

## CALL FOR PAPERS

We are seeking contributions in the form of critical essays, studies, case studies, projects, realizations, and designs for the second annual publication of Project Bauhaus, which will appear as an ARCH+ issue on the theme: “**Can the Universal Be Specific?**”

The following questions may serve as a starting point:

- How can a global notion of the universal be combined with local specificity?
- Can only values be universal, whereas their concrete manifestations must be specific?
- Does the “local specific” help produce, in a certain sense, the universal?
- How can the universal rights to housing, to the city, and to the world be realized in all their plurality?
- What is the impact on design when it migrates from one place to another?
- What differentiates the various modernisms, and what is their shared core?
- Or, on the other hand, is universalism a concept of “the West,” and thus by nature a hegemonic concept? What is the cultural impact of the global spread of science and technology as influenced by Western epistemology?

## DEADLINE: 31 JULY 2016

Please submit your abstract in PDF form (max. 500 words) to:  
[coop@projekt-bauhaus.de](mailto:coop@projekt-bauhaus.de)

Contributors whose work is selected for publication in ARCH+ will be informed and given an appropriate time frame to elaborate their submissions in collaboration with the Project Bauhaus team.

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## QUESTION 2016

# Can the universal be specific?

Both the Bauhaus and classical modernism as a whole were deeply committed to establishing universal principles of design. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, these movements grounded the practice of design in an approach based on rational, objective, and universally valid principles—an approach comparable to the natural sciences. In doing so, modern designers sought to forge a connection between their practice and the successful developments in the fields of science and technology that were founded on similar ideas of the universal. Additionally, they hoped to replace the concept of nationalism, which had led to the horrors of World War I, with a concept of internationalism. In this respect, advocating universalism was seen as a means to actively break with specific historical traditions. The former conventions of design, their forms rooted in local tradition, were replaced by design principles that could be understood universally. Modernists believed that these new methods and principles should be derived scientifically from disciplines like geometry and physiology; such methods purported to be value-neutral and applicable in all circumstances.

## CAN THE UNIVERSAL BE SPECIFIC?

The doctrine of functionalism, in turn, building from an assumption that all human activity is underlined by basic anthropological needs, made it possible to design any structure without consideration of class, nationality, or religion. Instead, following the doctrine of functionalism, you could design according to universal and general principles. From a design perspective, this approach endowed all architectural endeavors with the same significance, not assigning them a hierarchy based on social value or symbolic expectations (there was no hierarchical difference, for example, between building an industrialist's mansion or designing social housing). At the same time, this shift had a major impact on the syntax of design. In the place of forms that serve to impose hierarchy (forms like monumentality and symmetry), designs based on principles like seriality and the grid came to the fore.

Through this approach, it seemed that universal design could be used to hasten the arrival of equality and social justice. Universally valid norms and standards, the modernists thought, would ensure a basic quality of life for everyone. This value system hearkened back to the French Revolution's demand for "liberty, equality, and fraternity" for all. But while the bourgeois understanding of universalism had limited itself to the legal equality of individuals—an understanding that allowed for a wide spectrum of social stations—the question of social equality had become ever more important over the intervening years of the nineteenth century. In the end, modernists argued, the only way to guarantee equality was to ensure basic standards of material life for everyone. These ideas became concrete in the form of basic material rights and, more generally, the right to participate.

In the fields of architecture and urban planning, the universal values of classical modernism led to the notion of a "right to housing"—a right that would be secured through the *Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* (the "subsistence-level apartment"). Later on Henri Lefebvre, expanding on various criticisms of the mass housing that had been built in the postwar years, introduced the idea of a "right to the city," broadening the assurance of basic needs to include the needs of social and cultural participation. Today, it seems necessary to formulate a third fundamental right: the "right to the world." In an age of migration, globalization, and man-made climate change, we need a basic idea that can be applied at a global scale. Bearing this in mind, the "right to the world" not only formulates a claim, but also formulates an obligation: every single individual is responsible for not endangering the Earth as a natural habitat, and for not threatening the lives of other people—in other places as well as future generations.

The universal values of classical modernism, however, coupled as they were to modern industry's Fordist model of production, soon began tapering

off into rules about types and standards—to the point that, ultimately, these universal values amounted to little more than standard, uniform solutions for design challenges. By 1926, for example, Hannes Meyer was already writing: "The surest indicator of a true community is that it meets the same needs with the same means . . . Standardized form is impersonal." In the same year, Walter Gropius wrote something very similar: "On the whole, the necessities of life are the same for the majority of people. The home and its furnishings are matters of 'mass demand,' and such demand should be satisfied by machines capable of producing standardized products." Here, we see universal ideas leading to a uniformity that is understood as compulsory.

The problems of such a development became obvious in the late modern period. And since the advent of postmodernism at the latest, the idea of universalism has been regarded as obsolete within the realms of culture and design. Today, every architectural practice worth its salt makes a point of emphasizing how its work is adapted to the specific conditions of the task at hand, to the local context. Even investors and architects operating at a global scale help themselves freely to the rhetoric of the individual, the unique, the local. While no one disputes the universal validity of science and technology, our culture expects this to be compensated by local specification, by uniqueness, as a counterweight.

Meanwhile, lurking behind in the slipstream of the critical row over modernist universalism, global capitalism has cultivated its own selective version of the universal. While the mobility of capital may be universal, and goods can circulate with increasing universal impunity, the mobility of people is severely curtailed. And while certain rules and regulations (like patents, copyrights, industry standards) have universal validity, in other areas of the law contemporary capitalism is defined above all else by inequality—in legal areas like workers' rights, for example, or environmental regulations and tax law. Indeed, the definitive characteristic of today's global economic system is how it can selectively couple and uncouple spaces where differing regimes of regulation prevail. For this reason, it would be inaccurate to blame our present crisis on a surfeit of universalism.

As this brief outline shows, universalism is Janus-faced. Its effects can be as emancipatory, as liberating, as they can be repressive. Yet in light of the crises confronting us today, we believe it's time to readdress the idea of the universal as it was formulated by the modernists—to reconsider its fundamental ambitions, to fashion something productive out of the justified criticism it has undergone.

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