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Towards an Architecture of De-Materialisation: Heinrich Tessenow’s
Festspielhaus, Hellerau (1910-1912)

A few kilometres north of Dresden’s Baroque city centre lies the Garden City of Hellerau on whose north-west fringes stands the Festspielhaus, or Festival Hall. (Fig. 1) This is arguably the finest building designed by the architect Heinrich Tessenow (1876-1950) in the years immediately before the First World War. A visit here is highly rewarding for the insights it gives into the architectural expression of what is known in Germany as the Reform movement in the arts and society. The Reform movement, and Tessenow’s work in particular, has a significance today in terms of urbanism as it strove to find a more humane way of living through the form of the garden city. As far as architecture is concerned, Tessenow’s innate environmentalism, and his search for an aesthetic of flatness coupled with the concrete expression of the grid, are aspects of the legacy of modernism which are still very much with us today.

Fig. 1    Heinrich Tessenow, Festspielhaus, Hellerau, Gable end.

Hellerau is located some six kilometres north of the historic centre of Dresden, hidden away within the woodlands of the Dresdner Heide. Alighting from the tram at Post Hellerau, one initially passes trim, small-scaled terraced housing of ochre-rendered walls and steeply-pitched clay-tile roofs: one might be in an architectural hybrid of Hampstead Garden Suburb or Letchworth-cum-Bavarian village. Hellerau was masterplanned by the Munich Arts and Crafts architect Richard Riemerschmid (1868-1957), who also designed approximately one-third of its houses in this characteristic manner. (Fig. 2) In fact, the German Garden City movement styled itself on its English equivalent, and members of the Deutsche Gartenstadtgesellschaft (German Garden City Society) made frequent study visits across the Channel.¹
Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), author of *Das englische Haus*, was the architect who designed the next third of the houses in Hellerau.² And indeed walking past Muthesius’s large double villas with the bold detailing around their bay windows, one might well be in Bedford Park, or Port Sunlight. *(Fig. 3)* But turn the corner and the architectural mood changes. Here is a street *(Am Schänkenberg)* of simple, unadorned terraces of white-rendered houses with a staccato rhythm of rectangular windows and doors. *(Fig. 4)* This is the architectural language of Heinrich Tessenow: plain, functional, *sachlich*, strongly suggestive of the architecture of the *Neues Bauen* of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. Devoid of the sentimentality of Riemerschmid’s heady mix of Arts and Crafts and rustic motifs, here is something surreal, with more than a hint of De Chirico, perhaps, or the repetitive, Rationalist architecture of the Italians, of Giorgio Grassi or of Aldo Rossi.

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Tessenow’s architecture is patently different from that of Riemerschmid and Muthesius. The handling of space and detail is deft and assured, the gardens are superbly integrated with the houses, as befits a garden city, and yet the expression is somewhat aloof, and not nearly so cosy, so *gemütlich*, as that of his contemporaries. There is something supra-regional to it, something which smacks of universal concerns, far removed from the woodland idyll of its location. The oddness of Tessenow’s architecture was also apparent to the patrons of Hellerau one hundred years ago, and was the cause of a heated debate there. This explains why the site of Tessenow’s masterpiece, his one major building commission in the garden city, was successively moved away from the prestigious centre of the garden city and out to the margins.

![Terraced houses 'Am Schänkenberg, Hellerau, (1910).](image)

**Fig. 4** Heinrich Tessenow, Terraced houses ‘Am Schänkenberg, Hellerau, (1910). Marco de Michelis, Heinrich Tessenow 1876-1950: Das architektonische Gesamtwerk (Stuttgart, DVA, 1991), p.216.

The approach today is up a narrow street on the central axis of the building complex. This was requisitioned by the Red Army as a barracks when it occupied eastern Germany; it continued as such until the demise of the DDR in 1990. In its gable was the red star of the Soviet Red Army; this replaced the previous emblem – a ying-yang symbol – which had represented the ideals of the Institute for Rhythmic Education (the formal name of the complex) on the building’s completion in 1912.

