

May 2012

## Gordon Watkinson

By Louisa J. Curtis



*Bauhaus Building, Walter Gropius, 1925-26, Dessau, Germany*

© Gordon Watkinson

This month I'm back to interviewing a photographer, and my conversation is with my friend and photographer [Gordon Watkinson](#) and his project "**Bauhaus twenty-21: An Ongoing Legacy**". Gordon and I met a few years back at an ASMPNY event, and I remember to this day how he stood out from the rest of the typically New York "dressed mostly in black" crowd because he was wearing a pale blue corduroy sports coat! However, once we started chatting, it really wasn't about his fashion sense, we just hit it off immediately, laughed at the same things and became friends.

Now although one of the main reasons for writing this article is because Gordon's project is coming to the U.S. (and we'll talk more about that in a moment) it is by no means a brand new project and has already had a successful run in Europe. So to give us a bit of background, I began by asking Gordon how and when the original idea for his project "**Bauhaus twenty-21: An Ongoing Legacy**" came about? *The idea for the Bauhaus project came about purely by accident. I went to see the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin and the buildings in Dessau while doing research for another somewhat related project in the summer of 1999.*

When I got to Dessau, I discovered the Törten Estate, a housing estate built by Walter Gropius using onsite prefabrication and assembly line techniques borrowed from Henry Ford, so that six houses could be completed in a week. Imagine if these techniques could be used in Haiti today? It was at this point I came to feel that an important part of the story of the Bauhaus was not being actively told.

This was obviously just the starting point, and from there, this seed of inspiration eventually blossomed into a traveling exhibition, book, workshop, and lecture tour. I asked Gordon what the most challenging aspects of the project were for him? I think the primary challenge of a project like this is to find something that you really believe in. If you find something you believe in, the rest will take care of itself. Creating a project of this scope is a long and drawn out resource (time and money), intensive process that will challenge you in ways that can be both exciting and unpredictable. If you don't believe in yourself and what you are trying to achieve, it will be difficult to find the fortitude you will need to achieve your objective.

And naturally I also asked what have been the most rewarding? The most rewarding moment for me came during the Night of the Museums in Frankfurt. The museums in Frankfurt have a night where they stay open all night long, which is a pretty festive affair. The exhibition had been up a while and I was back to give a workshop to students on how to tell a story visually. I was walking through the museum at about 10:00PM when I saw a couple in a spirited argument in front of one of the images; it was at that point I realized I had achieved my goal of starting a conversation not only about the ideas of the Bauhaus or Modernist Architecture but of the state of architecture and design today and its ability to deal with contemporary issues that affect society whether on a regional, national or international level.

But back to the present, so I asked Gordon to tell me more about his plans to continue with the project, in particular with his current [Kickstarter](#) campaign. "Bauhaus twenty-21: An Ongoing Legacy" will open at the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art at Auburn University on January 24th, 2013. Auburn is a very special place for architecture. The undergraduate program is called the "Rural Studio". Founded in 1993 to improve living conditions in rural Alabama, while giving practical experience to architecture students, the school advocates good design as a powerful life changing experience. For me it is a special place to start the North American portion of the tour.

With the success of your project in Europe, why are the funds necessary in order to bring the show to the U.S., what happened to good old corporate funding? The corporate sponsors that were attached to the project have little or no presence in North America, so they opted not to continue their partnerships past 2011. We will be raising funds this year primarily via "crowd funding" to offset the costs of creating a new set of the exhibition for North America, as well as to expand my ability to do more community based workshops and to create an ebook of the catalogue. To this end I have created a fundraising campaign on [Kickstarter](#), which is live until May 16th. Through the current [Kickstarter](#) campaign you can purchase discounted autographed copies of the book, a limited edition of the exhibition poster, prints, and even corporate sponsorships for the entire North American Tour. I am also raising money through Fractured Atlas, the fiscal sponsor of the project, and will also launch another crowd funding campaign using [Indiegogo](#) in September.

