Designing One Nation

Schreiter, Katrin

Published by Oxford University Press


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CHAPTER I

Form Follows Function

*Industrial Design and the Emergence of Postwar Economic Culture*

In 1967, Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School and then émigré to the United States, wrote a letter to the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, BMWi) to intervene in the debate about state funding for design institutions. Expressing his astonishment about West Germany’s limited use of design resources to enhance the national prestige of its production, Gropius warned that the federal government was making an enormous mistake: “More than ever, I am convinced that the solution to cultural-political questions touched upon by design belong at the center of public interest, not the periphery.” After all, design institutions such as the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus had once asserted Germany’s international leadership in modernist aesthetics, the architect maintained. Convinced that the Bauhaus tradition had been appraised “inaccurately” by the political and cultural elites in Germany, he identified “a lack of connections to powerful figures in government and economy after the war” as the real reason for this negligence.¹

Gropius’s intervention came at a moment of cultural crisis in West Germany that placed the rational-modern aesthetics of functionalism at the center of public political debate. Material culture was one of many battlefields on which the 1968 generation challenged the conservative reconstruction values of Adenauer’s Germany. Disappointed by how little two decades of efforts at cultural reinvention had achieved in terms of creating a truly democratic West German society, social movements demanded a more honest examination of Germany’s national culture, not least in regard to the Nazi past. Their requests led to the realization that, because Adenauer had prioritized Western integration and Cold War competition with the GDR over dealing honestly with the legacy of the Third Reich, postwar aesthetics had lost their impetus for true democratic reform. This in
turn enabled the GDR eventually to reclaim modern, functional aesthetics and production ethics for the socialist project in the East. Curiously, the cultural crisis in the West put the two German national aesthetics on a path of convergence.

While the late 1960s were thus a watershed moment in pan-German aesthetic development, the expatriate Gropius could not have been further from the truth in his evaluation of industrial design’s significance in postwar Germany. An analysis of institutionalization processes in cultural and economic politics of the immediate postwar years on either side of the Iron Curtain reveals how deeply interlinked and invested the interwar design elites were in the construction of postfascist societies. In fact, interior design and questions pertaining to the creation of new ways of living in East and West Germany received much attention as well as resources from the governments due to pressing demands for housing and, consequently, furniture.

Meanwhile, the war-scarred economy required efficient use of limited resources. Officials looked for structural solutions that could cultivate an economic culture built on greater coherence among the different participants in the production and consumption processes. Both Bonn and East Berlin supported proposals to develop institutions that would professionalize designers, acquaint producers with the merits of quality, or “good,” design, and educate consumers in questions of style and taste to create the “right” demand within the scope of available resources. Contrary to Gropius’s assertion that interwar design and its proponents had been forgotten, the members of the Werkbund and Bauhaus in particular pioneered this material cultural reinvention in both Germanys. Moreover, the rational aesthetic philosophy of interwar modernism served as a common point of reference in East and West Germany, alternating between an ideal to aspire to and a foil to reject, but in either case shaping German postwar culture. While the discourse first focused on aesthetics as the visual communicator of societal change and progress, this was not an entirely cultural undertaking. Despite vast changes in levels of prosperity and general public well-being on either side of the border over the first two postwar decades, the discursive concepts that tied the idea of “good design” to sensible economics remained stable.²

What happened during this period of design institutionalization in the years from 1945 to 1967 that led Gropius to assume that postwar West Germany had neglected the legacy of Bauhaus modernism? To answer this question this chapter follows debates surrounding the politicization of aesthetics as well as their institutionalization in East and West Germany from a comparative perspective. It does so to illuminate the cultural and economic reconfiguration of two divergent German political systems, marred by their National Socialist past, whose
attempts at rehabilitation extended from the public sphere all the way into the homes of the population. As a unified future moved out of reach with the introduction of the West German Mark (Deutsche Mark, DM) or D-Mark in 1948, the two German states explored diverging aesthetic options to develop identities for their part of the country. Cultural concerns about reconstruction design and living standards, often fought out in the field of economics, increasingly mirrored domestic and international tensions over the question of Germany’s division. It is thus important to consider how developments in both German states influenced each other.

At the same time, the reconstruction challenge connected the two Germanys to debates that were happening in other societies, illuminating the European dimension of postwar cultural and economic reform. For instance, Swedish and British design institutions inspired the German institutionalization process and served as a point of reference for both the West German Design Council (Rat für Formgebung, RfF) and the East German Central Institute for Design (Zentralinstitut für Formgestaltung, ZfF; renamed Amt für industrielle Formgestaltung, AiF, in 1972). Britain established its Council of Industrial Design “to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry” in 1944.3 Dedicated to quality control, consumer education, and national trademark promotion, this institution would be decisive in shaping a cohesive aesthetic for British national design and projecting a modern image abroad.4 Turning a war economy to peacetime production presented a parallel challenge, and thus the Germans were eager to learn. But the fact that in Germany this process began under Allied occupation added another layer to the debate. Both American and Soviet occupiers attempted to envelop their part of Germany culturally into their sphere of influence, which remained a contentious issue domestically and internationally throughout the reconstruction period.

Looking at political action and reactions on both sides of the Iron Curtain highlights exchanges across the increasingly fortified inner-German border and tenable analysis of how these exchanges shaped structural and cultural developments in East and West Germany. It also furthers understanding of how political and structural differences influenced the ability of modernism’s disciples to realize their vision of postfascist modernity in democratic and socialist societies. Cultural exchange across the Wall has been documented before, often as influenced by Americanization or Westernization.5 While Western influence certainly figured largely as a backdrop to Germany’s postwar consumerist turn, Americanization is a less helpful concept when looking at industrial design as a professional field, as it threatens to overemphasize Allied influence in this area of
German cultural development and to underplay the legacy of interwar aesthetics in the German-German relationship. East German designers in particular have been portrayed as uninspired copyists, who followed Western trends to answer public demand and were thus complicit in the regime’s strategy to bribe the GDR population via consumer goods in return for political support. Such a view eclipses GDR design’s creative potential while focusing on the East’s consumer good production output, which admittedly remained inferior throughout the Cold War due to the lack of appropriate machinery and quality materials, and mismanagement. In fact, a rich and visionary discourse took place in the GDR that far exceeded West German thinking about the material environment and its place in postwar society. Tracing the politics of German postwar design in both national cultures underscores mutual fertilization, while revisiting assumptions about East German achievements, or the purported lack thereof, that have developed in public memory.

The Long Shadow of National Socialism: Reinterpreting German Modernism

Historical scholarship on German industrial design has established that aesthetics did not change very much from 1925 to 1965; “What did change . . . was the cultural meaning and representation of design, as the very same objects were embraced by dramatically incongruous political regimes as visual markers of their specific political projects,” historian Paul Betts explains. This time frame brackets the heyday of modernism referenced in Gropius’s comments, a time of great influence for the German architecture and design reformers of the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus. The Werkbund, an association of architects, artists, and aesthete industrialists founded in 1907, had a long tradition of involvement in German cultural politics. It adopted “social aesthetics” as its cause, which the association promoted via exhibitions, competitions, and publications until the National Socialist regime absorbed it into its cultural organizations in 1933. Founded by Walter Gropius in 1919, the avant-gardist Bauhaus school has become synonymous with German modernism in architecture, photography, painting, and product design. Germany’s politically tumultuous first half of the twentieth century continuously affected how the Werkbund and the Bauhaus operated in changing political environments.

Since the Wilhelmine period, Werkbund activities had focused on forging ties to political circles to fund their vision of modernity based on the moral and educational value of everyday objects. They reacted against the mechanizing
elements of industrialization, which had been perceived as a threat to traditional craftsmanship and the cultural value of goods since the second half of the nineteenth century. Werkbund members, theorists and practitioners alike, looked to reconcile industrial production (standardization) and design (spiritualization) in aesthetic, social, and economic regards. They strove to achieve a quality of objectivity “through adopting a rational approach to form-giving, guided by the requirements of engineering and technology, which were deeply respected.”

Emphasizing the use of quality materials and simple, functional shapes, the association promoted the concept of “good design” as a middle ground between alienating mechanical asceticism and abundant decoration to introduce a material culture of modern everyday objects. In later years, the credo “form follows function” united the Bauhaus with these Werkbund ideas.

The post–World War I era saw an expansion and radicalization of such design conceptions, which developed traction particularly in urban planning and public housing. The Great Depression abruptly ended a period of state-supported architectural experimentation in 1929, leaving many ideas for the industrial age unexplored, and the Werkbund henceforth struggled with its association with this vision of failed industrialism. The movement thus came under attack both from the political left and right. Werkbund ideals for industrial modernism presented a provocation to cultural conservatives who feared that industrialization would do away with distinctly German culture. On the left, radical Marxists condemned Werkbund elites for being detached from the masses and wasting their talents on designing luxuries. With the Nazi seizure of power, the Werkbund ceased to exist as a private association and was brought first under the jurisdiction of Joseph Goebbels’s Reich Chamber of the Visual Arts (Reichskammer der bildenden Künste) and later under that of the Reich Chamber of Culture (Reichskulturkammer). Despite their different political perspectives, Werkbund industrial modernism and Nazi culture, with its agricultural “blood and soil” ideology, proved to be compatible at least in the realm of industry, rationalization, and propaganda.

