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Bauhaus Dessau: Think tank of classical modernism celebrates its centenary

In 1925, the Bauhaus moved from the conservative Thuringian town of Weimar to Dessau, the up-and-coming city in the east of what was then the Free State of Anhalt. At the end of 1926, the students and their masters moved into the newly constructed Bauhaus building on the outskirts of the city. Two dates that are being celebrated with an anniversary: "To the substance. Bauhaus Dessau 100!"

The days of the garish, even deliberately provocative student hustle and bustle are history. Today, visitors populate the building that is considered the built manifesto of the Bauhaus ideas. These are mainly tourists from all over the world, the employees of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, a few students from the Anhalt University of Applied Sciences and design experts on pilgrimage.

The breath of departure remained

Nevertheless, the breath of that departure a hundred years ago blows through the rooms of the house that the architect Walter Gropius designed for the new location of the training center he founded in Weimar in 1919. After completion in December 2026, life moved in. Life of a special kind. Training here always meant breaking out: from the ornate imperial style heritage, from the disdain for industrial appearance, from the craft and academic corset - today we would call it a think tank.

The Bauhaus building is an exhibit and exhibition space, an event space and an event theme in equal measure. It is not a museum, but you can still visit it. There is much to see that has long since become part of everyday life, but was revolutionary at the time: built-in cupboards as room dividers, columns made of reinforced concrete and floors made of stone-wood screed, lights with visible lamps, furniture without ornaments, wall paint in intense colors...

Discover the ideas in detail

If you are concerned that it might be difficult to get to grips with such a design, join a guided tour of the building offered by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation. As you walk through the rooms, staircases and corridors, you can hear and see a lot about the most famous German art and design facility of classical modernism. This morning, too, a small group is walking through the famous building, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996. Without the guide's advice, the guest would probably overlook many of the ingenious, Bauhaus-style solutions: the Junkers radiator, which hangs on the wall at eye level like a work of art; the chain with which the huge glass and steel windows can be opened effortlessly; the semi-circular recess in the wall into which the doorknob disappears; the incidence of light that draws the eye; the row of lights reflected in the window glass that seems to continue outside...

Where the masters were neighbors

The second part of the tour leads to the nearby masters' houses: white cubes that appear to be plugged into one another form a director's house and three identical semi-detached houses. This ensemble, completed in 1926, was also designed by Gropius and is considered a Bauhaus site. And so there is a lot to learn here about the art and everyday life of visionaries such as Walter Gropius, who of course lived in the spacious director's house and also wanted Lyonel Feininger to live with him, Anni Albers, Lucia Moholy, László Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, Georg Muche, Gunta Stölzl and others. The director's house and the Moholy-Nagy half of the house were destroyed by a World War II bomb and rebuilt as a largely hollow body that nevertheless cites Bauhaus ideas, for example deliberately chosen lighting or structured walls. "Artist in Residence" guests live in the Muche/Schlemmer Master House. But you can go into some of the buildings, for example the one where Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee lived with their families, and look around to see, among other things, the play of colors on the walls or the design refinements for the household.

Ahead of its time with the Garden Kingdom

A walk through the city is also worthwhile. The path between the Bauhaus building and the Master Houses leads past the "Seven Pillars", a portal of the Georgium. Strictly speaking, this English-style landscape park has nothing directly to do with the Bauhaus. But indirectly, it does. Together with Wörlitz Park, it forms the UNESCO World Heritage Garden Kingdom of Dessau-Wörlitz, which, as a typical example of Enlightenment, was ahead of its time.

The seven-year presence of the Bauhaus, before it was expelled to Berlin in 1932 and dissolved in 1933, left the city of Dessau with around 300 buildings that were designed by Bauhaus members or at least influenced by their ideas: the "Kornhaus" restaurant on the banks of the Elbe, the historic employment office, the Stahlhaus, the Törten housing estate... And it left behind those points that will be connected in the "Invisible Bauhaus Dessau" video walk starting in autumn. These are places that no longer exist in their original form, but about which there are exciting stories to be learned - accessible via QR code.

Invitation to Understanding

The start or finale of a tour through the world of Bauhaus Dessau should be a visit to the Bauhaus Museum, which opened in the center of the city in 2019. Even from the outside, its glass facades, which reflect trees in the city park or the neo-renaissance of the post office opposite, but at the same time provide a glimpse of the interior, tell of the ideals of the Bauhaus. Inside, around 1,000 exhibits - just a fraction of the second largest Bauhaus collection in the world with 50,000 pieces - bring everyday life at the school to life. The focus here is not on the design icons, but on the artistic experiment of the students. While some museum visitors delve into letters, sketches, photos, newspaper articles and technical drawings, others are impressed by the staged pieces of furniture, theater figures or lights.

Others slip into the role of the Bauhaus student. They take lessons from Kandinsky on the touchscreen, playing with shapes, colors and structures. Or look out for exhibits with the prompt "Touch". Here, visitors can feel surfaces, grasp fabrics or try out constructions. For example, a lamp on which movable bowls also shift the effect of the light.

And in addition to everything that can be experienced permanently in Dessau, the anniversary begins in March 2026 with the opening of five additional exhibitions. A jam-packed calendar of events will be followed by festivals, conferences and artistic performances. Not forgetting the Bauhaus Festival in September 2025. Then it flashes up, the bright, deliberately provocative student hustle and bustle of 100 years ago.

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