The **Festspielhaus** itself is located to the north of a generous square. **(Fig. 5)** On axis straight ahead is the portico, flanked on either side by symmetrical, grey-walled wings. These wings have steeply-pitched, hipped clay-tile roofs, with dormer windows protruding at regular intervals. The bare walls each have their expanses punctuated by high-level windows, one narrow and one wide, with a rain-water pipe judiciously positioned between. The portico as a whole is set proud of the flanking wings; its four square-plan pillars are faced in natural stone and their front faces are flush with the protruding side walls which frame the entrance porch.
GRIDS AND FRAMES

It is here that the theme of the grid is encountered for the first time. The south side of the square is enclosed by a white-painted timber pergola structure, punctuated on each side by two squat, compact, square-plan houses. (Fig. 6) These have attic storeys set into their hipped, tiled roofs, with a gabled dormer window on each of the four sides. The ground floor fronts of the houses have rendered walls which are co-planar with the rear, enclosing walls of the pergola structure, while the three bays of the entrance porch provide spatial rhythm within the matrix of the pergola. The pergola motif would have been familiar to the bourgeois German at the turn of the century. Die Gartenlaube (pergola) was the title of one of the most successful magazines read by the middle class; its cover featured an iconic pergola - frequently decked out in Semperian festive mood - and it communicated bourgeois comfort before it suggested, at the start of the twentieth century, more overtly political, Reformist aims. Indeed, at mid-century the pergola motif was so popular that it was used as frontispiece decoration to many books. Tessenow’s gridded frame does not attempt to mimic natural, arboreal form; instead it is an aesthetic reduction of a trabeated structure, united with a simple ‘unconscious’ or vernacular empathy that the workman would feel with his tools and his materials. His writings, like his buildings, are themselves always simply phrased and seem never to touch on the
word architecture: this apparent circumvention of the conventional vocabulary of design, and the decision to root the discourse in a wider cultural context, recall the aphoristic and often wry tone of Adolf Loos (1870-1933). For instance, in his (undated) essay ‘Unsere Wohnung’ (Our Home) he writes:

Our home is connected with the world by countless threads, and has an immediate relationship with the greatest variety of worlds, both close at hand and far away. For instance, the wood of our floorboards or of our furniture: where did the trees grow which provided the timber, and by what means did it get transported to us? Who were the people who felled the trees and sawed the timber? Who laid the foundations of our home, who made the roof and covered it and who made the tiles? Where does the lime for our walls come from, the glass for our windows? Who wove the curtains, who grew the flax from which they are made? Who made the key for our door, how did it get to us, where is the mine in which its iron lay for many thousands of years; where will it all end?

This can be read both as a compassionate hymn to all those involved in the process of construction, and as an early call for a sustainable approach to building.


Spatial enclosure is provided to the east and west by longer blocks. These have similar attic storeys with roofs sweeping down to first floor eaves level, with a continuous ground-floor loggia. With the departure of the Red Army the square was desolate and pot-holed, but in 1912 its level surface would have been marked near each corner by a stone fountain, raised up on a pillar and resembling an urn or candelabrum, the shallow pool at its base surrounded by spare, elegant iron railings. The sensitive visitor would have been impressed by the geometric play of the layout’s regulating lines. This is the first intimation we have of Tessenow’s interest in, and fascination with, proportioning devices. Tessenow is, in fact, working in parallel with his far more famous contemporary
Peter Behrens (1868-1940). Behrens came under the sway of the Dutch architect J. L. M. Lauweriks (both men taught at the Düsseldorf Academy in 1904) who was closely associated with Hendrik Berlage (1856-1934), architect of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange (1896-1903). Lauweriks (1864-1932) was something of a mystic who believed in the almost redemptive power of geometry to renew art and architecture. Renewal during this phase of Behrens’s output meant expressing Platonic geometries of square and circle in three dimensions, with wall treatment assuming an almost Albertian stripped-down appearance. His garden designs take on the abstracted aesthetic of Josef Hoffmann’s grids beloved of the **Wiener Werkstätte**. It is this abstraction for which Tessenow developed a particular affinity, particularly in the motif of the pergola.

Tessenow was a down-to-earth architect who, with his carpenter’s training, was particularly concerned to develop his architecture as a highly refined art of building. (Fig. 7) However, the other-worldly asceticism of Lauweriks, his relentless grids and regulating lines, were adopted by Tessenow and internalized within his own architectural system (even if he was less than enthusiastic about the Dutch School’s theosophy as such). We will encounter Tessenow’s engagement with some of the aims of theosophy shortly, on entering the main hall of the **Festspielhaus**. But first, what of the architect and his background?

