

# An Unpublished Interview with Walter Gropius, December 1960

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Having recently retired from the University of Pennsylvania's Department of City and Regional Planning, I was going through the boxes of files I had accumulated over the years, when I came upon folders containing three unpublished interviews I had done in the early 1960s. These conversations were with Reyner Banham, Walter Gropius, and José Luis Sert. Reading them over, I thought the Gropius interview was still worth publishing as a historical artifact, and so I contacted *JSAH* (Figure 1).

This is how the Gropius interview came about. In the summer of 1960, before returning to the Yale School of Architecture that fall, I had a job in the editorial offices of the *Architectural Record*. Jonnie Davern, who was effectively the managing editor (although she was not confirmed in that title until later), sent me across town to interview Philip Johnson at his office in the Seagram Building.<sup>1</sup> Johnson was in good form and enjoyed the idea of being interviewed by someone studying to be an architect. The *Record* was pleased with the interview and published it that December.<sup>2</sup>

Davern gave me some additional interview assignments when I went off to New Haven that fall, expecting me to fit them in during the academic year. She commissioned the Banham interview when she found out that he was visiting Yale; other assignments sometimes required me to travel. In 1961 and 1962, the *Record* published my interviews with Pietro Belluschi, Edward L. Barnes, Edward D. Stone, and Paul Rudolph.<sup>3</sup> I also submitted my interviews with Banham, Sert, and Gropius, but Emerson Goble, the editor in chief,



**Figure 1** Walter Gropius, 1955 (photo, Hans G. Conrad/René Spitz Collection).

apparently decided that the ones the *Record* published were enough.

Walter Gropius was actually one of the first of my interview assignments. I met him on 29 December 1960 at his office in an old, frame house that his firm, The Architects Collaborative, occupied near Harvard Square in Cambridge.

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Gropius had his office in what must have once been a bedroom on the second floor. It was not a big room. He sat behind a large desk, and I on a small office chair facing him, taking notes on a yellow pad. My method was to record the conversation in longhand as best I could, and then write it up in detail immediately afterward, when what was said and how it was said were still fresh in my mind. I always promised my interview subjects that the *Record* would send my text to them for review. My recollection is that Gropius, having reviewed the transcript of our interview, asked for only one change. He was uncomfortable being quoted as having said that art would one day come back to realism—not that he had not said it, but he did not want it published. Now, fifty-eight years later, I think it is acceptable to leave that statement in.

Why did the *Record* decide not to publish this interview, or the other two? As the *Record* had sent the text to Gropius for his approval and then let me know about the change he had requested, it had seemed to me the article was moving forward in the usual way. What happened? At the time, I was too busy to care, and now there is no way to find out. What follows is the text of the interview with a few new annotations.

**JONATHAN BARNETT: Professor Gropius, would you say the course of American architecture today represented the regionalism and variety you have always envisaged for modern architecture, or would you characterize some of it as a retreat into formalism?**

WALTER GROPIUS: I wouldn't say retreat, but a general confusion. Talented architects today seem to have a different method of approach for every problem, and they shoot off all their powder on minor projects. We cannot reserve our drama for a cathedral but put it all in a skating rink.<sup>4</sup> A community point of view is never in the foreground, and we never achieve the unity that existed in former times.

We live today surrounded by such unbearable ugliness, and so few people notice it. No power on earth can regulate what is built on Park Avenue today. There once was a feeling that certain things just were not done, but this feeling no longer exists. We need a new groundswell from the population to bring us back to the common denominator.

