"Absolutely Palpable Utopias": The Expressionist Ideas Behind Bruno Taut's GEHAG Housing Estates

Shannon Pruden

For viewers familiar with Bruno Taut and the Crystal Chain's fanciful and impractical architectural designs, it would be easy to be disappointed by Taut's later projects. The buildings Taut designed in the late 1920s bear few visible similarities to the expressionistic building and city plans he sketched during and immediately following the First World War. As such, Taut's works are often separated into distinct stylistic periods. Architectural historian Rosemarie Haag Bletter suggests that "stylistic categorization can, in effect, become an impediment to our understanding" of Taut's work.[1] Her comparison of Taut's expressionist and post-expressionist designs highlights Taut's continued commitment to socialist utopian ideals. [2] This paper will treat Taut's expressionist period as a self-conscious attempt to clarify his architectural and socialist convictions. By situating his successive architectural phases in historical context, this paper will focus on Taut's Britz Horseshoe Estate to show how the ideas he explored during his expressionist phase continued to influence the design of the residential housing complexes he built with GEHAG in the late 1920s.

Discussions of German expressionist architecture place the movement in the historical context of the First World War and the 1918 November Revolution. In many cases, this contextualization is used to dismiss the movement as an irrational response to the war, or as a hysterically optimistic product of the revolutionary fervour of the November Revolution.[3] Even historians who defend the movement against accusations of fanaticism, like Wolfgang Pehnt, are careful to emphasize that "the expressionist blueprint is bound to its particular historical moment," and that there is "no hope for a revival of expressionism."[4] These characterizations of the movement imply that expressionist architecture was nothing more than a reactionary movement too detached from reality to contribute to the future evolution of modern functionalist architecture. However, these statements fail to acknowledge that Bruno Taut—sometimes referred to as the "catalyst of major expressionist developments in architecture"—can be confidently identified as a major figure in the rational New Building movement.[5] Iain Boyd Whyte's analysis of Weimar culture highlighted that Taut became one of the most "vigorous advocates of rationalist and functionalist design and technology in the 1920s."[6] Bletter's argument that architects "did not change hats as they passed from one period into the next" certainly makes it possible for expressionist

[1] Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," *Art Journal* 43, no. 2 (1983): 117.
[2] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," 116.
[3] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity" 112.
[4] Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture,* trans. J.A. Underwood and Edith Küstner (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 12.
[5] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," 111. ; Sabine Hake, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008): 99, ProQuest ebrary edition.
[6] Iain Boyd Whyte and David Frisby, eds., *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 462, ProQuest ebrary edition.

ideas to have infiltrated Taut's post-war social housing projects and demands an analysis of his intellectual development and architectural intentions.[7]

The main principles of expressionist architecture are clearly embodied in the fanciful, impractical architectural illustrations Taut created between 1916 and 1920. These sketches include his infamous pacifist utopia *Alpine Architecture* and his contributions to the Crystal Chain correspondence. The Crystal Chain was a short-lived group of like-minded architectural thinkers founded by Taut that sought to exercise their imaginations by creating imaginary architectural projects. Historians agree that *Alpine Architecture* was never intended as a serious architectural proposal but as a critical reminder that the energy devoted to the First World War could have been put to better use.[8] However, the inclusion of some Crystal Chain sketches in the 1920 "New Building" Exhibition earned Taut a reputation as a hopeless romantic detached from the real world. Rationalist architect Le Corbusier dismissed Taut's expressionist architectural designs as the product of "twisted distressing neurasthenia."[9] What Le Corbusier failed to recognize was that Taut's designs were not created as serious architectural projects. Taut's introduction to the Crystal Chain correspondence makes clear that the work was intended as a mental exercise. He explicitly stated that the Crystal Chain correspondence was intended to provide the group of like-minded thinkers with an opportunity to "gather our strength" so that "when building begins again we shall know our objectives and be strong enough to protect our movement."[10] It is important to understand that Taut's sketches were exhibited in the hope of fostering public interest in the ideas that motivated his designs. The 1920 "New Building" Exhibition deliberately included Taut's fanciful sketches in the hope that these otherworldly images would foster widespread interest in the socialist architectural agenda of the exhibition organizers'.[11] These ideas and convictions are best understood when one considers Taut's association with German science-fiction novelist Paul Scheerbart and with the Berlin-based Arbeitsrat fur Kunst, the Worker's Council for Art.

