
The City Crown:

An Utopianist's Vision of a Better World

by Bruno Taut



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In the early part of the twentieth century Bruno Taut developed an urban concept that used architecture to overcome national and social differences. Taut's imagined city was an utopian garden city and socialist community that would be crowned by a communal center modeled after the medieval cathedral or temple. His idea of using an individual structure to give definition to and affect the planning of an entire city was championed in his anthology, *Die Stadtkrone* [The City Crown].

This article will give a short introduction to the work of Bruno Taut in order to place his architectural programs – comprising visionary writings and drawings – in context with his built work. Then Taut's presumptuous definition of the role and function of architects within society will be discussed. Centered on the work of the *City Crown*, I will reflect upon his notion of *Baukunst* [building art], weigh his vision against his own projects and examine Taut's influence on his peer architects in Germany. I hope to give a broader perspective of the work of this German architect, who – in the English-speaking world at least – is currently known mostly for his visionary *Alpine Architektur* [Alpine Architecture], written in 1917, and *Die Gläserne Kette* [The Crystal Chain Letters], written between 1918 and 1920.

In 1972 Shirley Palmer first translated “Alpine Architecture” for publication in conjunction with Paul Scheerbart's *Glasarchitektur* [Glass Architecture]. Scheerbart

fathered the fascination of Taut and other architects who used glass as a substance and building material in the early twentieth century. For a reprint of the *Alpine Architecture* folio in 2004, Matthias Schirren retranslated the texts, that accompany a set of very beautiful and expressive drawings and watercolors.

The *Crystal Chain Letters* is an exchange of letters between several architects during World War I, ending in December 1920 once the friends were able to not only theorize but also build again at last! Among the co-authors of the *Crystal Chain Letters* were the Taut brothers, Bruno and Max, the brothers Hans and Wassili Luckhardt, Hans Scharoun, Walter Gropius and a few other friends. In 1985 their correspondence was published in English.

However, the very select availability of texts in English led to a rather partial view on Taut's oeuvre. In Germany, Bruno Taut is best known for the quality of his colorful post-war housing projects and his urban planning initiatives. Iain Boyd White attributes Taut's development during the First World War to his work as architectural activist, rather than as an expressionist (Boyd Whyte, 1982). Though an older Taut himself dismissed his earlier dreams as "symptoms of an illness", I feel the ideas in *The City Crown* are visible in his later, more functionalist works (see Taut, 1929: 40).

Bruno Taut was born in 1880 in Königsberg, Prussia, and died in Ankara, Turkey, in 1938. He belonged to a generation of architects born in the same decade: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Hugo Häring, Le Corbusier and Erich Mendelson. Already before 1914 he was – along with Gropius – recognized as one of the most influential young men of the German Werkbund. Like the works of Behrens, Muthesius or Schumacher, his buildings were good examples of the first generation of a new kind. These distanced themselves from "the new Biedermeier", rejected conventions and boredom and were in themselves artistic creations. In his apartment buildings, like the ones at Kottbusser Damm (1910/11) or Hardenbergstraße (1911), he never showed the slightest routine or the intention to develop a particular personal style. Despite the fact

that these projects were not very lucrative for the architect, each design displayed the creativity of an artist and a highly ingenious potential.

Inspired by the architectural visions of poet and writer Paul Scheerbart, Bruno Taut designed and realized the Pavilion for the German glass industry for the Werkbund (the German Work Federation) exhibition in Cologne in 1914. The Glass House celebrates glass as a building material with colored glass, mosaics, glass paintings, glass bricks and floors. Julius Posener once said that, in Taut's hands, Glass had a new meaning, an "old-new meaning" similar to the examples of Gothic churches. He actually went so far to compare the Glass House to the Sainte Chapelle (Posener, 1980: 54-55). Unfortunately, the building was only a temporary structure and was thus lost, except for some photo documentation and plans. This exhibition pavilion for the glass industry immediately drew wide attention and spurred Taut's international reputation.

As early as February 1914, Taut had already proposed in the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* [The Storm] that the Gothic Cathedral was the greatest example of the unification of the arts. To him, these structures were not mere displays of masterful skill and architectural virtuosity; their creation was possible only through social unity based upon religious belief. It was shortly after the revival of his early utopian aims at the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* [Worker Council for the Arts] that Taut invited Erich Baron, Adolf Behne and Paul Scheerbart to submit essays that would support the creation of a new society, to be manifested in a new city, crowned by a non-religious, ¹ crystalline, cathedral-like structure.

Taut's city is concentric, following the pattern of most humanist utopias. Within this layout he developed a hierarchy of zones: from the profane at the perimeter (housing, business, industrial and recreational zones) toward the sacred – the common core in the very center. The city is a microcosm in itself, conceived as *axis mundi*. In the description of the layout, Taut gives most detail for the following two areas: the residential quarters and the intellectual and cultural center of his city.

In the residential quarters, streets mainly run from north to south, to provide the front of the houses on both east and west sides with sunlight as well as windless streets and gardens. The houses are entirely conceived in the character of a garden city in low single rows with deep gardens for every house, such as that of figures 13 and 14, so that the residential area itself is a horticultural zone making allotment gardens unnecessary. (...)

This garden city type of development allows for 300,000 inhabitants, or 150 souls per acre, with the possibility of expansion up to 500,000 inhabitants. [Although] green areas, playgrounds and park strips are intermingled in between residential and industrial areas to separate them, no further details are indicated. The distance from the periphery to the city center is not more than 3 kilometers = 1/2 hour walking time. The streets within the residential quarters themselves are as narrow as possible (5 to 8 meters) in order not to waste unnecessary resources. Thoroughfares are designed to accommodate streetcars and abundant car traffic.

According to the principles of the garden city, the height of houses in residential quarters remains as low as possible. Business and administrative buildings are allowed, at maximum, one floor above the houses. In this way, the city crown reigns powerfully and unreachably above the entire city.²

These residential areas are squatted around the epicenter of the city like the modest houses of a medieval town around the cathedral or Asian huts around the main pagoda. They form the profane ring around the sacred center of the municipality. At the end of his essay as final figures, Taut included the examples of his own Falkenberg Estate design, which was only partially executed. This can lead us to the assumption that he envisioned residential buildings that were very much like the ones he had previously designed. Detailed descriptions of the communal buildings for the spiritual and intellectual life of the city then follow. They include parks and gardens, an aquarium and plant houses for leisure and distraction, a theater, a library with reading houses, an opera house and a variety of assembly rooms for various social and communal functions. Higher in scale, these buildings build the base for the ultimate structure, void of any function, the so-called *Kristallhaus* [crystal house].

The upper crown is visible by the symbolic form of a cross, expressed by the masses of the four large buildings. The socially directed hopes of people find their fulfillment at the top [of the edifice]. The drama and the play of music provide a unified people their inner momentum, a drive they long for in their everyday life. Their reunion in community centers enables them to feel what they have to give to one another as humans. This leads the herd instinct, the elementary power of amalgamation, to its most refined statement. (Taut, 1919: 50-70)³

Taut's city is a proposal to re-tune *Geist* (the spirit) and *Volk* (the mass of humanity, the people) according to Gothic or oriental models.⁴ This is an idea that is based upon the writings of Gustav Landauer, who Taut clearly must have read: the creative individual is spiritually inspired (*Geist*) and becomes a link between humanity and the universe.⁵ At the same time, this spirituality is equally related, to the people (*Volk*). For Landauer, the Christian Middle Ages were models of the ideal of community.

For Taut the ideal society is founded in its faith into an equitable and harmonious community:

It is the urge to somehow help the well-being of mankind, to achieve salvation for self and others and to feel as one, solidly united with all mankind. This feeling lives, or at least slumbers, in all mankind. Socialism, in its non-political sense, means freedom from every form of authority as a simple, ordinary connection between people and it bridges any gap between fighting classes and nations to unite humanity. – If one philosophy can crown the city of today, it is an expression of these thoughts.⁶

From further description we can gather that Taut sees the city crown as a space rather similar but much larger in scale than the Glass House he built in 1914. This crystalline structure would be the spiritual and intellectual center and, at the same time, the secular beacon towering over the new city. Owing to its imposing scale, its communal functions, but especially due to its striking beauty, the city crown would be the cultural fulcrum of a unified living community, where individuals would be inspired by transcendent ideas of the collective good. The effects the structure might have had can be guessed by these images of a model reconstruction of the Glass House:

An iron concrete construction lifts it above the volume of the four large buildings, which forms its framework. Between them, the entire rich scale of the architecture hangs resplendent in prismatic glass fillings, colors and colored glass mosaics. The crown contains nothing but a wonderful room (...).

All deep and great feelings are awakened, as full sunlight showers in a high room and splits into numerous fine reflections or when the evening sun fills the upper vault and its red light deepens the rich chromaticity of the glass images and the sculptural work. Here architecture again renews its beautiful bond with sculpture and painting. (...)

The ultimate is always quiet and empty. (...) The Cathedral was the container of all the souls that prayed in this way; and it always remains empty and pure – it is “dead”. The ultimate task of architecture is to be quite and absolutely turned away from all daily rituals for all times.⁷

Like many other members of the avant-garde, Taut hoped for an intellectual revolution. The First World War had started in 1914 and during the early years there was hope for a quick end as well as a renewal of society through the accomplishment of modern times: industrial progress and a more equal society – “socialism in its non-political sense”.

When Taut wrote his essay around 1917, the political revolution had not yet failed. We can even say that at the time it might still have appeared that the members of the avant-garde – artists and architects – could create a better future and a more peaceful world. The city Taut envisioned sought to overcome societal differences through the construction of architecture, specifically of its city crown, the climax of the city. Architects always work toward the future. They have done so throughout all times – during the Greek and Roman period as well as during the Gothic or the Renaissance. Each true piece of architecture goes beyond its own time and has the ambition to create something new, something lasting. In Taut’s own words, he encourages architects to be the “creator”, the “spiritual leader”:

What in stone extends for centuries into the heavens, as a monument of the human spirit, must be based on a broad and strong perception. Although one individual may be its spiritual creator, a building needs many hands and material means for its construction. The architect must carry within himself an awareness and knowledge of all the deep feelings and sentiments for which he wants to build. Of course, his work aspires not only to the ephemeral, in that it calls to the *Zeitgeist*, but also to those dormant spiritual forces of generations, cloaked in beliefs and aspirations. At first, it appears necessary to solve tasks based solely on need. Yet, in reality, it is not practical demands, but rather the imagination, that creates architecture.⁸ This shows that the will of the building artist is directed by something entirely different from a specific purpose and that this will lies above and beyond mere functionality. Buildings that exhibit a minimal practical purpose or none at all, best demonstrate an architect’s volition.⁹

Admittedly, art and architecture have to accomplish a bit too much. Taut has very high ambitions for the profession. His dream unfortunately never came true. The publication of *Die Stadtkrone* in 1919 coincided with the end of World War I and subsequent speculations about the construction of postwar German architecture. Published only after the end of one of the deadliest conflicts of human history, Taut had developed the City Crown as an urban proposal of “apolitical socialism”¹⁰ where people would live in peaceful collaboration. After Germany’s defeat in World War I and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm on 9 November 1918, many architects sought to join with the Socialists in Berlin to help forge a new republic. In Berlin, these artists and architects became known as the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* [Workers Council for the Arts] and rallied themselves around both Taut’s *Ein Architektur Programm* [An Architecture Program]

and Walter Gropius's proposal for the construction of the new German architecture as the *Zukunftskathedrale* [Cathedral of the Future].

In 1921 Taut accepted the position as Stadtbaudirektor [City Architect] in Magdeburg. Here he started to implement some of his ideas. Though constrained by reality with many functional, financial and urban requirements, the residential quarters Bruno Taut designed during his career in Magdeburg and later in Berlin show a delicacy and consideration for the inhabitants. They were a step for social progress and provided very adequate solutions for the needs of the workers at that time. Unfortunately, the political climate in Germany changed during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime and the modern movement in Germany came to a halt.

At its time, Taut's anthology was intended to encourage architects to build and at the same time to strive for the ideal rather than the realistic. Though he was never able to build a complete city after his City Crown model, Taut's thoughts and especially his later-realized housing projects carry the seed for a new society with a better future in them and were highly respected. The movement to which Taut and his peers belonged ignited new ideas. However, only when the shift from spiritual thoughts to more technological concepts, from the initial notion to create the one and ultimate – and lastly static – monument towards an interest in the process and fabrication occurred, did these ideas have a final breakthrough in Functionalism. Still, Taut can be considered as one of the influential men of the modern movement and his thoughts and writings had a high impact on the architectural world. This first English translation of Taut's anthology should become a critical text in architectural studies today on the history of European Modernism and urban design theory with a similar impact as other works by Taut. At the same time, it will help to view this influential architect and thinker in the broader context of his own work.¹¹

