

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

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0 Abstract

Among German architects active following World War I, Erich Mendelsohn is 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, lectures, and books quite naturally reflect 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. Mendelsohn's use of photographs betrays 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 technical artifacts appear to constitute the background against which new architecture might -- or might not -- emerge.

Although most readily apparent in his book *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* (An Architect's Photo Album), this perspective persists throughout his second book, *Russland, Europa, Amerika*. The latter's subtitle makes explicit Mendelsohn's extension of the human gesture into geography's domain: "An Architectural Cross Section." Examination of photographs taken or selected by Mendelsohn for this publication points to a formal process by which man-made things come to substitute for the landscape and its more widely-held moral properties. Yet in the years following *Russland, Europa, Amerika*'s publication, Mendelsohn's writing betrayed a shift in his attitude towards the natural landscape. His travelogue of a visit to Greece, published in Berlin's popular press, suggests a more synthetic understanding of architecture's relationship to natural forms. Among the catalysts for this change may have been his 1923 visit to Palestine, during which Mendelsohn first encountered that region's characteristic topography, climate, and light.

Sources for comparison throughout this period include illustrations by contemporary artists and architects such as Hermann Kosel, Bruno Taut, Hannah Höch, and Paul Citroen.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

1 But Seriously...

In its September 1927 issue, the satirical, Berlin-based magazine *Ulk* published a two-page spread by Hermann Kosel, titled “Die neue Bauform”: *the New Design*¹ [Figure 01]. In this illustration, a single, grotesque building has been formed from a collage of architectural elements. Appendages to the building, such as an over-sized ship’s ventilator and a human figure giving a military salute, have been culled from non-architectural sources; otherwise, the constituent elements of both the large building and its surrounding environment derive from modern buildings widely depicted at that time in the popular press. At the base of the large building, photographs of smaller, mostly domestic buildings have been placed to mimic the texture of the dense, contemporary city. A cartoon figure of an elderly man, dressed in overcoat and capped by a bowler hat, regards the “New Design” with apparent resignation. This figure is the only warmly-hued element in an image otherwise composed in monochrome.

At the lower right hand side of the illustration is an additional picture caption, which reads, “If only we can change ourselves into ‘twisted people,’ then we can live quite comfortably in this place.”²

Readers of *Ulk* and its parent publication, *Berliner Tageblatt*, would likely have been somewhat less befuddled than the man in the picture. The most obvious target of this graphic satire should have been familiar to many as Erich Mendelsohn’s C.A. Herpich Sons building, most of which had been completed the year of Kosel’s photomontage [Figure 02]. As architect, too, of the Berlin headquarters of the Rudolf Mosse Publishing Company (which produced *Berliner Tageblatt*), Mendelsohn and his designs had been promoted extensively to Mosse’s readership by both print and patronage. The Herpich store’s façade renovation had been controversial among conservative city officials, and the extended battle for approval made the design and its architect emblematic of what others called “Neue Bauen.”³

As portrayed by the jumbled, collage-like landscape at the base of Kosel’s photomontage [Figure 03], the background for this new architecture was essentially *more new* architecture, as though the process of design could be conceived as enlarging or deforming those visual elements already at hand. And so, although the magazine illustrator may have been ostensibly unflattering (if not unfair) towards Mendelsohn’s Herpich design, Kosel had made his point by making use of a visual language which derived in large part from the architect’s own well-known picture books, the first of which had been published by the Mosse Company just the year before. Inspired by the architect’s travels to the United States in 1924 and, later, to Russia, these books are

¹ Hermann Kosel, “Die neue Bauform,” *Ulk* 56 (1927): 282-283.

² *Nun brauchen wir bloss alle Spiralmenschen zu werden, dann muss sich's in solcher Bude ganz habsch wohnen.*

³ Kathleen James, *Erich Mendelsohn and the Architecture of German Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-115.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

essentially visual narratives by which the architect sought to promote his ideas about Europe's own potential architectural development. Yet to approach their photography's formal construction suggests another fundamental – if only implicit – concern: Mendelsohn's view of architecture's surrounding landscape.

2 Mendelsohn: Landscape and Context

Historians have tended to ignore the relationship of Mendelsohn's designs to their environment, particularly for projects conceived before 1933, the year he left Germany. Writers have found ample material of interest relating to Mendelsohn's clientele, the commercial nature of his work, his Zionism, or his relationship with other architects throughout the world. In addition – and not surprisingly – writing about Mendelsohn continues to emphasize the importance of the architect's early sketches for imaginary projects, conceived during the last years of World War I. These drawings, many of which illustrated quasi-industrial forms, occasioned his initial notice among clients and established his reputation as a visionary architect for both public and professionals alike [Figure 04]. These early building sketches typically included no mark of a surrounding context, as though Mendelsohn's designs were intended for a landscape neither yet constructed nor, even, yet conceived. The only exception was his rare inclusion of an arc, representing the sky, drawn above a few later sketches [Figure 05]. The effect of this gesture is exceedingly generic, and evokes mostly what Mendelsohn himself once called “tellurian and planetary things.”⁴

Bruno Zevi does mention, in a caption to one of those early sketches, that Mendelsohn's work before 1933 reflects a “tenacious, intransigent, anti-naturalist approach.” Zevi continues:

We look in vain for a tree, a hill in the background, a topographical feature... Mendelsohn frees the building from its natural context and despises environmental details. Only the ground and sky are of importance to him... Owing to their character, Mendelsohn's visions and later his constructions were both autonomous and open; they omit description and mimesis...⁵

Zevi's categorical insistence upon Mendelsohn's “anti-naturalism” is belied by a series of sketches titled “Dune Architecture,” retained by Louise Mendelsohn and exhibited after her husband's death. Executed during a visit to the Baltic Sea in 1920, these drawings are representations of the naturally-occurring sand formations which he encountered there [Figure 06]. In an interview conducted almost fifty years later, his wife would suggest

⁴ Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 24 June 1917. In Oskar Beyer, ed., *Eric Mendelsohn: Letters of an Architect* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 40.

⁵ Bruno Zevi, *Erich Mendelsohn: The Complete Works*, tr. Lucinda Byatt. (Boston: Birkhäuser Publishers, 1999), 44.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

that “these shapes were in turn reflected in his actual working architectural drawings.”⁶ But Mendelsohn himself excluded these drawings from his published monographs, and so they are difficult -- as isolated examples – to relate to his professional thinking.

Part of the challenge towards understanding Mendelsohn’s view of landscape has to do with the elliptical character of his verbal comments about the subject. Although given to write a great deal throughout his career in Germany and afterwards, Mendelsohn’s correspondence and essays were typically infused with a kind of rhetoric which had little room for description of natural surroundings. A typical example is an impressionistic account of Pittsburgh, dating to his first visit to the United States in 1924. The passage shifts quickly from a description of the city’s environment to an emphasis upon artifact:

An early glimpse from the Allegheny Mountains onto the rivers, the suburbs, and the city itself. The same disorderly skyline as New York. It is a tongue of land that re-enters the waters of the Ohio River, which starts here at the confluence of the Monongahela glacial stream and the Allegheny spring waters. All amid the mists of the American Ruhr, the collieries (which line the whole length of the track from Buffalo) and Carnegie’s wells of steel.⁷

Rhetoric aside, a more fundamental challenge may be the fact of his best architectural work’s urban settings. The commercial designs conceived at the time of his greatest professional success – the Herpich store, the Schocken department stores, the Petersdorff store, or the Columbushaus – are those for whom urban relationships are fundamental to each building’s unique plasticity and functional logic [Figure 07]. Yet, for many of us, the architecture of cities and the morphology of their streets remain outside our considerations about “landscape,” except in the context of parks or gardens. That our understanding of landscape must include both rural *and* urban settings has been a repeated concern for much of the recent critical discussion about environmental design: “A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolizing surroundings.”⁸ It is, therefore, through this filter that one can begin to perceive those elements in Mendelsohn’s vision which distinguished him from his contemporaries. Furthermore, even in his first public statements, as Mendelsohn attempted to stake out a unique position vis-à-vis his contemporaries, he did so through a critique of *others’* use of landscape.

⁶ King, Susan. *The Drawings of Erich Mendelsohn* (Berkeley: The Regents of the University of California, 1969), 26.

⁷ Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 22 October 1924. In Beyer, op. cit., 69.

⁸ Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

3 Words and Images: The “Oppositional Landscape”

An early example is Mendelsohn’s illustrated public lecture, “The Problem of a New Architecture,” conceived originally for his gallery show at Paul Cassirer Gallery in 1919 and given later under the auspices of the “Arbeitsrat für Kunst” in 1920.⁹ The place and audience of his lecture were themselves significant. The Arbeitsrat had been established by Bruno Taut and had been populated by many of the artists who were soon to contribute to the “Crystal Chain” correspondence, in which the faceted forms of nature were explicitly evoked as the wellspring of a new architecture. Although Mendelsohn had been affiliated with the Arbeitsrat through his connection with the related Novembergruppe,¹⁰ he rejected offers to participate in their gallery shows.¹¹ He accepted, however, their invitation to speak about his own work.

With little apparent irony, Mendelsohn drew his first two lecture slides from Taut’s *Alpine Architecture* [Figure 08]. In the published version of the lecture, Mendelsohn identifies Taut’s drawings with the first of “three very different ways of realizing this future [architecture, which] will eventually merge...

I am going to read to you what the artist felt when he visualized it. ‘In the deep valley between crystal-edged, carved mountains, one can see from above, through the transparent glass vault, into the room with its supporting columns’ ... Here the ideal experience is placed above the spatial one.¹²

Mendelsohn then drives his point home with a reference to *The Cathedral Star* [Figure 06b]. “It is liberated from any architectural vision... Here is the call: Create symbols, not forms.”¹³

Mendelsohn’s references to Taut’s drawings are among the few mentions of landscape-based form throughout this lecture.¹⁴ In his direct quotation of Taut’s own evocative language, Mendelsohn pointed his audience’s attention towards the identification of landscape with a wellspring of feeling, not of form. From this perspective, landscape was not a meaningful context from which a design might derive its shape or its organization.

⁹ James, op. cit., 26.

¹⁰ Zevi, op. cit., xix.

¹¹ Beyer, op. cit., 51.

