

# In terms redolent of the Nazis, Germany's far-right AfD condemns the Bauhaus as an “aberration of modernism”

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26 November 2024

Last month, a motion by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was discussed in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt to mark the double anniversary of the Bauhaus UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2025 and 2026. In it, the AfD condemns the Bauhaus and its history as an “aberration of modernism” and calls on the state government to reject a “one-sided glorification of the Bauhaus legacy ... and instead to establish a serious and cultural-historical overall picture in a critical debate that illuminates all aspects of the Bauhaus”.

The AfD is not interested in a critical examination of the Bauhaus, which has existed for a long time. The motion is evidence of their provincial backwardness and ignorance when it comes to the history and impact of the Bauhaus and aims to turn the debate on art and culture “in the direction of a national cultural heritage”, as the director of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation put it. Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, the AfD Saxony-Anhalt parliamentary group’s cultural policy spokesperson, who formulated the Bauhaus motion, is categorised as belonging to the extreme right wing of the AfD.

Another AfD parliamentary group motion on education policy points in the same Nazi *blood and soil* direction: “Future needs origin—strengthening homeland and national heritage in the curriculum” is its title.

The motion “An aberration of modernism” criticises the alleged “historical building sins” of the Bauhaus, as “its purist aesthetics and functional reduction were often not reconciled with the quality of life of the residents”. The emphasis on “sobriety and minimalism” had “often led to impersonal architecture”, which was perceived as “cold, forbidding and unattractive”. “Particularly in relation to social housing and public buildings”, it can be described as “misanthropic”.

Anyone who is even slightly familiar with the concepts of the Bauhaus knows that its artists and designers focussed on the people whom their products were intended to serve and please. The AfD, on the other hand, complains about an allegedly “universal aesthetic that aims to standardise art and design”, in which “individual and regional characteristics” are lost. The “radical simplification and functionalisation of the living environment” often contradicted “traditional and culturally

anchored ideas of living spaces” and caused “alienation of people from their environment”.

Of course, the tirade also includes side-swipes at “communism”, which, in the view of the applicants, is epitomised by Hannes Meyer, Walter Gropius’ successor as Bauhaus director. His concepts of functional housing construction for the needs of the residents were responsible for the “ideologisation of art and architecture”, which “had and could continue to have negative social effects in the long term”. The AfD is particularly disturbed by the internationalism of the Bauhaus. The spread of its “uniform and interchangeable style” has led to a global “uniformity” and the “dilution of regional characteristics”.

In its choice of words and ideological orientation, the AfD’s motion could be taken from the writings of the notorious advocate of traditional pitched roofs and Bauhaus critic Paul Schulze-Naumburg, who espoused a conservative architectural style in the cultural debates of the 1920s and 30s and ultimately ended up with the Nazis with his ideas of “popular” housing construction based on racial ideology.

In 1925, the Bauhaus School of Art, Design and Architecture was forced to give up its first location in Weimar, Thuringia, and move to Dessau in Saxony-Anhalt, not least because of Schulze-Naumburg’s agitation.

In Thuringia, where a state government of the Social Democrats (SPD) and Communist Party (KPD) had been deposed by the Reichswehr (Imperial Army) in November 1923, an arch-conservative minority government came to power in 1924, which—for the first time in Germany—was tolerated by the Nazis and other nationalist members of parliament. It withdrew funding from the Bauhaus.

Dessau, an industrial and working-class town, gave the Bauhaus a fresh start and enabled it to develop creatively. The most famous Bauhaus buildings to this day were constructed there—the *Meisterhäuser* (Masters’ Houses), the large school building designed by Walter Gropius with its grandiose glass front, a large housing estate and the arboretum houses.

The achievements of the Bauhaus in all its diverse fields of work continue to have an impact to this day and have survived

the hostile attacks of right-wing conservatives, Nazis and Stalinists through to post-modernist currents.

Despite the fascination it still arouses today, however, there can be no question of “glorifying” the Bauhaus, as the AfD insinuates. For many years now, the Bauhaus has also been the subject of critical academic research into its historical complexity and contradictions, its many different forms and its historical development.

This year, for example, an exhibition in Weimar highlighted the entanglement of Bauhaus members with National Socialism (Nazism). Many of them had continued their careers under the Nazis or adapted to them in order to secure their existence. However, the Nazis were by no means unanimous in their assessment of modernism at the beginning. There was a wing of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) that held modern architecture and contemporary art, even Expressionism, in high esteem, which did not prevent it from being ostracised as “degenerate art”.

More than twenty Bauhaus representatives ultimately lost their lives in the Nazi concentration camps. Many others, including Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, were able to flee abroad. The latter had also initially tried to get involved with the new rulers.

#### **Why is the AfD so angry with the Bauhaus?**

It is not just the modern design that this art school developed and propagated, or the simple, functional architecture that largely characterised the 20th century. Rather, it was the interaction of all forms of artistic work and the creative power that could unfold in the collective work of the Bauhaus teachers and students, which represented an alternative to the eclecticism and individualism that prevailed in the profit-orientated cultural sector of capitalism.

The “equality of all types of creative labour and their logical interlocking within the modern world order”, as Gropius once defined the basic idea of the Bauhaus, stands for a progressive concept of art that is diametrically opposed to that of the AfD.

It is this artistic aspiration with which the Bauhaus confronted the needs and problems of society, and it is still a contemporary and forward-looking approach today to place art and design at the service of a human society striving for peace, solidarity and equality.

The Bauhaus was founded in the revolutionary spirit of optimism after the First World War. The fact that it developed into a myth of the 20th century and still fascinates people today is not least due to the fact that it was not a place where artists, designers or architects could only realise themselves and shape their students in their own image. Its creativity, which can be seen in the exhibits in the Bauhaus museums, stemmed not least from the pedagogical concept, which went back to Walter Gropius and was interpreted in different ways, but the main features of which were adopted by very different artists and architects.

It was no coincidence that the founding manifesto of the Bauhaus was adorned with a cathedral drawn by Lionel

Feininger, the “Cathedral of Socialism”.

The state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt rejected the obviously nonsensical AfD motion, although the fact that the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau attract well over 100,000 tourists from all over the world every year certainly played a role, as Barbara Steiner, the director of the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau, pointed out.

It was not the first attack by the AfD on cultural institutions that do not correspond to its backward-looking, German nationalist world view and from which it would withdraw funding if it were in a position to do so.

In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Peter Laudenbach, its Berlin theatre critic, warned against the AfD’s right-wing cultural campaign against works of art and cultural institutions. Although such AfD motions had not yet had any influence on government action, the depictions of a bogeyman were not without consequences: “After the AfD polemicised against a festival for new music in Saxony-Anhalt and submitted motions to cut funding for the Maxim Gorki Theatre and the Friedrichstadtpalast in Berlin, the respective artistic directors received death threats.”

Laudenbach seems to assume, however, that the other parliamentary parties are seriously opposing the AfD. But they too are increasingly focussing their policies on nationalism and militarism and are making massive cuts in the cultural sector. These are hitting the independent cultural scene in particular, especially social and multinational projects.

Cultural workers, academics and students who condemn the genocide in Gaza are already being persecuted and discriminated against under the slanderous accusation of “antisemitism”. The cuts in the cultural sector, a consequence of the pressure to slash costs in favour of the military budget, are being justified with arguments that are also put forward by the AfD.



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