It was this aesthetic and political legacy against which the Werkbund had to reconstitute after World War II. Indeed, its problematic involvement with the Nazi regime was something that the Werkbund desired to leave in the past. In contrast, the 1933 closure of the Bauhaus and the resulting emigration of most of its teachers freed the Bauhaus legacy from any allegations of complicity with the Nazi regime. In postwar West Germany, the term “Bauhaus modernism” carried an antifascist connotation, rendering it initially a safer aesthetic reference than
“Werkbund functionalism” in the public sphere. Bauhaus modernism served as shorthand for everything that National Socialism opposed. As a result, this term distinguished the Federal Republic culturally from the Third Reich, but it also released both theoreticians and practitioners of industrial design from any inherent necessity to seriously consider design’s sociopolitical function. Moreover, modernism’s association with an untainted past made it difficult for the intellectual elite to critique the aesthetics and their political instrumentalization in postwar Germany. Associated with Western democratic values, art historian Frederic J. Schwartz concludes, Bauhaus aesthetics left the Federal Republic without the necessary reference points, concepts, or terminology to move beyond its past.

Nevertheless, the devastated and bombed-out cities offered the Werkbund a new beginning and manifold opportunities for imprinting its principles on postwar material culture. In a turn away from the visual politics of fascism that emphasized the aestheticization of the relationship between people in the public arena, such as Albert Speer’s grandiose productions for the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, NSDAP) mass rallies, the postfascist campaign focused on the private sphere. In an effort to overcome the administrative and economic divisions imposed by Allied occupation, the Werkbund joined forces with former Bauhaus students in both the eastern and western zones of Germany to encourage the institutionalization of industrial design with the deliberate goal of maintaining a unified cultural identity. Yet the aesthetic continuity with Weimar functionalism in spite of political change posed challenges for the successive regimes on German territory: how to instill new meaning into the relationship between politics and design, between people and things, when the material culture, for all intents and purposes, looked the same?

Immediately after the war, the Werkbund re-established regional groups in the eastern and western occupation zones in cities like Dresden, East and West Berlin, Düsseldorf, and Stuttgart. The association quickly gained official recognition with the western authorities. By the summer of 1948, regional governments subsidized the Werkbund group West-Nord with DM 10,000 annually and the Bavarian cultural ministry generously gave its regional group DM 60,000 per year. Public financial support signified an acknowledgment of design as a constitutive part of the reconstruction effort and an early flirtation with modernist aesthetics in the West. Such official cooperation considerably facilitated the Werkbund’s later involvement in the foundation of a West German
design council that would continue the association’s mission to prevent the production of kitsch and educate the consumer about the “right” consumption.

The Werkbund bid for aesthetic leadership in the Federal Republic with two domestic culture exhibitions mounted in Cologne and Stuttgart in 1949. *New Dwelling and How to Dwell?* showed modernist solutions for small families in the bombed-out cities in Germany’s west. Northern European, Swiss, and American influences were immediately visible. Any confidence in once-powerful Werkbund ideals existed only in the exhibitions’ reliance on abstraction for the product placement in the displays. Promoting pure minimalism in furnishings, *New Dwelling* prescribed Germans modesty in their consumer behavior. The exhibition encouraged moral choices based on a collective commitment to counter the corrupting influence of materialism, false abundance, or pretentious ornamentation. The Werkbund tied its tradition of taste education (*Geschmacksbildung*) to its struggle against kitsch, which had long been associated with social decay. Photographs from this exhibition show multifunctional room settings that are best described as empty. This decorating style stemmed from the poor state of the German economy, underscored by an outdated prewar product range peppered with barely finished prototypes. But it also expressed the Werkbund’s renewed search for socially responsible aesthetics. A poster proclaiming “Werkbund is no Luxury” (*Werkbund ist kein Luxus*) advertised a reincarnation of the failed interwar mission: to make affordable and well-designed products for the masses. The Economic Administration for the Tri-Zone publicly embraced the Werkbund effort, which heralded the dawn of national solutions to problems of Germany’s postwar housing crisis. Earlier that year, the Economic Administration had entered negotiations with the Werkbund about a “committee for design,” but this had not come to fruition because of unsettled finances and an alleged lack of dedication on the part of the Werkbund. Nevertheless, Werkbund members publicly announced the idea for a national “council for industrial design” at their annual congress in June 1949 in Cologne, underlining again their claim to cultural leadership in the everyday. With West Germany still under Allied occupation, the realization of such a council, however, hinged on the restoration of a German-led government to power and the right motivation for investment in cultural politics at the national level. Such motivation eventually materialized with the growing reappearance of German products on the global market.

Meanwhile, the Werkbund groups in the Soviet zone of occupation increasingly lost their political influence. The Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) cemented political leadership with the SED in 1946, a first step
Figure 1.1. Graphic designer Hanns Lohrer designed this poster advertising one of the first postwar Werkbund exhibitions, the How to Dwell? show in Stuttgart, 1949. Photograph courtesy of Werkbundarchiv—Museum der Dinge Berlin 020627. © Hanns Lohrer succession.
Irritated by the coercive centralization of most cultural fields, prominent Werkbund members, such as industrial designer Wilhelm Wagenfeld in East Berlin and architect Egon Eiermann in Dresden, emigrated to the West. Others committed to the Werkbund and Bauhaus principles holding stronger socialist ideals, such as industrial designers Mart Stam and Horst Michel and architect Selman Selmanagic, remained in the eastern zone. The SMAD opened schools for the education of designers, beginning with the Weimar University for Architecture and the Arts in 1946. Weimar, significant as the location of the first Bauhaus school, thus remained a postwar center for artists, architects, and designers. Horst Michel, an experienced member of famed architect and interior designer Bruno Paul’s studio, started an industrial design program there. Provincial Weimar turned out to be the perfect setting to reconstitute East Germany’s material culture, offering Michel and the university the opportunity for diverse partnerships with local industries.

In contrast to his West German counterparts who had practically unlimited possibilities in their approach to industrial design, Michel found his work increasingly circumscribed by socialist ideology and constraints of nascent political centralization. The challenge lay in materially expressing the immaterial virtues of socialism, which, Michel recognized, entailed not only the aesthetic education of designers but also the education of consumers to create the right demand for a socialist domestic environment. In Michel’s eyes, durability, honesty, effective use of materials, reduced storage and transportation costs, and the avoidance of moral decay and pretension of value appreciation via “unauthentic” materials or embellished surfaces marked good socialist design. These qualities fit perfectly with the eastern occupation zone’s plans for industrialization of crafts in large-scale production. At the same time, they closely aligned with the Werkbund vision in the West, equally concerned with the moral perils of kitsch. To Michel, kitsch embodied the reverse of socialist ideals, a complex concept of profit-induced diversity that differs from today’s definition of kitsch as cheap trumpery. Like other twentieth-century cultural critics, Michel blamed kitsch on capitalist industrialization and mass production:

It seems to be necessary to fight increasingly rampant kitsch and its inherent waste of resources at the level of the state and to influence the quality of products from crafts and industry. The multiplicity of shapes, more or less resulting from financial greed, the amassing of dishonest pomp on appliances of the everyday and basic commodities, as well as the wasting of
resources mean an exploitation of the people and dissipation of the people’s wealth.34

Anticipating the later GDR economic motto “if only good is produced, nothing bad can be sold,” Michel drafted a “Law Against the Exploitation of the People by Kitsch” and introduced it into the Thuringia regional parliament in 1947.35 While the Kitsch bill did not pass, he successfully introduced a quality seal for crafts and applied arts in Thuringia: a white lily and hammer in a blue circle. Retailers recognized the merits of the seal and priced these products higher, which in turn incentivized industry and crafts to produce better products. With the cooperation of local companies, Michel also assembled household wares and ceramics in large juried shows that created criteria for socialist good design. This practice continued in later years during standardization and Sortimentsbereinigung, an effort to reduce the number of models for a given product to increase Plan efficiency and industrial output.36 These episodes illustrate Michel’s involvement in ideological debates about production and kitsch even before the official founding of the German Democratic Republic. While his principled take on socialist good design aligned with economic policy, his aesthetic sensitivities would soon clash with official stylistic development under Soviet influence.

Between 1946 and 1948, the SMAD worked toward the centralization of cultural politics in cooperation with its German partners.37 Here the SED hoped to ensure uniformity in the political reorganization process that accompanied the growing German division. By May 1948 the SED announced an all-encompassing claim to cultural leadership at the party’s Culture Conference (Kulturtag): “[The Culture Conference] has illustrated the character of the Party as a party of culture in the broadest sense of the word as well as the leading intellectual force in Germany’s democratic reconstruction.”38 Henceforth, principles of party control, rather than artistic and aesthetic concerns, guided East German cultural and educational policies. Consequently, the Kulturtag marked the end of any assumed or aspired cultural unity between East and West. The decision to pursue a “socialist” culture in the eastern zone of occupation allowed the SED to model its part of Germany on the Soviet example, in contrast to the liberal cultural fabric of the Federal Republic. These contrasting approaches to cultural policy set the stage for similarly divergent national aesthetics in East and West Germany during the reconstruction period.
Separate Economies, Separate Design

The nascent cultural division between East and West deepened as the Western Allies took measures to solidify the war-damaged German economy. The Marshall Plan and the currency reform of 1948 cemented the separation, creating two German economies. Acting against the Allied agreement on Germany’s economic unity at the 1945 Potsdam conference, Britain, France, and the United States merged their occupation zones and treated this territory of the so-called Trizone as a single economic unit while de facto excluding the Soviet zone of occupation. Eventually, the subsequent Soviet blockade of Berlin between June 1948 and May 1949, challenging joint control over Berlin, effectively foreclosed Allied cooperation in Germany and complicated the status of Berlin. These events dashed hopes for a unified future and left Germany to emerge as the ideological battleground of the Cold War.