Paul Scheerbart's writings on glass architecture directly influenced Taut's expressionist designs and this association was partly responsible for Taut's reputation as a romantic, visionary architect. In order to understand Scheerbart's ideas, his writings need to be placed in the broader cultural context of early twentieth-century social disillusionment. Many European cultural critics and artists of the 1910s, including Adolf Loos, F.T. Marinetti and Wassily Kandinsky, believed that they lived in a time of cultural decay and wanted to create a new, purer society. Scheerbart shared this conviction and expressed his belief that coloured glass architecture could be used to construct a purer society in his novels and short stories.[12] Bletter connected Scheerbart's fascination with glass to the nineteenth-century German Romantic Movement's use of the crystal as a symbol of spiritual regeneration.[13] Whyte suggested that

[7] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," 118.
[8] Ruth Eaton, *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002): 166.
[9] Le Corbusier, *Esprit Nouveau*, no. 25, July 1924, quoted in Maria Stavrinaki, "Big Flower, Small Root: Germany, War and Revolution According to Le Corbusier," *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 2 (2011): 175.
[10] Bruno Taut to The Crystal Chain, 24 November 1919, in *The Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and his Circle*, ed. and trans. Iain Boyd Whyte (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 19.
[11] Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, 90-91.
[12] John A. Stuart, "Unweaving Narrative Fabric: Bruno Taut, Walter Benjamin, and Paul Scheerbart's 'The Gray Cloth,'" *Journal of Architectural Education* 53, no. 2 (1999): 62-65.
[13] Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "The Interpretation of the Glass Dream-Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, no. 1 (1981): 30.

Taut's enthusiastic adoption of Scheerbart's ideas and their influence on his expressionist designs is indicated by his decision to sign his Crystal Chain letters with the pseudonym Glas and, more concretely, by his use of the material in the ideal cities he designed in *Alpine Architecture* and "The City Crown" (figures 1-2).[14] The light radiating off the colourful crystalline forms Taut placed at the center of these ideal cities proves that he shared Scheerbart's belief that glass architecture could be used to awaken "all deep and great feelings" and inspire "cosmic transcendental thoughts" that would purify society.[15]

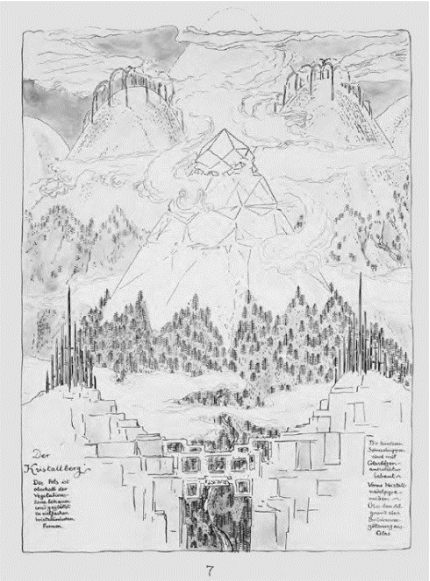

Figure 1 Bruno Taut, Alpine Architecture, illustrated plate, 1919, from https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/341499584230368545/