![Fig. 7](image)

Heinrich Tessenow was born in Rostock, an important seaport on the Baltic, in 1876. His father ran a joiner’s shop, and his training here, together with his more formal education in the building trades, gave him a deep understanding of practical crafts. Design, though, was his forte, and the realisation that he had a great aptitude for drawing encouraged him to pursue it. From 1899 onwards he attended a few seminars at the **Technische Hochschule** in Munich before launching out on a career in building and architectural education, initially in Mecklenburg. He began to get his architectural drawings published in technical journals, and through this publicity attracted the attention of Paul Schultze-Naumburg (1969-1949), the well-known architectural pundit and critic,
famous for his trenchant views on the values of Germanic vernacular design apostrophised as *Heimatstil*. In 1904 Schultze-Naumburg managed to attract Tessenow to Saaleck (near Halle) to participate in his atelier known as the *Saalecker Werkstätten*. *(Fig. 8)* Tessenow was frustrated at having to subordinate himself to his patron’s design predilections; within five months he had broken free to run – single-handedly – the architecture department of the Trier Arts and Crafts School in the Eifel, in the far west of Germany.

![Fig. 8](image.jpg)


Tessenow remained in Trier for almost five years, a period in which few projects were realised. Instead, Tessenow perfected his spare drawing technique, taught extensively at the Arts and Crafts School, and managed to have two works published, *Zimmermannsarbeiten* (“Carpentry Works”, 1907) and *Der Wohnhausbau* (“Housebuilding”, 1909). His main technical achievement in these years was his patented hybrid timber frame-cum-brickwork wall system, the so-called *Tessenow-Wand* (Tessenow-Wall). In 1909 he moved once again, this time to Dresden as assistant to the architect Martin Dülfer (1859-1942) at the *Technische Hochschule*. He had by this time already received his first commissions for architectural work in the Garden City.

The idea to establish a garden city outside Dresden was first mooted in 1906. It was largely the brainchild of two Dresdener, Karl Schmidt (1873-1948), the proprietor of a small furniture factory in Dresden, and Wolf Dohrn (1878-1914), a wealthy artistically-inclined man with a passion for good design. Schmidt decided to move his growing enterprise from Dresden out to Hellerau; a site was found on the south-western fringes of the nascent garden city and an architect too – Schmidt’s future brother-in-law Richard Riemerschmid. The factory also became Dohrn’s workplace: it was the first seat of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, the design trades’ association set up in 1907 for which he was the secretary.
Dohrn’s dream for Hellerau was to distinguish it from the purely entrepreneurial factory town model of, say, the Krupp steelworkers’ garden suburb in Essen. For this he needed a significant cultural enterprise which would ‘civilise’ the commercial imperatives of Schmidt’s *Deutsche Werkstätten* factory. He found the ideal collaborator for this in the person of the Swiss music pedagogue Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), and managed to persuade him to relocate his Geneva-based Institute for Rhythmic Education to Hellerau with the promise of a purpose-built school and performance space. Initially, Behrens himself was considered for the job (his temple-like AEG Turbine Hall in Berlin had just been completed) but within a short period the commission was offered to Tessenow. His first designs for terraced and villa houses were just being realised, and his impeccable craftwork credentials, allied with the implicit promise of lucrative timber-frame technology (the *Patentwand* having just been devised) made him seem a sound proposition to Schmidt. But it was Dohrn who really trumpeted Tessenow’s qualities and finally persuaded the great and good of Hellerau to commission him.

Dohrn saw in Tessenow something more than merely a highly competent technician, the ‘holy carpenter’ in the words of the architectural historian Julius Posener (1904-1996). Dohrn recognised that Tessenow possessed the higher level of intellectual and artistic sensibilities which made him a multi-facetted man of the Reform movement. He was thinking in particular of Tessenow’s engagement with the architectural manifestations of theosophy, his spare, unadorned design vocabulary of numinous spaces and planes. Dohrn recognized that the budding architect required a commission of the stature of the *Festspielhaus* to fully develop his aesthetic; what could be better for this objective than to bring him into contact with his fellow artist Jaques-Dalcroze who, with his eurhythmy, was attempting to translate music into dance. Dohrn was only too familiar with Goethe, having completed his thesis on *Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) a few years earlier; the promise of facilitating Tessenow’s architecture of “frozen music” (”*erstarrte Musik*”) to house Dalcroze’s music in motion (”*bewegte Musik*”, perhaps?) must have been irresistible.

What would have impressed Dalcroze about Tessenow was the architect’s humility and lack of the normal presumptions associated with the profession. Tessenow was a functionalist avant la lettre, determined to satisfy a client’s needs and not to make a false dichotomy between ‘artistic’ and ‘professional’ imperatives. In the presence of Dalcroze’s artistic and technical collaborators, above all the scenographer Adolphe Appia (1862-
1928) and the artist Alexander von Salzmann (1870-1933), he recognised that his knowledge in these areas was lacking, and fully accepted their input into the design process. Dalcroze believed in a direct translation of sound into movement: his pupils and students would ‘dance’ the musical notes. By extension, the place of musical performance should ‘resonate’ harmonically with the music; ratios should therefore govern the disposition of planes, in three dimensions, and so proportionally shape any given space. However, the dance movements were not to be random, haphazard ones; they were stylized, and the effect of the graceful, elegant dances, together with the white, archaic Greek chiton costumes, conjured up the classical world of the birth of Western civilisation. (Figs 9 and 10) So it was with the architecture. Tessenow’s austere, monochrome, temple-like exterior conjured up an orderly, refined, and cultured world of inner harmonies and outer dignity. Its stripped classicism was poised between a familiar world of allegorical significance, and a future of utopian possibilities. The interior, however, would surprise and astonish many.

Fig. 9  Dalcroze eurhythmic exercises

Fig. 10  Dalcroze, A Plastic Exercise.
On entering through the tall portico one finds oneself in a long lobby, its glazed doorsets at either end repeating the rhythm of the entrance doors. Its low ceiling is divided into rectangular bays by an even distribution of beams; in each bay hang ten milk-glass conical light fittings. (Fig. 11) The whole space is imbued with a creamy white sheen, its pale limestone floor and white-painted woodwork and ceiling countering its somewhat squat dimensions. Turning to the left (or to the right: the symmetrical layout of the building would lead one to a handed but otherwise identical space) one enters a square-plan hall with a stair winding around one and a half sides to a landing wrapping around, completing the square. Tessenow always called such spaces “stair halls” (Treppenhallen); the centredness and repose of the Festspielhaus stair halls are emphasized by a reprise of the entrance lobby light fittings, where an array of forty-nine of them (scaled up proportionally to match the increased height of the space) are arranged in a tight square grid in the centre of the ceiling. (Fig. 12)

While these arrangements of light fittings represent an obvious use of the grid motif, it is the planning of the Festspielhaus itself which is perhaps most remarkable. In his writings of some fifteen years later, when he was Professor in Berlin in the mid-1920s, Tessenow expanded on his ‘gendered’ view of spatial types. What we see in the layout of the Festspielhaus is a microcosm of Tessenow’s reading of urban space. According to Tessenow, streets are the basic building blocks of the city, together with squares; however, he ascribes masculinility to streets, and femininity to squares:

Streets distinguish themselves from squares as the masculine does from the womanly, and yet more so: There exists something akin to a vivid relationship between streets and masculinity as there is between squares and the womanly principle, so that a culture values streets more and builds more streets, the more it values masculinity, as on the other hand it builds more squares in proportion to its innate sense of primarily womanly qualities.  

The square is a figure at rest, and in this represents the feminine; the essence of the street is to be in motion, the masculine counterweight of dynamism in terms of urban form. Tessenow equates modern history, which for him, by implication, means the post-Renaissance, Enlightenment era, as bound up with notions of progress and incessant movement; in other words, as quintessentially masculine: ‘And since recent world history invests such extraordinary belief in progress, it has become increasingly a history of the masculine will, of masculine thought and work [...]’. The tone of this passage is essentialist, but decidedly feminist, in that it expresses regret for the imbalance between
the sexes and the overweening dominance of the masculine drive in the modern world. Tessenow does not spell out the urban corollary of his thinking; however, it is not hard to imagine the opprobrium with which he would have regarded Haussmannesque street planning, and his favouring the techniques of Camillo Sitte. If this passage of 1925 reflects Tessenow’s leanings of fifteen years’ earlier, it is easy to understand how well suited he must have seemed to the Hellerau commissions.

