

Harold L. Cohen: “Chicago’s Bauhaus Legacy”



Delivered Friday, August 9, 2013
on occasion of the exhibition opening at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, Chicago

Good Evening. My name is Harold L. Cohen and I am an 88 year old product from László Moholy-Nagy’s Institute of Design.

My whole life changed when I entered into that fortress of a building on Dearborn Street in the Fall of 1945. I met and married Misch Kohn’s sister, Mary. At our small wedding held at Northwestern University’s library, there were a few of our natural family. Most of our wedding party included our ID family: John and Jano Walley, Franz and Doris Altschuler, Misch and Lore Kohn, Hans and Maxine Friedman, Davis and Elsa Pratt, and others.

My two daughters who have flown in to join us in this super event carry the names of our special ID family. My oldest child is Jano, after Jano Walley and my middle child, Lore, is named after Lore Kohn.

Our life at ID was a compound of people and ideas, a creative environment supported by the students and faculty and Chicago’s creative community. Some of these people are present in this room and some others are represented in this exhibit being held at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art.

On behalf of the ID family and its friends, I want to thank the UIMA for sponsoring this important historical event. You have invited us into your family and exposed our history to the rest of society.

Thanks to Allen Porter and Paul Young for initiating this project. A very special thanks to Paul Young who weathered all the problems, who never gave up and because of his tenacity, made this exhibit possible for all of us to see and enjoy. Paul was not at ID but became its strongest convert.

Except for Elsa Kula Pratt who is now blind and deaf, I am the oldest living faculty member. Thus Paul asked me to help open this important exhibit, 90 years after Moholy was at the Bauhaus in Germany.

On a wall in my studio in Buffalo is one of Moholy's great statements: A philosophy which I have followed throughout my life since my student and teaching days at ID. Moholy said, "Design is not a profession but an attitude." He was so right. This philosophy, like a powerful virus, has infected all of those who came in contact with him.

In his book, *Vision in Motion*, translated by his wife Sibyl, he wrote,

"Each generation differs from the proceeding one in the determination of its task. The task of this generation is to search for its roots. It must try to understand the significance of natural functions so that everyone may become aware of the essential purpose of living: the preservation and refinement of the biological nature of the individual within a harmonious social existence. The value of such an existence will be measured in terms of cooperation, social usefulness and personal happiness. This new life requires a new methodology for approaching problems; a social mechanism of production and creative education." from p. 25, *Vision in Motion*, L. Moholy-Nagy."

It was Moholy's approach that made the new American Bauhaus, the Institute of Design, the great school that it was. It attracted faculty and students from all over the world.

After graduating from high school and the yeshiva in Brooklyn, I spent 1½ years as a color separator for D.C. Publications, producers of Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman and others. I studied with artists who were paid by the WPA project to teach in community centers throughout the country. The war was growing. My brother was in the army and I joined the navy.

When the war was over, I returned to the same company as assistant to the art director. Jack Levine, a color separator of some years, recommended that I apply to the Art Institute of Chicago. He said, "Schmuck, use the G.I. Bill to go to school."

I made the best mistake of my life and applied to the Institute of Design instead of the Art Institute. I sent in my application and was invited to Chicago for an interview and to bring samples of my work. I left Brooklyn by train with a portfolio of drawings and paintings.

Molly Thwaites, the registrar, interviewed me. The room was covered with paintings of circles and squares. The school resided over a drugstore on Rush Street. I was accepted. Later on, I learned that anyone who applied was accepted because they needed the money and the G.I. Bill was a goldmine.

These paintings and structures were strange to me but not unknown. All during the depression, I studied with WPA artists who were part of the "Ashcan School of Art." We drew and painted the poor, the destitute, and the architecture of the slums. We were socially relevant. I thought, "How social were colored circles and square?" I found out later that the philosophy behind these paintings were the images of social change.

I arrived late August to start school but only to be told that we were to spend the next two weeks cleaning up and painting our new home at the Historical Society on Dearborn Street. School eventually did start with a very heavy foundation program schedule. However, very often Moholy stopped all classes. We would gather into the auditorium to hear the Hungarian String Quartette, Gideon, Kepes, Schwitters, and countless others of his friends.