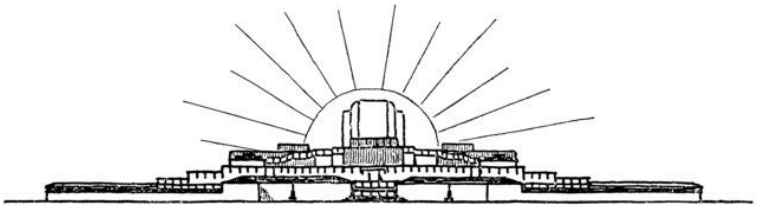

Figure 2 Bruno Taut, The City Crown—View Towards the East, 1919, from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/229992690_fig1_Figure-14-The-City-Crown-perspective-view-Drawing-by-Bruno-Taut-Reproduced-courtesy

However, Taut's expressionist designs are not pure illustrations of Scheerbart's ideas. They combine Scheerbart's ideas about the transformative power of architecture with revolutionary socialist ideas. Many German artists and intellectuals, including Taut, believed that the 1918 November Revolution laid the foundation for a new socialist society. Along with a group of artists and architects, Taut founded the Worker's Council for Art in the hopes that they could use art and architecture to guide the development of this future society.[16] In "The City Crown" (1919) Taut proposed that embedding architecture with socialist ideas could help foster enduring social order and harmony.[17] He believed that human communities required a spiritual focal point to prevent them from giving their lives meaning through conflict.[18] This belief led him to conclude that the only idea that could unite "the city today is socialism."[19] One of the main goals of The Worker's Council for Art was to articulate these beliefs and make them more accessible to the public. Taut and the Worker's Council hoped that utopian architectural sketches would force the public to contemplate how socialist values could dramatically transform society and encourage the public to adopt these values. [20] Taut's faith in the transformative power of socialism makes it easier to reconcile his utopian city designs with the housing projects he executed in the 1920s.

[14] Whyte, introduction to *The Crystal Chain Letters*, 8-9.
[15] Bruno Taut, "The City Crown" (1919), trans. Ulrike Altenmüller and Matthew Mindrup, *Journal of Architectural Education* 63, no. 1 (2009): 131.
[16] Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, 89.
[17] Taut, "The City Crown," 131-132.
[18] Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, 82.
[19] Taut, "The City Crown," 126.
[20] Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture*, 91.

By 1920 Taut grew tired of designing imaginary buildings intended to foster the public's interest in the creation of a new world. In one of his last contributions to the Crystal Chain correspondence he noted, "I no longer want to draw utopias 'in principo' but absolutely palpable utopias that 'stand with both feet on the ground.'"[21] Taut's frustrated rejection of imaginary utopian designing does not mean that he abandoned the ideas that motivated these designs. Rather, it shows that he tried to find a way to translate these ideas into realistic building plans that could actually be constructed.[22] Though his structures bear very little physical resemblance to the radiant, crystalline forms he sketched between 1916 and 1919, Weimar architectural and cultural historians, such as Sabine Hake, generally agree that the public housing estates Taut designed in the late 1920s successfully combined his utopian socialist ideas with functional designs.[23] When the German mark stabilized in 1924, the first item on Berlin's municipal agenda was the construction of large-scale public housing estates. The construction of public housing estates on the outskirts of the city to replace the over-crowded tenement blocks traditionally used to house the working class was motivated by the new municipal government's desire to demonstrate its progressive social values and its interest in the wellbeing of the working class.[24] It is easy to see how this municipal agenda aligned with Taut's socialist values.

Martin Wagner, the architect appointed head of Greater Berlin municipal planning in 1926 and the man recognized as the driving force behind the creation of Berlin's large-scale public housing estates, shared many of Taut's social ambitions. Wagner was responsible for Taut's appointment as the chief architect of GEHAG—the association of Berlin trade unions that commissioned and financed the construction of cooperative housing estates—which highlights the affinity between the two men's ideas.[25] Wagner shared Taut's belief that altering the physical layout of spaces could influence social habits and human relationships.[26] The design of Taut and Wagner's Britz Horseshoe Estate (1925-1933) demonstrates how they used architecture to foster a sense of community. The common consensus of architectural historians is that the Britz Estate's horseshoe design was intended to separate the estate from the rest of Berlin and the capitalist values entrenched in the city's industrial heart (figure 3). Moreover, scholars suggest that the inward-looking, three-story apartment buildings were deliberately organized around communal green-spaces to create an intimate, shared environment. [27] Taut and Wagner hoped that this environment would foster social interaction and provide the complex's inhabitants with a sense of community that would replace the stringent class divisions created in a capitalist environment.[28] The fact that the Britz Estate was criticized for being "too nice for the working class" and that Zehlendorf's

