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A microhistory of architecture historical imagination and the Bauhaus

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we develop the notion of historical imagination as a methodological practice in microhistory. The relevance of microhistory for organization research goes beyond the focus on the small scale, as its methods involve tracing the sources that allow us to reconstruct lived experience. We use the Bauhaus School as a case study to illustrate how microhistorical methods and historical imagination can reconstruct the perception and impact of a novel design aesthetic in their historical context. Here we draw on ego-documents as key to historical imagination and define a related type of source, alter-documents, that report on how others are experienced by the self. By bringing historical imagination to microhistory, we introduce methodological rigor and reflexivity to the approach. Our study also contributes to a better understanding of the methodological practice of narrative construction through historical imagination and demonstrates its usefulness for understanding the aesthetic experience of architecture and space in the past.

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aesthetics; understanding

1. Introduction

How to study architecture and the experience of spaces with historical methods in organizational research? We propose that the combinations of microhistory and historical imagination provide us with the epistemological and methodological framework to reconstruct the experience of new and innovative aesthetic artifacts. When it comes to the study of architecture, this experience is certainly shaped by the sensory encounter with visual, material and spatial forms, which can offer unique insights into the understanding of organizations and organizing through the aesthetic knowledge that this encounter produces (Strati 1992, 1996). However, how to research past aesthetic encounters with architecture in their historical context, and how these encounters affected organizing in the past, is problematic as it cannot be observed directly, but requires imagining others' mental states and sensory experiences of architectures in the past. This problem requires nuanced

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methodological tools and perspectives, in order to ensure both the rigor and the ‘conceptual leap’ (Klag and Langley 2013) that are needed to reconstruct others’ experiences and mental states, both at the microlevel and historically. Microhistorical practices such as tracing sources across archives (Ginzburg and Poni 1991) enable us to comprehend better the impact of novel ideas in their historical context. Here, we also highlight the role of historical imagination as an underappreciated practice in historical and microhistorical research, which could help illuminate the impact of architectures and space on organizations and organizing precisely by offering a methodological cue into their aesthetic experience in the past. Through a worked example of a historical narrative, following the model established by Rowlinson, Decker, and Hassard (2023), we reimagine the history of the Bauhaus School through its buildings, drawing on a synthesis of the historiography and historical sources in which observers in the past sought to frame their experiences in words and images.

Understanding innovative and creative organizations like the Bauhaus School requires imagination in order to appreciate how the emotional and symbolic contents of the new aesthetics and design spearheaded by the Bauhaus were perceived at the time (Verganti 2008). The wide-ranging influence of the Bauhaus movement on industry, advertising and design continues into the 21st century. Steve Jobs’ approach to designing Apple computers and consumer electronics such as the iPods and iPhones has been linked to the Bauhaus design principles (Cain 2017; Weber 2020). Technological innovations do not necessarily lead to the superior solution being successful (Cowan 1991; Liebowitz and Margolis 1995), highlighting the importance of how stakeholders and consumers perceive and experience innovation, which is frequently mediated through design (Verganti 2009). Therefore, designing artifacts that connect with people’s sense of aesthetics and identity is a crucial organizational capability. The Bauhaus School was one of the first organizations to consciously address these questions through the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ‘total work of art’.

The history of the Bauhaus School can serve as an illustrative methodological case of the role of historical imagination in narrative construction (Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker 2014). The notion of imagination is often maligned as fanciful and rarely considered in methods texts, whereas it is key to delving into the lived experience of individuals in organizations (Kostera 2020; Puyou et al. 2012). Yet historians have long argued in favor of structured imagination, and microhistorians have extensively relied on it to interpret their sources (Darnton 1985; Zemon Davis 1983). We specifically consider the notion of ego-documents, sources that reveal personal experience as the basis for the historical imagination of individual cognitive and affective states, or what Dilthey (2002) considered ‘*verstehen*’, understanding of other people’s experiences rather than explaining past events. We also define a related type of source, alter-documents, that report on the ‘other’ against which the historical self defines itself. By drawing on the Bauhaus case, we show the relevance of historical imagination as a microhistorical research method for exploring the past lived experience of innovative design, providing the methodological rigor and conceptual leap needed to imagine this experience in its historical context, thereby reconstructing aesthetic knowledge

and how it spread over time and space across a number of materials and design artifacts.

2. Microhistory in history and organization studies

2.1. *Microhistory in organization studies*

In one of the earlier uses of the term microhistory, Hargadon (2015) equated the practice with grounded theorizing and drew on primarily qualitative research templates such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Eisenhardt (1989). The focus on participants' experiences within their own time also necessitated a justification of the small-scale nature of studies primarily concerned with the experience of individuals. In a more recent reflection on the role of theory, Hargadon and Daniel Wadhwani (2022, 684) commented on this 'spatialization' of the micro as one of the levels of analysis commonly understood as an individual unit within a wider population. They expand the notion of the micro into temporality: 'actions observed at the pace of lived experience from their enduring consequences observed only retrospectively over long periods of time.' Levi (2012), a leading microhistorian, always emphasized that the *micro* of microhistory was never intended to refer to the small scale in the sense of small-n studies, or singular cases. Instead, the micro was meant to be understood as an analogy of the microscope, implying a focus on details in clearly delineated settings. Its purpose was to observe these microscopic details over time to better understand the nature of long-run historical processes on a much larger scale (Decker 2015).

In this, microhistorical approaches embraced the unique and the particular without abandoning the task of generalizing their insights into concepts and theories that retain their historical cognizance (Kipping and Üsdiken 2014). Microhistorians do this through temporal distance (Decker 2022) that preserves the unique and unrepeatable character of the past without abandoning the pursuit of conceptual and theoretical questions that are relevant to the present-day researcher. The methodological framing of the 'exceptional normal' (Grendi 1977) is an especially useful approach to generalize from historical cases. Levi (2012, 128) considered it as the ability to generalize from particular cases by emphasizing the 'absolutely unrepeatable nature of an event.' Therefore, historians have defined the exceptional normal as a way of enabling comparison and generalization (the normal) without challenging the epistemological foundation of the discipline that all past events are unique (the exceptional).

Organization scholars have, in contrast, engaged with the exceptional normal as a means to generalize from historical data. In seeking to theorize based on the exceptional normal, Hargadon and Daniel Wadhwani (2022, 686) argued that 'microhistory's value in management research lies not in its microscopic attention to lived experience alone, but rather in its ability to reconcile the relationship between that lived experience and the macroscopic view of its context and consequences over time.' They highlight that the dual lenses of microhistory balance the theoretical position of researchers with the lived experience of historical actors (Decker 2015; Ginzburg 2013). Identifying two levels of generalization, Hargadon and Daniel Wadhwani (2022) distinguish 'substantive theory', which is an empirically-oriented explanation of the case(s) studied, from 'formal theory',

which generalizes beyond the case by ‘identifying a plot structure or configuration that holds together context, action, and consequences in ways that produce a novel explanation for continuity and change’ (Hargadon and Daniel Wadhwani 2022, 688).

Yet the potential of microhistory also lies in its focus on the lived experience of historical agents, which offers us an opportunity to study more interior processes: visceral experience, identity and aesthetic appreciation. The impact and importance of interiority are often only revealed in hindsight, making microhistorical methods better suited to understanding and theorizing from the experience and the impact of the exceptional, thus providing insights into organizational creativity, innovation and aesthetics.

Moreover, microhistory has engendered a fruitful debate in critical management and organizational history, especially in relation to ANTi-history (Lugar et al. 2020). While ANTi-history engages with actor-network theory (Durepos and Mills 2012; Latour 2005) and views history as the outcome of actor-networks, microhistory is more concerned with the perceptions of often marginalized people and communities (Magnússon and Szijártó 2013). They share a critical stance toward grand historical narratives and the absence of the individual in organization studies, which has developed in a composite approach of ANTi-microhistory (Deal 2022; Horner, Holland, and Novicevic 2023).

2.2. *Microhistory in history*

Microhistory has been widely discussed within history, from its inception as a new approach to its more contemporary forms (Iggers 2005). As a methodological practice, its treatment of sources was particularly influential (Rahikainen and Susanna 2012), such as consulting different types of sources and tracing them across various archives (Ginzburg and Poni 1991). This practice highlights that what appears to be a narrowly bounded, very detailed and small-in-scale study can simultaneously require the intense search for evidence and scrutiny of a detective (Ginzburg 1989). These methodological aspects are rarely fully appreciated in organization studies, which continue to prefer narrowly bounded and relatively consistent sources such as internal report series or company magazines (Anteby and Molnár 2012; Heller and Rowlinson 2020) over the more eclectic and creative collection of sources compiled in historical publications (Lubinski 2022).

This issue of scale was directly linked to the criticisms of the Annales School’s approach to generalization by early microhistorians, who maintained that the particular should remain non-reducible. This implied not reducing individuals and their relationships to abstract constructs, which mid-20th century social history did in its attempt to quantify historical trends and relationships. Nevertheless, microhistorians did not seek to abandon generalization from unique and, by definition, non-repeatable events but interpreted the ‘exceptional normal’ (Carlo, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993; Grendi 1977) as an opportunity to consider anomalous and unique cases within their multiple contexts (see also Gibbs et al. in this issue).

Microhistorians affirmed the ‘absolutely unrepeatable nature of an event while at the same time retaining the possibility of generalizing from particular cases’ (Levi 2012, 128) by balancing close attention to the past, the sources and the historical individuals with the concepts and present-day understanding of the researcher (Ginzburg 2012). Here, temporal distance (Decker 2022) becomes central to the interpretive effort to understand past

events and people and consider them in their historical and temporal context as much as in conceptual or theoretical terms relevant to the present. This type of contextualized research (Welch et al. 2022) seeks to understand broader yet bounded contexts by focusing on small and intimate settings, therefore challenging overly generalized and hegemonic conceptions of theorizations that privilege specific regions and knowledge systems in the world (Boussebaa 2023).

Microhistorical approaches have particularly favored ego-documents in their practice (see also Decker 2015; Lepore 2001). Tinning and Lubinski (2022, 167) define ego-documents as ‘seeing together’ different types of sources that ‘reveal the historical self as a thinking and feeling being in the world [...] or unveil the impact of social norms and relationships on the historical self’. They draw on Dutch and German historiography, which expanded the definition of ego-documents to include involuntary self-disclosures and explicitly considered that individual experiences are shaped by socially held interpretations and norms (Schulze 1996). Such ego-documents go beyond the textual and narrative to include audio-visual and material sources. Within history, they discuss how scholars can research historical actors’ subjective lived experiences and to understand what is meaningful, pleasing, or hurtful to them in their own time (the ‘experiencing ego’) or how social constraints impact the life and experiences of the ‘coping ego’ in the past (Tinning and Lubinski 2022, 180).

Engaging with the extensive ego-documents related to the Bauhaus, we also began engaging with a different but related type of source, which we named alter-documents. *Alter*, which is Latin for *other*, refers to the perception of audiences and bystanders, who effectively engage in forms of social evaluation. Alter-documents obscure the self or *ego* of these documents, which is impacted by the activities of the existence of the other. Thus, alter-documents can be seen as a form of creating the *other* (Said 1979) as a foil or the imagined opposite of the self that created the source. Thus they are ego-documents by stealth, but due to their other-orientation provide a richer context of how audiences reacted to aesthetic innovations.

2.3. Historical imagination

Focusing on the individualized experience of conditions in the past meant that micro-historical research, in particular, requires imagination and empathy. Here, imagining practices relate to making visual or mental images, linking different forms of expression and communication, and cutting across conventional historical boundaries (Quattrone 2009). Early microhistorians were often challenged over the factuality of their accounts and the relationship between the historical imagination and the evidence (Burke 1991; Iggers 2005; LaCapra 1985). Discussions of the role of imagination in historical research date back to Collingwood (1946), a leading philosopher of history, who dedicated one chapter of his *The Idea of History* to the subject of the historical imagination. He considered imagination a necessity because the object of historical enquiry no longer exists and, therefore, requires a form of remote sensing (Gaddis 2002, 242). Indeed, Collingwood (1946, 242) considers imagination as central to historical practice: ‘its special task [is] to imagine the past: not an object of possible perception, since it does not now exist, but able through this activity to become an object of our thought.’

Key to this imagination is the relationship to evidence, to peg such imagination to reality and data. Yet Collingwood's notion of evidence emphasizes critical evaluation. Much like microhistorians like Ginzburg, he compared this combination of historical imagination with critical thinking to the detective, who 'is thinking exactly like a historian when, from indications of the most varied kinds, he constructs an imaginary picture of how a crime was committed, and by whom' (Collingwood 1946, 243, 245–46). He highlights four criteria for constructing rigorous narratives resulting from the exercise of historical imagination: (1) that the resultant narrative needs to make sense and be continuous as well as coherent; (2) that the account is localized in time and space; (3) that it remains consistent with other historical accounts, even if this is at the basic level of topographical and chronological detail; and (4) that it is based on evidence.

These criteria overlap to some extent with Gil, Gill and Roulet's (2018) standards for trustworthy narratives, which are based on Lincoln and Guba (1985). The differences between the two highlight that historical rigor places a stronger emphasis on specificity (criterion 2) and is less concerned with transferability. Collingwood also positions the creation of narratives as the result of exercising historical imagination, and narrative construction as the means of grounding the interpretation of sources. While trustworthiness is an important concern, 'historiographical reflexivity' (Decker, Hassard, and Rowlinson 2021) leads to deeper engagement with history as a source of methodological innovation such as historical imagination.

Collingwood was by no means alone among historical theorists in considering imagination as a central component of historical thought. White (1973) famously introduced the notion of *emplotting* historical narrative with tragedy, irony, comedy and romance in his analysis of the historical imagination in 19th-century historiography. Indeed, even heavily empiricist historians such as Geoffrey Elton exhorted that 'imagination controlled by learning and scholarship, learning and scholarship rendered meaningful by imagination – these are the tools of enquiry possessed by the historian' (Elton 1967). Therefore, historical imagination challenges the idea that imagination is always fictitious – constructing evidence of the past requires both understanding and imagination (e.g. Quattrone 2015). Reading sources imaginatively, with curiosity and empathy, has been a hallmark of microhistorical practice. Zemon Davis's (1983) *The Return of Martin Guerre* was both praised and criticized for this; her interest in women's identities and their self-fashioning led her to employ more speculative methods to imagine the experiences of those sidelined and forgotten by history (Pooley 2024).

Imagination may be used to interpolate between pieces of information, especially where there are gaps in the sources, and this interpolation may be mostly mundane and every day. For example, in an archive, the researcher may find a letter sent from Spain and a later letter by the same person from Belgium – the author of those letters must have traveled in the intervening period. Imagination may also be in aid of interpretation, assessing the plausibility of evidence to make sources speak (Little 1983). Another well-known historian, Trevor-Roper, highlighted that historical imagination is also required to envisage possibilities other than those that occurred, or in Stoler's terms, nonevents (Stoler 2009; Trevor-Roper 1980). Historians should consider the choices open to historical individuals and, therefore, restore to the past its lost uncertainties and anxieties. All these mental processes involve historians putting themselves in another's shoes.

Collingwood (1946, 242) refers to this as ‘a priori’ imagination, a ‘web of imaginative construction stretched between [...] the statements’ of the sources which he presents as inherent in any form of historical thinking. C. Wright Mills (2000) in his work on *The Sociological Imagination* similarly argues in favor of considering history and an understanding of the individual through biography and psychology as inherently sociological tasks without which an understanding of society would be meaningless. More recently, psychologists have studied this imaginative capacity under the label of *theory of mind*, defined as ‘the human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires and that these may differ from one’s own beliefs and desires’ (Kidd and Castano 2013). Perhaps the best-known conceptualization is Dilthey’s (2002) notion of *verstehen*, understanding the life worlds of people who lived very different lives in the past. He illustrates his notion of understanding as reexperiencing past events through reading the letters and writings of Luther, thus transcending the limitations of individuals’ more limited life experiences. His example of Luther’s records here is particularly interesting, as these can be characterized as ego-documents, suggesting that certain types of sources are clearly more amenable to the empathetic historical imagination. He characterizes this type of understanding as an important methodological achievement because the past appears strange and irrelevant: ‘To a human being caught up in daily life, the past seems at first the more foreign and indifferent the more distant it is. Its remains lie there as something whose connection to us has been broken’ 26 October 2024 11:03:00.

Dilthey’s conception of the past as distant and disconnected from the present is a historically conditioned view that gave rise to the study of history as opposed to the notion of memory as a more continuous integration of the past into the present (Decker 2015; Decker, Hassard, and Rowlinson 2021). Considering the past as different and fundamentally alien to present-day researchers is also fundamental to microhistorical research. Ginzburg (2012), for example, reflected on the need to consider the *emic* or historical participants’ perspective as part of any meaningful microhistorical practice. Nevertheless, the foreignness of the past also creates the role of the historical researcher as a detective (Ginzburg 1989), even a tour guide, to foreign shores, bridging the temporal distance between the past and the present (Decker 2022). A microhistory therefore needs to combine the ‘emic’ perspective with a present-centered, more conceptual or theoretical *etic* explanation of the past that renders it intelligible (Ginzburg 2012). For

Table 1. The historical imagination as a methodological practice in Microhistory.

Methodological practice	Explanation
1. Interpolation	Logically connect different pieces of evidence, including filling relatively small gaps in non-continuous information
2. Interpretation	Assessing the plausibility of evidence; considering people, events and choices in their temporal context
3. Understanding	“Walking in their shoes”, bridging the past and present, rendering the strange familiar through empathy, imposing familiar interpretive schemas on the account
Criteria for rigorous narrative construction	
1. The narrative makes sense, is continuous and coherent	
2. The narrative is localized in time and space	
3. The narrative is consistent with other historical accounts	
4. The narrative is based on evidence	

Source: The Authors.

Collingwood, this is achieved through the construction of historical narratives, and he offers clear standards as to how this should be achieved. An etic perception can also consist of conceptual considerations, though for microhistorians the autonomy of past experience would always hold primacy over theoretical accounts.

In Table 1, we summarize our prior discussions of the role of historical imagination. Structured imagination consists of three key methodological practices. The most basic is *interpolation*, which pieces together non-continuous information. *Interpretation* is important in assessing the plausibility of evidence in the context of existing information and in developing the temporal context of the past. Finally, *understanding* is a cognitive and affective act that seeks to bridge the past and present, imposing concepts and tropes on the emerging narrative that render unfamiliar settings less strange.

Closely linked to these practices are the criteria concerned with rigorous narrative construction, which we draw from Collingwood's work. While in many ways similar to validity considerations in qualitative research such as confirmability, credibility and dependability overlap (Lincoln and Guba 1985; see also Guba 1981), Collingwood's approach to rigorous narrative constructions requires consilience, i.e. the most concise explanation of the most data (Whewell 1840). Consilience is effectively the mirror image of theoretical parsimony, which seeks the simplest explanation over more complex ones. Consistency with existing historiography does not refer to agreement, but rather to the close engagement with evidence, arguments and interpretation, which may be challenged by another account – as is commonly the case in historiography. Taken together, the four criteria go some way to explain why historical narratives are specific, complex and heavily footnoted (Grafton 1997).

Interpretation and understanding are primarily employed in narrative construction to develop substantive theory. Abend (2008) considers this as one of several types of theory: an explanation of particular social phenomena, events or outcomes. Microhistorians have considered their often intimate and small-scale settings transferable to their broader historical contexts, be that market or gender relations (Levi 1988; Zemon Davis 1983). This contextualized explanation provides a different understanding of the relevance of theory for understanding social and organizational processes (Welch et al. 2022).

A microhistorical approach infused with historical imagination combines both the methodological rigor and the 'conceptual leap' (Klag and Langley 2013, 149) that are needed to offer a narrative of the past delving into the lived experience of individuals, including their sensory experience of architectural and spatial forms. This is particularly helpful for organization research on architecture and space, given the aesthetic knowledge that they can trigger (Taylor and Hansen 2005). Indeed, the aesthetic appreciation of material and visual forms can certainly affect organizational practices and ethical judgments (see, e.g. Strati 2020 in relation to responsible management), offering relevant cues into the history of organizations.

