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Av. Drassanes, 6-8, planta 21
08001 Barcelona
Tel. + 34 93 256 25 09
Fax. + 34 93 412 34 92

Closing speech

BACK TO THE FUTURE: REEXAMINING THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF ART NOUVEAU

GABRIEL WEISBERG

When Henry Van de Velde opened his home, Bloemenwerf, just outside the city limits of Brussels in 1894, he had already declared his fervent commitment to design, in seeing that all the arts were equal to one another. Bloemenwerf became more than his home. It was a symbolic model for what could be achieved in design reform as it eschewed historical styles in its architectural plan and the simplicity of its interior. Since Van de Velde and his wife worked on new types of furniture and textiles, they showed what could be done. Soon Siegfried Bing and Julius Meier-Graefe travelled to Bloemenwerf; it was a historic meeting further emphasizing that the tyranny of past styles was over.

It was from these meetings, and the fact that Bloemenwerf served as a crafts workshop where designers and craftsmen worked together, that an international new style evolved. Given all the new aspects of an art nouveau presented at this conference, we MUST not lose sight of those individuals who had the daring and ingenuity to forge ahead, to initiate a true revolution in all the arts by issuing a call for innovation that spread throughout the world. Seeing Van de Velde anew, as one of the principal progenitors of this direction returns art nouveau to its origins. During this Van de Velde year in Germany it is essential to recognize that he remained at the center of creative design and architectural reform beyond the era of art nouveau by preparing the foundation for the Bauhaus which followed.

I.

This Art Nouveau conference has been a herculean effort to try to make sense out of a movement that was nationally and internationally very complex. At the same time, the conference tried to expand the parameters of the tendency into new areas, new artists, and new time frames. These aspects were revealed here in Barcelona; they were openly discussed.

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Much care was expended on developing the historiography of the movement, on revealing some key moments and publications that have led us to where we are today. There was an attempt made to show the battles won as well as the battles lost. Françoise Aubry did much to focus on the history of Brussels with her excellent overview of the architecture of art nouveau.

Many of the successes have become models for the future. The city of Barcelona with Gaudi and the value of Glasgow as seen through the architecture of Mackintosh are triumphs. Other locations are being contemplated such as the city of Liège where the architecture of Serrurier-Bovy awaits further examination. But questions remains, and will remain, as unanswered.

How far have we come? Where are we going? Fifty years ago the study of art nouveau was nowhere. Academics, as many still do in universities, scorned serious examination of the movement. The decorative arts were considered unworthy of serious consideration; they were too minor. The significance of design museums was not fully realized as one of the key innovations or goals of art nouveau; it was not understood at all.

Only an occasional art or architectural historian ventured from the mainstream - from the great names. One of these was the American George Collins in his pioneering books on Gaudi (who has had a street named after him here in Barcelona) or my own teacher, Christopher Gray whose book The Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin pointed out the full value of decorative art. He saw that the applied arts had ideas imbedded in them that needed to be found and studied.

While scholarship has moved forward, the pursuit of art nouveau objects and the visitation of some art nouveau sites has become something new: it has emerged as a venerated practice. People going there resemble the pilgrims going to Lourdes. But a danger lies in following this direction. Art Nouveau sites will become devoid of “real” ideas, they will become something game-like, fantastic, and similar to visiting a Disney World of the present or a Jules Verne world of the future.

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Still, serious studies of art nouveau persist; need to be encouraged as has been done at this conference. But more needs to be championed so that Art Nouveau is not given a false meaning where its original goals are lost and the vision of the founding fathers misunderstood. This does not mean that Art Nouveau should be studied superficially or through Wikipedia references on the Internet. Rather it means that there must be a deeper grasp, a total absorption of the original intentions. I will return to this point later this morning.

With battles to be won and those already lost we turn to a lasting monument, an icon of everything this conference contains and should maintain. In this year of Henry Van de Velde in Germany (and to a far lesser degree in Belgium) Bloemenwerf, his first building and his home, is seriously threatened. We need to see why the potential loss of this building is a threat to all of Art Nouveau. And it is to this great monument that we now turn.

II.