Not only was the start of this project accidental, but so also was Gordon's entry into the world of photography itself, so I asked him to tell us about that. My interest in photography was purely accidental; I took a class in summer school at VCU with another football/soccer player who needed some good grades to stay in school. The first day of class after the syllabus was passed out, someone asked why all of the assignments were to be done in black and white. The professor told the student that black and white film had the widest exposure latitude and was therefore the easiest to work with. Another student asked the professor what was the most difficult film to work with. His answer was E-6 because the exposure needed to be perfect. Because of my dyslexia I was used to starting at the bottom of the page with the "hardest" problems first. That way if I did not finish the page and I got the hardest correct, I would at least have demonstrated my grasp of the work. For some reason still unknown to me I decided to apply this to photography. I went out and bought 100 feet of E-6 and bulk loaded it into canisters, I think I did one assignment in black and white. I spent the rest of the course using E-6, pulling and pushing film until the emulsion would break or disappear altogether. I was lucky that you could get your E-6 processed at the school for about \$1 per roll. (Little did I know this was setting the stage for very expensive lab bills in the future!) I was lucky that the professor liked me enough to encourage me to pursue photography seriously, giving me a B and finding me an internship. I was hooked from that point on.

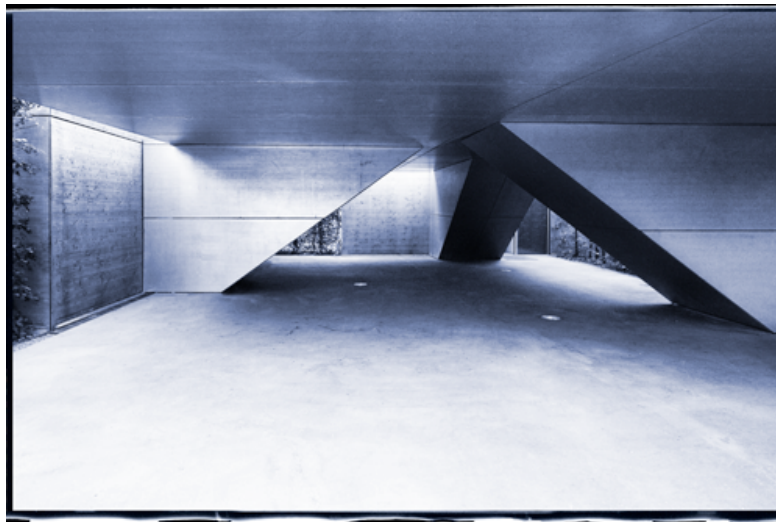


*Bauhaus Building, Walter Gropius, 1925-26, Dessau Germany (left) &  
Federal Environmental Agency, Sauerbruch Hutton, 2003, Dessau, Germany*  
© Gordon Watkinson

You spent much of your childhood between the U.S. and the UK, you played professional soccer in Spain, you live in the U.S., your wife is French and your project is German! Where do you identify with the most – where you came from, grew up, currently live or travel to? If the airport lounge was a country, that would be my passport of preference. In all seriousness the changes in my life have had a profound influence on my work and to a broader extent my world view.

I am certain that my interest in design stems from my aesthetic ideas about “normal family life”: houses (architecture), furniture (interior, product, and industrial design), and even fashion, all have their roots in this for me. I have a problem identifying myself anywhere. It drives my wife crazy, I try to envision moving/living in every new city that I visit. I pick up real estate magazines, check out the local scene, restaurants, etc. I have finally embraced the idea that I actually don't live anywhere. I am traveling almost half the year and call Berlin, Dallas, Paris and New York home for at least a portion of every year. It has gotten so bad that I decided to start a blog called Design Traveler, which will be launched very soon, to let people know what I have found along the way.

So if you could get on a plane tomorrow, and go anywhere you wanted to and perhaps somewhere you've never been before, where would you fly to and why? **Kyoto, Japan, to photograph Katsura.** Even though it was built in the Edo period, the building has had a profound influence on architects from the 20th Century onward. I am in the process of building an archive of some of the most important buildings in the pantheon of modernist architecture, which will be launched, together with my new Web site, later on this year; Katsura would definitely be the only one from the 17th Century.



*House of the Present, Allmann Sattler Wappner Architekten, 2005, Munich, Germany*

© Gordon Watkinson

I asked Gordon what else do we have to look forward to after the Bauhaus? Funny you should ask, next year will be a bit busy. I have been working on a project about Eileen Gray's villa in the South of France, E.1027, which is expected to open in late spring. I have also been working on a project about urbanism and transportation, the first part of which deals with trains and train stations. It is expected to be shown in collaboration with Deutsche Bahn in four yet-to-be-named German train stations beginning in the Fall of 2013. Finally I have a project about Rodin's monument "Burghers of Calais," which does not have an opening venue yet, but I hope to announce the dates soon. All these projects are represented by [Foto+Synthesis](#), a traveling exhibition service specialized in photography exhibitions,



I was curious to know who some of his favorite photographers were, and who or what has influenced him? I am influenced by graphic design, and painting as well as photography. Horst P. Horst, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Sophie Calle, Nick Knight, Mondrian, Andrew Wyeth, Ed Ruscha, Edward Hopper, David Carson, Neville Brody, and Saul Bass are some of my favorites. Not necessarily in that order.

