INTRODUCTION 1

I have excluded everything that prevents a city from becoming a work of art. In essence it is a realisation of an old dream, a dream that figures in all tendencies, all movements, all endeavours in the history of art of this century, and which, in its simplest form, one could refer to by its Wagnerian name: *das Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art.

CONSTANT, 1960[1]

The total work of art is a union of the arts, coming together in a synthesis that embodies the potential of art and its significance for culture. Throughout history, humanity has created major artistic stagings of religious and political acts, bringing together the arts and applying them all to the great task – ranging from ancient Greek tragedies to Gothic cathedrals to modern multimedia events. The rituals of the medieval church, courtly spectacles of the Baroque era, and present-day films, performances and installations have all endeavoured to create total, immersive experiences; some works appeal directly to all the senses and sweep us along physically, others create conceptual unities that extend our mindspace. However, the Romantics were the first to look longingly back upon the art of earlier epochs with an awareness of this perspective. They perceived the vastly different historical phenomena as manifestations of culture that ought to be revived in new ways. Hence, the history of the ideas addressed here begins with the Romantic era.

In Romanticism, it was believed that the unity of earlier cultures was lost and had to be recreated through artistic endeavours. The term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' made its first appearance here, meaning that more than anything, it denotes a dream of recreating a lost – or perhaps more accurately unprecedented – connection between art and people, culture and society. The composer Richard Wagner, 1813–83, would greatly inform and shape the concept in 1849 with his vision of the 'art-work of the future' as a music drama created for the people by the people. Specifically, Wagner delved into folklore and legends, sought the support of those in power, and gathered a circle of artists to create festivals that,

1 'Unitary Urbanism', translated in Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, Rotterdam 1998, p. 135.

through a shared experience, could promote a joint awareness and consciousness in the people – the *Volk*.

Wagner's aesthetic reflections on the possibilities of art and his visions, founded in a critique of culture, of creating better conditions for a new society, would later catch on in many different art scenes around Europe: from poets, playwrights and painters to the spatial art – *Raumkunst* – of the Jugendstil to the experiments of the avant-garde, ranging from actions and installations to visions of a new architecture and new sensescapes of design. These further developments are the subject of this study, and I focus especially on architecture and on design during the period 1890 to 1930. Here, the dream of the unifying and redemptive artwork can be said to culminate with the Bauhaus school, where the training strove to unite the arts in order to create an all-embracing union of architecture, construction, industrial design and visual forms of communication in order to help tie modern society together.

This book pursues and examines the dream of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a reflexive and discursive phenomenon, meaning that I follow it specifically from Wagner onwards. Accordingly, I adhere to the historical concept applied by him, 'Gesamtkunstwerk', and its role in the history of ideas, rather than the English translation, 'total work of art', which can be used as a broader, analytical category. This is more of a historical and conceptual study than an analytical, classifying one. The objective is not to be able to designate new Gesamtkunstwerks, but to trace the role played by these ideas in architecture and design. The thesis is that the translation of Wagner's vision into not just one version of the joint artwork, but into a wide range of attempts to link up art forms, was crucial to modern architecture and design in their experiments with other art forms and the vitalisation of communities.

The first use of the term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' can be traced to a dissertation from 1827 by the German theologian and philosopher Eusebius Trahndorff.[2] Here, the concept established a link between art and worldview, but its impact was not significant. Only when Richard Wagner used the designation in his programmatic writings from Zurich 1849–51 to assist the unfolding of his vision of the 'Art-Work of the Future' did it become a fixed term. Thus, Wagner cannot

2 Eusebius Trahndorff, *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst*, Berlin 1827. Daniel Schneller refers to A. R. Neumann, 'The earliest use of the term 'Gesamtkunstwerk'' from *Philological Quarterly*, 1956, vol. 35.

be credited with inventing either the term or the idea, but he is nevertheless the key figure in this regard because his art-philosophical formulation of the vision of the Gesamtkunstwerk and its concrete realisation in his Bayreuther Festspiele became the main inspiration for experimenting with and thinking in terms of other forms of redemptive total art. In fact, he himself stopped using the term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' after having created his programmatic writings.[3] He constantly sought for new words to describe his works, but it would appear that no genre designation could fully encompass the uniqueness of his vision. For example, *Tristan and Isolde* was simply called a 'Handlung in drei Aufzügen' – 'an action in three acts'.

