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**Peter Behrens**  
educatore e Gestalter  
del XX secolo

La Rivista di Engramma

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# Peter Behrens educatore e Gestalter del XX secolo

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e Christian Toson

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# Theater des Lebens

Marco De Michelis



Opening of the artist's colony exhibition with a dedication on May 15, 1901. Photographer unknown © Institut Mathildenhöhe, Städtische Kunstsammlung Darmstadt.

The beginnings of our story are well known. It was the composer Richard Wagner who famously announced the unification of the sister arts in two essays of 1849:



Das große Gesamtkunstwerk, das alle Gattungen der Kunst zu umfassen hat, um jede einzelne dieser Gattungen als Mittel gewissermaßen zu verbrauchen, zu vernichten zu Gunsten der Erreichung des Gesamtzweckes aller, nämlich der unbedingten, unmittelbaren Darstellung der vollendeten menschlichen Natur (Wagner 1849).

This idea shares deep connections with Wagner's involvement in the revolutionary events of 1849. His support of the political revolution informed his support for a revolution in the arts, first and foremost, through the establishment of a "National Theatre".

The push for the reunification of the different arts was not totally new: in a certain sense, it was the peculiar product of Romanticism. Already in 1803, Friedrich Schelling endorsed "the most perfect combination of all the arts: the unification of poetry and music through song, of poetry and painting through dance" (Koss 2010, 11). The composer Carl Maria von Weber had spoken of "a self-sufficient work of art in which every feature and every contribution by the related arts are moulded together... and dissolve to form a new world" (*ibid.*). At mid-century, Wagner clearly stated that his *Gesamtkunstwerk* contained three artistic forms: music, poetry, and dance. In it, each art form "will discover its own identity" and the public will become a "communal" audience, similar to those attending classical Greek dramas in the theatres of Athens.

Architecture became crucial to this project when Wagner started enquiring into the possibility of a theatre being conceived and built for his musical dramas. "In a perfect theatre building," Wagner wrote in 1849, "down to the smallest details, only the necessity for art gives measure and law. This need is twofold: that of giving and of receiving, which are [...] mutually dependent on each other" (Wagner 1849). During his time in Dresden, he had met with the young Gottfried Semper who, in 1841, had completed his beautiful *Hof-Theater*. Semper had also, in his own way, introduced the idea of a reunification of the arts: under the architect's supervision, the classical monuments had become "the quintessence of the arts" as a unified work of art. The discovery of coloured traces in the ruins of Greek temples in Greece and Sicily showed that these classical masterpieces were the product of a profound connection among the "three figurative arts", supported by the "more technical arts", and that "their boundaries

definitely merged” (Eggert 1976, 122-128). More generally, Semper affirmed mutual relations between the arts as part of their very genealogy, whose origins shared the same process and interaction; thus, the history of architecture begins with the history of applied arts (*Kunstindustrie*), and crucial principles like symmetry or harmony also share a common origin.

By 1862, Wagner was already able to describe his desire for a “provisional theatre, as simple as possible, perhaps merely of wood, and calculated only according the artistic effectiveness of the interior activity” (Habel 1985, 23): the seating arrangement would be amphitheatrical, and the orchestra pit would be submerged under the stage so as to be invisible to the audience. Two years later, the enthusiastic support by the Bavarian king Ludwig II seemed to increase the feasibility of the project and it was under these circumstances that Semper became involved with the architectural design. The solution seemed a difficult one from the very beginning: Ludwig’s desire was for a monumental permanent theatre whereas Wagner wanted a provisional structure with which he could experiment for different solutions.

Semper tried to give form to a possible compromise. The final designs for the amphitheatrical auditorium itself were monumental but also democratic, with 1500 spectators arranged in eighteen rows of seats. Undoubtedly, the reference was to the classical Greek theatre and its popular ritual function. The city of Munich, however, became an impossible location for the desired stage. The small Bavarian city of Bayreuth was a more promising site for the renaissance of German culture.

Instead of the great architect Semper, Wagner ended up choosing two unknown designers for the “Festspielhaus”, Karl Brandt and Otto Brueckwald. The new project (1876) nonetheless relied heavily on the plans that Semper had drawn for Munich. Wagner wrote to Semper: “although clumsy and artless, the theatre is executed according to your designs”:

The design of the auditorium, like that of its precursors in Munich, derived from the amphitheatrical model that Wagner had long championed; based on the outdoor theatres of classical Greece, it invoked Greek culture along with its democratic associations of the VOLK. Steeply raked, the rows of seats

form a unified architectonic mass, their fan shape ensuring that even the seats at the ends of the rows would offer full views of the stage (Koss 2010, 50-53).

