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LIVING A UTOPIA. THE ARTIST'S HOUSE AS A TOTAL WORK OF ART

The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) has no generally accepted definition. Since the mid-20th century in particular its use has become increasingly arbitrary and is nowadays often used for any multimedia phenomenon.¹ Consequently, today, everything up to Lady Gaga could be labelled as a total work of art. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* was much more restricted. It was Richard Wagner (1813–1883) who made the concept popular around 1850 and who gave distinction to its wider meaning. Uniting music, lyric and dance Wagner imagined the total work of art as an opera-like stage performance. He aimed for an overall creation that would educate, reform all

¹ Szeemann, H. (1983). Vorbereitungen. In Szeemann, H. (ed.) (1983). *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Europäische Utopien seit 1800*. Aarau/Frankfurt a.M.: Sauerländer, pp. 16-19, 17. Fornoff, R. (2004). *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Gesamtkunstwerk. Studien zu einer ästhetischen Konzeption der Moderne*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, p. 18.



political und artistic conditions and finally lead to an ideal future society.² The total work of art was supposed to realise a utopia.

These ideas inspired many intellectuals and artists. They tried to transfer Wagner's concept from the performing to the visual arts. Together with the opera, an architectural interpretation proved to be the most suitable medium for the total work of art. Here, two different developments can be observed: on the one hand, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could be limited to a unification of the fine arts to create an aesthetic interior design. This was also called *Raumkunst*, meaning a room designed as an artwork. In these examples all socio-political or utopian demands were relinquished.³ Other artists stayed as true as possible to the Wagnerian theory and simply changed the media. Particularly during the First World War and shortly afterwards they longed for a new hope, a utopia just as described by Wagner. The artists started various projects to install architectural total works of art, yet many of their ideas never made it past the drawing board for financial, political or personal reasons. However, the few projects that were realised were often designed artists' houses.

They belong to the finest and most complete representatives of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* tradition, as the private home offered the artist a place of maximum freedom and self-determination. All other total artwork conceptions –whether theatrical or architectural– were directly influenced by further artists, actors, musicians or the director, by patrons or by socio-political factors. Only at home was the artist able to implement his individual

² Bermbach, U. (2004). *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks. Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie*. Stuttgart: Metzler, p. 173.

³ Erichsen, J. (2011). *Gesamtkunstwerk und Raumkunstwerk*. In Stiftung Thüringer Schlösser und Gärten (ed.) (2011). *Das Kunstwerk in der Residenz. Grenzen und Möglichkeiten der Präsentation höfischer Kultur*. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, pp. 128-137, 130-134.

total work of art unhindered. Likewise, a second aspect makes the designed artist's home a unique *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Whereas other total works of art were often spatially and temporarily limited, the artist's home covered a much wider reality. To turn one's entire private sphere into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and to live inside that created utopia for years or even until one dies requires an incomparably strong conviction. In the following, three artists shall be presented who felt that passion for the total work of art and its utopia. They designed their private homes to the limit and intended to provide an example of a future way of life.

The first and most extensive total work of art to be introduced, is the property of the Swiss-born artist Johann Michael Bossard (1874–1950) in the Lüneburg Heath, near Jesteburg. At the age of 20 Bossard moved to Germany to study sculpting and painting in Munich and Berlin. After some years as freelance artist he was appointed as Professor of Sculpture at the School of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg in 1907, where he taught until his retirement in 1944. Longing for a rural place of recreation he bought a three hectare estate in the Lüneburg Heath in 1911, 40 km away from his place of work. Supported by the architect Wilhelm Tell, he designed his Residential and Studio House that was built between 1912 and 1914.



[Fig. 1] Johann Michael Bossard, *The Artist's Residential and Studio House seen from the North*, 1912-14. Kunststätte Bossard, Jesteburg.