¹² Erich Mendelsohn, *Complete Works of the Architect*, tr. Antje Fritsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8-9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mendelsohn’s only other such mention of natural forms is, significantly, a reference to drawings by Hermann Finsterlin, another member of the “Crystal Chain”: “[T]he restrained energy of such utopian spatial fantasy plays with the image of organic nature, in which a snail’s shell is placed in a tower instead of a glazed cupola, or the swelling of humus-laden earth is forced into an architectural posture.” Ibid., 18.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

Rather, for Mendelsohn, Taut's words and drawings pointed back towards a source of an architect's emotion, the expression of which was purposeful only as a spur to his or her personal impulse towards a design. To harness this impulse in the creation of "New Architecture," two other factors would be required: increasing abstraction of spatial geometry and greater reliance upon material characteristics and technical means. Mendelsohn's lecture ends, in fact, with a strong emphasis upon the latter. But the architect does allow that "all three impulses are necessary."¹⁵

Yet one should not assume, like Zevi, that Mendelsohn's concept of the landscape remained static during any one period throughout his career. For if, in 1920, Mendelsohn had explicitly omitted what Zevi calls "mimetic" content from his scheme for a new architecture, within three years Mendelsohn came to promote mimesis of an alternative kind. But rather than calling for architecture's *visual* analogy to natural forms, derived from the landscape, Mendelsohn instead proposed a *systemic* analogy.

The occasion was the second of his extant promotional lectures, given in four cities throughout Holland in November, 1923.¹⁶ Mendelsohn had made a visit to that country two years before, and so his awareness of Amsterdam and Rotterdam's increasingly divergent architectural cultures influenced a significant part of his presentation.¹⁷ In a letter to his wife earlier that year, Mendelsohn wrote that

Analytic Rotterdam rejects vision. Visionary Amsterdam does not understand analytic objectivity. Certainly the primary element in architecture is function, but function without sensual contributions remains mere construction. More than ever do I stand by my program of reconciliation. Both are necessary.¹⁸

To effect this reconciliation, the architect resorted to a common biological trope, that of a building as an *organism*. Throughout the speech, titled "The International Consensus on the New Architectural Concept, or Dynamics and Function," Mendelsohn refers to both machines and buildings as organisms, investing the term with the positive values of vitality, integration, and balance. As a rhetorical technique, reference to "organism" provided an easily-understood example by which to embody his titular concepts "dynamics" and "function." An organism is often motile, of course, and its metabolism is both metaphorically and literally dynamic. A thing alive also obviously functions, and yet its function rests integrally with its physical form. So in his presentation of 1923, Mendelsohn refers to his most famous building in these very terms: "The Einstein Tower, without question, is a clear architectural organism. That said, there are reasons why it is

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ James, op. cit., 55.

¹⁷ Gilbert Herbert and Liliane Richter, *Through a Clouded Glass: Mendelsohn, Wijdeveld, and the Jewish Connection*, (Berlin: Wasmuth Verlag, 2009), 40-43.

¹⁸ Beyer, op. cit., 60.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

not a purely functional organism. But it seems to me that one cannot take any part away from it, neither from its mass, nor from its motion, nor even from its logical development, without destroying the whole.”¹⁹

The use of such a metaphor was not, of course, unique to Mendelsohn. Architects throughout Europe and the United States had made reference to “the organic” for over a century.²⁰ And within the community of Berlin architects known as “The Ring,” of which Mendelsohn was a founding member, the notion of an organic source of architectural form would soon come to signify a process by which such form might be developed.²¹ What is key, however, is that Mendelsohn’s use of this metaphor extended from individual entities to a geographical one – the city. His 1923 lecture continues with the following proposition:

If the close unity of the terms ‘function’ and ‘dynamics’ is true for the cell, the individual building, it is all the more so for the multi-cell system of the city. For even its smallest unit is not a disinterested spectator but a co-operating agent in the movement, and the street becomes, because of the speed of traffic, a horizontal track leading from focal point to focal point. The city of the future itself becomes a system of focal points that is, in panorama, the very fabric of space. Seen in this way, the biggest city of the modern world is, unlike the spatial miracles of the best old towns, an inorganic agglomeration of the most contrary elements. The cubist repetition of individual skyscrapers does not change this. But our era has before it, as few others in history have had, the need to create new cities, or at least to plan them.²²

With little conceptual preparation, Mendelsohn has transformed his organic metaphor. What had been an integral, material phenomenon – a building – becomes instead a constituent element of a spatial continuum. To be sure, each building (that is, each *cell*) is seen to participate in the life of the city as a “co-operating agent.” And this point provides the basis for a comparative proposition. “The city of the future” engages the “fabric of space,” *but contemporary cities do not*. Mendelsohn’s description of the contemporary urban landscape is, for once, succinct: “an inorganic agglomeration of the most contrary elements / [t]he cubist repetition of individual skyscrapers...”

The image which accompanies this passage is a view of the tip of Manhattan [Figure 09]. An aerial view, the scene supports no apparent geographical orientation, as if the rules of perspective have ceased to apply in “the biggest city of the modern world.” Intriguingly,

¹⁹ Mendelsohn (1992), op. cit.,33.

²⁰ Peter Blundell Jones, *Hugo Häring: The Organic Versus the Geometric* (London: Edition Axel Menges, 1999), 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 77ff.

²² Mendelsohn (1992), op. cit.,33.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

the visual character of the photograph supports a double meaning for Mendelsohn's use of the word "cubist." On the one hand, the bulk of each skyscraper is primarily rectilinear, and so its random-looking placement against the many others reinforces each building's prismatic, *cubic* characteristic. On the other hand, the relative anonymity of each building and the group's crowded placement suggest many facets of a single thing, akin to the visual language of painterly Cubism, to which the term obviously relates. Akin, too, are the layered contrasts evoked by collage [Figures 10a & b], especially in photomontages promoted by Berlin's Dada artists throughout the period of Mendelsohn's early career.

