

Soul Man

*What didn't Rudolf Steiner do?
Douglas Brenner takes stock.*

By age 12, I had a rote reply for grown-ups' quizzical looks when they heard I went to a Waldorf school: "It's based on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner." Blank stare. "He was an Austrian philosopher who believed in teaching the whole student — mind, body and soul." Luckily no one ever asked me to elaborate, because I'd have been at a loss for words — except to say that we students got to do lots of drawing and painting, which I loved, but we couldn't skip eurythmy class (yuck). Any serious discussions of pedagogic method and what Steiner called his "spiritual science," anthroposophy, took place out of earshot in the teachers' room. My only mental picture of Steiner (1861-1925) came from a dim black and white photo showing a stern mouth and X-ray eyes that made me glad this guy wasn't our headmaster. Oh, well, I reasoned, as soon as I enter the real world after graduation, it's Goodbye, Dr. Steiner.

In fact, decades later, I keep bumping into him, and each encounter makes me want to deepen our acquaintance. A gardener I met praised the ecological marvels of biodynamic farming, a Steiner innovation. An art historian introduced me to the Goetheanum, a templelike edifice that Steiner — an expert on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theories of natural metamorphosis and the physiology of color — designed to anchor the anthroposophical colony in Dornach, Switzerland. An English professor pointed out that Saul Bellow had been a Steiner devotee. These were mere hints, though, compared with the insights I expect to gain from "Rudolf Steiner: Alchemy of the Everyday," a traveling exhibition organized by the Vitra Design Museum in collaboration with the Kunstmuseums of Wolfsburg and Stuttgart. When it opens on May 13 in Wolfsburg, Germany, it will be Steiner's first major retrospective ever staged outside the anthroposophic community.

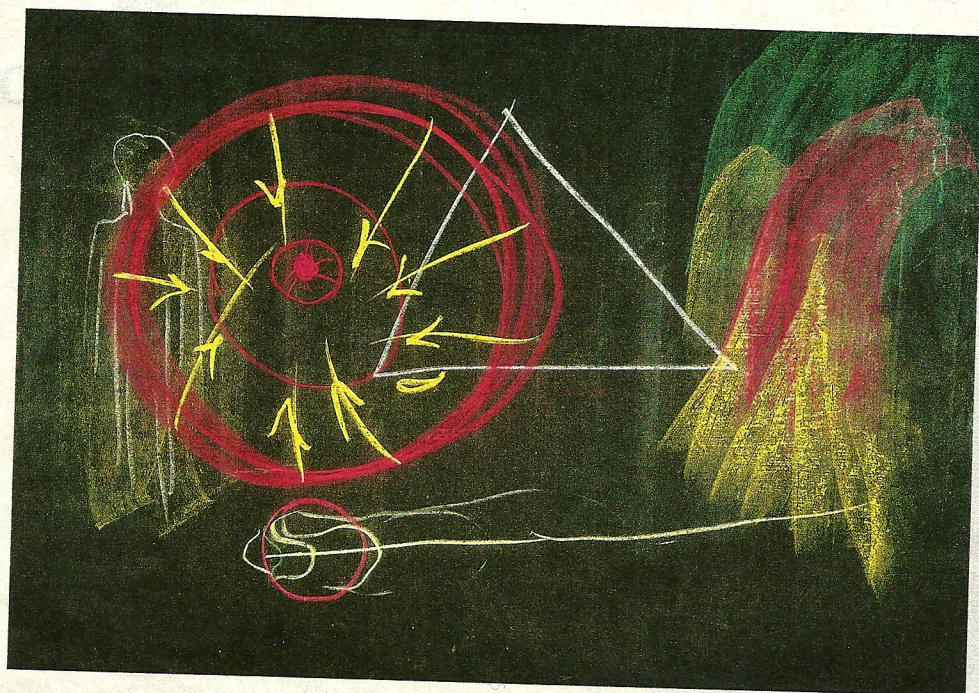


Towering figure Rudolf Steiner at work on a sculpture in 1919.

The images that Vitra's chief curator and deputy director, Mateo Kries, sent me promise a vivid portrait in the round. Watercolors and sculptures, furniture and architectural models, stage sets and eurythmy robes, lab instruments and maps will flesh out Steiner's ideas on (among other topics) prenatal existence and child development, environmentalism and economics, medicine and reincarnation. This polymath and mystic also found time to fit the design of necklaces, headache-remedy labels, stained-glass windows and radiator covers into his cosmic *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

"Today, design and architecture have become very focused on technology, removed from spiritual or social questions," Kries said. "It is fascinating to examine how Steiner dared to develop this overall vision that included everything from metaphysics and natural science to art."

I would never have dreamed that "hands-on" could apply to the remote Dr. Steiner of my boyhood. But there he is in a 1919 photograph, dressed in a workman's smock and grasping a chisel as he contemplates the gigantic wooden statue "Representative of Man" that he was carving for the Goetheanum, then under

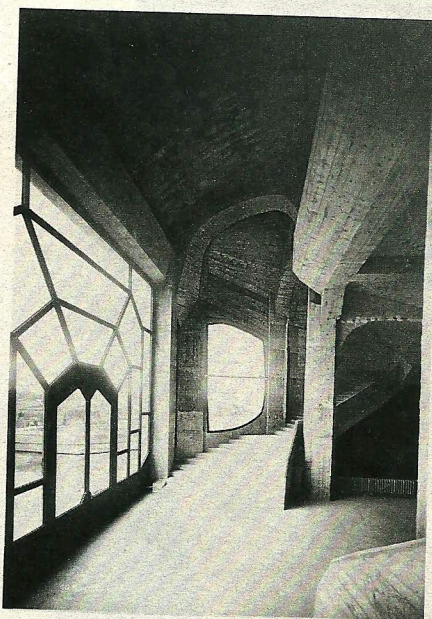
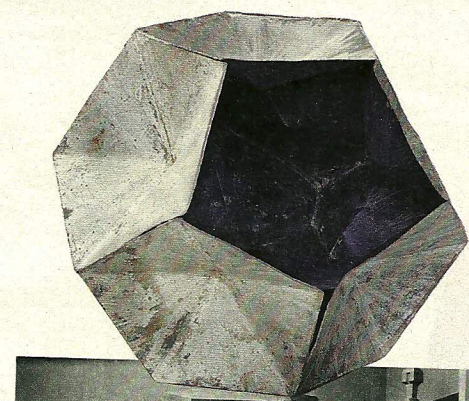


*Steiner's innovations
ranged from
BIODYNAMIC
FARMING to organic
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influence emerges. And like the crystals evoked in his designs, Steiner could reflect others' brilliance while retaining his idiosyncrasies.

Practically no one outside anthroposophical circles, it seems, lifted specific shapes or motifs from Steiner, but his concepts fascinated creative figures across the aesthetic spectrum. The exhibition will include pages from Wassily Kandinsky's diary with jottings about Steiner, fan mail from Piet Mondrian, a note from Franz Kafka requesting Steiner's comments about a new manuscript and a 1923 invitation from the architect Richard Neutra, then a disciple of the Expressionist master Erich Mendelsohn, to visit the new Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Germany. Luminaries in every medium warmed to Steiner's conviction that the arts could make intangible, universal laws accessible to the senses.

It's a belief that hasn't lost its appeal. As Kries and his colleagues began to plan this exhibition, he said, they asked themselves, "Why, over the past decade, have contemporary architecture and design begun to look more and more like the organic shapes and polygons that Steiner developed? Is his idea of metamorphosis of interest now because computers let us simulate natural growing processes? Are people today trying to see objects and furniture almost as living things?" I can't imagine a better place to ponder such questions than inside a *farbkammer*, or "color chamber," which Steiner conceived for solitary therapeutic relaxation. Each polyhedral room was to be lined in one solid tone and suffused with soothing light. Century-old working *farbkammer* prototypes have vanished, but a rare group of sketches and small metal models for a 12-chamber series recently turned up at Dornach's Rudolf Steiner Archiv. Vitra has constructed a full-size lilac-colored dodecahedron, about nine feet high, where visitors of every age will be welcome to bask in Dr. Steiner's aura — mind, body and soul. ■



Polymath at work Clockwise from top: a Steiner blackboard drawing; the Goetheanum; a room attributed to his follower, Oswald Dubach; a model of his color chamber.

construction. This was actually the first of two Goetheanums: a curvaceous, double-domed, mainly timber structure that burned down in 1922. The second, an angular outcropping of reinforced concrete, broke ground in 1924 and still stands. Vitra has delved into archives and private collections for little-known evidence of the creative processes that shaped them: terse pen-and-ink sketches aquiver with nervous urgency, lumps of plasticine molded by Steiner's fingers. These maquettes were guides for the engineers, architects and artisans who assisted him on the dozen meticulously detailed studios, houses and utility buildings

he clustered around the Goetheanum.

Evidence that the well-traveled Steiner kept abreast of the avant-garde are apparent in the many variations on of Jugendstil, Cubism and Expressionism that appear in his work. Vitra's pairings of his designs with those by notable contemporaries — a Steiner meditation chair, say, next to a dining chair by Frank Lloyd Wright, another progenitor of "organic architecture," or an interior photo of Goetheanum II beside a still from the 1920 film "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" — offer provocative overlaps and parallels. In most cases, Kries emphasized, no definite line of