George Bernard Shaw enthusiastically observed:

It is republican to begin with [...]. The 1500 seats are separated by no barrier, no difference in price, no advantages except those of greater or less proximity to the stage. The few state cabins at the back, for kings and millionaires, are the worst places in the house (Shaw 1889).

Built just north of the centre of Bayreuth, at the top of a small hill, the new theatre asked its visitors to experience a pilgrimage in the process of reaching it. Its exterior appeared devoid of all monumental elements like a small railway station or a country building with the traditional *Fachwerk* (half-timbering) wall construction.

“The shrine of St. Wagner”, as Mark Twain ironically called it, was inaugurated in August 1876 with three performances of the *Ring of Nibelungen*. Kaisers, kings, painters, writers, and composers like Grieg, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saens formed the audience. The experience of Wagnerian musical drama in the theatre of Bayreuth introduced a notion that would come to reveal itself as crucial for art theory, art history and artistic experiments during the last decades of nineteenth century: the notion of *Einfühlung* (Empathy) – the activity of “feeling in” – embodied engagement in the experience of art.

The audiences in Bayreuth were engaged in an experience where every aspect contributed to the entirety of artistic creation: from the spatial approach to the theatre and the embodied shared experience of the auditorium, to the mystical effect of the drama: “a sensation at once physical, psychological, and emotional” (Koss 2010, 104). In this way, the Wagnerian notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* joined the newest philosophical approaches to art: empathy, space, pure visibility, flatness and abstraction.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, Ernst Ludwig, Grand Duke of Hessen, founded an artist colony in Darmstadt, just a few kilometres from Frankfurt on the Mathildenhöhe, a hill rising to the east of the city. For this

project, Ernst Ludwig brought architect Josef Maria Olbrich, artist and designer Peter Behrens, the theatre and art critic Eduard Fuchs, the sculptor Ludwig Habich, as well as other young protagonists of the arts, to Darmstadt. In Vienna, Olbrich was the brilliant and young designer who brought the city the Secession building, opened in 1898 when he was only 31 years old. The year after he was invited by Ernst Ludwig to become the chief architect of Darmstadt's *Künstlerkolonie* (Artists' Colony). In Darmstadt, Olbrich would build the Ernst-Ludwig-Haus – the main building of the colony—and all the ancillary houses with the exception of Haus Behrens, where for the first time, Behrens – up to this point a painter and designer—experimented with architecture: it was in Darmstadt that Behrens became an architect.

Behrens was not the first artist – a well-known painter, graphic and industrial designer – whose destiny was to become a successful architect. Both Richard Riemerschmid and Henri Van de Velde followed the same path from their post-impressionist, symbolist paintings to their plans for new buildings in Weimar and the Garden City of Hellerau. The focus of the project for the Artists' Colony was “fusing life and art into a unity”; “raising everyday life to the heights of aesthetic experience” (Fuchs 1901, 17-22). In this sense, the colony anticipated a central issue of all the artistic experiments in the age of the avant-garde from Futurism and Constructivism to Dada: ‘art into life’.

On May 15, 1901, the Opening Ceremony of the Artists' Colony was held in front of the new Ernst-Ludwig-Haus. For this event, Fuchs rewrote a theatrical text *Das Zeichen* (*The Sign*) which Behrens staged on the building's front steps, flanked by Habich's colossal statues. Behrens himself, in the role of the prophet or messenger, descends the ceremonial steps of Olbrich's building with a white-robed chorus of fifty on either side [...]. The exalted experience of the beautification of life occurred though a shared communal experience, removed from daily life (Koss 2010, 104).

The Wagnerian drama emerged from the closed space of the theatre and blurred with the street and city space – with life. Indeed, Behrens

... conceived of spectatorship as a form of participation in the performance, a communal act [...]. The new kind of theatre he proposed would dissolve the traditional distinction between active performer and passive spectator [...]: Through our enthusiasm we, too, have to become artists [...]. We are on the threshold of being participants in a revelation of life (Koss 2010, 116).

