worker, for the people. nikita khrushchev had already criticized stalin's wedding-cake style for being bombastic, decorative and uneconomical. stalin had had seven tower-like high-rise buildings put up around the centre of moscow as a sign of the victory over fascism, which like the famous moscow underground railway were decorated with feudal pomp and tarted up with bombastic drama, known to the people as the wedding-cake style. each tower was topped with a pointed spire with a red star on the top. the wedding-cake style fell prey to derision and irony and showed what happens when the state begins to worry about the cultural well-being and happiness of its citizens, which always basically leads to securing its power by giving out sweets.

khrushchev broke with the stalinist era and enjoyed laughing at obsessions with being a great man. but they were a long way away from bringing a non-representational painter like Malevich out of the cellar, as i recommended to the lady director of the tretiakov gallery, or remembering a russian architect like melnikov, who built the rusakov clubhouse, which is still stimulating today. natural and realistic behaviour was the order of the day, and they were still going to stay close to the people, but using a simpler approach.

I visited melnikov's domestic building that had once been epoch-making. melnikov was not only ostracized, he was intimidated and forgotten, and he was talked about behind people's hands. i would not have been admitted if a friend of his hadn't been standing outside the door with me.

this friend was in a position to show me all the buildings i had in mind when i suggested that the constructivists should be made accessible to the world. but gollosov's suyev clubhouse was in just as lamentable condition as ginsberg and milinis' narkomfin residential block and melinokov's rusakov clubhouse itself. even the trade union building le corbusier built in moscow was in a condition of intentional decay that made it impossible to look at only vesnin's pravda building and shchussev's lenin mausoleum had the good fortune to enjoy political goodwill.

along with berlin and new york, moscow was the most important city as far as 20th century cultural impetus to develop humane technology and to see science and technology becoming components of a new creative culture was concerned. moscow was an important melting pot for new ideas and approaches. this moscow was to be forgotten on command, the city transformed itself into a collection of neoclassical copies in white stucco.

of course one wonders how stalin was able to make the cultural rubbish of the wedding-cake style into an obligatory architectural doctrine by state decree and forbid architecture that consciously subscribed to technology and industrial manufacture in the way that socialism wanted to humanize technology and industry over all. at first one tends to think that stalin got this from hitler. speer's neoclassicism was gigantic and bombastic, and the gesture of the sculptures by artists like thorak and breker that were placed upon it was dramatically overblown and stilted. the nuremberg buildings gave an idea of how german cities were to be rebuilt after the war, if the war were to be won: monumental, overladen and overproportioned.

but then the discovery was made, and it was this that was akin to a shock, that it was not stalin enforcing his taste here, but the so-called modern architects themselves. there is a design by ginsburg for a theatre in novosibirsk dating from 1931 that is all constructivist functionality. but five years later ginsburg built this theatre in a style of highly academic classicism.

what had happened? ginsburg himself had become convinced that the masses did not understand the new constructivist architecture. ginsburg was not only one of the most successful constructivist architects, he was also the movement's theoretician. the man who had brought le corbusier to moscow developed an artistic theory according to which all styles start simply, but that they cannot be tolerated in their simple form; they

become decorative, until finally they go under in a kind of baroque overload, this means that ginsburg, just like all bourgeois art theoreticians, thought in stylistic and formal terms, he started with aesthetics. in the end he did not think at all constructively and functionally, technology was just a new formal repertory, a material at the artist's disposal, a new sign language, a new zeitgeist that was being used.

i went into the moscow museum of architecture and asked to see ginsburg's drawings and had to admit, shakily: it was the modern movement itself that brought all the historical kitsch back from the rubbish dump. and i discovered that ginsburg was interpreting modernism formalistically as early as 1923. his books were called: *rhythm in architecture* and *style and epoch*.

i was myself staying in a hotel that shchussev had built about 1934, already with the first classical profiles and cornices, in concrete at first, later they had to be executed in natural stone. at first it was still restrained classicism, profiling of surface using pilaster cornices and window borders followed the rules of suprematism as developed by malevich in his spatial models.

there were also individual designers in the west who started off as pioneers of a new kind of design, but then collapsed under the third reich. the creator of the new typography, jan tschichold, forgot himself and finally worshipped at the altar of the new classicism, which soon turned out to be prestigious enough to guarantee the new dictators an appropriate display of power. mussolini too was in sympathy with futurism at first, but later he found himself better accommodated in a copy of roman antiquity than in a building with a rational basis.

i was familiar with western examples but the fact that almost the whole russian avant-garde gave up their experiment themselves, in order to chum up with state monumentalism, did come as a shock, and gave me a great deal to think about.

in the meantime i have got cleverer. i see in so-called post-modern architects the same escape into an historicizing style, into styleaesthetics, into formal composition, into symbolism, into aesthetic myth. what has been forgotten is this century's attempt to reconcile technology with human beings, by opening ourselves up to it. refuge is taken in style, in metaphysical aesthetics, in form, in historical models, in quotation. palladio is the most quoted architect, even if he is built in steel and glass.

the hard years of the industrial revolution, the civil war, collectivization and industrialization were obviously so burdensome in terms of internal politics that the people was offered the kind of art it liked. that is, or so it is thought, the art of palaces, of splendour and of gold, art for art's sake, decoration for decorations. this is then at the same time the art of the state, with which the state makes visible its existence as power and superior power. the people, so it is believed, needs adoration.

