

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE (1953)

In tackling this theme we must first of all consider what we understand by the two terms, 'continuity' and 'change'.

Continuity refers to that which persists, continues to exist, always in the same form, with the same value. Change is the opposite of continuity. It is that which mutates, albeit within certain limits. It doesn't refer to the kind of instant transformation, with no intermediate steps, that you get in fairy-tales for example, when a frog morphs into a prince.

If, however, we want to investigate these terms more closely, we need to find a measure that can be applied both to the constant and the mutable. If we were to use the measure of geological time, the only constant connecting these two terms would be a formula to the effect that the energy mass always remains the same.

By energy mass, I do not mean the form in which the energy is materialised, but simply the amount of energy. For while the amount of energy remains constant, it appears in a variety of forms that are subject to continual change. From this one might conclude that continuity is not to be found in materials, but only in ideas, and perhaps only then in an idea that has remained unaltered with the passage of time. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, I'd like here to equate idea with energy.

If we now look at what is happening today, we see a world being transformed. If we could replay the events on earth in some kind of time-lapse motion, we'd witness, over the millennia, a change of tremendous proportions. The course of history would then be measured in terms of the speed of light.

From this example you can see that the concepts of continuity and change are both relative. This means we

FORM, FUNCTION, BEAUTY = GESTALT

have to ask ourselves: what are the conditions framing this continuity and this change? Even when we limit the terms of our investigation to our own life-spans, we can see that we use a variety of measures – minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades – to mark the passage of time and gauge continuity and change.

From this perspective it's easy to succumb to the temptation to view nothing as constant and everything as mutable (or, conversely, depending on the time-span under review, everything as constant and nothing as mutable). It's therefore time that serves as a measure, it's the duration that counts.

In this context we find continuity in things where change is not immediately obvious. And change in things where the transformation is quite apparent.

In addition, with objects, we relate continuity and change to the life-span of the thing itself, in other words we judge a chair, for example, not only in terms of its individual qualities but also as a representation of a type – chairs as a whole over a longer time-span. We then see within an individual object elements not only of continuity but also of change.

If we're addressing this topic today, it's mainly because we want to be clear about our relation to so-called continuity and so-called change. We want to know what function continuity has, what function change has. And we want to know how to respond to them.

Since this is a question not just of artistic concern but of greater social interest, we need to recognise that both continuity and change are essential, indeed inseparable components of the artistic. And more than this: both are essential foundations of society.

The question is therefore: to what end continuity, to what end change? Or, more specifically, what should be constant, what should change?

Taking as our starting point people's needs, it's evident that these vary from place to place. Nevertheless there are certain basic things that all people need – forks, knives, spoons, plates, cups, chairs, tables, beds and other

everyday objects of this kind. There are regional variations in use. So, for example, in China and Japan they don't use forks but chopsticks. Chairs also take on different forms depending on where and how they're being used. But within a region there is little variation in an object's perceived purpose. Given this stability of purpose and use, one would expect a certain continuity. But just look at our cutlery and the way it has developed! It's clear that it has undergone a huge number of changes, and it's hard to find a single spoon whose form is untouched by contemporary styling, never mind one defined solely by its distinct (though versatile) use. So we have external, artificial stylistic changes exerting an influence over the continuity of the perceived purpose, thereby regulating the continuity of the form. I'm not sure whether the desire to have a spoon for all times – which always looks the same because it's always used the same way – should be put down to a striving for perfection, or a striving for freedom, or a striving for absolutism. Or whether the spoon is continually tinkered with out of some irrepressible instinct for play or desire for variation.

I do, however, believe that the spoon is continually changing because we haven't yet found its true form – the form that corresponds to all its different functions. This form depends less on some stroke of creative inspiration than it does on its purpose, which has first to be defined and then comprehensively tested. From this we get a form that is provisional at first, and requires patient development to become what we call *gestalt*. *Gestalt* in this sense is more than form: it embraces that which is valid, constant. I'd like to call this kind of change 'organic development', in that it arises out of the givens of function, with the proviso that when the purpose changes the *gestalt* does too.

Taking this route will ultimately lead us to look for – and find – the *gestalt* of all the things around us. Styles will effectively disappear; it will no longer be a case of *one* style simply being replaced by *another*, giving way to a new idea of form. One may recall previous misguided efforts to reduce everything to its so-called 'primary form' – to

FORM, FUNCTION, BEAUTY = GESTALT

spheres, cones, cylinders, etc. The intention was to go beyond style, but all that actually happened was that a new style was substituted for an old one. That kind of 'purification' of formal vocabulary is not what I'm recommending here. What I advocate instead is a search for the constant, a search for the valid *gestalt*. *Gestalt*, in this sense, is distinguished by its essential simplicity – not an artificial simplification, not stylisation, but simple and correct function.

And also beauty – not an artificially applied beauty, but a self-evident beauty. Objects of this kind presuppose a modesty on the part of the designer. Any eruptions of 'self-expression' (as the Anglo-Saxons so beautifully put it) would be out of place here, for the decisive factor is not the expression of the designer but the expression of the object, which has to neutrally fulfil its purpose. But being 'without style' is not the same as being characterless. Such objects in fact have a very distinctive character. They just don't have 'style', as one woman defined it when instructing Adolf Loos on the subject – she said that the same emblem should be applied to all objects and all pieces of furniture. In the example Loos related this was a lion's head in the so-called arts and crafts style. Later this kind of emblem evolved into the steel pipe or the spherical lamp. And later still into the pair of decorative lines that are to be found on most American use-objects today. Even the really pale wood that is currently being used for all sorts of pieces of furniture derives from a similar spirit – from an impulse towards external uniformity – that has nothing to do with the *gestalt* of the things.

If we want to try to give things their own form today, if we want *gestalt*, then we cannot operate according to the principles that have been in use up to now. We must turn towards new methods instead. These methods are to be found in morphology, in the study of *gestalt*. The founders of morphology, principally Goethe and Roux, used scientific methods in an attempt to understand the laws that structure the formation of organisms, that is, the connections between their functions as well as the changes in function. Theirs was an analytical investigation, aimed

at defining an applicable theory of formation. Morphology is still mostly approached in this analytical/comparative manner, that is, as a comparative investigation of the structure and functioning of organisms and the ways in which they change.

But what we need today is a synthetic, creative morphology, a creative theory of form. Just as we can draw on existing work in our own investigations, so we can anticipate future needs based on our present levels of knowledge.

The things created by man are certainly of a different order than plants or animals, which are the result of a long, self-correcting series of developments, a metamorphosis. With this in mind, we could also use the theory of form to demonstrate that all things are subject to change, including living organisms, which are continually seeking to adapt to new conditions.

Applying morphology to a thing means considering the connections between all its elements and all its functions, its technical properties and ultimately also its appearance. No one element should dominate – instead, all of them need to stand in harmonious agreement. With this, we leave the realm of applied arts far behind and enter uncharted territory.

You may ask: but where does this leave continuity? And I can only respond: there's continuity in our purpose. However our purpose is also to see – and to see clearly. We are not working for the sake of machines, for some impersonal, superordinate entity such as 'industry' or 'state' or 'community'. We're working for the wellbeing of every person, every individual, as part of a community. We're trying to develop things that can serve everyone equally, make their lives better, more beautiful, and allow them to develop their potential more freely. This purpose, this new humanism, is what I'd like to see as continuity.

It's to this end that we're working to create a relative continuity in things, to this end that we're always calling for quality. At first this was technical quality – things that are well made and therefore good value, things that last,

FORM, FUNCTION, BEAUTY = GESTALT

because we see no reason to always be changing them. Then formal quality can be characterised as the sum of all factors that are taken into account in the design and that are reflected in – and indeed shape – the form as a whole. Formal quality is the mark of an object that is functional in all respects.

But where does this leave imagination and art? I believe this is a valid question, as we need to find a way out of this dilemma in which we find ourselves (and have found ourselves for decades): art *or* daily life, art *or* function.

It might at first seem that you don't need to collaborate with artists to define a morphological basis for formal qualities. It might seem that an engineer would be in a position to calculate and construct everything. One Swiss engineer speaking at a recent conference in Darmstadt certainly seemed to think so. He related how he'd been asked whether a gifted young man should become an architect. And he replied, 'if he's gifted, then let him become an architect. If he's very gifted, then he should be an engineer.' Cue heavy applause from his audience. One can see this story as an indication of the depths to which our expectations of art, including architecture, have sunk. But I don't believe this is the right attitude, or that the right solution can be found this way. Indeed I believe that when an engineer makes something that's good in every respect, it's because the artist in him is shining through. But it shows a complete misunderstanding of the role of the architect and the artist in society to imagine that they could be replaced by a gifted engineer. At least not the kind of engineer who comes out of today's schools, with today's views. It seems to me that those who are truly gifted should become not just engineers, but truly creative designers of everyday objects. For I believe that in the current climate of specialisation people with artistic skills are needed to bring together the different fields. Their ability to do so depends largely on their education. And here I'm in agreement with the engineer who spoke at Darmstadt: better a gifted engineer than a middling architect or so-called artist. And better a knowledgeable engineer than an untutored artist.

And now I'd like to come back to the real theme. As I've said, continuity is our goal – our duty to people, the new humanism. Thus broadly defined, this goal, if it's taken seriously, is not subject to change. But the paths that lead to it are certainly very varied. There are many possible routes. As a small but typical example, I'd like to refer once again to the spoon and point out that, even given the most careful morphological research, its formal quality can turn out to be quite variable. Not everything that makes up form can be reviewed and quantified, so different variants can result – with spoons, just as with songbirds in nature – even if these differences are visually subtle and their purpose, their function, is difficult to define in relation to either their form or use. We therefore see that the same function can take on several different forms even without the input of artificial or artistic devices. So it's redundant to insist, on top of this, that we should give the alleged imagination free rein to turn the simple function of a spoon into an artwork – or a sorry excuse.

By itself, the manufacturing process can generate different forms of a spoon. These forms are not shaped morphologically, but are determined by production techniques. So when we go against our better judgement and change the form of a spoon for technical reasons – the sort of thing that happens all the time in industry – we are subordinating the spoon's meaning and purpose to production methods, and abandoning part of the postulate which maintains that a spoon ought to be at the service of people – not machines. What emerges from such an approach is an inferior but possibly cheaper spoon or, in the best-case scenario, a spoon of average quality and utility. But under no circumstances do you get a spoon that is morphologically correct and displays the formal quality we are calling for. From this example of a typical, though demanding, object like a spoon you can see that design issues are very closely related to production processes, and that up to now technology has been unable (or more often unwilling) to tackle those things for which rationally there is only one production method – one that proceeds according to our best judgement.

FORM, FUNCTION, BEAUTY = GESTALT

On the other hand, technology has not yet advanced to the stage where it's possible to manufacture anything we desire. This has a bearing on the programme I've sketched out above. Until we're able to produce a constant form in an economically viable way we can hardly avoid all the deviations from this constant, all the deficiencies of function that apparently need to be offset with meaningless things such as decoration and attention-grabbing design.

I've sketched out the influence of technical factors from the perspective of industry. Handcrafts are more flexible in this respect, as – putting aside the cost – craftsmen can produce individual works that achieve a perfect agreement between material and form. This gives one-off manufacture a distinct advantage, provided we don't take the economics into account. But often it is precisely this financial aspect – the risk for investors – that poses the biggest obstacle to the industrial production of an object. The manufacturing process is only one side of the equation. The other side is the material, which influences the character of the spoon. We have access to the most varied materials, each with their own advantages and disadvantages: wood, porcelain, silver, zinc, chrome, plastics, to name just a few. Each has a different weight and surface texture, which by itself leads to different forms. A light spoon has different formal qualities than a heavy one. Hence, in the absence of agreement on a single material that is suitable for all spoons, each material, as a consequence of its specific properties, will inevitably yield a different end product. All of these can be morphologically correct – in theory at least. The variants are not arbitrary, but arise solely out of the properties of the material: they are given by nature and have nothing at all to do with capricious plays of form.

You will perhaps ask again why we need artists at all if the creativity of the individual is going to be so constrained that the difference between maker and artist is erased. If you're one of those gifted individuals who can't get excited at the prospect of things that endure for a long time, I'd like to point you towards those areas that live by change – and rapid change, not slow evolution.

If I have placed such an emphasis on relative continuity, on slow morphological development, it's not because I consider this the only possible approach to ordering life. But I do believe that these standard objects can to a certain extent provide the foundation for making our lives easier. If someone wants to go further than this in pursuing their individual goals, and has the necessary means to do so, then they have any number of options open to them.

For example in fashion, where creative people can give a suit or a coat a perfect fit and a harmonious line – a line that changes with every year, to our continual surprise and delight. Changes in fashion always mirror changing times, either in micro-form or, just as often, in a magnified way. How connected they are with time and place can once again be demonstrated by referring to an example given by that tireless critic Adolf Loos, the example of the top hat. The top hat used to be considered a symbol of timeless elegance. (You don't necessarily have to agree, of course.) But Loos observed that if 20 top hats from the past 100 years were displayed together, and a top-hat wearer was asked to pick one out, he would invariably choose the latest model. But how do Loos's top hats concern us? They are an example of a standard that, while being a standard, is also a fashion, and thus subject to change.

We don't want to rule out this kind of fashion. It has a part to play in contemporary life, just as history does: neither can be ignored, and both are a potential source of inspiration.

But we must always be clear about one thing: as much as fashion may bring us pleasure, as much as we revere the historical, we should never forget that both of these things – the fashionable (as the thing which changes the most) as well as the historical (which became historical because everything changed) – only have real meaning when they're related to our constant goal, namely, the idea of serving man. That is why we need those standard objects which will create the basis for a higher standard of living – and to which changes in fashion can then be an enjoyable addition.

FORM, FUNCTION, BEAUTY = GESTALT

If I've been speaking to you about these standard objects, which currently lack good form, and about ways to go about making them, it is because these are precisely the things that surround us every day and that cumulatively form our environment. If these objects are created in the way I've just described, they will become components of our culture – consumer goods will become cultural goods. This is the route by which art can leave its ivory tower and return to life – no longer as a substitute for life, but as an integral, supporting part of it.