In 1900, Behrens had already published a small brochure with the title, *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst. Eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols* ("Festivals of Life and Art. A Consideration of the Theatre as the Highest Cultural Symbol", Behrens 1900). In this text, Behrens introduced the Nietzschean notion of "style" and the need for a "new style" that he described not as "besondere Formen in irgend einer besonderen Kunst" (particular forms in one particular art), but as "das Symbol des Gesamtempfindens, der ganzen Lebensauffassung einer Zeit" ("the symbol of a general sensibility, of a shared idea of life"). This new need became a new building, a 'House' dedicated to an expression of total art: "der gesamten Kunst eine heilige Stätte" ("a holy place for the entire art"). Behrens thus introduced a leitmotiv that would remain vital until the beginning of the twenties: that of a cathedral for the arts first described by Theodor Fischer (*Was ich bauen moechte*: Fischer 1906, 5-9), but also by Bruno Taut (*Eine Notwendigkeit*: Taut 1914, 174-175), and after the war expressed in the *Manifesto of the Bauhaus* by Walter Gropius in 1919. Architecture stood as a candidate to receive the new *Gesamtkunstwerk* and, at the same time, became itself the protagonist of the fusion of different artistic expressions.

The ideal building described by Behrens lies – like Wagner's project in Bayreuth – "Am Saum eines Haines, auf dem Ruecken eines Berges" (on the border of a little wood, on the side of a mountain: Behrens [1900] 2015, 27-37). In a certain sense it is still a theatre, but not the mundane theatre of the bourgeois tradition. It appears, instead, like Zarathustra's temple dedicated to the "Spiel des Lebens" ("Cult of Life"), no longer an offering to naturalistic illusion but rather an devotion to the illusion of the sublime.

Der Raum für diese Teilnehmer liegt in amphitheatralischer Anordnung um eine flache Bühne herum, eine Bühne mit reliefartige Wirkung, mit vorspringendem Proszenium. Hiervor, ähnlich der griechischen Orchester, ist der vertiefte Platz für die Musik [...]. Die Sitze sind so gestellt, dass der

Verkehr zwischen allen Plätzen ermöglicht bleibt [...]. Harmonisch wie unsre Stimmung sei dieser Raum. Der Übergang zur Bühne [...] soll jetzt durch eine ansteigende Terrasse vermittelt werden. Wir wollen uns nicht trennen von unsrer Kunst (Behrens [1900] 2015, 123).

[The space for the participants is on an amphiteatrical layout around a flat stage, a stage with a relief-like effect, with a protruding proscenium. In the front, there is an in-built space for the music, just as the Greek orchestra, [...]. Seats are placed in a manner to ensure effective circulation [...]. Let this space be harmonious as our mood. The access to the stage [...] should be granted by an ascending terrace. We don't want to separate ourselves from our Art].

Adolf von Hildebrand's influence is evident when Behrens practically quotes from his extremely influential *Das Problem der Form in der Bildenden Kunst* ("The Problem of Form in the Fine arts", 1893):

Die größere Ausdehnung in die Breite bedingt die reliefartige Anordnung und reliefartige Bewegung der Gestalten und Aufzüge. Das Relief ist der markanteste Ausdruck der Linie, der bewegten Linie, der Bewegung, die beim Drama alles ist (Behrens [1900] 2015, 124).

[The greater extension of the width determines the relief-like disposition and movement of the figures and the scenes. Relief is the most characteristic expression of line, of moving line, of movement itself, which in drama is everything].

The issue of sculptural relief had been fundamental to Hildebrand's collaboration with von Marées at the Oceanographic Station in Naples, and had become the key to a sculptural metamorphosis of the wall, hence the fusion between sculpture and architecture and the relation between surface movement and movement into depth. Through it, the experience of architecture becomes an emotional – empathetic – one, and allows architecture to produce emotions, seeking to involve the observer. There is no need to repeat the argument that Behrens shows his cleverness, adroitly interpreting the philosophical discussions of his time.