When the Hungarian art critic and entrepreneur, Julius Meier- Graefe dedicated the first issue of his publication L'Art Décoratif (Fig. 2) in 1898 to the decorative work and interior building spaces of Henry van de Velde he was emphasizing the fact that this artist was of central significance to the entire burgeoning design reform tradition. In assessing the importance of Van de Velde to the new Belgian style he was calling out how Van de Velde was set apart from other designers and manufacturers. He recognized the spare, constructed spaces that differed greatly from his contemporaries; he also presented the fact that Van de Velde was at the center of something decidedly new. His relationship between newly created forms and the use of traditional materials created a sense of simplicity in Van de Velde's work that by centering on his own home, his so-called cottage on the fringe of Brussels, presented this building as a paradigm for emulation and discussion. This house, where Van de Velde was living with his wife was situated on a small hillock; amidst a garden that Van de Velde's wife had orchestrated to demonstrate how nature was in harmony with her husband's building (Fig. 3, 4, 5). It was known as Bloemenwerf, since it symbolized, in name, the blooming of a new era

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similar to the plants and flowers that were found around it. Bloemenwerf was to become a center of considerable activity for those craftsmen who were working with Van de Velde; it also became a mecca for those committed to the design reform movement as both Siegfried Bing, the patron of art nouveau in Paris (Fig. 6), and Meier-Graefe, who by 1899 opened a shop in Paris known as the Maison Moderne (Fig. 7) journeyed to this house to meet with Van de Velde, to see what he had created and to discuss what future endeavors all of them could work on together. Thus, in the midst of our enlarged reconsideration of many new aspects of art nouveau here in Barcelona returning to the past will provide a clearer perspective of the way we must consider the future. The very significant achievements of Van de Velde must be seen with renewed enthusiasm and clarity.

Before we have a detailed look at Bloemenwerf we must also note that Van de Velde occupies a strategically significant position in art historical studies as his art work in general cannot be seen as contributing to just one strain of creativity. In fact, it is through Van de Velde's struggles that we can concentrate on some of the critical issues that faced artists, and would be designers, during the 1890s and beyond. In so many ways Van de Velde faced these challenges straight on, unflinchingly. These issues need to be re-enumerated here.

Van de Velde (Fig. 8) believed that one could not, even should not, remain working in only one field of creativity- an artist had to work in several areas simultaneously. While other artists of the era were thinking along similar paths Van de Velde was already a major painter, an artist who had regularly exhibition with Belgian colleagues in the avant-garde exhibitions of Les Vingt. Van de Velde's open shift from painting (Fig. 9) to the decorative arts (Fig. 10, Angel's Wake) was a central point, since the dominance of painting needed to be challenged; only a painter who had already commanded such visible attention could do this. A modern artist had to think of all the arts, and to do this meant accepting a truly universal point of view. Recognizing that all the arts were equal, as in Japan, was to become one of his guiding principles. He also recognized that working with older principles, such as the recording of literal

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reality, was a thing of the past. Van de Velde emphasized the importance of two-dimensional creativity placing much emphasis on the flat wall surface, qualities that he worked with in his fabrics and which he reiterated in the ways in which interiors of his buildings did away with any over elaborate decoration.

Van de Velde also embraced the debate surrounding the value of the applied arts qualities that were crystallized in Angel's Wake, his first tapestry example (Fig. 11) In order to become a truly modern creator meant that the locations where one lived had to be redone- a new type of space had to be achieved, one where a modern home, in the sense of the term used by Meier-Graefe, could emerge. As it became clear to other progressive artists of the 1890s, Van de Velde, and what he was producing, became a model for many others. And much of what he achieved early on centers on a full understanding of Bloemenwerf, of what it contained in the mid 1890s and what was actually taking place inside certain rooms of the villa.

At this site, around 1895, Van de Velde tried to assimilate changes in art, architecture and design into the creation of a domestic environment. Although Bloemenwerf (Fig. 12) was the first architectural work of Van de Velde, it has often been by-passed by art historians of the art nouveau movement who have considered it as an aberration, or as simply a redoing of the arts and crafts cottage style in England in Belgium without attempting to see what was actually achieved. Much of this has been hampered by the difficulty of visiting the building, of getting inside the spaces, and to not being able to grasp what the building was in its original form since much of the furniture and furnishings inside Bloemenwerf have been removed.