When East Germany achieved statehood as the German Democratic Republic in the fall of 1949, cultural delineation from the West became a pressing ideological concern. The construction of a national identity by the GDR included the socialist remaking of society and all its underlying structures. Toward these ends, early state socialism and its artistic proponents took a comprehensive approach to the human environment, discussing new ways of feeling, thinking, and living specific to the working class. Such efforts followed the example of the constructivists in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, an avant-garde movement that had shifted the focus from art for art’s sake to an active engagement in processes of sociopolitical restructuring inspired by the goals of the Bolshevik Revolution. The constructivist understanding of artistic production rendered every aesthetic decision a political one. Aesthetic expressions were meant to impact the population in its evolution toward revolutionary consciousness. Art and the material environment therefore played an important role in the education of the socialist individual and the creation of collective socialist identity.

While the constructivist bond between politics and culture had remained strong under Stalin, the carefully crafted relationship between art and the everyday was replaced by material culture that favored form and emotionality over function, a style commonly known as socialist realism. Socialist realist architecture, for instance, explored extremes, achieving monumental, heavily ornamented, and pompous aesthetics. Instead of integrating art into the everyday, under Stalin art came to dominate the design of everyday objects, betraying the ideas of the Bolshevik avant-garde. The GDR arrived at similar juncture in its
socialist aesthetic development about twenty-five years later, an outcome prede-
termined by the Soviet example.

During the years of occupation, the SMAD demanded German recognition
of Soviet cultural superiority. While Soviet influence remained considerable
after 1949, East Germans increasingly commanded their own state apparatus
and decision-making, at least in regard to domestic policies. Consequently, the
SED faced the task of creating the parameters of a German socialist culture,
which not only encompassed high culture forms of the arts in literature, paint-
ing, and music but also the culture of everyday life. Industrial design, the ma-
terial manifestation of socialist thought and its realization at the crossroads of
applied arts and economic planning, became part of this aesthetic reinvention.

East Germany’s socially conscious approach to cultural rebuilding did not go
unnoticed in the West. After Werkbund member Wilhelm Wagenfeld, one
of Germany’s most influential Bauhaus-trained designers, had left the East, he
warned Hermann Veit, the minister of Economic Affairs of Baden-Württem-
berg, in 1949: “I am from Berlin and, therefore, from the Germany beyond the
zone border. I have seen that we can counter the East only with a new intel-
lectual world and, thus, with new social empathy and thinking.” Wagenfeld
understood the intellectual appeal of socialism as he himself held leftist political
views and had remained loyal to the Werkbund mission that promoted design-
ers’ social responsibility. Most important though, by suggesting that western
material culture was to be inscribed with moral meaning, Wagenfeld pointed to
the need for a deeper rethinking of social and cultural structures to counter the
lure of socialist material collectivism. At the same time, his remarks show that
industrial design became a competitive field in the German Cold War, which
began to shape the West German discourse in contrast to the quickly developing
socialist alternative in the East.

Wagenfeld’s warning to the Baden-Württemberg administration echoed
West German intellectuals’ earlier antifascist campaigns for a complete break
with the German past. Their vision included an alternative material and so-
cial philosophy that stood in opposition to the so-called war-mongering forces
of nationalism and capitalism. They envisioned a social revolution that would
give birth to a humanized, non-Marxist Germany in the middle of a united
Europe led by the young generation with “its perceived condition of alienation
from the German past.” Yet this radical new beginning did not occur. Instead,
supported by the Western Allies, the older Weimar generation took control in
Bonn and quickly marginalized the leftists in the newly established capitalist
economic system.
This power shift emerged most clearly in West Germany’s foreign trade ambitions. As the country gradually reintegrated into international economic circles as a contributor to the reconstruction of Europe, West Germans longed to rekindle export relations and publicized their adherence to Western capitalist principles and peaceful economic competition. To test the waters, the Trizone participated in the Decorate Your House exhibition in New York in early 1949. It was the first time since World War II that the occupiers granted German industrialists permission to take part in an international trade event. In his opening remarks to the German industry show catalog, Ludwig Erhard, the director of the tri-zone economic administration, expressed his hope that the West German display would prove to the world that “the German people’s only desire today is to strive diligently for the improvement of human and social welfare and to show that they have kept their strength and ability for the accomplishment of this desire despite all the mistakes and the terror of the previous decade.” Yet Erhard downplayed the materialistic and commercial components of Germany’s participation in the fair, thereby missing an opportunity to establish a cultural bond based on shared attitudes toward trade and consumption with the West, particularly the United States. Instead, he placed German economic recovery in a moral and social context, thus emphasizing the ethical importance of aesthetic reinvention. New German aesthetics, he pronounced, should display industriousness and efficiency in the service of the common good, which implied a rejection of the pompous aesthetics connected to the public displays of National Socialism. Moreover, Erhard’s statement expressed the perhaps naïve sentiment among the West German political and economic elites that economic prosperity could replace, if not redeem, the vices of the Third Reich in public memory. In this way, politicians began to instill German products with symbolic meaning that went beyond economic values, but fell short of a progressive social vision.

Erhard embraced these material promises for a better future and promoted them abroad as new West German virtues. He described the New York exhibition displays as conveying the “honest work of German hands and minds.” The German trade show participation in New York thus marked a watershed moment in cultural diplomacy, which was henceforth wrapped in a rhetoric that equated aesthetic quality and material reliability with moral deliverance from the Nazi past, which, it was hoped, would improve West Germany’s international standing. These initial years of western economic activity coupled with a new morality laid the foundation for a West German democratic identity based on economic success that came to fruition during the “economic miracle” of the late 1950s and 1960s.
While the catalog clearly presented the message of a recivilized Germany, the material content of the New York displays failed to convince its intended audience. Showcasing curved, heavy recliners and an embellished display cabinet made of mahogany, the German exhibition received reviews that ranged from ridicule to outrage at what was regarded as impractical, pompous kitsch. Insecure about what kind of aesthetic could best demonstrate Germans’ reformed postwar attitudes, exhibitioners relied on best-selling Bavarian arts and crafts and Louis XV–style furniture. Such bold designs with extravagant use of materials, though, felt inappropriate amid the postwar scarcity of resources and living space. Critiques centered on the impression created of a culturally backward and arrogant Germany, the failure to break culturally with the Nazi past, and Germany’s abandonment of its heritage of international modernism. It gave cause for concern that products “made in Germany” could again gain a negative reputation on the global market. After this opprobrium in New York, West Germany’s political and industrial elites finally realized that aesthetic reinvention warranted more organized approaches.

The Struggle to Institutionalize Modern German Aesthetics

The following period from 1950 through 1953 proved critical in German state-directed industrial design as intensifying cultural debates led to the creation of design councils in East and West. After decades of lobbying, the Werkbund goals finally intersected with government interests in the early 1950s to create a modern German identity. Notably, the acknowledgment of the economic dimension of design in both Germanys resulted in the same conceptual shift: Both the East and West German governments created central institutions dedicated to the development of national aesthetics.

In stark contrast to the centralized state administration in the East, the federal organization of West Germany assigned the individual states authority for culture, education, and regional economic development. Within this pluralistic and decentralized state-building process, lobbying became a strong feature of West German political culture. The Werkbund aimed its lobbying activities at making the institutionalization of industrial design a governmental priority. The creation of a national Werkbund umbrella organization in 1950 under architect Hans Schwippert’s leadership decisively shaped the course of events. This united Werkbund successfully impressed upon the Adenauer administration the notion that a centralized governmental institution should oversee West Germany’s commodity aesthetic. With its close ties to Bonn’s political elite—Theodor
Heuss, the first president of the FRG, was a member—the Werkbund members were able to discuss the idea with representatives of the Federal Ministry of Economics and to win the support of parliamentarian Arno Hennig (Social Democratic Party, SPD) for the design council plans in the Bundestag. In October 1950, Werkbund member Heinrich König was invited to bring the plans for a national design council before the Bundestag Committee on Cultural Policy. Reminding the parliamentarians of the embarrassment at the New York exhibition, König connected Germany’s international reputation to domestic reconstruction needs: “Instead of handy, functional, and comfortable things to furnish the small apartments of public housing, producers offer heavy, pompous show-pieces of impractical arrangement.” König concluded that it created a situation in which “production continued with no regard to the real needs of the masses.” While economic connections between design and export rates dominated the ensuing discussion, the limited mentions of aesthetic considerations emphasized shaping a national style. Referencing national brands of world renown, such as Murano glass, Brussels lace, and French luxury commodities, expert witness Max Wiederanders reminded the committee to demand quality production that German consumers could trust. Although assimilation to foreign tastes was thought to increase exports, he regarded this to be of secondary importance as German workmanship in quality products would speak for itself. What was needed, according to the Werkbund and its supporters, was a national institution capable of executing a prescriptive and holistic aesthetic reform program. Yet, gaining unlimited support for a national design council proved difficult in the early years of the FRG, because it countered the trend of cultural decentralization.