During those years in which Wagner himself thought in terms of this concept and unfolded the ideas of the union of the arts in the 'art-work of the future', he was fuelled by a utopian socialism and was actively involved in the revolutionary uprising in Dresden in 1848. This was the starting point that inspired many later, progressive artists and architects. But these inspirations are of course also influenced by the changes subsequently found in his artistic project and later writings. In his last years, Wagner surrounded himself with a circle that inclined towards race theories and national chauvinism, introducing a timbre which his widow, Cosima, carried on in his legacy in Bayreuth. Such thinking was widespread at the time, encompassing many ambivalent elements from disparate movements such as Vitalism and health reforms to pan-Germanism and anti-Semitism; later, Adolf Hitler would draw on such fancies and ideas when moulding his Nazi ideology. An enthusiast of Wagner's work, the Führer would use and abuse his art and ideas in the staging of a Third Reich. If we look at the monumental buildings, the choreographed rallies, processions and folk festivals and the Nazi vision of a new, healthy culture, they have the feel of being envisioned as Gesamtkunstwerks. We must, then, consider and respond to the fact that the Wagnerian view of art could play a role in the mindset of Nazism and in modern art theories alike.

Wagner's thinking encompasses so many intimations, approaches and transformations that we cannot claim to identify a straight line connecting the various elements. What is more, many of those who were inspired were also critical of Wagner himself and his festival. This aspect was instrumental

3 Sanna Pederson, 'From Gesamtkunstwerk to Music Drama', ed. David Imhoof et al., *Total Work of Art*, New York 2016.

in ensuring that the visions grew, developed and took on such wide-ranging span and significance. Tellingly, a critic like Theodor W. Adorno, writing in his Versuch über Wagner, has reservations about virtually every step of Wagner's dispositions, yet is compelled to admire how his work can, despite everything, quite miraculously carry itself aloft and succeed as great art – first and foremost as great music. The strong critique of Wagner and his thinking will also play a role here, but it should not stand in the way of a historical and conceptual understanding of the often grandiloquent, overblown ideas and notions of this late-Romantic period; ideas that have often been ridiculed and seen as anathema by the champions of the modernist movement. Understanding the concepts in their earlier, formative context is crucial for the critique, cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer: 'Key concepts and words which we still use acquired their stamp then, and if we are not to be swept along by language, but strive for a reasoned historical self-understanding, we must face a whole host of questions about verbal and conceptual history.'[4] He also specifically mentions the concepts arising in the nineteenth century as strongly influential ideals.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARTS

It is no coincidence that the call for a joint, collective art came from music. One might well have imagined that the art of architecture, often considered the mother of all the arts, would have taken the lead, but a part of the problem was that architecture seemed to have lost its grasp on the collaborative efforts that were previously considered a perfectly natural given. Architecture had been hit the hardest by the style crisis and was often reduced to historicising set pieces. Music, on the other hand, had undergone a period of strong development with Viennese Classicism and the Romantic period, increasingly making music a role model for the other art forms. With the worship of Beethoven and Wagner seen in the years leading up towards 1900, not least within the visual arts, music was the highest ideal of art.

In his *Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* of 1872, Friedrich W. Nietzsche evoked how the artistic power of drama, poetry and visual art sprang from music like sparks. This was how the perfection of Greek tragedy as a political, sacred, and artistic whole had arisen, and the process was to

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (1960), London 1989, p. 9.

repeat itself with German music, pregnant as it was with a new culture, a new worldview. Nietzsche's affinity and empathy with Wagner's music dramas as liberating Gesamtkunstwerks formed the background for his dissertation. The philosopher was completely enraptured by the Wagnerian project until he suddenly did a *volte-face*, now seeing it as the strongest manifestation of all the ills of the time, the decadence of modern culture.