Its low roof, the gable with the timber cladding, the bricks and the colour scheme of red, white and green are reminiscent of the traditional architecture in the region and remind us of a typical farmhouse in Lower Saxony, while the large, north facing windows, the architectural sculptures and the wasters –the deformed bricks he incorporated into the façade– reveal the artist's home.⁴

Although Bossard's oeuvre documents an early interest in the total work of art it was probably not until 1921 that he decided to transform his weekend

⁴ Mayr, G. (2011). Johann Michael Bossard und sein Gesamtkunstwerk in der Nordheide. In Landkreis Harburg (ed.) (2011). *Kreiskalender 2012. Jahrbuch für den Landkreis Harburg*. Winsen, pp. 7-22.

home into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁵ After the horrors of the First World War and the lack of various goods in the post-war period, he seemed to have given up waiting for patrons or the opportunity to create a collective total work of art together with his colleagues from the Hamburg School of Arts and Crafts. Instead, he decided to pursue his utopia on his own private estate with the limited financial resources that were available to him.⁶



[Fig. 2] Johann Michael Bossard, *Music Room in Bossard's Residential and Studio House with the Portrait of Wagner behind the Piano*, 1919-23. Kunststätte Bossard, Jesteburg.

⁵ Schulz-Ohm, M. (2017). *Vom Künstlerhaus zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Eine exemplarische Untersuchung von Johann Michael Bossards expressionistischer Kunststätte*. Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Hamburg / Kunststätte Bossard.

⁶ Mayr, G. (2013). Riesenskizze einer Zukunftshoffnung. Johann und Jutta Bossards Gesamtkunstwerk am Rand der Lüneburger Heide. In Brandlhuber, M. Th. and Buhrs, M. (eds.) (2013). *Im Tempel des Ich. Das Künstlerhaus als Gesamtkunstwerk Europa und Amerika 1800–1948*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, pp. 244-259, 247.

He began his all-embracing interior design in the Music Room where he painted a cycle of genesis and demise on the wood-panelled walls and ceiling and a Gallery of Great Minds, including a portrait of Wagner. For the windows he used painted or coloured glass panes, while the furniture, the piano, the jute carpets, the covering of the radiator and the door were incorporated by using abstract ornaments. In this way Bossard decorated one room after another: the Hall of Eros, the Blue Landing, the glazed balcony, the living room and the two guestrooms.

From 1926, he was supported by his much younger wife Jutta Bossard (1903–1996), née Krull, who was a trained sculptor and one of his former students. She was responsible for most of the carvings and –as was typical at the time– concentrated on various household objects that she made of wood, clay or textiles. In the year they were married, Johann Bossard started to erect an expressionist Temple of Fine Arts next to his Residential and Studio House. By the end of 1925 he had already developed a concept for this temple in a 23-page typescript.⁷ Here, Bossard gave merely a rough idea of his architectural plans but focused on his vision of an ideal future society. Bossard imagined his temple to be merely a model for further temples that would then be erected by volunteers all over the Lüneburg heath. These temples were to become ‘cells of renewal’ in a two-fold way: during the construction period the volunteers from all social classes would live together in a temple colony for a year. In these colonies the future society would be practised and exemplified. On the other hand, Bossard expected the later visitors of the temples to experience a deeper understanding of their being and the world with the help of the surrounding arts. Thus, both the volunteers and the visitors, were supposed to become New Men, to function as

⁷ Bossard, J. M. (1925). *Werbeschrift an meine Freunde*. Unpublished typescript: Archive of the Kunststätte Bossard (AJB1).

propagators of the ideal future and to become the founding fathers of the utopia. The role of the artist as he does pioneering work remained crucial to this concept. He gains understanding before ‘ordinary’ people and is to use his art to support the changes in civilization. This is precisely the position in which Bossard would have seen himself.⁸ So obviously, with his *Gesamtkunstwerk* he aimed for political and social reform as fundamental as that which Wagner dreamed of. Although these large-scale changes remained fiction, Bossard was at least able to realise the transformation of his estate into a private total work of art and to erect his Temple of Fine Arts.