But for further illustration, Mendelsohn points instead to Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants* [Figure 11], published only the year before.²³ Referring neither to the project nor the architect by name, Mendelsohn presents the scheme as follows:

In this French plan the paths of the main highway superbly sustain the rapid traffic in their horizontal placement and their cubist self-containment. The highway cuts through the suburbs and the city in a straight line. Yet the dominance of the central city district betrays too obvious a scheme to be able to impart to the organism of the entire system the inescapable vitality of our modern era. In addition, the high-rise buildings are placed abruptly upon the plane, without connection to the other 'cells.'²⁴

The aerial perspective of Le Corbusier's image is similar to the previous view of New York – elevated, as though taken by an airplane – yet this scene is dominated by the effect of one-point perspective. Once again, Mendelsohn describes as "cubist" those elements whose relationship appears articulated and disjoint, although here the word relates most obviously to the rectilinear geometry of the illustrated buildings.

Mendelsohn alludes to the scheme's exaggerated functional zoning,²⁵ which in his view undermines the premise of an urban organism's "vitality." Le Corbusier's towers seem to Mendelsohn independent and without physical (or even visual) continuity, and are therefore indistinguishable from New York's skyscrapers, criticized in the immediately-preceding passage. So instead of illustrating a way forward, *Contemporary City*

²³ Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982), 253; Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982), 223. *Une Ville Contemporaine pour 3 Millions d'Habitants* was first shown late in 1922. But the image included by Mendelsohn in his *Complete Works* (1992) appears to be a photograph of the diorama which appeared in the *Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau* no earlier than 1925. It is unknown which image was actually presented by Mendelsohn in Holland.

²⁴ Mendelsohn (1992), op. cit., 33-34.

²⁵ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 190-191.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

embodied for Mendelsohn merely urbanism's status quo, a datum against which his own "New Architectural Concept" would rise.

What, therefore, would be the landscape upon which a future-minded architect should operate? By the time of this second lecture, given in the autumn of 1923, Mendelsohn's vision had crystallized. A landscape could be characterized, first of all, as a "fabric of space" and would be perceived visually, and not through the experience of other senses. Its elements would be abstract ("focal points") or else, in its basic "cellular" component, artificial. The natural landscape would have been subsumed *a priori* beneath contemporary civilization's material detritus, which was essentially inorganic and without connection to values such as idealism or place-based identity.²⁶ Indeed, Mendelsohn's presentation evokes what might be termed an "oppositional landscape," the visual and systematic characteristics of which could, at best, afford an architect the means for its own reconfiguration or reassembly.

4 Seen Through an "Architect's Eye": The World Abroad and its Representation

It was through foreign travel that Mendelsohn sought confirmation for and counterpoint to this "oppositional landscape." His desire to travel came from his impulse to observe, itself an ethical judgment about one's relationship to the visual world: "Our optical perception fails frequently – mostly from habit or indifference, only rarely from incapacity."²⁷ Yet his immediate inspiration derived from the diverse architectural discourse then at large in Germany: the media-based representations of *Amerikanismus*, which depended upon architecture for its iconology; the conservative reaction of Berlin's architectural establishment towards his own work and the work of his allies among the *avant-garde*; and the example, elsewhere in Europe, of competing architectural innovations, especially those which had already announced solutions to those problems of the New Architecture which Mendelsohn himself sought to solve.

One is reminded that Mendelsohn was himself neither a critic nor a cultural historian. He was, of course, an architect, and as such his interest to describe the world around him was essentially twofold. Mendelsohn sought to promote his point of view among the general public, which included clients and supporters in the press. And he sought to define with precision the parameters affecting his own designs. The extent to which the former afforded opportunities for the latter may have been unique among German architects during the 1920's. Many of his clientele were businessmen whose interests straddled

²⁶ Miles David Samson, "German-American Dialogues and the Modern Movement Before the 'Design Migration,' 1910-1933" (PhD. diss., Harvard University, 1988) 183ff. Samson places Mendelsohn and his contemporaries, such as Martin Wagner, in the context of an older German debate concerning *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*.

²⁷ Erich Mendelsohn, *Russland Europa Amerika* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1989), 164.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

industry, publishing, advertising, and even political propaganda. Men such as Lachman-Mosse and Salman Schocken in Germany, or even Pinchas Rutenberg in Palestine, occupied unique social and economic positions.²⁸ And their businesses' bases in emergent mass markets encouraged their use of Mendelsohn's work to further their own promotional interests. Their willingness to subsidize Mendelsohn's travel (and the resulting published narratives or architectural projects) reflected not only a faith in Mendelsohn's visual acuity²⁹ but also, more fundamentally, an intuitive affinity for the increasingly visual premise of mass media.

The outline of Mendelsohn's 1924 visit to the United States has been well established by other writers.³⁰ Mendelsohn's first book, *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten*, has itself drawn even greater attention, having attracted the notice of architects, critics, and historians from the moment of its original publication in 1926. One writer has called *Amerika* "the twenties' most sophisticated and most comprehensive attempt to use photography to decipher the metropolis – not only identifying the major forces shaping it but vividly conveying the new kinds of spatial feeling it engendered."³¹ For the Russian designer El Lissitzky, a friend of Mendelsohn's, the volume "thrills us like a dramatic film. Before our eyes move pictures that are absolutely unique. In order to understand some of the photographs you must lift the book over your head and rotate it [Figure 12]."³² And Mendelsohn's own feelings for his photographs' impact were unequivocal, tempered only by his ambivalence towards their audience: "[N]othing appeals more readily to modern man than pictures. He wants to understand, but quickly, clearly, without a lot of furrowing of brows and mysticism. And with all this the world is mysterious as never before, impenetrable and full of daring possibilities."³³