Works Cited

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Notes

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- ¹ Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's writings, to Taut as to many other Expressionists of his time, socialism became a substitute for religious belief.
- ² Translations are mine. Taut, Bruno (1919), *Die Stadtkrone*, First Edition, Jena, Eugen Diederichs, pp. 50-70:
 „Die Straßenzüge der Wohnviertel laufen im wesentlichen von Norden nach Süden, um den beiderseitigen Hausfronten Ost und Westsonne zu geben und windstille Straßen und Gärten. Ihre Ausbildung selbst ist völlig im Charakter der Gartenstadt gedacht, mit niedrigen Einzelhausreihen und tiefen Gärten für jedes Haus, etwa im Sinne von Abb. 11 und 12 (im Original Abb. 50 und 51), so daß das Wohngebiet selbst als Gartenbauzone gilt und Laubenzonen erübrigt. Außerhalb des peripherischen Parkgürtels schließt sich die Ackerbauzone an: Die Gesamtfläche der Stadt beträgt 38,5 qkm, die des Wohnareals etwa 20 qkm und würde bei gartenstadtartiger Bebauung Raum für 300 000 Einwohner, d. h. 150 Seelen pro Hektar, im Erweiterungsfalle bis 500000 geben. Dazwischen eingesprengte grüne Anlagen, Spielplätze, Parkstreifen zur Trennung der Wohn- und Industriegebiete und sonstige Einzelheiten sind nicht besonders gezeichnet. Die Entfernung von der Peripherie bis zur Stadtmitte beträgt also nicht viel mehr als 3 km = 1/2 Stunde Fußweg: Die Straßen innerhalb der Wohnviertel selbst sind so schmal (5 bis 8 Meter), wie sie gerade sein können, um hier nicht unnötige Mittel zu verschleudern. Die Verkehrsstraßen sind zur Aufnahme von Straßenbahnen und reichlichem Wagenverkehr eingerichtet. Die Haushöhen der Wohnviertel bleiben nach dem Grundsatz der Gartenstadt so niedrig wie möglich. Die Geschäfts- und Verwaltungsbauten dürfen sie höchstens um ein Geschöß überragen, damit mächtig und unerreichbar die Stadtkrone über allem throne“.
- ³ *Idem*, pp. 50-70: „Die obere Bekrönung bildet das Massiv der vier großen Bauten, als sichtbarer in seiner Kreuzform symbolischer Ausdruck der Erfüllung. Die sozial gerichteten Hoffnungen des Volkes finden hier auf der Höhe ihre Erfüllung. Das Drama, das Musikspiel gibt den hier vereinten Menschen den Seelenschwung, den sie im Alltagsleben ersehnten, und die Zusammenkunft in den Volkshäusern läßt sie fühlen, was sie als Menschen einander zu geben haben, und führt den Herdentrieb, die Urkraft des Zusammenschlusses, zur Veredelung“.
- ⁴ Compare also Boyd Whyte, Ian (1982), *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 76.
- ⁵ *Apud* Landauer, Gustav (1903), *Meister Eckharts mystische Schriften, in unsere Sprache übertragen*, Berlin, K. Schnabel. Eckhart von Hochheim, also known as *Meister Eckhart*, was a medieval monk, philosopher, and assumed mystic. The publication of some of his writings in contemporary German by Landauer attracted much attention at the time and also influenced Taut's thinking.
- ⁶ Taut, Bruno (1919), *Die Stadtkrone*, First Edition, Jena, Eugen Diederichs, pp. 50-70:
 „Das Gefühl, irgendwie an dem Wohl der Menschheit mithelfen zu müssen, irgendwie für sich und damit auch für andere sein Seelenheil zu erringen und sich eins, solidarisch mit allen Menschen zu fühlen, – es lebt, wenigstens schlummert es in allen. Der Sozialismus im unpolitischen, überpolitischen Sinne, fern von jeder Herrschaftsform als die einfache schlichte Beziehung der Menschen zu einander, schreitet über die Kluft der sich befehlenden Stände und

Nationen hinweg und verbindet den Menschen mit dem Menschen. – Wenn etwas heute die Stadt bekrönen kann; so ist es zunächst der Ausdruck dieses Gedankens“.

