cannot be said of the exhibition. This was partly the fault of the space and the installation. The show snaked its way through the basement of the Pinacoteca, centering on the so-called Salone degli Incamminati. These catacomb-like surroundings were far cry from the stage designs or paintings that Ferdinando, Francesco, and their descendants filled with such airy grace. The installation, by Mario Brattella and Cesare Mari, was needlessly labyrinthine, with dark, grim panels that compromised the Bibienesque plans outlined on the floor and killed the festive spirit of the large canvases in tempera and oil. This was unfortunate since the paintings were brought together here for the first time and showed a dazzling sequence of visionary architecture.

Also marvelous were two tapestries, each 3 meters square, part of a series of six dedicated to the months, which were probably commissioned by the dukes of Lorraine and are now in the Cathedral Treasury of Zagreb in Croatia. Woven in the Nancy atelier of Charles Mité between 1698 and 1710, they exhibit unusual perspectives dreamed up by Francesco Bibiena, who married into the Mité family when he was designing the Nancy Opéra for Leopold I of Lorraine.

The many drawings, prints, and theatrical models, both for ephemeral and permanent stages, map out an astounding achievement. But the section dedicated to the built architecture seemed less compelling. Added to the usual difficulties in showing real architecture through photographs and models was the impression that Bibienesque whimsy turns banal when built. To let one church stand for many, the façade of Sant’Antonio Abate in Parma showed Ferdinando’s inability to fuse the lower zone with the upper mass of the vaults.

The show’s interpretation of angle perspective, the trademark of the fantasy architecture of the Bibiena, was not totally convincing. Ferdinando apprenticed with the brilliant scenographer Giacomo Torelli, of course, but he must also have known the Renaissance examples of architecture seen from an angle in Florence and especially Rome, such as the Zecca (Mint) of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, or the Fountain Casino on Via Flaminia of Bartolomeo Ammanati, not to mention many examples in Baroque Rome, such as the Propaganda Fide or Santa Maria della Pace. To mention these precedents does not diminish the importance of the Bibienas’ ephemeral architecture, images of which circulated all over Europe. But it is interesting to point out that the modern city inspired Baroque theater design, something that can be seen in the very first item in the catalogue, a print by Nicholas Cochin taken from a stage design by Torelli. It shows a trident of streets in central perspective, which the catalogue would derive from Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. Palladio, of course, is never to be dismissed lightly, but one should note that the background of the print in fact faithfully reproduces a real cityscape, the Île de la Cité in Paris seen from the Pont Neuf, with the equestrian statue of Henry IV and the twin houses that form the front of Place Dauphine. A small oversight, perhaps, but it shows a certain interpretive conformity in the catalogue, an attitude that keeps alive the conventional reading of the Bibienas as a tightly knit phalanx (the “family” of the title) and in effect demotes them to the status of artisans, even if artisans of the highest level.

The exhibition was a pleasure to visit and presented a huge amount of visual documentation, but it missed the opportunity to open up a new critical perspective on this endless and disparate material. It might have extracted the authentic individual personalities out of the generic dynastic context. The “family” has become in the end more a cage than a tool of interpretation.

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Note

Publication related to the exhibition:

Hugo Häring. Architekt des Neuen Bauens
Akademie der Künste, Berlin
15 June–5 August 2001

A long-awaited retrospective dedicated to Hugo Häring (1882–1958), architect and contributor to the theoretical debates of the 1920s, opened in June 2001 at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. With the recent appearance of Peter Blundell Jones’s English-language monograph and a small exhibition at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London in early 2001, Häring can no longer be considered a neglected figure among Berlin avant-garde architects of the Weimar period. However, the complex task of reevaluating his significance in that milieu remained in its early stages. Through intelligent installation and rigorous scholarship, the Akademie der Künste has advanced this project.

The moderately sized exhibition was arranged chronologically. The first hall focused on Häring’s formative years, his education in Dresden and Stuttgart with Fritz Schumacher and Theodor Fischer, and his early work until 1920. The second and largest hall covered the triumphant modernist years, beginning with Häring’s move to Berlin in 1921, where he briefly shared a studio with Mies van der Rohe. It ended with his appointment in 1935 as director of the art school Kunst und Werk. It included important projects such as the Friedrichstrasse skyscraper competition, the farm at Gut Garkau, and Häring’s contributions to the modernist housing developments at Siemensstadt and Onkel-Toms-Hütte. Häring’s role as cofounder and secretary of the Berlin-based group of avant-garde architects known as the Zeblomming (later Der Ring) was also represented here. The third hall concen-
trated on Häring's circumscribed activities during the war years and the remainder of his career until his death in 1958. Drawing on the resources of the Häring archive in the Akademie der Künste, the exhibition included a large number of architectural drawings (about 200), as well as a selection of decorative arts designs, historical photographs, letters, and published writings. A handful of models and examples of Häring's furniture designs from the later years were also on view.

Not without humor, the main hall paid tribute to Häring's most important realized building, a cow shed built at Gut Garkau near Lübeck in 1924/25. It included the original bullpen, a now rusted fence-like structure. This prosaic object gave shape to the large central hall of the exhibition. It formed a focal point around which drawings for other projects were arranged in a tear-shaped ground plan, like the cow shed itself, here represented on a scale of one to one. A striking and unexpected feature of the installation was the appearance of sculpture throughout, from works by Auguste Rodin and Adolf von Hildebrand to others by Rudolf Belling and Naum Gabo. Their inclusion was, in a sense, the key to the success of the exhibition. They enlivened the galleries but also represented Häring's architectural theory.