It was the German poet Richard Dehmel who most excited Behrens' interest for the theatre, in particular the idea of the theatre acting as a spiritual centre of the Artists' Colony in Darmstadt. This idea appeared to be shared with the Grand Duke himself, whose intention was to build a modern theatre on the Mathildenhöhe. It was Dehmel again whose *Lebensmesse* convinced Behrens to both conceive a new theatre especially for its performance, and to publish his ideas about it in 1901. *Die Lebensmesse* asked for the realisation of "eine Stätte für die heiligste Kunst [...] für den Kult des schönen Lebens" ("a place for the most sacred art [...], for the cult of beautiful life"). One illustration shows the ground-plan of a Festival-Theater that was to have been a circular, domed building, with four entrances at the cardinal points of the compass. Inside, a sunken orchestra pit was situated virtually in the centre, on either side of which were broad shallow steps that gave access to a semi-circular stage. Behind the stage, a semi-circular wall with a single central opening formed a kind of cyclorama. Between the stage and the seating was a flat processional way on the east-west axis. In his article, Behrens described the choreography of the *Lebensmesse*, a kind of Oratorio: "there is next to no development or plot: the belief was that the production would induce such spiritual feeling in the audience that they would be reluctant to leave the theatre" (Windsor 1981, 27-34).

With this design, we find ourselves in the middle of what can already be considered anti-naturalistic theatre reform introduced by Adolphe Appia with his proposed reform of the Wagnerian drama in what would become the standard for the most important experiments at the beginning of the twentieth century from Dehmel, to Max Reinhardt, from Gordon Craig to Appia. It can be presumed that Behrens' desire was to become the architect of the new theatre of the Artists' Colony, but history took a different direction. Only a provisional theatre was built and its architect was Olbrich. The plain building, however, mirrored the idea of a reform-stage, one defined by its "relief structure".

All these aspects became reality a few years later in the Garden City of Hellerau for which Appia, Jaques Dalcroze and Heinrich Tessenow created the *Bildungsanstalt*, the new prototype of a theatre as a fusion of public and performers, of theatre and school, of music and dance, of light and space. It is here where we are finally able to understand why the first idea

was to involve Peter Behrens in the design for the new *Festspielhaus*, referred to in a letter from Dalcroze to Appia as “den besten Elektriker Deutschlands, einen gewissen Behrens” (“the best electrician in Germany, a certain Behrens”: De Michelis 1991, 13-39, 205-213).

Where does life fuse better with art than in the house? The first Behrens Haus was an experiment for ‘designing’ life. The house itself is not particularly interesting: its proportions are dubious and the architectural language it employs is still an insecure mixture of classical (the columns) and vernacular (the roof). On the side-door, Dehmel inscribed his dedication: “Steh fest mein Haus in Welt Gebraus” (“Be strong my house in the world storm”). But it is very clear that Behrens desired to underscore Nietzsche’s influence and the Zarathustran character of the house with the leitmotiv of the eagle and crystal appearing again and again. Fritz Schumacher remembered the *Zarathustra-Gesänge* (Zarathustra Songs) and a contemporary reporter spoke of a “Zarathustrastil” (“Zarathustra Style”: Malcovati 2015, 75-97).

The plan of the house was also not particularly original: a dining room and music salon together with a small drawing room for women on the ground floor and three separated bedrooms with bath on the first floor, as well as a larger library and studio for Behrens himself. Under the roof, a small apartment was nested for guests. Again, it is interesting to observe how Behrens underscored the spatial character of the domestic interior with different floor heights and different proportions for each room: something like an early Loosian *Raumplan*. Haus Behrens can be considered a spatial construction, a coherent composition of different elements and, more importantly, of different scales and sizes of life happening within it.

This explains Behrens’ desire to design everything, to give a coherent formal solution to every aspect of domestic life, to design not only the different rooms but also their plates, glasses and tableware, their chairs and cabinets, their wallpaper. From the music room and its piano, the library and its books, the *Damenzimmer* (women’s rooms) and the guest-room, his designs are everywhere, even in his wife’s clothes where rigid corsets and crinolines were done away with to introduce smooth lines following the structure and natural shape of the female body.



Haus Behrens was a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art that wanted to be a global expression of modern life (Buddensieg 1980, 37-47). It was nothing more than a first approach to an issue that, during the first decade of twentieth century, would become crucial, based as it was on an original inquiry about the notion of space. 'Space' is a word that is anything but neutral. The idea that the void within a building, or around the modelled volume of a statue, constitutes a problem had never been fully formulated before the modern era. It starts to occupy a central position in the history and philosophy of art only at the end of the nineteenth century, when German art historians like August Schmarsow and Heinrich Wölfflin – using the theories of *Einfühlung* developed by Robert Vischer and Wilhelm Worringer as a starting point – articulated their notion of space as an emanation of the presence of the body, as a 'construct; that takes shape through the movement of the body and the gaze of the individual who perceives it. As early as 1893, Hildebrand sought to transfer this new understanding of space to the visual arts, in particular to sculpture. For Hildebrand, space was the principal subject of the work of art, and the basis of the viewer's experience of it. For Hildebrand, artistic form could exist only when it was perceived in a space reflecting the kinaesthetic activity of our imagination (Hildebrand [1893] 1994).