At the same time, the heightened anticommunism of the early Cold War as well as the existence of the East German socialist alternative made the parliament suspicious about leftist influences on national aesthetics. Given this parliamentary apprehension and its historic connections to leftist reform movements, the Werkbund changed its strategy to complement the government’s two main interests in industrial design: export increase and the diplomatic value of material culture. At subsequent parliamentary hearings in 1950 and 1951, Werkbund representatives again invoked the embarrassment of the New York fair to stress the economic gains that the Federal Republic could acquire through the national organization of design activities. Eventually, the evident economic opportunity trumped concerns about undermining cultural federalism as the Bundestag voted in favor of the initiative with only one opposing vote in 1951. This vote swiftly formalized the Federal Republic’s claim to Weimar modernism, ensured
Werkbund control over design politics, and set the country on the path to finding a West German aesthetic that could withstand Americanization.

Indeed, the Western Allies, particularly the American military administration, intensified efforts to integrate West Germany culturally into the ranks of Western democratic nations. Financed by the Marshall Plan for Western Europe, the traveling exhibition *We Build a Better Life* introduced modern home design to the West German population in 1952. During its three-week run, it drew half a million visitors in Berlin (40 percent of them from the East), Hanover, and Stuttgart. The exhibition catalog announced that “the same taste, same needs, and same interests bond the Atlantic community tightly together.”62 This “same taste” was a commitment to a modernist aesthetic reminiscent of the Bauhaus, with clear lines, sparsely furnished rooms, and the limited use of patterned fabrics and ornamented household wares. Many of the objects had been recycled from the annual “good design” exhibitions at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), as Edgar Kaufmann Jr., curator of its industrial design department, had been hired for this Marshall Plan initiative by the US State Department.63 Much effort went into subduing the impression of cultural Americanization. US information officers stressed the inclusiveness of the aesthetic in press releases, and West German media conveyed the message: “There are different versions of one style and one way of life typical for a ‘western bourgeois’ household. Nothing is foreign to us, whether it comes from Berlin or Los Angeles, from Stockholm, Sicily or New York.”64 Nevertheless, many of the modern kitchen appliances had been imported from the United States and were unattainable by the average West German at the time.

In general, West German attitudes toward American patronage in industrial design were conflicted. US influence could not be completely avoided in the early years of the Federal Republic as American funding cofinanced a number of public institutions. For example, industrial designer Walter Kersting, an outspoken US critic, registered his concerns that American funding for the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, HfG Ulm) in Baden-Württemberg would give Americans control over German design. In a 1951 letter to Ludwig Erhard he wrote, “Above all, the idea that the United States will guide us to a new culture of design is no gain for the German reputation in the world.”65 Instead, Kersting pleaded for the founding of an exclusively German industrial design school, but to no avail. Eventually, Inge Scholl joined with Swiss designer Max Bill, a Bauhaus student and head of the Swiss Werkbund, in 1953 to found the school with American support that would provide a model for responsible political education. Its curriculum was to address the materialization of politics
through design, giving design a moral authority in defining the character of postwar life. The goal was to “educate a democratic elite as a counterforce against the tides of intolerance.” The HfG Ulm labeled itself the “New Bauhaus” in 1955, thus signaling to the world that antifascist resistance and international modernism were alive and well in the Federal Republic. It moreover reinforced West Germany’s claim to Bauhaus modernism as its cultural heritage. Financed mainly by the Scholl Foundation, the project was also funded by the regional government of Baden-Württemberg and the American high commissioner, John J. McCloy. Despite taking American money, HfG Ulm quickly developed a design vision with an anti-American stance that objected to Western mass consumerism. Bill, Scholl, and Scholl’s graphic designer husband Otl Aicher strove to develop designs that were driven by rational and systematic thinking, rather than style and fashion. “Within this,” art historian Jeremy Aynsley has observed about Ulm design, “the notion of timelessness was invoked as an
important criterion, defined against the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption and in-built obsolescence of the American system of industrial styling. The HfG’s story illuminates how the FRG, caught between the Western Allies’ vision for a new Germany and the ever-present communist alternative of East Germany in the early reconstruction years, needed its own strong institutions to shape its postfascist identity.

Encountering similar reconstruction challenges, the GDR fought its battles over the cultural policy of aesthetics that had the potential to turn East Germans into socialist citizens. In the early 1950s, the so-called Formalism Debate, an ideological-artistic dispute involving SED politicians and artists, discussed a more holistic approach to the aesthetics of the socialist material environment. Deeming socialist realism the official aesthetic, the party announced a radical reorientation of all areas of cultural activity at the Third Party Congress in July 1950. By displaying cultural coherence with the Soviet Union, the GDR government strove to present a contrast to West Germany. Yet, from the beginning, socialist realism also connected artistic expression to the task of enlightening and ideologically reeducating the working population in the spirit of socialism. Stressing modes of socialist production and class struggle, socialist realism focused on everyday work heroes, who built the socialist utopia, to inspire popular ideological identification. Folk culture, materially articulated in artisanal traditions, provided German national substance to the style. At the same time, East German politicians, led by State Council chair and general secretary of the SED Walter Ulbricht, a cabinetmaker by trade, denounced modern functionalism as artless, international, and cosmopolitan. Its lack of ornamentation, according to the SED, signified the missing element of national culture, and the reduction of its design to simple shapes made this aesthetic formulaic. The fact that West Germany embraced functionalism as its official aesthetic only reinforced the GDR’s political and ideological resolve to reject interwar modernism.

For a centrally organized state, East Germany’s cultural reorientation had far-reaching consequences for the freedom of artistic expression. To protest what was effectively censorship, the artistic community publicly challenged the party’s sweeping decision, but with minimal success. Over the course of three years, the government repeatedly defended its stance in newspapers and at public events. In this way, the Formalism Debate became less cultural and increasingly political in content. Alignment with the Soviet bloc outpaced the search for a homegrown modern socialist aesthetic that Horst Michel and others had begun and, eventually, the nationalistic values embedded in the realist aesthetics of
cultural Stalinism held sway. In January 1954, the GDR Council of Ministers commanded the furniture industry to develop aesthetically pleasing furnishings “based on the national cultural heritage.” Reminiscent of the style and ornamentation of the so-called founders’ period (Gründerzeit, c. 1870–1890), German cultural heritage in the GDR was thereafter to be expressed in artful decorations, curved lines, and expensive handicraft techniques. For instance, East Germany’s first major public housing project in East Berlin, the Stalinallee, showcased wedding cake–style facades, heavily adorned with sculptures and mosaics depicting workers and farmers. A coherent vision for the apartments’ interiors followed in a 1952 exhibition held in the first finished high-rise. The furnishings were bulky with patterned upholstery fabric. Pleated lampshades, lace curtains, and squat-shaped porcelain added a curious petit-bourgeois atmosphere. This emphasis on ornamentation came to represent simultaneously a search for a politically untainted past, a demonstration of integration into the Eastern Bloc, and cultural delineation from West Germany.

While some historical analysis has cast doubt on the political significance of the Formalism Debate—for instance pointing to the possibility that the SED used it to create the illusion of a participatory pluralistic public sphere—there is evidence of ideologues and functionalist designers, architects, and artists being
First, a number of applied art schools founded on Bauhaus teaching principles already existed in East Germany by 1950 led by steadfast socialists like Michel. The country depended on these schools to create consumer goods for reconstruction and thus wielded considerable influence. Second, the fact that the debate lasted approximately three years and was conducted in public speaks volumes about the earnestness with which politicians and cultural elites immersed themselves in the making of East German official culture. Interpretations of the Formalism Debate as a predetermined affair risk to miss the initial stage in negotiations between designers and the state over the place of interwar modernism in GDR design and the struggle against an unfamiliar culture of Soviet provenance.

Although praised in the initial reconstruction phase, Bauhaus modernism and its students comprised the main target of the political campaign against “formalism.” Despite the risk of losing their livelihood, the GDR Bauhaus disciples resisted state intervention in artistic expression. Mart Stam, a Dutch architect appointed as the first director of the new School for Applied Arts (Hochschule für angewandte Kunst) in Berlin Weissensee in 1950, became the most prominent casualty of the conflict. Stam had introduced the Bauhaus curriculum and methods in Weissensee. A socialist idealist, he had worked with architect and urban planner Ernst May on the New Building (Neues Bauen) public housing projects in Frankfurt on Main in the 1920s and helped build the industrial cities of Magnitogorsk, Makeyevka, and Orsk in the Soviet Union between 1930 and 1933. Stam additionally founded and headed the Weissensee Institute for Applied Arts (Institut für angewandte Kunst), the first inception of the East German design council. When cultural Stalinism gained the upper hand in the Formalism Debate, Stam and his wife left the GDR in 1953, disenchanted with the country where he had hoped to contribute his vision for a socialist way of life to a true Marxist state.

Stam’s departure simultaneously marked the end of the Formalism Debate and the beginning of the institutionalization of cultural Stalinism in East Germany. The remaining Bauhaus community viewed this development critically. In a surprisingly candid 1985 interview, Bauhaus-educated Selman Selmanagic, a highly regarded urban planner, interior designer, and architect, who had worked with Stam at both the Weissensee Institute and the School, lambasted the transformation of the institute into a government agency after Stam’s emigration. He saw Walter Heisig, Stam’s successor at the Weissensee Institute, as a person “without comprehension,” who “designed florets on ceramics and such kitsch.” Labeled as “German cultural heritage,” this naïve representation of reality was
henceforth the official aesthetic of the GDR. However, the practical influence of the institute on broader culture remained limited under Heisig’s leadership and he does not appear to have been a strong force in the search for an East German national aesthetic. The remaining Bauhaus disciples in East Germany left Berlin and went into artistic exile in the provincial centers of the GDR. For example, Stam’s student Martin Kelm started the independent Halle Institute for Design and Development with fellow Stam student Günter Reissmann in 1958. Many years would pass before East German disciples of modernism and their vision for the “workers and peasants’ state” regained political influence.

