

What did Mies van der Rohe mean by “less is more”?

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There is no doubt that the aphorism, ‘less is more,’ is the most commonly abused in architecture. As far as architectural designs form the basis of the aphorisms, this one by Mies van der Rohe depicts a modern ethic. What most people fail to fathom is that this phrase was not originally developed by Rohe; rather it was introduced by his godfather, Peter Behrens, who is also known for his remarkable contribution to aspects of the AEG Turbine Factory, which was put up between 1907 and 1910 in Berlin. Behrens undoubtedly represented a huge figure in arts after implementing great designs,, including the corporate AEG, and nurturing a number of great architects, among them Mies van der Rohe, Adolf Meyer, Jean Kramer, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier.

Mies admits that Behrens had played a critical role in shaping his architectural career and was a sign of hope for the unification of all modes of cultural expression. Mies recalls an instance where he was tasked to design the glazing of the west courtyard elevation, which was considerably more advanced than that of the grand street elevation. While he did well in the technical aspects of the design, Mies claims it was “indeed almost nothing” as he came to learn a lot more during the process to the point he came across the infamous phrase, ‘less is more.’ After the expedition, he went to Behrens’s office for the first time, and after Behrens inspected Mies’s drawing, he only gave a single remark, ‘less is more’. Whatever he meant, Mies repeatedly referred to the phrase making it appear as his own. He represented this saying in his later works when he decided to reduce buildings and their advanced features with respect to geometry and techniques into smaller units that only required simple details integrated with tectonic expressions more than his former master had ever achieved.

Peter Behrens

Peter Behrens is viewed by most people as the father of architecture following his tremendous achievements during the beginning of the 20th century that saw him bring forth outstanding creations in the form of paintings, industrial designs, graphic designs, and architecture. What followed was the exertion of pressure in these fields to open uncharted territory for the generations that were to follow. To others, he is the founder of industrial design and industrial architecture. Peter Behrens was born in 1868 in Hamburg and was enrolled at the Hamburg Kunstgewerbeschule School for Applied Arts for the years between 1886 and 1889. In theater, he studied at Kunstschule in Karlsruhe and later on attended Düsseldorf Art Academy.

From 1890 he started working as a graphic artist and painter in Munich before joining the Jugendstil movement, where he had a lot of influence. By 1893, Behrens had become the founding father of the Munich Secession.^[1] From this point onwards, he produced colored illustrations, woodcuts, crafts

objects, and book bindings entirely designed according to the Jugendstil formal language. Beginning in 1897, he formed strong alliances with the likes of Bruno Paul, Bernhard Pankok, Hermann Obrist, Richard Riemerschmid, and August Endell to establish a company, Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst und Handwerk in Munich to manufacture utilitarian objects. The years that followed saw Behrens make tremendous steps towards promoting architecture and was even featured in the “Pan” journal in 1898, where he displayed some of his first furniture designs. In 1899, Behrens built his first dwelling after he had been appointed as the Grand Duke of the newly established Hesse-Darmstadt to the Mathildenhöhe artists’ colony. The house was named “Haus Behrens,” and given the complexity of its furnishings and interior design, it was not a wonder that it caused quite a stir.

Peter Behrens’s Early Education and Works

In the years 1901 and 1902, Behrens was a tutor at Kunstgewerbeschule before becoming the director at the same place and served for the next five years until 1907. A year earlier, he had received the first commission from AEG to assist them in designing advertising material. Thereafter, Behrens was hired by Emil Rathenau as a consultant before officially getting to work in 1908-09, where Behrens designed the AEG Turbine Factory in Berlin using steel, glass, and concrete to represent an outspoken agenda. Other than architectural designs on houses that would be used by the working class alongside their families, Behrens also incorporated electrical design systems that standardized the forms of their components and would thus be used interchangeably, thus rationalizing production.^[2]