Behrens was well acquainted with these issues. The house in Darmstadt reflects these problems through the multiplication of spatial experience at different scales of life, from the architectural space itself and the smallest objects of everyday life to clothes worn on the body. The same spatial construct moves from the wall reliefs of the dining room to the shapes of the furniture, and into the handled forms of plates and glasses. The same happens in the music salon where the wall painting and the grand piano are also designed by Behrens himself. It is possible to interpret this formal multiplicity as a variation of the effective form (*Wirkungsform*) described by Hildebrand as "a joint product of the object, on the one hand, and of its lighting, surroundings, and our changing vantage point, on the other" (Hildebrand [1893] 1994, 233).

Just a few years later, the same issues were approached more systematically and abstractly in the form of geometry and proportions which Behrens described as the "Alpha und Omega von allem

Kunstschaffen" ("Alpha and Omega of every artistic creation"). One might even dare an analogy between the historical ideas of *Einfuehlung* and "embodied minds", and more recent experiments in the neurosciences, asserting that the *Wirkungsform* of Behrens' domestic interior could be described as "embodied simulation" activated by "mirror neurons" whose main function is to connect our experiences with the surrounding context, to establish a meaningful relation between fragmented reality and the wholeness of our embodied experience (Mallgrave 2013).

What artists and architects were looking for was something able to express, in a unified way, a sense of modern life itself beyond its fragmentation. The true critical issue for modernism was that of establishing a new relation between art and life, of erasing the boundaries that separated human life from the genius of art.

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## English abstract

Richard Wagner's 1848 proposal for a reunification of all arts was the starting point for a new theatre of life. The great Gesamtkunstwerk was intended to portray perfect human nature by merging Music, Poetry and Dance. Spectators had to be involved in a communal audience recalling Greek theatre.

The necessity of a theatrical building included architecture among the arts to be unified. Theatre had to be built in such a way that every detail reinforced Wagner's ideas. By 1864, thanks to the support of Ludwig II, G. Semper was involved in a project for a provisional theatre in Bayreuth, Bavaria. Wagner's Festspielhaus was

built in 1876 on a project by K. Brandt and O Brueckwald, heavily influenced by Semper's work. The Festspielhaus was completely amphitheatrical, with no class distinction, and introduced the concept of "Einfuehlung" - "feeling in", the embodied engagement in the experience of art. This early example of modern theatre contributed to the newest philosophical approaches to art: empathy, space, pure visibility, flatness and abstraction.

The influence of Wagner's Festspielhaus is evident in the opening ceremony of the Darmstadt Artists Colony (Kunstlerkolonie) in 1901, where Behrens staged *The Sign* (Das Zeichen), written by E. Fuchs. Behrens conceived with R. Drehmel an ideal theatre acting as a spiritual centre of the Artists' Colony, "for the cult of beautiful life": a doomed circular building where a Lebensmesse could take place. This could be considered one of the first examples of anti-naturalistic reform introduced by A. Appia.

Another experiment of unification of arts and "designing life" is the first Behrens Haus. Behrens designed space at different scales, from the architectural space to the smallest furniture details. There is a strong reference to A. Hildebrandt's theories about space and kinesthetic activity, and there is a clear desire to represent all the aspects of life inside the house. Behrens' house is an attempt of unification of modern life beyond fragmentation, establishing a new relation between art and life.





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**Behrens als Erzieher.**

**Einführung zum Colloquium im Warburg-Haus Hamburg am 13. April 2018**

Hartmut Frank

**Sull'attualità di Peter Behrens | On the Continued Relevance of Peter Behrens**

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**Collaboratori, studenti ed epigoni di Peter Behrens**

Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino

**Un incontro incisivo.**

**Karl Schneider nell'atelier di Peter Behrens (1915-1916)**

Monika Isler Binz

**Peter Behrens alla V Triennale di Milano, 1933**

Silvia Malcovati

**Der „Geist des Archimedes“.**

**Die Bedeutung von Peter Behrens für die Holländische Architektur**

Herman van Bergeijk

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