

BOOK REVIEW FOR ARCHITECTURAL FORUM

(Typesetter please note differentiation of Herbert Bayer and Herbert Bayer (italics and intentional use of lower case i.)

HERBERT BAYER: VISUAL COMMUNICATION, ARCHITECTURE, PAINTING.

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211 pp, 11" x 9", Illustrated. \$18.50

There is plenty of architectural precedent for it; even so it is not an act of especially deep humility to produce a book enshrining one's life's works, major and minor, real and projected, interlaced with samples of the verbal pearls one has dropped along the way. However, within the genre, Herbert Bayer — ex-Bauhaus man and resident sage of Aspen, Colorado — has produced Herbert Bayer with consistent modesty. An air of humble resignation is detectable even in a remark on the jacket flap: "The material for this book has been assembled by Herbert Bayer with the hope that it will have meaning for the younger generation

To the younger generation, however, a lot of it will seem only old-fashioned — and not just some of the quaint visual styles like de Chirico Surrealism, almost as remote now as Gothic Revival. One of the basic Bauhaus ideals, of total design through teamwork, no doubt sounds like horse and buggy thinking if you are dreaming of building megastructures by computerisation. Then, the idea of this one man dabbling in so many fields — graphics, architecture, sculpture, painting (including house-painting at one time) — is out of sympathy with the modern necessity for the sharpest possible focus of individual talents. In short the Bauhaus is dead, like God — and Leonardo.

On an equally superficial level this book can be, to the older generation, a

nostalgic journey like flipping through a stack of old 78s in an attic. Here are visual hits of the 'twenties and 'thirties: Bauhaus exhibition posters, the hand symbol recurring like a Paul Whiteman rhythm, multi-image photo-montages like a Benny Goodman orchestration.

Nevertheless, on another level, Herbert Bayer can still be an inspiration to old and young. Bayer's life and art stand for a timeless quality which is as necessary now as ever, and still in as short supply as ever: the quality of the idea.

The idea of a community of ideas attracted him, when he and this century were both 21, to the Bauhaus at Weimar. The same prospect attracted him again in 1946 to Aspen, and though he is sad to have watched the town sink into the disagreeable ways of any resort, still the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, the design conferences and the music, retain in an independent colony beside the town something of the original Bauhausian idealism.

An idea — a sharp intellectual answer to a design problem represented in visual terms — illuminates all Bayer's most successful works, and it is often strong enough to break through the generation barrier. However, sometimes it is not, as for instance in the restaurant building at Aspen Meadows, social center of the colony. And this is a pity because that is a restaurant with ideas even in its cuisine. It deserved better than a diagonal pattern of cinder blocks projecting from the walls.

Bayer's best ideas are rational, definable and as personal as can be in the Bauhaus manner. They relate every field he touches, from painting to typography. The latter is one of his special interests and carries him fairly far out towards an "optofonetic alphabet". Throughout the book, he practises other theories for easier reading, including the elimination of hyphenated words and of all capital letters — even for the first person singular, which always looks uncomfortably inadequate, I think. Since Herbert Bayer and Herbert Bayer make much of

typographical reform, a gross inconsistency in the book should be mentioned. Bayer's rationalistic approach to typography led him early to one of his several genuine inventions. He revolted against the printer's aesthetic convention of justifying the length of lines of type to give a trim straight right edge at the expense of even spacing between words. In 1926 he designed an historic Bauhaus advertisement which he claims to be "the first known application" of the "flush left, vignette right" method of typesetting, with equal spaces between all words. This style has of course lived on. It is familiar in well-designed typography today, including the captioning on picture pages of Forum.

Several times in Herbert Bayer the point is made that the whole text of the book is set in this style. In fact this simply is not so. Mr. Bayer must have endured awful difficulties with the typesetters (Graphic Arts Typographers, Inc.) who somehow never got the hang of the idea. They insisted on justifying most, but not all, of the shorter lines, adding more space between words to get a straight right edge, while at other times they unaccountably cut lines short when there was still plenty of room for the word which started the next line (e. g. pp75, 97, 150) and once (p. 78) added a word too many so that the line bridges the margin between its column of type and the next one. The result of all this inconsistency is that the text of Herbert Bayer alternates unpredictably between sections with a ragged right edge and blocks of conventional solid type with the uneven word spacing which Herbert Bayer deploras. The worst of both worlds.

Yet when Herbert Bayer illustrates its author's strongest ideas correctly it hints at an extraordinary fact: that the Bauhaus is not dead after all! It might have looked pretty sick from the viewpoint of a few years ago at the height of the Yamastone Romantic Revival but it has recovered remarkably. It is not just that some of Bayer's visual ideas — like the op distortion of a checker-board in an Olivetti ad of 1953 — were so many years ahead of their time that they are still in fashion. It is not just that they frequently anticipated

pop by nearly half a century (see Bayer's cigarette kiosk project of 1924. See, hear, and smell his exhibition pavilion of the same year, which simultaneously projected film, flashing signs, letters of smoke, and sound from a loud-speaker horn.) The Bauhaus principles themselves are as alive as ever and a completely new generation of grandchildren are rediscovering them, usually without appreciating that they have been discovered before.

This book is more than a record of a highly intelligent designer. It is a timely reminder that the influence of Gropius through the Bauhaus, which was the least visual of all the major pioneers' influences, will almost certainly be the longest lasting. Not just because of that marriage between art and the machine; someone else would have performed that ceremony sooner or later. But because of the humanity at the foundation of the Bauhaus. It promised a world in which all intelligent art is made for popular enjoyment, which is different from one in which everything made for pop enjoyment is automatically claimed to be intelligent and art.