[21] Bruno Taut to the Crystal Chain, 2 September 1920, in *The Crystal Chain Letters*, 155.
[22] Stuart, "Unweaving Narrative Fabric," 68.
[23] Hake, *Topographies of Class*, 46.
[24] Hake, *Topographies of Class*, 31-38.
[25] Barbara Lane Miller, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 104, ACLS Humanities ebook.
[26] Hake, *Topographies of Class*, 40.
[27] Volker M. Welter, "The Limits of Community—The Possibilities of Society: On Modern Architecture in Weimar Germany," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 1 (2010): 73-75.
[28] Paul L. Knox, *Palimpsests: Biographies of 50 City Districts, International Case Studies of Urban Change* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2012): 120, ProQuest ebrary edition.

middle class inhabitants opposed the construction of Taut's Uncle Tom's Cabin Estate (1926-1931) proves that Taut's designs succeeded in subverting the traditional social order created by capitalism.[29]

Figure 3 Bruno Taut, Britz Horseshoe Estate, 1922 from, http://architectuul.com/architecture/view_image/britz-horseshoe-estate/488

Taut's interest in socialist ideas and his belief that architecture could be used to transform capitalist society bridges the gap between his expressionist utopias and his post-war public housing estates. However, it is still difficult to reconcile his fantastic, coloured glass city sketches with the functionalist, standardized housing estates he designed for GEHAG. Nevertheless, Taut's contemporaries were quick to read elements of his designs as expressionistic outbursts. In 1927 Leo Adler criticized the completed portion of Taut's Britz Estate. He commented, "Unfortunately, despite all the lip service paid to rationalization, it has to be acknowledged that rational judgment still continues to be swayed and overruled by maudlin emotion."[30] Adler's criticism highlighted Taut's use of coloured plaster and his decision to place the windows in his stairwells at landing height (figures 4-5). Adler emphasized that these design elements increased building costs to support his argument that Taut's design was not entirely rational. In addition, he drew attention to the fact that the design was motivated by Taut's interest in "dazzl[ing] the people ascending the stairs" and influencing people's emotions

[29] Ibid., 120.
[30] Leo Adler, "Housing Estates in the Britz District of Berlin" (1927), trans. Michael Loughridge in *Metropolis Berlin,* 483.

through the use of colour.[31] Adler's criticisms are significant because they indicate that Taut's contemporaries were able to see a connection between Taut's irrational, expressionist designs and his functionalist GEHAG housing projects. Moreover, Adler's comments reveal that Taut's interest in using architectural forms to inspire transformative emotions survived his decision to abandon the Crystal Chain and turn his back on imaginary utopian designing.

Figure 4 Bruno Taut, Britz Horseshoe Estate, 1925-1933, from https://architectureinberlin.wordpress.com/2008/10/11/the-britz-horseshoe-estate-bruno-taut-martin-wagner/

Figure 5 Bruno Taut, Britz Horseshoe Estate, 1925-1933, from https://architectureinberlin.wordpress.com/2008/10/11/the-britz-horseshoe-estate-bruno-taut-martin-wagner/

Modern scholars often relate Taut's use of brightly painted facades to his expressionist period (figure 5). It has been argued that Taut's use of bright colours recalls expressionist artists' interest in synaesthesia.[32] More importantly, Taut's use of colour and glass in the Britz Estate recalls the spirit of the crystalline utopias he designed between 1916 and 1920. Taut's expressionist and post-expressionist designs were both motivated by his desire to use architecture to transform society. Like Scheerbart, Taut believed that architecture could be used to inspire an emotional revelation that would enable individuals to recognize a form of universal morality that would change how people interacted with each other.[33] While the post-war economy made it impossible for Taut to design the crystalline palaces he proposed in his utopian publications, the ideas behind these designs directly inspired the Britz Estate and his other GEHAG constructions. It is certain that Taut's decision to use bright, saturated colours was motivated by his belief that these colours would lift people's spirits and

[31] Ibid., 484.
[32] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," 114-117.
[33] Matthias Schirren, *Bruno Taut, Alpine Architektur: A Utopia* (München: Prestel, 2004): 22.

foster a sense of community that would challenge capitalist values.[34] Thus, in a way, the brightly coloured facades of Taut's GEHAG housing estates served the same spiritual function as the crystal palaces Taut designed in *Alpine Architecture* and "The City Crown." The Britz Estate's use of colour remind us that Taut never abandoned the ideas that inspired his imaginary utopias.

Bruno Taut's commitment to socialist ideas and his conviction that architecture could transform modern society is evident in his expressionist and in his post-expressionist designs. Taut's own conception of his expressionist period as a mental exercise counters the claims of critics who suggested that the inherently irrational character of his fanciful expressionist sketches would prevent expressionism from contributing to the development of modern, functionalist architecture. However, the fact that the public housing estates Taut designed for GEHAG, such as the Britz Estate, served as models for future housing developments in both Germany and the rest of Europe disproves these claims. The designs of Taut's public housing estates are inseparable from the ideas he explored in his expressionist fantasies. Only in the context of Taut's belief that architectural forms could influence human interactions and his desire to create a socialist society can the design of the Britz Estate be understood. Taut never entirely abandoned his expressionist principles. Rather, he stopped sketching imaginary architecture so that he could focus on creating "absolutely palpable utopias" in the real world.

[34] Bletter, "Expressionism and the New Objectivity," 117.

Bibliography

Bletter, Rosemarie Haag. “Expressionism and the New Objectivity.” *Art Journal* 43, no. 2 (1983): 108-120.

_____. “The Interpretation of the Glass Dream-Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, no. 1 (1981): 20-43.

Eaton, Ruth. *Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment.* London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Hake, Sabine. *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. ProQuest ebrary edition.

Knox, Paul L. *Palimpsests: Biographies of 50 City Districts, International Case Studies of Urban Change.* Basel: Birkhäuser, 2012. ProQuest ebrary edition.

Lane, Barbara Miller. *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918-1945.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985. ACLS Humanities e-book.

Mertins, Detlef. “The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass.” *Assemblage* 29 (1996): 6-23

Pehnt, Wolfgang. *Expressionist Architecture.* Translated by J.A. Underwood and Edith Küstner. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973.

Schirren, Mattias. *Bruno Taut, Alpine Architektur: A Utopia.* München: Prestel, 2004.

Stavrinaki, Maria. “Big Flower, Small Root: Germany, War and Revolution According to Le Corbusier.” *Oxford Art Journal* 34 (2011): 157-177.

Stuart, John A. “Unweaving Narrative Fabric: Bruno Taut, Walter Benjamin and Paul Scheerbart’s ‘The Gray Cloth.’” *Journal of Architecture Education* 53 (1999): 61-73.

Taut, Bruno. “The City Crown” (1919). Translated by Ulrike Altenmüller and Matthew Mindrup. *Journal of Architectural Education* 63, no. 1 (2009): 121-134.

Welter, Volker M. “The Limits of Community—The Possibilities of Society: On Modern Architecture in Weimar Germany.” *Oxford Art Journal* 33 (2010): 65-80.

Whyte, Iain Boyd, editor and translator. *The Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and His Circle.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985.

_____, and David Frisby, eds. *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940.* Berkley: University of California Press, 2012. ProQuest ebrary edition.