Do you have an essential piece of photographic gear that you always carry with you – your “must-have” item? I don’t really carry a lot of gear, three lenses, a body, a tripod, a laptop and an audio recorder. I guess I could do without the audio recorder. All of the rest are must have items for me. And how about your essential non-photographic “must-have” item? These days, it has to be the iPhone. I can book flights, find train schedules, answer emails and texts anywhere in the world.

Bauhaus is quite a serious topic, so do you by any chance have a funniest moment or story you can recall from a photo shoot for this project, or perhaps just any good story from any photo shoot? I think that serious thing has surprised a number of my friends as well. My favorite story from the project is just before I left to open the exhibition in Frankfurt. I was about to take my daughter to her mother’s when she looked at me curiously after asking me about the exhibition and said “daddy, I don’t really like you [r]pictures”; I asked her why and she told me that I don’t photograph flowers and use more color. I think the work has grown on her since then although I am not sure how much.

As a back-up plan, and in case his daughter was on to something (just kidding!) I asked Gordon what would he do if he weren’t a photographer, and he said: I was a barman (bartender) while I was in college in Austin and New Orleans, it was an amazing job, I met people from all walks of life who immediately trusted me like a friend. There is no other job in the world with that kind of immediate bond. Sometimes I still miss that.



*Villa Tugendhat, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1930, Brno, Czech Republic  
© Gordon Watkinson/ VG Bild-Kunst*

And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? I hate to sound trite but any day I get to spend with my daughter Sophie or my stepdaughter Charlotte is my favorite. I rarely see Charlotte, who just moved from London to LA. Sophie, I see everyday that I am in NY, however at 10 she is maturing at light-speed now.
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? I am fairly limited in my television; I generally watch Bill Maher, "Mad Men", "Entourage", Chelsea Football Club, and old movies. I am not sure I have a favorite in there. Chelsea certainly moves down a bit when they are losing though!
- 3) What was the last movie your saw? I try to watch a movie or a portion of one every night, I think "Charade" was the last one.
- 4) When is your birthday? July 24, 1964. I am a Leo and a Dragon, how's that for a pain in the ass? (Well, I'm a Leo and a Horse, so you can't be that bad!)
- 5) Give me a favorite word, and why? I don't have a particular favorite, however Convergence, Subversive, and Complex are a few of my favorites.
- 6) And how about 3 words that describe your creative style? Form, Form and Form, with a bit of "storytelling" on the side!
- 7) What is your favorite music, song, or band? My favorite new band is the Kills, they remind me a lot of X (the one from LA). I will always have a soft spot for the Call who I photographed for my first school assignment, and Texas, my first paying gig. Although I think I was asked to photograph Texas more as a translator than photographer. The reporter was from London and was scared he would not understand their Glaswegian accents.
- 8) How about your favorite animal? It would have to be Homo sapiens; they seem to be the most unpredictable of the lot.
- 9) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be? I think I will stick with this one, if I am allowed.
- 10) What is your favorite food? And I like that Gordon didn't hold back for us on this one... Oooh, that depends on the day, the city and whom I am with, of course. Schnitzel in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Goulash in Hungary. Fish & Chips in London. Steak Frites with oysters in Paris. Socca with a glass of rosé in Nice, and Avgolemono Soup when I am sick. Bratwurst in Weimar and Krakow. Mexican in Dallas. BBQ in Austin... This could go on for days. (Personally, I wouldn't mind if he did.)
- 11) And your favorite color? As you can see from my previous answers, I don't really have a single favorite anything! I would have to say blue, black and any shade of cool gray. (Ironically, or not, those are the exact same colors as his Bauhaus images!)
- 12) I saved this question for last instead of my usual Oscar acceptance speech because Gordon gave me such a splendid answer! Who (dead or alive) do you admire? Not only did he tell me, but he also took it one step further by imagining it to be a very interesting dinner party with the following 12 guests, seated as follows... (He also qualified that Andrew Carnegie would only have been invited later on in his life!) So let's ponder on the kind of conversation this group might have had across the dinner table as well as the person who invited them all!  
Dr. Cornell West - John Newton - Benjamin Franklin - Sidney Poitier - Cary Grant - Audrey Hepburn, José Mourinho - Andrew Carnegie - Albert Einstein - Paul Krugman - Steve Jobs – Leonardo da Vinci

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