As it faded in the East, functional modernism was gaining political and cultural influence in the West after the Bundestag resolved to create the design council on 4 April 1951, to enhance the Federal Republic’s image abroad and promote the country’s exports. The council’s tasks, such as advising industry, helping to re-establish Germany’s competitiveness at international exhibitions and trade fairs, supporting design education in applied arts schools and professional training, and instructing traders and consumers about quality and design, imbued it with extensive influence over industry and consumers. The Werkbund seemed to have finally reached its goals of being the arbiter of West German good taste and reviving the prewar reform project.

Centralization of cultural power in the hands of the Werkbund, though, was counteracted by two factors: funding and personnel decisions. Industrial design, emerging as a new profession in postwar Germany, competed for state funding with the fine arts. While the Federal Ministry of the Interior supported the arts financially, industrial design did not fall under their jurisdiction. The connections politicians drew between industrial interests and design considerations resulted in the subordination of this new council for design (Rat für Formgebung) to the Ministry for Economic Affairs (BMWi). This decision, primarily based on budget considerations, inherently linked design to the promotion of products for export. In June 1953, the RfF was established in Darmstadt, Hesse, as a non-profit organization. West German economic interests, rather than the Werkbund’s cultural hegemony, subsequently played a key role in determining the state’s plan for the design council. The Werkbund could only effectively influence the planning of international exhibitions. This initial and fundamental conflict continued to generate strong infighting among different factions in the design council until the Werkbund officially withdrew from it in 1968.

The second factor undermining Werkbund influence from the start pertained to the selection criteria for RfF board membership. The original goal had been to create an advisory body of distinct personalities that took on cultural
leadership in the young republic. Yet the BMWi quickly abandoned this plan and, instead, pushed for including representatives from all economic fields. Minister of Economics Ludwig Erhard (1949–1963, Christian Democratic Union, CDU) initially appointed to the council sixteen designers and industrialists, almost all of whom were Werkbund members and aesthete industrialists. But Erhard then appointed twenty more unsalaried consultants—representatives of varying concerns such as crafts, labor unions, consumer organizations, and public administration—which caused discord between the government and the initial council members. The Werkbund especially objected to the appointment of Eduard Schlafejew as council director. Schlafejew had been a competent economic administrator in Erhard’s BMWi, which, in their eyes, made him a “puppet of industry” who lacked design expertise. Instead of an innovative and modern aesthetic mission, the Werkbund lamented, the council would become a pawn for economic interests, a “second Federal Trade Office.” This, the Werkbund feared, would strip the design council of cultural assertiveness and diminish its leadership in material culture. Lobbyist König, worried about a loss of control and influence, likened the situation to the Werkbund’s first experience with failing state-cooperation in the Weimar Republic under the Reich art supervisor (Reichskunstwart). After more than a year of negotiations with the ministry and threats of withdrawal from the project altogether, the Werkbund eventually chose to compromise. Leading members decided to work within the ministerial framework, which they believed to be a watered-down version of their design institution. They accepted Schlafejew’s appointment on the condition that longtime Werkbund member Mia Seeger be named general secretary.

With Seeger’s appointment, the Werkbund gained lasting artistic influence over the RfF. Seeger was an experienced “cultural broker of German modernism” whose organizational work included important Werkbund exhibitions, most notably the 1927 architectural exhibition Weissenhof Settlement (Weissenhofsiedlung) in Stuttgart. The legal status and the funding of the design council, however, remained contested between the Werkbund and government. In a pamphlet introducing the council and its agenda, the presidium labeled it a government-initiated “self-administrated organization” instead of a state institution. Both the federal government and the Bundestag had operated “from the assumption that broad segments of the German economy will recognize the importance of industrial design and support it.” In the end, it became clear that Bonn supported the council only due to Werkbund connections to the economic elites represented in the Federation of German Industries (Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie, BDI). After initial hesitation, West Germany’s business community strongly
supported the RfF. Large companies, such as Siemens and AEG, set up a foundation for industrial design, from which the design council drew some funds. Through overlapping membership the BDI was well represented in the Werkbund and vice versa. This overlap in membership further demonstrates that only a small group of designers and entrepreneurs shaped the inception of West Germany’s central design institution. Bonn’s increasing involvement in setting up the council, however, disabused industry of the notion that it could control the council, and therefore limited industry commitment in the long run.

Without wholehearted industry support the design council had major financial problems throughout its first two decades of existence. In its first five years from 1953 to 1957, the RfF received a moderate DM 70,000 annually. By comparison, the GDR later financed its design institution with state subsidies of 796,000 East German marks (Ostmark, M) in 1963, its first fiscal year. The British Council of Industrial Design had an annual budget of over DM 6 million, of which the state provided 3.5 million by 1967. At that point the RfF budget had grown to DM 220,000—still only a fraction of the funds available to the British Council of Design that year and less than a third of what the East German industrial designers had had in its first year of operation. In part this stemmed from West German industry bodies reneging in later years on their formal promise to support the RfF financially.

In the GDR, the creation of a central design institution comparable to the RfF began with the Weissensee Institute for Applied Art in 1952. In contrast to the West, the East initially thought design to be purely a part of the cultural development of a socialist society. The initial positioning of the institute under the Ministry for Culture indicates that the East German government still categorized industrial design as applied arts and not as an asset to economic development in the early 1950s. This notion possibly stemmed from the country’s focus on heavy industry in the early years of reconstruction, because of its importance for fulfilling the reparations that the Soviet Union demanded. And yet, by allocating most of its resources to coal mining and steel production, the GDR also emulated the economic principles that had catapulted the Soviet Union from the agricultural to the industrial age. However, this policy neglected consumer industries at the expense of living standards within the GDR. This meant an unfortunate delay in gratification for the hard-working population that suffered under consumer product shortages, while work norms simultaneously increased in 1952 and 1953 through these measures of economic Sovietization.

In the wake of Stalin’s death in the spring of 1953, this economic policy underwent a partial shift. The post-Stalinist New Course announced on June 9
reversed some of the measures, yet the work quotas remained in place and fueled the pent-up frustration among the population. Construction workers began a protest against the work norms on 16 June, and the demonstration spread from Berlin throughout the country the following day. The spontaneous uprising of some five hundred thousand people was put down with the help of Soviet tanks. In the aftermath of the bloody protests, the SED became even more aware of the political dimension of living standards. Public support, the regime learned, could be gained by improving the population’s material situation. This led to an emphasis on consumer products, exemplified by the shop window competition in divided Berlin in the 1950s.

The sealing of the German-German border on 13 August 1961 further heightened the political significance of consumer products. The Wall not only stemmed the tide of westward mass migration, but also temporarily cut off the flow of western goods into the GDR. This blockage aggravated the GDR’s supply problem, and it underscored the line between prosperity in the West and scarcity in the East. Investment in consumer product development became a new priority. The hope was that an official industrial design institution would create a distinct aesthetic in commodities that would represent an East German national identity and at the same time stave off popular desires for western goods. This endeavor was helped by international developments. In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 the United States and Soviet Union implemented a policy of peaceful coexistence between the Cold War blocs. The military de-escalation reinvigorated the ideological competition in other fields, among them consumer products and their design. GDR officials noted: “Peaceful coexistence has at its root the decisive, forceful battle against all manifestations of bourgeois ideology. Specific artistic problems are also to be classified in this broader political context.” That year, the newly founded Council for Industrial Design (Rat für Industrieform), a link to industry, joined the Weissensee Institute at the Ministry of Culture to implement state initiatives in the field of industrial design and to “supervise their realization through economic institutions, trade organizations and specialized institutes.”

At this critical point, Mart Stam’s student Martin Kelm utilized the centralized industrial design effort to increase the political responsibilities of the Weissensee Institut für angewandte Kunst under the new name of Central Institute for Design (ZfF) in 1963. Shortly thereafter, the ZfF under Kelm’s leadership began its ascent to prominence within the East German planned economy, foreshadowing the eventual success of functionalist design within East Germany’s production industries. The ZfF was the first East German government body
committed to forging a cohesive aesthetic that also exercised increasing influence in the economic planning process. Thereupon, throughout the 1960s, industrial design became more deeply anchored in the economic structures of the GDR. In 1965, the ZfF moved to an institution dedicated to standardization and product testing, the German Office for Standardization and Product Testing (Deutsches Amt für Messwesen und Warenprüfung, DAMW), a transfer that significantly changed the perception of industrial design’s role in the East German economy. The SED leadership began to see industrial design as part of a scientifically measurable process that enhanced products and optimized their competitiveness on the international market, rather than simply as a superficial beautification process.