[Fig. 3] Johann Michael Bossard, *Temple of Fine Arts*, 1926-36. Kunststätte Bossard, Jesteburg.

⁸ Mayr, G. (2010). *Johann Michael Bossard: Kleinplastiken. Mit einem Bestandsverzeichnis von Stefanie Nagel*. Jesteburg: Kunststätte Bossard, pp. 46-47.

Until the early 1930s he decorated his expressionist brick temple as extensively as his home with several hundred architectural sculptures in the façade, three interchangeable painting cycles, an altar-like polyptych, painted glass ceiling and windows, carved cement columns, a mosaic floor and doors with copper reliefs. To visually complete the court between his house and the temple he grew a hedge and placed a gallery of his sculptures on brick pedestals in front of it. Another garden arrangement was developed as natural counterpart to the expressionist temple. For his so-called Temple of Trees Bossard planted spruces in a square that formed dense green ‘walls’ while huge stones marked the atrium. The artist’s bid for a close relationship between architecture, art and nature becomes apparent.



[Fig. 4] Johann Michael Bossard, *Hall of Nordic Myths in Bossard's Residential and Studio House*, 1932-35. Kunststätte Bossard, Jesteburg.

Between 1932 and 1935 Bossard decorated the last room in his house: his studio. He transformed it into the so-called Hall of Nordic Myths, continuing

to develop his utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁹ Thematically the room programme is based on Norse mythology as told by the Edda and interpreted by Wagner. Bossard had developed an early interest in this mythology because he felt a special connection with Odin, the Allfather of the Eddic gods, who was blind on one eye just as Bossard was since his childhood. The Edda tells the story of Odin, who sacrificed his eye to drink from the Well of Wisdom in order to gain knowledge of the past, present and future. Without doubt, Bossard identified with Odin as he thought himself to be someone who 'knew' more than the general populace with his utopian vision of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The walls in Bossard's Hall of Nordic Myths are completely covered with mythological scenes: in the lower half in the form of wooden reliefs and in the upper area as canvas glued to the bricking painted with tempera and oil paint. Although these paintings are divided either into horizontal or vertical bands there is no continuous progression in the stories depicted. Instead, Bossard split the narrations into single pictures that he spread incoherently over different walls across various artistic genres. One of the most elaborate depictions is of the story of Baldr's death and the punishment of his murderer in paintings on the west wall as well as the carvings of the southern wall and the gallery. In the Edda the death of Baldr, the god of light, marks the beginning of a chain of events that will finally lead to the destruction of the godly kingdom at Ragnarök. In further scenes Bossard painted –amongst others– the three destiny defining Norns, the warriors training for the last battle, and Heimdallr sounding his horn to announce Ragnarök. All of these episodes point to the expected destruction of the existing world and the accompanying triumph over evil. According to Eddic mythology, a new

⁹ Schulz-Ohm, M. (2017). *Vom Künstlerhaus zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Eine exemplarische Untersuchung von Johann Michael Bossards expressionistischer Kunststätte*. [op. cit.].

world will rise from the water after this *tabula rasa*. This essential turning point and the symbolized hope of a utopian future is depicted by Bossard in a minor scene on the west wall in the form of a Venus-like female stepping out from a sea shell.



[Fig. 5] Johann Michael Bossard, *Portal of Wayland the Smith in the Hall of Nordic Myths*, 1934-35. Kunststätte Bossard, Jesteburg.

On one of the wooden portals with copper reliefs dedicated to the mythological figure Wayland the Smith, the idea of this future world becomes more focused and shows a direct reference to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The skilful Wayland was captured by a king who paralysed him in order to force him into his service. Secretly, Wayland experimented with wings he made himself that finally enabled him to escape his prison. In 1849 Wagner

referred to this Edda poem at the end of his essay *The Artwork of the Future*.¹⁰ For him, Wayland symbolised the German people. Wayland was able to leave the tyranny behind and to set out for a better world with nothing more than the help of his strong mind and his craftsmanship. In the same way, the Germans should rise up against the political situation and start a new society through the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