The foundation experience was overwhelming. We had to forge our own steel chisels. We had also to make a series of wooden joints, first using only hand tools (no sandpaper permitted). Hin Bredendieck checked one of my joints using a small thin piece of cardboard and said, “dis joint es no good. Do again.”

It was learning by doing, learning by failure and learning to be persistent and working towards success at one step at a time: the Germanic approach to the crafts.

In late October, 1945, Moholy gave a 2-hour lecture on Picasso’s “Guernica.” It was extraordinary. It was, for me, an epiphany. At the end of the lecture, I knocked on the open door of his office. He waved me in. I told him that I had seen “Guernica” many times at the Museum of Modern Art in New York but now, because of his talk, I could understand its powerful imagery. I understood what Picasso was telling the world. The fascists had changed the rules of warfare and the world thereafter.

That conversation directed my future life and upon graduation, I became a teacher and a designer.

In November that same year, Moholy went to New York for the opening of his one-man show at the Museum of Non-Objective Art which later became the Guggenheim. While there, Countess Rebay, Guggenheim’s mistress, sent him to a doctor who was a bleeder. She believed that his leukemia could be cured by blood-letting. He returned from New York only to die shortly thereafter.

The school was in shock and deep mourning. Walter Gropius led the memorial services in the ID auditorium with Moholy’s casket on the stage. He ended the service by telling us what Moholy had asked him to say to all of us. “You are to return to your classes immediately, work hard, do not waste time mourning. You have much more important work to do.”

Gropius met with others and appointed Serge Chermayeff to become the new director of ID. At that time, Chermayeff was head of the Art and Design Department at Brooklyn College.

After Moholy’s death, his wife Sibyl was hired to teach art and design history at ID. She started a revolution to depose Chermayeff. That failed. Chermayeff fired Sibyl, Nathan Lerner and a few others. Subsequently, he hired Peter Selz to replace her.

Years later, losing the financial support of some of the most powerful board members of the ID, Chermayeff negotiated a merger of ID with IIT. Shortly thereafter, he left the Institute and Crombie Taylor became acting director. For me, it was the beginning of the end of the dominance of Moholy’s design philosophy at the ID.

In my senior year, I was appointed assistance teacher to both John Walley and Davis Pratt. Both remained friends and role models. John Walley said, “You are what you want to be.” That is both a frightening yet clarifying statement.

In spring 1948, I graduated. Emerson Woelffer left ID at that time and Chermayeff rehired me as a full time instructor. I taught basic workshop and sculpture for both day and night classes. Shortly thereafter, Davis Pratt and I formed Designers in Production. About a year later, I left ID to work fully at the DinP.

John Walley and others left ID for the University of Illinois. The faculty at ID was changing dramatically.

Years later Bob Nickle came to the DinP factory to encourage me to return to ID and head the Product Design Department. I did go back and signed a 3-year contract with IIT. As head of the Department, I re-hire Nathan Lerner and Charles Forberg to join Bob and me as fulltime members of the department.

Later that year, School of Engineering Dean Owens, appointed Jay Doblin as Director of ID without ID faculty approval. After listening to Doblin's talk at the ID auditorium to the faculty and students, it became clear to me and Bob Nickle that Doblin did not understand the philosophy of our school. Bob and I prepared and put up an exhibition of student work to protest Doblin's appointment.

IIT did not reappoint Nickle, Lerner and Forberg. They had only one-year contracts. I visited Dean Owens to protest the dismissal of my staff. He laughed and blew his cigar smoke into my face and said, "When are you leaving?" I replied, "When I am ready." I exposed the problem to the press and the radio and to anyone who would listen.

Misch Kohn, Charles Forberg and I met with Walter Gropius for lunch. I told Gropius that it is important to keep the old philosophy alive and that I wanted to start a new design school. He said, "I spent most of my life administering and teaching. I finally was able to design and build the PAN AM building in New York. Work as a designer and do not spend your life as an educator."

Some weeks later, I resigned from ID and started thinking about what I wanted to do. John Walley called to tell me that Dean Shryock – an old friend from his WPA days – wanted to start a new design program at Southern Illinois University. John recommended me. Shryock invited me to SIU. I met with President Delyte Morris and others to explain my direction for a new department of design. They accepted. Two months later I left Chicago with my family for Carbondale.

The rest is history.