The leadership change deposing Walter Ulbricht from power in 1971 facilitated Kelm’s rise on the career ladder. The new First Party Secretary General Erich Honecker, for whom Kelm’s wife worked as personal secretary, turned the ZfF into a government institution in its own right in 1972 and renamed it the Office for Industrial Design (Amt für industrielle Formgestaltung, AiF). Kelm had already been a member of the Council of Ministers, but as the director of the Office, he officially joined the economic planning apparatus. This gave him far-reaching authority in design decisions with power over other ministers. Two laws ensured that the central design institution remained the main arbiter of taste in the GDR and became crucial stepping stones for Kelm’s lasting influence over East German industrial design and the prevalence of the functionalists. First, the 1965 law required all nationalized companies (Volkseigene Betriebe, VEB) in the production industries to employ designers and, second, the 1973 law obliged all factories to “outsource” their industrial design work exclusively to the AiF. Whereas few people in the GDR design scene had praised Kelm’s artistic vision—in fact, some even criticized him as “uninspired”—he definitely was known to the political elite as a superb bureaucrat with excellent connections. Günther Mittag, a member of the Politbüro since 1958 and secretary of economics in the Central Committee since 1962, took Kelm under his wing. Mittag oversaw Kelm’s dissertation about the role of industrial design in socialism and vouched for his party credentials as well as his aesthetic vision for a socialist way of living.

The ascent to power of a functionalist like Kelm was noteworthy for completely contradicting GDR cultural policy. The 1965 transfer of the ZfF from the Ministry of Culture to the DAMW had seemed logical in the contemporary economic climate of standardization and production streamlining. Yet an interpretation of this event as the natural outcome of the East’s progress toward
economic production aesthetics would undervalue the ideological determination with which the political elite had shaped the discourse on socialist realist aesthetics. In fact, the SED apparatus was painfully aware of the ideological inconsistencies among industrial designers and their lack of loyalty to the official party line. In 1964, the Culture Department at the Central Committee of the SED (Zentralkommittee, ZK) reported, “Revisionist attacks from the applied arts against the cultural policies of the Party [that] are supported by some members of staff of the ZfF” to the secretariat. The industrial designers argued “against a connection between applied arts and our socialist ideology as well as against the designer’s task being to work according to the newly developing aesthetic necessities of socialist men.” Fearing that these challenges from within would break applied arts away from the “edifice of socialist aesthetics” and could even result in attacks on the principles of socialist realism in the fine arts, the Central Committee demanded a strict response to bring the ZfF back in line. Instead, the problem was avoided by relocating the institute from the realm of culture to the DAMW. Kelm and his unruly institute were essentially “kicked upstairs” to avoid further meddling in cultural politics, though Central Committee members knew that “the supporters of this wrong opinion [that applied arts and ideology should be separated] will interpret the Central Institute breaking away from the Ministry of Culture as a confirmation of their opinion.”

The conflict between the Central Committee and industrial designers over the implementation of socialist cultural principles points to a lively ideological debate around socialist realism in the 1960s. Indeed, the SED never achieved full aesthetic control in the field of industrial design. The ideological deviance of the ZfF indicates that there was space for practical arguments that favored functionalism on the basis of its more economical use of resources, which stood in contrast to the expensive embellishments of Stalinist aesthetics. Rather than this constituting a break away from Soviet socialist realism in official policy, as others have proposed, the late 1950s and early 1960s in fact saw a softening of aesthetic guidelines only in practice, albeit not in discourse. Nevertheless, it was evident to the SED government that representative wedding cake buildings, such as the houses on Stalinallee, were costly, work-intensive, and required scarce resources, such as marble and hard wood, that the GDR could not afford for public housing. The turn to prefab housing blocks in the late 1950s, starting with Neu-Hoyerswerda in 1959, was only later followed by a rethinking of the interior, including a general shift toward functionalist furniture design in the mid-1960s. Thus, the practical dilution of cultural Stalinism in the GDR occurred only some years after Nikita Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization in the Soviet
Union, as Ulbricht’s personal taste for power delayed the Thaw in East Germany. Modernist design would not be officially rehabilitated until later in the decade, and it took until the 1970s for Kelm to be able to furnish the interiors of Honecker’s state guesthouses using Bauhaus designs.

Politics of Design: The Rise and Fall of Functionalism

Whereas the GDR experimented with dramatically different German styles during the first two postwar decades, the Federal Republic developed its national aesthetic incrementally, continuously testing international reaction. International representation was at the core of the RfF’s mission and it took most of the 1950s for it to create a clear vision for the postwar reinscription of everyday material culture. The design council dismissed the international style of Nierentisch organicism, which was popular among West German consumers at the time, and established a design style based on functionalist principles. The development of the council’s aesthetic was apparent in the contrast between the 1954 Milan Triennial, the 1957 Milan Triennial, and the 1958 World Exposition in Brussels. An increasing emphasis on humility and transparency distinguished the postwar state from the monumental architecture and folk home design that had characterized the Third Reich aesthetic.

In these exhibitions, the RfF decreased the number of arts and crafts objects and increased the industrial design goods on display. By 1958, the materials featured in the German pavilion at Brussels were clean and modern, such as glass, tubular steel, concrete, and wood. While viewed with suspicion by West Germany’s own national media, this new, subdued aesthetic won acclaim from the foreign press and international audiences for its openness and simplicity. Captivated by its “spiritual functionalism,” the London Times hailed the West German pavilion as elegant, transparent, and radiant. Paranoia about international perception had led to a West German cultural policy that embraced dependable and high quality products for the improvement of daily life as ambassadors of the Federal Republic’s emerging economic culture and national identity. In Brussels, the German emphasis on everydayness decidedly contrasted with the attention-seeking displays of other nations. The groundbreaking exhibition successfully linked West German industrial design with postfascism and set new standards for how the Federal Republic used interior design and architecture to communicate its postwar identity abroad in the Adenauer era.

Despite this international acclaim, the work of the RfF came to a complete standstill between 1964 and 1965. The Federal Republic’s government remained
reluctant to turn the design council into a proper public agency, and the council was dependent on business involvement and private sponsorship.\textsuperscript{125} In 1965, RfF president Ernst Schneider, at the time also president of an industry-led industrial design interest group called BDI Committee for Industrial Design (Arbeitskreis für Industrielle Formgebung), wrote to the Minister of Economics Kurt Schmücker to convince him that the council would be able to tackle its
growing challenges if given new organizational and financial footing. To this end, Schneider set the council’s national significance in global perspective: “The idea that the Rat für Formgebung fulfills a socio-political function has been recognized as a state task and honored as such in the Federal Republic as well as in many other industrial countries.” But the government refused to take on what it perceived as the responsibility of the specific industries that would financially benefit from the council’s work. After almost two years of unproductive negotiations and mutual accusations, the BDI Arbeitskreis attained administrative control over the RfF in early 1967. Schneider served as president, porcelain manufacturer Philip Rosenthal as his deputy, and architect Fritz Gotthelf as managing director of both institutions, decisively diminishing Werkbund influence. With this step, the RfF lost its independence and freedom from private interest.

Following this crisis, funding for the council resumed and the extension of the council’s official responsibilities was reassessed. The ministry, though, saw little promise in the proposed changes based on the work of the last three years, which had been limited by the ongoing power struggles. Only two-thirds of the budget had been spent in 1966 and 1967. Schmücker’s successor Minister of Economics Karl Schiller and his advisors at the BMWi criticized the council’s personnel structures as a continuing impediment to greater efficiency and success and supported only a few practical proposals, such as the creation of a national industrial design prize (eventually endowed as Bundespreis “Gute Form” in 1969), an industry-initiated International Design Center (Internationales Design Zentrum, IDZ) in West Berlin, and triennial global exhibition tours of excellent German design.

Werkbund members began to fear that their cultural ideals would be sidelined or undermined by industry interests, which led to a public falling-out between the Werkbund and the BDI Arbeitskreis in 1968–69. The Werkbund maintained that the public design council had been swallowed up by private interests and demanded a “complete institutional and personnel separation” from the BDI Arbeitskreis and reassertion of the RfF’s democratic legitimacy. However, the organizational structures, including Schneider’s joint presidency of both institutions, remained unchanged. In the end, the Werkbund representatives resigned from the RfF in the summer of 1969. Its board of directors published a statement lamenting that “the Werkbund cannot identify with the Rat für Formgebung as it had once been able to” under the circumstances. The feeling was mutual. A promotional pamphlet that the RfF produced in 1989
about its history and purpose completely omitted the Werkbund’s integral role in the inception of the design council.¹³²

Alongside these battles over design council leadership, functionalism as a sociopolitical and moral agenda underwent a crisis in the Federal Republic. Prominent participants in the 1950s discourse on architecture and design, who had enthusiastically embraced the credo “form follows function” as the spirit for West German reconstruction, became uneasy about neofunctionalism as a revisionist official aesthetic in the 1960s. The debate revolved around the shift in functionalism from a social program—aimed at reforming societal stratification through material uplift—into an iconic style that papered over persisting social relationships.

The origins of the philosophical void can be traced back to the previous decade, when even Werkbund members, once firmly committed to the language of social uplift, struggled to find any underlying welfare concepts in West Germany’s striving domestic culture. For instance, in anticipation of the 1957 Interbau architecture exhibition in Berlin, a key event in international modern public housing construction, the RfF previewed the furnishings for one of its projected apartments at H55, an interior design summit in Hälsingborg, Sweden. Instead of explaining how the design would improve living conditions for the population, however, in the catalog Mia Seeger attributed the interior design solutions to the fact that both the exhibition space and the H55 concept had restricted the German committee to space-saving furniture.¹³³ There was no mention of a vision for a reformed postwar German domestic culture, a democratization of design, or material redistribution.

