

## CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

# FROM TUBULAR STEEL TO FLAT PACK: A CASE STUDY COMPARISON BETWEEN BAUHAUS AND IKEA INNOVATION LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the enduring influences of the Bauhaus in contemporary design by comparing the movement's impact on 20<sup>th</sup>-century social change, and as a model for social inventiveness and innovation through promoting equality of arts for everyone by combining the arts and business. The review of literature and a comparative analysis of similarities and differences between Bauhaus and IKEA helps understand contemporary framing of design innovation, through minimalist styles mass produced for modern cultural consumption. The main findings show that shifts have occurred from classical Bauhaus to present design thinking methods, where pricing, distribution, logistics, and the realities of competitive markets have affected consumer perceptions of value and market notions of design excellence. The paper concludes that leadership in design innovation today calls for more pragmatic considerations of strategic pricing over design and quality. Affordability and price tag are perceived to increase mass appeal and accessibility of mass-designed products for consumer segments, but that comes at the expense of awareness and appreciation of quality, materials, and labour and workmanship costs.

**Keywords:** *Bauhaus, furniture, design innovation, design process, mass production*

### INTRODUCTION

The Bauhaus was a Germany art school established in Weimar in 1919 by architect Walter Gropius to teach modern arts and architecture. In under two decades from 1919 to 1933, when it moved first to Dessau, then Berlin under director Mies van der Rohe, the institution revolutionised the art-world with its controversial, cultish ideals, leaving a legacy of inspired ideas and inspirators that not only impacted Western art education and cultural production philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, but radically altered the look of material culture, from architecture to book production (Ambler, 2018; Droste, 2006; Heathcote, 2019; Hochman, 1997; Ott, 1997; Whitford, 1992).

Enduring contributions in fields from architecture to graphic arts and visual culture is seen today, as Bauhaus continues to generate social conversations and research criticism, one century into its founding (100 Years of Bauhaus, n.d.; Rix-Standing, 2019). But what truly makes the Bauhaus core ideology a *cultural* shift is that it's teaching principles and ideologies emphasised cooperation between, and integration of, creative arts and the knowledge of technologies of production.

This is an observable trait particularly for furniture design, whereby ergonomic comfort, material utility, spatial functionality and durability are equally as important as artistry (Emmons, Hendrix & Lomholt, 2012). One leading example of Bauhaus-inspired design is Swedish furniture manufacturer, IKEA.

Marketing strong nuances of minimalism in its designs that mirrors the Bauhaus style, many compare IKEA to Bauhaus in its innovations practices that has gradually earned it market and consumer recognition worldwide.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the similarities and differences in these two different decades of design philosophies, in order to understand why and how much the Bauhaus philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century still resonates with the current trends and needs of users in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

The main research objective is to develop insights into the many factors involved in marketing of mass-produced furniture, ranging from costs, the impact of globalisation on design trends, etc. Another research objective is to understand how design-based businesses improve design thinking and methodologies of practice through innovation leadership that result in greater consumer appreciation and brand loyalty.

Questions raised in this paper include: *What contextual characteristics of contemporary design is integrated with Bauhaus ideals today? How different is the concept of design innovation under the Bauhaus, compared to innovation practices in the production and marketing of contemporary design? How pertinent and relevant is 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bauhaus for 21<sup>st</sup>-century mass market design production today?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section begins with a review of literature tracing the social, historical roots Bauhaus philosophy and design thinking principles in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

The Bauhaus School gained eminence in the 1920's as the first arts and architecture institution that encouraged students to embrace the learning of multiple art skills before specialising (Monoskop, 2019; Ott, 1997; Whitford, 1992). Its curricula advocated development of a range of different inspirations. These core principles and theories, says art historian David J. Adams (2017), were collated and integrated in the Bauhaus design curriculum, and idealised through architectural forms and in production arts and crafts.

Unfortunately, Bauhaus conflicted with dominant political ideologies of Europe caught in the throes of World War II during the movement's prime years (Dyckhoff, 2002). Where political divisions once separated the arts along wealthy-bourgeois lines (Volkman & de Cock, 2006), the Bauhaus' apolitical infamy leveraged on promoting equitable access to well-made goods for everyday living, through the practice of designing for all, regardless of wealth and social aspirations (Barringer, 2009). From its progressive core ethos that design is for everyone, the Bauhaus' eventual clash with traditional perceptions of design as an elite symbol of artisanal membership and cultivated social status, was inevitable (Ambler, 2018).

The social legacies of Bauhaus' philosophy have been the subject of much scholarly inquiry. Some researchers have criticised the banal, but popular, image of Bauhaus school's confrontational stance on the socio-political beliefs of pre-war societies (Ott, 1997). Architecture critic Fiona MacCarthy (2019) claims that behind the "visionary" ethos of Gropius, him she calls a charismatic, public relations "master charmer", many practitioners have rather ignored the study of Bauhaus' contextual relevance and influence in revealing artistic hostility with its focus on mass market production. Arising from post-war political revolutions that upheaved Western Europe, a new strain of material culture was introduced, combining aspects of traditional fine arts, architecture and crafts with progressive industrialisation, to contribute towards social rebuilding of Germany (Droste, 2006: pp.8-19).

In contemporary media, there is an upswell of feminist criticisms over the Bauhaus ideology, with its male-dominant progressive politics resulting in perceptions of the art school being a "proto-hippy", self-indulgent institution obsessed with severe experimentalism and a

product of "its own biased lunacies" (Heathcote, 2019).

Despite such public image issues which may dent Bauhaus aesthetic sensibilities in the eyes of modern art educators, critics concede that this awkward marriage of art and business for cultural progress has a direct influence on the context of understanding society's industrial design consumption trends today.

The movement expanded its target frame to be inclusive of all classes. This radical ideology undergirded the scope of design practices that aimed to bring the arts and business together to resonate across class divides. Gropius believed materials and construction processes should clearly identify the final product, a belief unlike other art schools during that time, as this concept overthrew aesthetics in favour of market viability as the key factor for innovating arts practice (Ambler, 2018).

Fuelled by an industrialisation outlook and the democratisation of workmanship, combined with tentative zeal for entrepreneurialism, Bauhaus apprentices celebrated and experimented the joys and catharsis of the design process and the fashioning of creativity itself, under the motto, *Form Follows Function*.

Gropius taught his belief that knowledge of materials and fabrication, rather than pure aesthetics, form the initial stages of the designing process, taking up ideally between 30 to 40 percent of the artist's idea development (Postell, 2012: pp.67-68).

Carbone and Sheard (2003) studied how the Bauhaus conceptual notions of minimalism were fostered through informal arts and design education in classrooms. The authors found that the workshop or studio environment was where young designers cultivated and honed their skills to reimagine the material world, reflecting the unity of the arts in reproducing images of everyday life, e.g. interior furnishing, teapots, lamps and chairs as works of art, on par with sculpture and painting.

Through sketching, modelling and workshops, students were rigorously instructed on the tools of the trade from master craftspeople, while cooperating with each other to foster experimentation using different materials (Ambler, 2018; Carbone & Sheard, 2003; Whitford, 1992), in diverse fields of typography, architecture, theatre and sculpture (Droste, 2006).

At the same time, the school posited itself as a modern design institution in the burgeoning creative industry, reminding students to take on studies on "practical production", blending design thinking with profitmaking (Droste,

2006: pp.152-174). The Bauhaus legacy shows its relevance as represented by a formula whereby, *Design Excellence + Quality = Innovation Leadership*.

For an example of Bauhaus in everyday practical innovation, most scholars would point to the *Wassily Chair* (Fig. 1), designed in 1925 by student Marcel Breuer, whose career spanned from interior furnishing to commercial buildings. Folding and non-folding Wassily club chairs took inspiration from bicycle frames (Knoll, Inc., n.d.), a creation that captured the zeitgeist of an era when wood had become an increasingly cumbersome, costly and scarcer resource for large-scale commercial furnishing production.



Fig. 1 *Wassily Chair* design by Marcel Breuer

Constructed from bent tubular steel, so light and transparent as to dematerialise its form, the chair's high-tint chromium-plated metal, with sturdy seat and back material that complements the symmetrical "mirror effect" of its beauty, the Wassily revolutionised furniture manufacturing for its replicable attributes and becoming the inspiration to many designers, including Mies van der Rohe and others throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>-century (Frampton, n.d., Schneider, 2011; Watson-Smyth, 2013), some of whom innovated the concept further with fibre glass and plastic.

As Droste (2006: p.175) notes, experimentation with metal craftsmanship in Bauhaus workshops was an achievement both for apprentice learning and industry pioneers as it was a proof that "organoid forms" could be capably constructed and exploited commercially through large-scale manufacturing.

This similar aspect is reflected in the works of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, director of the Bauhaus at Berlin, whom some academics have labelled as dogmatic and authoritarian, the "personality pedantic" (Ott, 1997: p.619). van der Rohe's famous *Barcelona Chair* (Fig. 2), designed in 1928, was a watershed Modernist symbol. Future-inspired tubular steel frame and pre-fabricated elements combined for the *Barcelona Chair*, winning it widespread

admiration as a "crucible" of Bauhaus style. With stainless steel supports and foam rubber cushions, it exudes the Miesian propensity to design coldly elegant, rigorous forms of "aesthetic conformance" (Ott, 1997: p.620), exemplifying the single-mindedness of Bauhaus to integrate form and function in application. The *Barcelona Chair*, a metaphorical icon of social reform, drew much initial criticism. Being very heavy, at nearly 38kg, rendered it impractical and challenging for distribution, packing and delivery (Postell, 2012).



Fig. 2 *Barcelona Chair* by Mies van der Rohe

As Elaine Hochman (1997: p.41) argues, van der Rohe is more noted for his prominence as a social symbol of protest against the Nazi control of Germany, through insisting on industrial automation of production processes and technology. While it showcased the school's ruthless pursuit of perfect aesthetics, it also shows the difficult context of aesthetic separation from political identification (Dyckhoff, 2002; Hochman, 1997).

Creative arts would arguably be unsustainable in practice unless architects, designers and manufacturers develop production models which effectively incorporate advanced technology, consumer research, market knowledge, and global distribution systems, applying these to classical principles of excellent craftsmanship and quality materials in the designing process.

To sum literature, studies and publications would suggest the Bauhaus discipline and methodical typology for developing market potential of design comes from the contextual characteristics of formal learning and fostering experimentation. Nevertheless, today's designers cannot ignore the problems of market commercialisation just to prove their point about aestheticism. We would thus argue that contemporary application of Bauhaus ethos needs integration of brand marketing solutions such as marketability and appeals of mass-produced designs, and technological

inventiveness, in order to deepens consumer appreciation and create brand loyalty.

### Case Study: Comparing IKEA with Ideological Inspiration of Bauhaus

To gain deeper insight on this aspect, this section presents a case study analysis of Swedish furniture manufacturing brand IKEA's integration of Bauhaus contextual characteristics into contemporary design. The analysis considers the concept of design innovation under the Bauhaus, comparing it with innovation practices in 21<sup>st</sup>-century furniture design and production.

IKEA is often cited in analysing modernism in design. It encapsulates the commercial viability of modern design retail by operating a business model that positions an image of affordability and minimal aestheticism. Although the urbanity and simplicity of IKEA styles are strongly associated with, and inspired by Bauhaus, what makes IKEA furniture design innovative *on its own right* is through revolutionising how consumers perceive, seek, buy and obtain innovation.



Fig. 3 IKEA furniture shows Bauhaus influences

For instance, ecologically resourceful “flat-pack” packaging was launched to reduce the logistical issues of transportation, servicing and labour costs by using the stripped-down packaging and self-assembling concept. Some models are sold in-store and online in flat packaging for *Do-it-Yourself* (DIY) assembly at customer's home or site. Since IKEA coined this idea, many other companies compete to gain customers' favour by similarly lowering the prices of furniture, creating the demand for furniture as affordable merchandise that brings the aesthetics of modernity and simplicity to everyday living, particular for consumer segments with modest incomes (Burt, Johansson & Thelander, 2008: pp.14-16).

Thus, IKEA's brand concept shares the unique Bauhaus position of adaptation to social shifts (in the case of the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century, urbanisation) by responding to consumers' desire for value, catering to “as many people as possible” (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, the difference between the mission of Bauhaus and the core ideology of IKEA, is the nature of production itself. Bauhaus as a site of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century innovation, is seen by some design advocates as a “crucible of modernism” only in its *symbolic* role, which is to reduce economic oppression of social classes by becoming a “bridge” with practical, functional and affordable consumer-demanded products.

IKEA, in contrast, produces furniture for commercial markets based on affordable product marketing strategies, thus promoting social equality of consumption. Its DIY concept reflects a familiar context of social deconstruction and construction, the scheme of political resistance by positing on notions of “knocking down to rebuild” (Rix-Standing, 2019; Whitford, 1992). Additionally, by encouraging self-transportation and self-assembly, transportation and labour charges are eliminated. Focusing on marketing well-designed, consistent quality furnishings and customising its after-sales support activities accordingly, IKEA's claims of responsiveness to customer needs underlies its brand value (Edvardsson & Enquist, 2009).

### ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS

In examining the similarities and differences between the Bauhaus and IKEA Company, some perspectives will now be discussed on the question raised earlier: *Are Bauhaus principles still relevant in the mass market design economy today?*

Similar to the Bauhaus movement which intended design to be democratised for everyone, IKEA is a culturally-significant brand for having successfully constructed cultural identity as a value associated with “lifestyle” (Edvardsson & Enquist, 2009: p.66), to the point where simplicity of design ideas can be consumed and enjoyed universally under modern social living conditions (Cooper, 2018; MacCarthy, 2019).

Businesses' overarching globalisation strategy leads in their search for marketable, unifying cultural symbols and representations, from architectures to consumer-recognised brands. These concepts enjoin the once-dissimilar tastes of societies, acting as “bridges” for the notion of an International Style of living (Emmons, Hendrix & Lomholt, 2012; MacCarthy, 2019; Postell, 2012; Watkinson, 2009).



Furniture retailing supports the construction of social unification as a reality (not an aberration), and in removing signs of differences such as locality or regions, a greater concord can be achieved in what innovation stands for, and how it is supposed to look.

IKEA attempts to implement the Bauhaus ideology in spirit, but where IKEA is distinguished from the latter is its consumer-driven outlook. While Bauhaus enjoyed a broader educator's role as cultural inspiration for change through depoliticisation (Dyckhoff, 2002), IKEA prioritises efficiency in its operations such as standardisation of designs and processes, sustainable and cost-efficient production, and global chain-store retailing via supply chains and franchising agreements (Burt, Johansson & Thelander, 2008; Edvarsson & Enquist, 2009; Inter IKEA Systems, 2018). Overall, the integration of the chain-store organisational culture enables IKEA to come up with strategic innovations that reflect agility and spirit of improvisation to meet consumers' needs (Jarrett & Huy, 2018).

Price, as an economic factor for social and lifestyle consumption, plays a crucial role in influencing perceptions about business innovation. The furniture industry is no exception, as most manufactured furniture brands are designed with pricing as the main proposition (Yohn, 2014: pp.203-5). IKEA targets urban consumers with space-constrained lifestyles who seek trendy furniture at a low cost. Essentially, offering great design with high prices will not work with the market today: the measure of functionality, brand value and innovation speak greater volumes to consumers' hearts, but is of greater import to their pockets. Looks and pricing, according to market research, are more important to consumers than awareness about materials, environmental sustainability, aesthetics and quality of finishing. This suggests that pragmatic factors of efficiency, convenience and affordability play more decisive roles in the typology of social consumption today (Yohn, 2014).

As consumers develop increasingly sophisticated tastes through perceptions of "what looks and feels good for my money", IKEA takes it further by acknowledging and promoting the value of innovation where design unites with service efficiency, and effective marketing and promotion strategies worldwide. Design innovation that bespeaks value and cultivates consumer loyalty through after-sales and other customer engagement and support activities, are aspects which did not exist in the Bauhaus ideology.

Ergonomics, functionality, practicality and utility are equally crucial design elements, but aesthetics' role is a supplement to economic and ergonomic considerations. Form may necessarily follow Function, but form and function are not the only concerns of today's design industries. The brand slogan, *The Biggest Idea is the Smallest Price* captures IKEA's proposition succinctly, with price as the No 1 determinant of value. What is revealing about IKEA's brand success is its steadfast passion to be sympathetic to consumers' needs for a social revolution in living, through democratising consumption for communities, rather than classes.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding the analysis, the research turns to answer the question of whether successful commercialisation of design implies that conformity to aesthetics can be efficient, functional and practical. Many designers, experts and researchers seem to concur that there are positive outtakes from the Bauhaus influence, symbolic of anti-class elitism in consumption. The Bauhaus movement has had undeniable impact on design innovation practices, although analysis suggests this is only a surface reflection of its principles in application today. As design evolves to improve living culture and ultimately change the social environment, shifting cultural trends would reset and refine Modernist concepts, ensuring classical styles survive in fresh configurations and iterations.

Through analysing contemporary furniture design production, marketing and retailing, this paper concludes that design innovation leadership is the outcome of excellence and quality integrated, where design innovation, aesthetics and cultural values are seamlessly transformed into an organisational mission to deliver value for consumer market segments.

Bauhaus, to be a 21<sup>st</sup>-century design philosophy, must align with current trends and challenges such as globalisation of export markets, competitive strategies, brand leadership and more. Clearly, the same attributes of linearity and simplicity found at the Bauhaus school, are necessary to cultivate design innovation leadership today.

21<sup>st</sup>-century design thinking needs to consider business model sustainability and brand leadership by undertaking comprehensive market research before investing into materials, production facilities, global supply chains, operational systems, marketing strategies, other variable costs and regulatory factors. IKEA is a model example of how to

position design as a core value attribute through brand messages of aesthetics as the symbol of the company brand pride.

As a strategic component of its business model, IKEA design thinking methodology emphasise price-points, proving global consumers' keen desire for affordable products, but at the same time, it also points to lesser awareness and appreciation of quality, materials, workmanship and environmental issues related to production in the consumption cost equation. Through leadership in its market sector, IKEA has successfully adapted the Bauhaus ethos of minimalism, pragmatism and innovation, but they need to keep watch over product durability, quality and consistency, and at the same time, develop greater environmentally-sustainable strategies, all of which exerts the ultimate influence its brand image and reputation.

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## Images Credit

### Figure 1:

Wassily Chair Design by Marcel Breuer (n.d.) Retrieved from [http://media.liveauctiongroup.net/i/5573/8523596\\_1m.jpg?v=8CBACF9967152D0](http://media.liveauctiongroup.net/i/5573/8523596_1m.jpg?v=8CBACF9967152D0)

### Figure 2:

Barcelona chair designed by Mies van der Rohe (2013) Retrieved from <https://www.knoll.com/product/barcelona-chair>

### Figure 3:

IKEA Malaysia (2018) POÄNG Rocking Chair. Retrieved from <https://www.ikea.com/my/en/catalog/products/S29900868/>