

## Meeting the New Bauhaus: First Impression of a New Vision

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1987

To a high school sophomore whose interest leaned heavily to realistic illustration, cartooning, an inclination to become an animator for Walt Disney or an animator of Harold von Schmidt whose pith helmeted adventurers and voluptuous oriental women adorned the pages of the Saturday Evening Post, the invitation of my high school teacher (Mrs. Kube, if my memory serves me) to join the senior class on a visit to an art school named the New Bauhaus seemed less a prelude than a legitimate excuse to be absent from some not particularly interesting classes for most of the day.

One could not have been more ill-equipped than I for the shock of the first exposure to Moholy-Nagy and the strange assortment of activities which engulfed me as our group was led from workshop to workshop. The sights confounded: string walls, ceiling hung with undulating, twirling air-moved devices I came to find out were called mobiles; walls covered with “pictures” of dots, bars, flat spectrums of color exercises in vibrant primary colors; students bent over abstract wooden shapes polishing them to glass-smooth brilliance; others intensely occupied with folding and scoring of paper, which, from the already finished examples would ultimately result in complex structures of planes and shadows of no apparent practical or, as I perceived it, artistic value.

All of this activity was being enthusiastically explained in a soft Hungarian accent by a man dressed in a conventional business suit wearing very conventional glasses and looking for all the world like a prosperous banker. The words that he used to describe the various objects and effects (negative space, dynamic symmetry, light modulator, etc.) were incongruous coming from him, yet his dress and manor gave them a legitimacy they might not have had coming from a more flamboyant looking individual. All of these words were encompassed within a general term, “DESIGN” which for me had none of the same meaning as seemed to be the context here. He talked of furniture (which I had never considered an art within the confines of my limited view), of new materials, of air-supported seating which he demonstrated by use of an air hose and ping pong ball; he included the entire range of crafts, products, photography, printing, typography, architecture in his demonstration of the relationship of all human activity.

He spoke of movements: cubism, futurism, dada, etc., which were not only shadows at the edge of my artistic perception, but downright heretical in my eyes.

I left my first visit to the New Bauhaus that day in 1942 with the vague impression that I had witnessed an aberration in the art world which was fascinating, obscure in meaning, and would have very little to do with my future as an illustrator, cartoonist, painter or still less as a newspaper reporter which also held some appeal as a way of life. For all intent and purpose the entire event was forced into a remote corner of my mind.

I enrolled in Bradley Polytechnic Institute (now Bradley University) in Peoria, Illinois immediately after high school to be in college when my draft call came. They had an art department just beginning to flirt with some of the concepts of the modern movement, but still within the convention of painting, sculpture, etc. My draft call came near the end of my first year and it was off to Fort Sill, Oklahoma and the field artillery.

The convolutions of fate, the focus points at which forces and people meet are only seen in retrospect. That a USO in Lawton, Oklahoma run by an art and music loving Salvation Army husband and wife would lead back to that fateful 1942 visit and an awakened sense of what I had seen would be almost impossible to predict. It happened.

The rear of the USO had been turned into an art studio and music room with a large collection of excellent records. It could be closed off from the front which tended toward the usual living room atmosphere with sofas, tables for writing, a piano and possibly a ping pong table (no longer a politically correct description, it was actually there - my memory clouds after forty seven years). The back also contained a kitchen which we sometimes appropriated for a special ethnic style event.

I visited the USO almost every night I was able to get to town. I was fortunate after finishing basic training, to be assigned to a training literature and visual aids department on the main post which assured me minimum after work duties, and art studio and access to the excellent post library during the day.

The USO served as a gallery for the work done in the back and after a few visits I found that every painting or drawing I found interesting was done by the same person. One night I met him there and we found we had much in common as far as our view of art and general philosophy was concerned. He was far more accomplished both in his drawing skill and painting ability than I was and in addition, played the piano. His name was Wesley Nunemaker and he was from Buffalo, New York. We painted and sketched, but were becoming increasingly bored with the direction we were taking.

One night we were joined by a third party whose interest was in music and observing and critiquing our art. He did this latter rather brusquely and with a certain arrogance at our ignorance of some artists named Mondrian, Braque, Picasso and groups called Dada, Cubists, Futurists, as well as even less familiar architects. This rude, but dedicated person was Joe Nitti. Joe was originally from Chicago's Taylor Street area,

a renegade Catholic and a tool and die maker. He was a lover of Bach, Vivaldi and earlier music, the harpsichord, especially the Goldberg Variations played by Wanda Landowska. He cared for few pianists (Arthur Rubenstein, he said played like Chopin with his mittens on) and found little to like in the romantic orchestral works. I mention these characteristics only to emphasize the unbiased nature of Joe Nitti's criticism concerning the work we were doing.

He chastised us for not experimenting with pure color, loosening up on our drawing, working with geometric shapes and other assorted and non-illustrative approaches. He insisted that we redesign a battery-powered portable radio that was covered in fake leather texture into something more in keeping with the technology. This did result in a new dial face (done in Futura on a hot stamping machine in my office) and a stark white fabric cover overlaid with lines and bars in red, blue, yellow and black in the style of an artist whose name it would not be difficult to guess.

Let me fill in the roll of the aforementioned kitchen in all of this. We had attracted a small group of hangers-on including a couple of the local artistically inclined young women and some other soldiers. It was Joe's culinary ability that turned the kitchen into the pasta and pasta sauce capital of Oklahoma and where, on special occasions, we were allowed to commandeer the kitchen and long table for an Italian feast in the middle of this steak and potato country.

In the midst of this restless activity, I took a furlough to Chicago and ended up one day in Kroch and Brentano's bookstore among the "remainder" books. I picked up a rather large blue book with silver stamping on the cover whose name intrigued me and flipped through it. I started to read the text which was difficult to follow, as though it had been written in another language, but then concentrated on the drawings and photos: everything in the book looked familiar - very much like the experiments we were doing under the whip of Joe Nitti in Lawton. I turned to the title page and read, Language of Vision, by György Kepes, published by Paul Theobald. Captions under the drawings referred to visual fundamental classes at the School of Design. Then it struck me. Different name, same school. 1941 and déjà vu! By the time I arrived, it was the Institute of Design.

I purchased the book and brought it back to Oklahoma where we collectively scrutinized it page by page trying to understand the underlying context of the writing. Even Joe did not have the intellectual grasp of this, just the intuitive sense that there was something much bigger behind it all which we had yet to discover.

Crucial events followed rapidly. Wesley and I determined to enter the school as soon as we were out of the army. Joe would return to California where he had been living before the war but would eventually join us in Chicago. Wesley was discharged early in 1946 and enrolled immediately. I was discharged the first of September 1946 and returned to Chicago (my own home) just too late to register for the fall semester. Nevertheless, at Wesley's urging I soon began to sit in on classes and was fortunate enough to attend a number of Moholy's sessions until he died in November. I registered officially the next term and stayed until the summer or fall of 1949.