

## Burning Down the Haus: Broadening Perspectives on British Modernism

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**Dates:** Tuesdays 29 October, 5, 12, 19, 26 November and 3 December 2019

**Times:** 18.00–20.00

**Location:** RIBA Clore Learning Centre, 66 Portland Place

**Level:** All levels

**Class size:** Maximum 20 participants

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### Course Description

A century after the renowned Bauhaus School was founded in Germany, take a fresh look at the relationship between Bauhaus and Britain. Join leading historian and author of *Bauhaus Goes West* (2019) Dr Alan Powers, and a host of guest experts, in examining the role of the Bauhaus in the development of Modernism in Britain.

Our course title conveys an irreverent but constructive approach. Unquestionably, the Bauhaus occupied a significant presence in British design consciousness after 1933 – largely due to the arrival of Walter Gropius and other émigré architects and designers. This has, however, obscured parallel movements in Britain and elsewhere and closer examination reveals a more interesting and complex story across the fields of art, product design, education and architecture. Over six weeks you'll hear from experts in architectural and cultural history and engage with a range of cultural issues from 20th-century Britain that still have contemporary relevance.

Timed to coincide with the RIBA's new autumn exhibition, *Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain 1933-66*, you'll also hear from exhibition curators and have exclusive access to original drawings, photographs, archive manuscripts, books, journals and ephemera from the RIBA's world-class architectural collections.

Led by Dr Alan Powers and Dr Neal Shasore (University of Liverpool), guest contributors include Dr Julian Holder (University of Oxford), Magnus Englund (Isokon Gallery) and Dr Elizabeth Darling (Oxford Brookes University).

**This course is delivered through a collaboration between the RIBA and the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (SAHGB).**

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### Week 1: 'Pushing the tank uphill': British design reform before 1933 (Tuesday 29 October)

When Bauhaus figures such as Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer came to Britain in the 1930s, they encountered a newly-invigorated phase of design reform. Our opening session examines how the supposedly backward nation of Britain attempted to shed its sentimental adherence to the past and embrace simplicity in an unending uphill struggle against commercialism and indifference. We'll focus upon the role of official and voluntary organisations after 1914, such as the Design and Industries Association, to help explain what they meant by 'good' consumer products and carrying the same values into the preservation of rural landscapes and towns – and question how far such zealous efforts to divert people from their own preferences concerning their surroundings were achievable or even justifiable.

**Guest contributor: Dr Julian Holder**

Julian Holder is an expert on 19th- and 20th-century British architecture and design. A former Inspector of Historic Buildings with English Heritage, he lectures in Architectural History at the University of Oxford and is a Visiting Fellow at Kellogg College. His recent publications include *Neo-Georgian architecture 1880-1970; a re-appraisal* (with Elizabeth McKellar), whilst *Beauty's awakening; the architecture of the Arts and Crafts Movement* is due for publication in 2020.

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**Week 2: Questions from a Long Chair: people, objects and perspectives** (Tuesday 5 November)

Marcel Breuer's 1936 Isokon Long Chair – a wooden recliner – is a 'design classic' that encapsulates our perception of a Bauhaus 'style' in Britain championed by architects, furniture designers, retailers and museums. In our second session we'll consider how the Long Chair opens up wider questions about famous Bauhaus slogans such as the call by the second Bauhaus director, Hannes Meyer, for 'Volksbedarf statt Luxusbedarf' (the needs of the people not the needs of luxury). In the longer perspective of post-war design and campaigning, how have actual public taste, affordable production and durability correlated to the objects we see in books, exhibitions and museums?

**Guest contributors: Christopher Wilk, V&A Museum; Magnus Englund, Isokon Gallery**

Christopher Wilk is Keeper of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion at the V&A. His exhibitions have included 'Marcel Breuer: Furniture and Interiors' (MoMA, 1981), 'Modernism: Designing a New World 1914-1939' (V&A, 2006) and 'Plywood: a material story' (V&A, 2017), each with an associated book.

Magnus Englund was born in Sweden and co-founded the design store chain Skandium in London in 1999. He is the Director of the Isokon Gallery Trust and author of several books on design, including most recently *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* (with Layla Daybelge, 2019).

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**Week 3: Sound, camera, action: presenting Modernism to the public** (Tuesday 12 November)

In the 1930s as now, there were different ways of pushing the tank of design uphill and through the doors of indifference. Even in the Edwardian classical period, the architectural profession wanted to engage a wider public and this effort continued through the inter-war decades, with Modernism becoming a lively if divisive new addition to the discussion.

In week three, we'll look at the effectiveness of radio, film and early television in offering new opportunities for staging Modernism, including the famous 1931 'debate' for the BBC between the Edwardian grandee Sir Reginald Blomfield and Modernist Amyas Connell who, like professional wrestlers, both needed the other in order to provide a public spectacle. Exploring the print culture of magazines, we'll also consider how the division between professional and popular became increasingly blurred as each adopted the other's agenda and techniques.

**Guest contributor: Dr Jessica Kelly, University for the Creative Arts**

Jessica Kelly is Senior Lecturer in Contextual and Theoretical Studies at The University for the Creative Arts. Jessica's research centres on the mediation of architecture, with a particular focus on the mid-20th century.