Tessenow’s eschewing the qualities of the Großstadt and espousal of those of the medium-sized town were fully in accord with the actions of a man of the Reform movement in the early 1900s. Similar to many of his like-minded contemporaries, he sought not so much to ameliorate the city as to vacate it. Hellerau Garden City was the first concrete achievement in Germany in which an organic, holistic development was proposed; one where housing, employment, and spiritual purpose were integrated. Others would grapple with dealing with the ‘evils’ of the nineteenth-century inner city. The problems of the over-dense city described by Werner Hegemann in Das steinerne Berlin would be tackled theoretically by Hans Bernouilli et al., and practically, on the ground in Berlin, by architects such as Paul Mebes and Paul Emmerich. What is significant is that their means of tackling the problems of the inner city were essentially the same ones as those employed by their colleagues in the Garden City movement, namely, to de-densify the city, by breaking up the massive and oppressive large-scale blocks of which the nineteenth-century city was overwhelmingly composed.

Tessenow’s internal planning of buildings, initially evidenced through a spate of unrealised projects in the first years of the new century and then through the building of the Festspielhaus and various housing commissions, has close affinities to the theories of Alfred Lichtwark (1852-1914), Director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle. In his book Palastfenster und Flügeltür (Palace Windows and Folding Doors, 1899) he argued for an ‘English’ domestic layout, one which banishes enfilade planning (hence the title) and establishes the convenient plan as more important than a palatial facade. The public spaces of the Festspielhaus, however, the sequences through which the visitors enter the building and walk through to find their way to their seats, are all accomplished without recourse to any corridor spaces. The internal planning is remarkably concise: from the public’s point of view one is led to one’s seat in the auditorium having walked a minimum distance. The walk itself, however, becomes one of the most effective promenades architecturales ever experienced. It is a subtle play of rhythmic space in three dimensions, achieved with a minimum of bombast and a virtual denial of
architectural rhetoric. What is more, it achieves all this by means of the repose of the ‘femininity’ of the ‘hall’ type space, as opposed to the imputed masculinility of the corridor.

Domestic and monumental spaces are also denoted by means of scale differences. In the Festspielhaus there is a curiously simple rhythm of scales (brought about essentially by varying ceiling heights) – entrance porch: large/ entrance lobby: small/ staircase: large/ side lobby: small/ performance space: large - which the visitor experiences by walking through the building from the entrance lobby into the performance room itself. This consistent see-sawing of scales disorients the visitor as to exactly what scale of space he or she will finally expect.

Tessenow’s gendered view of space, as we have already pointed out, was that ‘[s]treets distinguish themselves from squares as the masculine does from the womanly’. Transposing these observations about urban design to the scale of a building, how did he achieve good internal planning which both privileges the ‘square’ over the ‘street’, while still following Alfred Lichtwark’s strictures against enfilade planning? (Lichtwark was keen that continental Europe adopt ‘English’ planning principles of corridors connecting differently-functioning rooms, for reasons both of propriety - increased observation of privacy - and of economising on interruptions - by doors - in the peripheral walls of rooms.) In institutional buildings such as the Festspielhaus, public circulation is arranged by juxtaposing differently sized rectangular spaces, with a supporting network of ancillary corridors which do not, however, ‘figure’ because of their service nature. In private houses, the circulation is planned centrally and extremely economically, and the staircase volume (‘Treppenhalle’) is afforded special attention that enables it to be read as a ‘square’, with all its connotations of the feminine. In this way, Tessenow achieved the planning economy and propriety called for by Lichtwark, but not at the expense of the humanity and ‘feminine’ repose of a plan of juxtaposed and interlinked volumes.

We need to remember that the *Festspielhaus* only functioned as a festival hall intermittently; on a daily basis it was a working school for eurhythmic education (indeed its name was formally the Dalcroze Institute for Rhythmic Education). Advanced – and alternative – pedagogy was one feature which characterized the Reform movement in the first decade of the twentieth century. Another was the emphasis it placed on hygiene in its various manifestations, so beyond the main spaces on the left-hand side there are the mens’ showers leading directly outside to the external courtyards dedicated to external sunbathing and exercise (the *Licht- und Luftbäder*), with identical facilities for women on the right-hand side.