Visits to New York, Buffalo, Detroit, and Chicago brought Mendelsohn in direct contact with many of the structures already known to the architectural avant-garde, including skyscrapers, grain silos, automotive factories, and commercial buildings [Figure 13]. What made Mendelsohn's book so influential was the directness with which he presented his material. With little support from verbal captions, *Amerika* illustrated these subjects with a compositional sensibility legible to its European audiences as the formal method of the *avant-garde*: haphazard juxtaposition, attenuated proportion, and asymmetrical placement within the picture frame. Jean-Louis Cohen has written of a cultural "horizon

²⁸ Anthony David, *The Patron: A Life of Salman Schocken* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 145; Gilbert Herbert and Liliane Richter, op. cit., 67-71.

²⁹ Samson, op. cit., 183.

³⁰ James, op. cit., 57-70. See also Jean-Louis Cohen, *Scenes of the World to Come* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 85-98.

³¹ Christopher Phillips, "Twenties Photography: Mastering Urban Space," in *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*, ed. Jean Clair (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 218.

³² El Lissitzky, "The Architect's Eye: A review of Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika*," in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 221.

³³ Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 11 July 1927. In Beyer, op. cit., 96.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

of reception,” relating to established German perceptions about the United States,³⁴ yet one must include among those expectations too the “visual language” of modernism. In his selection of photographs for *Amerika*, Mendelsohn was among the first to apply that language to subject matter which itself embodied modernity.³⁵

In his travels to Russia, the first of which occurred in 1925, Mendelsohn carried with him different expectations. Kathleen James has written that Mendelsohn’s perceptions of Russia were based on his identification of the place with “Eastern” spiritual values, distinct from those prevalent in the more-familiar societies of Western Europe.³⁶ Such values were essentially pre-modern, and were described by Mendelsohn in his correspondence as a “yearning for salvation,” combined with an “Eastern resignation.”³⁷ So it is not surprising that his photographs of Russia’s physical environment reflected his attempt to represent both. One encounters salvation, in the form of ornate, ecclesiastical architectural forms or the utopian designs of contemporary architects [Figure 14]; and one encounters resignation, in the form of crude, labor-intensive construction techniques or (for Mendelsohn) even cruder visual sentimentality [Figure 15].

Russia’s unique geographical extent also impressed Mendelsohn. One senses here another “horizon of reception,” since his mention of the Russian landscape is invariably tied to that same conceptual framework with which he sees Russian spirituality. After his second visit in 1926, he wrote to his wife that “[t]he endless space of Russia makes dream and aspiration – idea and action – impenetrable in the negative sense, infinite in the positive.”³⁸ To be sure, as yet another paraphrase for “resignation” and “salvation,” these words tell us little. But his identification of these terms with a spatial experience suggests continuity with his earlier treatment of landscape. As before, for Mendelsohn, one’s experience of landscape remains essentially abstract and made possible, primarily, by vision. And, as before, Mendelsohn projects onto such abstraction opposing ideas, the dialectic of which might effect some kind of *genius loci*. In all cases, that dialectic would derive from an architect’s design, without which those elements would remain in visual and – essentially – moral conflict.

Therefore, where the natural landscape is actually described verbally in his book *Russland Europa Amerika*, conceived to document Mendelsohn’s impressions of the Soviet Union, the photographs to which words refer suppress natural details in favor of architectural ones. Several of Mendelsohn’s captions evoke “the Russian sky,” the landscape, and the “blue Southern sky,” this last phrase even in photographs of buildings

³⁴ Jean-Louis Cohen, postface to *Amerika: Livre d’images d’un Architecte*, by Erich Mendelsohn (Paris: Les Éditions du Demi-Cercle, 1992), 226.

³⁵ Phillips, op. cit., 221.

³⁶ James, op. cit., 73.

³⁷ Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 14 July 1927. In Beyer, op. cit., 97.

³⁸ Letter to Louise Mendelsohn, 11 July 1926. Ibid., 90.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

as far north as Moscow.³⁹ Yet, at best, the visual role of landscape elements is primarily to complement the architectural elements within his photographs, either through counterpoint or reflection [Figure 16].

Published in 1929, also by the Rudolf Mosse Company, *Russland Europa Amerika* shared the same large, vertical format of the earlier *Amerika*. The content of the book was divided into several sections, and each section was named for the geographical locus of its photographs: *Amerika*, *Russland*, *Russland-Amerika*, *Europa*, and *Russland-Europa-Amerika*. Beginning with “Amerika,” Mendelsohn revisits several images from his previous book and attempts to draw a chronological portrait of the architecture of the United States. The first two photographs, attributed to Mumford’s German edition of *Sticks and Stones*,⁴⁰ showed colonial-era structures: the John Ward house, in Salem, Massachusetts; and George Washington’s home in Mt. Vernon. These photographs of 18th-century structures are followed by a picture titled “Side Street,” a 20th-century view of 19th-century New York, including brownstone residences and their stoops. This photograph, taken by Mendelsohn and originally published in *Amerika*, was for the later book significantly cropped [Figure 17, above]. The effect of the altered image was twofold. The magnification of ornamental detail naturally reinforced the historical connotation of the pictures’ sequence. But, more importantly, the exclusion of the scene’s perspective focus and of its expanse of sky served to flatten the subject matter into Mendelsohn’s “oppositional landscape,” that is, the incoherent spatial and material background against which contemporary architects must operate. Subsequent photographs, too, reinforce this implicit message. In fact, most of the photographs re-used by Mendelsohn (especially plates 5, 6, and 11 – see Figure 17, below) were severely cropped for publication in the new book.