I am always attacked as a functionalist. For me this word "function" has more than the meaning that is always taken by critics. There is another aspect, the satisfaction of the human soul, that is equally important. Two houses may both serve their occupants equally well. But we call one ugly and the other beautiful. Why is this? Beyond the technical function there is the psychological function. Good design is always based upon a threefold approach. One is the Technique, another is Economy, and the other Form. We cannot cheaply

turn it around and say that function should follow form. This is nonsense; it is a verbal stunt.<sup>5</sup>

**JB: What would you say was the relationship between modern painting and sculpture and modern architecture?**

WG: That is a very difficult question. The artist has been so isolated in his ivory tower that quite naturally he turned away from depicting events. The artist withdrew into his own thoughts and abstract art was the result. In my opinion, art will come back to realism again when contact with the populace is reestablished.<sup>6</sup>

The isolation of the artist makes it difficult to produce a really grown-together work of art, where painting, sculpture, and architecture exist as a unit.

I have been trying to do this all my life, generally without success. Only at the Bauhaus did we achieve this working together. I was chairman of the committee for the UNESCO building, where we were very conscious of this question; but the artists were called in much too late, and the art was just hung on the building.<sup>7</sup>

**JB: What do you think constitutes the appeal that the architecture of the past has for the people of today?**

WG: I would say it was the unity of such a time. On a New England green the church and the house have a common denominator and there is enough margin for individual variety. The men who built the green respected the scale of what was there and the material of what was there.

**JB: Do you think that the definitions put forward in the book *The International Style* [Hitchcock and Johnson, MoMA, 1932] reflected such a common denominator for modern architecture?**

WG: Internationality only exists in the use of the same technical means. Regionalism is also important, although it is much less of a factor now than it once was. What remains of regionalism is the climatic conditions and certain habits and customs, which also get less and less pronounced as time goes by.

**JB: Does our modern industrialized society make a qualitative difference in the type of architecture that can be produced today?**

WG: The old patron was lost to the last generation. Now we come slowly into another patronage, by industry.

I am always interested to see the rank order of professions in different countries. In Prussia, where I was born, the soldier and scholar were on top and the businessman was rather

despised. You wouldn't want your daughter to marry one. It was silly, but that's the way it was. In this country, the businessman is on top, and the scholar and the artist not so high.

This power position is very important. In Germany, when I arranged an exhibition, I dictated to industry what should be exhibited. That would not happen in this country. But I think industrial patronage is the pattern of the future.

**JB: How does the businessman, or the ordinary citizen, go about telling a good building from a bad one?**

WG: He cannot if he hasn't a discerning mind. The problem is one of education. We know from history that whole populations have had this quality of discernment. I think Japan has it today. Japan was for me a revelation. For once in my life I felt a member of the majority, because the plain man possessed this understanding.<sup>8</sup>

I dare say that in architecture Japan is now in the lead. You have a score of talented architects, and yet all have a common point of view. They remember their old culture and absorb the best of the new as well.

**JB: What should be our attitude to our own architectural heritage? For example, how much architectural history should the architecture student learn?**

WG: They have always attacked me for not teaching history, although this does not represent my point of view.

In my youth, I went to Italy and traveled all over.<sup>9</sup> Then came a period where I built up my own creative approach to the things that I had seen, and did not look again until I had built a platform under my feet.

The very young man should not have too much history in the early stages of his training. He mustn't become intimidated by the great masters. I am against looking into books, books, books, to see what has gone before.

When history is studied it should be studied analytically, to create an understanding of the kind of civilization which produced the architecture of the past.

Education is not the accumulation of knowledge alone, but a method of approach and of finding one's own way. This was our attitude at the Bauhaus, a fact which is not generally recognized.

I did not wish to follow the example of those who teach in such a way as to produce small editions of themselves. My predecessor at Weimar was [Henry] Van de Velde, and all he could produce was little Van de Veldes. I felt that it was necessary to start with the objective facts which are the tools of understanding: materials, surface, volume, space, and color; and to try and destroy imitation everywhere. When you throw the student into the water to sink or swim, just at the moment he is drowning, he is ready to learn something.

But we were not against history, we were only against the old form of art history which was just learning by rote.

