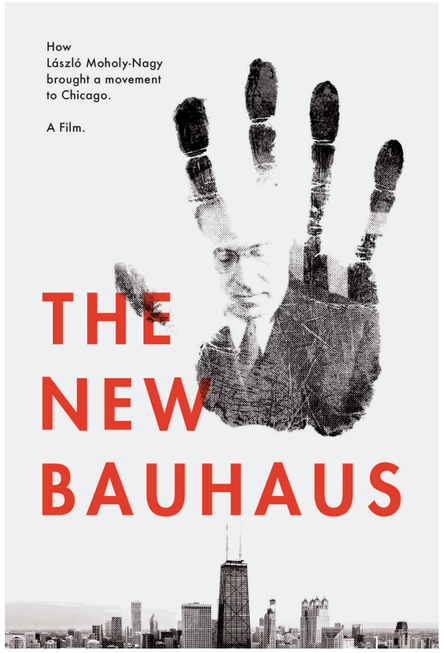
Changing the Way You See the World

Alysa Nahmias in Conversation with Ajay Manthripragada

Alysa Nahmias is a filmmaker who studied architecture. Her latest film is *The New Bauhaus*. In this conversation she addresses her career path; the story of *Unfinished Spaces*, her first film; the process of making *The New Bauhaus*; the cast of characters involved; the history of László Moholy-Nagy in Chicago; and his legacy as an educator and artist today after the Bauhaus celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019.

AM Having met you in architecture school, I want to start by asking if you can speak about your background before you started making films. Could you talk about how that led to making films about design and design culture generally? I was also pleasantly surprised to learn about your Houston connection.



The New Bauhaus film poster.
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AN I always knew that I wanted to be involved with art. I'm definitely one of these people who's always making and who loves the ways in which the world can be commented on and re-shaped through visual or written expression.

Houston played a role in my early awareness of architecture and urbanism. My father and my stepmother lived out by Pasadena and Clear Lake, so I spent a lot of my childhood in Houston. We went into the Loop sometimes, or to Rice Village, so there were moments when we left the industrial and post-industrial landscape where they lived, and I saw how the built environment was vastly different in various neighborhoods.

As an undergraduate I studied art history, studio art, and literature at an interdisciplinary college called the Gallatin School at NYU. During the last semester of my undergraduate studies at Gallatin, I enrolled in a course that involved a study trip to Cuba. I thought I wanted my project to center on Cuban art history, but a professor of Latin American art told me, "If you're going to Havana, study the architecture. It's a museum of architecture. You'll never get that opportunity anywhere else." Honestly, my first reaction was dubious and symptomatic of the "Old Master"-centric art historical education I'd been engaged with up to that point, "Architecture?" I thought, "That's boring in comparison to painting and sculpture." But it was boring because nobody had unlocked it for me yet, and this professor's excitement about it was enough to spark my curiosity enough to take a chance that I'll never regret.

When I was in Cuba, my professors introduced me to Roberto Gottardi, one of the architects who had designed the Cuban National Art Schools. That's when I became more seriously interested in architecture. Roberto insisted on taking me to the schools. I was in front of this building with the architect who'd designed it, in this very different place from my own home and this building (all five buildings, actually, as we walked through each of them) really expanded my awareness so much: the history of the place; a relationship with this person, who would become a mentor for me; and also what the potential of architecture is; and how it can relate to site, history, politics, social change, and individual expression. I totally fell in love. I said to Roberto, "Someone should make a film about this," and he responded, "Well, why don't you do it?" had no idea what that would entail yet but I said, "Okay."

I finished that class by writing a paper about the art schools, but the film kept haunting me. I couldn't let it go; I knew I just had to do it.

After school, I was offered an internship at Dia Art Foundation. I was at Dia at a really interesting time, which is relevant here because it relates to Houston again. One of my jobs at Dia was to reorganize the press and image archive, so I was also the archivist. I went through all of the institutional archives, and part of that was attempting to understand how Heiner Friedrich and Philippa de Menil, who founded Dia Art Foundation, had come to encounter conceptual art, land art, and begin to build their minimalist art empire, which later would also include the Menil Collection in Houston. Dia and the Menil are sister institutions, in a way.

Simultaneously, while I was at Dia seeing the process that the architects at Open Office were leading to create Dia:Beacon, I was also working on this idea for my film project about architecture in Cuba. Then I just had the idea that I should go to architecture school.

The point I'm trying to make is that, for me, all this was really nonlinear. It's almost like I sought out a space that was both architecture and film. It was about how art could be both formally and socially engaged. I saw both of these mediums having that kind of potential in ways that were really exciting.

I also love the large-scale collaborative processes that both disciplines require. I'm a pretty social being, and I'm naturally collaborative in my creative process, so for me the hard part about being a painter or sculptor was the idea of just going to a quiet studio every day. Additionally, I didn't like the idea of selling singular art objects to someone who may or may not share them with the rest of the world; that would've been hard for me. Whereas with film, or writing, or public architecture projects, you never have to let it go in the same way as you do when selling a painting, because the work can always be reproduced or inhabited.

I ended up at Princeton to do my M.Arch—where I met you, Ajay—and while there I was quietly working on *Unfinished Spaces*, the film about Cuban architecture. When I finished the film, only a few people at the school knew about it. But after I graduated and the film came out, I saw Liz Diller and Ric Scofidio at a screening. Liz came up to tell me how much she enjoyed the film, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me about this while you were my student?" But it wasn't a student project, it was this thing that I was doing professionally while simultaneously pursuing my degree. I sort of also wanted to tell her, "I am not sure if you would've cared." Not because of her, really, but because until you've done something, there's no reason for anybody to care. You have to sort of cut your teeth and prove to yourself and others that you can follow through with real-world projects.

Unfinished Spaces was the launchpad for me. After that I started to make more films. I've done various types of films, mostly documentary, but also one scripted feature as a producer. And even the scripted feature was improvisational and documentary-like, involving no script and lots of non-actors.

Exterior of The New Bauhaus School of Design in Chicago, 1938.
Photographer: Unknown.

AM Tell me a little about *The New Bauhaus* and how it came to be—it seems like a very different set of circumstances, having in part to do with the resources now available to you as a more established filmmaker.

AN *The New Bauhaus* is an odyssey through the life and legacy of László Moholy-Nagy, the innovative artist and educator whose pioneering approach to integrating technology into design continues to influence and inspire. The film took three years to make. Together with my fellow producer, Petter Ringbom, and executive producer Marquise Stillwell, who I had worked with previously, we pitched the idea to make a film about Moholy's final decade in Chicago. This was 2015. We knew the hundredth

anniversary of the Bauhaus was approaching—it opened in Weimar in 1919—so we talked with the Institute of Design at IIT in Chicago to gain access to their archives and to have their blessing to tell some of the story. We brought on producer Erin Wright and co-producer Ashley Lukasik onto our team.

Then we talked with the Moholy-Nagy estate. We met Hattula, Moholy's daughter, who appears in the film. When I met her, I realized that we have something that's not just going to be archival. There will be a guide in the present day, and a literal connection to Moholy.

AM This is interesting relative to what you said about *Unfinished Spaces*, which emerged in your head slowly and was something you didn't know you would finish when you started. With this film, it was a more definitive, "Yes, I can make that happen."

László Moholy-Nagy, Self-Portrait, 1925. ©Moholy-Nagy Foundation. Photographer: László Moholy-Nagy.

AN *The New Bauhaus* is a different kind of story. It's even more archival than *Unfinished Spaces*.

I knew from the beginning that conjuring this ghost of Moholy would be tricky, because only a few minutes of video footage of Moholy exists, and it's all silent, and we don't have recordings of him speaking English. But he wrote a lot. Much of his writing is dense, but we were able to isolate certain amazing quotes. I knew Moholy's words would be in the film, but I wasn't sure if it would be graphic treatment of text, or if there would be an actor performing Moholy's voice, or if there would be a narrator of some sort. I was open to possibilities during production. First of all I knew that I had to get the structure of the film right and then figure out which quotes needed to be included.

Once that was clear and we had a rough cut, it became about experimentation. Moholy was all about experimentation. We tried text on screen. Then we had a scratch voiceover recording done by a friend. Then we ended up talking with a casting agent and were thinking of casting a Hollywood actor, but this wasn't going to work out within our timeframe, and the more I thought about it, the less I liked it conceptually, so I had many discussions with my team about other possibilities. As a director, your job is to come up with ideas, but ultimately, you have to be able to identify the best ideas, wherever they may arise.

My producer Erin Wright knew Hans-Ulrich Obrist through a friend in the art world and threw his name out there. It was a great match. He has Moholy-like energy, but he also has a long-term project on artists' quotes and does countless interviews with artists. So to have him reading Moholy's words in a documentary is fitting, even though he's Swiss German and not Hungarian. The idea is that Hans-Ulrich is not an actor playing Moholy, but rather that he's reading Moholy's words and conveying them to the viewer. The direction to him was, "Don't be Moholy, be yourself." It became an opportunity to break the fourth wall in the film, exposing the artifice of documentary filmmaking by showing Hans-Ulrich on screen, including the microphones, script, and other production gear in the frame with him.

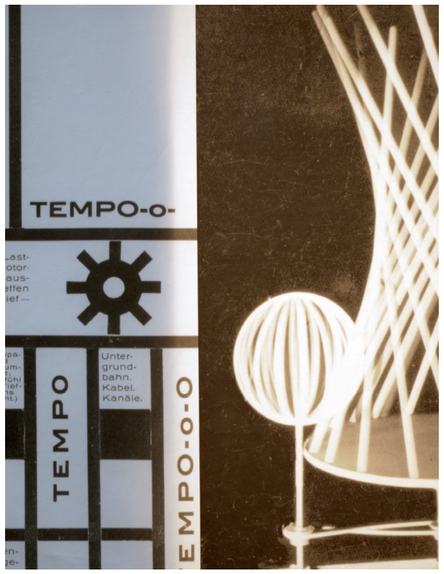
AM I think that aspect brings the film into our current moment and makes it contemporary. The film provokes the idea that the way Moholy's schools were structured is very much alive in today's thinking about pedagogy. This includes the question of interdisciplinarity in the arts. Many of the techniques addressed, like montage, have had a resurgence as modes of representation as they migrate across disciplines, especially into architecture. Perhaps those techniques were never fulfilled in terms of their promise, and now we have tools that have enabled those things to happen. It seems relevant that these things are coming back or are now finally able to exist to their full potential.

AN Moholy was ahead of his time. In the 1920s, he said things like, "The illiterate of the future will not be the one who can't read, but the one who can't read images." This is a prophecy of 21st-century digital image culture, where memes are all over the place and anyone can transform images using Photoshop. Moholy knew we'd need to be able to think critically about visual information. But what you're saying about the Bauhaus pedagogy is interesting too, because you're probably teaching in a Bauhaus lineage whether you know it or not.

AM I was likely formed in the Bauhaus lineage, so that's the way I teach. But I try to understand its successes and pitfalls. Some today are against the idea of a foundation course—or think that a foundational course is irrelevant. "It's too specialized, disciplinary, internal, or autonomous," they might say. But I can't think of how we teach students to engage the world without being experts first. And I think that's absolutely a Bauhaus thing. It's an interesting thing that you bring up, because in this situation I'm defending the Bauhaus lineage, in a way.

Moholy's project might ultimately be a pedagogical one. The film is about him as a teacher, and at the end it posits the reason why he's not a household name is perhaps because his most significant project is his teaching project.

Top Right and Above: Light-Space Modulator, László Moholy-Nagy, 1922–1930. Photographed at the Art Institute of Chicago. Image from *The New Bauhaus* courtesy of Opendox. Art courtesy of the Moholy-Nagy Foundation. Director: Alysa Nahmias. Photographer: Petter Ringbom.



Design and artwork by László Moholy-Nagy. Photographed at the Art Institute of Chicago. Image (detail) from *The New Bauhaus* courtesy of Opendox. Art courtesy of the Moholy-Nagy Foundation. Director: Alysa Nahmias. Photographer: Petter Ringbom.

AN Teaching is not about fame, it's about rendering yourself unnecessary so that the students can learn to surpass the teacher's knowledge and rely on their own experiences and abilities. I think that was part of Moholy's philosophy of teaching. As much as he did want to be famous, as Hattula says on screen in the film, he also essentially eschewed the commercial gallery system and remained independent. He didn't take a job for another institution, but rather strove to create his own institution. He was willing to do anything to enable his students to find the inherent talent within themselves. I think it gave him great joy to see them flourish, and that made him a great teacher with a tremendous legacy. His legacy isn't fame or fortune during his lifetime, but perhaps more significantly it's his presence in the DNA of the creative processes of future generations of artists and designers.

I think he believed in a utopian project, and I don't mean utopian in a disparaging way. I think ideals have value. If we lose that, then there's no chance things will change. I think Moholy really believed that, too. He believed in the pure potential of each person, and in the universal value of human creativity. That was a driving principle that kept him going, even in tough times for the school, or for himself.