The strange shape of Bloemenwerf (Fig. 12) eludes easy identification with specific vernacular models. But Van de Velde was clever enough to allow the building to fit neatly into its rural site (far more rural when it was originally conceived than today) by suggesting allusions with a vernacular style without providing any specific prototypes. The three-hipped gables, ornamented with half timbering suggest that the building rises upward while also revealing three bays to its construction. Other windows, irregularly placed on the building's façade, emerge from what appears today

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as a white washed façade, which actually might have been of a different color tone when the building was first completed (Fig. 13). Bloemenwerf's actual materials are also at variance from the type of materials that were being used elsewhere in Brussels by Victor Horta, among others (Fig. 14), when they constructed townhouses for the super-rich, for political members of the Belgian government, or for himself.

Van de Velde prided himself on the use conventional materials in the construction of his home: stone, wood, plaster, are the key ingredients. He left these materials in their original states in areas of the house that people would normally not visit such as the attic (Fig. 15, 16) and the basement. If one gains entrance to the attic area of the house the ways in which materials have been used, without any attempt to conceal them or reface the planking on the floor, predominates. The way in which the carpentry suggests that of an artisan constructing a home, is plainly visible. Van de Velde seems to be diametrically positioning himself against many of the bourgeois houses of the period; he is paving the way for architects to become increasingly more inventive with the materials that they use and in the use of materials that will not be overly expensive especially since some architects had little money to expend. But the guiding principle at Bloemenwerf was the creation of a building that stressed domesticity, privacy, the need to be reclusive and to step away from the bustling, hectic pace of the urban center. Hence, the original garden was of extreme importance, especially since it had been designed by Maria Sèthe, Van de Velde's young wife, who was also actively engaged in developing designs for clothing that were inventive and largely inspired by some of the abstract patterns that she saw on Japanese textiles, kimonos or katagami (stencil patterns) (Fig. 17,18). Many of these katagami were positioned in various sections of the interior; they were often framed, as they continually provided inspiration for both Van de Velde and his wife as she worked on textile patterns as found in this old photograph of her activity. Notice the framed katagami on the back wall of the interior space; Maria Sèthe often wore the textiles that she designed at home providing evidence that a designers home had to be in harmony with what was actually worn even while working in the kitchen (Fig. 19, 20, 21).

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The gardens of Bloemenwerf were originally carefully laid out (Fig. 22). Maria Sèthe studied botanical sources; she incorporated all types of flowers and pathways through the gardens that would emphasize the blooming qualities of nature. At the same time the Van de Veldes suggested how the building was one with nature – one of the central conceits of the art nouveau movement – the gardens also provided a natural buffer from the outside world. Van de Velde was demonstrating that his version of a modern home had to be set off from commercial intrusions, privacy had to be stressed, and these qualities dominated the effectiveness of the building itself.

In April, 1895, as the plans for the building were filed (Fig. 23) with the communal authorities of Uccle (outside Brussels), Van de Velde provided a very original scheme where irregular shaped rooms were distributed around an open, central two story core (Fig. 24). This interior was lighted by a skylight (visible from the attic), which used frosted glass to helped mute direct sunlight. The very spacious central hall had a winding staircase that in Van de Velde's initial installation (Fig. 25) was decorated with other framed Japanese katagami providing these designs with pride of place since they were clearly visible to any visitor who was welcomed into the interior space. As we examine the various rooms, paying close attention to the ways in which materials were used in a plain, sparse way, the spaces from the kitchen, to the sitting room, (Fig. 26) and even the bathroom revealed the ways in which Van de Velde and his workmen were in control of every aspect of interior design. As one moved to the upper floor, which originally contained Van de Velde's study and possibly part of his work office, he installed cases, with frosted glass (Fig. 27, 28) which originally contained ceramics (and other objects from Japan as well as modern ceramics by Finch, Bigot and Delaherche all ceramicists who were forging the tradition of the independent artisan) providing a built in display area for the pieces that he was collecting and which he wanted to show to others who visited him; inside the space one could continually see the skylight (Fig. 29). From this workspace, which also had built in cabinets for books (Fig. 30), the expansive windows opened out onto the garden providing a constant reminder to Van de Velde and his wife that nature was always an active presence in their world. It was also from this personal workspace that Van de Velde and his wife

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were able to monitor the activities of the artisans/workmen who were beginning his design business in a room on the first floor.