Given her professional background working with progressive architects and designers, Seeger should have been able to articulate a new West German social outlook on design, that is, if there had been one. Her expertise in the field of reform aesthetics only underscored the de-emphasis on the social question in West German domestic culture. Other European countries, particularly Scandinavian ones, were better able to communicate the postwar challenges in public housing and general welfare. In comparison, West German postwar functionalism looked insubstantial and had lost its reform vision.

Even earlier in the 1950s, the new ideological threat from the GDR, the socialist alternative across the border, had exposed leftist ideals to criticism in the Federal Republic. Attacks on reform design as a guiding principle had come from within the Werkbund, among others, in the so-called Bauhaus Debate of 1953. Cologne church architect and Werkbund member Rudolf Schwarz published an
essay in which he rejected Bauhaus rationalism for the rebuilding of Germany. He targeted the Bauhaus and Gropius’s avant-garde projects as un-German and communist. Instead, he promoted a conservative “modernism of the middle.” His contemporaries rushed to the defense of Gropius and the Bauhaus, though none of them were Werkbund members. Schwarz’s attacks contributed to the successive diminishing of leftist reform ideas in the Federal Republic’s postwar design and architecture, and his populist comments exemplify a pervasive anti-communism in Adenauer’s Germany.

The prevalence of this sentiment is indirectly confirmed by the absence of social reform ideas in West German design institutions and their teachings, which created generations of “socially unconscious” designers. Rolf Heide, one of Germany’s most influential neofunctionalist designers to date, began his career in 1950 as a cabinet-maker and went on to study architecture at the Muthesiuschule in Kiel, an institution of higher education named after Werkbund founder Hermann Muthesius. His colleague Peter Maly followed a similar path, beginning a cabinet-maker apprenticeship in 1955 and later studying at the technical college for interior design in Detmold. When asked about the social vision behind their designs, both responded that they made things to be beautiful, not socially responsible. Admired and critically acclaimed designers, Maly and Heide also embody the absence of a social philosophy in the West German discourse on material culture.

The HfG Ulm, Germany’s only educational institution founded on the assumption that material culture necessarily represented political consciousness, is a prime example of the institutional repercussions of this change in intellectual climate. Ulm had developed a philosophy of aesthetic and material austerity that became its trademark in the years of want. However, the sudden and strong public criticism of design without a social message in the 1960s led to the school’s eventual downfall at the height of the economic miracle. Situated on a hill overlooking the city, the school was not only physically but also conceptually removed from the life of the people “below.” The HfG Ulm was an institutional stronghold of die-hard functionalism that correlated with the RF’s aesthetic postwar vision for a culturally and economically liberal Federal Republic.Rejecting popular taste and consumer demands as guiding principles in the design process, Ulm found itself increasingly criticized in the press. In particular, a damaging article about the institute in the West German political magazine Der Spiegel caused the Baden-Württemberg government to review its financial commitment to the school. Tensions in the relationship between Ulm’s design principles and wider societal trends led to it losing funding from
the regional government in 1968, and the HfG Ulm closed its doors that November. The criticism of Ulm was not the only one leveled against elite institutions or functionalism. 143 1967–68 witnessed worldwide social change and rejection of a democratic consensus, which the HfG Ulm and the RfF claimed to materially express in their aesthetics of good design. The closure of the Ulm institute marked disillusion with the moral power of functionalism as a distinct West German aesthetic. Ulm’s modern aesthetic rigidity, nonetheless, had a tremendous influence on German material culture through, for example, the school’s collaboration with the electric appliance producer Braun, its corporate design for the German national airline Lufthansa, and its design for the elevated trains of the city of Hamburg. The school’s closing showed, however, that functionalism had run its course by the end of the decade.

German intellectuals from the political left, motivated by the general population’s rising concerns about capitalism’s shortcomings, contributed to the critique of neofunctionalism. The escalating Cold War arms race and the politics of nuclear deterrence had shown that trade and collective prosperity had failed to fulfill the promise of world peace. 144 Modernist design, which from its inception had attempted to temper industrial production with human artistic sensitivity, began to represent the failure of a humanistic capitalist order. This was especially catastrophic in West Germany, where democratization had become closely intertwined with the concept of Western economic integration and social advancement. In his 1965 critique of “Functionalism Today” at the annual Werkbund conference, leftist philosopher and Frankfurt School member Theodor Adorno chastised the inhumane postwar application of modernism. 145 A renowned critic of mass culture, he historicized the functionalist rejection of ornamentation, emphasizing that one era’s indispensable design feature could easily be seen as obsolete ornamentation by the next generation. Yet this did not mean that functionalism as a stylistic concept had any claim to an aesthetic truth. 146 To Adorno, the functionalist demonization of historical styles uncovered it as a political dogma. The prescriptive idea inherent in functionalism, the defined relationship between form and utility, Adorno argued, rendered the functionalist object “unfree.” The remedy, he suggested, would be for society to create more humane objects by opening up materiality to unknown functions.

As the debate continued in subsequent years, the West German design periodical Form published a series of articles that grew increasingly critical of functionalism. The articles highlighted some of its shortcomings as a design style. One fundamental problem was that the designers considered to have fathered functionalism, Henri Labrouste and Louis Sullivan, who had coined the phrase
“form follows function,” had never actually defined what function meant: the practicable, the useful, or the technically optimized? On closer examination, functionalism started to look more like an ideology than an aesthetic truth. Contributors to this discussion demanded the sacrifice of the “sacred cows” that had been labeled “good design” in divided Germany since the 1950s. By 1969, Form pronounced “grandpa’s functionalism” dead. Thus, functionalism, with its fetishization of geometric forms, durability, utility, and (in theory) need-based consumption, was revealed to be inherently production-oriented, while ignoring the consumer.

At this very point Bonn withdrew its commitment to the RfF, marking the end of West Germany’s crisis of functionalism. In an effort to salvage the national functional aesthetic, the debate moved on to consider Adorno’s proposed extended functionalism, one that designs objects to serve humanity rather than maltreat it with sharp edges. Already in 1950, designer Wilhelm Wagenfeld had worried that the Federal Republic would lose sight of the social significance of materiality on its path toward capitalism. Wagenfeld’s concern could not only be seen in the language of functionality but also in the teachings of his contemporaries. To theoreticians and practitioners of design, this demonstrated that, for two decades, West German material culture had failed to pursue an agenda that stood for human improvement.

Interestingly, functionalism’s western crisis enabled the East to finally reconcile its economic and cultural policies and claim the once opposed aesthetic for the socialist project. In general, any motivation to think about the human aspect of design at this point, it seemed, originated from the socialist Germany. Within socialism, designers intrinsically considered how their designs improved the human condition, while limited resources forced them to find economical solutions.

Yet also in the East the philosophical and aesthetic elements of postwar design remained subject to criticism, and they underwent constant change from the reconstruction years onward. Ulbricht had purged Weimar modernism and its disciples from GDR institutions by 1954, but it proved difficult to enforce a cultural consensus around socialist realism in the applied arts. Kitsch products, combining styles such as rococo, classicism, and Biedermeier, were produced for the cultural rebirth of the East German state. This style also favored ornamentation over functionality and hygiene, an especially important consideration for household wares. Kitsch and petty-bourgeois coziness (Gemütlichkeit) were privileged over economic considerations and production ethics. Some cultural critics remained at odds with the new cultural doctrine, such as Horst Michel, who proclaimed that “the person who buys Rococo china in 1950 shows bad
He reiterated this position in 1952 at the first conference for interior design at the Deutsche Bauakademie: “This [cultural policy] cannot end in providing ‘princely’ furniture to the working people. We shouldn’t talk them into things that look like bourgeois riches, instead we need to give them real riches that serve humanity.”

Given his opposition to the aesthetics of socialist material culture, it is somewhat surprising that Michel remained an influential figure in the GDR. His work gained recognition abroad in 1957 when the West German Institute for New Technological Form (Institut für neue technische Form) in Darmstadt organized an exhibition featuring the designs of Michel and his Weimar colleagues. West German designers perceived these Weimar designs as the East’s return to functional shapes, celebrating the emergence of a “functionalist German style” on both sides of the German-German border. However, this was a premature celebration of shared aesthetics. At the Culture Conference of 1957, the SED renewed the claim for a socialist-realist culture, declaring cultural work a political issue that concerned the very fabric of the working class. The following year the political leadership connected cultural reform with its economic goals at the Fifth SED Party Congress in East Berlin.

In the spring of 1959, the Bitterfeld Conference, a writers’ conference that included representatives of the government, the SED, workers, and the intelligentsia, discussed the prospects of assimilating workers and farmers into socialist realism. A resulting program that aimed at overcoming the previous separation of the arts and workers became known as the Bitterfeld Path (Bitterfelder Weg). The Bitterfeld Path included industrial design as a field of applied arts and suffused all areas of the economy to avoid the pitfalls of profit-oriented mass production that, according to the SED leadership, ignored social responsibility. The Bitterfeld critique of capitalism played an important role in the regime’s strategy to counteract suspicions of socialist mass production and promote the possibility of responsible socialist serial manufacturing. In the same vein, Michel wrote the pamphlet “The Industrial Designer on the Bitterfeld Path,” in which he criticized the lack of cooperation between designers and workers in socialist production, but used this reasoning to target socialist-realist kitsch. Arguing that only the laborers knew their own needs, Michel maintained that the state should rely on them to eliminate the production of “commodities that do not comply with our Zeitgeist. Bourgeois kitsch, modernist Formalism, decadence and snobbism are not befitting for us.”