**JB: However, the artist, at some stage of development, must reject what has gone before?**

WG: The true artist has to sacrifice and open the eyes of others very slowly. He must be able to make himself ridiculous to others. It happens to all of us with advanced ideas. When you really have stamina to stick with them, then others will recognize them too. I believe that true art is really shocking to the great majority of people when it first appears.

**JB: Do you think the position of the architect as an artist is different in a mechanized society from what it was in the past?**

WG: The difficulty is in achieving a unity of overall effect, when the building is put together by so many people.

In the Middle Ages the master was not the one who designed the whole building, but he gave the others a key; it was a true collaboration. Today the architect puts his design down platonically on the drawing board, writes the specifications, and an army of men carry out his whim without being able to change anything.

I believe that the architect has been drawn too far away from the practical experience of architecture. When architects talk about practical experience, they mean office experience.

When I was at Harvard, I made it a requirement that every student spend a term—it should have been a year—working for a contractor. At first everyone was bewildered, but then they came to understand and to like it.

The AIA says that an architect should not be allowed to execute a building, but to me it is a very sound affair if an architect and a contractor should put up a building together. By this I do not mean the package deal where the architect is an employee.

**JB: Then the architect must be not only an artist but a contractor, a psychologist, and several different types of engineer as well.**

WG: My answer to this has always been the collaborative, also an idea that has been much misunderstood.

The spark must always come from the individual. In our office, the man who is the job captain can take or leave what the others say; he has the last word. Very often somebody else can suggest good ideas that improve his own line of thought and yet harmonize with it.

Engineering has to be included right at the beginning and so does mechanical equipment, which is now so big a factor. Collaboration needs simultaneity. We cannot do architecture

first and then put the other things in, but simultaneously, side by side, they must work and penetrate each other.

**JB: Which brings us back to the question of the unifying concept.**

WG: When you are as old as I am, you begin to notice that the strange thing is how ideas go in waves. First one thing comes up, and then it is submerged again, perhaps because it is taken for granted. When they attack the Bauhaus, I ask myself whether there is anything to replace it. Has it been formulated? And, if so, what might it be? I would be interested to know.

## Notes

1. Her real name was Jeanne, but everyone called her Jonnie, and she generally signed her name that way.
2. The editors, however, were disconcerted by Johnson's candor and decided to introduce the interview with a proviso: "Discoursing freely in his inimitable and outrageous fashion, Mr. Johnson consigns the International Style to the academies; comes out for the one-man office and against architectural schools; advises making function follow form—etc., etc." "Architectural

Student Jonathan Barnett Interviews Philip Johnson," *Architectural Record* 128 (Dec. 1960), 16, 128.

3. "Architectural Student Jonathan Barnett Interviews Pietro Belluschi," *Architectural Record* 129 (Mar. 1961), 10, 397, 351; "Architectural Student Jonathan Barnett Interviews Edward L. Barnes," *Architectural Record* 130 (Aug. 1961), 10, 194; "Architectural Student Jonathan Barnett Interviews Edward D. Stone," *Architectural Record* 130 (Sept. 1961), 10; "Architectural Student Jonathan Barnett Interviews Paul Rudolph," *Architectural Record* 131 (Jan. 1962), 12, 62ff.

4. Eero Saarinen's David S. Ingalls Rink for Yale University, which had recently been completed, is probably the building Gropius had in mind.

5. This could well be a reference to statements Philip Johnson made in my interview with him (see note 2, above), published just weeks before Gropius and I met in late December 1960.

6. This is the sentence that Gropius, on reflection, asked not be published—his only edit to my transcript.

7. The architects for UNESCO were Marcel Breuer, Pier Luigi Nervi, and Bernard Zehrfuss; Gropius's fellow advisory committee members were Lucio Costa, Le Corbusier, Sven Markelius, and Ernesto Rogers.

8. See Walter Gropius, "Architecture in Japan," in *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, by Kenzo Tange (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960). Gropius visited Japan in 1954.

9. Gropius traveled in Italy in 1907, after completing his architectural education and before going to work for Peter Behrens.