Seen in relation to music as the highest ideal, applied art and design for everyday life occupied a position at the opposite end of the hierarchy, but under the motto of Ars Una – a single, indivisible art – they became an important part of the struggle for a new art. In the years leading up to 1900, they gained newfound status and respect in the collaboration with the higher arts and were even envisioned as having a style-defining and revitalising role in relation to the crisis-stricken arts that were slowly suffocating in the lethargic salons – a breath of fresh air in oxygen-deprived surroundings. Indeed, an array of the central figures in the Gesamtkunstwerk tradition were artists who originally came from the realm of painting, but moved into architecture by way of applied art and interior design. Such a shift had already taken place in the case of William Morris, but the trend became particularly prominent in the generation around 1900, spearheaded by Henry van de Velde and Peter Behrens. Through the Werkbund and, later, Bauhaus movements, they would significantly impact the breakthrough in modern architecture and design, so that one may confidently speak about a revitalisation of art. In interiors and in design, art could be directly linked to the realities of everyday life and thus seek the kind of organic connection with culture that would strengthen art and the entire divided culture. In being activated this way, design took on a visionary dimension infused by elements of cultural critique, offering fertile ground for modern design history to grow and evolve.[5] By 'design' I thus also refer to the entire, much-contested field which emerged all through the nineteenth century, through factors such as industrialisation and aesthetic reform effected by the medium of applied art, from arts and crafts to the German Kunstgewerbe-Bewegung and Werkbund. The controversy was expressed in a wealth of different terms and designations used in various languages, including applied arts, decorative arts and industrial design, each embedded with their own artistic ideals and cultural visions.

5 Anders V. Munch, 'Design as Gesamtkunstwerk', *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, vol. 11, Copenhagen 2001.

Pursuing this route, architecture too could attain its special position as a physical setting for a joining of the arts and for cultural life. Not only should the building itself be created as an artistic form; it should also be regarded as a formative factor in society, making it natural to work with architecture as a simultaneously artistic and social totality that could act as a guiding light for culture as such. Thus, early modern architects such as Peter Behrens, Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius dreamed of a new monumental architecture, the cathedrals of the future. The cathedral became a symbol and a metaphor for the common task – the building of communities – but that task could also be addressed in the carefully considered and thorough composition of the individual home, in solutions aimed at many homes or in treating an entire city as an artistically organised community. The contribution made to the history of the Gesamtkunstwerk tradition in this book concerns the role played by architecture, applied arts and design in a state of constant interaction with art.

PARALLEL IDEAS IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

Although the stated mission of this book is to trace the Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk within the fields of architecture and design, we must also take into account the fact that ideas about monumental architecture or the home as a union of the arts play a role in nineteenth-century architectural and design history that falls beyond Wagnerian tradition and develop without reference to the Wagnerian terms. In that sense, they are developments within a broader complex of ideas, rather than a narrowly defined history of a single concept. As I shall explore in my presentation of Wagner's thinking, the leading German architects Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Gottfried Semper had already entertained notions about resurrecting and revitalising the art of architecture in interaction with the other art forms. Schinkel painted large prospects of Gothic cathedrals as the focal points of the living culture that had created them. Semper was inspired by the new archaeological discoveries revealing that the friezes and sculptures of antiquity had originally been painted in vivid colors, prompting him to imagine a new, dynamic collaboration between the arts with architecture as the framework and the architect as conductor.[6] Wagner would work directly with Semper as the architect behind both the Dresdner Opera

6 Gottfried Semper, *Vorläufige Bemerkungen über bemalte Architektur und Plastik bei den Alten*, Altona 1834.

and the plans for a new type of opera house to accommodate Wagner's music dramas in Munich. So these ideas from architecture have obviously been part of Wagner's inspiration.