In the following narrative, we will focus specifically on the practices of *understanding* and the imposition of explanatory concepts on the narrative to render a substantive historical theory familiar to its readers.

3. The Bauhaus and its school buildings

Understanding the Bauhaus movement through the school buildings it inhabited and created allows organizational historians to understand how the members and stakeholders of an organization responded to the challenges of a radically new and innovative approach to aesthetics and architecture. We draw on events in the history of the school buildings (from library and digital resources) and visual and narrative accounts of people's lives inside the buildings as our ego-documents for delving into lived experience. Our historical imagination focuses on the spaces of the school buildings between 1919 (when the school was founded) and 1933 (when it dissolved).

The Bauhaus case is the exceptional normal in this context: an outstandingly influential design movement that emerged in the early 20th century among various influential modern design ideas. Exceptional in its long-term impact and organizational history, it can still be compared to other avant-garde movements and innovative and creative organizations (Kesidou, Plakoyiannaki, and Annabel Tardios 2024). As the influence of the Art Deco style, which reached its apogee in 1925, gradually faded, De Stijl, the Bauhaus and other modern art and design movements championed a new understanding of aesthetics. The Bauhaus distinguished itself through simplicity of form and judicious use of color and texture (Griffith-Winton 2016), first, through its reinterpretation of existing forms and buildings, such as the first Bauhaus building in Weimar, and later, through the creation of new designs that challenged existing architectural conventions.

As an influential design movement with a well-rehearsed history, reconstructing an account of the Bauhaus School's short-lived existence was straightforward and based on multiple secondary accounts (cited throughout the narrative) so that our account remains consistent with other historical accounts (narrative construction criterion 3). We decided to structure the historical narrative around the School's buildings and focus on how masters, students, and the wider (expert and non-expert) public engaged with these artifacts, including those items produced in and around the School. This ensured that the narrative makes sense and remains continuous and coherent (criterion 1) as well as clearly localized in time and space (criterion 2). Consequently, we rarely need to employ interpolation and could focus on interpretation and especially understanding as key elements of historical imagination.

Next, we collected images of the buildings, contemporary and historical, inside and outside, to gain a better idea of what textual sources referred to. Secondary sources discussed the buildings and their history in detail and also reproduced quotations from primary sources. We searched further through digital archives and libraries holding newspapers and other accounts, including a book collecting the private letters of masters and students commenting on their Bauhaus experience. Searching for a variety of sources in different places ascertained that our account remained based on evidence (criterion 4). The fame of the Bauhaus School meant that both digital sources, and published primary sources, were plentiful, and we selected the richest quotations for the narrative.

Many ego-documents referred to the Bauhaus parties, which painted a picture of social life at the School, but often required extensive contextualization and explanation for analysis. We decided to instead focus on those visual and textual ego-documents that showed the closest link between the historical selves and the materiality of the building and associated designs. The Bauhaus is, unsurprisingly, visually extremely well

documented, which led us to consider imagery as ego-documents (many of these are widely reproduced and can be found online or in books). The richness of these sources facilitated historical imagination, but we also came to value another type of source through our research, as the School's prominence and notoriety also afforded us an opportunity to engage with a different kind of source closely related to ego-documents.

A wide range of eyewitness accounts of the Bauhaus, its masters and students, its buildings and designs, by others not part of the school survived. These alter-documents provided equally significant insight into how the Bauhaus' creations challenged the status quo and provided outsider observations through a range of utterances, including active derision or criticism through commentary or derogatory nicknames. Ultimately, we found the combination of ego- and alter-documents particularly rich in providing us with an empathetic understanding of the innovative challenge that Bauhaus's design philosophy presented to society. In the political, economic and social tinder box of 1920s Weimar Germany, the School was at the center of increasingly polarized and politicized notions of the role of design that gave birth to modernism as a wider artistic and philosophical movement.

3.1. *The Bauhaus in Weimar 1919–1925*

The Bauhaus was founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar, Germany, on 12 April 1919, as a merger of the Weimar Saxon Grand Ducal Art School and the Weimar Academy of Fine Art. Gropius renamed the merged school *State Bauhaus* when he took over as director. The school was initially located in the *Main Building* (built in 1904–11) for the Grand-Ducal Saxon School for Fine Arts. Weimar's Main Building was an important example of the craft-focused Art Nouveau style, which drew on a more romantic and craft-focused lexicon of architectural styles (Droste and Berlin 2019, 13).

During its first phase in Weimar, the Bauhaus proclaimed a synthesis between arts and crafts, which chimed with the visual and symbolic elements of the Main Building. Yet its educational model broke with tradition in many ways: based on a foundation course (the *Vorkurs*) followed by focused study within workshops dedicated to specific crafts or trades (such as metal, ceramics, weaving), the Bauhaus presented a significant departure from the existing art education system (Gropius 1919) and highlighted that innovative architecture was not just the result of design and construction, but also of the training and practices of new architects and designers.

From the beginning, the school's director, Gropius envisaged artists and artisans collaborating in a partnership of equality, which would deliver high-standard products developed in the Bauhaus for industrial purposes. The early Bauhaus students and teachers also showed an interest in a spiritual and romantic conception of the individual, with a group around the *Vorkurs* teacher Johannes Itten following the Mazdaznan cult (an American sect with elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism). In the early 1920s, the Bauhaus was still open to how its reinterpretation of existing design conceptions was evolving.

As historians, we know from hindsight that this would lead to conflict between these different groups, but for the Bauhaus students and masters, this was not a certain outcome of working in a diverse and varied environment where people held different ideas.

Historical sources suggest that Bauhaus members and fellow travelers perceived this openness to experiment differently from how outside observers experienced the school. Acknowledging the importance of the school early on in its development, a Berlin daily newspaper opined:

A strange lot, these so-called Bauhaus people of the Weimar school. They are so well known to the locals that no one bothers to look at these curious creatures anymore. They still make strangers curious, however, and make the crowds gather if a gang of them were to go along the busy streets of a large town. In multi-coloured little skirts, bright as a goldfish, the boys with flying locks, the girls with their hair often cut short, wearing fantastic, loosely hanging costumes which are stylized, timeless, capriciously bizarre, more or less happily selected, invented, made up. Clasps in their hair, ribbons, bare feet, sandals, low-necked, short-sleeved, bare-headed. Through the thin linen suits of several of the disciples of art peeks something like bashful poverty. (Marie-Luise von Bandeis, in: Berliner Tageblatt, 18 October 1922; quoted in: Whitford, Engelhardt, and Frank 1993, 119)

This account shows how the aesthetic choices of the ‘Bauhaus people’ with clothes and everyday accessories were perceived and imagined by outside observers, with the bizarre and poor style pointing to their artistic identity and belonging to the same community. This aesthetic knowledge produced through everyday activities was able to attract the attention of observers, young students and artists. As an example of an alter-document, it provides an observer’s view of the *other* which challenges perceptions and assumptions. In this sense, alter-documents are also ego-documents, as they obliquely reveal the disquiet that the self experiences in the face of radical aesthetics and innovation.

