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From Object to Installation in Bruno Taut’s Exhibit Pavilions

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This study investigates the gradual evolution of the idea of installation in three experimental exhibition pavilions designed before World War I by the German architect Bruno Taut. In collaboration with the critic Adolf Behne, Taut gradually transferred ideas from Expressionist painting to architecture and helped move his designs, and with it modern architecture more generally, from a focus on visual “objects,” to multisensory “experiences,” an idea that continues to resonate in modern installations today.

Introduction: Installations

From 1910 to 1914, the German architect Bruno Taut built a series of three increasingly radical exhibition pavilions in Berlin, Leipzig, and Cologne that challenged some of the most fundamental orthodoxies of modern architecture and art. Only in part has the significance of these pavilions, especially of the experimental Glashaus built at the Cologne Werkbund exposition in 1914, been recognized. Aided by the popularity of the world’s fairs of the nineteenth century, and of exhibit buildings by Peter Behrens and related Werkbund artists after 1907, Taut’s pavilions have long been included in typological discussions of exhibit and fair architecture. Contemporary architectural critics already highlighted their innovative use of glass, steel, and concrete, materials that would become hallmarks of the “New Building” after World War I in Germany. Art critics of the day praised the unique integration of contemporary art in the form of murals, sculptural reliefs, stained glass, and even poetic aphorisms into Taut’s architecture. Ever since the critic Adolf Behne became the first to apply the term Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) theory and experiments that blossomed amidst eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism, as
well as the turn-of-the-century applied arts
movements that influenced Taut’s earliest training.
Based on the premise that all art, like nature,
embodied universally valid spiritual and material
laws, Gesamtkunstwerk artists attempted to synthe-
size various artistic media into a single total work of
art that would evoke and intensify such universal
laws. In both their creative process and the resulting
art works, these artists sought to confront the
perceived chaos, anonymity, and spiritlessness of
modernity with a greater artistic, social, and
philosophical unity than was possible through more
conventional art. Taut too integrated the arts to
create multisensory, at times even synaesthetic,
experiences in his exhibit pavilions. But as shall be
investigated in greater detail below, his intent to
harness the other arts specifically in the service of
architecture remained distinct and more closely allied
with contemporary ideas about installations.

From Object Exhibit to Exhibit Object:
The Steel Pavilions
Taut designed his first exhibit pavilion for the Träger
Verkaufs-Kontor, a manufacturer of structural steel
seeking to advertise at the 2nd Ceramic, Cement, and
Lime Industrial Exhibit in Berlin in 1910 (Figure 1).14
The stark symmetry, the clear volumetric character,
and the graphic sensibility of Taut’s black-and-white
design recalled Peter Behrens’ nearly contemporary
exhibit pavilions. But Taut abandoned Behrens’
obvious references to Tuscan gothic and other historic
precedents in favor of a more abstract modern image.
Even more provocatively, the Träger-Kontor pavilion
rejected the notion of creating clearly usable archi-
tectural spaces for displaying objects, as had been
typical in exhibition buildings since the late eighteenth
century. Instead, Taut reduced the typical exhibit
pavilion to a small core that all but disappeared at the
center of a large, abstracted volume outlined by a few
slender, reiterated rectangular frames made from the
clients’ own steel beams. Borrowing from industrial
marketing and advertising practices, Taut’s evocative
forms and supergraphics promoted an image, rather
than specific objects. Here the exhibit building itself
became the exhibit object. But the experience
remained graphic and two-dimensional. With no inte-
rior, there was little difference between the view from
afar and the experience of moving among the frames.

In the Spring of 1913, Taut began design work
on a second pavilion, the “Monument to Iron,”

1. Bruno Taut’s pavilion for the Träger-Verkaufs-Kontor, a firm that sold steel beams, constructed at the 2nd Ceramic, Cement, and Lime Industrial
Exhibit in Berlin, in 1910. (From Berliner Architekturwelt 13 (1911): 257.)

2. Taut’s “Monument to Iron” pavilion for two
steel manufacturer’s associations, the Deutscher
Stahlwerks-Verband and the Verband Deutscher
Brücken- und Eisenbaufabriken, constructed at
the International Building Exposition in Leipzig, in
1913 (From Der Industriebau 4, no. 11
(November 15, 1913): 140).
designed for the Association of German Steel Workers, and the Association of German Bridge and Steel Fabricators, for the much anticipated International Building Exposition in Leipzig (Figure 2). Much as in the Träger-Kontor pavilion, Taut used the very material he was hired to advertise and promote in order to create an abstract, geometric, exposed steel-frame construction. Supergraphics also clearly announced the product and sponsors being exhibited. The spare, logical, and precise black-and-gold color scheme was once again influenced by Behrens’ tectonic and monumentalized forms.