These ideas would find little practical foothold in architecture at first, prompting neither revolution nor revitalisation. The wish to find a new, contemporary mode of expression and a new role for the art of architecture was a trait regularly repeated throughout the century. However, all the arts sought a revitalisation beyond the roles and formats assigned to them by bourgeois salon culture. Artists of all kinds sought the original sources of art in history, in the people, in everyday life, in the human senses and in craftsmanship.[7] This also challenged the academic hierarchy, where sculpture, history painting and other representational art forms used for official purposes were now being contested, while applied art was the focus of renewed attention as a source of new stylistic expressions, new challenges involving old techniques and new contexts. This break-up within the established hierarchy, where painters and sculptors looked to applied art and architecture alike, dovetailed neatly with the notion that the arts only came into their own when they came together for a higher goal – when boundaries and hierarchies were broken down.

John Ruskin's and William Morris's ideas about the revival of medieval craftsmanship in architecture and crafts, from churches to private homes and book print, had the same starting point as Schinkel and Semper, but caught on more widely. They would also enter into a direct interplay with inspiration from Wagner and the symbolist Wagnerianism found among the continental Jugendstil artists, above all in the work of Henry van de Velde. I examine this connection in the chapter 'Out of the Golden Frames', where the Gesamtkunstwerk idea is, as it were, translated into architecture and design, reaching beyond Wagner's own wishes for the festival theatre in Bayreuth.

I strive to restrict myself to examples and texts that draw on or contribute to the Wagnerian tradition. However, this task is complicated by the simple fact that the years leading up to 1900 feature such a rich array of trends and inspirations that reinforce each other in architecture and design, even though they had widely differing and often conflicting starting points. If I may use Denmark as an example, references to contemporary German art or culture were

7 Werner Hofmann, *Turningpoints in Twentieth-Century Art: 1890–1917*, London 1969, and *Die Moderne im Rückspiegel*, Munich 1998.

rarely used positively, either by artists or architects – nor indeed in later art and architectural historiography. Danish art and cultural identity were most often understood in terms of how they represented a contrast or opposition to the large neighbour south of the border, even though Danes would typically follow the latest developments through German contacts and magazines. For the Danes, Germany represented a threat in many respects: politically, militarily, culturally and in terms of trade, too, not least because the processes of modernity and industrialisation developed at a furiously fast pace there compared to Denmark.[8] There was, then, little breeding ground in Denmark for a broader Wagnerianism outside the realm of music. But the Danish secession movement known as *Den Frie Udstilling* (The Independent Exhibition), established in 1891, was influenced by international trends from an early stage, especially by Les Vingt in Belgium. It also began showing applied art in 1894, before the Viennese and Munich secessions did the same. The leading artists of the movement – J.F. Willumsen, Johan Rohde, Thorvald Bindesbøll, and Agnes and Harald Slott-Møller – worked with ceramics, furniture, interiors and architecture in addition to their painting.[9] These artists, who sought to rediscover or create a distinctly Danish mode of applied art, were inspired by Japonisme and by the Danish National Romanticism movement alike. They sought to create a new aesthetic coherence and unity in everyday settings based on techniques found in Japanese decorative arts, but using subject matter and imagery from the Danish countryside and earlier epochs in the nation's history. No subject, no object was too trivial or ordinary to be artistically designed or adorned.

The Copenhagen City Hall, 1892–1905, became a pivotal undertaking that provided work for many artists and led them into the realm of applied art. The architect Martin Nyrop designed the furniture, but commissioned artists to create decorations, fittings and interiors done in various materials and old techniques. Even though the exterior of the Copenhagen City Hall drew inspiration from the city hall of Siena as an architectural type, the idea was for all the decorations

8 Anders V. Munch, 'On the Outskirts. Geography of design and the self-exoticisation of Danish design', *Journal of Design History* 30/1 2017, pp. 50–67.

9 Munch, 'Heraus aus den Goldrahmen. Rohde, Hannover und die Idee von der Vereinigung der Kunstarten', in *Johan Rohde. Ein dänische Künstler der Moderne*, eds. Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen & Gertrud Oelsner, Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 2006.

to appeal directly to the common citizens, featuring well-known motifs from Danish nature and history.