It is surely no coincidence that Bossard took up Wagner's utopia in the 1930s. Even though his fascination with Norse mythology and the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* went back for three decades or more, National Socialism seemed to fulfil the long awaited change sought in Germany at this time. In 1933 Bossard discussed with close friends if he should attract the attention of the new government and ask for support to realise his artistic and socio-political visions.¹¹ Fortunately, he decided not to do so. Otherwise his expressionist style would have probably been classified as degenerate and his *Gesamtkunstwerk* may have been destroyed. In the following years Bossard began to understand that the assumed parallels between his utopia and the National Socialist upheaval were misleading. Whereas the Nazis aimed for total conformity and allegiance, Bossard dreamed of a liberal society of individuals. Disillusioned, Bossard seemed to give up his plans for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* related to society as a whole and withdrew to his private total work of art. Only at home did he and his wife continue to live inside their personal utopia until their deaths. They were granted special permission to inter their urns on their private estate under an erratic block at the end of the Alley of Monoliths. Thereby they were completely absorbed within their *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As a symbol of eternity a simple circle engraved in the

¹⁰ Wagner, R. (1849). Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. In Wagner, R. (1897). *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*. Leipzig: Fritzsche, 3, pp. 42-177, 177.

¹¹ Mayr, G. (2013). Riesenskizze einer Zukunftshoffnung. Johann und Jutta Bossards Gesamtkunstwerk am Rand der Lüneburger Heide. [*op. cit.*]. p. 259.

erratic block marks this site as the burial place of Bossard and his wife. Here, the artist's intended unification of life, art and religion found its ultimate completion.

The second total work of art to be introduced is the house of Wenzel Hablik (1881–1934) in Itzehoe, 90 km north of Bossard's estate. Hablik, born in Brůx/Bohemia, moved to Germany in 1907 and settled in Itzehoe where he worked primarily as painter and designer for cloth patterns, cutlery, containers, furniture, jewellery and interior design. His wife, Elisabeth Hablik-Lindemann (1879–1960), ran a successful weaving mill that produced many of Hablik's patterns. In 1916 the couple bought an old Wilhelminian style villa in 14 Talstraße that Hablik enthusiastically started to redesign. During their first few years in the house, they used their living rooms on the ground floor and the stairwell as show and salesrooms for their craft products and Hablik's paintings. Here they gave their middle-class customers an authentic sample of tasteful interior design. In March 1925 the weaving mill moved to a new address where the showrooms could be located so that the shared use of their private living quarters was no longer necessary.¹²

During their early years in the house historic decorative elements from the *Gründerzeit* were still present. Dark wallpaper with small, floral ornaments adorned Hablik's private rooms even though he was already a member of the functional-orientated *Werkbund* since 1916.¹³ After his first modernistic and colourful interior designs were made for private and commercial clients, Hablik redecorated his own dining room in 1923. Aided by an experienced local painter he covered the walls, the ceiling and the door with a vivid pattern

¹² Barthel, A. (2007). Haus Hablik in Itzehoe. Ein Wohn- und Atelierhaus der frühen Moderne, In Ritter, A. and Fischer, P. (eds.). *Steinburger Jahrbuch 2008. Patenschaften und Partnerstädte*, pp. 52, 202-233, 223.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

of colour bands of diverse length and width. In a strictly right-angled composition these bands of fourteen different colours run through the whole room, crossing each other in a transparent or opaque way, transitioning seamlessly from the walls to the ceiling and over the door leaf. Whereas his earlier contract designs followed a certain rhythm, Hablik relinquished here –for the first time– any hint of perceptible order or repetition. Yet, at some points the asymmetrical bands of colour follow the outline of the furniture as can be seen on a historical photograph where the solid *Gründerzeit* cupboard is framed by a wide black stripe.



[Fig. 6] Wenzel Hablik, *Dining Room in Hablik's Villa*, 1923, photographed around 1926. Wenzel-Hablik-Foundation, Itzehoe.