In the “Monument to Iron,” however, Taut created a larger interior for display. The ground floor, clad in sparkling, glazed tiles in the German national colors of black, red, and gold, featured an outer ring of exhibition space for architectural models and product displays (Figure 3). A dark inner space contained imposing, large-scale photographic transparencies lit from behind. Stairs led to a two-and-a-half story, vaulted, early cinema space above (Figure 4). Draped in a sumptuous dark purple cloth designed by his artist friend Franz Mutzenbecher, the space showed film clips of steel construction to a seated audience. The dematerialization of the exhibition, represented in the transition from models to transparencies to moving images, was an important step in Taut’s development beyond both the conventional exhibit hall, and architecture as object. Here was the elusive multisensory experience that could only be fully understood if experienced in person.

In the process of starting to design the “Monument to Iron,” Taut met the young art critic and former architectural student Adolf Behne, soon to be Taut’s biggest supporter. Drawing on evolving definitions of Expressionism that he had gleaned from Wassily Kandinsky, Wilhelm Worringer, and other artists and theoreticians known to him through Berlin’s avant-garde Sturm gallery, Behne began to write a series of articles that all commented favorably on the “new, revolutionary,” and “strict, sachlich” (objective) nature of Taut’s pavilion. Basing his ideas more on feelings than visual cues, he wrote “everyone could feel that behind these spare and wonderfully energetic creations, free of all quotation, there is a truly modern and totally contemporary artist . . . What distinguishes [Taut], is his rigid Sachlichkeit—that is, an artistic Sachlichkeit, and not the Sachlichkeit of a ‘functionalist’ or of a ‘purist’ . . .”

The modern, spectator experience of Taut’s “Monument to Iron” was especially convincing,Behne felt, in comparison to the anachronistic logo of the Leipzig exposition—a single classical column—or in comparison to the neighboring “Concrete Pavilion”—a pastiche of the Roman Pantheon designed by the conservative architect Wilhelm Kreis.

For Behne, even the gigantic (nine-meter diameter), seemingly ornamental gold sphere resting on an open lattice at the top of Taut’s stepped pyramid was sachlich (objective) and aesthetically “functional.” He described it as a “necessary antidote” and “lively counterpart” to the stack of “rigid vertical walls” below and to the building’s overall “unrelentingly Cubist design” (cubistische Gestalt). He claimed it would be wrong to ask about the rational “functionality” (Zweck) of such a “stern yet playful . . . aesthetic creation” (Gebilde). The “artistic Sachlichkeit” of Taut’s “innovative approach,” he insisted, revealed forms derived simultaneously from primal elements of building and from inner fantasy. In a line very similar to one Taut would later use to describe his own work, Behne wrote prophetically that the Leipzig pavilion appealed not to
the intellect, but to feelings, having “no other purpose than an inner-artistic one.” Although not yet a true “installation,” Taut was approaching the creation of architecture as a pure sensual experience.

Unifying the Arts in a Glashaus

In the summer of 1913, while finishing the “Monument to Iron,” Taut began work on an experimental glass pavilion, which he proposed to build at the upcoming Werkbund exhibit in Cologne (Figure 5). Taut’s youth and relatively unknown status, the experimental and artistic nature of his ideas, and the fact that his project was both personally initiated and a form of advertising pavilion, rather than an officially sponsored exhibition building, made it controversial to the Werkbund’s executive board and planners. In February 1914, Taut himself put pen to paper to explain and justify his ideas. The resulting article, “Eine Notwendigkeit” (A Necessity), was arguably the first written manifesto of Expressionist architecture and an early call for architecture as experience and installation.

Taut’s article called on fellow architects to follow the contemporary Expressionist painters in seeking a new artistic spirit. Success in this venture, he professed, would “necessitate” the creation of a magnificent new communal structure, akin to Gothic cathedrals. Architects were to lead the other arts in creating a temple of the arts whose design and construction would help revitalize and renew all of modern art. He insisted that the new building was to be without any real function, more of a provocative installation than a pragmatic solution. Taut imagined a museum-like building, in an open space outside the city, with “large windows [containing] the light-compositions of Delaunay, on the walls Cubist rhythms, the paintings of a Franz Marc or the art of Kandinsky. The interior and exterior piers feature the constructive forms of [Alexander] Archipenko’s sculptures, and [Heinrich] Campendonk will create the ornament . . . Individuals all should collaborate—as is only possible in architecture—in such a way that the whole rings with a magnificent, unified harmony.”