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**Week 4: Art and technology: a different unity** (Tuesday 19 November)

'Art and technology: a new unity' is one of the famous Bauhaus slogans that defines what was intended as a fresh approach to industrial design. Historians and institutions have followed this by imposing mutually exclusive categories of craft and mass production, with the latter seen as the appropriate and 'modern' choice. These distinctions often make little sense in the real world of workshops, prototypes and batch production. In our fourth session, practitioners in this field will discuss how they operate in the fully digital world to retain distinctive qualities of form and texture while supplying the needs of customers.

**Guest contributors: Tony Wills; Eleanor Pritchard, woven textiles for contemporary interiors; and Deborah Saunt, architect DSDHA**

Tony Wills trained as a furniture designer and is a partner of Wills + Watson Associates designers and engineers, product designers specialising in devices used or specified by professionals in architecture, manufacturing and medicine.

Eleanor Pritchard is a textile designer who set up her own studio in London nearly 20 years ago, specialising in blankets and furnishing fabrics. All her designs are woven in the UK. She says “I have always loved playing with colour and pattern. My work often has a mid-century quality and I feel a strong affinity for the aesthetics and design philosophy of this era”.

Deborah Saunt is Director at DSDHA architects, leading mixed-use, residential and cultural schemes, including the recent remodelling of Alison & Peter Smithson’s Economist Plaza. In 2015 she co-founded the London School of Architecture (LSA), with the aims to democratising architectural education and bridging the gap between practice and academia.

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**Week 5: Brick upon brick: did housing need to be reinvented? (Tuesday 26 November)**

Mass housing and its role in making a better society was a key issue in the 1930s. A strong case was made, by Gropius among others, for changing the nature of cities by building towers or slab blocks in green open spaces, shaped to enable rapid construction with ‘new’ materials. These ideas were popular in Britain, where social housing had originated in the 19th-century and today, the possibility of social housing is being discussed again after a long lapse. In our fifth week we’ll consider how many of the problems that arose from Modernist convictions were anticipated at the time, especially by the remarkable housing researcher and campaigner, Elizabeth Denby.

**Guest contributor: Dr Elizabeth Darling, Reader in Architectural History, Oxford Brookes University**

Elizabeth Darling is Reader in Architectural History at Oxford Brookes University. She has published widely on the history of inter-war English modernism, social housing and gender. Books include *Re-forming Britain* (2007), *Wells Coates* (2012) and she also wrote an introduction to the 2015 re-issue of Elizabeth Denby’s *Europe Rehoused*.

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**Week 6: Putting the Bauhaus back in its box (Tuesday 3 December)**

After a year of centenary celebration, what have we learnt about the Bauhaus and our attitudes to it? In our final sessions we’ll debate whether it is a monolithic body of pedagogy and doctrine or a fluid, responsive vision capable of going in many different directions. We’ll consider whether it is inherent in museums and collections to favour the first assumption and, in the process, to risk killing the real meaning that spreads beyond the 14 years of the actual school to encompass unbounded time and place.

**Guest contributors: Valeria Carullo, RIBA; Rachel Rose Smith; Grant Watson, Royal College of Art**

Valeria Carullo is RIBA Curator of Photographs and has organized a number of exhibitions at the RIBA and the Estorick Collection, most recently ‘Rationalism on Set: Glamour and Modernity in 1930s Italian Cinema’. Her exhibition ‘Beyond Bauhaus: Modernism in Britain 1933-66’ is at the RIBA Architecture Gallery (1 October 2019-1 February 2020) and her book, *Moholy-Nagy in Britain 1935-1937* (Lund Humphries) was published in 2019.

Rachel Rose Smith was an AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award holder from 2011 to 2015 for her thesis titled *Modern Art Movements and St Ives 1939-49*. She was the first curator of the Heong Gallery at Downing College, Cambridge, and of the display ‘The Bauhaus & Britain’ at Tate Britain (to 17 November 2019).

Grant Watson has worked internationally as a curator and with Marion von Osten developed the conceptual and structural framework for *bauhaus imaginista*, launched in 2016 with a book published by Thames & Hudson and a series of worldwide events, including the exhibition, 'Bauhaus Imaginista, Still Undead' at Nottingham Contemporary (21 September 2019-12 January 2020).

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### Course Directors

**Dr Alan Powers** is a leading historian of 20th-century architecture in Britain. A founder member of the Twentieth Century Society, he has published widely on architecture, art, and design including *Modern: The Modern Movement in Britain* (2005), *Britain: Modern Architectures in History* (2007) and most recently, *Bauhaus Goes West* (2019).

**Dr Neal Shasore** is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at Liverpool School of Architecture, working on 20th-century civic centres. He is a trustee of the Twentieth Century Society and Secretary of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (SAHGB). He is currently writing a new history of the RIBA's headquarters, 66 Portland Place, and finishing a book on architectural culture in interwar London.

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### Previous knowledge and experience

None required. A willingness to undertake the recommended advance reading and to participate in group discussion will help you get the most from this course.

### Recommended background reading

Alan Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West* (Thames & Hudson, 2019)

Fiona MacCarthy, *Walter Gropius, visionary founder of the Bauhaus* (Faber & Faber, 2019)

Layla Daybelge and Magnus Englund, *Isokon and the Bauhaus in Britain* (Batsford, 2019)

Marion von Osten and Grant Watson (eds), *Bauhaus Imaginista: A School in the World* (Thames & Hudson, 2019)

Additional short texts will be made available in advance for individual sessions.

### Access and refreshments

The Clore Learning Studio will open for participants 15 minutes before the start time. Participants will be served a glass of wine/soft drink at each session.

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