

A school for democracy!
The buildings of the Ulm School of Design
and their history
Architect: Max Bill

“can germany become a democracy?” asked the designer and co-founder of the HfG Otl Aicher in June 1948. In a text entitled “let’s get started”, he explained that the Germans first had to learn to govern themselves.¹ Together with Inge Scholl, whose siblings Hans and Sophie had been executed in 1943 for their critical stance towards fascism, he planned to found a “new school”. Young people were to be inspired in favour of democracy as a form of government and receive an education as journalists, politicians, product and graphic designers.

Scholl and Aicher found an important partner in the Swiss architect Max Bill. He made contact with Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius and designed the buildings for the Ulm School of Design (HfG). They were officially inaugurated in October 1955.

The architecture
The buildings were constructed in exposed concrete, an unusual construction method for civilian buildings at the time. The building owes its great flexibility to the column grid of three by six meters (three by nine in the auditorium). Beams and base elements are also made of exposed concrete, while the non-load-bearing wall panels were bricked in and painted white or closed with wooden wall elements. Black and white and grey terrazzo or slabs of black mastic asphalt were used as floor materials. The wooden window elements are characteristic of the buildings. They are each divided into three parts vertically and vary in height. The interiors of the school building are characterised by the lights designed by Walter Zeischegg: synthetic resin sockets are attached to a metal tube with fluorescent tubes clamped between them.

The metal tubes were stretched between the ceiling beams at the HfG, and the sockets were specially manufactured by a company in Neu-Ulm.

The individual construction elements are standardised, but offer a wide range of variation options. The serial construction method creates a series of carefully interlocking structures. The topological arrangement of the buildings follows the slope: garages, boiler room and technical facilities are located on the lower level, with the cafeteria, auditorium and student apartments above. The administration rooms serve as an intermediate link, while the spacious wing with classrooms and workshops is located above.

The large window elements ensure that all rooms are bright and flooded with light. Somewhat to the side, also lined up along the slope, are the faculty houses. Three of these semi-detached houses were completed during the first construction phase of the HfG. Only one of the residential towers was built, together with two adjoining rows of studio houses. The other two residential towers date back to the original plans, but were built later and no longer according to Max Bill’s plans.

Current use
In 1968, the HfG had to cease teaching: The private institution had not managed to finance itself as planned. A continuation by the state of Baden-Württemberg was implemented with the newly founded Institute for Environmental Planning (IUP), which, however, ceased operations after just three years.

The buildings were initially vacant and began to fall into disrepair. When it became apparent that the University of Ulm would use them, they were renovated for the first time. Since 1986, the School of Design Foundation, the legal successor to the Geschwister Scholl Foundation, has managed the foundation’s assets. It uses the profits generated to promote science, research and the development of design, as

well as to preserve the buildings, which have been listed since 1979.

After the university moved out in 2010, a second renovation took place. Today, the buildings house the HfG Archive, which makes the history of the Ulm School of Design accessible to the general public through permanent and changing special exhibitions. It offers scientists and students the opportunity to research the history of the HfG using files, graphics, photographs, an extensive collection of models and, last but not least, the completely preserved library. The estates of significant HfG members, including those of Otl Aicher and Walter Zeischegg, complement the collection.

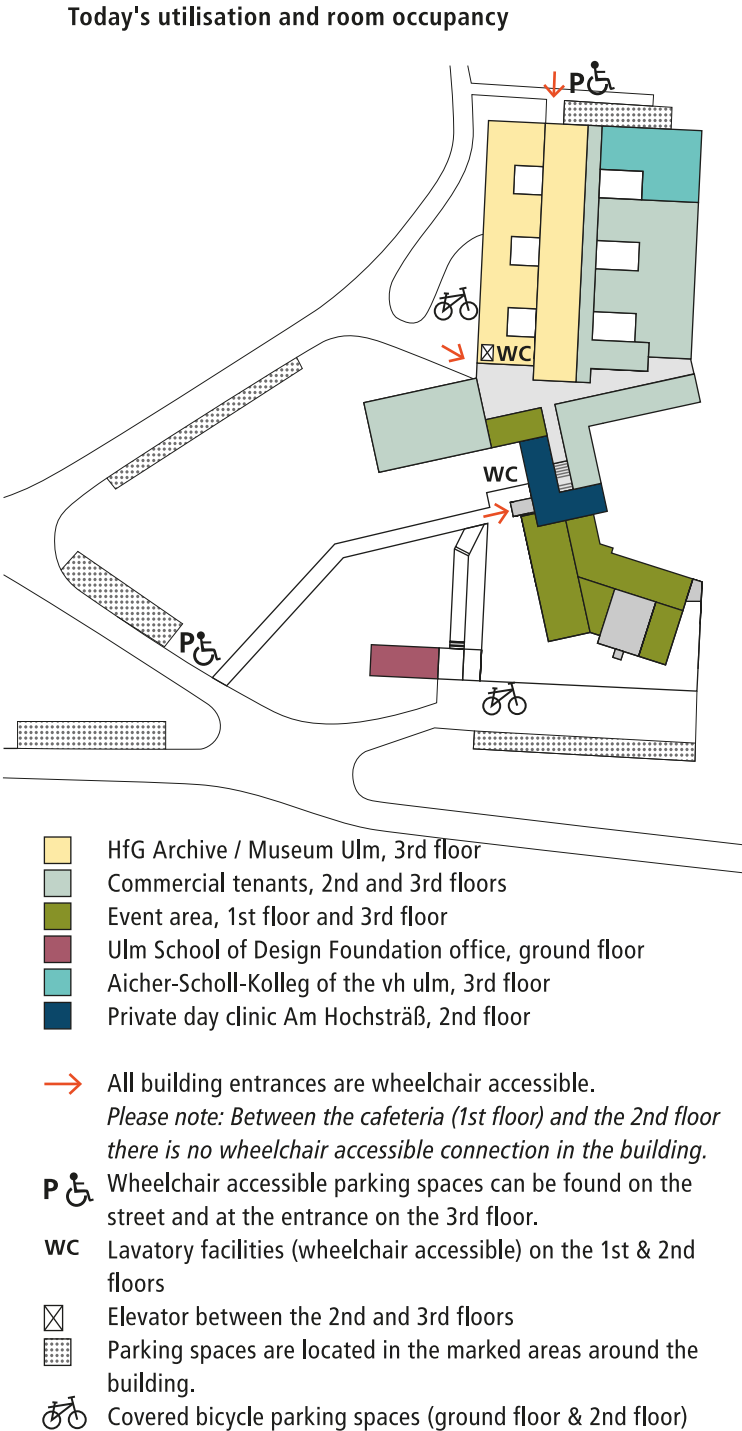
Other tenants include design-related offices and companies as well as the Aicher-Scholl-Kolleg: it offers a one-year general studies program for school graduates with the aim of providing orientation for their future career choices.

The former cafeteria, the lecture halls and the associated spacious access areas of the HfG are open to the public and can be rented for events. The location on the upper Kuhberg, with sweeping views of the Danube valley and Alpine foothills, as well as their outstanding architecture, make the buildings of the former School of Design an example of German post-war architecture worth seeing and experiencing.

The foundation’s own residential buildings on the HfG campus are now rented out privately.

Cover photo: Entrance area of the HfG, photo: Wolfgang Siol, 1956

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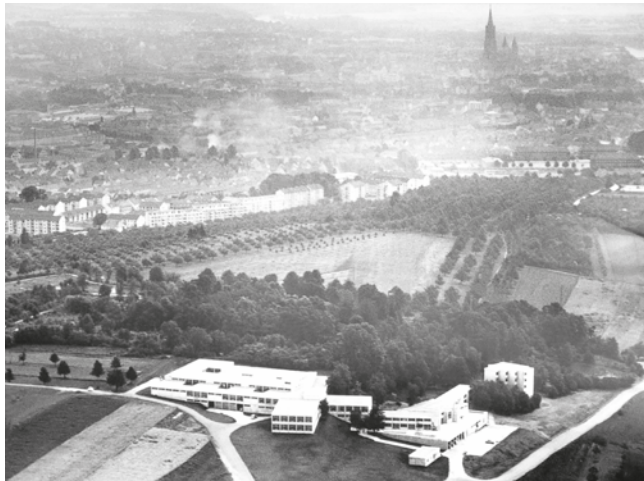
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The buildings of the
HfG Ulm and their history

¹ Otl Aicher, let’s get started, 16 June 1948. HfG-Ar Sti AZ 619.08



Building of the Ulm School of Design (HfG)
Architect: Max Bill, built 1953–55

Photo: Otl Aicher, 1955

Soon after the completion of the HfG buildings, Otl Aicher undertook an extended flight during which he photographed the HfG building. One of the images can be seen on the cover of the first printed program published by the school in 1956. It shows the HfG buildings from the air and far away in the haze the Ulm Minster.

Built program

The path into the buildings of the Ulm School of Design leads, between the caretaker's house and garages, in a gentle curve towards the bright glass hall of the entrance: unpretentious, as if natural, in keeping with the scale of the human form and steps. The school buildings are a built program with a cafeteria and auditorium as a community center. The apartments are on one side, the work rooms on the other. The lecturers lived in their own houses on the campus west of the school building. Their architect, Max Bill, combines austerity and elegance, security and the challenge of freedom in these buildings. The architecture is understated and yet shapes the learning, living and thinking of its residents.

What began as a utopia, as an idea of peaceful coexistence that respects the individual, of working together towards a promising future, is inscribed in these buildings and can still be felt today.

- Construction 1953–1955 (architect: Max Bill)
- ▨ Construction 1961 (architect: Hans Gugelot)
- ⋯ Additional buildings (architects: Fred Hochstrasser and others)



1 | Basic teaching

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

Basic teaching and the construction department were housed in the same building.



2 | Reading corner in the cafeteria

Photo: Wolfgang Siol, 1957

The reading corner in the cafeteria was used for the political education of school members. Current daily and weekly newspapers were displayed here, from the local press to the conservative "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" and the GDR newspaper "Neues Deutschland", which was actually banned in the Federal Republic of Germany. The reading corner was furnished with three low wooden tables with linoleum flooring from the HfG's wood workshop and armchairs by Danish designer Jens Risom.

3 | Lecturers' houses

The three semi-detached houses are located west of the school building.

4 | Caretaker's house

On the aerial photo at the front

In addition to his traditional duties, the caretaker was responsible for picking up guests from the railway station in the school's own VW bus.



5 | View from the auditorium into the reading corner

Photo: Wolfgang Siol, 1957

In the early days of the school, the auditorium and cafeteria of the HfG formed one large room, which could be divided into the two areas by flexible walls. As in the other parts of the building, the ceiling is formed by pumice concrete slabs that rest on the beams.



← 7 | The "Säge" (saw), hall between the administration wing and workshop building

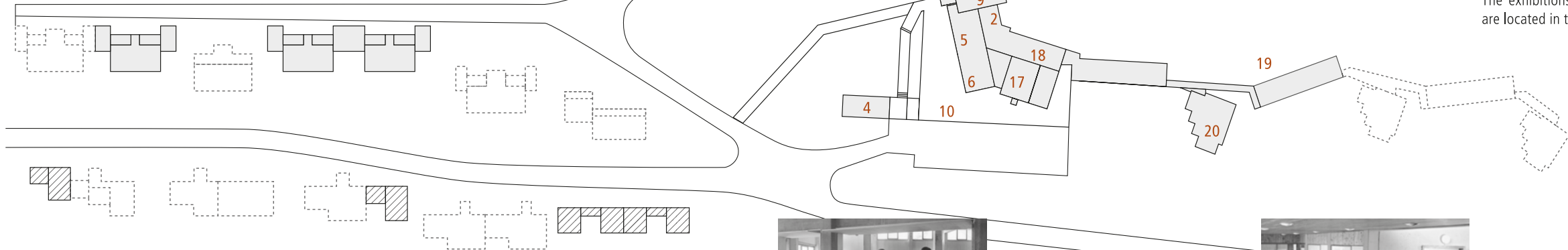
Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

When designing the HfG buildings, Max Bill was guided by the topography of the site, a hill that slopes gently down to the Danube. The spacious hallway was created by shifting the axis between the workshop and administration wing. The later panelling of the hollow ceiling is missing in this picture, as are the railings made of boiler pipes. They were installed shortly afterwards.



9 | Stairs to the "Säge"

Photo: Claus Wille, 1959



6 | Cafeteria

Photo: Ernst Scheidegger, 1956



10 | Terrace

Photos: Ernst Hahn, 1955 (left), Claus Wille, 1959 (right)



11 | HfG photo workshop

Photo: Wolfgang Siol, 1957



12 | HfG typography workshop

Photo: Wolfgang Siol, 1962

14 | Department of Visual Communication

15 | "Bathtub" library

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

→ The rooms of the information and film department were connected to the library (16).



17 | View from the kitchen into the cafeteria

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

The wood workshop produced all the kitchen fittings. They consisted of white-painted blockboards with beechwood edging, the sliding doors were made of hardboard. The work surfaces were covered with green and black linoleum. The photo shows the counter with a hot serving table, Max Bill on the left. The partitions to the canteen were folded up for serving.



13 | HfG wood workshop

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955



18 | Bill-Bar

Photo: unknown, 1960s

The **plaster, wood and metal workshops** formed the backbone of the main building to the northwest, which contained workshops and studios from various departments. They merged into one another; in the picture on the left, you can see the outer wall of the building through the metal workshop adjoining the wood workshop. The plastics workshop was later set up in an adjoining room on the right.

The rooms of the product design and visual communication departments were located on both sides of the workshop wing. While there is no shortage of space in the "Säge" (7), the distances here are short and there are almost no circulation areas.

During the renovation in the 2010s, a side corridor was separated from the workshops. This created a corridor through which the smaller office units of the tenants and the Aicher-Scholl-Kolleg can be reached. The exhibitions of the HfG Archive are located in the former workshops.



HfG door handle with long plate

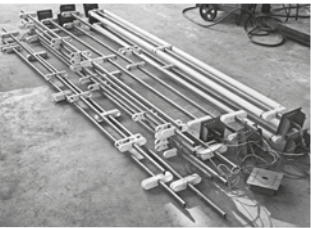
Design: Max Bill, Ernst Moeckl, 1954/55

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

Bill developed this door handle together with student Ernst Moeckl. It is made of aluminum. The arched curve towards the door leaf was given so that it was easy to hold, but not too easy to get caught on. The handles were manufactured by the Steinbach and Vollmann company, and all doors in the HfG building are fitted with them.

HfG lights, photo: Ernst Hahn

The lighting system was designed by HfG lecturer Walter Zeischegg in 1954/55 specifically for the new building. The electrical supply lines were laid in the beams. The beams were also provided with recesses for the installation of the lights.



20 | Student rooms in the residential tower

Photo: Ernst Scheidegger, 1956

The only residential tower built by 1955 offered a total of 40 beds in six single and two double rooms on five floors. Max Bill, Hans Gugelot and Walter Zeischegg were involved in the interior design.

The residential spaces were not enough for all the students, so those in the first year of study lived in the city. Every day they had to make the long journey to Kuhberg—either on foot, by bike or in carpools. There was no kitchen in the residential tower, as it was planned that the students would eat in the cafeteria. The first hotplates soon appeared in the corridors of the individual floors, and the first refrigerators in the early 1960s. Each room had a washbasin. The toilets were located on the floors, showers were in the basement.

← 19 | Studios and residential tower (rear view)

Photo: Ernst Hahn, 1955

The 16 residential studios are located next to each other in two one-and-a-half-story units. They were intended for married students and guest lecturers.