A more tightly composed total work of art was the Faaborg Museum, 1913–15, designed by Carl Petersen. Having honed his feel for materials and colours by working with stoneware at Bing & Grøndahl, the architect went on to compose a museum where the changing lighting, the saturated wall colours, floor mosaics and the dynamic flowthrough emphasised architecture as a spatial art that interacted with the collection of paintings. Together with a young Kaare Klint, who was a self-taught painter at the time, Petersen designed furniture for the museum; the Faaborg chair has since been highlighted as the starting point of the Danish school of furniture design.[10] The building's total, accumulated effect of different art forms, space and rhythm, colours and materials has since been highlighted as an ideal for Danish architecture. The museum is a focal point in many Danish histories of architecture and is used to describe how architecture creates experiences, making it seminal for the articulation of the ideals in Danish architecture.[11]

It is, then, perfectly possible to find clear-cut examples of architecture from around 1900 that wants to create a total, sublime experience and a unifying effect, offering a shared, common identity – without reference to a Wagnerian tradition. Outside Denmark, though, Wagnerian ideas would often reinforce the aforementioned tendencies. Although the historical study conducted here restricts itself to examples that refer to the Gesamtkunstwerk in a Wagnerian sense, I also wish to trace how this tradition was influenced and fuelled by encounters with other strong tendencies such as the Arts and Crafts movement, National Romanticism and Japonisme. In the Nordic countries, National Romantic architecture and interior design encompasses an even stronger topos in contemporary art, 'the home as a work of art', to use a designation employed by Barbara Miller Lane.[12] She considers the painters Akseli Gallen-Kallela in Finland, Gerhard Munthe in Norway and Carl Larsson in Sweden. The latter became famous for his watercolours of the home he created with his wife, the artisan Karin Larsson, and the book *Ett Hem*, 1899, has had a major impact on

10 G. Hvidberg-Hansen & G. Hedin, eds., *Faaborg Museum and the Artist's Colony*, Aarhus 2019.

11 Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, London 1959.

12 Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries*, Cambridge 2000.

1. The archive of *Faaborg Museum*, 1913–15, architect Carl Petersen, with furnishing by Petersen and Kaare Klint and wall painting by Johannes Larsen

the general perception of Scandinavian homes and on the artistic aspect of how the home shapes identity formation.

Wagner's own home in Bayreuth, Villa Wahnfried, and other imposing artist-created homes from the period such as Lehnbach-Haus and Villa Stuck in Munich, could also be interpreted as total works of art, but they did not usher in the same kind of renewed focus on everyday life and one's homeland among the general population. Although these Nordic artists were cosmopolitan by nature, spending much of their time in the major cities of Central Europe, they sought inspiration for a new sense of coherence and connectedness in their art by seeking out those provincial regions that played a special role in their particular countries, creating their own homes from scratch – or even forming entire artists' colonies. Found throughout Europe, such colonies were founded as efforts to revitalise art by searching either for one's roots or for the exotically alien, from Barbizon in France to Abramtsevo in Russia. But the Nordic and, later, German colonies have a special focus on fashioning homes with an emphasis on reforming everyday life and on a new, rational mode of design. Miller Lane's bold interpretation sees National Romanticism as a common German-Nordic set of values where the Nordic examples inspire a broader German movement in the interwar period, one in which the modernist (known in Scandinavia as functionalist) residential areas are carefully orchestrated in every detail, ranging from landscapes and urban plans down to individual spaces, objects and colour schemes. This is a main deveopment which we can certainly see the Wagnerian tradition play into, from Henry van de Velde to the Werkbund to Bauhaus.

CATEGORIES

In addition to the inherent challenge in the fact that we may come across ideas that run parallel to Wagnerian tradition, yet fall outside the scope of that tradition during the period under scrutiny here, we also face the difficulty that the Gesamtkunstwerk is an ambiguous concept right from its starting point in Wagner, and becomes increasingly so through critical reinterpretations right up until modernism. One must first distinguish between two vastly different dimensions, each of which is crucial in the efforts to create the unifying and redemptive art-work. One is the monumental form, in which the art forms manifest themselves in a collective form and demonstrate a unity of style and values. Here one may think of the visual arts and architecture as a lasting form and fixed framework for a given context. The second dimension is a momentary