

The former Zeeck department store in downtown Dessau is the point of departure for the exhibition Algae | Debris | CO₂. Opened in 1908 and expanded in the 1920, the building is an outstanding example of modernist department-store architecture, and its material layers tell a story of the city lasting more than a century.

The exhibition makes this history visible: Within the framework of the exhibition, so-called time windows at the stairs, floors, pillars, and ceiling provide views of the material history of the building. What seems unchanged at first glance reveals on closer inspection a sensitive approach to the historical building fabric. Flaking plaster is removed, holes are filled, whatever can be repaired is repaired or renovated – for example, old windowpanes or the panels of the Hetaflex aluminium façade, which were removed when the façade was renovated in the spring of 2025. Additions such as the ceiling lighting system and repairs of the floor covering in the 1980s follow the principles of reusability.

Algae | Debris | CO₂ is a “model exhibition” for sustainable design intended to produce as little CO₂ as possible. It is a space for display, use, and events all at once. It presents cross-disciplinary approaches to research and collaborative work in which human and non-human actors, economies, technologies, and material streams come together. The exhibition centres on alternatives to the canon of materials of (classical) Modernism: for example, clay, mycelia, algae, and geopolymer concrete based on clay, basalt, flax, and recycled materials. For example, the InMyco project at the Anhalt University of Applied Sciences is developing innovative mycelia materials, while waste materials from regional agriculture, forestry, and industry are used as substrates.

A micro-habitat has been initiated in the courtyard of the former department store that will develop on its own. This was done as part of the “Habitat Weaves” project, which reconceived overlooked urban spaces as habitats for several species.

Tradespeople, small and larger companies, researchers, designers, and artists were closely together here. Building is understood to mean a joint process that is sparing with material resources and that needs to be updated constantly because it is subject to change. During the exhibition, model construction sites offer insight into these processes and workshops invite others to participate.

The dynamics and synergies triggered by the exhibition will have effects that outlast the Bauhaus centennial: For example, the exhibition floor will be available for non-profit functions for at least three more years. Several projects will be started later over the course of time.

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The history of the Zeeck department store

The Zeeck department store opened in 1908 and was expanded in the 1920s. In 1945, it became the HO department store and then in the 1960s the Magnet department store. For a long time, its façade of blue slats and the name Magnet was a defining element of the cityscape. After the GDR collapsed, the building stood vacant. In the early 2000s, the Dinh family acquired the building and used part of it for its textile company. The Asian restaurant Lou is now located on the ground floor. In 2025, work began on removing the sheet-metal curtain façade and restoring the historical façade of the 1920s.

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