On the doorways, leading into different rooms, Van de Velde showed his increasing interest in metalwork (Fig. 31) as the sweeping curvilinear qualities of a handle, or the window lock, became the precursor of many other designs that he would do throughout his career. Even the metal locks on doors leading outside were designed with a spiraling curve, suggesting that the reliance on a snake-like S curve can be found in some of the smaller details at Bloemenwerf especially when one looks carefully at all the details within the building itself. The simplicity of plain wood, used in the creation of a series of bookcases in the study, also stand out for the interest in practicality that was a hallmark of the interior design (Fig. 32) that Van de Velde was championing. In unusual locations in the house Van de Velde placed abstract patterns on a series ceramic tiles that were used as a decorative trim around and entranceway; these also emphasized the way in which decoration was used subtly for accent inside the building. They also seem to prefigure the ways in which Van de Velde was going to increasingly develop designs for ceramic tiles that would be used in side his buildings or sold, eventually, through Siegfried Bing's shop L'Art Nouveau after 1895 (Fig. 33, 34).

One of the rooms, off the main gallery on the ground floor, was reserved for the nascent work of the Ateliers of Van de Velde. Here, by 1897, Van de Velde went into business as a designer of furniture, wallpaper, and many other household items (Fig. 35, 36). It was at Bloemenwerf that craftsmen were first assembled, discussions held, plans drawn up for all types of objects that would be produced outside of Bloemenwerf. At Bloemenwerf Van de Velde's wife also prepared designs to be used on fabrics, textiles and clothes. By late December 1898, the main ateliers were established In Ixelles, with headquarters being moved eventually to Berlin. But it has to be remembered that it was at Bloemenwerf (Fig. 37, fireplace) that these studios were initiated, and it is here that discussions were held with visitors who also realized that close proximity with the master designer was what was essential if an art nouveau was going to succeed. The location of the ateliers, on the premises itself where the master designer worked, were

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going to directly influence Siergfried Bing and Meier-Graefe in the ways in which they positioned their own workshops in direct relationship with their shops.

In looking at other rooms other aspects emerge clearly. Van de Velde was working with rustic traditions, such as having a modernized modern fireplace surmounted by tiles in the living room; if one looks closely metalwork (Fig. 38) suggests the ways in which the designer was trying to give them an up-dated look while maintaining past traditions. Even the bathroom, while revealing modern qualities (such as a double sink) were also practical, unadorned, without any sense of ostentation at all. A similar sense of simplicity was found in the kitchen, although the original disposition in the house is difficult to fully reconstruct with the ways in which this interior looks today .An occasional metal object, placed on a Japanese inspired textile (Fig. 38) suggestive of a design developed from a katagami, were able to reveal that other types of objects were continually integrated into the interiors. Furniture from Bloemenwerf, especially the chairs used in the dining room and sitting room (Fig. 39, 40) reflected a type of primitiveness since the chairs were both sturdy and elemental. This type of chair, which was made widely available, were sold at S. Bing's art nouveau emporium in Paris and they are featured in the recent Van de Velde exhibition in Weimar, Germany as part of the Van de Velde year in Germany. They are among the first pieces of furniture designed by Van de Velde that had an international impact.

Once Siegfried Bing and Julius Meier-Graefe visited Bloemenwerf they were confronted with a singular achievement that they wanted to bring to their respective sites in Paris. They recognized what Van de Velde had done for his own living quarters; they also recognized how he integrated his personal life-style with by his own working quarters—and while they could not implement everything Van de Velde achieved immediately (for a number of reasons) they were committed toward the goal of revolutionizing home interiors, of elevating the craftsman tradition and in providing the opportunity for many to move away from the dominance of past historical styles. Whether either man forged a contract with Van de Velde remains unknown but some of the successes of Van de Velde's work were brought to bear when Siegfried Bing

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redesigned his shop so that it could become an emporium for art nouveau on an international scale.