⁷ *Idem*, pp. 50-70:

Eine Eisenbetonkonstruktion hebt es über das Massiv der vier großen Bauten heraus und bildet sein Gefüge, zwischen dem in Prismenglasfüllungen, farbigen und Glastafeln die ganze reiche Skala der Glasarchitektur prangt. (...)

„Alle innigen und alle großen, Empfindungen sollen hier wach werden, wenn das volle Sonnenlicht den hohen Raum übergießt und sich in zahllosen feinen Reflexen bricht, oder wenn die Abendsonne die obere Deckenwölbung erfüllt und mit ihrem roten Schein die reiche Farbigekeit der Glasbilder und plastischen Arbeiten vertieft. (...)

Immer ist das Letzte still und leer. Meister Eckhart sprach: »Ich will Gott niemals bitten, daß er sich mir hingeben soll; ich will ihn bitten, daß er mich leer und rein mache. Denn wäre ich leer und rein, so müßte Gott aus seiner eigenen Natur sich mir hingeben und in mir beschlossen sein.« Der Dom war das Gefäß aller Seelen, die so beteten. Und es bleibt immer so - leer und rein - »tot« -, still und ganz und gar abgewandt den Tageszwecken bleibt für alle Zeiten das Letzte der Architektur. Hier verstummt immer der Maßstab praktischer Forderungen - ähnlich wie bei dem Münsterturm, der im Verhältnis zu dem ohnehin schon »unpraktischen« Schiff noch weit über das hinausgeht, was dieses Kristallhaus im Vergleich zu den vielen von einer höheren Zweckmäßigkeit geborenen Bauten bedeutet“.

⁸ It is difficult to imagine that Le Corbusier's claim that architecture is a "pure creation of the mind" in *Toward an Architecture* is not influenced by the distinction Taut makes here. See: Le Corbusier (2007), "Architecture, Pure Creation of the Mind", in *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, pp. 231-251. The original printing of the essay as "*Architecture III; pure création de l'esprit*" occurred in the 1920s.

⁹ Bruno, Taut (1919), *Die Stadtkrone*, First Edition, Jena, Eugen Diederichs, pp. 50-70:

„Was in Stein als Denkmal menschlichen Geistes für Jahrhunderte in die Höhe ragt, muß auf einer breiten und starken Grundlage des Empfindens beruhen. Ist wohl ein Einzelner der geistige Schöpfer, so braucht doch ein Bauwerk zu seiner Entstehung viele Hände und viele materielle Mittel, und um diese zum Regen zu bringen, muß der Architekt das Bewußtsein und die Kenntnis aller tieferen Empfindungen und Anschauungen in sich tragen, die die Gesamtheit beherrschen, für welche er bauen will, freilich nicht allein die ephemeren, das was man den »Zeitgeist« nennt, sondern vielmehr jene noch schlummernden latenten Seelenkräfte des Volkes, die, in Glauben, Hoffnung und Wünschen verhüllt, ans Licht streben und im höheren Sinne »bauen« wollen. Dies ist schon dazu nötig, um die Aufgaben zu lösen, welche scheinbar nur auf dem Zweck beruhen, da schon dabei nicht die praktische Forderung, sondern die formende Phantasie die Architektur erzeugt. So zeigt es sich, daß es etwas ganz Anderes als die Zweckgebundenheit ist, was den Willen des Baukünstlers ausmacht, und so erklärt es sich, daß dieser Wille über und jenseits des eigentlich Praktischen liegt und daß das Höchste, wonach sein Wille strebt, in den Bauten liegt, deren praktischer Zweck ein geringfügiger oder gar keiner ist“.

¹⁰ Boyd Whyte, Ian (2001), "Der Visionäre Bruno Taut", in *Bruno Taut – Architekt zwischen Tradition und Avantgarde*, Stuttgart, DVA, pp. 68-89.

¹¹ At this point I would like to acknowledge Matthew Mindrup of Marrywood University, Scranton, PA. He initiated and cooperated with me on the translation of Taut's essay "Die Stadtkrone" into English. A complete publication of the translation of the full anthology "The City Crown" is planned. As a preview, the main text of this book was published in JAE 63.1, the *Journal for Architecture and Education*, a publication of the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture.