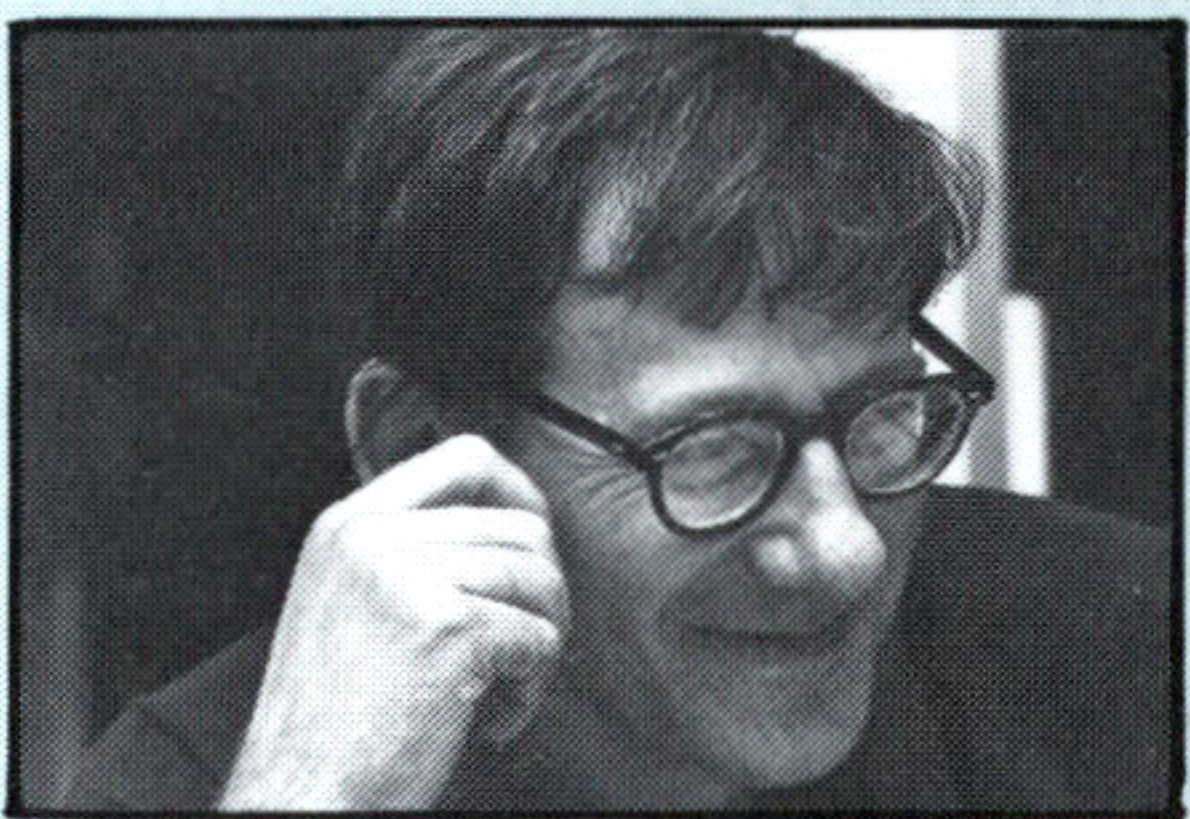
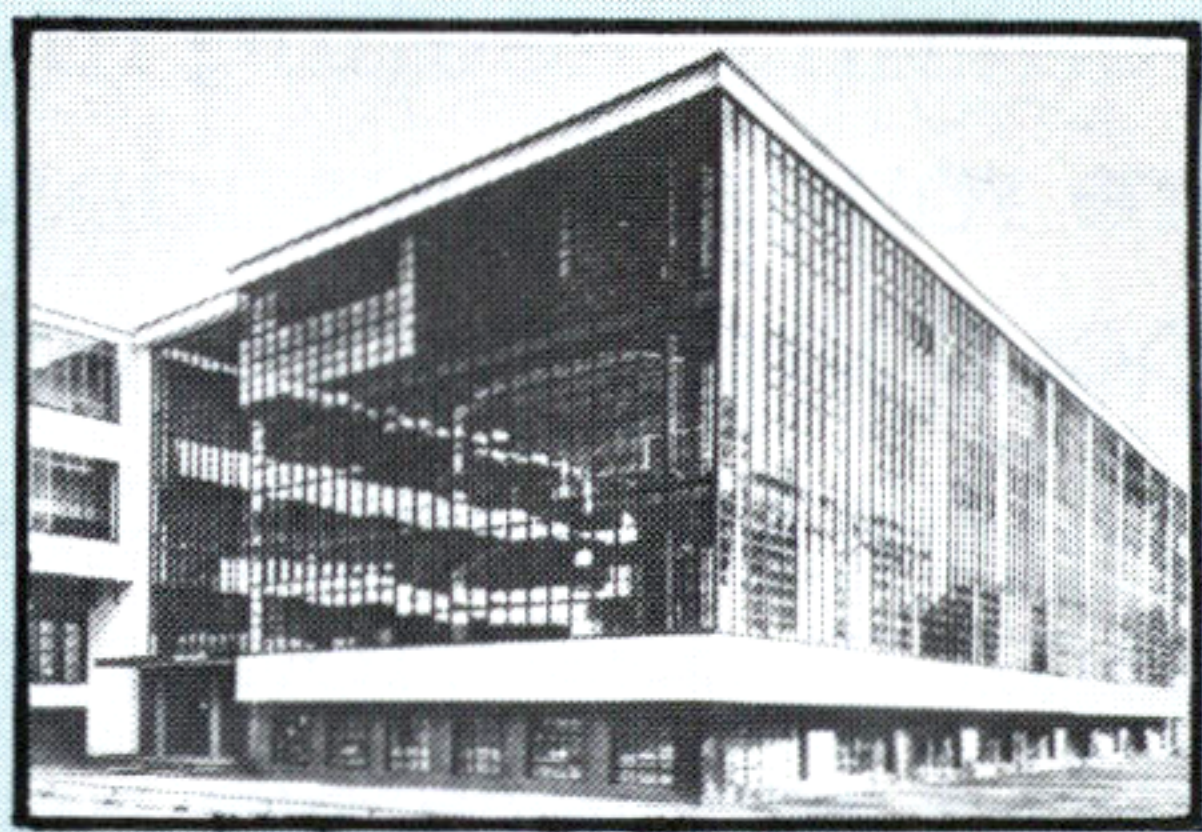


TOM WOLFE, THE BAUHAUS,



CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER AND OTHER MATTERS

Tom Wolfe, one of the best critics of taste in our time, looks at modern architecture in his forthcoming book, *From Bauhaus to Our House*. The scene leaves him unsettled and dyspeptic. Here are some quotes:

"Every child goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts wholesale distribution warehouse. Not even the school commissioners, who commissioned it and approved the plans, can figure out how it happened..."

"Every new \$900,000 summer house in the north woods of Michigan or on the shore of Long Island has so many pipe railings, ramps, hob-tread metal spiral stairways, sheets of industrial plate glass, banks of tungsten halogen lamps and white cylindrical shapes, it looks like an insecticide refinery..."

Wolfe traces the whole thing to the Bauhaus theory of design, a post-war European architectural theory — and intellectual design encampment — that spread an ideology which infected every architectural school and every young architect in America. This was particularly true because of the traditional American feeling of frontier-like boorishness in the face of Europeans who were assumed to be more knowing and cultured about design.

The ideology spread because of the sense of *certainty* given to architects by the rigid Bauhaus orthodoxy. This allowed them — indeed *required* — that they ride roughshod over the client. Says Wolfe: "The notion of the uncompromisable architect became highly contagious... (For instance) there was the theory of the flat roof and the sheer facade. It had been decided, in the battle of the theories, that pitched roofs and cornices represented the 'crowns' of the old nobility, which the bourgeoisie spent most of its time imitating. Therefore, henceforth, there would be only flat roofs..."

It's interesting to compare this with Chris Alexander on roofs (*A Pattern Language*, pages 570-571):

"The roof plays a primal role in our lives. The most primitive buildings are nothing but a roof. If the roof is hidden, its presence can not be felt around a building, or if it cannot be used, then people will lack a fundamental sense of shelter...the roof must not only be large and visible, but it must also include living quarters within its volume and not only underneath it..."

"Environmental researcher George Rand says: 'Despite 50 years of the flat roofs of the "modern movement," people still find the simple pitched roof the most powerful symbol of shelter'..."

"And the French psychiatrist, Menie Gregorie, makes the following observation about children: 'At Nancy the children from the apartments were asked to draw a house. These children had been born in apartment slabs which stand up like a house of cards upon an isolated hill. Without exception they each drew a small cottage with two windows and smoke curling up from a chimney on the roof.'"

As for the relationship between architect and client, Alexander takes a view strongly opposed to the autocratic Bauhaus theorists. Though he acknowledges a current arm's length competition between client and architect, Alexander feels it hides an enormous buried kinship and potential synergy. Says he (in private conversation):

"Most clients are so unsure of themselves that they approach their architect with a handful of clippings from magazines indicating things they want in their new homes. This triggers an immediate sub-conscious response in the architect: 'Pictures! You think you've got pictures? I spent years in architecture school assembling pictures of great buildings past, present and future. Let me tell you about *my* pictures of what *your* house should look like.'

"But the answer," says Alexander, "is in *neither* of their assembled pictures. The answer is in a universal pattern language buried so deeply in their unconscious that they're too embarrassed, too untrained and too insecure to dig it out. If they had the courage to dig, they'd find that they had a remarkably-similar picture of what the client wanted — with the client furnishing most of the description and the architect offering professional insights and options."