While the Dining Room and Smoking Salon that were designed for Bing have received considerable attention in the past (Fig. 40), the circular Salon (with panels painted by Albert Besnard) has not (Fig. 40). In looking closely at the fireplace in this room, one is reminded of the way in which Van de Velde had emphasized his own fireplace at Bloemenwerf revealing that he was the inspiration for this setting, if not the total designer of the fireplace itself. The catalogue that Bing published for this first Salon did, however, give credit to Van de Velde as having designed the fireplace itself while making use of what he first did at Bloemenwerf. In another way, beyond the two earlier rooms as noted, Van de Velde remained an influence in another area inside the model rooms that Siegfried Bing had commissioned for his first Salon of Art Nouveau in December 1895. When reexamining these areas we have another source to reconsider for the future.

Having provided considerable innovation through the rooms Van de Velde designed in 1895, the French press remained intensely chauvinistic, noting vociferously that the rooms were a key example of Bing's misguided internationalism. In the wake of these attacks, Meier-Graefe stepped up his defense contributing a thorough analysis of the rooms, and all of the first Salon of Art Nouveau in the periodical Das Atelier. He found all of the rooms perfectly "original, perfectly homogeneous" implying that despite the fact that several artists had worked together, all of the room interiors were completely integrated. With time to think about what he had already seen at Bloemenwerf, Meier-Graefe recognized that what had been done by Van de Velde himself and his wife were providing the models for what could be conveyed in the interior of an exhibition, inside a shop that was promoting the new art. He understood that Van de Velde wanted his interiors to be unpretentious, without the creation of any jarring distractions. The presentation of a comforting environment was critical; he was one of the very few critics, if not the only one, to actually see what had been achieved. It is this fully integrated design that was to remain one of the most important

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characteristics of these rooms, qualities worth noting at this conference as we look for more suggestions of an art nouveau at various new sites.

Meier-Graefe also commented on a host of smaller details found in the rooms: metallic objects used with furniture and the integration of ceramic tiles to work with a fireplace. In keynoting the ceramic tiles at Bing's he recalled what he had seen, again, at Bloemenwerf (Fig. 41, 42) in a surround at a door opening. The same type of swirling movement of abstracted shapes in these Bloemenwerf tiles were found in ceramic tiles that Bing had for sale in his shop. These shapes, undoubtedly inspired by what Van de Velde had first seen in Japanese katagami, examples that Van de Velde extensively collected, provide further evidence of two issues. First, that the abstract designs that Van de Velde had employed at his home, in ceramic tiles, both Bing and Van de Velde wanted to see promoted and used in tiles that were actively sold to the public. And, more importantly, the rhythms in these tiles, with their swirling lines against a flat background, provide further evidence of how the Japanese katagami was gaining influence through what Van de Velde had already created and what Bing was promoting as an art nouveau.

The influence of Van de Velde was not solely limited to what he did for Siegfried Bing in 1895. With Meier-Graefe's stinging defense of the artist ringing in his ears, Van de Velde was commissioned by this second major supporter of an international art nouveau to design the exterior and interior of his shop La Maison Moderne (Fig. 43,44) located in the heart of Paris just a few blocks from the Opera House. Opened in 1899, with Meier-Graefe's ateliers linked close by, Van de Velde provided a modernistic viewpoint for a large window pane, so that passersby on the street in Paris could look inside with an unobstructed view of what was on display. The name of La Maison Moderne, reiterated one of the basic beliefs of Van de Velde (and the others); the use of a new type of lettering also forged further ahead by making it clear that not only the name, but also the actual lettering of the typeface was part of a new regime. Inside the interior, Van de Velde designed cases (Fig. 45) where small objects could be easily displayed, while the top part of the interior woodworking, using

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frosted glass, most likely in a tone of yellow, enhanced the soft atmosphere conducive for contemplation. All was done with an eye for the display of new objects that could prove both fashionable and appropriate for someone who wanted to be modern and aesthetic.

Although Meier-Graefe's Maison Moderne used everything possible to promote itself from posters prepared by Manuel Orazi and Maurice Biais, to advertising cards (Fig. 46, 47) designed by Van de Velde (Fig. 48) that were subtle and creative, the reception given to this store, and many of the artists that were exhibited, was limited. The French found Maier-Graefe's version of "new art" too international, too abstract, and too much of a deviation away from the norm and the continuing love of historical styles. Similar to Bing, and perhaps even more so, Meier-Graefe had to concede that his experiment in creative taste making was too advanced, too alien for the French public. Even his appeal to a younger, more "chic" type of clientele proved wanting so that within he few years time he was forced to close his shop in Paris, although he still had the opportunity to sell objects through an outlet he maintained in Budapest, his native city.