At other places the colour bands form representational shapes. For example, the bands can be squeezed to smaller lines and forms that remind us of an abstract painting hanging on the wall, just like the area next to the cupboard, underneath the rectangular lamp where lines are compressed together. Another example is the large red shape that rises from behind the stove he designed to the ceiling. It can be interpreted as the visualization of the heat produced here. In this way the representational shapes seem to link the wall painting to the objects in the room.¹⁴



[Fig. 7] Wenzel Hablik, *Dining Room in Hablik's Villa with the Oil-Painting 'Große bunte utopische Bauten'*, 1923, photographed around 1923. Wenzel-Hablik-Foundation, Itzehoe.

¹⁴ Barthel, A. (2007). Wenzel Hablik. Farbenträume der Moderne. In Schleswig-Holstein (ed.). *DenkMal! Zeitschrift für Denkmalpflege in Schleswig-Holstein*, pp. 14, 25-36.

Similarly, the furniture, textiles and handcrafted objects mirror the abstract wall patterns as another historical photograph from about 1923 shows. Here the meandering design of the sofa and the cushion, the bowl with the curved ornaments on the small cupboard on the left, as well as the striped carpet echo the geometrical colour bands that decorate the walls. Also interesting in this context is Hablik's oil-painting *Große bunte utopische Bauten* (Huge Colourful Utopian Buildings) from 1922. It was placed above the sofa to cover the door-opening into the front showrooms. At the same time, it fitted in perfectly with the new wall design because of its meandering, linear composition and the colourful architectural structures. The stars in this painted cosmos are connected with the interior through Hablik's brass box in the form of Saturn on the right-hand side of the sofa. The real room seems to spill over into the painted world and a great spatial depth is created. Simultaneously the utopian vision becomes part of the reality and daily life.¹⁵

Hablik used his oil paintings and printing cycles to develop his idea of a fantastic futuristic architecture which, according to his writings, was supposed to function as basis for a new religion and ideology. In his artwork he created utopias of flying cities or gigantic crystal domes in the mountains as he was convinced that all technical and financial problems could easily be solved if only the 'consciousness of the world' (*Weltbewusstsein*) were prepared. Like Bossard he imagined that groups of volunteers would help to build this new, perfect world.¹⁶ In the intervening period, Hablik planned a

¹⁵ Feuß, A. (1989). *Wenzel Hablik (1881-1934). Auf dem Weg in die Utopie. Architekturphantasien, Innenräume, Kunsthandwerk*, p. 243. In <<http://www.bandegani.de/axelfeuss/public.html>>

Barthel, A. (2007). Wenzel Hablik. Farbenträume der Moderne. In Schleswig-Holstein (ed.). *DenkMal! Zeitschrift für Denkmalpflege in Schleswig-Holstein*. [op. cit.], p. 29.

¹⁶ Hablik, W. (1925). Eine neue Architektur. Auszug aus der Einleitung zum Radierzyklus *Architektur* von 1925. In Reschke, W. (ed.) (1981). *Wenzel Hablik. 1881 bis 1934. Aspekte zum Gesamtwerk*. Itzehoe: Künstlerbund Steinburg, pp. 18-19. Feuß, A. (1981). *Altona 1918 – Prag 1925. Rekonstruktionen zweier Ausstellungen*. In

cubic and colour intensive interim architecture that would blaze the way to the utopian future.¹⁷

Evidently, Hablik claimed to be more than just an artist or a designer. For example, by using motives from Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) *Zarathustra* in his etching cycle, he presented himself as a person with a messianic sense of mission and as a creator of a utopian world. He aimed for the architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the unity of all fine arts and crafts and an ideal future society.¹⁸

As has already been demonstrated, the best opportunity for Hablik to begin to fulfil his utopia arose in the redesigning of his private house in Itzehoe. With the help of his wife's weaving mill and his workshops for metalwork and cutting gemstones in the cellar of their villa, he was able to directly produce many of his craft designs. Thereby Hablik could create a close unity between his artistic works and his craft goods. Besides the new decorated dining room, which is probably the most consistently realised example of his conceived interim architecture, Hablik designed several further rooms in their villa, including his and his wife's bedrooms, the library and his studio. But while Bossard's estate is decorated in a stylistic coherent manner, Hablik's rooms testified to his changing stylistic taste during the almost seventeen years he lived inside the house. As a result no homogeneous overall impression –like the one to be found by Bossard– was created here. Instead, the interior design of some rooms was even modernised from time to time.