Moreover, he was also responsible for the design and creation of catalogs, price lists, and sales rooms, among others, for the first time to form a unified corporate identity that lasted until 1914. In 1907, Behrens joined forces with similar minds depicted in the likes of Fritz Schumacher, Peter Bruckmann, Richard Riemerschmid, Josef Maria Olbrich, and Hermann Muthesius to establish, once again, the Deutscher Werkbund. Similar to the Vereinigte Werkstätten in Munich, Deutscher Werkbund was motivated by movements such as the British Arts and Crafts movement. Its core objective was to ensure that they promoted crafts skills and, at the same time, enhanced industrial production with the aim of achieving better standards than those set by homemade goods. Still, in 1907, Peter Behrens founded a large architectural firm in Berlin.

The fascinating fact about this design practice is that it developed with the help of other architectures such as Walter Gropius, who worked with Behrens up to 1910, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who worked with the company for 3 years up to 1911, and Le Corbusier, who worked there for a year up to 1911. This coming together of great minds attracted numerous commissions, including the IG Farben Höchst headquarters in Frankfurt and the German embassy in St. Petersburg, with the former showcasing the influence of Expressionism. In 1926, Behrens designed an early example of the International Modern style in the “New Ways,” a private dwelling located in Northampton. In addition, he also developed glass, china, and patterned linoleum flooring for a number of organizations. Key among his last commissions was the AEG headquarters stationed in Berlin in 1938.^[3] He never stopped his teaching

practice and continued to do so in the Vienna Akademie der Bildenden Künste from 1933 to 1936. For the remainder of the period, he became the architectural head of the same institution.

Graphic Art And The Jugendstil

In modern art, Jugendstil refers to a movement that came up before World War 1 in the mid-1890s and persisted until the beginning of the war. Its name was derived from a periodical time that focused on a specific style known as the Art Nouveau. This art was, at the time, the most fashionable and most decorative within the traditions of most communities in the country. This art form evolved in two phases, with the first pre-1900 phase characterized by floral motifs rooted in Japanese art, especially ukiyo-e prints and English Art Nouveau. The second phase is the post-1900, which was hugely characterized by a tendency to borrow from Henry van de Velde and other architects such as Hector Guimard and Victor Horta. Specifically, some of the movements that influenced the development of the Jugendstil included but were not limited to: the synthetism and cloisonnism expressive paintings by Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard, respectively, Arts and Crafts Movement, illustrations of Englishman Aubrey Beardsley, and poster art of lithographers such as Alphonse Mucha. Jugendstil was known by different names in other countries, such as Spain and Austria.

In a nutshell, the German typographer, architect, and painter was a leading voice in the development of the modern art culture by designing strong and monumental buildings alongside commercial products. When he joined the Darmstadt Artists' Colony, Behrens developed his industrial and architectural design aesthetic that was, to a greater extent, propelled by sympathy for arts but at the same time maintained a definite modern view. Under his hand, the amorphous turn-of-the-century swirl replaced cylinders and geometric tubes. His works started to receive worldwide acclamation after he had designed the International Exhibition of Applied Art in Turin. He also improved his expertise by accepting the leadership role offered to him at the School of Arts and Crafts in Düsseldorf.^[4]

It is here that architectural theories that would later be passed to the generations that followed were invented. In 1904, more than sixty countries were invited to showcase their industrial achievements using catalogs. There was no doubt that Behrens would be the obvious choice, and as it came to pass, he represented his country and described it so vividly that the contemporary German aesthetic was visible for the entire world to see. The ultimate achievement of Behrens in his entire career is when he was commissioned as an artistic adviser to AEG, which is among the largest producers in the globe. Among other things, he designed the typographical presentations, catalogs, stationery, street lamps, electric fans, and the entire factory. Indeed, most renowned architectures of the 20th century, including Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, owe lots of credit to him.

Notable Work and Transition

From the start of 1897, Peter Behrens collaborated with multiple other key personalities in Munich to form Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst und Handwerk which specialized in unique utilitarian products.