Back in the stair hall one turns to the left and passes beneath the balcony (through another low-ceilinged space with three columns down its length: lavatories are located alongside this ante-space) and emerges into a long hall with five lay-lights set into its flat ceiling. Two doorways to the right lead off into the final destination of this ground-floor architectural promenade, into the main performance hall itself. The alternative route is via the upper landing. This leads to a gallery with the same shape as the entrance foyer beneath. (Fig. 13)
The performance space is where Tessenow had so much to learn from Dalcroze’s technical and artistic advisors, Appia and von Salzmann. Appia insisted on a space which would do away with the usual distinction between performers and audience: in other words, the proscenium opening separating the two zones had to be abolished. Instead, we find ourselves in a simple rectangular box. In its ‘school’ mode the students felt themselves to be at the centre of a democratic space, and when there were staged performances they felt they shared this space with the audience, as if the public had been specially invited in to participate in their ‘mystic’ rites. Instead of elaborately painted scenery – flats flown in from a tall fly-tower above, and realistic props - Appia designed...
simple, moveable block-like podia covered in brown fabric. (Fig. 14) Tessenow immediately intuited that his version of a formally reductive classicism fitted this scenographic vision perfectly, and Appia’s exquisite, shadowed pencil drawings uncannily evoke the quiet presence of Tessenow’s architecture. (Fig. 15) The illusion was completed by locating the musicians in a pit below floor level, out of sight of the audience, who would be seated in raking rows sloping up to the first floor gallery.

The Festspielhaus great hall is one of the first performance spaces to unite performers and audience spatially (Tessenow would have been aware of the Arts Theatre, Munich designed by Max Littmann (1862-1931) and completed in 1908), but what would have astonished the visitor in 1912 was its lighting, and the way space, to borrow Le Corbusier’s words, is ‘revealed in light’. You would have entered a bare, luminous, box-like space, and taken your seat. All four wall surfaces, and the entire ceiling above, would have cast a uniform, white light, soft and constant, shining from behind. The music begins and the light slowly disappears, leaving you sitting in pitch black. Then on come spotlights, hidden from view, white (and sometimes coloured), the
scene is revealed and this time the podium blocks and the performers are seen in sharp relief, as their cast shadows model them in three dimensions.

FLATNESS

The Festspielhaus embodies one further architectural feature that was emblematic of much advanced architecture in the new century: flatness. What makes this building so fascinating is the combination of an aesthetic of flatness, and its concomitant validation of surface, with the flatness inherent in the shallow stage. In Tessenow’s buildings, extended planar expanses of walls invariably emphasise block, cuboid form. Openings in the wall surface, be they windows or doors, are always discrete, and relatively small in proportion to the overall superficial area. Indeed, Tessenow devotes a whole section of his book Hausbau und dergleichen (“Housebuilding and Such Matters”, 1928) to a study of appropriate means of making openings in walls. The opening is always subservient to the wall plane itself, and the three-dimensional cubistic nature of the overall building volume is emphasised by the continuity of surface around corners. In this way Tessenow’s architecture differs from the Jugendstil aesthetic of, say, Josef Hoffmann (1870-1956). In Hoffmann’s Stoclet House, Brussels (1904-1911), each surface of the white marble cladding reads distinctly as a facet of the prismatic volume of which the building is composed. This is achieved by means of a gilded metal ‘braiding’, which serves to frame each plane, distinguishing each one from its immediate neighbour. Such an overtly aestheticising role of the surface tending to dematerialise the sense of volume is anathema to Tessenow for whom ‘style’ is an intrinsic product of three-dimensional massing.

In contrast to Josef Hoffmann and Otto Wagner (1841-1918), with their overt display of surface claddings (and in the case of Wagner, of tectonic expression too), Tessenow seeks to render his buildings as unarticulated volumes, privileging the eidetic image over tectonic and superficial expression. In this sense his buildings resist the commodification that is the ineluctable consequence of an aesthetic decision to promote cladding. The reason is simple: when one sees a building which has an obviously clad surface, one realises that the decision to use this cladding as opposed to that one is a relatively subjective one, so that to a great extent the external ‘wrapping’ of the building (its Stilhülse, to use Werner Oechslin’s term) may be changed at will, leaving the essence of the building, its Kern, untouched. Tessenow’s aesthetic, like that of his contemporary
Behrens, never allows this dichotomy: his buildings have an apparent solidity reinforcing an Idealist reading of the architectural object.

The other, spatial, meaning of flatness was to be found in the tendency for the stage to become ever more shallow, with changes in scenography which favoured the steady demise of the side and back-stages and fly-tower. This went hand in hand with the development of the cinema (the flat performance space in extremis) in the early decades of the twentieth century. There is not space here to chart the development of this characteristic building type of the last century; suffice it to say that it had its genesis in a variety of types, ranging from theatre, music hall, fairground attraction, and diorama. In fact up until about 1910 one can barely talk of the cinema as a building type at all: films were shown in a variety of makeshift spaces. Immediately prior to the First World War, however, the cinema as a distinct building type had begun to emerge. Modelled on the proscenium arch theatre, it clearly had no need of a deep stage. In this sense the flat relief stage of the Festspielhaus Hellerau prefigured the architectural space of the cinema auditorium.