in a similar way we are also served with the enjoyment of life today. the post-war period is over, the revolution of '68 is over, the period of social movements is over. we set ourselves up in beauty itself, even if we are suffocating in rubbish and the world is falling apart. gone are the utopias of a new society, new education, new ways of getting on with each other, new relationships between the sexes, gone are the movements for a life without death by chemicals, for food without additives, for natural nature. we are back to spraying our hair with cfc's and all the colours of the rainbow. we wear things that make us look good and for a service society the greatest services are those of beautification, styling and design. we have come to live in a society of design for superficial covering.

design and architecture are in a profound crisis. they are in danger of becoming the dogsbodies of fashions. they are no longer derived from argument and good reasons like science and technology, but from whim, from aesthetic chance, according to which art can be worshipped and cannibalized.

this is to a large extent caused by the fact that there is no profession concerned with the theory and history of design, in the way that the art historian has his firm place in present-day culture and science. the industrial archaeologist, the man who deals with the history of technology and technological theory is not yet part of our academic establishment. and therefore building orientated towards design and technology has no intellectual accompaniment or analytical presentation. the few exceptions only confirm the state of affairs. in goethe's day artistic beauty was discovered alongside natural beauty and art historians were appointed to look after it. design beauty, technological beauty has not yet been discerned, and so no theoretician of technical artefacts has been appointed.

it has turned out to be disastrous that the theory of design and architecture is looked after by art historians. design is quite different from art. design and art are

related in the same way as knowledge and faith. there may be scientists who are religious. but in principle science is different from religion.

design must rest on the same foundations as science and technology. it too draws life from argument. art and metaphysics lie beyond argument. here statements are made, rather than reasons given. even though st. thomas aquinas says that faith and knowledge cannot contradict each other, faith is still so subjective that it is possible to believe anything that does not represent a contradiction. essentially there are as many religions as there are individuals.

design relates to states of affairs, it is related to language. language too is worth as much as its ability to reproduce states of affairs. its achievement lies in also being able to reproduce those states of affairs that it has so far not exoressed. its yardstick is its sureness of aim. attempts to handle language without content as in abstract art may be assumed to be doomed to failure.

design consists of developing products appropriately to their factual content. and above all this means adapting to new states of affairs. in a changing world, products must change as well.

but what is the measure of design, new states of affairs or art? today design has gone downhill and degenerated into applied art.

post-modernism is a new faith. it is not design, but a kind of religion or, as it defines itself, dedicated to myth. what myth? the myth of the 20th century, the myth of archetypes, the myth of prehistoric social structures? one may choose between c.g. jung and claude lévistrauss and should not be surprised to arrive at Alfred Rosenberg and his way of shaping the world. there is no bridge of reason from the architecture of post-modernism to the noe-classicism of stalin and hitler, no bridge of argument, though there probably is a bridge of myth. mussolini's relapse from futurism into the architecture of ancient rome is the way of myth, and corresponds with leon krier's relapse into a film city made up of old bits of scenery.

it is not possible to quarrel about myth. but it is possible to quarrel about design, just as it is possible to quarrel about science, technology, about economics and politics, about everything that drives the modern world and holds it together and forces it apart. design must have its reasons.

i know that many people cannot accept this. magnago lampugnani says that today chairs are close to being

works of art. and that for this reason a certain amount of discomfort has to be put up with. at any other time this would have been seen as pure nonsense, drivel. in our pluralistic society thinking seems to have become pluralistic as well, uncritical, conformist, balanced. the little two-times-table has been replaced by the great not only but also.

a chair that is not good to sit on is not a good chair. perhaps it can become a work of art if it is hung on the wall, where it doesn't actually belong, or can be a psychic stage prop. it will never be good design.

it is clear that the simplest states of affairs have been displaced, distorted, disjointed, dismembered, destroyed. it does not seem to suit thinking, particularly thinking about simple states of affairs, if it withdraws into myth and sees the phenomenon as a symbol.

today there is no homeric laughter, no homeric mockery, otherwise a new philosophy like this would be swept away by the breath from the roars of laughter that the programme caused. no, we carry on solemnly sitting on an uncomfortable chair, even when it is only a work of art in embryo.

a chair that is not good to sit on is a bad chair, even if it would be suitable as a work of art. it is bad design.

a statement of this kind has rarity value nowdays. anyone who argues the other way round, and says precisely that today chairs are on their way to becoming works of art and that as a consequence a certain amount of discomfort has to be put up with, is made the new director of the frankfurt museum of architecture (like magnago lampugnani).

the former director, art historian heinrich klotz, has now been appointed to set up a new centre for modern media, art and design in karlsruhe. this was commissioned by lothar späth, the regional prime minister with the brightest ideas, who wanted to give his land a "new future". lothar späth has read the signs of the times. while franz josef strauss wanted to give his land new economic input with nuclear energy, nuclear science, nuclear technology, and a new industrial estate from oberpfaffenhofen, ottobrunn, wackersdorf to erlangen, lothar späth has climbed a storey higher, and arrived at silicon valley, computers and computer art.

both land prime ministers have cocked a snook at the liberal state with its market economy and introduced economic policy, research policy and cultural policy as mercantile planning and control elements. to the good of their citizens. however, they both asserted that they