Some of the notable names were such as Endell August, Pankok Bernhard, Obrist Hermann, Bruno Paul, and Richard Riemerschmid. In the following year, Behrens collaboratively developed the “Pan,” which was a representation of a Berlin Journal. The year proved to be very productive for him as his initial furniture models were developed later in the year. This exposure early in their career served to broaden his professional scope by networking with other artists, helping sustain a standard for his work.^[5] His efforts would soon pay off as early as 1899 as he was extended the courtesy by Ernst Ludwig, who was the Grand Duke of the Hesse Darmstadt, to participate in the Mathildenhöhe colony for artists that the prominent Duke had just founded in Darmstadt.

This was an opportunity Behrens exploited to fully establish his first home design, which was so pompous it generated much sensationalism around the region. He did quite a comprehensive work focusing on the details of architectural nature as well as interior design. This was a great depiction of his artistic talents, and being as much of a pioneer as he was, he continued to influence the artistic institution for years to come. From the beginning of the 1900’s Behrens actively engaged himself in offering classes at the Dusseldorf, and up to the year 1907, he was the acting director of the institution. It was at this point that he accrued his starting commission from the AllgemeineElektricitatsGesellschaft (AEG), giving him clearance to design his preference of materials that could be used for advertising. At this point, his employer was Emil Rathenau, who put into good use Behren’s skill set making him a resource person and consultant for all the projects of an artistic nature. Peter did his best not to squander this opportunity and, in so doing, opened up more opportunities and demand for his output. In this period, he helped bring into the function a group that identified itself as the Werbung. Their core purpose was to transform the traditional perceptions about art as well as improve the esthetic properties of all the locally manufactured goods to improve their quality in the market.

In the year 1907, Paul Jordan, who presided as the managing director of AEG offered a Chief designing officer position to Behrens, who gladly accepted the offer. He first laid his focus on the products of the electric company as well as developing appropriate poster advertisements that would be suitable for the large firm. He came up with a logo for the company and established a new trend in the visual representation of the company. This extended to products commonly manufactured on the premises by giving them a new physical appeal by altering their shapes and choice of decorations.^[6] The significance of this particular artist cannot be downplayed as, in his time, he was the first in Europe to successfully generate a comprehensive identity suitable for a corporation. This went a long way to merge the institution of art to the dynamic industrial sector hence making it more acceptable in modern societies.

In the years 1908 to 1909, Behrens was responsible for creating a Turbiation for the AEG Company, which was an imposing building designed with steel and concrete and applied the utility of glasses. This factory complex also incorporated the internal housing units for the workers with enough facilities for their families. The general feeling was that this was a projection of high artistic work with an underlying agenda. During this time frame, his work extended beyond structural architecture, providing new designs for electrical products, and developing the nature of their components to make

them easy to interchange. This not only created convenience for the consumer of the appliances but also the standardized cost for the manufacturer. Behrens's scope of responsibility continued to be increased as his productivity improved. He went forward to collaborate with other pioneers to create a second group called the DeutscherWerkbund, which derived its motivation from the British art and craft movement. This sought to encourage the integration of artistic properties in the production process of manufactured and even hand-tailored goods.^[7] Although the AEG meeting was received with many sensations, this was not the only depiction of his architectural designs, as illustrated in this paper.

Behrens mentors Mies

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is attributed to have played a very significant role in the course of development of the institution of architecture to what it is in the modern day. He pioneered the less is more model of designing that was a standard for generations to come in the advancement of architecture. His career course was steadily developed and influenced by key figures such as his father, who engaged in stone masonry. Another mentor was in the case of Bruno Paul, once the artist gained residency in Berlin, who greatly oriented him in developing modern furniture designs. His most considerable influence was also his mentor Peter Behrens who played a significant role in shaping the career of the artist, for he was strategically leading the artistic movement in the period.

