

## ALPENREISEN UND WÜSTENWANDERUNGEN: ENVISIONING LANDSCAPES OF EARLY MODERNITY

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought with them profound changes in the perception of the natural environment that served to fundamentally reshape the spatial organization of the built environment. Reports and representations of monuments and landscapes, from the mountainous Alps to the deserts of Egypt and the Middle East were catalogued in archaeological tomes or appropriated for architectural treatises by architects such as Fischer von Erlach, William Chambers, and Etienne-Louis Boullée.

This importance of these 'voyages of discovery' as spatial narratives is not to be underestimated and strategies of eliding the spatial configurations of the natural and built environments continued through early modernist projects such as the Alpine architecture of Bruno Taut and his circle. These strategies of elision and transposition challenged dualistic constructs of modernity (ancients vs. moderns, sacred vs. profane, culture vs. technology, etc.), and consistently invigorated modes of architectural production. Much recognition has been granted to the interrelationship of natural and built environments in the areas of aesthetics, ideology, and colonization. More recently, an important emphasis has been developed in the area of visual culture. The interest of this session is to take a somewhat different tack: to examine the ways in which treatises on natural environment served as prescriptions or inscriptions as spaces of presence or absence, setting the stage for the idealization of some and the desecration of others. Unlike the oft-valorized Alpine travels, deserts often served as a source of continuous fascination for their architectural qualities and archaeological treasures but never fit comfortably into schema of aesthetic domestication or easily into the arenas of ideological projection and colonial appropriation. This session is particularly interested in exploring the extremes of mountainscapes and deserts as sites and countersites of early modernity.

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### **From Building towards Landscape**

*Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms*

[Paper proposal for SAH Annual Meeting 2010]

Among German architects active following World War I, Erich Mendelsohn was remarkable for his early projects conceived for sites far beyond the borders of his native land. Mendelsohn's visits to Palestine, Greece, the United States, and the nascent Soviet Union resulted, too, in extensive written and graphic descriptions, many of which were published by the popular press. And although these foreign places were as diverse culturally as they were geographically, Mendelsohn's letters and books quite naturally reflected the designer's own sensibility both towards architecture, per se, and towards something else: architecture as a *constituent* part of a universal "visual landscape."

In Mendelsohn's case, photography was a significant tool in the assembly of his travel-based narratives. In contrast to his writing, Mendelsohn's use of photographs betrayed a reversal of the more typical relationship between landscape and an architect's creative process. Rather than having drawn inspiration for new man-made forms from nature, Mendelsohn's travel images evoked a world in which artifact appears to constitute the background against which new architecture might — or might not — emerge. This perspective was most readily apparent in his book *Russland, Europa, Amerika*, the subtitle of which made explicit Mendelsohn's extension of the human gesture into geography's domain: "An Architectural Cross Section." Comparative examination of photographs taken or selected by Mendelsohn for his publications points to a formal process by which man-made things came to substitute for the landscape and its generally-held moral properties.

Among the catalysts for this change may have been his 1923 travel to Palestine, made at the behest of a potential client interested in Mendelsohn's industrial architecture. His descriptions of the horizon in elevated regions, especially the hillside city of Haifa, had visual analogies with the compositional scale for which his later books' photographs may be noted.

Other sources for comparison include illustrations by contemporary artists and architects such as Hermann Finsterlin, Paul Gösch, and Hannah Höch, as well as Charles Ashbee's *A Palestine Notebook 1918-1923*.