This clear sense of identity that outside observers identified continued inside the School. Many students at the time felt they were part of a family like no other (Student Johannes Driesch to Lydia Driesch-Foucar, October 1919, in Whitford, Engelhardt, and Frank 1993, 42) and their letters and accounts enable us as researchers to imagine the experience of Bauhaus students and the community of artists. Supporters of Gropius’ school, such as the artist Oskar Schlemmer, cast the Bauhaus students in a far more favorable light than the journalist in the previous quotation:

[T]he Bauhaus brand has attracted a fearless band of young people (we have a crazy sampling of modern youth). All this means that Bauhaus is ‘building’ something quite different from what was planned – human beings. Gropius seemed very aware of this. (Oskar Schlemmer to Otto Meyer-Amden, in: Whitford, Engelhardt, and Frank 1993, 118)

This ego-document is interesting in that it clearly considers a *we* rather than an *I*, focusing on a shared identity and project with different roles. Schlemmer, a well-known artist, reflects on the students, the masters (*we*) and Gropius as the founder and leader as engaged in a shared process of metaphorical building. Bauhaus is German for ‘building house’, even though in the first years of its existence, the School did not have a department of architecture. The notion of building, however, was becoming more metaphysical and metaphorical, challenging not just design through the notion of the *total work of art*, but also as a self-fashioning of artistic identities.

Ego- and alter-documents require researchers to put themselves in the shoes of a variety of different historical observers and participants. Working with different sources is therefore not just a matter of interpolating for missing information, but also imagining empathetically how different groups of people experienced innovative aesthetics. Here,

researchers need to interpret the connections and disjoints between the different perspectives and reflect this in their historical narratives. This is particularly necessary, yet also difficult, when historical sources and perspectives clash, as in the case of the Bauhaus (for another example of interpreting different worldviews, see Popp in this issue).

With its increasingly radical commitment to modern forms of art and design, the school found itself at the center of a culture war in the early 1920s in which the personal and aesthetic became highly politicized. The state government, which had shifted further to the right of the political spectrum, was critical of its achievements so far and demanded a progress report from Gropius. On the one hand, the rise of nationalist groups in the opposition proved a challenge; local craft guilds also did not agree with any new approaches to arts and crafts in their midst. Unless the Bauhaus was able to demonstrate its ability to create value for society, the government was ready to deny all funding to the school. This progress report was to take the form of an exhibition; space and architecture would play a fundamental role in this. As researchers, we chose to narratively frame this conflict as a culture war, which is an act of present-day interpretation that renders past experiences more familiar. It is based on evidence but also connects to the wider logic of the account, including what happened subsequently. Such frameworks seek to enable contemporary readers to bridge the temporal distance to the past through historical imagination.

3.2. *The 1923 exhibition in Weimar and the Haus am Horn*

In the history of the Bauhaus, the 1923 exhibition is considered a central event. This makes the task of interpretation relatively straightforward, as there are many primary and secondary sources relating to the exhibition from which to reconstruct and contextualize these events and artifacts. Gropius saw this exhibition as an opportunity to make the school more popular in the region but also to clarify the aims and program of the Bauhaus (MacCarthy 2019). Such a 'concrete, collective task' (Forgács 1995, 110) brought divisions to the fore as the school considered how to express its emerging identity aesthetically. Ultimately, the exhibition occasioned a move away from a unity of arts and crafts (which the Art Nouveau style of Weimar's Main Building symbolized) toward a more rational, formalistic and mass-produced notion of architecture, leading to a splintering of the Bauhaus community. The more romantically and spiritually inclined group around Itten left as the School moved toward a synthesis of the arts and technology rather than craft (Rüedi-Ray 2011).

The Bauhaus exhibition took place across two sites (the Weimar School building and a new residential development) in the Summer of 1923 and hosted 15,000 visitors. Gropius and the students were not permitted to alter the Weimar building. However, they hybridized its Art Nouveau space with colorful and geometric murals in the Bauhaus visual language and crafted a new stylistic lexicon for interior design in the office of the school's director.¹ The chief event of the exhibition was the modernist Haus am Horn (Droste and Berlin 2019, 172), which presented a radically new design for a single-family dwelling. Named after the street it stood on, the house was designed by painter Georg Muche, then the

youngest Bauhaus master, and delivered by Gropius, as the director of the Bauhaus and Adolf Meyer as the architect. The furniture was designed by Marcel Breuer, the lights by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and all interiors were fabricated in the Bauhaus workshops (Periton 1996). The internal layout dispensed with hallways and presented interconnected rooms in a visually uncompromising style that dispensed with the traditional norms of homeliness. Its aesthetic qualities elicited enthusiasm and wider recognition, including by the government's art adviser, Dr Edwin Redslob:

There is evidence that a type of design is developing that organically unites several small rooms around a large one, thus bringing about a complete change in form as well as in the matter of living. Of all the plans I have seen, none appears to me so apt to clarify and solve the problem as the one submitted by Bauhaus. The plight in which we find ourselves as a nation necessitates our being the first of all nations to solve the new problem of building. These plans clearly go far towards blazing a new trail. (Dr. Edwin Redslob, in: Whitford, Engelhardt, and Frank 1993, 154)

This ego-document is interesting in that it conveys the enthusiasm and excitement of an architectural expert who shares Bauhaus's view of design as a potential solution to existing social and economic problems. Such accounts enabled us to reconstruct the aesthetic knowledge produced by the internal layout of the Haus am Horn and *imagine empathetically* (Strati 1992; Strati and de Montoux 2002) how it was experienced. While the reconstruction of space requires interpolation and interpretation of the existing evidence, imagining empathetically requires understanding and reexperiencing moving through the space of the Haus am Horn. We can also contrast this with an alter-document: locals referred to the house as 'die Kaffeemuehle' (the coffee grinder), which is reminiscent of other irreverent nicknames the public give to striking architecture (the 'gherkin' and the 'walkie-talkie' in London, for example). This points to how people may have felt challenged by these new aesthetics at the time.