The Glashaus was among the first exhibition buildings designed primarily as a mechanism to create vivid experiences throughout, from exclusively optic to partly haptic (Figures 6 and 7). The circuitous circulation up, around, and down the narrow glass stairs, the pervasive colored light filtering through the colored Luxfer prisms on the interior that simultaneously illuminated the space and closed off all visual contact with the outside, and finally the synaesthetic experience of water, light, stairs, colored tiles, and the cinematograph in the lower floor powerfully commandeered the spectators’ sensory experiences. Ordinary visitors to the Glashaus frequently remarked on the profound emotions they encountered, not merely the experiences of the five senses, but of the psychic and often visceral reflexes they had. Unable to move beyond the unfamiliarity of the physical artifact, they commented on the “unearthly,” “unreal,” or “astounding beauty” of the building, or of feelings of “purity” and “luck” that seemed almost to suppress reflections on the architectural or technical merits. Many were reminded more of a folly or an amusement park fantasy than of serious architecture. Some dismissed the Glashaus as a joke or a trifle, others saw it as part of an “impossible” ideal. One critic noted that “the public is estranged from such new form[s],” forms that seemed to proliferate in much of modern art, and life in the metropolis more generally. Even when the reviews were more positive, there was an air of exotic abstraction and an unknown future. The socialist critic Felix Linke described the design memorably as a “Temple of Beauty . . . the main attraction of the whole Cologne exhibition . . . one that can be characterized as a giant, half sunken crystal.”

Taut’s friend Behne wrote too of a “beautiful cupola room, vaulted like a sparkling skull, or of the unreal, ethereal stair, which one descended as if walking through pearling water, that moves me, and produces happy memories.” The goal of the Glashaus installation was that architecture would subsume the other arts of painting and sculpture to achieve a new, unified expression. This search for a unity of art and life had been inspired by many sources, including current debates on the Jugendstil, the Gesamtkunstwerk, as well as architectural sources as diverse as Hedrich Peters.
Berlage, and the Gothic Cathedral. Behne cited Richard Wagner’s quest for a Gesamtkunstwerk as an important precedent for Taut’s essay, though he felt Wagner’s unity of the arts was outdated, forced, and disjointed. The critic sought more Idealist results, in which artists would feel drawn together to achieve an “inner transformation of all art,” and criticized Taut’s essay for falling short of this ideal. Following the lead of the painters, Behne sought to transform architecture from an externally driven “Impressionist” approach, to an inner-motivated “Expressionist” approach that created psychologically and sensorily rich experiences. Rather than a Gesamtkunstwerk that synthesized diverse arts, he sought an Einheitskunstwerk (unified art work) that achieved unity through a common inner-cause and artistic principles, the emergence of a single new art form, not merely a fusion of interrelated discrete arts.

Echoing Behne’s earlier proclamation that Expressionist artists were defining “a new age of intuition, of metaphysics, of synthesis,” Taut pronounced that he was overjoyed to work with artists so intently striving for “synthesis, abstraction and what everyone is calling the construction (Aufbauen) of paintings . . . There is a secret architecture that goes through all this work that unifies them.” His reference to architecture was more than metaphorical. As in Gothic cathedrals, Taut felt this architectural sensibility was not analogically, but literally, at the root of all the new art. With this reference to construction and building at the foundation of modern art, Taut shared the language and theories of Kandinsky, Marc, Worringer, and others. In the absence of a represented subject matter, construction was used as a means to justify and explain the increasingly abstract forms of modern painting, as well as the transition from iconic object to experienced installation.

### The Glashaus as Functionless Installation

As built, the Glashaus was a collaborative creation between Taut, Behne, and the Expressionist poet Paul Scheerbart. Scheerbart provided Taut with a “program” for the Glashaus as well as much of the formal inspiration for the built work. The poet’s extensive published work over the previous twenty years had sought to release architecture from the burdens of constricting rationality, pompous style, and inhuman seriousness. He had conjured up a utopian, visionary “glass architecture” (Glasarchitektur) that was flexible and mobile, floating and towering, gleaming and transcendent, and that was allied with a modern political and social agenda calling for
internationalism, pacifism, and a greater equality of the sexes. Behne summed up Scheerbart’s belief in the power of architecture to transform culture when he wrote later in 1918: “The idea of a glass architecture is simple . . . It is not just a crazy poet’s idea that glass architecture will bring a new culture. It’s a fact! . . . Building as elemental activity has the power to transform people. And now building with glass! This would be the surest method of transforming the European into a human being.”

A poetic fantasy, translated through an architect’s designs, was to transform an entire continent’s society and culture.

A close analysis of Taut’s and Behne’s work reveals that the two worked increasingly symbiotically, each developing and expanding upon commonly held ideas, especially with regard to Expressionist theory. Taut designed the building, and Scheerbart provided much of the inspiration, but Behne’s role as critic, as primary interpreter, reviewer, and propagandist, was equally important. Whereas most visitors and critics were unable to overcome the unfamiliarity of the forms that Taut created in the Glashaus installation, Behne, with language varying from precise technical description to poetic prose and popular slang, was able to analyze the material artifact and the dynamic experiences of the building far more potently. His theoretical musings placed the building within the varying architectural, social, cultural, technological, historical, and philosophical contexts.

Behne’s most thought-provoking essay on the Glashaus, “Thoughts on Art and Function,” was published in the popular arts and crafts journal Kunstgewerbe (Applied Arts) a year after the pavilion closed. His analysis framed the glass building as an Expressionist synthesis of function and art, as an installation-like experience. Taut had set the tone for the interpretation when he stated in the first line of the visitor’s guide, “The Glashaus has no other purpose than to be beautiful.” But these words essentially repeated Behne’s earlier contention that Taut’s Leipzig pavilion had “no other purpose than an inner-artistic one.”

Behne realized that slogans such as these were more extreme than true. Taut’s pavilion had a definite use: as a temporary marketing pavilion for the glass industry at an exposition full of new products and ideas. For the critic, it was precisely the pavilion’s purpose as an ephemeral exhibition building that made a certain “functionlessness” possible and appropriate.

Much like Scheerbart and Taut, Behne believed that temporary exhibitions represented a unique opportunity for architects to experiment and leave aside constraining functions and even all social obligations in order to create pure and ideal expressions of art. He argued that exhibition pavilions had to reach beyond their pragmatic function of advertising and representing an industry to contain “a little bit of extravagance . . . freedom . . . and the fantastical.” Later the critic suggested further that “when the pressures of economics, commerce and industry are removed, the passion and love of creating should simply be explosive . . . [Exhibitions should be] a kind of folk festival, an eternal Sunday . . . something celebratory.” Exhibitions, he insisted, demanded the spectator experience “an artistic rush.” By defining Taut’s exhibit pavilion in this way, Behne proposed a fundamental shift in exhibit design away from both the object and the pragmatic exhibit hall, and toward the purely artistic installation.

Behne was unique in being able to see beyond the physical construction to interpret and thereby determine the understanding of the building, and with it the direction of modern architecture. Through his writing, he tied Taut’s glass pavilion fully to higher philosophical and Idealist meanings that could lead to a new architecture:

The longing for purity and clarity, for glowing lightness and crystalline exactness, for immaterial lightness and infinite liveliness found a means of its fulfillment in glass—the most ineffable, most elementary, most flexible and most changeable of materials, richest in meaning and inspiration, fusing with the world like no other. This least fixed of materials transforms itself with every change of atmosphere. It is infinitely rich in relations, mirroring what is above, below, and what is below, above. It is animated, full of spirit and alive . . . It is an example of a transcendent passion to build, functionless, free, satisfying no practical demands—and yet a functional building, soulful, awakening spiritual inspirations—an ethical functional building.

With these nostalgic words written at the beginning of World War I, Behne made the Glashaus into an installation, a symbol, a mystical sign, and a guidepost for a new world view and future architecture. Borrowing from Taut’s building and Scheerbart’s writings, Behne transfigured glass from a transparent modern technical material to a crystalline expressive spiritual force that could transform culture. The simultaneous perceptions of functionless freedom and functional practicality, of fluid change and crystalline clarity, of spirited life and of death and resurrection, of the sparkling heavens above and descent into an ethereal world below, set the tone for future interpretations of this building. These paradoxes and juxtapositions of contrary images revealed in the Glashaus became part of the very definition of Expressionism, and a key to the emotional force it had with those who encountered it or promoted it as the beginning of modern architecture in Germany.