Meanwhile, economic planners struggled with the implications of economic socialism for the population’s consumption habits. This discourse paralleled the
cultural debates at the Bitterfeld Conference and aligned centralization, rationalization, and standardization with Ulbricht’s cultural vision. Fears that a rigid restructuring of production would flatten the cultural value in socialist materiality led to the question of how to retain a “domestic culture despite standardization.” At the first standardization show in Leipzig in 1959–60, the GDR interior design journal Kultur im Heim (Culture at Home) discussed how to combat the impression that standardization would necessarily lead to uniform apartment furnishings. Alongside pictures of the first standardized living room furniture sets, the journal asked its readers, “Would you have guessed that these are standardized pieces?” However, no matter how tasteful the execution, standardization and streamlining of the product range logically resulted in limited choices for consumers.

To quell consumer discontent, the ZfF needed to justify the monotony of standardization. By introducing the ideas of leftist cultural intellectual Giulio Carlo Argan into the debate, designers and policymakers tried to reconcile uniformity with individuality. Designer and ZfF employee Ekkehard Bartsch quoted Argan’s formalistic critique of Weimar modernity, stating, “When industry exclusively reproduced shapes that were meant for crafts, that is as singular pieces, monotony resulted from the repetition of these formal specialties.” On the contrary, he argued, standardization celebrated the generalized shape because “the machine has no other job than to make a thousand pieces of it” and thus “identity and not uniformity results, because every object will keep the character of an original.” According to this interpretation, uniformity was only present in form because of its assigned function. Identity, on the other hand, was inherent in standardization, because it was left to the owner to ascribe a product’s specific function, thus leaving the object to fulfill individual expectations:

The individual can develop freely and creatively only on the basis of standardized production. Only when humans stop seeing the fruits of their material ambitions as a marker of their social status and attitude will they finally be able to benefit from technological innovation. Products become real servants of his [sic] existence, he himself stands in the center, not his supporting equipment.

This position had much in common with Adorno’s suggestion for an extended functionalism that made the human being the central category for evaluating the functionality of an object. Argan is thus an essential stepping stone in the discursive realignment of eastern and western aesthetics. Although the FRG and
the GDR faced very different challenges in changing social relations through material culture, by the mid-1960s they had arrived at similar ways of thinking about the place of objects in industrial society.

In practice, however, GDR planners and designers soon realized that efficiency-oriented organization of mass serial production rendered a small number of furniture models ubiquitous. This, in turn, led to the feared “moral deterioration” of the individual designs and thus a loss of their cultural identity. The challenge was to find a compromise between industrial productivity and socio-cultural demands. It was neither in the interest of the GDR leadership nor its goal to make public and private life entirely uniform; it always wanted to keep up the appearance of a dictatorship with a human face.

What all of these contradictions between design dogmata and production practice brought about was an increasing insecurity about what GDR design actually embodied ideologically and, in turn, how this ideology could be expressed materially. It is thus no surprise that even with the benefit of hindsight seasoned East German designers failed to make sense of 1960s GDR design. This is visible in a concept for a 1990 AiF design retrospective entitled From Bauhaus to Bitterfeld. While the curators concluded that the diversity of permissible forms increased in the early 1960s, they had difficulties explaining the formal, if arbitrary, limits to artistic expression that continued to exist. For instance, they were unable to satisfactorily explain official disdain for designer Hubert Petras’s cylindrical, plain white vases, which had been exhibited at the fifth Dresden Art Exhibition in 1962. In the end, the curators pinned the critique on the design’s lack of joie de vivre: “The strict, compromise-less cylinder shapes delineated themselves from shallow industrial mass production. Yet officials agreed that they ran counter to the optimistic attitude towards life of a civilized people with a happy future.” While the vases fulfilled antikitsch requirements, they apparently failed to show the right uplifting spirit that the leadership demanded for GDR material culture. Each object, it seems, was judged on its own merit and sometimes arbitrarily censored without considering what socialist material culture tried to achieve, namely a contribution to the cultural-ideological education of the New (Wo)Man. A response to needs, the avoidance of kitsch, and timeless designs immune to moral decay—these were the maxims of the time. In fact, Petras’s designs fit that bill.

Cultural policy in the 1960s slowly but steadily moved away from socialist realism and toward modern idioms, which confronted arbiters of taste such as Michel with the opposite extreme—fashionable and modish designs with an aesthetic life span of only a few years. In response, Michel shifted from
criticizing backward-looking stylistic historicism to warning against exaggerated originality and avant-gardism. Michel reiterated his concerns in 1964 on the occasion of the ZfF’s reorganization under the DAMW, which included the implementation of standardized design criteria for technological product evaluation. Pointing out that quality in mass production was difficult to maintain, he rejected the argument advanced by producers and retail that “products are designed badly because of popular taste and demand.”

The guest books from a 1965 interior design exhibition attest to the fact that at least parts of the population appreciated moderately modernist-inspired designs. Fifteen thousand
visitors saw *Modern Dwelling* in Hoyerswerda, and for the first time in a decade, their opinions were not only recorded but also were used to evaluate the success of a new, holistic exhibition concept that offered the atmospheric effect of a decorated room. Not so surprisingly, the modern way of living found broad acceptance. Michel suggested that the efforts previously undertaken to achieve better designs had been insufficient. After all, “in every type of taste, in every style, tasteless products exist. It is the task of the designer to create something decent in every individual or seasonally conditioned taste,” he maintained. Rejecting doctrinaire one-sidedness that favored a specific style or slavishly followed official cultural policies, Michel saw material socialism play out in the relationship between the product and its user. With the standardization of product ranges, he hoped to have more control over what was produced as well as distributed to the East German home. This did not foreclose diverse styles, as long as they moderately interpreted a taste or fashion. Michel did not believe in coercion and taste dictation. Rather he strove to enlighten retail buyers and consumers to positively influence production through the right demand. Michel thus helped establish a modern vision during the reconstruction years and the Bitterfeld Path in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but he was unable to leave a mark on the Formalism Debate between 1951 and 1953 and the later years of modish production. In these phases, which overlapped with heightened Cold War tensions and deteriorating German-German relations, moderation contradicted the ambitions of the GDR, a country that tried to propel its economy forward with centralization and Five-Year Plans. A distinct national culture and socialist mass production presented two ways in which East Germany aimed to gain a higher profile in the postwar world and to compete with the Federal Republic.

Toward the end of the 1960s, amid the crisis of functionalism in the Federal Republic, the GDR finally gained greater clarity about how to align its cultural and economic outlook. Here again East German industrial design elites took the lead, suddenly and publicly embracing the leftist politics of interwar modernism. On the occasion of the GDR’s twentieth anniversary in 1968, the ZfF organized an exhibition that positioned GDR design at the intersection of the Bauhaus/Werkbund tradition and Soviet constructivism. The exhibition’s historical section addressed a range of artistic expressions that the GDR designers saw themselves indebted to: 1840–95 historicism and eclecticism, 1895–1915 arts and crafts reform movements and stylistic art such as art nouveau and neoclassicism, and 1918–33 new objectivity, expressionism, and functionalism. This exhibition concept was the first to include the latter two among the roots of
socialist design in East Germany. In a break with previous cultural policy, the exhibition text also paid special attention to the leftist politics of some of the Bauhaus’s protagonists.

In the 1970s, after functionalism’s gradual rehabilitation in the previous decade, the East German design magazine Form und Zweck (Form and Function) became the forum for a discussion about the merits and the pitfalls of functionalist design. This critical debate was not dissimilar to the 1960s exchanges in the West German design periodical Form. The term “good design” now found usage on this side of the Iron Curtain as well, but it gained a different meaning. GDR good design embodied two sides of the same coin: It used resources and labor efficiently, while at the same time it was dedicated to fulfilling the needs of the population without providing dispensable luxury. With economic considerations shaping the conversation, the East German functionalism debate was less politically loaded and instead presented a historic perspective on German modernism’s original intentions. Cultural critic Karin Hirdina intervened in this debate, reclaiming the legacy of western functionalist dogmatism for socialism in 1975: “In fact, defined as a program and a method, not as a style, functionalism represents a Utopian vision of a non-capitalist order of relationships between Man and his environment. Strictly speaking, functionalism does not work in the capitalist system. It does not affirm capitalism, it transcends it.”

East German designers and politicians thus slowly regained confidence in their modernist heritage, a development epitomized by the reopening of the Bauhaus Dessau in 1976. What seems like a long overdue realization to the outside observer took the GDR leadership two decades to understand: The good design principles of utility, resourcefulness, and timelessness were perfectly matched to the GDR discourse on a socialist domestic culture. In contrast to West Germany, the social program of interwar modernism fit neatly into the state ideology. In the GDR, design debates had always involved morality, because everyday culture was understood as a central part of a holistic approach to creating a socialist society. Hirdina’s practical, or in Adorno’s words “extended,” understanding of functionalism refrains from creating stylistic maxims and taste regimes.

A decade and a half after Michel’s Darmstadt exhibition had triggered premature declarations of German-German aesthetic rapprochement, GDR state approval and the eventual alignment of cultural goals and economic planning resulted in East German interior and furniture design free from earlier
contradictions and ambiguities. This revitalization of interwar design principles also marked the first steps toward an all-German economic culture.