The end of this first sequence of fourteen photographs allowed Mendelsohn to draw his narrative through to the current day. Once again, Mendelsohn chose a view of New York’s skyline which lacked a clear perspective focus [Figure 18]. But with little direct reference to the picture, Mendelsohn writes

[F]rom the world war to the ecstasy of world power. Because in America the world war is the given situation, she expands her accumulated forces to the immeasurable. The objective onlooker grabs for the victorious party, tries to make it his ally. The developed technique becomes the greatest development of power.⁴¹

So with this rhetorical flourish, the reader arrives to the point where Mendelsohn’s previous volume, *Amerika*, left off: the contemporary city, once again portrayed visually as “an inorganic agglomeration of the most contrary elements.”

³⁹ See Mendelsohn (1989), op. cit., 62 and 74.

⁴⁰ Mendelsohn received the first American edition from Mumford himself, during the architect’s 1924 visit to the United States.

⁴¹ Mendelsohn (1989), op. cit., 34.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

The second section, “Russland,” depicts almost exclusively historical architecture. All but nine of 38 photographs in this section are credited to Mendelsohn himself. Of the nine exceptions, six are attributed to a Russian history of architecture,⁴² one to a book on the Ukrainian baroque,⁴³ and one to Dr. Ernst Cohn-Wiener, a Berlin-based expert on the architecture of Turkestan.⁴⁴ Some of Mendelsohn’s photographs hearken back to *Amerika*’s neck-straining perspectives [Figure 19; compare with Figure 12]. Others, on the other hand, try to evoke a sense of Russians’ day-today experience. A photograph titled “Moskau / Lubjanka” depicts a crowd of people, each going about his or her business, in front of a heavily-ornamented façade [Figure 20]. The façade is festooned, too, with figurative political propaganda of a similarly ornamental texture. With this picture, Mendelsohn introduces the book’s comparative theme, for the final sentence of the caption reads, “Russia’s people are a shapeless mass: in America everybody is his own motor.”⁴⁵

In general, however, the photographs of *Russland Europa Amerika* evoke complexity and intricacy, together with a moody judgment of Russia’s backwardness. But the images and captions suggest, too, ambivalence towards attempts at modernization. A scene of a Paris-like, commercial passage in Leningrad [Figure 21] is joined by the phrase “industrialized oriental bazaars but without the dreamy light.”⁴⁶ Throughout the picture sequences, a tension between supposedly authentic Russian characteristics and newer, foreign influences anticipates further comparisons between Russian and the United States, drawn explicitly in the third section of the book. One image announces directly the thematic shift. The photograph illustrates a model of Ivan Leonidov’s thesis project for the Lenin Institute and Library, dating to 1927 [Figure 22]. Here, Mendelsohn’s version of Russian history arrives at the present day. The caption for the photograph reads, in part:

Revolution! / The new Russia recognizes the law of the new world. /
Technique becomes the God. / America becomes the longing. /
The beyond is worth nothing – the here everything.

Leonidov’s design for the Lenin Institute and Library perfectly embodies the predicament in which Mendelsohn perceived the Russian avant-garde during his visits there. In the photograph itself, architectural elements have been attenuated to the abstract level of physical forces – tension, compression, and coordinate geometry. The enthusiasm for this abstraction, graphically attractive as it was, troubled him. Like his German colleagues of

⁴² Igor Grabar, *Istorija Architektury: Do-Petrovskaja Epocha, Moskva i Ukraina* (Moscow: Knebel, 1909).

⁴³ G. C. Lukomskij, *Denkmäler Kirchlicher Architektur des XI. bis XIX. Jahrhunderts. Byzantinische Baukunst, Ukrainisches Barok.*, ed. W. Klein (Munich: Orchis Verlag, 1923).

⁴⁴ Richard Ettinghausen, “Ernst Cohn-Wiener, 1882-1941,” in *Ars Islamica*, 9 (1942): 238.

⁴⁵ Mendelsohn (1989), op. cit., 84.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

the “Crystal Chain” earlier in the decade, the most admirable Russian architects were, for Mendelsohn, too quick to embrace a world on paper. They were too quick, as well, to adopt European architectural trends more provocative than convincing. To find glass, for instance, so prominently used in a project for a Kievan newspaper building [Figure 23] appeared farcical to him. Even Mendelsohn acknowledged the extremes of Russia’s natural environment, which made the extensive use of glass obviously untenable: “But during the eight winter months the temperature descends to 40 below zero – in the icy east wind...”⁴⁷ Yet Mendelsohn’s warning extended to his entire readership, not just to his to Russian colleagues. In the preface to the book’s final chapter, he anchors what will follow with a grounded critique of his fellow Europeans’ theoretical posturing:

The world is going to laugh at Europe’s preachers of reason if they build unreasonably. Here the mental acrobat separates from the visionary, the boastful from the self-understood, the complicated from the simple, the veiled conventional from the obviously original. This separation is common law. It is independent of nation and continent and from the layers of epochs and styles.⁴⁸

Russland Europa Amerika ends with a sequence of illustrations intended to synthesize the positive qualities of each of those so-called continents [Figure 24]. From Europe, Mendelsohn selected Dudok’s columbarium at Haarlem-Westerveld and writes, “This is the way!”⁴⁹ From Russia, he picked Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* [Figure 13, right] to represent “spiritual daring.”⁵⁰ From the United States, Mendelsohn curiously chose two opposing images. Mendelsohn characterizes the first, a drawing of Ware and Metcalfe’s proposal for New York’s *Gateway of the Nation*⁵¹ as “bombastic.” About the second, a photograph of James Gamble Rogers’ New York Medical Center, Mendelsohn writes, “This way demands also America’s drive for something new, expressed through the organized strength of her new zoning laws.”⁵² One should note that here Mendelsohn represents even legal and procedural processes as a visual matter, subject to the same formal analysis as composition, material, or structure.