The shallow stage space of Tessenow’s Festspielhaus is an example of spatial flatness that relates to the surface planarity of Jugendstil and Art Nouveau aesthetics. It is also an instance of abstraction at work in the conception of interior space. This abstraction, at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century in Germany, can only properly be understood in contrast to its polar opposite, empathy. The protagonists of the theoretical debate were the sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand (1847-1921) representing empathy, and the art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), championing abstraction. Light, and most particularly the way in which it models space through the play of shadows, begins to stand for the quality of abstraction which theorists and architects were then groping their way towards. (Of course, this may be regarded as a reprise of the mysticism of light which played such a central role in European medieval ecclesiastical architecture.) In Tessenow’s case, the luminous interior, especially in the bodiless, weightless and ethereal Festspielhaus auditorium, may be related to Worringer’s Abstraction and Empathy (Abstraktion und Einfühlung) text of 1908.

When faced with the commission for the Dalcroze Institute, together with its auditorium space, Tessenow the pragmatist looked not only to his own experience in Dülfer’s office, but also to contemporaneous practice in Germany, notably the prodigious output of Littmann, renowned for his string of theatre designs. Tessenow the idealist,
however, was alive to the abstract impulse put into print by Worringer two years earlier, and responded with a balance of judgment remarkable for its boldness. Tessenow, while taking on many of Littmann’s innovations for Munich, jettisoned the empathy baggage when it came to the interior space and conceived of it much more abstractly. Interestingly, the sequence of foyer spaces and stair-halls while abstract in a decorative and planar sense, evokes great corporeal swellings and attenuations in the ebb and flow of its spaces, almost Baroque in effect.

The main hall of Tessenow’s *Festspielhaus* is superior to any theatrical auditorium devised by Littmann by virtue of its modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* uniting formal abstraction with artificial lighting. Alexander von Salzmann’s great achievement, in collaboration with Tessenow, was to devise a lighting strategy of striking simplicity; Tessenow’s ingenuity lay in interpreting this and bringing it into technical and artistic harmony with the design of the space. The walls and underside of the timber roof construction were lined with two layers of waxed cotton material, the horizontal ceiling sections being supported by lightweight timber frames to hold them taut and prevent sagging. They were positioned one metre apart, with three thousand light bulbs supported at regular intervals on metal poles set in the space between. (Fig. 16) These were wired back to a central console, and switched so that the light could be ‘played’ on a kind of light organ.

![Fig. 16](image-url)  
Alexander von Salzmann, Patented lighting system, (1913).

The reviews were ecstatic: ‘I never saw a room so exclusively boxed-in and therefore almost naked. In itself it’s nothing; it is merely a protective envelope warding off anything which might disturb, distract or mislead. And, above all, [...] it is a dispenser of light [...].’ Tessenow took the idea of the cyclorama which had just been developed around the turn of the century and turned it into the planes which defined the performance space itself. It was both a great technical achievement as well as an aesthetic one, in that the limits of interior décor, or style, were being severely tested. In this, Tessenow was responsible for an architecture every bit as advanced as that of his contemporary in Vienna, Adolf Loos, with his banishment of decoration from the architectural firmament. 

To quote Appia again,

Tessenow understood in a really ingenious manner that the architecture of the building had to take second place to the life that you would want to create within. He understood that the style of the institute resides in the absolute tranquility and elegant restraint of each line and of each surface, because these lines and these surfaces need to respond to the requirements of life and especially of the [bodily] movements which it is required to limit and to envelop [...] the visitors have never known before a materialisation so ‘material’ of light, nor such an ‘immaterial’ materialisation. Salzmann’s diffuse light literally fills the space, materially and spiritually.