Matthias Schirren, director of the architectural archives of the Akademie der Künste and curator of the exhibition, wanted both to present an overview of Häring's career and also to grapple with Häring's difficult and continually evolving theory. The architect's articulate and often critical writings were central to the theoretical debates of the 1920s and are arguably his real contribution to the Modern Movement. They provided an essential counterpoint to the voice of Le Corbusier and served to deepen the level of discourse among modern architects as a whole. In his “Wege zur Form” (Approaches to form), originally published in 1925 in Die Form: Zeitschrift für gestaltende Arbeit, Häring introduced the basic tenets of his theory of Organic Functionalism. While all architects associated with the Neues Bauern believed that their times called for new forms, Häring wanted such forms to be discovered rather than imposed. They should literally grow out of the function of the object, like machines, ships, cars, and aircraft. It was inevitable, Häring argued, that such a process of coming into being would ultimately generate organic form, not geometric form, which was a product of the intellect, imposed from outside.

“Wege zur Form,” with other influential writings, such as “Probleme des Bauens” (Problems of building) and “Zwei Städte” (Two cities), are reprinted in the current catalogue. (Much of Häring’s writing was previously brought together in two books now difficult to find, Heinrich Lauterbach and Jürgen Joedicke’s Hugo Häring: Schriften, Entwürfe, Bauten of 1965, and Margot Aschenbrenner’s Hugo Häring: Die ausbildung des Geistes zur arbeit an der gestalt, fragmente of 1968.) But it was sculpture rather than texts that served to convey Häring’s theory in the exhibition. In 1946, Häring would recall, “In our student days we were occupied by the question: What comes next, how does the path go further? The figures embodying this debate were Hildebrand and Rodin.” A comparison of these two sculptors demonstrated the polarization of the sculptor’s approach to form at the end of the nineteenth century. An austere neoclassical bas-relief by von Hildebrand was juxtaposed with a sensuous male nude by Rodin. The von Hildebrand needed to be viewed from a frontal position, while the Rodin invited the gaze from every angle. The former prioritized the idea of sculpture, the latter its materiality. Von Hildebrand embodied the German idealist tradition, while Rodin explored the phenomenologically known world. “Hildebrand,” Häring continued, “was important to me, but Rodin’s line led to a more living world.”

In the second room of the exhibition, this polarized approach to form was traced into the twentieth century. Naum Gabo’s wire-and-glass Raumkonstruktion (Space construction) is an object that utilizes new materials in order to demonstrate the idea of space, whereas Rudolf Belling’s abstract, jagged, three-dimensional wooden object engages space
directly as its medium. Gabo’s work might be described as geometric, symmetrical, and mechanical, Belling’s as organic. One began with an idea of space to be given form, the other with an exploration of space that resulted in sculpture. One follows a deductive, the other an inductive, process of reasoning.

Haring considered his own approach comparable to Belling’s. Function and materials constituted his point of departure. He called his entry for the Friedrichstrasse skyscraper competition of 1921/22 “Funktionale Form” and explained that its fluid sculptural massing and undulating walls were the direct result of practical considerations, such as site, circulation, and daylight. In his article of 1925, “Funktionelles Bau: Gut Garkau / Das Viehhaus” (Functional building: Gut Garkau / the Cattle House), Haring presented his cow shed as a case study in functional building. It was to house forty-two cows and one bull, and was shaped in a loop so that the cows did not have to face one another. It had a concrete cantilevered frame so as not to interrupt the spatial flow, and a continuous high band of windows for light and ventilation. Every feature, according to Haring, was dictated by function.

Kurt Schwitters, in an article of 1927 entitled “Stil oder Gestaltung” (Style or form-giving), singled out Haring as an architect of outstanding significance. “Most New Architects,” Schwitters wrote, “claim that simple, meaningful, and functional form derives from new materials such as iron, concrete, glass, etc., but this cannot explain the fact that the outer form of their works often appears so similar... Haring shows us that in our time we have no style, only a form-giving principle [Gestaltungsprinzip].” The integrity of Haring’s building practice to his theory ultimately made him appear at the time as an outsider to the modernist movement. Refusing to subordinate his vision to what Schwitters referred to as a “boxy system of architecture,” he withdrew his contribution to the Weissenhof Siedlung exhibition of 1926/27, and began to consider his work in opposition to the modernist mainstream.

All recent efforts to reestablish Haring’s place in the history of modern architecture have maintained this oppositional basis, regarding Haring as the founder of an alternative, organic modernist tradition, one later developed by Hans Scharoun and the Brutalist architects of the 1950s. The Berlin exhibition, by contrast, tried to return Haring to his original position as a defining rather than alternative voice of the Neues Bauen. His Gestaltung was important to architects who sought to free themselves from historical precedent through the givens of task and materials. Once again Haring has become integral to the theory and practice of the Neues Bauen. It was disappointing that the exhibition did not overlap with Mies in Berlin, which opened at the Altes Museum in December 2001. An opportunity to have seen the work of the two men together would have contributed to an understanding of reciprocal influences and a shared milieu.

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Notes

Publication related to the exhibition: