

# fundamentals of exhibition design

by herbert bayer



1871: the formalistic and imitative mixture of styles is best exemplified by this figurative tower construction of beer bottles. it is inconceivable today, how the purpose of this product could be so ignored. instead, emphasis is placed on its characteristics as a decorative building material.

*The text of the three articles by Herbert Bayer is set experimentally in lower-case. For a detailed discussion of this question of lower-case typography, see the article "toward a universal type."*

—THE EDITORS

in exhibition design, we have a new and complex means of communication of the idea, in which elements, such as painting, photography, etc., fill only part of the field. the great possibilities of exhibition design rest on the *universal* application of all known means of design: diagram, lettering, the word, photography, architecture, painting, sculpture, tone, light, film. it is the apex of all collective effects, of all powers of design. all the elements suited to the purpose of communicating the idea are included in it, such as enlightenment, advertising, education, etc.

the new point of view is not based only on stylisation. the object to be represented should not simply be shown and exhibited in the old museum sense. the essence of the present-day concept follows: the theme must be clearly expressed, its special character, its purpose and value, its advantages and disadvantages; by means of comparison, survey, sequence, exhibition and representation. the theme should not retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, demonstrate, and even persuade and lead him to a planned and direct reaction. therefore we may say that exhibition design runs parallel with the psychology of advertising. and here lies an essential cause of the intensification of the exhibition. the new point of view also extends to design of house facades, show-window decoration, stage, and the



customary term, "exhibition design," is insufficient.

#### analysis of existing and newly discovered elements

the organism of a successfully designed exhibition-unit includes in itself unity, mobility, aesthetic pleasure, forcefulness, and economy. the following conditions may be regarded as requisites for this end:

1. the ground-plan and the direction of the visitor.  
the available space and its possibilities in arrangement, interpenetration and intersection.
2. the design of the exhibition theme.
  - a. the formal media, line, surface, color, and sculpture, etc.
  - b. the movements of the individual and his perspective.
  - c. the technical media, the material.



*disorder in floor plan in relation to direction*



*organized direction*

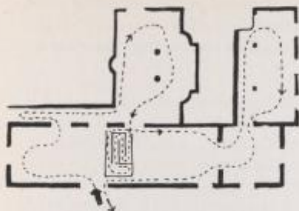
#### ground-plan and direction

the ground-plan is built up on a motif or theme, which is to be reproduced on a surface or in space. the old, ceremonious representational solution with its symmetrical and axial effect is not possible because it is entirely formal. this is impossible when the given theme is composed of an unequal number of members, when there is a time element, or whenever a development is to be represented which entails motion.

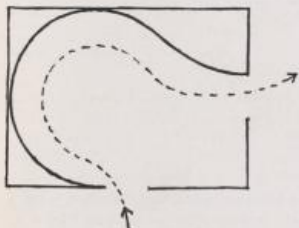
*ground-plan and direction of the visitor become one, because from the solution of the direction problem, the ground-plan must take shape.*

#### the problem of direction:

- a. to lead the individual in the correct order past all that which should be viewed, and without conscious compulsion.
- b. the organisation of the mass of people coming and going into a smooth traffic.



*plan of direction in werkbund exhibition, paris, 1930. (gropius, moholy-nagy, breuer, bayer.)*

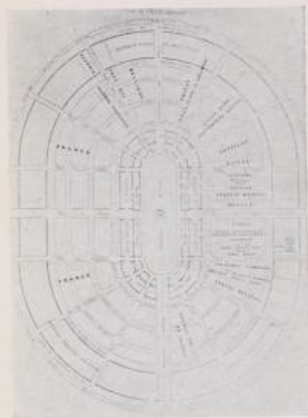


in this way, as a result of the dynamic quality in man, a dynamic and purposeful construction is reached, and not only a formal one. then it is not only artistic views which produce the new, open, and seemingly variable ground-plan.

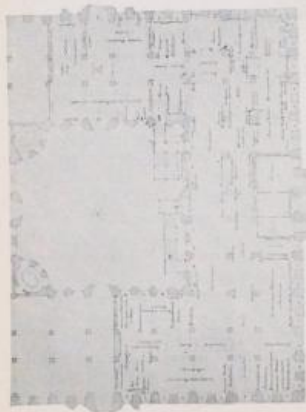
therefore in the future, ground-plans will be more readily conceived of in groups, lightened, dynamic, and less symmetrical and axial. the wish for direction through the space corresponds to the practice of rounding out of the space and its articulation by means of curves which has often been applied by members of the bauhaus.

when the exhibition material is already grouped in a reasonable succession, then the direction of visitors will follow in a free and unaffected manner: by means of the forceful and effective swinging motion of direction arrows, by means of mechanically produced sounds, by means of automatic repetition or playing of speaking records, etc. an unseen direction will be easily accomplished by placing interesting and outstanding things at points where they will immediately be observed. the lettering and reading direction of our printing, from left to right, may also be a deciding factor for the direction of visitors, for the moving spectator must be able to go logically in the direction of the writing. this problem is, of course, different for a people whose writing takes a different course. another influence on the direction of the procession is the habit of walking to the left or to the right. this habit should not be underestimated, for it is so natural to the individual that his subconscious reactions toward the order of traffic become a matter of automatic habit. the visitor might also be conducted through the exhibition by a mechanical device such as a moving carpet,

and thus perform submit to direction. there follow a few examples from the past which assume importance here.

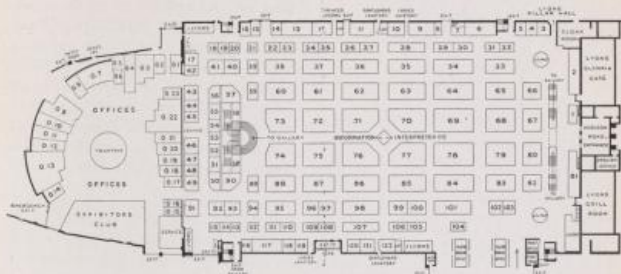


**1867 paris**—central oval ground-plan. an attempt is made here for the first time to attain a complex organisation and clear relationship of the material. this integrated attempt is manifested in the arrangement of the separate exhibiting countries in sections, while each one of these includes an arrangement of material according to kind. no direction was accomplished in this manner, and a survey was only theoretically reached. as a matter of fact, the idea, which was the first attempt at "living statistics," failed to be of note.

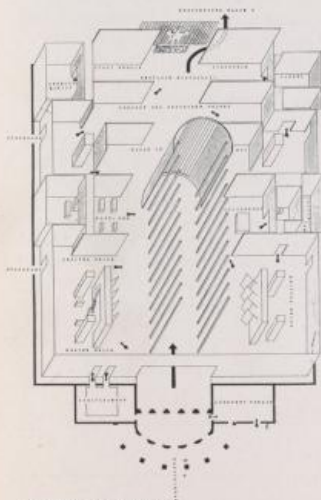


**1844 berlin**—arsenal. the confusion of the ground-plan is quite natural since the exhibition is lodged in an existing building without organic articulation. a prussian military idea was the basis of direction. in an orderly fashion, the visitor is led in the right direction by means of spoken commands.

1935 england. nearly 100 years later, the same confusion reigns, a primitive ground-plan is geometrically divided, and the thought of direction has never been considered.



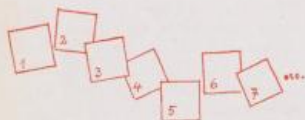
21



*senseless symmetry.*

1936 berlin. as in general (plan of entire exhibition), so in detail the question of direction must be explained. the ground-plan of the exhibition space must not be clothed in rigid symmetry for the sake of architectural effect, if this symmetry is not based on the theme of the exhibition. but asymmetry, too, is useless if it is unfounded.

it is a question of finding a compact and adequate solution on the given ground-plan, which will unite the many details of the complex exhibition material. the temporary character of the exhibition job, with more rapid construction and demolition, brings about a freer and more creative handling, opposed to the monumental construction of permanent architecture. its experimental character and free design have undoubtedly strongly influenced permanent architecture. the



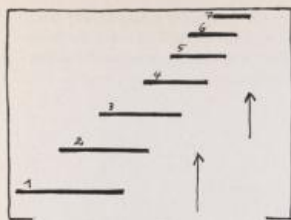
paris world exhibition in 1937 revealed that the architectural face was the most actual mirror of the times and by this means also proved the documentary value of such an arrangement. aside from the technical stipulations, free play was allowed for all kinds of artistic expression. all possibilities of fixed and variable architecture, of questioning and suspended elements, of multiple relationships, of interruptions, perceptions, invasions, intersections of materials, of light and shade, of color and movement, are ready to be used for beautiful and practical effect.

**the movements of the individual**  
the reader of a book can either sit still or move, the book will always remain in a fixed relationship to his eyes. in an exhibition, the situation is changed: the object remains fixed and the individual is in motion. aside from the fact that he may pause for the closer inspection of certain things, the exhibition visitor might be conducted past the individual objects on a moving platform. those things which, in a book, follow each other on separate pages, are here arranged in close succession in the direction of the visitor's course. the situation could also be reversed if the spectator were to stand or sit, and the displays pass him on moving bands. from this it follows that we who read from left to right must plan the succession of events in this same order.

MAN NEEDS SUNLIGHT

→ correct walking direction

wrong walking direction ←



succession in space. floor plan and



the same in perspective.



the walking direction must be parallel to the reading direction. the same rule of succession from left to right applies also to picture arrangement. displays which are self-contained are an exception to this rule. such displays may also be arranged in the left to right order. but in this case the separate parts must retain their self-contained character.

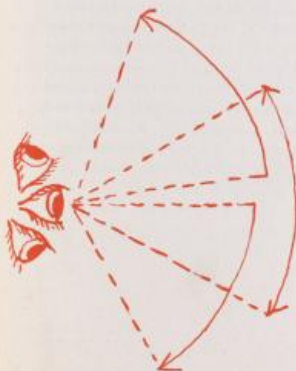
relationships in succession must always be arranged in the direction of the movement of the individual, whether this be horizontal or vertical (by means of the elevator).

**the perspective of the individual**  
the eye of man is fixed at an average distance from the floor. the field of vision has a definite size whose limitations are founded in the nature of the eye.

by means of movement of the eye, of the head, or of the body, the field of vision is extended. it also becomes larger with increasing distance between the eye and the object.

normal sight is horizontal. since, however, the perspective may be so greatly enlarged, there lies here an elementary motif of design. up to the present time, it has been little used.

the exhibition space is available to the individual eye and should obtain its forms from the qualities of the eye





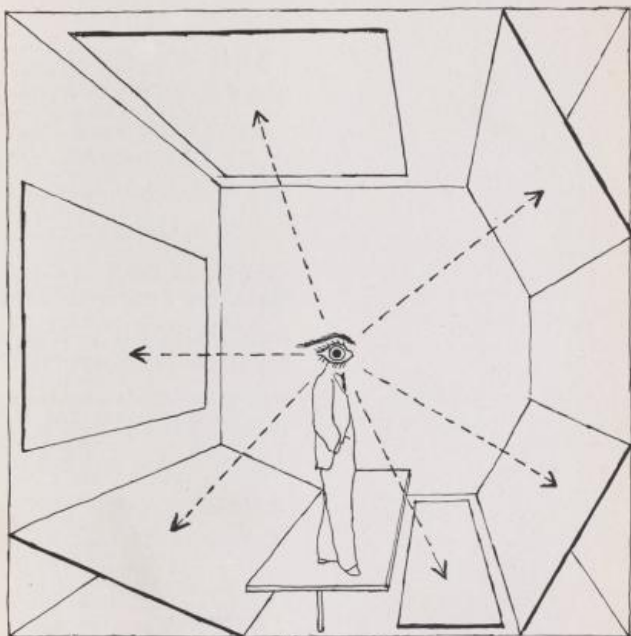


itself. this space is also mostly temporary, which fact differentiates it from the design of monumental buildings or homes.

#### the material

the form and effect of the room and of the design may be definitely influenced by the material and are dependent on it. the use of old and well-known materials such as wood, metal, brick, etc., is a foregone conclusion. there are, however, many new materials which may be made to serve the design. in the last few years, the recognition of this fact and the search for synthetic materials has tremendously enriched the store of media. material is structure and texture to the eye. the effect of the material will depend on color, pattern, roughness, or treatment of the surface. the sense of sight and the experiences of the sense of touch or smell are elements of the psychology of the effect. development and discipline of the feeling for material were especially fostered at the bauhaus. material has just as much psychological and physiological function as color. in addition, different materials require different methods of handling and constructive and special effects. here, too, important experience was gained in the practical construction of commercial buildings and exhibitions. a new "industry" was being developed. craft organisations sprang up to specialize in the use of all kinds of materials. entirely new techniques were discovered and investigated. in this field of exhibitions, the fruits of universal education were apparent: familiarity with many different techniques and materials and their possibilities in design. 1937





*inclusive picture of all possibilities*