The exhibition also redefined the artist's role in the Bauhaus community, placed greater emphasis on design and production-oriented work, and was considered, overall, as a triumph in public relations (Forgács 1995). Its success lay in generating commissions from industry and beyond, which had the potential to make the school financially independent from government funding (Rowland 1988). The exhibition is widely discussed in historiography, and the poster for the event can still be found in interior decorations of restaurants and cafes as a random signifier of good taste to this day (see Figure 1). The original Haus am Horn was destroyed but has been reconstructed on the basis of contemporary photographs and plans. Reconstructing the aesthetic innovations of the Bauhaus through commemoration and immersion has remained important not just to historians but also to a wider public with artistic interest, who seek to imagine themselves in the spaces and aesthetic experience of Bauhaus members and supporters at the time. It enables an immersion into the sensation produced by the aesthetic features of the artifacts (Strati and de Montoux 2002), and how this aesthetic knowledge affected public relations and the subsequent organizing of the School. The significant number of visitors and praise in the press at the time indicate to historians that the Bauhaus had a significant base of supporters. However, historical researchers also benefit from hindsight, and the knowledge of what happened after the exhibition also attests to the power

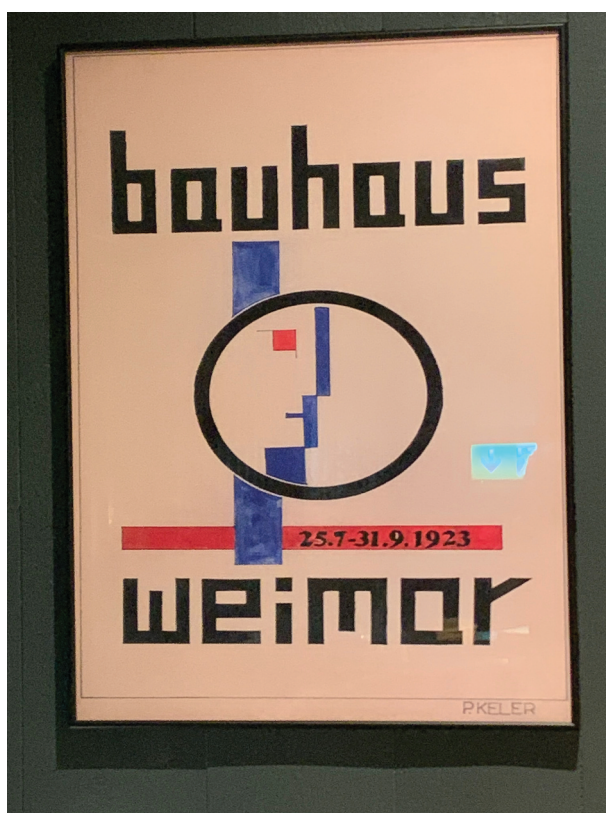


Figure 1. Bauhaus exhibition poster, photographed by the author in a restaurant in Dublin, Ireland, in 2019.

of the school's detractors and reinforces our culture war interpretation. In this section, our narrative switched seamlessly between interpretation, such as placing the events and artifacts into a sequence and a wider historical context, and understanding, when we reflect on the aesthetic qualities and experiences that we can glean from imagery, objects and historical documents in which individuals directly discuss their personal experiences (ego-documents) or obliquely use observation and commentary (alter-documents).

3.3. The Bauhaus in Dessau 1925–1932 and its dissolution and diaspora since 1933

To reconstruct historical events and narrate them, we need to contextualize and interpret events within the broader historical setting that framed the experience of people at the time. Focusing too narrowly on an unusual and highly interesting group of people like the Bauhaus community should not distract from understanding the wider economic, social and cultural context at the time that enhances historical imagination. Despite the exhibition's success, the Great Depression created political and economic turmoil in Germany: rampant inflation and the increasingly volatile political system meant that state funding was reduced. At the same

time, the sale of products or enhanced access to capital was less profitable due to rising inflation.

The state treasury conducted a formal audit of the school, considered it inefficient and troublesome, and recommended the dissolution of the State Bauhaus in Weimar (Rowland 1988). The reputation of the Bauhaus four years into its existence was already such that several German cities competed to attract the school when Gropius decided to relocate it as a private School of Design. In particular, its industrial product development based on research into materials and techniques and its design experiments remained highly attractive to industrial cities. In 1925, the Bauhaus chose Dessau as an emerging industrial city with prominent industry leaders (e.g. Junkers aircraft factory), which made it an appropriate location for a school seeking to collaborate with local industry. The city was also governed by a social-democratic local government, as opposed to the nationalists that had taken over in Weimar. This resulted in a generous offer of land and money, which enabled the construction of several Bauhaus masters' houses and its own iconic school buildings, offering a remarkable opportunity to realize the school's pedagogic and artistic vision (Kentgens-Craig 1998).

The Bauhaus building was designed by Gropius and opened in December 1926 (Droste and Berlin 2019, 192, 195–96). Its key material was glass to reinforce man's changed perception of space (Kentgens-Craig 1998). The building consisted of three wings to house workshops and studios, a technical school of arts and crafts, and students' accommodation. In its new building, the Bauhaus community operated as a microcosm, independent from intervention and free to express its democratic approach of a non-differentiated society, individual freedom and a break with traditional educational norms, including the integration of foreign students and women in the student cohort (Kentgens-Craig 1998). Ultimately, the Dessau building would be considered one of the most important edifices of the 20th century (MacCarthy 2019). Some experienced it as a built manifesto (Markgraf, Rebecca, and Regina 2021):

This house is a visible sign of its devotion to the environment; it wants, if I understood its meaning correctly, only to serve. To serve life, which it embraces, the work, which emanates from it. This life, this function, this work it wants to visibly enact. May the light and the clarity, which are inseparably connected in this building in an unusual way, be a symbol and stimulator for this labour that emanates from it. The most valuable task still lies ahead. We hope and wish that Gropius and his aides may be granted to fully achieve what has been so happily begun. (Rading 1927 [translation by author])

It made 'a far more powerful statement and has greater charisma than all written statements, which Bauhaus members were never especially reluctant to produce' (Hämer 1998, 6). In the Vorkurs, students created suspended and kinetic sculptures to match the floating aesthetic of the Dessau building, where they were continuously exhibited (Friedewald 2019). In their photography projects, students interwove their portraits with the façade of the Dessau student accommodation block (Droste and Berlin 2019, 319, 335). These are some of the most powerful examples of visual ego-documents we came across, as they present a self-fashioning of students' identities through the School and its architecture. These accounts enable reconstructing, and imagining, the 'felt sense' of the building, overcoming its 'aesthetic muteness' (Taylor 2002, 861), suggesting an empathetic understanding of how they encountered the

building's aesthetic features and artifacts, and this reinforced the sense of community and the artistic identification of its members. The building was a central feature in the expression of the organization's and the students' identities and developing aesthetic expression.

The Bauhaus continued to have many enemies who viewed the radically modern as a threat to German national values. The school's activities in Weimar now focused this dissent on the sensational and extremely expensive Dessau complex (Droste and Berlin 2019). Worth millions of marks, the Bauhaus' detractors wanted the Dessau building demolished, but its sheer cost made this unpalatable and ultimately cemented the Bauhaus's impact on architecture and design (Eckstein 1932). Its floating nature, and the glassed-in walls that made both interior and exterior spaces visible at the same time, were considered particularly stunning when viewed in the dark, and several images survived recording this. This new design language was referred to in value-laden terms, such as being honest and transparent about the raw materials used in its construction (Droste and Berlin 2019, 194), suggesting that at the time, this new aesthetic sensibility had a profound impact on observers. Imagining the aesthetic impact of Bauhaus architecture helps researchers comprehend the sensory reaction of contemporary observers (see Strati 1996), and therefore the power struggles surrounding the movement. Reading both ego- and alter-documents in conjunction affords a better sense of how innovation and aesthetics are inherently linked to political and social visions of the future. While the role of organizations in imagining futures has been discussed (Beckert 2021), the methodological implications of considering past people's historical consciousness (Rüsen 2004) require further development.

