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# Policy Brief

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## Overview

Looking to the post-pandemic future, we explain how a design-based approach known as 'Bauhaus' can be used to build back something truly better: starting with a socially stronger and fairer Europe combined with a low-carbon economy. Here we mean two things by the word 'design'. First, a practice of designers for aesthetic products that last a long time. Second, social design as a partnership for multiple value creation, i.e. design for people by people. City authorities, planners, architects, students, investors, cooperatives and partnerships for multiple value creation will be key actors in this transformative programme.

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## *The 4B's: Follow Bauhaus to build back a better world*

A spectre is haunting the world: COVID-19. In high-level discussions on recovery, pledges have been made by the European Commission, the Group of Twenty (G20), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) not simply to recreate the old economy based on fossil fuels and rampant inequalities, but to use this once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a better world based on a greener economy and more inclusive, resilient societies.

In June 2020, the OECD produced a special report on what new and original policies may be able to achieve. Then in September, 135 delegates from 47 European municipalities gathered online to discuss how cities can create a stronger, social Europe.<sup>2</sup> The title of this rallying cry is simple: *Building Back Better* (OECD, 2020).<sup>3</sup> The vision is there, it has a name, but how to achieve it remains unclear.

In this brief, we explain how a design-based approach known as 'Bauhaus' can be used to build back something truly better: starting with a socially stronger and fairer Europe combined with a low-carbon economy. Here we mean two things by the word 'design': as a practice of designers (for aesthetic products that last a long time) and social design as a partnership for multiple value creation (design for people by people). City authorities, planners, architects, students, investors, cooperatives and partnerships for multiple value creation will be key actors in this transformative programme.

Every development must have a name, and we think that Bauhaus is a good metaphor. Interestingly, the plea for "a new European Bauhaus for a green transition" came from the top, from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen,<sup>4</sup> who sensed that reshaping the economy into something better would need enthusiasm, creativity and deeds in the form of fully-



engaged action. Properly applied, the Bauhaus idea could spark optimism, enthusiasm and idealism from professionals and citizens, not just for the energy transition but also for tackling the ills of the present economy, which include the climate emergency, work without security, extreme inequalities and loss of biodiversity. Europe as a cooperation project between nations, designed to bring wealth, freedom and opportunity to all, with safeguards against exploitation and biodiversity loss, has so far been unable to deliver on these promises and potential. It needs rebooting – and Bauhaus is ‘the best show in town’ for achieving that. A show that motivates people to become actors, instead of spectators and critics.

apparently being too ‘Bolshevist’, too radical, too ideological (even though Bauhaus was never in the service of any political party).

### *Redesigning, redefining*

For this brief, however, the word Bauhaus is not to be taken literally, as advocating a German design philosophy from the inter-war years. Instead, it should inspire a radical renewal of European universities and academies of art and design. Here we can also learn from the Design Academy of Eindhoven (DAE), based in the south of the Netherlands. In the 1990s, DAE struck out in a new direction: that designers now have a duty to tackle a range of social, economic and cultural needs – a duty to proactively

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Bauhaus first appeared in 1919 in the German city of Weimar. Known for its modernistic use of geometric and linear forms, it also drew on British arts and crafts traditions, particularly in its building work. In the Weimar years, the focus was on making unique design pieces, such as furniture. But in 1925, when Bauhaus moved to Dessau, the company began to focus on constructing cheap buildings for the workers of the Junkers Factories. Industrial multifunctionality was central to the Bauhaus philosophy before the Nazis brutally shut them down for

shape everyday lives for the better. The concept is simple: design for people.

The academy draws students from all over Europe, attracted by the curriculum and Dutch design successes such as ‘DroogDesign’ (an internationally-renowned design label), which blends humour with simplicity. The basis for this success was a strong education in design and fine arts, with an essential role for craftsmanship. The use of digital technology also became a prominent element, calling for alliances

between technical universities and academies for arts and design. Other examples of good design are the FairPhone<sup>5</sup> and a VR application helping people to experience what it is like to experience psychosis (Psychotica Labyrinth).

Examples of co-design-based approaches in the physical environment include the 'Brainport Smart District' in Helmond, close to Eindhoven (see image below, courtesy of UNSense). This new neighbourhood makes maximum use of smart technology, based on an inspirational book and methods of 'co-creation'.<sup>6</sup> The second example is the renovation of the quays in Amsterdam, based on multiple value creation. In this project (known as 'koppelkansen'), social scientists from the Centre for Urban Studies at the University of Amsterdam study with citizens, water and energy companies how to use the quays to bring heat into people's homes – and conversely

how to use canal water for natural cooling. They also work on glass fibre-based telecommunication, sewerage and reducing heat stress via trees. Both projects involve social scientists doing systemic 'action research' based on reflexive interactive design.<sup>7</sup>

The plea of the Commission President for a Bauhaus project linked to new energy transitions and other societal challenges draws attention to levers for change that have so far been overlooked: the positive energy and creativity of designers, architects, builders and young people (but also retired people) to be actively involved in processes of positive change, as active people. The word active is deliberately used here. It refers to the distinction made by the German philosopher Hannah Arendt between three sorts of activity: labour, work and action. Action (which includes speech) is associated with individual initiative, with





making a difference. It is worldly action, reflecting engagement with the world, based on “a conception of positive freedom and public happiness [that] transcends our modern moral talk of duty and interest”.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, ‘action’ in the form of distinctive deeds for dealing with global ills has won more and more attention from designers and business organisations. But the design task goes beyond creativity: new business models are needed for multiple value creation. Unless profits are aligned with societal value creation, little can be done to prevent environmental costs and make work both enjoyable and fruitful.

The policy solution put forward by economists is that governments should tax carbon. Taking this step would in theory level the playing field and encourage innovation in low-carbon products. But in reality there are clear barriers to effective use. The European Commission embarked on a system of emission trading, but resistance from industry and fears of carbon ‘leakage’ and European job losses have served to undermine the EU Emissions Trading System. Policies based on tax hikes are never popular, as the French government discovered when it increased the tax on diesel. So carbon taxes are essential but they do not stimulate creative, multifunctional thinking. People also resent unfairness in the paying of taxes because under the present system, ‘the have’s have it’. This must change – and our 4B approach can surely help.

### *Concrete climate policies*

For their part, scholars such as Mariana Mazzucato are calling for innovation missions. One example would be to achieve plastic-free oceans. Shifting to alternative energy carriers, such as hydrogen, is another mission. The EU (more than nations) has assumed responsibility for the future: Europe is a global leader when it comes to climate policy, and has been active on this front for many years. An example policy is the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive which requires all new buildings to be nearly zero-energy by the end of 2020. This year the Commission embarked on the European Green Deal, as an ambitious action plan for Europe with the aim: that “there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, economic growth is decoupled from resource use, no person and no place is left behind”.<sup>9</sup> Large sums of money will be spent (in the order of 1 trillion euros)<sup>10</sup> to change the economics of decision-making. That is important, but still not enough to ensure real change.

Practical suggestions for action (inspired by Bauhaus) are: programmes for affordable houses (involving multi-generational living), partnerships between farmers and consumers (as co-owners of land), a Schumacher-meets-Schumpeter programme for young people to discuss a better economy and be trained in design thinking, special funding for academies like the one in Eindhoven, which offer a curriculum of design for society, and ‘Just Transition’ initiatives to help local and regional economies move away from gig work, outdated industries and deprivation.

#### About the Authors

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Regular business and traditional universities cannot be in the lead, because it is not in their short-term interest to do. But if students opt for a new kind of education, as inevitably happens in a transition, then incumbents' interests change too. From transition research, we know that once good alternatives are available, the need for active promotion starts to fall. Opponents may become active supporters. But to get to this point, a lot of experimentation, coordination and intermediation is needed. Zero energy houses and hydrogen cars are expensive at the early stage of development and meet with societal resistance. The challenge for the energy transition and building a circular economy is to find attractive 'transactions' for all.

economy and society into something better – i.e. with a smaller role for material-intensive consumption and a greater role for the satisfaction of intangible needs.

The need for change has become clear to many: the model of for-profit production at the expense of workers and nature, with trickle-down benefits for the poor, must be replaced by a more just and purposeful system. The need for change is particularly strong in cities and industrial areas already in decline. Government spending sprees are unlikely to be enough. We can expect more from Timebanks (where people trade services) and cooperative activities, part-funded by the public purse, allowing people to live a decent life outside the rat-race

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#### *Major disclaimer*

A word of caution is warranted here: promoting green products may actually deepen inequalities in the short term. Building Tesla cars, integrated photovoltaic and vehicle-to-grid solutions are something for rich people, partly paid by taxes from people on low incomes. An energy transition should not be at the expense of those in material need (think of the yellow vest movement in France). That is why the energy transition should be pursued as a broader project of remaking the

economy. In the past, architects often believed that good buildings would produce good people. We now know that this is not true: people are not muppets. Design for social innovation is needed to cater to the needs of those involved.

Our new conception of Bauhaus fits with the insight of Ursula von der Leyen – i.e. that smart design in every imaginable field of today’s society can help ensure both economic and cultural transformations. Co-creation space and content where scientists, design-

ers, students at different stages of education, engineers but also amateurs, volunteers and others work together to match style with sustainability. Like its predecessor, Bauhaus builds on European humanistic values, and aspires to be an open model for solving immense social problems. Next to economic needs, people want a sense of belonging and activities that they can feel proud of, both of which have been inadvertently undermined by the EU Single Market (through competition between workers and mass migration). A design for a human-centric approach, based on co-creation, can achieve a lot in this respect.

Any nation can attempt this, but if it pursued in a broad-scoped way, with funding from the European Commission, a joint message of hope can be given to young people in particular. Youth born into a world of competition and stress, not of their design or making. Being less part of the problem they can be part of the solution. The 'Bureau Europa platform for architecture and design' in Maastricht could be used for this: a place for imagination and new thinking, as a hub in a system of Bauhaus satellites and groundswells or an element of this.<sup>12</sup>

Bauhaus appears (to us) an apt name for a process of inspired change, which will create high-salary jobs in Europe in the market sector and lower-salaried jobs in the social economy (both of which are needed). An example of a more social economy is the *Gedeelde Weelde*, an eco-supermarket in Maastricht. Located in a renovated factory building, the supermarket is owned and mostly

run by volunteers (members) who receive product discounts. The motivations stand in stark contrast to those in the market economy: contributing to a good cause in a convivial way is an important part of people's motivation (whose ambition in life is not to get rich). Truly voluntary activities are also part of our vision.

Although this has nothing to do with the Bauhaus idea of visually pleasing designs, it fits the philosophy we have in mind: a human-centric approach that positively contributes to people's well-being. A *Homo Creator* approach<sup>13</sup> that makes use of people's desire to be creative with others in self-chosen projects, in a context that caters to psychological needs for autonomy, community and use of talents.<sup>14</sup>

The attention to multiple value creation should result in reduced ecological and social damage and thus a reduced need for state-funded 'repair' activities. Now is the opportunity to do precisely this, rather than restore business models where most of the value created is financial (i.e. appropriated by shareholders with the help of tax havens). We are not saying that this will be easy, but ultimately our message is one of hope: building back better is possible through the use of design thinking and different partnerships, especially when backed by finance and cherished leaders. It will help people to become part of the solution instead of the problem.

### Examples of 'design thinking'

With the help of design thinking, the energy transition can be used as an opportunity for action in the form of wood-based construction, climate-adaptation projects (via 'sponge' cities in which water does not flow quickly into the sewer system), business Action for a circular economy (based on circular business models), and energy citizenship Action to insulate houses or create a hydrogen coalition of business, government, energy cooperatives, consultants, scientists and citizens (as happened in the southern Dutch region of Limburg thanks to the activities of two retired professionals).<sup>11</sup>

### Footnotes

1. This paper benefitted from the comments of Laurie Kemp, Ger Jonkergouw and Howard Hudson -- for which we owe a big thanks.
2. <https://eurocities.eu/latest/building-back-better-a-stronger-social-europe/>
3. The notion originated in the context of recovery and reconstruction from physical disasters, where it refers to the recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction phase after a disaster to increase the resilience of communities through the restoration of physical infrastructure and societal systems. The emphasis is not just on preventative measures to reduce cost of recover, but also on incorporating social and environmental improvements for increasing well-being of impacted societies. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5/#endnotea0z2>
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/725b5351-6ca3-4fc3-8dc7-902ac9fb2f3b>
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairphone>
6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/realestate/brainport-smart-district-takes-shape-in-the-netherlands.html#:~:text=AMSTERDAM%20%E2%80%94%20In%20his%20late%2060s,smartest%20neighborhood%20in%20the%20world.>
7. <https://transitiepraktijk.nl/en/experiment/method/reflexive-interactive-design-rio>
8. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2010.00756.x>
9. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)
10. For a discussion of this number, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/what-is-the-european-green-deal-and-will-it-really-cost-1tn>
11. [https://www.limburger.nl/cnt/dmf20200925\\_00177428](https://www.limburger.nl/cnt/dmf20200925_00177428)
12. Another suited place in Maastricht is the Landbouwbelaang building. Built in 1939 for wheat storage by the agricultural cooperation Vereeniging Landbouwbelaang, squatters took over in 2002, turning it in a cultural centre. The building has various floors and a very flexible spatial radiation, making it suited for meetings, exhibitions, trainings, garden events, urban labs and city hall events. The squatters should be involved in the future destination of this building, as co-owners and designers.
13. <https://karimbenammar.com/en/12-english/purpose/58-5-purpose>
14. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11031-019-09818-1>



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The United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) is a research and training institute of United Nations University based in Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands. The institute, which collaborates closely with Maastricht University, carries out research and training on a range of social, political and economic factors that drive economic development in a global perspective. Overall the institute functions as a unique research centre and graduate school for around 100 PhD fellows and 140 Master's students. It is also a UN think tank addressing a broad range of policy questions on science, innovation and democratic governance.

INSIDE:

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