In the year 1905, Mies relocated to the city of Berlin, where he got acquainted with Bruno Paul's artistic work in designing furniture as well as art nouveau. Under the mentorship of the artist, he was able to make significant advancements in his designs in a very short span. He was able to accrue his first commission in post-dam within two years hence captivating the recognition of Peter Behrens, who was the most prolific designer and artist of the day in Berlin. Peter presented Mies with a job offer which he gladly accepted to learn and be mentored by one of the most elite minds of the movement.^[8]

Under the mentorship of Behrens, Mies goes to interact with other upcoming figures working with Behrens. Such was in the example of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. Unlike the general expectation, the forthcoming figure was greatly frustrated and demoralized under the mentorship of Behrens. At a given point Mies tried to take credit for modifications made to elevate the courtyard of the famous Behrens AEG turbine factory. He blatantly made accusations that Behrens did not know what he was doing hence second-guessing his superior publicly. These furious exchanges went on to feature Hendrik Petrus, the great Dutch architect. Mies admired Hendrik's work, especially the Amsterdam exchange complex, which Behrens had passed off as not being as good. To this remark, Mies fired back at Behrens, saying, "Well, if you aren't badly mistaken." This infuriated Behrens, who almost confronted him physically in retaliation.

Less is More

The guiding principles behind this concept are that what is presented in a way that lacks complexity appeals more to the public because they understand and relate to it easily. To avoid complexities, one has to master how to appropriately utilize minimal resources to achieve maximum results. When using this model to build structures, buildings should be rid of all the unnecessary details to maximize visual acuity as well as expand the working space allocated to such a construction. Less is more requires one only to utilize the vital materials necessary for development. For Ludwig, his needed resources were only the steel frames and the cladding which were the essentials for the physical integrity of his structures.

All the secondary components of buildings revolve around the aesthetic appeal of the building. The more one elaborates on this, the more the building's original design seems to be congested. By removing the additional secondary factors to a structure, the plan is projected more clearly, making even the basics of architectural design seem elegant. There is also a preference for more open spaces and free space from the heightened visual appeal of this model.^[9] This design by Ludwig was motivated by the great works of architects like Karl Friedrich, who utilized the application of lintel and posts to simplify architectural designs. Another significant influence was from Dutch De Stijl proponents, who stipulated architecture based on simplified designs. The less is more model greatly influenced modern architecture which is currently taking even more, simpler forms by utilizing less bulky structural frames to articulate a desirable balance between spaces that need to be empty and those that have to be filled when maintaining the integrity of the structure.

A good example of such an architectural design is the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies Vander Rohe which he describes as a clear illustration of his "pure and open skin and bones" design. This structure features a u-shaped water catchment basin connecting the interior and exterior of the whole enclosure. Despite its sophisticated appeal, the structure maintains a subtle and simple design that blends in with the famous statue to complement the architecture of the structure.^[10] This style widely deviates from the conventional methods of architecture which traditionally involves filling up open spaces with secondary features of construction.

Conclusion

Behrens set the advancement of modern architecture in motion, paving and mentoring other pioneers to make their mark in the industry. He encouraged his students to deviate from traditional rigidity hence motivating his juniors, such as Gropius, Mies Van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, to pursue independent architectural models. Behrens knew how to balance between traditional designs and incorporating modern features making his work relevant during and past his time. He introduced the application of resources like glass and the strategic use of steel beams to build stronger structures. His continued fixation on modern designs greatly impacted the line of thought of those he mentored

and was illustrated by the international designs later assimilated in constructing skyscrapers.

Other than his designs on AEG turbines which were a significant milestone, Behrens played an active role in developing the plans for the German embassy situated in Russia. He also designed the TechnischeVerwaltungsgebäude located in Frankfurt among a long list of professional accomplishments. Despite setting such standards, he also fostered continuity of the institution by offering lessons to a younger generation of architects hence passing down his skill set. He indeed was a patron of the arts, and despite shaping the professional careers of talented architects like Mies, he also developed the industrial sector at large.

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