What is the power of art? This is something that interests me thematically. Art gives us an ability to create something from nothing, and that something is actually quite powerful— it's sometimes even dangerous to the status quo. When we're talking about design education, or arts education, that's what we're teaching people to do—to harness their inherent power for positive change.

I love when, in the film, Joyce Tsai, an art historian, says this about abstract art: "It might seem crazy that circles, lines, and squares were going to change the world, but it's not about the circles and lines, and squares, it's about changing the way you see the world, how you understand relationships." If you're a designer, you understand how these things have tremendous impact down the line. The way that we conceptualize something, the kind of drawing we make, the kind of painting we make—or what we're allowed to make, and what we're not allowed to make—actually shapes our ability to see beyond what exists right now.

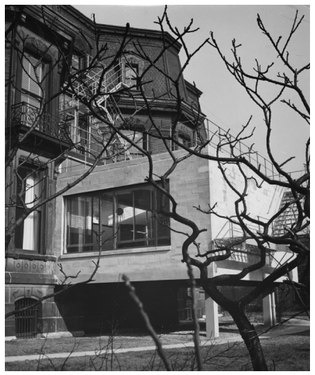
I knew that quote would be in the film as soon as Joyce said it in her interview, because it's emblematic of what Moholy and other abstract or conceptual artists stand for. When I'm telling a story in a film, it has to be entertaining, it has to be engaging, and it has to be universal—there has to be a human story that I'm following, not just a concept like Bauhaus or a straightforward biography. This statement by Joyce is one of those moments that brings art theory down to earth in plain language, and she shares this wisdom in a very relatable way. It allows the audience to really feel how Moholy's art is relevant beyond his own individual story.

At one point I wondered about the title of the film versus something that includes Moholy's name, but I think this answers that

question. It's about a broader set of themes and interests that orbit a single figure, but it's not just about him.

The New Bauhaus was the name of the school that Moholy founded in Chicago in 1937. It was something that came up early on as a title, and it stuck. Why didn't my producers and I hear about this New Bauhaus in Chicago during our design educations? Is it because Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, and Mies van der Rohe got all the love when it came to histories of Bauhaus in America?

AM I don't know. Clearly The New Bauhaus had an influence on other architects in Chicago, right? Mies arrived after...



Exterior of The New Bauhaus School of Design in Chicago, 1938.
Photographer: unknown.

AN Well, the school was influential later, but it wasn't the case that Moholy drew Mies to Chicago; Mies arrived on his own. In 1937, Mies came to become a professor at the School of Architecture at Chicago's Armor Institute of Technology, which became the Illinois Institute of Technology. What happened is that the New Bauhaus School of Design soon afterwards became the Institute of Design, and then it merged with IIT.

After Moholy died, the Institute of Design was housed in the basement of Mies's Crown Hall. So Moholy's school was literally put underneath Mies. Mies was teaching his students on the main floor, and Moholy's school was in the basement. But it made sense because ID needed a darkroom. There were many photography students, and I've heard they were basically content to be in the basement. But metaphorically, you have Moholy shoved underneath Mies in Crown Hall. The Institute of Design students were, I've been told, the artier, less conventional types—in a good way as far as I'm concerned. Meanwhile the more uptight architecture students (and I say that lovingly as a former architecture student myself) were up top in the glass jewel box that is Crown Hall frying in the sun and freezing in the snow.

AM There is this cast of characters, which includes people who went through the school: what was it like to research them? How did you choose them? And of course, Moholy's daughter, Hattula, is a beautiful presence throughout the movie.

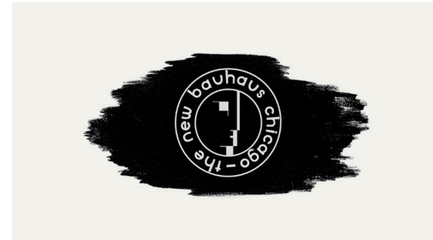
AN Hattula is a gem. As soon as I met her, I wanted to film her. I think she has such an interesting relationship to her father, especially since he died tragically when she was young, yet he's been a major force in her adult life through the foundation she founded. Her character ties in with a central theme in the film about legacy, right? Not just creative legacy, but the legacy that he left her with, and how she's managing that.

Hattula Moholy-Nagy with a photograph of her father and Walter Gropius.
Image from *The New Bauhaus* courtesy of Opendox. Director: Alysa Nahmias.
Photographer: Petter Ringbom.

Hattula knew people who were associated with the school. Many of them have passed away, but some were still with us and willing to do an interview, and thankfully still as charismatic as ever. I wanted to showcase a diversity of work and experiences among the alumni of the school. We interviewed more people than appear in the film. We actually interviewed Dirk Lohan, Mies's grandson. Mies was going to be in the film, but his footage was left on the cutting room floor as we realized that the documentation of any connection between the two men wasn't enough to sustain a storyline. Dirk was, not surprisingly, incredibly gracious and supportive about all of the choices made to arrive at the finished film.

And then there are the artists who featured at the end of the film, whom I call the "indirect disciples"—the people who are representative of the many artists who didn't go to the school or know Moholy directly, but who are influenced by Moholy's work. We spoke with Jan Tichy, Barbara Kasten, and Olafur Eliasson. I think Eliasson is genuinely inspired by Moholy and was pleased to have a chance to be in a film about such a giant of 20th century art and design.

AM My other interest here lies in the techniques of making the film itself. There's a clear nod to Bauhaus aesthetics and values, but then there's invention. It looks contemporary, but at the same time there's a relationship to historical graphic design techniques. The animations were particularly inventive.



Exterior of The New Bauhaus School of Design in Chicago, 1938.
Photographer: unknown.

AN I appreciate you watching the film with this level of aesthetic attention. The moments of invention in the film are perhaps the most significant nod to Bauhaus values, and of course there are some literal aesthetic echoes as well. The film is comprised of several visual elements: there are interviews and original shooting in Chicago. We also have archival imagery, which is photographs or footage that's sourced from third parties, including the archives at ID and other institutions. Within this category is Moholy's own footage. For example, when we land in Berlin in the 1920s, the images on screen are Moholy's own films that he made in Berlin. My approach was always to try to visualize Chicago, Berlin, Dessau, and the other cities through the eyes of artists. If we had images that Moholy made of the places, we used them. If we had images that other artists in his circles had created, we used those.

Once in a while we had to fill in a scene with some footage from a more general source, but even when we sourced images—say of Chicago in the 1930s, or during the war—a lot of the material I chose was made by artists independently, for commercial companies such as Container Corporation advertisements, or for the WPA. We were always trying to look at the world through the eyes of artists.

There are also the animations and artwork. There were a couple of things we did with artwork. There are certain instances where Moholy's montages are manipulated by animator Petter Ringbom and not Moholy. We did these to suggest how a viewer might imagine a narrative of the construction and conceptual underpinnings in some of these images of Moholy's photocollages or photograms.

AM Even the choice of Futura as the typeface works; it's clearly of that era, but it performs well when overlaid onto newer images. The results are synthetic in a way that I wouldn't have expected but that speak to the lasting power of the original material.

AN It's the Bauhaus. You're not going to compete with Bauhaus typography, and you shouldn't imitate, but you do have to be thoughtful about these choices, especially in this context.

But also, Moholy was messy and improvisational at times. By the end of the film, I think you understand that he was both messy and precise. His paradoxes were part of what made him complex, and this makes him a rich figure for us to think about nowadays.

AM I think this film will resonate with designers and artists because paradoxes are such a large part of our work and existence. Who else do you hope to reach with this film?

AN Hopefully this film's story is inspiring for educators, too. It's so important that we celebrate great educators, and understand how valuable they are, because often their praises go unsung.

Mies had a lot of imitators, but was he a great teacher? I'm not sure. Moholy didn't have a lot of imitators; does that speak to how good he was at teaching?

AM That's an interesting point about teaching and imitating. This might be true of other visual disciplines as well, but in architecture, in the last ten years or so, there has been a real shift for some young faculty to produce themselves through their students. There are some drawbacks to that model—it seems Moholy had different priorities that began with a focus on the students.

László Moholy-Nagy photographed in Finland by Alvar Aalto ©Alvar Aalto. Photographer: Alvar Aalto.

AN That's interesting about Moholy, right? His motivation for teaching was to create a better world, and you do that through teaching the whole person. He really cared about the whole person. He believed that everyone is talented. He understood that to be an artist you must have the capacity to work collaboratively, to adapt to new circumstances and technologies, and to consider how your artwork or design will operate in the world and shape you just as you give form to it.