Building on the success of the movement's architectural statements, the Bauhaus School eventually created a department of architecture under the leadership of Hannes Meyer in 1927, who took over as director from Gropius a year later. The same political shift to the right in the city government in Dessau that precipitated Gropius's departure ended Meyer's directorship in 1930. Mies van der Rohe, who was already a famous architect, took over. He was less political than Meyer (a Marxist) and more commercially oriented, but he similarly struggled to keep the school going amid the political upheaval of the 1930s. The success of the school, both nationally and internationally, did not insulate it from the culture war dynamics but instead made it more of a target.

In May 1932, the National Socialists won the parliamentary elections in Anhalt (the German state that Dessau was located in) and promptly decided to close the Bauhaus. The school moved to Berlin in October 1932, where van der Rohe rented a derelict factory in Berlin to accommodate the new Bauhaus with his own money (Droste and Berlin 2019, 366). The school operated for ten months without further interference from the Nazi Party. In 1933, the Gestapo shut down the Berlin school. Van der Rohe protested the decision, eventually speaking to the head of the Gestapo, who agreed to allow the school to reopen. The Bauhaus was voluntarily dissolved in July 1933, a few months after Adolf Hitler was appointed German Chancellor.

Its abortive history in Berlin meant that the Dessau building remained the intellectual and aesthetic focus of the movement. Bauhaus masters, students and graduates dispersed internationally and became particularly influential in the US (Kentgens-Craig 1998). Interest in and knowledge of the Bauhaus and its ideas began in 1919, as American journals reported on the Bauhaus as early as the year of its founding, paving

the way for its reception after its dissolution in Europe. Some members of the Bauhaus emigrated to the US during World War II, where their work and teaching philosophies enriched the more traditional curriculum of many institutions and contributed significantly to the development of North American architecture. Breuer and Albers taught at Yale, Gropius went to Harvard, and Moholy-Nagy established the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937, followed by a major Bauhaus retrospective exhibition at the MoMA in New York in 1938 (Logemann 2017). It is this diaspora, especially the influence of Bauhaus masters and students in the US where they shaped architecture, interior and consumer designs, and advertising, that cemented the school's importance as one of the most innovative design and architectural movements of the 20th century. It is this after-history that informs our interpretation of history and draws on a variety of sources to place the design experience into a global historical context within our narrative.

From a narrative perspective, the demise of the Bauhaus in Germany precipitated its success in the US and its subsequent international influence in the 20th and 21st centuries in an ironic, or perhaps tragic, twist (Rowlinson, Decker, and Hassard 2023; White 1973). Modern ideas from Europe came to the forefront and were translated into the US setting. The Bauhaus influence was evident in the corporate towers and the cityscape of the modern metropolis, such as the State of Illinois Centre, the United Airlines Terminal in the O'Hare Airport in Chicago, and the entire campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) – designed in 1938 by van der Rohe (Hitchcock and Johnson 1997). These buildings visually referenced the mnemonic cues most clearly established at the Dessau building: the use of glass, a sense of a floating construction, modern materials, rational design and the honesty or transparency regarding the materials employed. All these elements point to the enduring nature of the Bauhaus aesthetic identity and the way in which its admirers interpreted its design language in affective and value-laden terms, which spurred on the legacy projects of its diaspora.²

4. Weaving time and space through microhistory, historical imagination and theory of mind

The history of the Bauhaus, its architecture and its aesthetic impact on contemporary observers requires us to do more than just closely follow the sources in the archives to reconstruct the past. It also requires us to practice historical imagination – to empathize with the attempts of contemporary participants and observers to put into words and imagine the profound impact that a new idiom of space and architecture had on them. Collingwood's detailed discussion of what historians actually seek to achieve when imagining the past remains one of the clearest elaborations of what historical imagination entails. Our article draws out his insights in terms of current discussions around historical methods in business history and organization studies. We differentiate between three different operations that underpin historical imagination: (1) interpolation, which is the relatively simple practice of establishing a sequence of events and addressing unproblematic gaps by linking different types of historical sources; (2) interpretation, which weaves together primary and secondary sources to facilitate a thorough historical contextualization of the narrative; (3) understanding, which draws on both logical interpretations and empathetic sensory imagination of the experiences of others.

Consequently, historical imagination is a fundamental part of the historical craft, with even Austen (1818, 87) having one of her characters in *Northanger Abbey* pronounce:

I read it [history] a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all — it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.

Microhistory introduced the importance of history beyond popes and kings, focusing on women, minorities, dissenters and the powerless who only rarely get to put down their worldview into future historical sources (Carlo, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993). Nevertheless, microhistorians carefully recreated and imagined the experiences of 16th-century millers, cat murderers and other historical figures that previously had not been deemed worthy of historical investigations (Carlo, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993; Darnton 1985; Levi 1988; Zemon Davis 1983). The members of the Bauhaus were clearly more elite and were afforded many opportunities to put down their views in written and visual form. Microhistorical methods, such as focusing on ego-documents and a wider variety of sources as ‘clues’ (Ginzburg 1989; Peltonen 2012) are nevertheless important in studying design, art and innovation because they expand on Collingwood’s historical imagination by focusing on empathetic aesthetic imagining (Strati and de Montoux 2002).

Our account seeks to combine this with how the buildings were experienced and the impact this had on students and observers. Following the sources for well-known organizations, such as the Bauhaus, has become much easier due to the widespread digitization of historical newspapers and significant collections compiled online for the centenary of the school’s founding in 2019 (Kirsch et al. 2023; Nix and Decker 2023).

Our narrative reflects on the imaginative practice of historians who trace and compile, like detectives, primary archival or digital sources and secondary accounts (here, Bauhaus histories based on primary sources). Interpolating and evaluating these sources for their evidentiary value has been widely discussed (Dobson and Ziemann 2009; Howell and Prevenier 2001; Kipping, Daniel Wadhwani, and Marcelo 2014; Lipartito 2014; Scott 1990). However, detailed discussions of the affordances of specific types of sources have remained rarer, with Tinning and Lubinski’s discussion of the role of ego-documents a welcome exception. We highlight the special place that ego-documents hold for microhistory due to their richness when it comes to historical imagination. Through our analysis of the Bauhaus case, we also defined a new source type closely related to the ego-document: the alter-document. These sources only indirectly report on the ego through its experience of the ‘other’ that challenges the ego’s sense of self. This provides us with an opportunity to study the reception of ideas and creates an avenue for studying organizational aesthetics and innovation in the past.