The building is one of the most important precursors of modernism of the first decade of the twentieth century, and deserves to be seen in the same light as, say, Behrens’s AEG building in Berlin or Loos’s Haus am Michaeler Platz in Vienna. The building exterior has been carefully restored, as have the entrance foyer and staircases. When you next visit eastern Germany be sure to pay your respects, as the great poet Rilke did in 1913. (Fig. 17) His poem ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’ (1907) might have been written with Tessenow’s Festspielhaus in mind, with its rallying call for petrified forms to turn luminescent, and for reform in all its manifestations:

We never knew his legendary head
nor saw the eyes set there like apples ripening.
But the bright torso, as a lamp turned low
still shines, still sees. For how else could the hard
contour of his breast so blind you? How could
a smile start in the turning thighs and settle
on the parts which made his progeny?
This marble otherwise would stand defaced
beneath the shoulders and their lucid fall;
and would not take the light
like panther-skin; and would not radiate
and would not break from all its surfaces
as does a star. There is no part of him
that does not see you. You must change your life.\textsuperscript{19}

G Adler April 2008

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Fig. 17 Lucian Bernhard, Poster for the Festspiele Hellerau, (1913).
NOTES

This article draws on my doctoral dissertation Tessenow in Hellerau: The Materialisation of Space (Canterbury, University of Kent, 2004), PhD Diss. I am indebted to the fine monograph on Tessenow by Marco De Michels, Heinrich Tessenow 1876-1950: Das Gesamtwerk (Stuttgart: DVA, 1991) for many of the facts pertaining to Tessenow and Hellerau, and in inspiring me to uncover more of the cultural, theoretical and technical background to his work.

1 See Kristiana Hartmann, Deutsche Gartenstadtbewegung (Munich: Heinz Moos, 1976).

2 Hermann Muthesius, Das englische Haus (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1904-1905), 3 vols. The English House was particularly influential in popularizing English domestic Arts and Crafts on the Continent.


4 Key works by Behrens from this period are his exhibition pavilions for the Northwest German Art Exhibition, Oldenburg (1904-05) and the International Art and Garden Exhibition, Mannheim (1906-07).

5 Tessenow, Geschriebenes, pp.64-65.

6 Tessenow, Geschriebenes, p.65.

7 Camillo Sitte, Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen (Braunschweig and Wiesbaden: Vieweg, 1983), originally published 1909.


12 Peter Hall states that there were already 2280 cinemas in Germany by 1919; between 1911 and 1919 Berlin’s ‘West End’ around the Tauentzienstrasse and the Kurfürstendamm the great cinemas such as the Marmorhaus, Capitol, Gloria-Palast, Ufa-Palast and Rialto were all opened. Peter Hall, Cities in Civilization, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p.255.

13 Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie (Munich, 1908), reprinted Amsterdam: Verlag der Kunst, 1996. Worringer’s book was originally published as Abstraktion und Einfühlung (Neuwied: Heuser’sche Verlagsdruckerei, 1907). Juliet Koss’s excellent study of the theme of abstraction and empathy, exemplified by the work of Max Littmann at the Munich Künstlertheater, is developed in depth in her doctoral dissertation, Empathy

14 The cinema, through its episodic and montage method of composition and through its viewers’ kinaesthetic observation, allies itself far more to the theory of empathy than to any mooted abstraction. Modernism, with its emblematic theory of abstraction, is curiously dissociated from the ‘modern’ aesthetic of the masses par excellence, the cinema. The narrative art of the cinema, implicit in its essentially sequential nature of one frame following another, is allied to the figuration that comes with the close-up focus afforded to the expressive faces of film-actors. Equally, the compositions of the early cinema, based inevitably on human narratives, are anything but grand abstractions. In the case of the dualism offered by empathy and abstraction, Worringer proceeds to offer a rational critique of von Hildebrand’s position. In privileging far vision over the near, the urge to visual flatness should triumph over three-dimensional corporeality, and hence abstraction (the power of the mind) over empathy (the body ‘feeling-into’ the artwork).

15 See Stanford Anderson, Peter Behrens and a New Architecture for the Twentieth Century, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002), pp. 5-25. Of interest is his chart which presents the spectrum of aesthetic sensibilities spanning between the poles of empathy and abstraction. Anderson terms the former practitioners ‘patheticists’, the latter ‘idealists’.


17 Appia, Oeuvres Complètes, pp. 97-98 and 109-110.

18 Restoration of the interior (staircases and foyers) was carried out in 1997-98 by Fabian Zimmermann of 4D Architekten, Berlin. In 2000 the Munich architects Meier-Scupin & Petzet won the competition for the next phase of development and refurbishment of the buildings.

19 Rainer Maria Rilke, Rilke Neue Gedichte: New Poems (introduction by John Bayley), (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), translation by Stephen Cohn. Originally published in Rainer Maria Rilke, Neue Gedichte (Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1907).