This brings us back to Bloemenwerf, the impact of Van de Velde on art nouveau, and his importance for the art nouveau movement and the creation of a "new style." As the creative climate changed, as the opportunity to do new experiments in Belgium became limited, and those in Paris either failed or were restrictive, van de Velde moved to Berlin, to Germany. Interiors that he showed in Dresden in 1897, close to those that he did for S. Bing in Paris, disappeared, although they did add to his importance internationally at the time. An interior that he designed for the Havana Tobacco shop (Fig. 49) in Berlin became one of his most innovative areas as the sense of movement developed through the wall patterns not only reflected, symbolically, the movement of cigar or cigarette smoke, but provided Van de Velde with another opportunity to demonstrate how he could create an interior design that was revolutionary, modern and bordering on abstraction. Looking carefully at some of the chairs, in the interior (aside from their covering) and they reflect the models found

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earlier in Van de Velde's own home. But what of Bloemenwerf? What was to become of the modern villa, the country home, that had helped initiate the call and the direction for new art both (Fig. 54) for Van de Velde himself as well as the other visionary types who came there and understood what he was saying? As Van de Velde moved away, as he transferred his design ateliers to Germany, Bloemenwerf gradually receded into the past.

Most significantly, as Amy Ogata has pointed out in her superb book on "Art Nouveau and the Social Vision of Modern Living" Bloemenwerf was Van de Velde's attempt to make tangible a personal dream: it was designed to invoke an image of innocence. It was a safe haven where one could live free from the encroachment of the modern "industrial society" a location where academic rules could not gain a foothold. Even though Van de Velde's first child died in May 1895, the simplicity of his home, where a child could grow up unfettered by the constraints of the past, remained uppermost in his mind. Van de Velde's home at Bloemenwerf (Fig. 50) stressed the creation of an area that was sheltered, a symbolic space where architecture and decorative art were united so that a psychological wholeness could emerge. Bloemenwerf was a created vision one that Van de Velde hoped others would see and emulate. In revolt against the venality of modern bourgeois life Bloemenwerf remains-today—a beacon, a foundation point- for what art nouveau had in mind, the key example of the starting point that Van de Velde hoped would be a staging area for the future. We need to restudy it anew keeping in mind just how revolutionary, visionary, and comprehensive it was and still remains.

III.

With our brief excursion into the world of Bloemenwerf now behind us, we can return to a reconsideration of the current Art Nouveau conference, one where some of the ideas enumerated earlier were presented. But we are again left with a series of perplexing questions.

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First, just what was art nouveau? Was it a slogan promoted by a perspicacious promoter to get people into his Parisian shop? Was it a designation given to a historical moment in time? Was it an attempt to find a way to better the environment in which one lived by redesigning the world? As has already been espoused by Professor Loyer art nouveau was not a style. There is clearly no problem in accepting this point. Was it, then, an attempt at experimentation, was it individuality in excess exerting itself against what was commonplace? I think that we can also accept this. But, yet, Art Nouveau, is much more. It is a desire held by some to shatter conventions, to become aggressive radicals, to be seen as anarchists even, in an effort to do something NEW in the face of opposition.

Seeing Art Nouveau for what it was requires more than the pointing out of details on an architectural façade as if it were an architectural handbook for creativity. Art Nouveau requires an ability to believe in a vision, to reconnect with what the founding fathers were committed to doing. Understand the past, read the original writings, examine the buildings, the furniture, the tapestries, the ceramics, the glass and lighting fixtures of Louis C. Tiffany, and see Art Nouveau in a proper way. See it as a fervent attempt at uniting all the arts, of trying to harmonize the environment by creating a vision for the future. If this vision is dated now, and other tendencies have come and gone, we owe it to the mentors of the Art Nouveau world to see what they were doing as a whole. By seeing Art Nouveau in this way we will provide the key to building the future. Design Reform, gesamtkunstwerk as used by Van de Velde, was a key goal and we need to recommit ourselves to this idea as we move forward in future Art Nouveau studies.