

'Discover Design – Discover Bauhaus!' Interview with designer Dirk von Manteuffel

The first phase of the "Discover Design – Discover Bauhaus" roadshow has been successfully completed in the US. What were your key impressions?

Overwhelming and unbelievably compressed: a new town each day, workshops in elementary, middle and high schools, colleges, museums and libraries. Our youngest guest was six years old, and the oldest was over eighty. Thanks to their curiosity and generally spontaneous enthusiasm as well as the private conversations that we had, we were able to bring 'Wunderbar together' to life. I wasn't a tourist – I was part of their everyday life. This gives you a different perspective on people. We can't use a one-size-fits-all attitude for the US because the country is unbelievably diverse – it is home to so many different cultures, peoples, states and trends. Even over here, more knowledge is needed to ensure that we don't think in stereotypes.

The workshop tour reached over 1500 people in eleven states. It must be difficult to compare the regions you visited, but could you give us a brief insight?

I travelled from the Mid-West to the East Coast and also to Texas in the Deep South. I experienced the city of Chicago and its modern architecture, which is obviously different to Washington or Boston, which have a more historical cityscape. Houston has a different feel altogether – in part due to its hot climate, but also due to its aerospace and oil and petrochemical industries. Our most rural stop was Peterborough in New Hampshire. The area is home to 30,000 people, with next to no immigrants. At one college in Texas, there were 5500 teenagers from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. In comparison, the 800 students at Peterborough's Convai High School learn in a much more homogeneous and sheltered environment.

Let's talk about people's perceptions of Bauhaus in the US. Bauhaus is by and large very well known in Germany. How do perceptions in both countries compare following your encounters with local people?

Here in Germany people tend to associate Bauhaus with modern design classics or famous protagonists such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe. People in both countries still need to learn more about the movement itself and its revolutionary approaches – including for social renewal. As expected, people in America immediately associate Bauhaus with 'New Bauhaus' – they know about the large buildings in Chicago. Some know about the work of Gropius at Harvard University, which subsequently became one of the leading training centers for modern architecture. Based on the responses from our workshop visitors, ten percent of people had prior knowledge of some kind. For the vast majority we were breaking new ground.

"Discover Design - Discover Bauhaus" is designed to promote transnational dialogue. The roadshow took place during the Year of German-American Friendship. What were your experiences of this exchange?

Around one half of the workshops were held in German. People were curious and genuinely thrilled to have the opportunity to communicate with a native speaker. Many people wanted to find out more about Germany and ask questions about its history. This helped to create bridges and empathy – for example by showing pictures from the early 1920s. People immediately compared them to the Great Depression and understood what the emergence of a new society characterized by mass production meant. At the same time people had images of a varied, folkloric "German Heritage" shaped by immigrants and returnees from the period of occupation. There was also a boy who wore a kippa during school lessons. All of these images remain.

Is design part of the school curriculum, and does it enjoy equal status with other subjects? That's what you would expect in the homeland of Charles and Ray Eames, Raymund Loewy and Steve Jobs.

Of course, I was only able to see part of the picture. Design is taught during art lessons – if at all. Students very rarely have classes dedicated to design. For most people, design workshops are a whole new world. The reactions in both countries are similar: Students can quickly get involved in the topic because it has a concrete relationship to their interests and everyday life. During the design workshops, many students learn for the first time how to be creative and discover that design also has an impact on the shaping of our environment – and are using this knowledge as an opportunity for themselves.

Practical design is an important element of the workshops, which are designed to teach students about Bauhaus designers and methods. How are the workshops taught in practice?

The Bauhaus workshops, which teach important principles of modern design such as "less is more" or "form follows function", give the participants a solid grounding in design theory – not something dry or abstract, but something that can be put into practice immediately in their own sketches and designs, rather like a finger exercise for designers. The 10-minute chair is designed in a limited time with limited materials. Such challenges are very welcome and are part of everyday life, albeit in other contexts. These challenges are solved using principles such as "think, pair, share". During the workshops the students also learn that there is no such thing as failure in the design process – an exciting concept for Americans. Even if a model is not completed or successful, the result is still useful for the design process.

You worked in two roles – as workshop leader and guest ambassador for design: How did your audience respond?

Surprisingly well – you could tell that people's expectations were mainly positive. This is because American students love working with interactive parts during lessons. Cultural themes that are related to people's own lives generate immediate interest. Our workshops are team-oriented and don't have a set protocol – the leader is treated as a coach. The fact that I'm German and that official

partners such as the Goethe Institute and the foreign ministry are involved in the exchange program makes the workshops more meaningful for the participants, but not unfamiliar. Creativity is fun – that's also an important message. Overseas we are still better known for our precision and engineering expertise than for our sense of humor.

Could you give us a sneak preview of the autumn tour?

First of all I'd like to compliment everyone who worked on the "Discover Design – Discover Bauhaus" roadshow during the spring. It was carefully planned in advance across a region of thousands of miles and was a unique experiment, just in terms of the logistics. Our efforts have been more than rewarded – in most cases we became friends. Each visit starts with a security check that can take a while. My colleagues can look forward to classes without mobile phones, which are handed in before the lesson starts. And more importantly, they will experience the enthusiasm generated by our hands-on design workshops. This enthusiasm is infectious, primarily because the students learn that their newly acquired knowledge can be used to create practical designs.

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