Although the Glashaus was a public, fully functioning, and self-contained exposition hall designed according to existing building codes in conjunction with a consulting structural engineer, the architect Bruno Taut had from the beginning intended the Glashaus to be more of an experimental “installation” than a functional building. The temporary nature of exhibit pavilions, their limited functional complexity, and the fact that Taut paid for the Glashaus in large part out of his own pocket allowed him to create a monument that was more theoretical and inspirational than practical. Freed
from the strictures of permanent, functional, or comforting architecture, Taut and his colleagues hoped to reveal through the building an evanescent spiritual and artistic ideal. By focusing on the building primarily as an environment that creates illusive experience and elusive meaning, rather than as object or mere backdrop for display, they hoped to make manifest for the populace (Volk) a “higher passion to build” that could inspire the way to a brighter, reformed, unified, and eventually “socialist” European culture. In the best spirit of innovative “installations,” Taut intended his Glashaus not only to provoke radical change in art and architecture, but also to give inspiration for massive social, cultural, and political change promised by his vision of a new light-filled world.

Notes


9. The literature on installations invariably sees its origins after World War I, in the first Dada evenings in Zurich and Berlin (1916–20), Kurt Schwitters’ “Merzbau” in Hanover (1923–37), El Lissitzky’s “Prounenraum” in Berlin (1923), van Doesburg’s Café Le Aubette in Strasbourg (1926–28), and the first Surrealist exhibit in Paris (1938). These early experiments are said to have led to the Happenings and Environments after World War II, including much of the Minimalist, Conceptual, Landscape, and Performance art of the late 1960s and 1970s. A first apotheosis came in the large installations featured in spaces such as the Guggenheim addition and the Tate Modern beginning in the 1990s. See Bishop, Installation Art, and Gonzalez, “Installation Art.”


16. Taut had taken his idea for a glass pavilion around to the glass industry but found only a few minor sponsors. Werkbund organizers left the controversial pavilion off the first two master plans, delayed, and then reduced funding to such an extent that Taut was forced to put up large amounts of his own money to see his glass dreams realized. When Taut’s friend Karl Ernst Osthaus finally intervened to assure Taut permission to build, the Werkbund assigned Taut a site right at the entry to the exposition, far from both the large and popular exhibition halls by
Fischer, Hoffmann, and Muthesius, and such icons of modern architecture as Gropius’ model factory and Henri van de Velde’s Werkbund theater. To add insult to injury, the City of Cologne and the Werkbund asked him to pay for its removal when the German army needed the grounds in 1916 for troop preparations. See Thiekötter, Kristallisationen, pp. 15, 158–159, 168, and Kristiana Hartmann, “Ohne einen Glaspalast ist das Leben eine Last,” in Nerdinger et al., Bruno Taut, p. 56.


30. This association was not altogether spurious. When visitors arrived at the exposition via city tram, they had the option of entering into an actual amusement park the Werkbund had set up to attract visitors and to make money, or of proceeding down a long dusty path toward the exhibit halls, at the very beginning of which stood the Glashaus. On the amusement park at the Werkbund exhibition, connections to the Glashaus, and a site map, see Thiekötter, Kristallisationen, pp. 10, 19–22, as well as Herzogenrath and Teuber, Die Deutsche Werkbundausstellung, pp. 62–63, 337ff.


41. For summaries of Scheerbart’s works that relate to architecture, see Musielki, Bau-Gespräche, and Bletter, “Paul Scheerbart’s Architectural Fantasies.”

42. Scheerbart, Glasarchitektur (Berlin, Germany: Sturm, 1914), was republished recently with a postscript by Mechthild Rausch (Berlin, Germany: Gebr. Mann, 2000), from which all citations here are taken.

43. Behne, Wiederkehr der Kunst, p. 65. Behne quoted Scheerbart’s lines from Glasarchitektur: “Our culture is to a certain extent a product of our architecture. If we want to bring our culture to a higher level, we must, for better or for worse, change our architecture,” in Behne, “Bruno Taut,” Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung 2, no. 1 (April 1919): 13–15.


47. Behne was careful to remind his readers that this emphasis on art and spiritual ideals did not mean that good architecture ignored function. Rather, he felt that through art, the architect should be able to animate even the most trivial of functional requirements. Function should not constrain the architect, he suggested, but rather the architect should use it as yet another material to bring his creation to life. Resorting to a more Idealist vocabulary, Behne wrote that the true architect does not degrade forms to functions, but rather elevates functions to forms; Behne “Gedanken,” p. 4.

48. Scheerbart had great hope that exhibition pavilions, especially in America, would help spawn a true glass architecture; Scheerbart, Glasarchitektur, chapters 74–76. In his novel Münchenhausen (1905), Scheerbart described a world’s fair in Melbourne that served as an example to Behne; see Behne, “Die Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbundes,” Dresdner neueste Nachrichten (June 20, 1914).


51. See also Regine Prange, Das Kristalline als Kunstsymbol: Bruno Taut und Paul Klee (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1991), pp. 78ff.