

## **“Discover Design – Discover Bauhaus” in the USA: Interview with designer Jan Christian Schulz**

**You are 26 years old, a designer and developer; you are in the process of completing your master's degree in Eindhoven, and you have just spent two and a half months leading workshops at schools, universities and museums in the USA. Not many people know about Bauhaus from the Weimar, Dessau and Berlin era. The realm of design is largely excluded from the classroom. How were you able to reach out and engage with people?**

Young people want to have a hand in shaping their world! They are curious. They welcome facts and theory if they are of practical use and can be integrated into everyday life. So this is where we focused our efforts. Workshops are a platform for creative freedom without rules. The “Discover Design – Discover Bauhaus” workshop roadshow headed by the German Design Museum Foundation promotes the fundamental basics. Bauhaus champions the idea of finding new forms and ways to live and work together. Both teachers and students wanted to break with tradition and monocultural rules, and push for the unification of revolutionary approaches, different disciplines and cultures. This visionary spirit still inspires us today: projects, enthusiasm and opportunities are of equal importance. A German designer meets with young Americans of different origins, interests and skills; they exchange ideas and work together on something new.

### **Does working with a young designer break down potential barriers?**

It's about the situation and atmosphere, not really the age. It is very easy for me not to follow routines, as I do not represent the authority of a teacher. We changed the layout of the rooms, moved around the chairs and tables. We did not deliver speeches from the front of the class; we encouraged the students to ask questions and to interrupt if they had a meaningful observation. Design is nothing if we cannot think freely! I wanted to provide and deliberately create a space in which students could be playful, and unleash their creativity. If there was enough time, we rounded off the workshops with an open Q&A. The cultural differences and similarities between the US and Germany were a major topic for discussion. But many of those who attended also wanted to learn more about what it is like to study and live in my home country. The teaching staff and lecturers were often surprised and encouraged to see how students developed in this environment, free from constraints.

### **Did the students produce designs in line with their age, did the younger children differ from the young adults?**

There is no sweeping statement that is universally true, but there were patterns. The younger the participants, the more freely they approached the design task. They would get stuck in as soon as the materials were distributed, whereas the older participants took time to first reflect on the tasks, approaching them in a more abstract manner. To unleash maximum creativity with plenty of room for interpretation, we had a go at designing seating. By following the principle of “form follows function”, students were prompted to use their individual needs to create an imaginative seating item. Within each group, different people often took on the task of developing ideas, working out the design and presenting it to the

class. They inspired each other. In the final presentation round, we praised the results, but also scrutinized them critically, just as they did back then in the Bauhaus school. We often worked in a more structured way with the art and design classes, as these students were a little more familiar with the process. The sheer inventiveness was unbelievably fascinating, no two seating items were alike. The designs ranged from flying seat constructions, swings for several people, to a truly archaic notion: the floor.

### **Bauhaus today – how can students of design benefit from the Bauhaus approach?**

They will benefit primarily from the power derived from the idea of combining elements of different potential, in order to create better living conditions and shape our future. Creative settings, studios or project-based companies that embody this multidisciplinary and intercultural idea can be found everywhere today. But it is not just about the vision. Design opens up concrete opportunities and scope for changing society by fundamentally scrutinizing its needs, and constantly questioning them. The workshops impart a way of thinking and, above all, a way of integrating this mindset into your everyday life. This may give rise to new worlds, or at least engender a new understanding of the similarities shared by Germany and the US.

### **Transfer is an important element. How do knowledge and skills come together in everyday life?**

The students perceive Bauhaus as a mindset; they transfer the creative principle to their own situation and then reflect on their surroundings. To come up with a new idea for seating furniture, you first have to rid yourself of all archetypal forms and identify the underlying need, that of sitting. Then comes the next step, an important aspect: thinking about ways of sitting. This could be almost anything and opens up a much wider range of possibilities, paving the way for crazy, revolutionary solutions. The participants were allowed to specify the setting to suit their individual ideas, for example a seating option on the beach. A change in perspective is effective in everyday life, it brings forth new thought patterns and behaviors. We designed a piece of furniture for new purposes with minimal materials, in a short period of time. Depending on how long the workshop was, after building their seat, the participants also designed a poster to convey their idea. This helped to reinforce the design process in both three and two-dimensional formats. All of these elements can be easily transferred into everyday life. Reflection and improvisation, sharing and communicating are applied skills that are useful in almost any situation, not just design.

### **The Year of German-American Friendship was hosted in both small and large places of learning and cultural institutions, and followed an official program. What did you find particularly inspiring?**

In twenty states and almost seventy locations, nothing was ever the same. It is difficult to choose one place that was particularly inspiring – the whole roadshow was one huge highlight. The size or occasion did not necessarily make one workshop more important than another. The high regard bestowed on the project by official guests certainly was certainly rewarding, and helped to promote the project. Thanks to word of mouth, we received

requests far beyond the scheduled stops. New people came together with new ideas, time and time again. From a small school in Seattle to a sprawling school complex in Orlando. We were in the center of New York City, the suburbs of Kansas City, and we enjoyed appearances with the “Wunderbar Together” PopUp Tour for the Year of German-American Friendship in Atlanta and Portland. Being able to share the wonders of design, Bauhaus and cultural affinity with so many people was a unique and incredibly inspiring experience. New friendships were forged, and I am eagerly awaiting a reunion in Germany or the USA. This adventure has brought two distant countries a little closer. It has ignited a new passion for working together in me, and, without doubt, in many of the people we met as well.

*Jan Christian Schulz was interviewed by Helga Sonntag-Kunst on behalf of the German Design Museum Foundation on December 13, 2019.*

The Year of German-American Friendship is supported by:

