Program outline

In 1936 Marcel Breuer, who had emigrated to London the year before, designed a table for the Isokon Furniture Company. The table was bequeathed to the Victoria and Albert Museum by Gilbert and Winifred 'Mainie' Cousland, authors of progressive children's books and Breuer's neighbours in the Isokon building, the so-called Lawn Road Flats, a multi-storey, serviced apartment block designed by Wells Coates.

The origins of Isokon Ltd. date back to the early interest that Jack and Molly Pritchard took in lightweight and functional furniture. Jack Pritchard's career in marketing and public relations with the Venesta Plywood Company, which made plywood hatboxes and suitcases, brought him into contact with the world of international avant-garde designers and architects. Consequently, he travelled to Germany in 1931, where, accompanied by Bruno Taut, he visited housing estates in Berlin, the Bauhaus Dessau and the Dessau-Törten housing estate. Together with the architect Wells Coates, the Pritchards founded a company specialising in standardisable, industrially produced furnishings. In December 1931 this company was given the name Isokon Ltd. The business partners' main aim was to create a living culture serving the requirements of modern large-scale housing, ranging from furniture items through to standard flats which could be produced industrially.

These ambitions find their expression in the Isokon building on Lawn Road. The choice of location was no coincidence: since the turn of the century, Hampstead Heath had been a popular residential area for London's bohemian community, where artists, writers, architects and intellectuals settled. The idea of an apartment block with services that included flats being cleaned, beds being made and the provision of meals aimed at young professional women and men with few possessions. In this, the Isokon building responded to the demand for housing among the rapidly growing number of office workers in 1930s London. In actual fact, the first residents of the Isokon housing block were prominent émigrés rather than modern urban migrants. Walter and Ise Gropius were among the first residents of Flat 15, a 33 m² studio flat comprising two rooms; the open plan living and sleeping area could be divided by a curtain. They lived here for almost three years until Gropius moved on to Harvard. Marcel Breuer, joining Ise and Walter Gropius in 1935, moved in to a small flat measuring just 25 m². With its cosmopolitan residents, the Isokon building became a place of transition for the cultural avant-garde who had been forced to emigrate. With 22 partly-furnished one-room flats, each with a fully equipped kitchen and bathroom with dressing room, several two-room flats with balconies and a penthouse flat with a roof terrace, the Isokon had every modern convenience. This was further enhanced by the Isobar, which was integrated in the central kitchen area of 1937 and gave rise to the Half Hundred Dining Club established by the
Pritchards. The Isobar was designed by Marcel Breuer, who from 1935 was a designer for the subsidiary Isokon Furniture Ltd. There is no doubt that the concept for the building emerged in light of the contemporary debates on collective forms of living, on 'liberated living in light, air and sun' and 'housing for the subsistence minimum', which also resulted in the realisation of ground-breaking model projects in Europe in the inter-war period. In architectonic terms, with its imposing cubic, reinforced concrete structure, balcony walkways, flat roof with sun terrace and, finally, colour design, the Isokon building also represents the international architectural avant-garde.

Today, the table Breuer gave to the Couslands is part of the comprehensive collection of Bauhaus objects held by the V&A Museum. This collection includes textile samples by Gunta Stölzl and Margarete Leischner—the latter also having emigrated to London after studying at the Bauhaus Dessau, later on making a successful career as textile designer in the UK. It comprises photograms by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy—another Hungarian born émigré in London, who designed e.g. the advertisement for the Isokon Long Chair, made by Breuer—as well as photomontages by Herbert Bayer or ceramics from the early Bauhaus by Theodor Bogler.

The Bauhaus Lab will study selected objects from this collection and research the provenances and migration movements, exhibition careers and historiographies in which they have played a part. It will investigate the material stories, commodity and ownership phases from personal belongings to museum estates—critically analysing the various social lives embodied in the objects. The compiled findings of this research will be presented in an experimental exhibition in the Bauhaus Building, and constitute a contribution to the centenary conference “Collecting Bauhaus” taking place in December 2019.

Week 1
12 to 14 June 2018
The Formation of the Bauhaus Heritage
Controversies around Bauhaus exhibitions and collections

Wednesday, 12 June
Arrival, moving in

Thursday, 13 June
Morning: General introduction to the programme;
Afternoon: Introduction of participants
Evening: Reception w/ students MSc Coop Design Research and Bauhaus Dessau Foundation staff

Friday, 14 June
Morning: The Bauhaus Dessau Collection: History and Museum Concept
Afternoon: Bauhaus tours

Week 2
17 to 21 June 2018
Actors and Networks
Monday and Tuesday, 17 to 18 June
Reading and Discussion
Bauhaus emigrés and encounters in London

Wednesday 19 June
Readings and Visualization
“Projects, Networks and Agents”

Thursday 20 June
Symposium: Exhibitions: Arenas of design knowledge at the cluster of excellence Image Knowledge of the Humboldt University Berlin
(in the framework of the Bauhaus MSc Coop Design Research)

Friday 21 June
Excursion to Leipzig: “Bauhaus_Saxony” exhibition at Grassi Museum of Applied Arts; “Anarchive” exhibition at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK)

Week 3
24 to 28 June 2019
Plywood: Material histories, flows and practices

Monday to Wednesday, 24 to 26 June
Readings and Discussion
Mapping of Material flows and sites of making and production

Thursday and Friday, 27 to 28 June
Theories of things
Material studies and the social life of things

Readings and Discussions

Week 4
1 to 5 July
Collections vs Exhibitions
Modes of making material heritage

Monday, 1 July
Readings and discussions

Tuesday, 2 July
Excursion to Dresden: Archiv der Avantgarden (AdA)

Wednesday, 3 July
Visit of the Bauhaus Dessau Archive (tbc)

Tuesday, 4 July
Excursion to Weimar Bauhaus Museum and Archive
Friday, 5 July
Preparing the trip to London

Week 5
8 to 14 July
Excursion to London

Visiting archives in London (Victoria & Albert Museum) and Norwich
(University of East Anglia, Pritchard Papers and Isokon Trust)

Week 6
15 to 19 July
Material Collection

Sorting out the findings, Group discussions on observations made on site

Week 7
22 to 26 July
Concept phase 1: Curatorial narratives

Curatorial workshop
Dispersed/Collected: Networks, Objects, Materials and Actors

Week 8
29 July to 2 August
Concept Phase 2: Exhibition design

Workshop on modes of representation and spatial concept with Lisi
Zeininger (tbc)

Week 9
5 to 9 August
Concept development for the Final Symposium

Week 10 through Week 13
12 August to 4 September
Final production phase, symposium and opening

Thursday, 5 September
Final presentation / exhibition opening and international symposium
Bauhaus Building

Saturday and Sunday, 7 to 8 September
Grand Opening, Bauhaus Dessau Museum

Epilogue
Monday to Thursday, 2 to 5 December
Conference: “Collecting Bauhaus”