Reschke, W. (ed.) (1981). *Wenzel Hablik. 1881 bis 1934. Aspekte zum Gesamtwerk*. Itzehoe: Künstlerbund Steinburg, pp. 36-43, 41-42.

¹⁷ Feuß, A. (1989). *Wenzel Hablik (1881-1934). Auf dem Weg in die Utopie. Architekturphantasien, Innenräume, Kunsthandwerk*. [op. cit.], pp. 225-226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 253, 291-292.

From 1925, the compact, functional *Bauhaus* style had an increasingly influential effect on Hablik's interior and furniture design. It gradually substituted his cosmic and crystalline motives. Furthermore, Hablik came to acknowledge the importance of industrial production and believed that social reform could only be achieved by a reduction of form, function and material.¹⁹ For this reason, he once again made significant changes to the general design of the house. The interior was cleared of all outdated elements, several rooms were redecorated with monochrome colours, furniture from *Bauhaus* designers were incorporated, and the garden was rearranged to create a more modern impression. Hablik even replaced the *Gründerzeit* façade of his villa with its arched windows with a progressive, linear front in the summer of 1933. At the same time he covered the expressionist colour scheme in the dining room with wallpaper.²⁰ 1934 his early death abruptly ended his utopian vision of an ideal future.

The almost totally artistic decorated homes of Hablik and Bossard are two great models of artists' houses designed as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* intended to provide a glimpse of their personal utopia. In both cases the artists added different individual, yet co-ordinated artworks and crafts in a variety of techniques which created an artistic whole. Their obvious influence, inter alia, through the Arts and Crafts Movement cannot be denied.

The so called *Merzbau*, Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) house in 5 Waldhausenstraße in Hanover, showed a rather different approach to the total design and is the third residence to be introduced here. Since it is probably the best known example it shall be analysed only briefly. Its overall design was not based on solitary pieces of art. Instead, Schwitters turned parts

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294.

²⁰ Barthel, A. (2007). Wenzel Hablik. Farbenträume der Moderne. In Schleswig-Holstein (ed.). *DenkMal! Zeitschrift für Denkmalpflege in Schleswig-Holstein* [op. cit.].

of his parental house into just one single piece of art with the help of the collage technique *Merz* that he developed in 1919. Amid the ruins left after the First World War, Schwitters searched for a new entirety and combined various found objects in his *Merz* art giving the fragmented world a new structure. The differences between the art genres were evened out and every material and found object was declared worthy to be regarded as art.²¹ “*Merz* was first of all a struggle against ‘dispersion,’ [...] Thus, even if Schwitters desires to extract these signs of the tragic [= the fragments] from their negative states in order to situate them in the controlled ‘totality’ of the work of art, he nonetheless does not erase the destruction that is an inherent part of what is uncontrollable about the world.”²² Schwitters used his *Merz* technique for all kinds of art: he made *Merz* collages and sculptures as well as *Merz* poetry. He imagined *Merz* photography, *Merz* film and *Merz* city planning and dreamed of transforming the whole world into a work of art. He proclaimed the *Merz* stage to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but as its realisation proved to be impossible he later focussed on *Merz* architecture. In the end he even called himself *Merz*. And so the line between the artwork and the artist was finally erased and he himself became the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.²³ In his pamphlets, the references to Wagner’s concept are revealed by his use of the same key words, such as “das rein Menschliche”²⁴, or by stressing the *Merz* stage as the real total work of art.

²¹ Fornoff, R. (2004). *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Gesamtkunstwerk. Studien zu einer ästhetischen Konzeption der Moderne* [op. cit.], p. 255.

²² Stavrinaki, M. (2011). Total Artwork vs. Revolution. Art, Politics, and Temporalities in the Expressionist Architectural Utopias and the Merzbau. In Finger, A. and Follett, D. (eds.) (2011). *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork. On Borders and Fragments*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 253-276, 271.

²³ Elger, D. (1984). *Der Merzbau. Eine Werkmonographie*. Köln: Walther König, p. 121.

²⁴ Schwitters, K. (1931). Ich und meine Ziele. *Merz*, 21 [erstes Veilchenheft], pp. 113-117, 114. In: <<http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/merz/21/index.htm>>

Still, it was the *Merzbau* itself that afforded the best opportunity for exploring Schwitters' *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it absorbed the spectator within it, just like other artists' houses that are designed as total works of art.²⁵ Schwitters initially used his studio as a showroom presenting various *Merz* objects. Around 1923 he started to expand the *Merz* art from paintings, collages and sculptures to the surrounding room. Single artworks were integrated into an architectural *Merz* design. A few years later the entire studio was transformed and the *Merzbau* spread to other rooms in his and his parents' apartments.²⁶

After 1930 the appearance of the *Merzbau* changed fundamentally. Inspired by Constructivism he painted over everything with a harmonising white and set only a few coloured highlights. Later, Schwitters used mainly wood and plaster for further extensions.²⁷ The found objects that had previously been gradually added became no longer distinguishable from one another and the fragmented character was overcome in favour of a merging wholeness.

In January 1937, Schwitters was forced to emigrate to Norway leaving his *Merzbau* behind. During a bomb strike in 1943, Schwitters' parental home with the *Merzbau* finally burned down. The *Merz* architectures that Schwitters began in his exile in Norway and England met similar fates, so that today only photographs, reconstructions and relics give an impression of these attempted total works of art. The most extensive of these architectures was the Hanoverian *Merzbau* that, according to the artist's statement, ultimately comprised eight rooms in the house. It extended from two basement rooms through several floors up to the attic and, in the shape of a

²⁵ Stavrinaki, M. (2011). Total Artwork vs. Revolution. Art, Politics, and Temporalities in the Expressionist Architectural Utopias and the *Merzbau*. In Finger, A. and Follett, D. (eds.) (2011). *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork. On Borders and Fragments*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 274.

²⁶ Elger, D. (1984). *Der Merzbau. Eine Werkmonographie* [op. cit.], p. 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

column, even through the skylight. Compared with the houses of Bossard and Hablik the designed *Merz* rooms seemed to have been almost uninhabitable. Their functional use was mentioned only for two of them: one as Schwitters' studio with library, the other one as his joined study and bedroom.²⁸ The artist's family had apparently lived in the undesigned rest of the house. Summing up, Schwitters' *Merz* concept offered an ideal opportunity to unite various artforms and everyday fragments but as a fusion of art and life it proved to be rather less suitable than Bossard's and Hablik's approach to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Nevertheless, all three houses were extraordinary designs for a total building. With different means each artist created an all-embracing medial unification and an idealistic social microcosm in a way that could hardly be surpassed by any other attempted total work of art. Bossard, Hablik and Schwitters devoted not only their artistic production but also their living to the utopia of a better future. Their total works of art were intended to create an alternative reality. There the utopia of a new society became probably more concrete and vivid than ever before (or afterwards).

²⁸ Orchard, K. and Schulz, I. (eds.) (2003). *Kurt Schwitters. Catalogue raisonné. 1923–1936*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, pp. 2, 85.

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Barthel, A. (2007). Haus Hablik in Itzehoe. Ein Wohn- und Atelierhaus der frühen Moderne. *Steinburger Jahrbuch 2008. Patenschaften und Partnerstädte*, pp. 52, 202-233.

Bermbach, U. (2004). *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks. Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie*. Stuttgart: Metzler.

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