The volume’s final image, one more photograph taken from Grabar’s book of traditional Russian architecture, encourages Mendelsohn to add, “and [this way] demands Russia’s genuine and mystical creativity, expressed in the splendor of the Kremlin – the Russian heart.”⁵³ The exuberant “skyline” of the Kremlin’s Terem Churches, a 17th-century design, emerges up from a mundane landscape of roofs and chimneys. As the culmination

⁴⁷ Mendelsohn (1989), op. cit., 176.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 184.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁵¹ Werner Hegemann, *Amerikanische Architektur & Stadtbaukunst* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1925), 64.

⁵² Mendelsohn (1989), op. cit., 212.

⁵³ Ibid., 214.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

of Mendelsohn's intellectual journey to "Eastern" Russia, this image stands in counterpoint to New York's skyline, shown at the beginning of the book [Figure 18]. With a final written paragraph titled "Synthesis," Mendelsohn positions his readers at the confluence of all three cultural streams. The way forward, Mendelsohn asserts, depends upon their successful joining.

5 Multiple Conclusions / Alternative Landscapes

Russland Europa Amerika attracted the endorsement of critics for whom *Neue Bauen's* increasingly strident functionalism already appeared sterile. In the United States, for instance, Lewis Mumford reviewed the book and referred to "the European tendency to isolate and caricature in architecture some single element of the modern scheme."⁵⁴ In Mumford's view, Mendelsohn's photo essay acknowledged and challenged that tendency.

Erich Mendelsohn's arrangement of pictures is a method of thinking, not abstract and analytical, but concrete and synthetic. The two processes are complementary; but the abstract method, formed by mathematics and fostered by finance, until recently ruled out the architectonic mode.⁵⁵

More recent writers have also seen in *Russland Europa Amerika* a terminal statement of the positive phase of German *Amerikanismus*, after which the United States and Russia – as models by which to measure a changing German society – came under more direct attack by parties from across the political spectrum.⁵⁶ And among the targets of Mendelsohn's own geographical interests, both countries receded in the years immediately following the book's publication. Subsequent travels, especially after 1930, show the architect's increasing attention to Mediterranean landscapes. A visit to Greece, made in 1931 at the suggestion of Amédée Ozenfant,⁵⁷ sparked an enchantment with the visual character of that region. From that point on, Mendelsohn's writing reflected more and more the emergence of a "cross section" quite different from the East-West axis of his photograph-based publications. Instead, descriptions of Mediterranean places and their surrounding landscapes indicate an alternative, North-South alignment, by which a modern, "northern" civilization – and its architects! – might reclaim the original values of their "southern" antecedents.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Lewis Mumford, "Steel Chimneys and Beet-top Cupolas," in *Creative Art* 4 (1928): xlv.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cohen (1995), op. cit., 98.

⁵⁷ Ita Heinze-Greenberg, "An Artistic European Utopia at the Abyss of Time: The Mediterranean Academy Project, 1931-34," in *Architectural History*, 45 (2002), 448.

⁵⁸ Gilbert Herbert and Liliane Richter (2009), op. cit., 113.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

In these later voyages, Mendelsohn retained little use for his camera, even for as famous a site as the Acropolis. “Every photograph and every drawing detracts from the scale of the effect of the Parthenon and reduces it to the actual dimensions... For drawing and photography are incapable of reproducing one of the most essential elements of architecture, the enclosure by space.”⁵⁹ But a subsequent passage is especially evocative:

This play between the brilliance of the atmosphere and the radiation back from the built space, i.e., the play between air and material, softness and hardness, limitlessness and limitation of space, the exhalation of the landscape and firm breath, the fluidity of nature and its stabilization in the architecture.

Nature, with the geographical situation and climate, is every time specific, i.e., the carrier of the idea of the building. For on situation and climate equally depend its technical perfection – its use of materials and its construction – and its architectonic expression.⁶⁰

Mendelsohn’s written style remains here as fustian as ever. But what is different here is the architect’s first published acknowledgement of the natural environment’s reciprocal effect upon architecture, whether archaic or new. Here, within view of Piraeus and its Mediterranean port, Mendelsohn expresses a sense in which a building’s visual effects might relate synthetically the elements of its surroundings. “Fluidity” and “stabilization,” not contrast or disjunction (nor, even, “opposition”), have come to characterize a building’s place in the landscape.

The seed for this alternative view had already been planted years before, during Mendelsohn’s 1923 travel to Palestine. The pretext of that visit had been the design of a power station, sought by the industrialist Pinchas Rutenberg as part of that region’s electrification. The trip to Palestine, in the company of the Dutch architect Hendricus Wijdeveld, included stops before and afterwards in Egypt, and took Mendelsohn to many of the large Jewish developments of that time: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Tiberius, and Haifa. Mendelsohn’s reaction was famously documented in a postcard sent to the German art-historian Oscar Beyer: “The experience is great, beyond expectation, and will take time to settle. Once it settles, then it can only fortify what has long since been strong. Blood and space; race and three dimensions!”⁶¹ In a rare sketch of a building not composed by himself, Mendelsohn drew a Jerusalem “skyline” scene above the written note [Figure 25].

The project for the power station, developed in collaboration with Wijdeveld while in Palestine, was never realized. Like Mendelsohn’s other industrial projects, the bulk and

⁵⁹ Erich Mendelsohn, “Acropolis and Parthenon,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, May 1931. In Beyer, op. cit., 112.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Postcard to Oscar Beyer, 9 March 1923. In Beyer, op. cit., 59.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

the organization of the building were influenced little by the immediate surroundings of the building's site [Figure 26]. In the drawings for the project, mark of the natural landscape exists only in the silhouette of Mt. Carmel, a faint background presence. And the inclusion of two palm trees – unique in Mendelsohn's entire oeuvre! – is merely a superficial, “orientalizing” gesture. Evident, however, is Mendelsohn's attention to orientation and to the need to control the light of the sun in that climate. From this, and from the rectilinear forms of the power station's bulk, one might infer the influence of local vernacular structures. But such forms are also in evidence in other designs, including a power station of a similar size, produced by Mendelsohn for a site in Germany just the previous year [Figure 27].

More revealing were two other 1923 projects for Haifa, each sited at the opposite extremes of the city's geography, that is, mountaintop and sea-side. The former, titled “Garden City” by Mendelsohn's publications but labeled “Mountain City” (“Bergstadt”) in an extant sketch, would have been the architect's first urban plan were it to have been realized [Figure 28]. Mendelsohn's proposed massing and its evocative designation have much in common with his Expressionist colleagues' work, so publicly repudiated only a few years before in the speech to the Arbeitsrat. The explicit proposal here for what Taut called a “Stadtkrone” may well have been a consequence of Mt. Carmel's dramatic rise above Haifa Bay, but may also have been inspired by Mendelsohn's (and Taut's) teacher, Theodor Fischer, and his theory about city morphology.⁶² One may note with irony that Mendelsohn had developed his plan for the Carmel as a response to what he called the “medieval romanticism” of another scheme for the same site, drawn up previously by another student of Fischer, Richard Kauffmann.⁶³

Mendelsohn's plan shows steep grading around the site, especially for the approach to the central market tower, seen at the center of the site plan [Figure 28b]. Besides being impractical to the point of uselessness, the layout betrays Mendelsohn's essential reliance upon compositional logic, defined by his intuitive visual sense, instead of environmental considerations such as topography, geology, plantings, or climate. In the context of the natural landscape, Mendelsohn's creative dilemma of that time in his career is nowhere better expressed; in this project, two contradictory approaches apparently compete for the architect's attention.

But at the foot of Mt. Carmel, in Haifa's historic city center, Mendelsohn was able to operate upon more familiar ground. The project for the business center [Figure 29], conceived in collaboration with Richard Neutra, was a successful competition entry for a site bordered by the existing urban fabric and (potentially) by the waters of the Mediterranean. The resulting design incorporated existing historical structures and maintained existing plantings; moreover, the plan responded imaginatively to an existing, vernacular spatial vocabulary, including covered arcades, courtyards, and passages, of

⁶² Peter Blundell Jones, *op.cit.*, 18.

⁶³ Gilbert Herbert and Silvina Sosnovsky (1993), *op. cit.*, 100-103.

From Building towards Landscape

Erich Mendelsohn and a Reconstitution of Geographical Forms, 1919-1929

nearby commercial buildings. Without a specific stylistic antecedent, the Haifa Business Center succeeded in establishing *sui generis* a unique environmental design, distinct from the specific architectural language of the surrounding traditional city and Mendelsohn's own the contemporary European work.

Indeed, Mendelsohn knew that he had achieved something distinctive. In that early "Dynamics and Function" speech, given in Holland later that same year and already discussed in this paper, Mendelsohn followed his criticism of Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City plan* to end with an illustration of the Haifa project.

[T]his less ambitious project, which is only concerned with the development of a business center, presents... a successful attempt to create a clear expression for our cities of the future. Here, terraces, bazaars, street facades, a movie theater, a hotel, and an office building unite into one organism stemming both from the function of their individual purpose as well as from the dynamic of the whole. Rarely, it seems to me, has the order of the world been revealed so clearly; seldom has an emblem for existence been manifested more legibly than in this time of supposed chaos.⁶⁴

So here, in embryo, was Mendelsohn's alternative to what he identified throughout his written and illustrated essays. Still tied explicitly to the existing artifacts of the immediate environment, Mendelsohn nevertheless proposed here a solution at once synthetic and sympathetic that surrounding landscape. Anticipating through design the ideas evoked later on, in *Russland Europa Amerika*, Mendelsohn sought in Haifa to integrate the full spectrum of human behavior into a single, composed form. In 1923, as later, doing so appears to have been his ideal method with which to approach all elements throughout mankind's environment.

At the end of his lecture in Holland, Mendelsohn exhorted his audience to "Seize, construct, and convert the earth!"⁶⁵ As a measure of his enchantment with the natural world, Mendelsohn's hortatory words may appear essentially contradictory. But as a complement to his other, critical perspectives on the world during his time, his words may well have been inspirational.

⁶⁴ Mendelsohn (1992), op. cit., 34.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

From Building towards Landscape

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