To do so, we sought out ego- and alter-documents in our research to gain a better understanding of how people experienced design innovation in the early 20th century. We show the usefulness of using an aesthetic approach to interrogate the visual signs of buildings and architectures, as a way to unpack information yielded by these artifacts and develop knowledge about the past. We also drew on our sensory experience of the artifacts (through our direct observation of pictures and objects), while making logical connections between this experience and information acquired through secondary and primary sources. Furthermore, we looked at accounts of organizational members (ego-

documents) and observers (alter-documents), as well as the artifacts created, to ‘understand’ (Dilthey 2002) the sensory experience of architecture, and immerse ourselves in their encounter with Bauhaus artifacts in the past. Here, historical imagination aided our reflexive voice in researching this experience. Ego- and alter-documents and visual accounts (e.g. drawings and projects) allowed us to overcome aesthetic muteness (Taylor 2002), aiding our empathetic understanding of the sensory experience and of the aesthetic knowledge (or resistance) derived from their encounter with the artifacts (Strati 1992). In so doing, our reflexive voice as researchers meant that we could imagine ‘walking in the shoes’ of historical individuals. This did not happen by observing or listening to others directly but through historical imagination, particularly interpretation and understanding.

We also contribute to a better understanding of the process of narrative construction, which has been considered somewhat mysterious (Rowlinson and Hassard 2013; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker 2014; Rowlinson, Decker, and Hassard 2023). Our article presents a narrative of the Bauhaus that interprets primary and secondary sources to present a very specific history of the school and its buildings. At key points in our narrative, we reflect on how we use interpretation to contextualize our account and how we use historical sources to put ourselves in the shoes of people experiencing the art and architecture that the Bauhaus was producing. We demonstrated how the criteria for narrative construction developed by Collingwood in conjunction with historical imagination underpin our practice and ground our account in evidence.

Here, we placed the Bauhaus School into wider conceptual frameworks, such as design innovation (Kesidou, Plakoyiannaki, and Tardios 2024), and narrative frameworks, such as culture wars. The latter is a concept clearly recognizable to 21st-century readers, and we employ it to render the past more intelligible and familiar. While microhistory is perhaps better known for its insistence on the past’s essential foreignness, we find Ginzburg’s description of the interplay between the ‘emic’ insider view that the historian needs to understand, and the ‘etic’ outsider view. Historical imagination is an essential methodological tool to understand the emic perspective, whereas the role of narrative construction is to render this intelligible and coherent with etic views of the past.

This process of imposing familiar concepts on historical narratives is significant because it provides an avenue for theorizing. Concepts or tropes (White 1973) are embedded as substantive theories in the narrative to explain the events or experiences (McCullagh 1984). But the narrative can also be embedded in theory, such as organizational aesthetics, to facilitate the ‘conceptual leap’ (Klag and Langley 2013) from substantive to formal theory, which organization and management studies require. Indeed, Weick (1989) prominently argued for the centrality of ‘disciplined imagination’ in organizational theorizing.

However, the standards of rigor for narrative construction, which we summarized in Table 1, conflict at times with the widely accepted standards of qualitative research in the social sciences. While some have argued that there are fundamental and unbridgeable differences between historical and organizational research (Leblebici 2014), others have considered the distinctions between history and business studies as based on ‘myths’ (Plakoyiannaki, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, and Hoorani 2023). We believe that a better appreciation of the methodological practices and insights that underpin historical research and narrative is necessary for any attempt at theorizing from history.

Our suggested approach also adds to organizational aesthetics as it allows researching how aesthetic knowledge develops and shapes organizing when direct observation of aesthetic encounters, in their time-space context, is not possible. Organizational aesthetics require a sensory experience of an artifact (Strati 1992; Taylor and Hansen 2005), and often a 'direct questioning about the 'felt sense of organizational actions' (Taylor 2002, 821). This can be challenging because of the impossibility for the researchers to observe this experience directly, or for the actors to offer a direct account. Historical imagination allows the researcher to 'live' the aesthetic encounter, share organizational actors' state of mind empathetically, and develop knowledge out of it, in the specific time-space context when and where the aesthetic encounter happened. Ego-documents (Tinning and Lubinski 2022), as well as alter-documents, are important sources for this type of empathetic historical imagining as they provide a more 'emic' perspective (Ginzburg 2012) that facilitates understanding past experience (Collingwood 1946; Dilthey 2002), as opposed to explaining past events. Importantly, we employ sources that reveal the historical self in conjunction with material and visual forms of expression to broaden our understanding of what constitutes a historical source, and how it may contribute to our understanding of organizational history. A microhistorical approach, enhanced by historical imagination, offers both the methodological rigor *and* the reflexivity needed to reconstruct aesthetic experiences of material forms and architectures, and their impact on managerial and everyday practices, aiding the theorization of organization and organizing from organizational aesthetics and from history. By bringing these elements together, we follow the call of Decker (2015) to contribute a methodological innovation that offers transparency as to how historical accounts are constructed.

5. Conclusion

We expanded on Collingwood's discussion of the nature of historical imagination to introduce his ideas as a methodological framework for microhistorical research in management and organizational history. By focusing on three interrelated practices (interpolation, interpretation and understanding) we highlight how we can make the standards of narrative construction in history more transparent and rigorous. Our account specifically draws on a category of source discussed widely in microhistory, the so-called *ego-document*. These sources report on the thoughts and feelings of individuals and provide important insights to researchers interested in organization design, innovation, and aesthetics. We build on Tinning and Lubinski's (2022, 167) claim that ego-documents enable research into 'subjective historical experiences' and elaborate on how this can give us new insights into the experience of aesthetics and innovation in the past. Specifically, we defined a related type of source, alter-documents, that facilitates historical imagination by opening up a diverse range of responses to aesthetic innovation. Through our elaboration of a historical narrative of the Bauhaus school and the aesthetic experience of its members and observers, we demonstrate how interpolation, interpretation and understanding in particular can enable historical researchers to imagine aesthetic experience in the past. Ultimately, in this paper,

we outlined a methodological innovation that provides greater transparency of how historical source interpretation leads to the construction of rigorous historical narratives.

Notes

1. These have been recreated at the Bauhaus Universität Weimar; for photographs, see <https://www.uni-weimar.de/en/university/profile/unesco-world-heritage-bauhaus/main-building/> and <https://vielfaltdermoderne.de/en/weimar-directors-office-bauhaus/> (links correct as of July 7 2022).
2. These ideas actually spread on both sides of the 'iron curtain'. Meyer, the second Bauhaus director, emigrated to Moscow in 1930 and popularized Bauhaus and Modernist architecture in the Soviet Union. He returned to Europe after Stalinist purges in 1936.

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